Beyond Checking A Box: A Lack of Authentically Inclusive Representation Has Costs at the Box Office
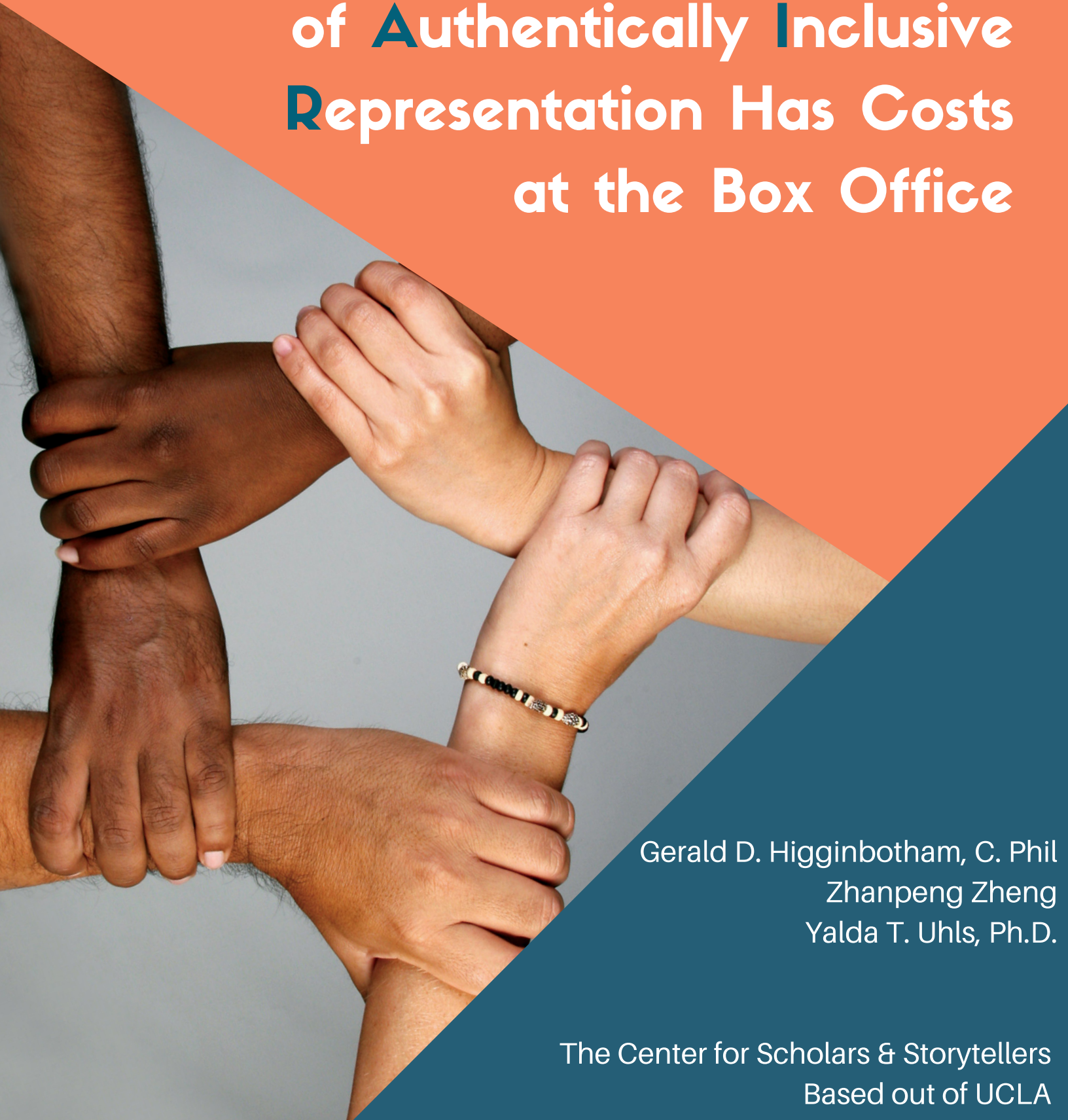
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Message from Stephanie Allain, Founder Homegrown Pictures

When I first read *Boyz N the Hood*, I immediately connected to the material because I went to school in Inglewood and I knew these kids. The representation was authentic and true to the Black experience, both for the protagonists and for the antagonists, and I knew that with John Singleton at the helm of his own story, it would resonate in a big way. What I didn't know is that authentic representation is so powerful, it changed the culture: Drive-by shootings plunged after kids were able to see themselves on screen.

The power of stories to shape the lives and identities of young people in meaningful ways is real. As content creators, we know this intuitively. The Center for Scholars & Storytellers is backing up our intuitions with data and research. They understand the business in a way most academics don't and understand the levers that must be used to change the system.

That's why I'm thrilled to see this study and I hope that executives will seriously consider these findings when deciding what to greenlight. I've spent my entire career supporting voices and content that are not often seen on the big screen. But it has always been a struggle and the budgets are typically smaller to validate the absurd fallacy that Black content doesn't travel internationally. This study demonstrates that studios are leaving money on the table by not showcasing stories that are authentically diverse. Perhaps now is finally the time that Hollywood movies, which shape hearts and minds throughout the world, will start to reflect ALL of us in ways that resonate deeply with the multicultural audiences that make up the USA.

