

Another “Woke” Adaptation?

News Media and Racist Backlash to Amazon’s *Rings of Power*

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ABSTRACT

Even before the release of Amazon’s Rings of Power, a loud group of fans of J. R. R. Tolkien and his works expressed their disapproval and hate regarding the series’ diverse casting. The online backlash demonstrated concerning signs of racist abuse towards cast members, who received personal hateful messages on social media and were told that they do not belong in Tolkien’s legendarium because Tolkien meant for it to be white. Unfortunately, such racism and hate are not new, nor is this an isolated phenomenon. Other adaptations such as Disney’s remake of The Little Mermaid and HBO’s prequel series House of the Dragon have faced similar racist backlash upon the casting of people of colour in leading roles. The backlash against Rings of Power has not escaped the notice of news media, which have fuelled the controversy and led to further discussion of Tolkien in relation to racism, and how the fantasy genre seems to perpetuate its “traditions of whiteness”. This study seeks to examine the discourse in selected articles from various news outlets in the USA and the UK, using a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach to reveal their reception of and critique on the inclusion of diverse characters in Amazon’s Rings of Power. The present study suggests that the conflict surrounding racism in this context has a strong political hue to it, where terms like “woke” and “forced diversity” are utilised to dismiss efforts to increase equality and inclusion as inauthentic and unfaithful to Tolkien’s vision. Amazon’s Rings of Power as well as other fantasy adaptations that make similar efforts are also accused of being part of a political agenda that seeks to force its ideologies “on the masses”. The findings further indicate that many journalists condemn and condone the racist backlash simultaneously, where the main argument often expresses support for the cast members and the series’ casting choices. At the same time, journalists tend to employ discursive strategies that suggest agreement with some of the fans’ justification of these cast members’ exclusion. The lexical choices that accompany these discursive strategies can influence the reader’s perception and understanding of the controversy, and demonstrate how power, ideology and discourse work together in such conflicts.

KEYWORDS: *Critical discourse analysis, media discourse, racism, Tolkien, political discourse*

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Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Definition
CDA	Critical discourse analysis
CRT	Critical race theory
ESG	Environmental, social, governance (reporting practice)
LOTR	Lord of the Rings

Introduction

Only a week after its debut, Amazon's *Rings of Power* released an online statement in solidarity with their cast and crew members, trending on X (formerly Twitter) with the hashtag #YouAreAllWelcomeHere ([LOTRonPrime], 2022). The newest adaptation of J. R. R. Tolkien's legendarium was faced with staggering backlash, of which a strikingly large portion was concerned with the series being unrightfully diverse and "woke" ([szelejohntwitt], 2022; [DragonflyShadow], 2022; [azijnzijker], 2022; [GearyHaiden], 2024; [ProfessorSponge], 2024). According to this group of fans, the diversity was "forced" onto Tolkien's lore and his fans, and not in line with the ethnography Tolkien had created for the fictional world of Middle-earth.

The first season *Rings of Power* tells the story of an ancient evil returning to Middle-earth, where Elves, Dwarves, Men and Hobbits live divided and isolated. As the danger approaches, however, these different races must find a way to work together in order to stand their ground against the Dark Lord Sauron. The second season is already set to premiere on August 29, 2024 (Toby, 2024). In 2017, Amazon acquired the rights to *The Lord of the Rings* and its appendices and *The Hobbit*, Tolkien's most renowned works part of the greater lore he wrote. Post-mortum, more of Tolkien's writings were collected by his son Christopher Tolkien and published as *The Silmarillion*, which can be seen to be a book filled with ancient lore and history of Middle-earth. The series *Rings of Power*, however, covers a part of the legendarium that is only hinted at in the books of which they acquired the rights—which means that they only used the small portion of information found in the books, and subsequently interweaved this with their own, original narrative. This has been found to be somewhat controversial by Tolkien fans, as it essentially attempts to tell a story they do not have the rights to (Rogers, 2022; Colbert, 2022; Holly, 2022; Pierce-Bohen, 2023). But this creative restriction can also be perceived as creative freedom, as there is more space for the addition of original characters and narratives. Interestingly however, the series' original characters are more diversely casted than the canon characters¹ that are in part renowned for their appearance in Peter Jackson's films, as Ritchie ([verilybitchie], 2023) points out in their video essay on the topic. This is possibly because Amazon's series were meant to be a prequel to the films rather than the books, which obliged casting directors to cast actors similar in appearance to the actors of *The Lord of the Rings*.

¹ Canon characters are characters from the source material, rather than original characters added in later adaptations.

