

**Diversity and Tokenism in Canadian Industries**

October 7, 2021

**As an Asian Canadian, how do you view Canadian diversity and inclusion? Are diversity and inclusion just moral imperatives, or are they considered as socio-economic advantages in the global village? Examples can be drawn from all areas of Canadian society: academic, business, economic, non-profit organizations, political, research, science, trades, etc.**

As an Asian Canadian, I find that Canadians value diversity and inclusion and they do try to incorporate that in their policies. Canada is starting to become a multi-cultural hub, especially in larger cities across different provinces. However, diversity is still a new concept considering that a lot of organizations and industries are still using diversity and inclusion as a way to gain favor with people (Abawi, 2018). By being exclusive, industries lose traction and interest, so they go the opposite route and try to be inclusive. In my experience, this has created tokenism, where they still have a majority white employee base with a handful of people of color from different backgrounds to represent different "diverse" backgrounds. The practice of tokenism harms people more than it helps them because, while it appears to be an opportunity to represent a cultural background, it provides an organization a publicity opportunity to "show off" how diverse they are. This puts the weight of representing an entire culture on a handful of people. It becomes less about actually being diverse and more about appearing diverse to appeal to mass demand.

I personally have an Asian Canadian friend who works as an engineer at an Ontario university. She is one of the only female Asians in her program, and as result, the university often uses her as a poster girl for their marketing. While there may be inherently good intentions there, this is a still a form of tokenism because they are using her because she is Asian and a female, amongst a program of white males. Even the professors at Universities in Canada are predominantly white, for example, statistics Canada reports that only 4% of university professors in Canada identify as a visible minority (Abawi, 2018). Tokenism is a poor effort at proving that

there is diversity in the program because just one person isn't diverse, and one person hardly represents an entire background. There will not be true diversity until industries stop resorting to tokenism (Awari, 2018).

While I find that many organizations have diversity policies and these provide a steppingstone for more diversity in future years, it is only a ripple in an ocean and larger initiatives need to be taken aside from hiring one person of color (POC) every few months, often just for the sake of just having a POC on board to fill a diversity quota. Corporations are economically benefiting off this fake diversity (Abu-Laban, 2002). In the public eye, an organization without diversity looks terrible, and having a bit of diversity makes it look a little better, but it does not solve the issue at hand.

One example I can draw from is that in the industry that I work in, television and film, examples of diversity are mostly just to appeal to mass demands for diversity to be included in movies and television shows (Savage, 2008). The success of media in Canada often relies on getting the support of many cultural communities (Savage, 2008). The media industry is also a key tool for creating genuine diversity because of the cultural reach movies, television, radio, and music has (Savage, 2008). This is why it is damaging that movies and shows push to feature around one person of each cultural and social background. Having only one Latino character or one LGBT character makes it seem as though they were just put there to fulfill a quota, and that makes it hard for representation to be seen for what it is. It is representation in the way that there is a single character for each minority to connect with, however, the number of white characters significantly outweigh the POCs. When in reality, Canada and the world are much more diverse.

On the opposite end, there are some films where the amount of people of color outweighs

the number of white characters, however, the white characters are still seen as the leading stars or “White saviors” (Hughey, 2010). The term white savior was coined to describe this type of character, such as Matt Damon in *The Great Wall* (Zhang, 2017) or Christian Bale in *The Flowers of War* (Zhang, 2011). Both of these films feature a white, male hero that saves a group of Asian characters from distress. Some thinkers have gone as far as to call tokenism a “new racism” because it still revolves around the concept of “us and them” (Hughey, 2010). There is an immediate need to correct this “new racism” because films historically portray white characters being the hero as well as the majority of the cast, with only a few token POC characters. It is important to have a truly diverse cast for people to see that they can also be the hero, regardless of their culture (Hughey, 2010).

Movies such as *Shang-Chi* (Cretton, 2021) on the other hand, are exactly what it means to have diversity done properly in media. These movies are an example that allows other Asians living in Western countries to see themselves on screen in a format that is shown to mass audiences. This makes Asians feel more included and welcome in western society. The difference between this film and many others is that it is an American made film for American audiences, featuring a cast of Asian actors, with the hero being an Asian man. *Shang-Chi* was not made for the purpose of tokenism or forced diversity. The film has a genuine, excellent portrayal of Asians that makes steps towards a more included future for media.

Diversity and inclusion are inherently moral imperatives, and many people feel that they are incredibly important to our future. Division in society causes harm while unity only leads to a better society. The fact that there is a mass demand for inclusion in media, workplaces, or schools, creates hope because it means there are people who want to see diversity in their industries. The way people have been using diversity thus far has largely been for socio-

economic gain through tokenism, but recently we are seeing more and more attempts to create genuine diverse, safe spaces for people from all backgrounds.

## References

Abawi, Z. (2018). Factors and processes of racialization in the Canadian academe. *Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education*, 9(1).

Abu-Laban, Y. & Gabriel, C. (2020). Selling Diversity: Immigration Multiculturalism, Employment Equity, and Globalization. *Toronto: University of Toronto Press*. <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442602274>

Cretton, D. D. (September 2021). Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings. *Marvel Studios*.

Hughey, M. W. (2010). The white savior film and reviewers' reception. *Symbolic Interaction*, 33(3), 475-496.

Savage, P. (2008). Gaps in Canadian media research: CMRC findings. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 33(2).

Zhang, Y. (February 17, 2017). The Great Wall. *Legendary Studios*.

Zhang, Y. (February 24, 2012). The Flowers of War. *EDKO Film Studios*.