- Stephanie Allain, Founder, Homegrown Pictures and Producer *Dear White People*, *Beyond the Lights*, *Oscars 2020*

Homegrown Pictures, founded in 2003 by producer Stephanie Allain, is a film, television and digital production company dedicated to creating content by and about women and people of color with authentic stories, depictions and representation. Homegrown Pictures' numerous efforts have been nominated for over 100 awards with wins from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Film Independent Spirit Awards, Sundance Film Festival, the NAACP and more.

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Based in the psychology department at UCLA, the Center for Scholars & Storytellers (CSS) exists to support authentic and inclusive stories for young people at every stage and age, from 2-25. CSS works with research scientists in a variety of subject matters to share their expertise with content creators. CSS curates research, translates it into lay language, and disseminates it through a variety of platforms; CSS also designs original scientific studies with the input of the entertainment industry. Collaborations have included work with Disney Channel, the Television Academy, Jim Henson Productions, Amy Poehler's Smart Girls, YouTube Kids, Mattel, and other industry influencers. You can learn more about their work at scholarsandstorytellers.com.

INTRODUCTION

The recent box office successes of high-profile films such as *Coco*, *Black Panther*, and *Crazy Rich Asians* showed that betting on diverse casts and key decision-makers can bring huge financial wins. These films, which pushed the envelope forward for big screen representation of racial minority groups in the U.S., likely benefited from the box office clout of ever growing multicultural audiences. Indeed, researchers consistently find that movies with racially diverse cast members perform better at the box office.[1] In other words, diversity sells.

Since researchers have already demonstrated that casting diverse actors is related to box office success, we wondered if other research could support the business case for content that represents the inclusion of diverse voices, people, and cultures both in front of and behind the camera? We decided to explore whether we could find a data-driven method to ask the question "*What is the cost of lacking diversity?*" Hollywood is a business after all, and no business wants to leave money on the table.

To consider our research question, we needed to define "diversity." What became quickly apparent was that numerical representation, even behind the camera, didn't necessarily equate to authentic and diverse storytelling. To truly consider our research question, we needed to consider the content for dimension, cultural relevance and social context. We coined the term (A)uthentically (I)nclusive (R)epresentation (AIR) to capture the essence of what we sought to examine.

What is Authentically Inclusive Representation (AIR)?

Just because a film numerically has a cast that includes more members from a variety of backgrounds, it may not actually reflect true diversity in its storytelling.

To determine if there is true diversity in storytelling — what we call Authentically Inclusive Representation (AIR) — it is necessary to examine both:

(**a**) if there are individuals from diverse backgrounds (in terms of race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and their intersections) on the screen *and* behind the scenes.

(**b**) if such diversity is present, whether the characters and story on-screen reflect genuine aspects of the culture being portrayed (i.e., instead of relying on and reinscribing stereotypes or tropes).

To determine whether a movie had or didn't have AIR, we relied on a pre-existing source that captured this notion: Mediaversity Reviews, a movie and television review website that prioritizes inclusivity and intersectionality (i.e., different and overlapping identities) along with film technical quality in their ratings.[2] Please see https://www.mediaversityreviews.com/how-we-grade to learn more about how they rate movies.

The result of our research was finding that a movie that lacks AIR can indeed cost a distributor big-time at the box office. For average-to-large budget films, the impact of not having AIR can be expected to be felt financially in the first weekend and have significant costs. And, while our findings are specific to box office, the immediate costs of lacking AIR captured by our study are relevant to other kinds of releases and types of content.

> **In light of the national conversation around systemic racism, it is well past time for entertainment media creators to think beyond on-screen numerical representation as a marker of "inclusivity and diversity."**

Diverse representation in content (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and their intersections), particularly behind the camera, is still disproportionate and slow to change. Without including a broader swath of voices on every level of a production, from set decorator or costume designer to director or actor, stories and characters will come across as stereotypical and sacrifice dimension. And today's moviegoing audience quickly recognizes when a story rings false.

By having a greater representation of the audience reflected in the leading characters, in the key decision-makers, and in the story itself, Hollywood can rise to the challenge being asked of all artistic work to tell stories of our world that truly reflect all citizens. The U.S. has a long way to go to make sure that our stories and the stories we tell about our own history truly reflect all of its people. Hollywood can and should work to ensure that the stories being shared on the big screen and in our homes help lead the way. We hope that our findings can help inspire the industry.

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*Consistent with our findings, a 2018 Mediaversity Reviews report found that while the top 25 "buzziest" films of 2017 varied widely in their Mediaversity scores, there was some evidence that those films with higher scores performed better financially.[3]

Sample:

We analyzed 109 films, all of which had been rated by Mediaversity, and which had publicly available information about production budget and the first weekend of the U.S. box office, from the period 2016 to 2019.[4]

Metrics:

In order to run our analysis we needed to answer the following questions:

1. How does the film score on Authentically Inclusive Representation?
2. How do we compare a broad range of films as fairly as possible?
3. What kind of "cost" should we measure (e.g., public perception, profit, revenue, etc.)?