The term “woke” has been and remains a rather unclear concept, but it appears to be utilised mostly by those who are against it, or “anti-woke.” Davies and McRae (2023) provide an etymology of the word, tracing it back to the civil rights movement in the 19th and 20th century in the United States of America, when woke came to mean “being fully politically conscious of one’s racial oppression” (p. 4). However, Davies and McRae argue that British rightwing press has, over time, created a discourse where being woke equates being inauthentic and self-indulgent. Attributing a ‘trendsetter’ to the definition’s evolution requires a study that is not conducted in this thesis— however, a brief search on the website of the *Urban Dictionary* does acknowledge that the term is increasingly used to refer to inauthentic advocacy of social justice and “saviors with a moral high ground” ([sealcake], 2022). Another entry even details how woke courts principles of cultural Marxism, a conspiracy which used to be promoted widely in far-right politics (especially Nazism) but has now seeped into the ‘mainstream’ ([ApplesPotatoGardner], 2023; Busbridge, Moffitt and Thorburn, 2020). Indeed, Smith et al. (2023) observe that woke has become a term fuelled by political discourse and argue that it is currently used to refer to those who seek to “destroy western culture” (p. 524). Following this line of thought, Cammaerts (2022) argues that far right movements such as “alt-right” or Nouvelle Droite attempt to toxify movements that seek to establish LGBTQIA+ rights as well as racial and gender equality. As *Rings of Power* has found, this anti-woke rush can, if it rallies a big enough number, cast aspersions towards shows that advocate diversity and inclusion, and overshadow other critiques or acclaims.

With the film and television industry having such a powerful foothold in society, there has been an increasing recognition of the need for more representation of women, the LGBTQIA+ community, and people of colour. Now, diversity and inclusion are a theme that is recurrent and prevalent in corporate annual reports, such as Environmental Social and Governance (ESG) reporting where attention is given to action plans, targets and transparency regarding environmental and social sustainability. Both in the workplace and on screen, the screen industries have begun to recognise that what they portray on-screen must reflect the diversity of contemporary societies (Netflix, 2023; Amazon, 2023; The Walt Disney Company, 2023). However, adapting a book written in the mid-twentieth century to the screen in the twenty-first century has proved to pose a challenge. Especially when Tolkien’s legendarium has inspired fans to become Tolkien scholars, and his lengthy works are held as sacred by so-called “Tolkien

purists”. Thus, it is not strange that there has been some pushback against the newest addition to the legendarium—Peter Jackson’s films too, despite their seventeen Academy Awards, were not necessarily well-received by all fans. Before the release of *Fellowship of the Ring*, discussions on online Tolkien forums demonstrated that fans dreaded the newest adaptation of the books and accused Jackson of disrespecting the source material (Talierin, 2001). The character Arwen was “supposed to be this little Elven-hottie that sits in the Hall of Fire [and] has next to no lines, and Aragorn marries her in the end (Kraas, 2001). It is safe to say that adaptations of esteemed works of literature always risk critique from “purists”— and as the forum user Kraas and the angry posts on X have shown, this critique is not always about the quality of the story, but also about the inclusion of diverse characters that allegedly behave out of the ordinary (e.g. Arwen as a fierce warrior rather than merely a pretty lady, or a black actor cast as an elf).

Thus far, I have highlighted a small part of the online discourse surrounding *Rings of Power*, wokeism, and diversity and inclusion. This “diversity debate” (Russell, 2022) has not gone without notice from the press. This thesis researches the discourse from select press articles regarding *Rings of Power* and the backlash it received for its diversity. It is relevant to study this discourse, as it might reveal how the press navigates and positions itself in—but may also mirror—the fierce debates concerning diversity and racism.

But what is meant with the term discourse? For this present study, I will mostly draw on Fairclough’s (1992) understanding of discourse. He explains that discourse looks at both the interaction between the interlocutors (be they speakers or writers and addressees) as well as the process of producing, perceiving and interpreting the language used. The interaction itself can be isolated and referred to as a text, which, by linguistic definition, is the product of writing and speech. Aside from direct interactions and the process behind them, discourse also relates to certain fields or social situations, governed by institutions and their leaders, which have active control over such discourse (Van Dijk, 2015). For instance, in this way media discourse is accessed and controlled by journalists, and public political discourse by political actors. Fairclough (1992) relates that such discourses position individuals or groups as social subjects, and thus also construct social entities and relations as well as their perception.

There is a long tradition of scholarship on the influence of media and press on public discourse. For instance, in their analysis of how the press navigated the 2008 financial crisis in the United Kingdom, Happer & Philo (2013) observed that the press mostly seemed to highlight

what they perceived as the favoured ideologies. They pose that the public is “key to setting agendas and focusing public interest on particular subjects”, which, besides highlighting a sense of mistrust in the media, also speaks of an intention to hold sway over the public (p. 322). In their research on the public discourse around migrants, Giorgi & Vitale (2017), too, argue that media has a direct impact on the public opinion, seeing as media and press “contribute to confirming stereotyped frames and conversation that stigmatizes immigrants” (p. 82). Focusing more on social media platforms than on news outlets, Wafiq (2023) demonstrates, how social media can be used as a “tool for shaping the public agenda”. Drawing on the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements, social media can be utilised to mobilise action and raise awareness about social, environmental and political issues. However, Wafiq also points out that it is important how certain issues are interpreted and understood—or “framed”—as these understandings can influence political ideas and agendas. In a more historical account, Coleman and Ross (2010), detail how the commercialisation of the liberal press allowed for the press to become “politically shaped” (p. 32), and that now, “both mainstream and alternative media are tied into an ongoing battle to characterize the public” (p. 21). Returning to Happer and Philo (2013), however, they conclude that the press acted, for the greater part, “as a release for frustration and discontent rather than a forum to explore potential alternatives” of solutions (p. 326). This demonstrates that the press may also act as a mirror of public discourse. Reaching many readers across the world, news outlets— whether mainstream or trade, physical or digital— have the power to create discourse and narratives of certain events. The thesis seeks to unveil the position of press by means of the following research question: How does the discourse in news media reveal their reception of and stance on the inclusion of diverse characters in Amazon’s *Rings of Power*?

