Diversity as Discourse: A Critical Race Theory–Informed Analysis of Tokenism in Media Debates on Inclusive Casting

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Abstract

Present dialogues regarding inclusive casting are frequently framed as progressive efforts to amend historical under-representation; however, they often elicit counter-narratives that depict inclusion as superficial or tokenistic. This study examines the discursive construction of tokenism within English-language media discussions on inclusive casting, employing Critical Race Theory (CRT) as its primary analytical framework. The research employs qualitative critical discourse analysis to investigate a series of media commentaries and opinion pieces regarding casting processes in film and television. Drawing on key tenets of Critical Race Theory, including the persistence of racism, interest convergence, and the critique of liberalism, the analysis reveals that discourses of diversity are often articulated through market-oriented and liberal paradigms that prioritise visibility, individual merit, and representational equity, while obscuring systemic inequalities and historical marginalisation. Sometimes, inclusive casting is justified by references to commercial viability, audience appeal, and symbolic progress. This shows how racial inclusiveness can line up with institutional and economic interests. At the same time, counter-discourses that talk about authenticity, meritocracy, and color-blindness work against structural critiques of racial inequality and change the meaning of inclusion to mean unnecessary or ideologically driven. This study conceptualises diversity as a discursive construction rather than a neutral practice, contributing to critical scholarship on race, representation, and power in contemporary media culture, while emphasising the limitations of superficial inclusion that maintains underlying racial hierarchies.

Keywords: Critical Race Theory; inclusive casting; tokenism; media discourse; representation

Introduction

In the past few years, inclusive casting has been a big and controversial topic in media discussions around the world, especially in the film and TV industries, which have historically been criticised for excluding people of colour. Casting decisions for actors from racially marginalised communities are increasingly depicted as corrective measures intended to address historical inequities and improve representational diversity. These changes have led to a lot of public discussion in media commentaries, editorials, and opinion pieces. Some people praise inclusive casting as a sign of social progress, while others criticise it as fake, politically motivated, or tokenistic (Chan, 2021). These discussions highlight that inclusion goes beyond industrial practice; it embodies a significant ideological and discursive process in which racism, power, and legitimacy are challenged in the public domain.

Researchers have cautioned that the increased representation of racial minorities in mainstream media does not automatically result in structural change. Tokenism, which means including marginalised groups in a shallow way without actually giving them more power or resources, is still a big problem in discussions about diversity programs. In media contexts, tokenism often manifests as superficial representational actions that maintain existing norms, narratives, and institutional frameworks essentially unchanged. Critics assert that these methods might sustain racial inequality by positioning inclusion as a terminal objective rather than an ongoing structural initiative (Chan, 2021). As a result, conversations about inclusive casting often revolve around claims of progress and accusations of just following diversity rules.

The media's opinion is very important when it comes to understanding, judging, and supporting inclusive casting. Editorials and opinion pieces not only reflect what people are feeling, but they also help shape how people think about racial representation. By using certain words, evaluative language, and persuasive techniques, these kinds of publications may show inclusion as a moral necessity, a business strategy, a cultural change, or an ideological threat. These discursive frameworks ascertain whether inclusive casting is perceived as an ethical solution, a market-driven decision, or an unwarranted infringement on artistic autonomy. Even though there is more and more talk about this issue, there hasn't been much scholarly work on how tokenism is talked about and challenged in media debates.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a significant theoretical framework for analysing these discourses, highlighting the structural and ideological dimensions of race within ostensibly liberal and progressive contexts. Critical Race Theory, originating from legal studies, challenges the notion that racial equality can be achieved through incremental reform and colour-blind legislation, emphasising the persistent nature of racism and its institutional entrenchment (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Critical Race Theory's main ideas, like interest convergence, the critique of liberalism, and the social construction of race, are very relevant to discussions about inclusive casting. This is because diversity initiatives often align with institutional interests without addressing the underlying power dynamics.

Interest convergence suggests that racial progress is most likely to occur when it aligns with the objectives of dominant groups. In media companies, inclusive casting is sometimes justified by claims of market growth, audience diversity, and brand reputation, rather than real promises of racial fairness. These reasons show that diversity rhetoric and financial interests are coming together. This raises questions about whether inclusion is a transformative practice or just a strategic performance. Media analyses that portray diversity as profitable or fashionable may unintentionally sustain the injustices they purport to confront, a paradox that Critical Race Theory effectively elucidates.

Additionally, CRT's critique of liberalism contests dominant narratives of meritocracy, neutrality, and individualism that often underpin resistance to inclusive casting. People who want casting to be "colour-blind" or only based on merit often don't think about the historical and institutional factors that have made it harder for racial minorities to get jobs and other opportunities. Discussions in the media that talk about these liberal ideas may make structural analyses of racial exclusion less effective, while making resistance to inclusion seem reasonable and without political context. It is essential to analyse the expression of these arguments in media discourse to understand the discursive perpetuation of racial hierarchies.

