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## Assessing The Business Case For Asian-American Casting In Hollywood Films

Arthur Zhou  
*University of Pennsylvania*

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## Assessing The Business Case For Asian-American Casting In Hollywood Films

### Abstract

The Asian-American Pacific Islander (AAPI) population has been subject to recent attention due to their relative underrepresentation in Hollywood films. Through use of secondary sources, spanning academic literature and box office receipt data, a preliminary relationship could be discerned between the presence of AAPI cast members and improved box office results. General academic literature points to an “ingroup” effect occurring when an individual views a film casted with actors of a similar background. The extent to which film studios can capitalize on this “ingroup” effect, either in casting or through external marketing efforts, will help improve the box office receipts for films that participate in diverse casting. Finally, there are a variety of alternative rationales for studios to adopt diverse casting measures for AAPIs beyond the immediate revenue gain in box office receipts, tied to the tastes and preferences of the AAPI cohort and the potential for international market expansion. Ultimately, more research is needed to quantitatively define the relationship between increased viewership and diverse casting, as well as more AAPI-casted films to empirically explore this relationship.

### Keywords

Asian-American, AAPI, Movies, Entertainment, Consumer Choice, Diverse Casting

### Disciplines

Asian American Studies | Business | Film and Media Studies

ASSESSING THE BUSINESS CASE FOR ASIAN-AMERICAN CASTING IN  
HOLLYWOOD FILMS

By

Arthur Zhou

An Undergraduate Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

JOSEPH WHARTON SCHOLARS

Faculty Advisor:

Dr. Keith E. Niedermeier

Director of Undergraduate Marketing Program, Marketing

THE WHARTON SCHOOL, UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

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**ABSTRACT**

The Asian-American Pacific Islander (AAPI) population has been subject to recent attention due to their relative underrepresentation in Hollywood films. Through use of secondary sources, spanning academic literature and box office receipt data, a preliminary relationship could be discerned between the presence of AAPI cast members and improved box office results. General academic literature points to an “ingroup” effect occurring when an individual views a film casted with actors of a similar background. The extent to which film studios can capitalize on this “ingroup” effect, either in casting or through external marketing efforts, will help improve the box office receipts for films that participate in diverse casting. Finally, there are a variety of alternative rationales for studios to adopt diverse casting measures for AAPIs beyond the immediate revenue gain in box office receipts, tied to the tastes and preferences of the AAPI cohort and the potential for international market expansion. Ultimately, more research is needed to quantitatively define the relationship between increased viewership and diverse casting, as well as more AAPI-casted films to empirically explore this relationship.

*Keywords:* Asian-American, AAPI, Movies, Entertainment, Consumer Choice, Diverse Casting

## INTRODUCTION

Broadly, the goal of this study is two-fold: (1) to gain a deeper understanding of the decision-making process for watching a given film, with respect to the backgrounds of the actors and other stakeholders involved, and (2) to assess whether this relationship is substantial enough to make business-driven decisions behind the casting and involvement of specific backgrounds in a given movie. Specifically, it hopes to capture the recent zeitgeist of advocacy surrounding the presence of Asian-American Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) in Hollywood films and other forms of mainstream media, and whether this lack of representation can either be explained or solved for while still applying a revenue-driven mentality. As Millennial consumers – those who are aged between 25 and 39 – represent the largest age block of frequent moviegoers, an effort was made to focus on the attitudes and behaviors of this specific segment.<sup>1</sup>

Many existing drivers may aim to explain the relationship between one's ethnic background and the movies they seek to watch – this can range from ingroup and outgroup biases, to a desire to view novel experiences of specific cultures, to a reluctance of venturing beyond the comfort of known and relatable actors and actresses.<sup>2</sup> Data was gathered through an analysis of secondary sources, through a literature review in hopes of both understanding these various drivers and analyzing them in two sequential steps: (1) what are the most impactful drivers in the decision-making process behind choosing a movie to watch, and (2) how is this financially applicable to capturing the AAPI demographic in particular?

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<sup>1</sup> Motion Pictures Association. “2018 THEME REPORT.”