I intend to answer the research question by utilising a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach for the selected samples taken from miscellaneous mainstream and trade news outlets. In the following section I dive deeper into the diversity and inclusion in the screen industries and how it has become an increasingly recognised topic for both filmmakers and audiences, discuss the literature concerning J. R. R. Tolkien’s works and the racial colour-coding found in themes and narratives, and the media discourse surrounding “wokeism” and culture.

Theoretical framework

Diversity and Inclusion in the Screen Industries

Social inequalities are, according to Eikhof and Warhurst (2013), systemic in the creative industries. This largely due to the high risks that come with creative production and the reception of creative goods, which Caves (2000) described as the “nobody knows” principle. This bedrock property of the creative sector implies that the market is volatile, unpredictable and always in motion. Should a project or creative good fail to see success, most of the costs made are sunk. Thus, in order to minimise these potential sunk costs, flexibility is needed—and achieved through project-based creative production. However, project-based production also creates an environment of employment instability, low pay for industry entrants or even unpaid labour, network-based recruitment, long working hours, and the expectation that professionals are by default geographically mobile (Eikhof and Warhurst, 2013). These systemic social inequalities and how they relate to project-based production are demonstrated in figure 1 (on p. 7), a model taken from Eikhof and Warhurst (2013, p. 502). The model shows how characteristics of creative production result in project-based employment, and subsequently how the characteristics of project-based employment negatively impact the equality on the workforce. Ursell (2000) described that freelance and project-based work in the screen industries also had to do with political measures: with the 1990 Broadcasting Act, the British conservative government liberalised the broadcasting industry to promote competition. As major broadcasters shed their employees over the next few years, the number of freelancers in the field rose to 60% by 1996. One result of liberalising the industry was lower budget for production, which led to producers looking for unpaid labour from students and other aspiring media enthusiasts. Currently, this is common practice in the screen industries and can be seen as one of the properties of project-based employment. Aspiring creative workers seem to be willing to work for low or even no pay and as this is perceived and promoted as an investment for their career in the future (Baker and Hesmondhalgh, 2010). However, unpaid labour or low-pay entry-level positions create barriers for entrants that do not have the supportive economic capital to sustain themselves. In a synthesis of interviews with creative workers, Baker and Hesmondhalgh (2010) revealed the sense of powerlessness among creative workers when it comes to pay. One creative worker expressed that standing up for one’s own pay could mean the employer might avoid them when a similar project launches: “They say okay, fine, we’ll pay you more, and then you never get any more work from

them because it's just a freelance gig" (p. 11). This prevents creative workers from taking action when it comes to low pay for their labour, as it can aggravate job insecurity. Another result of project-based production and employment is the manner in which creative workers are recruited. As Ursell (2000) observed, recruitment occurred (and still occurs) based on "reputation and familiarity, conveyed in a mix of personal acquaintance, kinship, past working connections, and past achievements" (p. 811). Through network-based recruitment, insecurity around a project's feasibility is often avoided, and it improves predictability in an unpredictable environment.

However, as a rostrum camera operator explained, this comes with risks:

They ask me to recommend someone but often it's a case that who I'd choose isn't available.

Then I get worried. Maybe I'll recommend someone who lets us down. Then it's my fault. I'll get the blame (2000, p. 812)

More critical, however, is that this network-based recruitment again creates barriers where there is less opportunity for workers from marginalised groups or with a working-class background to participate, "resulting in a 'white middle class monoculture' in the creative media industries" (Eikhof and Warhurst, 2013, p. 500).

Roles are fulfilled based on a network of friends who have known each other for a long time.

It's impossible to get a foot in the door if you're not "one of them". I don't know if this is because I'm a woman and the main power-holders are men or because I'm not white. Maybe a combination of both (Female, 36 years, actress, non-white) (Hennekam and Syed, 2017, p. 558).

In front of the camera, tokenism has long been a controversial way to "solve" critiques regarding this lack of diversity. Brayton (2021) referred to racial and ethnic tokenism as "the highly-visible inclusion of select racialized individuals" while maintaining the dominance of the majority, which, in many organisations, is white and male (p. 28). In film, tokenism is often manifested in side characters of colour that are superficial and racialised. For instance, non-white actresses described that they were often casted for submissive or inferior roles that reinforce social stereotypes:

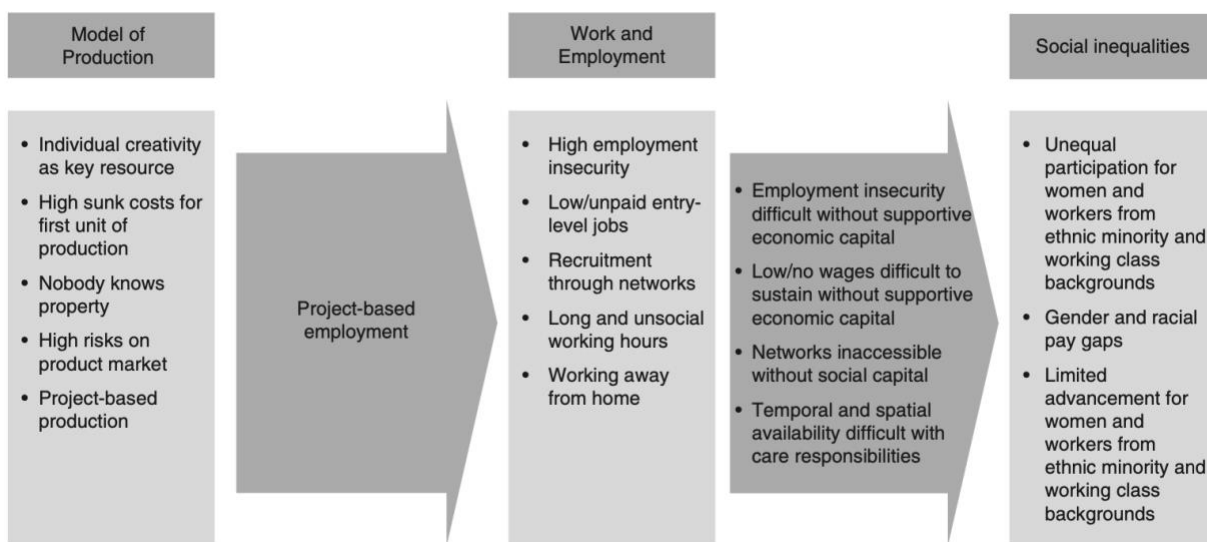
I always get offered the same kind of role: nurse, maid [...] This is confirming the existing stereotypes and preconceived ideas. It puts me in this outdated stigmatised identity. I feel this is important, as we are also full persons, with our own character with a complex identity. It's always the same angle that is taken, reducing us to the stereotype we represent. If we want

social progress, this needs to be tackled (Female, 29 years, actress, non-white) (Hennekam and Syed, 2017, p. 558)

The inclusion of these “token” characters is a performative practice to maintain the appearance of social equality. As Chan (2021) explained, tokenism differs from representation mainly in purpose and intention: “representation seeks to promote inclusion and diversity, tokenism only seeks to achieve an appearance of representation”.

Figure 1

Model of production into social inequalities (Eikhof & Warhurst, 2013)



The terms diversity and inclusion are often found together, but they address different issues. Consultancy organisation Global Diversity Practice (n.d.) defined diversity as “any dimension that can be used to differentiate groups and people from one another”. Similarly, Eikhof (2023) described diversity as a measure: how many different “expressions of a characteristic” are present in a given population— and how leading is this presence (p. 10)? Diversity refers not only to ethnicity and gender, but also to age, sexual orientation, disability, religion, education and national origin. Ideally, it fosters understanding and appreciation, as well as inclusion. Global Diversity Practices (n.d.) described inclusion as an organisational effort, which seeks to ensure a sense of belonging for all individuals. In that sense, an organisation may have established a diverse workforce, but may lack the effort and the practices to make minority

groups feel welcome and appreciated. Likewise, an organisation may be diverse in terms of gender and sexual orientation and do well on inclusive practices, but it may lack ethnic diversity. This concept of diversity without the inclusion is also found in social justice movements. Terms such as ‘white feminism’ or ‘green colonialism’ demonstrate that even if a movement advocates social equality or environmental sustainability, it may still leave behind or even exclude other groups.

In recent years, the importance of diversity and inclusion has become increasingly recognised and implemented at organisational levels. In many firms’ latest annual ESG reports, it has become a standard topic of interest (see Amazon, 2023; Procter & Gamble, 2022; ING Groep BV, 2024). However, the topic also sees an increased interest on a political level. In the Netherlands for instance, a legislative proposal was submitted which aimed to ensure equal opportunities in the labour market (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, n.d.).

The ESG reports of organisations in the screen industries also demonstrate their commitment to diversity and inclusion. The Walt Disney Company (2023), for example, has intended “to make progress toward a workforce that reflects the market” and established an inclusive culture where leaders and employees take ownership to maintain this culture (p. 15). The organisation has also launched programs and collaborations that foster “diverse talent behind the camera” and commits to “attracting and developing talent that reflects [their] audiences” (p. 20; p. 16). Netflix (2023) also recognised that “increased representation is only part of the journey. People need to feel included and valued within an organization if they are to stay long term” (p. 41). The streaming platform intends to go further than awareness of diversity and inclusion, but to move to action and impact to deepen their culture of inclusion and belonging. But even though the reports from Disney and Netflix showcase their results and initiatives, they demonstrate a lack of targets. Target-setting is an important aspect of ESG reports, but interestingly, they seem to be associated more with the topic of environmental sustainability than social responsibility. In her book, Eikhof (2023) explained and demonstrates how the screen industries can operationalise the concepts of diversity and inclusion by setting targets. Eikhof observed this lack of diversity and inclusion (D&I) targets and that too many companies focus solely on diversity. She vouches for the implementation of inclusion targets, seeing as actors and crew members may be diverse, but also may still experience discrimination or exclusion in the workplace (p. 4).