Contemporary research on media representation has comprehensively documented patterns of stereotyping, under-representation, and symbolic inclusion of racial minorities. Nevertheless, a considerable segment of this research prioritises representational outcomes—such as character archetypes, narrative functions, or screen time—over the discursive conflicts that arise from representational decisions. Conversely, media discourses regarding inclusive casting elucidate the negotiation of racial significations prior to, during, and subsequent to the implementation of representational practices. These arguments function as platforms where ideological boundaries are defined, contested, and institutionalised, making them crucial topics for examination.

This research examines the formation of tokenism in media discourses regarding inclusive casting through a critical discourse analysis informed by critical race theory. The study frames diversity not as a neutral or self-evident virtue, but as a discursive construct shaped by competing ideological aims. This study seeks to clarify the definition, defence, challenge, and limitation of inclusion in public discourse by analysing media commentaries and opinion articles. It goes beyond judging inclusive casting as "good" or "bad" and instead looks at the power dynamics that are part of the conversation about these practices.

The focus on discourse is particularly significant, as language plays a crucial role in legitimising institutional activities. Ahmed (2012) posits that diversity often functions as a performative discourse, allowing institutions to convey a progressive image while not fundamentally altering their structural configurations. Media narratives that celebrate diversity while minimising systemic inequalities may cultivate what Ahmed refers to as "non-performative" diversity—where the rhetoric of inclusion does not lead to substantive change. Examining the dissemination of these narratives in media discourse enhances the understanding of the limitations of representative politics.

This research examines the influence of media discourses on tokenism within the framework of inclusive casting, while also identifying the ideological underpinnings that sustain these constructs. By situating media discussions within a Critical Race Theory framework, the study clarifies the tensions between symbolic inclusion and structural inequality, illustrating how diversity discourse can simultaneously contest and reinforce racial

power dynamics. In this way, it adds to bigger academic conversations about race, representation, and discourse. It shows that the fight for inclusion happens not only on screen but also, and this is important, in language.

Literature Review

Studies on race and representation in media have consistently shown that cultural production is not an impartial reflection of social reality; instead, it is a crucial domain where meanings related to race, identity, and belonging are constructed and legitimised. Initial research on media portrayal indicated that racial minorities have historically been marginalised through omission, categorisation, or symbolic confinement, thereby perpetuating rather than challenging existing social structures. Recent research has concentrated on diversity initiatives and inclusive practices, particularly within the film and television sectors, where increased representational visibility is often regarded as an indicator of societal progress. This change has led to a lot of talk about how deep, meaningful, and important such inclusion is.

Tokenism is a common problem in this collection of writing. Tokenism is usually defined as having a few people from under-represented groups to show diversity without changing the basic power dynamics. Originally developed in organisational and sociological research, tokenism has become a crucial analytical framework in media and cultural studies, utilised to examine representational practices that appear extensive yet are ideologically constrained. Scholars assert that tokenistic inclusion often materialises through isolated or symbolic actions that enhance visibility without fostering empowerment, positioning racialised characters as exceptions rather than integral contributors within narrative contexts. So, tokenism may not be a way to fix inequality, but rather a way to deal with criticism while keeping the institution's credibility.

Inclusive casting has become a major problem for media companies. Sometimes, decisions about casting racialised actors are framed as corrective actions that challenge long-standing patterns of exclusion. Critics assert that these methodologies are often superficial, motivated by market dynamics, or constrained by dominant narrative conventions. Studies on casting practices reveal that inclusion is often confined to particular genres, character archetypes, or narrative roles, thereby sustaining racial disparities despite the superficial enhancement of diversity. These findings suggest that inclusion cannot be evaluated solely by presence or absence; it necessitates analysis regarding the framing, justification, and legitimisation of representation.

The growing criticism of inclusive casting shows how important rhetoric is in shaping how people think about diversity. Editorials, opinion pieces, and online comments in the media are important places to talk about and judge inclusive practices. They often bring up conflicting ideas like artistic freedom, meritocracy, authenticity, and social responsibility. These discourses not only reflect dominant ideologies but also actively construct frameworks for understanding inclusion. For this reason, they are very important for defining the limits of valid representation and acceptable variety.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) offers a thorough framework for examining these discursive conflicts. Critical Race Theory challenges the liberal notion that racial inequality can be addressed through incremental reform, neutrality, or colour-blindness, emphasising the systemic and enduring nature of racism. The central tenet of Critical Race Theory posits that racism is not an aberration but a normalised feature of social institutions, encompassing cultural domains. This perspective is particularly relevant in media contexts, where diversity initiatives are often celebrated as signs of progress, even though structural disadvantages continue to exist.