<sup>2</sup> Weaver, Andrew. The Role of Actors' Race in White Audiences' Selective Exposure to Movies

## BACKGROUND

### Asians in America & Their Media Consumption Habits

Recent movements led by Asian-American Pacific Islander (AAPI) activist groups have pointed to a lack of AAPI representation among the casts of Hollywood films. This lack of representation is particularly disproportionate when accounting for the demographics of the areas surrounding Hollywood, also while factoring in how the bulk of AAPI actors are members of a supporting cast, rather than acting in a lead role. While the response from movie studios has pointed to the insufficient “bankability” of many AAPI actors – that is, a lack of awareness contributing to the lower box office potential of the films they star in – this ultimately perpetuates a cycle where inexperienced actors are unable to gain the credits necessary to thrive in a competitive employment landscape.

Currently, Asian-American Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) comprise 5.6% of the U.S. population<sup>3</sup> and are the nation’s fastest growing ethnic group, with a reported growth rate of 72% between 2000 and 2015.<sup>4</sup> In recent years, they have been regarded as the nation’s wealthiest consumer segment, with a household median income 39% than the median, at \$74,829.<sup>5</sup> Currently, their buying power is expected to reach \$1.1 trillion by 2020, disproportionately large for their size.<sup>6</sup> This increase in income, however, is also focused on entertainment consumption; in 2016, it was reported that subscription video on demand services (SVOD) were found in 68% of AAPI households, outpacing the average adoption rate of 21% by greater than a factor of

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<sup>3</sup> Office of Minority Health. “Office of Minority Health.” *Asian American - The Office of Minority Health*

<sup>4</sup> López, Gustavo, et al. “Key Facts about Asian Americans.” *Pew Research Center*

<sup>5</sup> Nielsen Holdings plc. “Nielsen Asian American Consumer Report.” *Nielsen*

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

three.<sup>7</sup> This rapid rate of adoption among AAPIs points to their importance towards the future success of Hollywood films, particularly as SVOD platforms begin to invest more in original content and gain a larger share of aggregate screen-time among U.S. consumers.<sup>8</sup> Currently, however, AAPIs assumed just 3.4% of all film roles in 2017.<sup>9</sup> While this is relatively in line with the aggregate AAPI representation within the United States, it falls much below Californian population statistics, wherein AAPIs comprise 16% of the state's population.<sup>10</sup> The significance of Californian population statistics stems from the concentration of media production that occurs in the state, with it being the single largest area within the United States.<sup>11</sup>

Even when AAPIs assume roles, however, their isolation to specific genres prohibits their exposure – and, by extension, the film / TV program's viewership – from reaching its full potential. Research by Deo points to how even when AAPIs are casted, they are typically relegated to dramatic roles rather than comedic ones.<sup>12</sup> By extension, this not only prohibits them from appearing in a series of popular programs and films – thereby limiting AAPI exposure to the masses – but it also may further typecast certain actors, harming their prospects to branch out to new projects. Furthermore, not only are AAPIs absent from a wide range of character types, they are also excluded from large timeslots on the silver screen. The highest screen-times for AAPI characters ranged from only 20% to 40% of the highest screen times for non-AAPIs.<sup>13</sup> Research points to the invisibility of AAPIs – and, in instances where they are visible, how their

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<sup>7</sup> Nielsen Holdings plc. "Nielsen Asian American Consumer Report." *Nielsen*

<sup>8</sup> Sheppard, B. W. (2015). The rise of svod

<sup>9</sup> Hunt, Darnel, et al. "Hollywood Diversity Report 2019." *UCLA*

<sup>10</sup> López, Gustavo, et al. "Key Facts about Asian Americans."

<sup>11</sup> Hunt, Darnel, et al. "Hollywood Diversity Report 2019."

<sup>12</sup> Deo, M., Lee, J., Chin, C., Milman, N., & Yuen, N. (2008). Missing in Action: "Framing" Race on Prime-Time Television.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

lower screen times and lack of proper depiction restricts their ability to portray well-developed, multidimensional characters.<sup>14</sup> This is extended by the non-existence of wide-release lead roles for AAPI actors, of which there were a total of two films in 2019 – given the prolific production of content from movie studios, television networks, and streaming services alike, tokenized representations are particularly harmful when attempting to produce media content.