The literature discussed until now has mostly focused on how the system of the screen industries have been to blame for its lack of diversity and inclusion. Yet it does not discuss the extent to which audiences hold a certain power or control over such decision-making processes. In their annual Hollywood Diversity Report, Hunt and Ramón (2020) found that films with a larger representation of minorities generally performed better than those that displayed less diversity. This result might urge filmmakers to listen to their audience and make more inclusive casting choices. As Hunt and Ramón claim, “diversity on screen sells,” and thus the audience has a powerful influence on what kind of cast is seen on screen (p. 10).

Debates on Tolkien in Contemporary Times

The debate of Tolkien and race was, in a way, fuelled by Peter Jackson’s film adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien did receive criticism for his work before the release of Peter Jackson’s films in the 2000s, though this usually did not revolve around skin colour and racism. Early on, Landa (2002) argued that Tolkien had a tendency to be paradoxical and maybe even hypocritical in his descriptions of Orcs in comparison to the Elves, seeing as the violence of Orcs is described as cruel and wicked where the violence of Elves and their weapons are heroic and revered. Yet, Landa’s focus was on a political reading of Tolkien’s works, drawing on Marxism and capitalism, and not on race. The release of Peter Jackson’s films and his casting choices, however, seemed to have incited a debate on Tolkien’s writings and whether they can be read as racist or not. The very question was met with outrage, and Reid (2017) asserted that scholars should move away from the “need to defend Tolkien,” and that a multidisciplinary approach is required to truly understand race in Middle-earth— an approach not only based on medieval scholarship but also on contemporary contexts (p. 54). Thus, this subsection does not seek to add to this debate, nor do I mean to find a solution to the race problem in Tolkien’s works. Rather, it provides a brief yet critical synthesis of influential works on Tolkien and race published between the release of Peter Jackson’s *The Lord of the Rings* films in 2001 to 2003 and the present.

In his book on Tolkien and race, Robert Stuart (2022) made the distinction between racist and racialised. Racialism is defined as the awareness of racial differences and race across a variety of levels such as politics, societal order and history, whereas racism seeks to establish hierarchy among races. Johnson (2003) described this distinction in historical perspective, drawing back on

nineteenth-century imperialism when the categorisation of race and racial differences was a universal tool to better understand race, customs and behaviour. Yet, racialism is currently understood as a synonym of racism, and the Merriam-Webster (n.d) has defined the term as “a belief that race determines human traits and capacities”. The definitions’ fusion may point to the tendency that racialism was often accompanied by racism and forms of Othering (alienating certain races from a dominating and a perceived superior race). Indeed, Stuart (2022) contended there is a fine line between the two distinct theories and provides evidence thereof from Tolkien’s works. The racialisation in Tolkien’s legendarium is quite abundant and clear, seeing as Men, Elves, Dwarves and Orcs are described as races. Though Elves, Dwarves and Men all seem to be equal to each other (even if Elves are often elevated for their superior wisdom and beauty), the bottom tier Orcs are, as Stuart argued, a plainly racist creation. Orcs embody the “dark side of Middle-earth,” and Tolkien often refers to them as a “foul folk” (p. 125). In the Fourth Age, after the War of the Ring, they are hunted to extinction by the newly crowned kings Aragorn and Éomer. Considered as irredeemable and inherently evil, as well as being thoroughly Othered, Middle-earth needs to be racially cleansed from Orcs. It would seem that racialism here is accompanied by racism, and Othering appears to be a leading form of racism. McLarty (2006) indeed observed that this Othering and “dehumanization of an enemy is achieved, in part, by provoking disgust” (p. 188), often through insect- and vermin-like characteristics and body horror. Flieger (2017) asserted that the Othering of Orcs is achieved by playing on familiar language use—the language of the Orcs is “so colloquially modern that it is jarring and is therefore counter, original, spare, and arrestingly strange in this fantastic world” (p. 207). All these rhetorical practices demonstrate how racialised characters were subverted to hierarchy, and are thus, as Stuart, McLarty and Flieger have argued, subject to racism as well as depictions of racism.

Kim (2004), Redmond (2008) and Young (2016) have focused less on Tolkien’s writings and more on Peter Jackson’s rendition of the Orcs. Kim (2004) pointed out the black and white colour-coding in the films— pure, ethereal and idealised whiteness is juxtaposed by evil, devilish and once more Other blackness. There are the White Wizard and the White Lady of Rohan, and there are the Black Riders who, as well as other evil beings, speak the Black Speech. Kim also pointed out how the “Men of the West” in Peter Jackson’s visual representation are inspired from Old English and Germanic storytelling, and that Hobbit culture was mostly drawn from the