Below are the metrics we used to answer each of these questions.
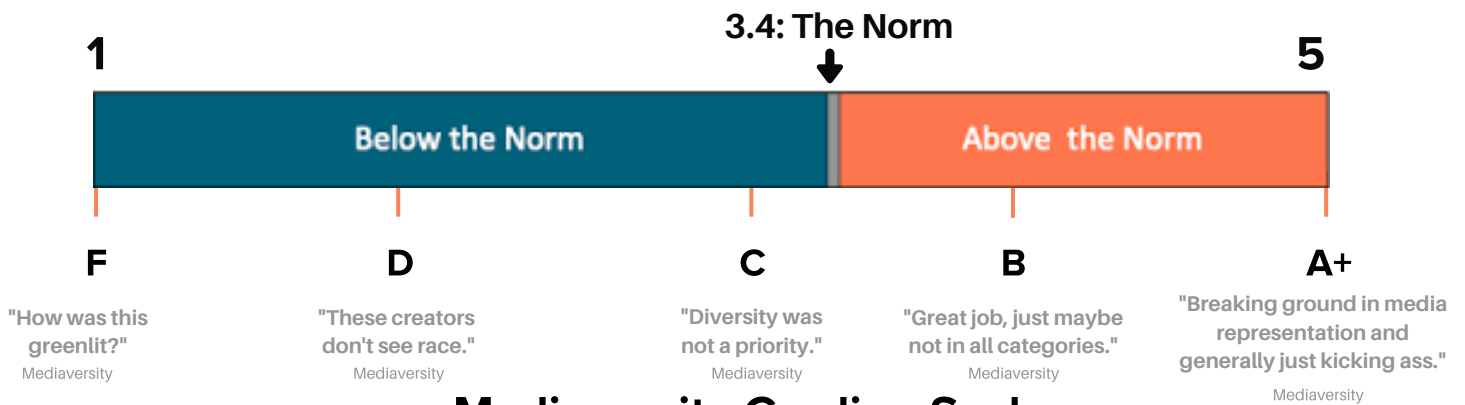
1. How does the film score on Authentically Inclusive Representation?

AIR Ratings: To determine a positive or negative AIR rating, we looked at each film's diversity score on the independent movie and television review website Mediaversity Reviews. We ascertained that the Mediaversity ratings objectively measured diversity by ensuring that they corresponded to diversity ratings from GradeMyMovie.com, another robust source that measures numerical race and gender diversity in key cast members and decision-makers (i.e., writers, directors, producers).[5] Next, we compared the Mediaversity ratings to the critical acclaim aggregators, Metacritic and Rotten Tomatoes, to examine whether the Mediaversity ratings were related to these critical acclaim metrics. We found a moderate, positive association between critical acclaim and Mediaversity ratings (correlation range: .21-.41). We ultimately deemed each film's Mediaversity score to be an accurate measure of AIR for our analyses. Given that films vary in critical acclaim, we also report the costs of lacking AIR in film when accounting for these differences.

Mediaversity rates each film on a base scale ranging from 1 to 5. Films scoring 3.4 to 3.59 (which they say are *"Chilling in that inoffensive groove,"*) are, in Mediaversity's assessment, films that neither performed well nor badly on diversity. In our analysis, we used a score of 3.4 as our criterion for what we called the NORM for AIR. We considered films that received a Mediaversity score of 3.4 or above as **"Above the Norm" for AIR** and films that scored below 3.4 as **"Below the Norm" for AIR**. The average Mediaversity score for films "Above the Norm" for AIR was 4.18 (a *"B"* average), while the average Mediaversity score for films "Below the Norm" for AIR was 2.43 (a *"D"* average).

AIR Rating Scale

3.4: The Norm

1				5
	Below the Norm		Above the Norm	

F	D	C	B	A+
"How was this greenlit?"	"These creators don't see race."	"Diversity was not a priority."	"Great job, just maybe not in all categories."	"Breaking ground in media representation and generally just kicking ass."
Mediaversity	Mediaversity	Mediaversity	Mediaversity	Mediaversity

Mediaversity Grading Scale

An example of a film that CSS counted as near the Norm for AIR:

"The Sun is Also a Star" was rated by Mediaversity near what we called the "Norm" for AIR. Mediaversity Reviews cited the film positively for centering the story on two, complex non-White protagonists. However, colorism in casting and story decisions were also cited as detracting from the positive impact of these diverse representations.

An example of a film CSS counted as Below the Norm:

JUSTICE LEAGUE

**An example of a film CSS counted as Above the Norm:**

WONDER WOMAN

2. How do we compare a broad range of films as fairly as possible?

Production Budget: The kind of release a film has (e.g., wide, limited, etc.) will often determine its box office on opening weekend, while a film's production budget often correlates to type of release. Thus, we decided to use the budget of the movie to proximate an apples to apples comparison. The average budget of the 109 films we examined was $78M. We classified films that were at least one standard deviation greater than the average as *large-budget* (i.e., greater or equal to $159M) and films whose production budgets were in the bottom tercile among the films analyzed as *small-budget* (i.e., less than or equal to $15M). These budget cutoffs align with typical industry cutoffs.[6] Thus, we placed the films into large (n=21), average (n=67) and small (n=21) budget categories.