In summary, AAPIs as a target segment are: (1) fast-growing, with growth rates outpacing any other ethnic group (2) early adopters of SVOD platforms, likely extending to new forms of media & entertainment in the future, (3) high-earning, with the greatest median household income of any ethnic group, and (4) are underrepresented in media roles as a whole.

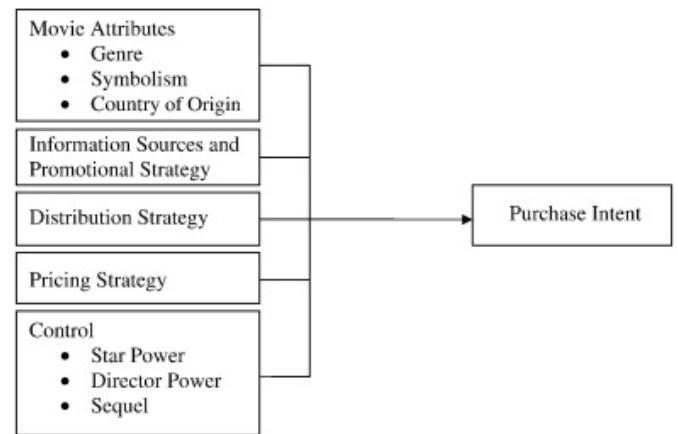
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<sup>14</sup> Deo, M., Lee, J., Chin, C., Milman, N., & Yuen, N. (2008). Missing in Action: "Framing" Race on Prime-Time Television.



## LITERATURE REVIEW

Research began by attempting to understand, specifically, the typical list of drivers behind one's choice of what film to see. These drivers, nebulous in nature, are varied – they range, naturally, from genre to star power to the distribution strategy, etc. Drawing from the research of Gazley, Clark, and Sinha, a factor-analytic approach can help map the different attributes to better understand drivers of choice.<sup>15</sup> To simplify the exhaustive list of factors, a conceptual model was applied in their 2011 study, reducing the list of independent variables into higher-order constructs: that is to say, movie attributes, information sources, promotional strategy, distribution strategy, pricing strategy, etc., all sequentially driving to a summary purchase intent within two weeks of a movie's opening (pictured right).



In summary, the study helped determine the relevance of certain variables on the end decision to consume a specific film. Specifically, two variables are important to note: (1) that the results suggest consumers desire real-life experiences when watching films, in contrast to a previous study by Venkatesh and Meamber (2008) that shows that “aesthetic consumers desire experiences that provide an escape from everyday life, and are novel and creative,”<sup>16</sup> and (2) that star power, as confirmed in several previous studies, is particularly important in driving the end decision to see a film. In its applicability to AAPI films, point (2) is unsurprising – the rationale of several film executives behind the lack of diverse casting is the lack of bankability of several

<sup>15</sup> Gazley, A., Clark, G., Sinha, A. (2011). Understanding preferences for motion pictures.

<sup>16</sup> Venkatesh, A., Meamber, L. (2008). The aesthetics of consumption and the consumer as an aesthetic subject.

A-API actors. In terms of (1), however, it incites an important question: that is, to what extent can A-API-driven films create a “real-life” experience for movie-goers, and to what extent does that appeal differ based on the background of the viewer? Answering this question will help to link the relationship between diverse casting and positive purchase intent for a given film.

Currently, limited research exists on the relationship between A-API-specific casting and end film performance – to this end, Black and other non-White actor populations have been used as a proxy to evaluate the impact of diversity on end box office performance. In particular, a study conducted by Kaden Lee at Brown University investigated the effect of a movie’s racial composition on three aspects: its ticket sales, its critical reception, and its overall audience satisfaction.<sup>17</sup> While it found no statistically significant differences between films starring white and nonwhite leading actors, it determined that “Black films” – defined as movies with predominantly Black casts – “outperformed in estimated ticket sales by almost 40%,” earning “5-6 more points on Metacritic’s 100-point Metascores,” (Metascores refers to the aggregate of professional critics’ reviews) while simultaneously having the “Black film factor” reduce the audience user rating on the Internet Movie Database by 0.6 points out of a scale of 10. This can be explained from one of two perspectives: either Black films experience generally underestimated ticket sales, due in part to their typical lack of as-established cast members, or the incremental revenue effect of having a diverse cast is stronger than anticipated, and generates higher returns for diverse films. From this, it can be concluded that while a blended cast may not necessarily impact box office potential or audience reception, a *purely* diverse cast, consisting of casts collectively of a distinct nonwhite background experiences higher-than-estimated box office receipts and higher critic reviews. While this information is useful, and helps to validate

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<sup>17</sup> Lee, K. (2014). Race in Hollywood: Quantifying the Effect of Race on Movie Performance.

the business case of diversity among casts irrespective of elements such as star power, etc., it does not help to delineate whether these increased box office revenues stem from individuals matching the nonwhite background of the diverse film, or whether they come from viewers of all ethnicities themselves.