comforting and homely “Englishness” (p. 876). The colour-coding is more visible when it comes to the portrayal of Tolkien’s Elves: the costume designers intended to make “Galadriel” “the most white,” “the most elegant,” and “most beautiful” of all the characters” (p. 876). Juxtaposed to this pure whiteness, is the Dark Lord Sauron and his Black Riders, whose attire and strongholds are all black. Yet the colour-coding becomes racialised in our own terms upon the consideration that these characters are all played by white actors, whereas the few actors of colour involved were all cast for faceless Black Riders, Orcs wearing prosthetics, or the Easterlings and Southrons that followed the dark path of Sauron. Redmond (2008) has followed this line of thought, and likewise observed how the characters of Galadriel and Arwen are idealised as ultimate white femininity. They are the ultimate forces of good, powerful and innocent—graced with glowy milky skin bathed in light. Whiteness is a source of light and has mostly positive connotations, whereas the epitomes of evil—the Orcs and Uruk-Hai—are likened to black people. However, it might be said that Redmond’s comparisons go a little far, as he refers to elves as being “Aryan” and thus draws on Nazi doctrine. On the other hand, it is known that, despite Tolkien’s despise for Nazism (as well as for the incorrect use of “Aryan”, which in actuality refers to an ancient Indo-Iranian people), white supremacists following Neo-Nazi ideologies praise his works and Peter Jackson’s adaptations for exactly this racial colour-coding (Young, 2016). Focusing on the contrast between good and evil as well, Young (2016) established that culture and geography are intricately correlated with these two opposites: “Both the cultures and the geography of Middle-earth are morally coded, and good is directly linked to the North and West of Europe; Middle-earth is not only Europe-centered but also ideologically Eurocentric” (p. 349). This racial colour-coding has seeped through the entire franchise of the *Lord of the Rings* films, as purity-coded whiteness is also very much present in the games. Young described that the Orcs in the games have animalistic behaviorism, wear animal pelts and dreadlocks, and “make hooting calls like apes or monkeys”. Even if their skin colours range from pale to dark, their “tribal feel” make them distinguishably “non-White”.

This background is relevant to the discussion of diversity in this thesis, as *Rings of Power* depicts a thoroughly different image of race, ethnicity and colour from the films of Peter Jackson. With the influence Jackson’s films have had on the iconography and fans’ visualisation of Middle-earth, it is likely that this may have fuelled the racist backlash on *Rings of Power*.

Media and the War on “Woke”

As I have described in the introductory section, the angry tweets of fans about the “wokeism” in *Rings of Power*, as well as the entries concerning the term on Urban Dictionary, give an accurate portrayal of what the term currently typically refers to. However, as Davies and MacRae (2023) have described, the term “woke” was not always “an instrument of parody” (p. 5). To reiterate, during the civil rights movements in the 20th century, woke meant “being fully politically conscious of one’s racial oppression” (p. 4). In this period, racial segregation and systemic discrimination was still legal in the United States of America, and especially the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s is marked for its nonviolent protests and civil disobediences. The term was popularised again during the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in the 2010s, which was roused by police brutality against black Americans and gained much attention mostly through social media. This popularisation of “woke” has also led to brand activism, which is essentially “a marketing tactic for brands seeking to stand out in a fragmented marketplace by taking public stances on social and political issues” (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 1). However, these brands’ motivations for their activism have become increasingly scrutinised, as consumers have increasing doubts whether these motivations are truly authentic, or mostly intended to gain publicity. Inauthentic brand activism is also known as “woke washing.” Vredenburg et al. (2020) defined woke washing as “brands that have unclear or indeterminate records of social cause practices [...] but yet are attempting to market themselves as being concerned with issues of inequality and social injustice” (p. 2). Critics of woke washing thus scrutinise the authenticity of brand activism. The previously mentioned concept of tokenism can also be seen as a form of woke washing. Tokenism, too, jeopardises the authenticity of a brand or media product, as it is merely a symbolic effort to make the brand or media product appear racially (or sexually) equal. Lately, however, it appears that the definitions of woke washing and woke have been confused, whether intentionally or unintentionally. The connotation of wokeism with inauthenticity and performative social justice suggests that the original definition of woke has been supplanted by the definition of woke washing.

Though *Rings of Power* has too many ethnically diverse characters to be scrutinised for tokenism, many argued that the series’ diversity was forced and inauthentic. Especially on X (formerly Twitter), fans have accused the producers of woke washing the series and its source material ([Anc_Aesthetics], 2023; [MooreDausen], 2023; [DankoHabs], 2022; [CarrionHound],

2023; [agameboycolor], 2023). X user [Anc_Aesthetics], for example, was quite positive about the “aesthetics” of *Rings of Power*, and stated that “if they improve the writing, stick to the lore, and get rid of the forced diversity that everyone hates they could make something truly special” (2023). Likewise, [MooreDausen] argued that *Rings of Power* is a “great example” of forced diversity, as diversity is “added where it wasn’t in the source material and realistically couldn’t be” (2023). Another user lamented that “we know diverse people don’t just spawn in the area out of thin air, but often adaptations like [...] *Rings of Power* simply don’t care about it and i’m as a viewer immediately pulled out of those fictional worlds by forced diversity” ([CarrionHound, 2023]. To rephrase the disapproval of “forced diversity”, *Rings of Power* had the potential to be a successful series among the fan base, but the alleged imposition of diversity onto the narrative has ultimately undermined the series’ integrity and the quality of its storytelling. However, rather than vouching for what would be deemed as authentic diverse casting, many of these critics seemed to prefer no diversity at all, as the source material apparently does not allow for the series’ diversity. The previous section described that both Tolkien’s works and Jackson’s adaptations drew heavily from early medieval European and Scandinavian mythology, which, by that logic, does not allow for any actors nor characters of colour.