Interest convergence is an important idea in critical race theory studies of diversity discourse. Interest convergence posits that advancements in racial equality are most likely to occur when they align with the interests of dominant groups. In the media, this alignment usually shows up as financial rewards, branding efforts, and audience growth. Researchers have observed that inclusive casting is often justified not only on ethical grounds but also through considerations of business, global market access, and brand reputation. These justifications suggest that diversity is deemed acceptable solely when it aligns with institutional goals, leading to investigations into the transformative potential of inclusion driven by business interests.

In the same way, CRT's criticism of liberalism goes against the common ideas of meritocracy and colour-blindness that often come up in media discussions about inclusive casting. People who say that casting should only be based on "talent" or that race doesn't matter sometimes forget about the historical factors that have affected people's access to training, opportunities, and recognition in the business. By framing resistance to inclusive casting as a defence of justice or artistic integrity, these narratives may obscure systemic inequalities while depicting opposition to diversity as logical and devoid of political context. Scholars assert that these narratives reinforce dominant norms while subverting structural critiques of racial inequality.

The concept of variety has been subjected to extensive critical scrutiny. Instead of seeing diversity as a fixed or obvious good thing, more and more scholars are seeing it as a way to talk about ideas that serve ideological purposes. Ahmed's (2012) analysis of diversity discourse reveals that the rhetoric of inclusion can function performatively, allowing organisations to express a dedication to equality without implementing substantial change. In this context, diversity is expressed rather than implemented. This finding has been widely applied in studies concerning organisational culture, education, and media, where the discourse of diversity often coexists with persistent inequity.

In media discourse, diversity is occasionally defined as progress through exposure, with representative presence viewed as evidence of inclusion. Critics argue that this emphasis on visibility may reduce diversity to superficiality, disconnecting representation from matters of power, authorship, and narrative authority. Tokenistic inclusion may serve as a means of containment, allowing organisations to claim moral authority while limiting the scope of change. The tension between visibility and structural change is central to contemporary debates on inclusive casting and underscores the need for discourse-centred analysis.

A lot of people have used critical discourse analysis (CDA) to look at how media texts use language to either reinforce or challenge social power dynamics. CDA experts contend that discourse affects not only the substance of communication but also the boundaries of acceptable expression, defining the confines of legitimacy and shared comprehension. In studies concerning race and media, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been utilised to investigate framing strategies, evaluative language, metaphors, and

legitimisation processes that normalise inequality or marginalise divergent perspectives. When combined with Critical Race Theory, discourse analysis enables a nuanced examination of the ways in which racial concepts are embedded in seemingly neutral or progressive narratives.

Even though there is a lot of research on how media represents people, there aren't many studies that focus on how tokenism is talked about in media discussions about casting that is more inclusive. A substantial segment of the research focuses on textual representation or industry methodologies, overlooking the discursive conflicts inherent in these practices. Media commentary serves as a substantial platform for addressing this disparity, as they clarify the ideological conflicts that underpin inclusion, revealing how diversity is navigated, challenged, and constrained in public discourse.

Additionally, contemporary research often depicts conversations surrounding inclusive casting as binary conflicts between progress and resistance, failing to rigorously analyse how both supportive and critical narratives may sustain existing power structures. Stories that praise diversity through market success might keep interest convergence going, while critiques that use meritocratic or colour-blind frameworks might completely ignore structural racism. Analysing these discourses through a CRT-informed lens enables a sophisticated understanding of how inclusion can both challenge and sustain injustice.

This research enhances existing scholarship by conceptualising inclusive casting not merely as an industrial or representational endeavour, but also as a discursive phenomenon shaped by ideological conflict. This study examines media discourses through the lenses of Critical Race Theory and critical discourse analysis, emphasising the role of language in constructing tokenism and validating particular interpretations of diversity. In doing so, it meets the needs of critical media studies by going beyond shallow evaluations of representation and getting more deeply involved with the ideological frameworks that govern inclusion.

The literature suggests that diversity initiatives should be evaluated in relation to the prevailing discourses. Discussions in the media about inclusive casting are places where racial meanings are made, negotiated, and stabilised. They also shape how people think about inclusion and what it might mean. This study contextualises these arguments within a Critical Race Theory-informed discourse analytic framework, enhancing ongoing scholarly debates concerning race, representation, and power in contemporary media culture, while highlighting the constraints of inclusion that is primarily symbolic rather than structural.