To help answer this nuance, and again using the dynamics of Black casts and audience viewers as a proxy for AAPI casts, literature by Andrew J. Weaver points to how the presence of Black casts can impact white audiences' decisions on whether to see a movie.<sup>18</sup> The conclusions of his study revealed that actors' races influenced a white consumer's willingness to view a movie in certain contexts – that is, “for nonromantic movies, participants' racial attitudes moderated the relationship between race and selective exposure,” and “for romantic movies, regardless of racial attitudes, White participants showed significantly less interest in seeing movies with mostly Black casts than in seeing movies with mostly White casts.”<sup>19</sup> From this, we can examine that while preferences for movies are influenced by cast diversity, that this is (1) a genre-specific phenomenon, at least for White and Black populations in particular, and that (2) the effect of additional diversity can also adversely harm a movie's revenue potential depending on the background of the movie-goer.

In examining whether this effect persisted across all mediums of media however, Knobloch-Westerwick, Appiah, and Alter's research on news selection patterns as a function of race were also considered. Drawing from social cognitive theory – that is, the consideration of internal and external social reinforcement when deciding to learn or consume a piece of content<sup>20</sup> – Knobloch-Westerwick et al. highlight how “Whites showed no preference based on the race of

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<sup>18</sup> Weaver, Andrew. The Role of Actors' Race in White Audiences' Selective Exposure to Movies

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> LaMorte, Wayne W. “Behavioral Change Models.” *The Social Cognitive Theory*

the character featured in the news story. In contrast, Blacks strongly preferred news stories featuring Blacks and spent more than twice the reading time on them compared to exposure to news stories featuring Whites.”<sup>21</sup> These results may be potentially explained by the persistence of White populations in most stories, making them desensitized to their appearance in the media. In addition, however, they also help to highlight how while the presence of race may be a non-factor in the media consumption of the White demographic, that this effect is concentrated predominantly among people of color for whom there exists less coverage.

To assess for the correlation between cast and topic – that is, gauging whether White disinterest in a minority-driven film is by virtue of, say, an AAPI film containing cultural elements that are distant from White populations – the research of Grier, Brumbaugh, and Thornton was considered.<sup>22</sup> Their recent study manipulated the ethnic orientation of film descriptions, measuring participant attitudes toward those descriptions. In doing so, they aimed to evaluate whether cultural-specific films (i.e. ones focused on Black culture, for instance) had the potential to cross-pollinate into White communities and garner viewing interest. Similarly to the results from Weaver’s research, however, the opposite occurred – while interest in these films were influenced by the diversity of the cast, cultural elements resulted in a negative propensity for viewership.

In summary, an overview of the literature helps point to three key conclusions regarding the relationship between the diversity of a film and its impact. (1) To the extent that a film can possess a bankable cast and emulate “real-life” experiences for its audience, it will be successful.

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<sup>21</sup> Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick, Osei Appiah & Scott Alter (2008) News Selection Patterns as a Function of Race: The Discerning Minority and the Indiscriminating Majority

<sup>22</sup> Grier, S. A., Brumbaugh, A. M., & Thornton, C. G. (2006). Crossover Dreams: Consumer Responses to Ethnic-Oriented Products.

This may, however, may be less possible in the incorporation of “cultural” elements and themes that may, similarly to their casts, deviate from the many moviegoers’ backgrounds and experiences. (2) That to possess a blended cast of both White and non-White actors will have no significant impact on box office receipts or critic reviews, but that to have a cast that is distinctly diverse will. And, finally, (3) while this added diversity may gain a film additional viewership and advocacy from members of that given diversity group, this does not necessarily translate to White viewers who themselves prefer to view films with casts wherein they are represented.