SMALL-BUDGET FILM	AVERAGE-BUDGET FILM	LARGE-BUDGET FILM
$15M	**$78M**	**$159M**
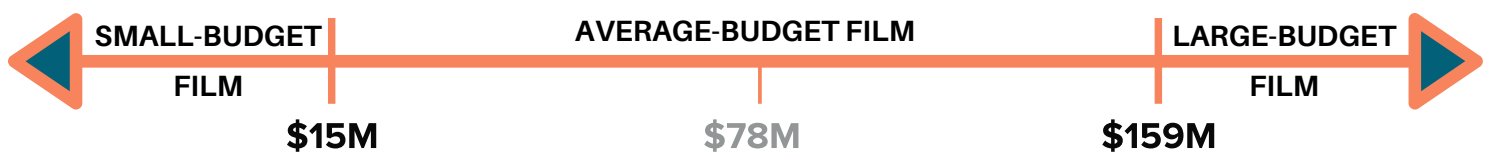
3. What kind of "cost" should we measure (e.g., public perception, profit, revenue, etc.)?

Box Office: We decided to use the first weekend U.S. box office results as our "cost" metric because these numbers most closely capture audience demand before word of mouth, reviews, and/or the release of newer films impact attendance. In addition, the first weekend box office, particularly for wide releases, typically accounts for about 25% of total box office take.[7] Thus, any reduction in box office in this initial weekend would typically impact the total financial success of a film.

Analysis of the Expected Cost of Lacking AIR in Film: We used multiple linear regression analyses to estimate the expected cost of lacking AIR in films we classified as having small ($15M), average ($78M), and large ($159M) production budgets. At each of these three budget classification values, we compared the expected difference in first weekend box office performance of a film with the average Mediaversity score for films scoring "Below the Norm" for AIR and a film with the average Mediaversity score for films scoring "Above the Norm" for AIR.

In other words, our analysis assigns a film one of two scores, Above the Norm for AIR or Below the Norm for AIR, and then determines the difference in opening weekend box officbetween these scores, at each budget level: small, average, or large.

CENTER FOR SCHOLARS & STORYTELLERS

1 Large-budget films ranked Below the Norm for AIR incur a significant cost in the opening weekend box office. We found that a $159M-budget film is estimated to **lose $32.2M**, effectively 20% of the budget, with a potential total loss of a **staggering $130M (82% of its budget).**

2 Average-budget films ranked Below the Norm for AIR also incur a significant cost in the opening weekend box office. We found that a $78M-budget film is estimated to **lose $13.8M,** effectively 18% of the budget, with a potential **total loss of $55.2M (or 71% of its budget).**
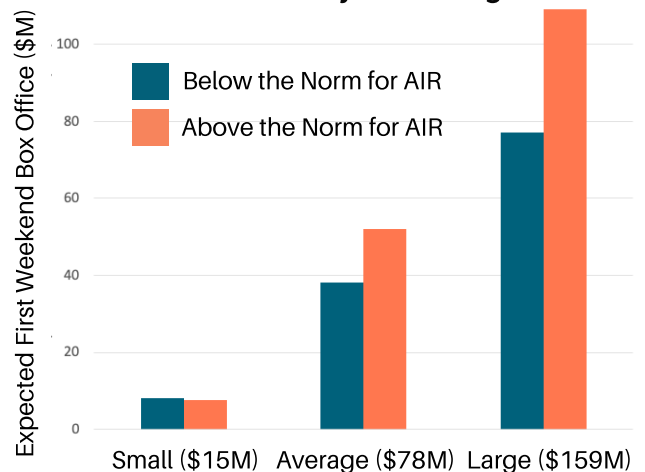
3 Small-budget films included in the analyses overwhelmingly scored Above the Norm for AIR (81%).

4 Numerical diversity on or behind the screen does not automatically translate to AIR. Although positively associated with AIR, the mere presence of individuals from diverse backgrounds did not always translate to more authentic representation on-screen. In other words, to truly have AIR, a movie must not only include diverse talent and decision-makers, but the story itself must also be authentic and inclusive with respect to the social and cultural context.

Entertainment content creators are extremely powerful. And they have a clear choice — contribute to the marginalization of groups (e.g., racial minorities, women, LGBTQ+ people, and their intersections) or work to promote meaningful change toward equity.