Methodology

This study utilises a qualitative research design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and informed by Critical Race Theory (CRT) to examine the discursive construction of tokenism in media narratives concerning inclusive casting. The methodological framework is predicated on the premise that language is not a neutral conduit of meaning but a social practice that produces and legitimises power dynamics, ideological positions, and institutional interests. The study underscores discourse to go beyond superficial evaluations of representation and analyse how diversity and inclusion are expressed, contested, and constrained in public media criticism.

The data for this study consist of English-language media commentaries and opinion pieces regarding inclusive casting practices in film and television. These texts were selected because opinion-driven media genres function as crucial avenues for ideological articulation, shaping public perceptions of social issues while simultaneously reflecting institutional and cultural objectives. People didn't see media comments as clear statements of personal opinion; instead, they saw them as discursive creations that were part of larger social, political, and economic contexts. Selection criteria prioritised texts that explicitly tackled inclusive casting, racial representation, or allegations of tokenism, and that were circulated via mainstream or widely consumed media platforms. The dataset was deliberately curated to include a range of evaluative viewpoints, featuring texts that support inclusive casting as progressive and those that condemn it as artificial or excessive.

Although the study did not aim for statistical representativeness, the dataset was constructed to enhance analytical depth and discursive variation. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that the analysed texts were rich in information and directly relevant to the research topic. This approach is in line with qualitative discourse research, which focuses on theoretical importance instead of numerical data. Each piece was seen as part of a larger discursive space where people always argue about what variety, merit, authenticity, and power mean.

The analytical framework integrates Critical Discourse Analysis and Critical Race Theory to provide both linguistic and theoretical depth. CDA offers tools for studying how language affects social reality through techniques like framing, assessment, legitimation, and exclusion. CRT provides a crucial framework for analysing these discursive approaches concerning structural racism and institutional authority. The foundational tenets of Critical Race Theory that underpin the study include the enduring nature of racism, interest convergence, a critique of liberalism, and the social construction of race. These principles did not dictate the interpretive process; rather, they influenced the identification and theorisation of discursive patterns.

The analysis utilised a reflexive thematic discourse analytic methodology. At first, all of the texts were read several times to get to know the data better and to find patterns in the way people talked about inclusion, diversity, and tokenism. The initial coding focused on the framing of inclusive casting, specifically highlighting lexical choices, metaphors, evaluative adjectives, and argumentative structures. Codes were derived inductively from the data, informed by theoretical frameworks of Critical Race Theory (CRT). Discourses emphasising market appeal, audience demand, or brand value were classified according to interest convergence, whereas narratives invoking meritocracy or colour-blindness were examined through CRT's critique of liberalism.

During the second phase, codes were grouped together into larger discursive themes that included systematic ways of talking about inclusive casting. These themes were not simply subjects but discursive constructs that enabled the normalisation of particular ideological positions. The investigation scrutinised the legitimisation or delegitimisation of inclusive casting, the underlying assumptions about race and equality embedded in these legitimations, and the degree to which structural inequality was either accentuated or obscured. There was a lot of focus on the tensions and inconsistencies both within and between texts, since discourse is rarely steady or consistent.

The analytic method employed iterative and reflexive interpretation. The researcher vacillated among facts, theory, and evolving interpretations, refining analytic categories to ensure conceptual coherence and explanatory effectiveness. Reflexivity was crucial to this process, as the researcher meticulously examined their own interpretive position and theoretical responsibilities. The study acknowledges that analysis is contextual and that meaning is co-constructed through engagement with the data, rather than claiming objectivity. To enhance analytical credibility, interpretations were systematically assessed against the dataset, ensuring that claims were supported by textual evidence rather than by isolated instances.

Transparency and coherence also helped make the analysis more rigorous. Discursive claims were predicated on consistent patterns across texts rather than on isolated statements, and illustrative samples were selected to demonstrate the linguistic manifestation of overarching themes. Qualitative discourse analysis does not rely on inter-coder reliability in a positivist sense; however, analytic reliability was established through systematic coding procedures, thorough documentation of analytic decisions, and a robust correlation among data excerpts, interpretive claims, and theoretical frameworks.

We also looked at ethical issues. Because the data included media materials that were open to the public, formal permission was not needed. Nevertheless, ethical obligation was maintained by examining the texts instead of rendering judgement and by situating individual commentary within broader discursive and institutional contexts. The study seeks to examine the ideological role of discourse in media discussions rather than evaluate the moral integrity of individual authors.

This methodological approach is appropriate for achieving the study's research aims, as it enables a comprehensive examination of the emergence of diversity and tokenism in language, while situating these constructs within larger contexts of racial power dynamics. This research amalgamates Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with Critical Race Theory (CRT), enabling an exploration of how seemingly progressive narratives may sustain inequality via liberal, market-oriented, or colour-blind discourses. The technique supports the study's primary objective of redefining inclusive casting not merely as an industrial practice but as a discursive space where racial significations and power dynamics are continuously contested.