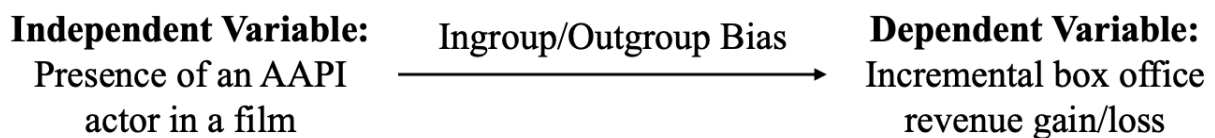
## RESEARCH QUESTION, HYPOTHESIS, AND METHODOLOGY

### Section I. How does having an Asian-American cast impact a film's revenue potential?

The previous literature review highlighted three key takeaways pertaining to the determinants of film choice: (1) that the purchase intent behind a film can be broken up into a series of five higher-order constructs, ranging from the movie's inherent attributes (genre, plot, etc.) to the pricing and distribution strategy of the film; (2) that purely diverse casts perform better than partially diverse ones; and (3) that in cases of diverse films, social cognitive theory and ingroup biases would apply, leading to a negative propensity for viewership for audiences of dissimilar backgrounds and a positive propensity for viewership for audiences of similar ones.

With this in mind, it asks the fundamental question: how does having an Asian-American cast impact a film's revenue potential? This question can best be answered from two specific lenses: what is the change in revenue potential from ingroup – that is to say, other Asian viewers – and what is the change in revenue potential from outgroup – that is to say, non-Asian, or rather, non-diverse – viewers?

Distilling key takeaways from the literature review above, the decision to view a film based on its cast diversity can be expressed as follows:



Whereas the independent and dependent variables are fairly self-explanatory, referring to the relationship between AAPI casting and the end box office results, “Ingroup/Outgroup Bias” refers to the mechanism described in previous research surrounding social cognitive theory. That is, does an individual relate to the actor in the film on the basis of their shared background, and

how does this bias impact the incremental box office gain through an increased willingness to view said film?

**Primary Objective:** To assess whether the inclusion of AAPI actors in varying roles can positively influence a film's viewership potential, thereby translating into a business case for diverse casting.

**Primary Research Question:** To what extent does the presence of an AAPI cast member in roles of varying degrees of presence influence a given consumer's propensity to view a given film, and how might that effect may differ based on said consumer's racial background?

**Hypothesis:** Given the constructs of social cognitive theory, the presence of diverse cast members in high-presence roles will influence the decision of any given consumer to view a given film. With that said, it is expected that this will have either a neutral or negative effect on White populations viewing AAPI-centric films. Among communities of color, however, we hypothesize that Black, Latino, Indigenous Peoples, etc. will demonstrate a greater degree of interest in viewing AAPI-led films.

## Section II. Case Study Methodology

Recognizing the limitations of a survey-based experimental design, wherein data on any incremental box office gain would be self-reported (wherein a survey respondent would self-specify their intent to see said movie), a case study methodology was applied.

In this methodology, the **independent variable** is, as before, defined as the inclusion of an AAPI actor in a leading cast role, whereas the **dependent variable** would, in this case, be the relative strength of the box office receipts of said film when compared to other films within that given genre (Action, Romantic Comedy, etc.). To view a more comprehensive outline of what an alternative, survey-based methodology, might explore, please view **APPENDIX A**.

To assess the effect of AAPI casting for a given film, the case study methodology was selected. Given that there has only been *one* wide-release Asian-American ensemble film in the past 25 years<sup>23</sup> – that is, 2018’s *Crazy Rich Asians*, released by Warner Bros. – box office receipts and the film’s audience breakdown may shed some light in terms of the impact of representation. Recognizing the simplistic and outlier nature of a sample size of one, while also being cognizant of the reasons behind this small sample size which thereby prompted the interest in this analysis, a few caveats were considered: first, that the revenue of this film was compared against other films of similar genre, and second, that the difficulty of controlling the variables of release date, dollars spent on promotion, etc. is also conceded.

To provide additional background: the film was released in August of 2018, drawing an opening weekend of approximately \$26 million USD, the 22<sup>nd</sup> best opening weekend in the history of the “Romantic Comedy” genre.<sup>24</sup> Further, it maintained this opening weekend across

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<sup>23</sup> Ho, Karen. “Crazy Rich Asians Is Going to Change Hollywood. It’s About Time.”