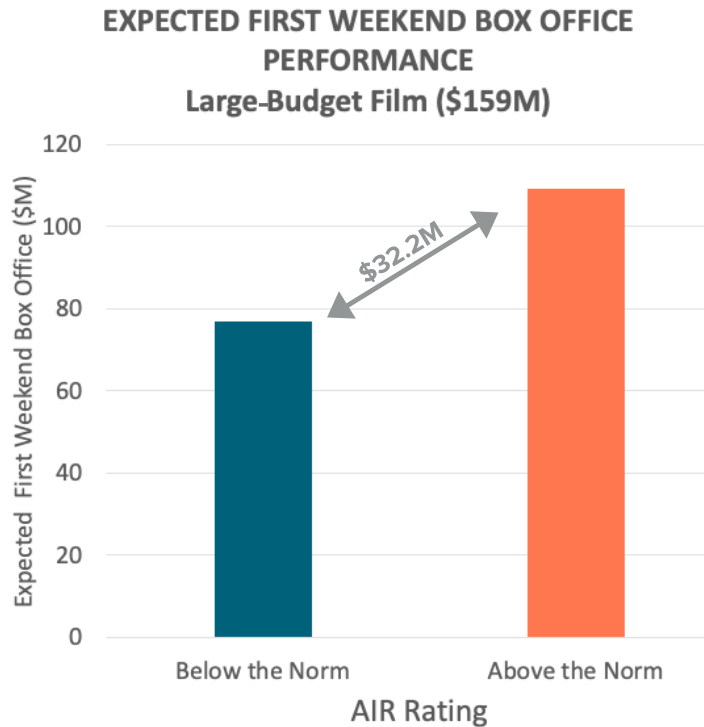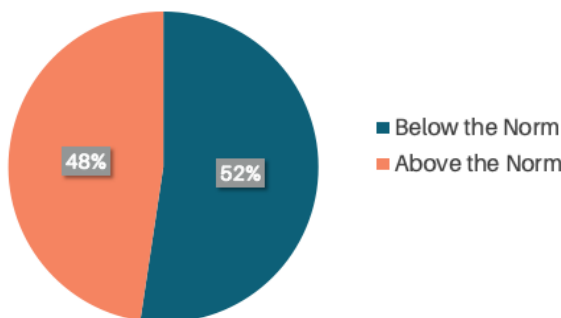**Expected First Weekend Box Office Performance By AIR Ratings**

Legend:
- Below the Norm for AIR
- Above the Norm for AIR

Y-axis: Expected First Weekend Box Office ($M) — 0, 20, 40, 60, 80, 100

X-axis: Small ($15M), Average ($78M), Large ($159M)

CENTER FOR SCHOLARS & STORYTELLERS

Large-budget films ranked Below the Norm for AIR incur a significant cost in the opening weekend box office. We found that a $159M-budget film is estimated to **lose $32.2M**, effectively 20% of the budget, with a potential total loss of a **staggering $130M (or 82% of its budget)**. When accounting for differences in films' critical acclaim (i.e., MetaCritic ratings), the estimated first weekend box office loss is **$27.3M**.

EXPECTED FIRST WEEKEND BOX OFFICE PERFORMANCE
Large-Budget Film ($159M)

$32.2M

(bar chart: Y-axis "Expected First Weekend Box Office ($M)" 0–120; X-axis "AIR Rating" — "Below the Norm" ≈ 77, "Above the Norm" ≈ 109)

Distribution of AIR Ratings for Large-Budget Films

(pie chart: 48% Above the Norm, 52% Below the Norm)

- ■ Below the Norm
- ■ Above the Norm

EXAMPLES: LARGE-BUDGET FILM AIR RATINGS

AIR RATING: ABOVE THE NORM

Rogue One: A Star Wars Story (2016)

BUDGET: $200M
WEEKEND 1 BOX OFFICE: $155.1M

"The number of non-white characters in major roles stretches long."

MEDIAVERSITY

AIR RATING: BELOW THE NORM

Solo: A Star Wars Story (2018)

BUDGET: $275M
WEEKEND 1 BOX OFFICE: $84.4M

"While racial diversity isn't ignored, neither is there any thought behind how it may play into the way certain characters are treated or developed."

MEDIAVERSITY

Average-budget films ranked Below the Norm for AIR also incur a significant cost in the opening weekend box office. We found that a $78M-budget film is estimated to **lose $13.8M**, effectively 18% of the budget, with a potential total **loss of $55.2M (or 71% of its budget)**. When accounting for differences in films' critical acclaim (i.e., MetaCritic ratings), the estimated first weekend box office loss is **$10.9M**.

EXAMPLES: AVERAGE-BUDGET FILM AIR RATINGS

AIR RATING: ABOVE THE NORM

Girls Trip (2017)

BUDGET: $19M
WEEKEND 1 BOX OFFICE: $31.2M

"Girls Trip walks the walk. It stars black women and delivers their unique perspectives while managing to appeal to all viewers."
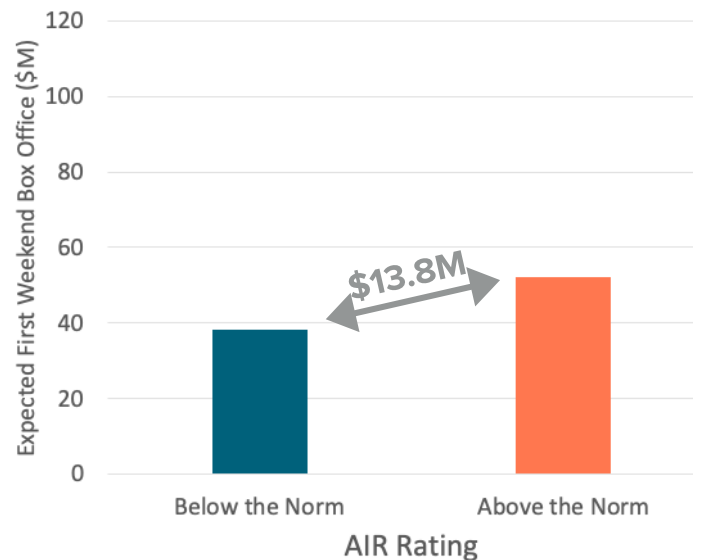MEDIAVERSITY