Findings

The analysis shows that media conversations about inclusive casting are structured by ongoing patterns of discourse that both promote and hinder diversity. The analysed texts portray inclusive casting not only as an ethical imperative but as a complex interplay of commercial interests, liberal ideals, symbolic progress, and resistance framed as rational concern. These discourses not only contradict one another; they frequently coexist within the same texts, leading to ambivalent and contradictory representations of race and inclusion. When looked at through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT), these patterns show that diversity is only accepted within narrow ideological boundaries, which usually keep existing structural racial hierarchies in place.

A common way of talking about inclusive casting that can be seen in the dataset is through market-driven reasons. Financial feasibility, audience growth, and brand relevance are often used to justify diversity. This makes inclusion seem like a smart way to adapt to changing demographics instead of a moral or political obligation. Words like "market appeal," "global audiences," and "commercial success" connect inclusion with institutional goals, making diversity a normal business advantage. This framing exemplifies the Critical Race Theory concept of interest convergence, wherein racial inclusion is legitimised primarily when it aligns with the economic or reputational goals of dominant institutions.

In this discourse, inclusive casting is infrequently portrayed as a challenge to existing power structures. Instead, it is described as an adaptive strategy that allows media companies to stay competitive without making major changes to their organisational structures or standards for telling stories. Diversity is an improvement that adds value, not a way to redistribute wealth. Media analyses obscure historical exclusion, labour disparity, and decision-making authority by framing inclusion as economically advantageous, thereby reducing race to a manipulable element of strategic representation.

This market-driven discourse also creates a limited form of inclusion. Racial diversity is acceptable as long as it does not upset the comfort of the audience, the rules of the genre, or the profit margins. As a result, inclusion is limited by existing norms, which keeps the idea alive that people of colour must follow established aesthetic and narrative standards. The focus on making money brings back institutional authority, which lets media companies set the rules for when diversity is okay.

The investigation uncovers a prevailing liberal discourse that situates inclusive casting within the paradigms of meritocracy, impartiality, and individual competence, alongside market justifications. Many texts that talk about this discourse say that casting decisions should only be based on "ability," "authenticity," or "fit." They see race-conscious casting as a step away from fairness. This conversation often brings up colour-blind philosophy, which means that talking about race is always bad or divisive. These books make it seem like rejecting diversity is okay, moral, and not political by saying that opposing inclusive casting is a way to protect neutrality.

From a CRT standpoint, liberal narratives obscure structural inequalities by personalising success and failure. The emphasis on merit neglects the historically inequitable allocation of opportunities within media enterprises, including variations in training, access, and acknowledgement. By assuming that the playing field is inherently level, meritocratic arguments weaken claims of structural exclusion and make inclusive casting seem unnecessary or too much. Liberal language serves as a tactic for sustaining racial hierarchy while superficially appearing neutral.

Meritocratic arguments encompass more than just critiques of inclusive casting. Supportive commentary may unintentionally reinforce liberal reasoning by emphasising the exceptional talent of certain racialised individuals, thereby advancing the notion that inclusion must be justified by extraordinary ability. Even though these stories seem to be about celebrating success, they might actually make racialised success seem like an exception rather than a rule, which promotes tokenism by focusing on individual achievements instead of structural change.

A significant trend is the characterisation of diversity as an indicator of progress. Some people see inclusive casting as proof that media companies have moved on from past wrongs, and exposure as a sign of equality. Words like "historic firsts,"

"breakthrough moments," and "representation matters" make inclusion seem like an end point instead of a process that goes on and on. While these narratives acknowledge historical exclusion, they often depict racism as a historical concern rather than a persistent structural issue.

This symbolic framing aligns with the characterisation by CRT researchers of the minimisation of racism, where systematic disparity is downplayed in favour of narratives of progress and resolution. By encouraging visibility without questioning power, media rhetoric turns inclusion into a show of moral progress that limits the ability to critically examine how institutions work. Tokenism emerges in this context as a tactic of regulated visibility, where representation functions to demonstrate a dedication to diversity without redistributing creative or economic authority.

It's important to note that stories of symbolic development often come with warnings about putting too much emphasis on race. Writings may praise inclusiveness while also warning against "forced diversity" or "agenda-driven casting," which suggests that diversity is only okay when it seems real and not threatening. These disclaimers work as rules that limit the scope of inclusion by reaffirming existing standards of authenticity and artistic freedom. These actions both support and limit diversity.