<sup>24</sup> IMDB, “Genre Keyword: Romantic Comedy.”



the first three weeks of its release, maintaining the #1 spot across *all films, regardless of genre*, domestically.<sup>25</sup> By its closing date, it had garnered an international box office revenue of \$239 million, of which 73.2% was generated domestically. This, in turn, ranked the film as the 6<sup>th</sup> most successful within the “Romantic Comedy” genre, and the most successful of the past decade. With the breakdown of the audience being predominantly Asian (at 38%, compared to a moviegoing population of 8-10%), the success of the film was evidently driven by the disproportionate presence of ingroup audience members.<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, however, AAPI audience members were not the predominant audience demographic, as 41% of audience members were White. This existed in subtle contrast to Weaver’s initial findings, wherein groups of dissimilar backgrounds displayed a negative propensity of consumption towards media. As data only exists for one film within one genre, the further implications of these initial conclusions have yet to be determined. Recognizing this one case study as a microcosm for the correlation between Asian-American casts and box office success, however, a few additional factors, in addition to the presence of a purely diverse cast, should also be present.

First, there must be sufficient buy-in from the ingroup, both socially as well as financially. Prior research conducted by Lee highlighted how, on aggregate, purely diverse films gain box office potential from their ingroups and lose audience review points and, by extension, box office potential from outgroups. To this end, the incremental revenue generated by the ingroup must exceed the potential revenue loss in order to generate a net gain for the studio. Second, this buy-in can exist intrinsically or through the aid of tribalistic movements – in the case of *Crazy Rich Asians*, a group of Asian-American arts foundations, advocacy groups, and

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<sup>25</sup> IMDB. “Release: Crazy Rich Asians.”

<sup>26</sup> McClintock, Pamela. “Crazy Rich Asians Box Office.”

popular figureheads spearheaded the “#GoldOpen” movement, providing financial support and additional promotion for the film.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, Blair Rich, the global head of marketing for Warner Bros. at the point of the film’s release, had highlighted studio partnerships with groups such as the “Asia Society and the Coalition of Asian Pacifics in Entertainment” as being a key driver of success in generating buy-in from the core demographics.

As a whole, the correlation between an AAPI-driven cast and box office success finds its roots in *Crazy Rich Asians* but has yet to be followed up with additional empirical data. While the resurgence of AAPI-casting is likely to occur given the box office success of the film, the success of future AAPI films is predicated on the intrinsic buy-in from the ingroup, as well as the additional promotion generated via partnerships between studios and key outreach groups.

Further research is likely to be conducted as more film studios are expected to incorporate diverse casting across their existing projects. Currently, however, existing films outside of *Crazy Rich Asians* (A24’s *The Farewell*, Netflix’s *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before*), either were not granted wide domestic or international releases, or exist on streaming platforms, which do not publish viewership data.

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<sup>27</sup> Yang, R. “#GoldOpen Movement Behind ‘Crazy Rich Asians’ to Partner with AMC Theaters.”

### Section III. The Ripple Effects of Representation

Even with a preliminary relationship between the presence of AAPI actors in a film and an eventual increase in box office revenue, what incentive is there for studios to act? For one, while *Crazy Rich Asians* was successful – for its genre – several other Hollywood films with less-than-diverse casts were just as, if not more so. Further, the previous established risks of building up an artist’s reputation from the ground-up still remain. With that said, are there any further reasons for studios to support this?

Again, looking to broader literature, there are three key reasons why AAPI-casting generates business sense, even if the current incremental revenue from diversity shaped up to be less than studios hoped for. They are: (1) future-proofing the future of cinema, (2) looking abroad, and (3) the social benefit of progressive casting.

Beginning with the concept of “future-proofing” the future of cinema, we can first look to previous research surrounding AAPIs in the United States. Of this, two points in particular were most impactful: (1) AAPIs were, as a demographic, fast-growing, with growth rates outpacing any other ethnic group, and (2) AAPIs were also early adopters of SVOD platforms, likely extending to new forms of media & entertainment in the future.<sup>28</sup>

As streaming services continue to rise in membership,<sup>29</sup> along with the budgets behind original films and other content on said streaming services, the importance of capturing the AAPI viewership base becomes more paramount.<sup>30</sup> While there may be limited financial upside

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<sup>28</sup> Nielsen Holdings plc. “Nielsen Asian American Consumer Report.” *Nielsen*

<sup>29</sup> McKinsey & Company. “When the content consumer is king: Adapting to the media and marketing power shift.”