AIR RATING: BELOW THE NORM

Shaft (2019)
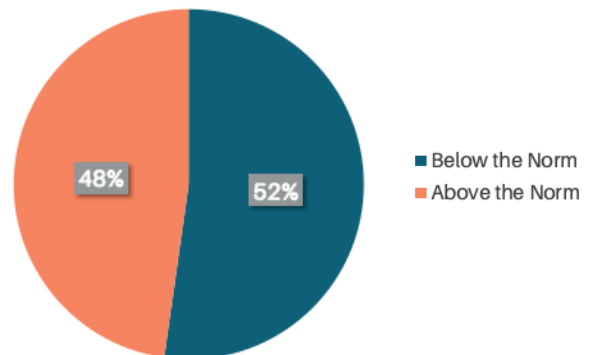
BUDGET: $30M
WEEKEND 1 BOX OFFICE: $8.9M

"'Shaft' reduces women to the role of sex objects and damsels in distress."
MEDIAVERSITY

EXPECTED FIRST WEEKEND BOX OFFICE PERFORMANCE
Average-Budget Film ($78M)
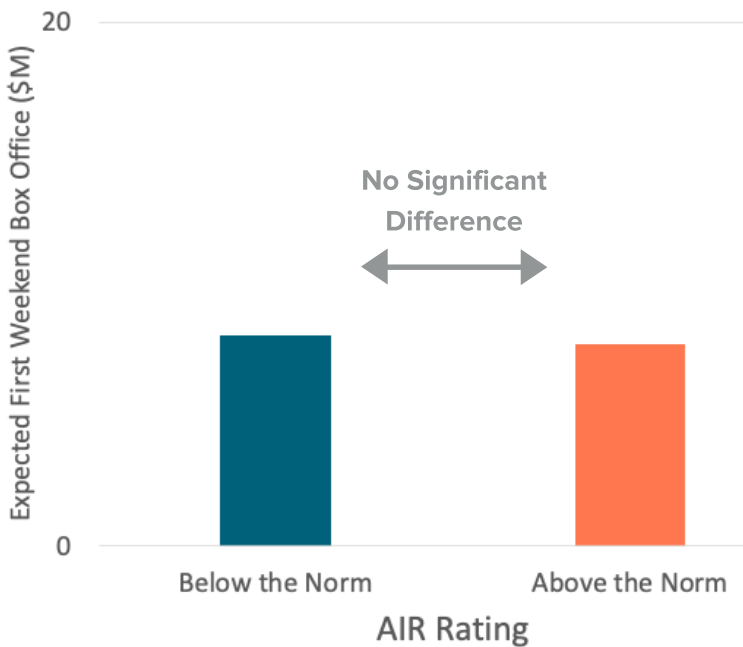

Distribution of AIR Ratings for Average-Budget Films

48%   52%

■ Below the Norm
■ Above the Norm

Small-budget films included in the analyses overwhelmingly scored Above the Norm for AIR (81%). For the small-budget films we highlight below, we also include total box office to help illustrate the longstanding impact and reception of these movies.

EXPECTED FIRST WEEKEND BOX OFFICE PERFORMANCE
Small Budget Film ($15M)

No Significant Difference

AIR Rating — Below the Norm, Above the Norm

Expected First Weekend Box Office ($M)

Distribution of AIR Ratings for Small-Budget Films

- Below the Norm — 19%
- Above the Norm — 81%
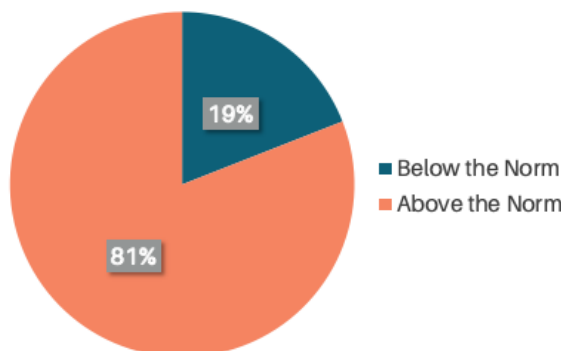
EXAMPLES: SMALL-BUDGET FILM AIR RATINGS

AIR RATING: ABOVE THE NORM

Moonlight (2016)

BUDGET: $4M
WEEKEND 1 BOX OFFICE: $1.5M
TOTAL BOX OFFICE: $26M

"The majority of people in this film were people of color, but I never thought of Moonlight as a 'Black' story, just a human one."