The investigation also finds a persistent counter-discourse that describes inclusive casting as an ideological imposition. People say that diversity programs are things that people have to do because of political correctness, social activism, or corporate branding goals. Words like "wokeness," "agenda," and "virtue signalling" make inclusive casting seem fake and oppressive, and they frame opposition as a way to protect creative freedom. This conversation often brings up ideas of artistic integrity, suggesting that thinking about race hurts the quality of the story or the truth of history.

This point of view shows how Critical Race Theory (CRT) sees people who don't like people who challenge the status quo. By labelling inclusive casting as ideological imposition, such narratives validate existing representational norms while discrediting race-conscious critique. The appeal to artistic freedom acts as a shield, drawing attention away from established practices of exclusion. Resistance to inclusion is consequently redefined not as an opposition to equality but as an opposition to politicisation, thereby further entrenching racial hierarchy.

Critiques of tokenism may inadvertently sustain these resistant discourses. When people talk about superficial inclusion, they sometimes completely ignore race-conscious interventions. They mix criticisms of tokenism with hostility toward diversity itself. This slippage shows how resistance discourses can use critical language while still keeping things the same. Tokenism is often used as a rhetorical tool to hurt inclusion instead of pushing for deep structural change.

The concept of authenticity emerges as a significant discursive resource throughout the dataset. Authenticity is employed to assess the legitimacy of inclusive casting, often expressed in terms of narrative coherence, historical accuracy, or cultural suitability. Authenticity may appear neutral, yet it frequently serves as a gatekeeping mechanism that privileges dominant perspectives of culture and history. Decisions about what "authenticity" means are rarely questioned, which lets the parties in power keep their interpretive power.

Critical Race Theory stresses that calls for authenticity are often racialised, based on unspoken rules about who is seen as natural or credible. In media discourse, racialised individuals are sometimes depicted as disruptions to conventional narratives, particularly within genres associated with tradition or heritage. These kinds of frames show how authenticity rhetoric can be used to exclude people while still following artistic or historical standards. In this context, tokenism functions as a boundary condition, enabling limited inclusion while resisting thorough transformation.

These discursive patterns collectively illustrate that inclusive casting is not positioned as a radical challenge to inequality, but rather as a regulated process shaped by conflicting ideological forces. Diversity is acceptable when it aligns with commercial interests, liberal values, or narratives of symbolic progress, but is contested when it threatens established norms of excellence, authenticity, or authority. Tokenism is an important place for negotiation because it is both a criticism of cosmetic inclusion and a way to control how diverse a group is.

From a CRT-informed perspective, the results demonstrate that media discourse regarding inclusive casting often reinforces the inequalities it aims to address. Even positive conversations often rely on ideas that make success seem like a personal thing, make diversity seem like a product, or downplay structural racism. Resistance discourses employ liberal and aesthetic principles to subvert race-conscious critique while maintaining institutional authority. These tendencies collectively suggest that diversity discourse operates within limited ideological confines that reduce its potential for transformation.

Instead of being a clear sign of progress, inclusive casting is a contentious discursive landscape where racial meanings are always being talked about. The results underscore that representation cannot be deemed evidence of equality without acknowledging the discourses that contextualise, justify, and regulate inclusion. This analysis elucidates the ideological roles of media discourse regarding inclusive casting, highlighting the imperative to move beyond superficial diversity and critically examine the structural determinants that influence inclusion.

Discussion

This study sought to examine the discursive construction of tokenism in media discussions regarding inclusive casting, employing a Critical Race Theory (CRT)-informed critical discourse analysis methodology. The results show that inclusive casting is not a simple fix for racial inequality. Instead, it is part of a complicated set of ideological debates that decide when, how, and to what extent diversity is acceptable. The conversation about inclusion often shows the power dynamics it says it wants to change. The subsequent discourse synthesises the findings with contemporary scholarship and clarifies the theoretical implications of the study.

The principal contribution of this study is the demonstration that market-oriented rationales supersede media-related justifications for inclusive casting. Prior research has recognised the commercialisation of diversity within cultural sectors, while the present analysis demonstrates how this rationale is normalised through everyday media discourse. Media commentary frames inclusion as commercially viable, strategically advantageous, or audience-centric, thereby aligning diversity with institutional self-interest rather than social justice. From a Critical Race Theory standpoint, this aligns closely with the concept of interest

convergence, which posits that racial progress is considered acceptable only when it aligns with the economic and reputational interests of dominant groups. This framing does not explicitly reject inclusiveness; instead, it renders inclusion dependent on profitability and audience comfort. Diversity is thus depoliticised and redefined as a managerial tool, limiting its capacity to challenge entrenched racial hierarchies.