<sup>30</sup> Spangler, T. “Netflix Projected to Spend More Than \$17 Billion on Content in 2020.”

in the current day, as the AAPI demographic grows and adopts streaming services more readily, studios can expect to see high returns for taking a risk on AAPI actors.

Secondly, the adoption of AAPI casts, while a riskier move among domestic film audiences, may prove a prudent move to capture additional viewership in international markets. As China is currently the fastest growing film market in the world,<sup>31</sup> the importance of capturing international consumers in traditional films' ongoing battle against the streaming market is integral to the long-term success of the industry. Currently, to capitalize on this market, films have looked to integrating portions of their plot to Asia – or, in the case of *Transformers 4* – integrating Chinese products and brands in the context of the film to appeal to foreign markets.<sup>32</sup> While effective, this also represents a white-space opportunity for continued appeal through the inclusion of diverse cast members. As Disney is poised to launch both *Mulan* in 2020 as well as Marvel Studios' first Asian-American superhero in *Shang-Chi* in 2021, this is expected to be a growing trend that other studios can adopt into their expansion strategies.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, it is also important to recognize the social benefits of progressive casting. A study conducted by Martins & Harrison on correlations between racial and gender representation in media and self-esteem points to the positive psychological effects of representation among children at very young ages.<sup>34</sup> While the existence of representation is considered a positive correlator with self-esteem, a lack of representation is actually viewed as detrimental.<sup>35</sup> To this end, the implications of media representation extend beyond the financial economics of movie-

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<sup>31</sup> Deloitte Global. “China’s Film Industry – a new Era.”

<sup>32</sup> Xinhua News Agency. “Behind the scenes: China’s product placement in Hollywood movies.”

<sup>33</sup> Ramos, D. (2019, July 18). “Comic-Con: From ‘Shang-Chi’ To ‘Birds Of Prey’, Asian Americans Are More Than Ready For Their Close-up In Superhero Movies.”

<sup>34</sup> Martins, N., & Harrison, K. (2012). Racial and Gender Differences in the Relationship Between Children’s Television Use and Self-Esteem: A Longitudinal Panel Study.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

making, but rather influence a sense of belonging among people of color communities viewing said content. To the extent that movie studios participating in corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives do so to gain publicity, benefits to their public image, and free marketing, there is a triple-purpose to participating in AAPI casting: the altruistic and intrinsic social benefits of progressive casting, the incremental revenue gain from diverse audiences, as well as the extrinsic benefit of improving a studio's image in the public eye.

## CONCLUSION

While there is a continuous uphill battle for the representation of AAPIs actors and actresses in Hollywood films today, the pervasive growth of AAPIs as a demographic, their rapid adoption of new forms of media, and their growing spending power make them a prime target for film studios. To this end, existing literature and the empirical evidence of the few AAPI-casted films that exist point to a positive relationship between the presence of AAPI actors and increased box office potential. Even in cases where said gain is minimal, however, three alternative reasons point to the importance of AAPI-based casting from the business perspective, ranging from future-proofing studios to the pervasiveness of streaming services; to the importance of appealing international markets; to the social benefits of progressive actions and the added benefits that follow with them.

While further study is needed, both from the lens of quantitatively defining this existing relationship as well as in gaining additional empirical data, the recent movements of a select few studios has spearheaded a change in Hollywood, and incites hope for the growth of AAPI representation in films for the future.

## APPENDIX A: AN ALTERNATE METHODOLOGY

### Section I. Defining the Variables

To capture the decision-making-process behind an individual's choice to view a film, the independent and dependent variables can be defined as such in a potential form of:

**Independent Variable:** presence of an AAPI actor in a leading role in a film (defined by a cast billing among the top three)

**Dependent Variable:** the self-reported desire from a survey respondent to view a film (rating ranging from a value of 1-7)

The above variables aim to answer two key questions: (1) does the presence of an AAPI actor encourage an individual's desire to view a given film and (2) how does the degree of that actor's presence across the film's description, etc., impact that rating? These questions will be answered across three popular movie genres: Action, Drama, and Comedy.