MEDIAVERSITY

AIR RATING: ABOVE THE NORM

Lady Bird (2017)

BUDGET: $10M
WEEKEND 1 BOX OFFICE: $2.5M
TOTAL BOX OFFICE: $48M

"This film champions women, displaying the full range of complicated emotions, untold strengths, and everyday triumphs that are often afforded only men in feature films."
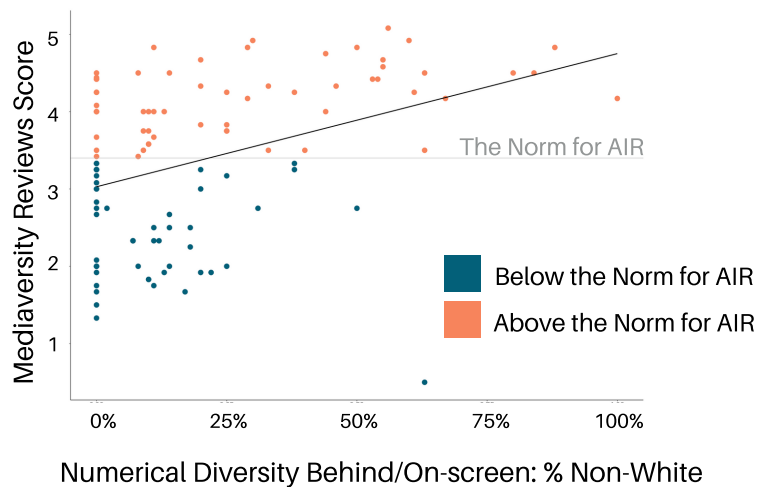
MEDIAVERSITY

Numerical diversity on or behind the screen does not automatically translate to AIR. Although positively associated with AIR, the mere presence of individuals from diverse backgrounds did not always translate to more authentic representation on-screen. In other words, to truly have AIR, a movie must not only include diverse talent and decision-makers, but the story itself must also be authentic and inclusive with respect to the social and cultural context.

Each dot on the graph represents a single film in our analyses plotted by both its score on numerical diversity (race or gender) along the horizontal axis and its Mediaversity Reviews score along the vertical axis.

We found an overall positive relationship between a film's numerical diversity of race/gender and its Mediaversity score, which is represented by the black line. Yet, the graphs show that several films with greater numerical diversity were rated Below the Norm for AIR and several other films with less numerical diversity were rated Above the Norm for AIR. This was the case with respect to both racial and gender diversity.

AIR Rating Distribution by Film: Racial Diversity in Key Cast Members & Decision-Makers

The Norm for AIR

Below the Norm for AIR
Above the Norm for AIR

Numerical Diversity Behind/On-screen: % Non-White

AIR Rating Distribution by Film: Gender Diversity in Key Cast Members & Decision-Makers

The Norm for AIR

Below the Norm for AIR
Above the Norm for AIR

Numerical Diversity Behind/On-screen: % Non-Male
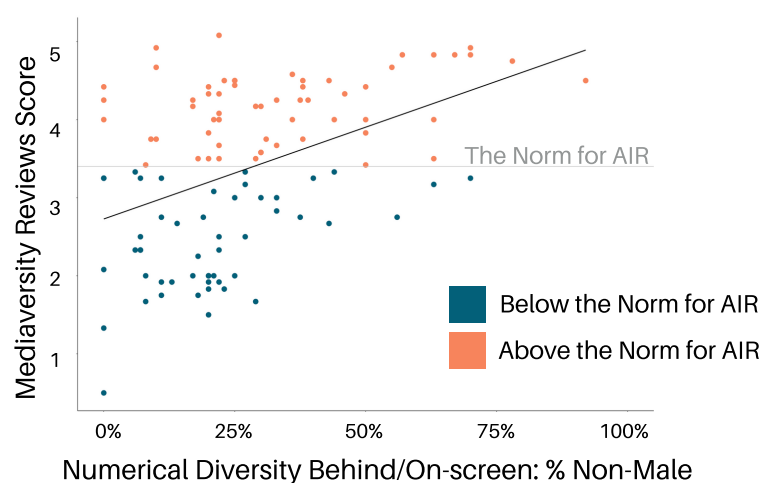
Although there is a clear business case for **AIR**, acknowledging and attending to the moral case for **AIR** is essential to foster an effective, inclusive environment for content makers.

Photo Credit: Fauxels from Pexel

Current statistics show that Hollywood has much room to improve its diversity, especially behind the camera.[8] Focusing exclusively on the business case for diversity, however, undermines underrepresented groups' sense of belonging in and attraction to an organization and can actually increase bias in hiring and promotion.[9] Further, organizations that express commitments to diversity but do not reflect that commitment in the makeup of their workforce are perceived as dishonest by underrepresented groups (e.g., Black and Latino/a/x Americans) and as having work environments where these groups cannot be their authentic selves[10]– clearly a required component of increasing AIR in film. Below we provide more specific suggestions for ways the industry can and should consider promoting AIR. We also have a tip sheet and a checklist free on our website for those who want to take this work further. Visit https://www.scholarsandstorytellers.com/AIR to download these tools.