The findings also highlight the persistent influence of liberal ideologies such as meritocracy and colour-blindness in conversations regarding inclusive casting. These discourses function as powerful legitimising strategies that recontextualise resistance to race-conscious casting as a defence of equity, impartiality, or artistic integrity. While liberal principles are often depicted as fundamentally equitable, Critical Race Theory posits that these frameworks obscure structural inequity by prioritising individual achievement over institutional barriers. The analysis shows that meritocratic language not only weakens claims of exclusion, but it also makes racial criticism seem illogical or ideological. While inclusive casting is advocated, it is often justified through narratives of exceptional individual talent, thereby reinforcing the notion that racialised inclusion should be earned rather than systematically promoted. This creates a tokenistic reason for why racialised success is seen as rare, which keeps whiteness as the norm.

One important thing to notice is how diversity is portrayed as a sign of progress. Media discussions sometimes see inclusive casting as a sign that racial injustice is getting better, when in reality, it's just the end of a long-standing structural conflict. This aligns with criticisms of post-racial discourse, which argue that narratives of progress may undermine or negate the persistent reality of racism. By celebrating "firsts" and anniversaries without questioning institutional authority, media discourse threatens the genuineness of diversity, reducing it to a mere performance. Ahmed's examination of diversity rhetoric reveals that this performativity allows institutions to convey inclusivity while preserving static material conditions. This study enhances the thesis by illustrating how media commentary facilitates this process, propagating narratives that link visibility with equality and consequently limiting the scope of critique.

The data suggests that opposition to inclusive casting is rarely articulated as a direct affront to equality itself. Instead, it is placed in the context of conversations about authenticity, artistic freedom, and ideological neutrality. These discourses serve as protective mechanisms that shield existing representational norms from scrutiny. Appeals to authenticity function as gatekeeping mechanisms that prioritise established cultural interpretations and marginalise alternative narratives. Critical Race Theory emphasises the racialised nature of these arguments, contending that claims of authenticity are often grounded in historically exclusionary criteria. Resistance narratives reaffirm institutional power by portraying exclusion as rational and non-racial, while characterising inclusive casting as disruptive or externally mandated. This finding underscores the intricate ways in which racial power is maintained in liberal-democratic contexts, where overt racism is denounced yet systemic inequality persists.

The main theoretical contribution of this study is its claim that discourses that support inclusive casting can still lead to tokenism. The analysis shows that pro- and anti-inclusion discourses can exist within the same ideological boundaries, rather than being completely opposed to each other. Stories that support market

rationality, symbolic progress, or exceptionalism may unintentionally keep tokenism going. This challenges simplistic interpretations of inclusion discussions and emphasises the need to scrutinise the dynamics of power within ostensibly progressive language. The study advances CRT-informed media scholarship by illustrating that racial injustice is sustained through both resistance and conditional acceptance.

The integration of Critical Race Theory with critical discourse analysis enables an in-depth investigation of the ways in which language influences racial power dynamics. CDA is frequently employed to examine media discourse; however, its amalgamation with CRT amplifies its capacity to address structural racism and institutional interests. This methodology enables the shift from simple textual description to an explanation of how discursive patterns align with broader systems of inequality. The findings respond to calls within critical media studies for research that combines linguistic analysis with race theory, establishing a framework for the examination of diversity discourse across cultural contexts.

The consequences of these findings are significant for both scholarly and practical contexts. The analysis in media studies underscores the imperative of advancing beyond mere assessments of representational presence to a critical engagement with the discourses that influence inclusion. Representation cannot be evaluated in isolation from the ideological narratives that endorse and constrain it. The results show that diversity programs for media professionals and organisations that focus on looks instead of real structural change are not working. If you don't pay attention to who makes decisions, how people work, and who controls the story, inclusive casting could become nothing more than a symbolic act that keeps injustice going instead of stopping it.

This study improves existing conversations about how culture affects racial politics. Media discourse not only reflects societal sentiments but also significantly influences the frameworks of racial justice conceptualisation and pursuit. This analysis shows the ideological limits that affect conversations about inclusive casting. It shows how cultural arguments can both help and hurt chances for growth. Tokenism does not solely stem from a deficiency of inclusion; rather, it emerges as a discursive phenomenon shaped by liberal, market-driven, and post-racial ideologies.

In short, the conversation makes it clear that inclusive casting, as it is talked about in the media, works within limited ideological boundaries that limit its ability to bring about change. People often talk about diversity, but its structural importance is often downplayed and redefined as strategy, symbolism, or an exception. This study, utilising a CRT-informed analysis, illustrates that combating tokenism requires not only enhanced representation but also a rigorous reassessment of the discourses that delineate the concept of inclusion.