The primary method of data collection would be a blend of survey-based and experimental design. It can be divided into two sub-segments of exploration: (1) customer segmentation, and (2) assessing the willingness to view a film given its cast diversity.

With respect to customer segmentation, an extensive survey will be distributed to a large sample of Millennial consumers, and will aim to identify three key elements: (1) the current movie-watching habits of said consumers, (2) the medium of which these films are seen (whether by box-office ticket, streaming service, pirating, DVD, or otherwise), and (3) the racial background of said consumer (of which will be sub-divided into three types: AAPIs, Non-AAPI but a Person of Color (PoCs), and White populations). The segmentation of the survey population into specific ethnic groups will allow for the assessment of a consumer's willingness to view a given movie to be isolated to specific racial backgrounds.

With respect to assessing a film's viewership potential based on cast diversity, an A/B testing methodology will be considered. Surveyed individuals will be linked to a webpage with 10 randomly selected movie descriptions with links; each will contain: (1) a full cast list, and (2) a generic plot description.

These 10 randomly selected movies will span across three different genres (action, romance, and comedy). Within each film page, the independent variable, or the **presence of an AAPI actor in the leading role**, will be manipulated.

At the bottom of each film page, individuals will be asked to report their willingness to view this movie on a 1-7 scale, gauged across three mediums (a paid box-office ticket, a paid streaming service, or via free an online streaming website).

In addition, individuals will be able to report the "single largest" driver of their choice to view the given film, if applicable – this can either be self-reported via a text box or prompted via checklist (the criteria of which will be ascertained via a series of focus groups prior to the official testing). These can range from: plot, actor background, setting, genre, etc. to help directly gauge the effect of the cast on the propensity to view the film.

Plot descriptions and setting within a given genre will be controlled. To ensure that the popularity of a given cast member does not skew the results, the actors chosen will be normalized by popularity by using one or several of the following factors: age, # of appearances in a blockbuster film in the past year, # of followers on Instagram, # of followers on Twitter, and so on – this is to ensure that the primary differentiating factor between actors is their diversity, rather than something idiosyncratic about their online presence. Individuals will either be assigned a unique identifier throughout the survey and webpage portion of the study or conduct



both concurrently in a behavioral lab setting so as to link the baseline survey results of an individual to their eventual taste preferences for diversity casts in films.

The method of using an individual webpage will allow us to, in addition to gauging participants' self-reported willingness to see a movie, gauge interest on a film by seeing the order in which links are clicked and time spent on pages, and whether there are any correlations to be found between film descriptions of interest (based on the image, preview of description, etc.) and any implied background.

Experimentally, this draws from the methodology conducted by Knobloch-Westerwick et al.'s research on racially-driven media preferences, wherein a similar web-page was used to gauge interest based on time spent on pages, etc.<sup>36</sup>

## **Section II. Plan for Analysis**

Once this data is collected and aggregated, there will be two primary outputs: (1) a sample baseline for the movie-going preferences of a given racial identity, and (2) a comparative on how those baseline preferences are impacted based on the racial background of the cast of a given film.

The analysis will be sub-divided based on the three prior mentioned groups – AAPIs, PoCs, and White consumer groups, to assess how the influence of diverse casting differs based on the surveyed background.

A three-way, 3 x 3 x 2 ANOVA Analysis will be conducted (Race of Actor x Presence of Actor x Propensity to View Film) to gauge how Race and Role play into an individual's desire to

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<sup>36</sup> Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick, Osei Appiah & Scott Alter (2008) News Selection Patterns as a Function of Race: The Discerning Minority and the Indiscriminating Majority

view a film. This can be further sub-divided based on the backgrounds of participants, highlighted in the baseline survey. Experimentally, this draws from Cohen et al.'s research on providing feedback through the racial divide, wherein the race of the feedback deliverer was considered as a factor in the ANOVA analysis.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Cohen, Geoffrey & Steele, Claude & Ross, Lee. (1999). The Mentor's Dilemma: Providing Critical Feedback Across the Racial Divide.

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