This backlash is not the only one of its kind. British actor Steve Toussaint received similar backlash and racist abuse upon being cast as a Corlys Velaryon for HBO’s *House of the Dragon*, a prequel series to *Game of Thrones*. In an interview with a journalist from *The Hollywood Reporter*, he described how his friends and colleagues, who are also black, were faced with hate upon their casting as well (Hibberd, 2022a). Another instance of a perceived woke rendition of an older original text would be Disney’s upcoming film *Snow White*, where the main character is to be played by actress Rachel Zegler. The production and actress were faced with similar hate and online backlash even far before the release (which is set in 2025) due to Zegler being Polish-Colombian, and thus not matching the characteristics of “a character who was famously white-skinned in the 1937 animated classic” (Reid, 2024).

Focusing on the Vietnamese audience reception of Disney’s newest remake of *The Little Mermaid*, which featured actress and singer Halle Bailey as Ariel, Gammon and Phan (2024) observed that online hate regarding the “unfaithful representation” of Ariel for a large part pointed to preferences of whiteness in beauty standards, but also to a perceived destruction of

audiences' childhood (p. 3). Further, they observed that those who were hateful of Halle Bailey's casting as Ariel argued that they were not racist, but

that they were only against the unreasonably woke Western "Black-washing" trend that "robs" White actors of "their" roles. These people's support for "Black people within Black spaces" and their concern with a Black invasion into White spaces demonstrates a desire to put Blackness in "their place," further reinforcing racial differentiation (2024, p. 3)

Researchers have observed that over the last few years, the history behind the term woke has been minimised and denigrated in a discourse that seeks to dismiss social justice and civil rights movements (Cammaerts, 2022; Davies and MacRae, 2023; Smith et al., 2023). Davies and MacRae (2023) have noticed for instance, that British rightwing press have come to use woke as an accusation toward progressive politics, and framed it as, again, inauthentic and self-indulgent, performed by privileged individuals. In doing so, the press has disassociated "wokeness from authentic anger against racism" and fuelled fear and "moral panic about perceived leftwing cultural hegemony," (p. 6). This perceived leftwing cultural hegemony points to the conspiracy theory of "Cultural Marxism", which is believed to be intertwined with wokeism, according to an entry on *Urban Dictionary* ([ApplesPotatoGardner], 2023). Beirich (2013) explicated that the conspiracy theory was developed "to explain the rise of political correctness and anti-racist beliefs as well as the advent of multiculturalism" (p. 96). It is also a theory widely adopted and appropriated by fascist or fascist-adjacent political movements. Fascism and far- and extreme-right politics are distinct in that the former undermines and poses a threat to democracy. Yet, Richardson (2018) observed that the latter often fail to condemn—and instead often even justify—fascist discourse. This may partly be due to what Martinez Guillem (2018) has described as a shift in emphasis from race to ethnicity in describing Othered groups, to evade accusations of racism. She also pointed out that more "covert, 'well-intentioned' forms of racial discrimination" fail to be considered as forms of racism (p. 368). The justification of racism is also rather difficult to perceive and point out, seeing as fascist discourse uses manipulative discursive strategies such as ambiguity (e.g. in implicit racist messages that refer to ethnicity instead of race), euphemisms and a calculated ambivalence that enables various interpretations and rejections of intended discrimination. Davies and MacRae (2023) remarked that more extreme rightwing and conservative communities position themselves in contradiction to what is perceived as leftwing. Thus, institutions that are increasingly invested in societal issues

perceived as leftwing incites the claim that universities and schools indoctrinate students with woke orthodoxy, and that universities are “infected by CRT²” and against freedom of speech (p. 17). Even news media outlets have been accused of being too biased to be deemed trustworthy—an accusation that is echoed on both sides of the political spectrum. A report on news media and trust revealed that out of the nine countries involved in the research, participants from the USA and the UK showed most concern about political bias in the news media (Newman and Fletcher, 2017). Similarly, Nygaard (2023) described that the rise of alternative rightwing press has led to mainstream media outlets being increasingly accused as elitist and too biased in their politically left orientation. Davies and MacRae (2023), but also Cammaerts (2022) and Smith et al. (2022), have argued that this “war on woke” or “anti-woke culture war” stems from a discourse that seeks to normalise and rationalise racist and fascist ideologies. This discourse leads to a narrative where:

[f]ighting fascism, condemning discrimination, and contesting hate speech is thus not a moral disposition any longer, but rather an ‘opinion’; not just an opinion like any other opinion, however, but a very dogmatic and highly ideological one, and furthermore those who espouse such ‘opinions’ are part of an aberrant, crazy, elitist, irrational mob, lacking a sense of humour and out of touch with common sense (Cammaerts, 2022, p. 735)

Thus, the focus has shifted from the racist ideologies to the “extreme” and “intolerant” reactions of these groups. Van Dijk (1992) has similarly described this shift of focus as follows:

[T]he person who accuses the other as racist is in turn accused of inverted racism against whites, as oversensitive and exaggerating, as intolerant, generally as ‘seeing racism where there is none’ [. . .] Accusations of racism, then, soon tend to be seen as more serious social infractions than racist attitudes or actions themselves (p. 90).