Conclusion

This study sought to meticulously examine the construction and negotiation of tokenism in media discourses concerning inclusive casting, utilising a Critical Race Theory (CRT)-informed critical discourse analysis methodology. By shifting focus from merely representational outcomes to the discursive contexts that influence the expression of inclusion, the study has demonstrated that inclusive casting is neither a neutral nor consistently progressive endeavour. Instead, it shows up as a contentious discursive arena where language is always used to argue about race, power, and

legitimacy. The conclusion summarises the main findings of the study, talks about what they mean, and suggests ways for more research to be done.

The findings suggest that media discourse regarding inclusive casting is shaped by a limited set of dominant discursive frameworks that dictate the interpretation and scope of diversity. Market-driven reasons, liberal ideas of meritocracy and color-blindness, and stories of symbolic advancement are the main reasons why inclusive casting is justified. These discourses appear to support inclusion, yet they simultaneously impose limitations, allowing diversity only when it aligns with institutional interests, aesthetic criteria, and dominant ideological perspectives. From a Critical Race Theory standpoint, this exemplifies the persistent character of racial power structures that adapt rather than dissolve in response to calls for equality. In media discourse, diversity is depicted as limited, regulated, and deliberately curated, rather than being transformative.

The main thing this study adds is showing how tokenism works as a criticism of inclusion and as a result of discursive management. Tokenism occurs when representation is divorced from structural transformation and is reinterpreted as visibility, exceptionality, or economic value. Media stories that praise inclusive casting as a sign of progress often hide the fact that racial inequality is still a problem. They present representation as an end goal instead of a part of a bigger fight for the redistribution of power and resources. As a result, rhetoric is very important for making shallow inclusion seem normal while limiting the ability to look at the big picture.

It is also important to note that people who are against inclusive casting rarely use overtly racist language. Instead, it is expressed through appeals to impartiality, authenticity, and artistic freedom, which are ideologically powerful tools for maintaining the status quo. These discourses portray dissent against race-conscious initiatives as rational, nonpartisan, and moral, while simultaneously eroding structural critiques of racial inequality. CRT's emphasis on the persistent and adaptable characteristics of racism elucidates the mechanisms of resistance in ostensibly liberal contexts, where overt exclusion is rejected yet systemic injustice persists.

The study enhances critical media scholarship by challenging reductive binary interpretations of inclusion discourse. The analysis indicates that pro- and anti-inclusion discourses, rather than being antagonistic, may both sustain tokenism through different approaches. Supportive narratives grounded in market principles or symbolic progress may inadvertently sustain the same structural constraints as opposing narratives founded on meritocracy or authenticity. This observation underscores the imperative of meticulously assessing both the advocacy for diversity and the justification and context in which it is articulated.

The integration of Critical Race Theory with critical discourse analysis offers an extensive framework for examining race and representation in media contexts. This approach enables a comprehensive analysis of language while situating discursive patterns within broader structures of power and inequality. The research underscores the importance of media commentary as a site of ideological production, rather than mere opinion, thereby demonstrating the impact of language on public perceptions of inclusion and equity. This methodological contribution is particularly important for future research that seeks to integrate language analysis with critical racial studies.

The consequences of this work extend beyond academic discourse. The results show how ineffective diversity programs are in media organisations and among professionals who focus on looks instead of real change. When inclusive casting is mostly seen as a way to market a brand or make a statement, it can make the problems it tries to fix worse. Substantial inclusion requires not only representational presence but also structural reforms that redistribute creative authority, decision-making power, and economic resources. Without these changes, discussions about diversity may be used by institutions to justify their own existence instead of promoting social justice.

The study underscores the imperative for scholars to surpass representational metrics and critically engage with discourse. Future research could expand this methodology by examining additional media genres, such as promotional materials, audience responses, or industry policy documents, to enhance the understanding of diversity construction within institutional frameworks. Comparative analyses across cultural or national contexts would yield substantial insights into the divergences and intersections of inclusion and tokenism discourses with local historical narratives of racism and power.

This work provides considerable insights, yet it possesses limitations. The focus on media criticism naturally puts discursive creation ahead of material practice. The next study could benefit from combining discourse analysis with industry interviews or production data. However, the study's emphasis on discourse is a strength as it clarifies the ideological contexts that shape the conceptualisation and contestation of inclusion in public spaces.

This study concludes that inclusive casting, as framed in media discussions, operates within rigid ideological constraints that limit its potential for transformation. The analysis clarifies the discursive mechanisms that produce and normalise tokenism, emphasising the need for a more critical evaluation of diversity—one that interrogates not only the identities represented but also the methodologies and justifications regarding the importance of representation. From a CRT-informed standpoint, the study underscores that racial equality requires more than mere symbolic inclusion; it necessitates continuous examination of the discourses and structures that consistently shape cultural production.

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