Promote AIR with a focus on EQUITY.

INCLUSION focuses on whether everyone feels welcomed and valued. **EQUITY** focuses on giving people what they need to be successful. **EQUITY** requires recognizing that structural barriers exist, requires understanding how these barriers impact people differently due to their multiple identities, and requires providing what is needed to adjust for the differential impact of these barriers with the end goal of removing these barriers.

Photo Credit : Kevin A. Clark, Ph.D.

Specific Suggestions

- Implement explicit norms and guidelines to ensure that all viewpoints will be shared.
- Review the process of greenlighting content and add BIPOC decision-makers into the process.
- Hire diverse casting directors who can bring in original and dynamic talent from underrepresented groups.

CALL TO ACTION

Empower and increase the number of actors/actresses and key decision-makers behind the camera (e.g., writers, producers, directors, costume designers, hair/makeup artists, editors, sound mixers) who are from diverse backgrounds.

While increasing numerical representation behind and in front of the camera is critical, truly empowering people from diverse backgrounds is the key component to achieving AIR.[11] For example, make sure the writers' room is open to dissenting opinions, that a wide net is cast for hiring, and that younger, less-tenured voices are encouraged.

Photo Credit: Cottonbro from Pexel

Specific Suggestions

- Build diverse teams (function, demographics, etc.).
- Establish Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) standards (e.g., content focus, team make-up) to be reported on quarterly.
- Create a report card with metrics to track progress in diversifying teams (e.g., for each project or department either internally or with an objective third party) and track progress year over year.

When characters' backgrounds do not match that of the writer, consult with internal and external sources who can weigh in on cultural competence.

AIR cannot exist without cultural competency. Thus, achieving AIR requires input from individuals who have had authentic interactions and experiences with the characters and cultural content being portrayed. This recommendation does not imply that content creators cannot elevate the stories of characters or communities with whom they do not share a similar background. This recommendation does strongly suggest that content creators include and seek out input and insight from individuals who can weigh in on cultural competence.

Specific Suggestions

- Bring in expertise regarding cultural competency (e.g., consultant) at the beginning of the development process, not as a band-aid later on.
- Create ongoing, required professional development courses for creators and executives on building cultural competency. From these, build a repository of resources available for all production and marketing execs to use as thought starters in developing content. Provide checklists and guidelines to help write culturally-specific stories.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Our source for AIR ratings, Mediaversity Reviews, is unable to rate every movie released in a given year. Instead, Mediaversity Reviews prioritizes a rich, in-depth qualitative analysis of each movie selected for review. This means that we were unable to do a comprehensive review of the nearly 700+ movies that are released in the US every year. However, we believe that our sample of 109 films captured most of the significant small to wide releases in the last three years. Moreover, the sample was large enough to statistically determine that receiving a Below the Norm rating for AIR leaves money on the table.

Of note, some movies that received very low Mediaversity Reviews scores, and thus scored Below the Norm on our rating of AIR, did receive positive critical acclaim and did do well at the box office (e.g., *Joker, La La Land, Greenbook*). However, our analyses highlight that regardless of the critical acclaim of a film, money is still being left on the table if the film lacks AIR.

We hope our findings spur (a) further qualitative and quantitative analyses of AIR in film using a more comprehensive sample of movies and (b) a more critical and nuanced consideration of diverse representation in film. We also hope to see these kinds of analyses conducted for other forms of content.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND THANK YOUS

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Thank you to Louise Zeitzew, Jamie Azar, the Center for Scholars & Storytellers lab, Stephanie Allain, Paul Almond, Dr. Fashina Alade, Tayo Amos and Curtis Taylor, Jr. for their helpful feedback.
Most importantly, we would like to thank Li Lai and acknowledge the important work she accomplished with her ratings system from Mediaversity Reviews that made this report possible.

Gerald D. Higginbotham, C. Phil   **Zhanpeng Zheng, B.A.**   **Dr. Yalda T. Uhls**

ENDNOTES

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2. After an extensive search of film review companies, we found Mediaversity Reviews to be the only outlet that took a more qualitative and critical lens to films in a manner that captured our concept of AIR and that permitted open access to their movie review data.

3. Lai, L. (2018). Box office diversity report 2018. Mediaversity Reviews. https://movietime.guru/diversity-at-the-box-office-2018-193154f12827

4. Mediaversity does not review every film that is released. However, we analyzed all 109 films that Mediaversity had rated from 2016-2019 that also had available information on first weekend box office numbers and production budget.

5. We employed ratings from GradeMyMovie.com as a source of diversity ratings that capture numerical diversity (e.g., % non-White, % non-male) for both key on-screen actors and off-screen decision-makers. Please see https://grademymovie.com/about/ to learn more about how they rate films on numerical diversity. Some films that were rated by Mediaversity (and thus were included in our analyses) were not rated by GradeMyMovie.com. For these films, independent coders scored these films on numerical diversity using GradeMyMovie.com methodology to permit a more complete analysis.

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