In this way, racist attitudes and actions are normalised whereas outrage against it is condemned. Cammaerts (2022) also described how terms such as “cancel culture” endorse a discourse where pushback against discriminatory attitudes is “sinister” and a threat to free speech (p. 737). The suspension of English cricket player Ollie Robinson due to his racist and sexist posts on Twitter, for instance, or the backlash J. K. Rowling received after she posted anti-transgender statements on the same platform, led to the condemnation of the “woke mob” that imposes their “woke

² CRT stands for Critical Race Theory, which is an interdisciplinary field that looks at social conceptions of race in media, social and political laws, etc.

opinions” and “cancel culture” onto the public—Boris Johnson, then prime minister of the United Kingdom, and secretary of culture Oliver Dowden decried the woke’s “cancel culture”. What these political actors fail to see is that this “cancel culture” and the backlashes that are part of it is, in fact, also found among the Tolkien fans that wish to boycott Amazon’s new series because of its unfaithful diversity. This makes for a double standard, and reduces ethical and moral concerns of human rights and social justice to “opinions” which in turn allows for people to draw on their freedom of speech and to disagree with these “opinions.” Cammaerts voices his concern on this issue, arguing that:

[b]y positioning this in the context of agreement/disagreement within a democratic debate a moral equivalence between a variety of opinions is being constructed, thereby completely disregarding the inherent ethical dimension of the fight against fascism, racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination and related hate speech (2022, p. 737)

A Brief Recap

We have seen that diversity and inclusion have become an increasingly acknowledged topic within the screen industries specifically. Unfortunately, this has also given rise to an opposition that appears to view diversity and inclusion as something conditional—the conditions being that it is not “forced” into cultural products where it does not belong. Researchers have observed that far right politicians and public figures weaponise the negative connotations to “wokeness” as well as their right of free speech, shifting the attention to the “woke mob” that cancels those who do not agree with their “leftwing doctrine”. In this way, the attention is no longer on the discriminatory messages to which that “woke mob” reacts (Cammaerts, 2022; Davies and MacRae, 2023). Rather, speaking out against social injustice and discrimination is viewed as “cancel culture”—an impediment on freedom of speech, which sustains a sense of victimhood among those that are “cancelled” as well as those that may share “anti-woke” views. Whereas existing literature on diversity and inclusion in the screen industries have failed to address the power audiences may have over decision-making processes within a production, or the discourse surrounding such a production, the literature on media and the weaponisation of “wokeism” has certainly demonstrated how audiences exert such influence.

The online backlash against *Rings of Power*’s diverse cast has displayed a similar rhetoric. Critics have argued that they are not racist for decrying the diversity in the series: it is

rationalised by claiming that the source material was centered on medieval Europe, which does not allow for the inclusion of other skin colours than white. Diversity, then, is forced upon both the source material—that being Tolkien—as well as on the viewers. Brandon Morse, editor at conservative news website Red State, took it a step further, because not only is diversity imposed on them—it is part of a leftist political agenda that seeks to, as Morse called it, “woke-ify” cultural media products (Morse, 2022).

Users on X have clearly demonstrated their understanding of “wokeism” and their denouncement of “forced diversity” in the series. The backlash has received much attention on online news sites since the *Rings of Power*’s teasers and trailers were released. The purpose of this study is to analyse the discourse in these news articles and how these news outlets navigate the so-called “diversity debate” surrounding Amazon’s *Rings of Power*. In the following section, I detail the methods utilised to conduct this research as well as the sampling and analysis processes.

Methods

This section outlines the methodological approach utilised to conduct this research, which adopts a qualitative research design, examining strategies and patterns in a sample of online news articles. In this way, the research design aligns with the research objective of shedding light on dominant discourse patterns and strategies employed in the coverage of the controversy. The research involved a thematic analysis and a critical discourse analysis (CDA) that helped examine how the news media represents and frames the racist backlash surrounding Amazon's *Rings of Power* and its diverse cast. CDA was selected as an appropriate approach as it allows for in-depth examination of discourse, power and ideology, as well as how media discourse has a constructive role in shaping social entities and realities.

Data Collection

A total number of 21 articles were studied in this research. A key criterium was that these articles discuss the diversity in the series as well as the racist backlash the series faced upon release, either by way of interviews or referring to these interviews as a secondary source, or by describing the controversy from a distance. These articles were mostly from trade press (e.g. *Vanity Fair*, *the Hollywood Reporter*, *the Wrap*, *Deadline*) and mainstream press. Characteristics of trade press are that 1) they have a specific focus on film and television, or the wider entertainment industries, 2) they are perceived as a trusted source for industry professionals and academics, and 3) other mainstream press usually use 'the trades' as a source. Mainstream press can be subdivided into two categories: quality newspapers and press (e.g. *the Washington Post*, *the New Yorker*, *the Guardian*, *the Independent*) and popular press or news websites (e.g. *Daily Mail*, *Fox News*, *the Sun*). In British journalism, the distinction used to be quite straightforward through its formatting: 'serious' press tended to be broadsheet newspapers, and the tabloids had their own format. Oxford Royale Academy (n.d.) described the press as either Broadsheets, referring to in-depth newspapers meant for audiences that prefer "serious news writing rather than celebrity gossip and sensationalism", or the tabloid newspapers, where news reliability has been discarded for sensationalism even if it may contain some good journalism. Likewise, the Collins Dictionary (n.d.) described quality press as "the more serious newspapers which give detailed accounts of world events, as well as reports on business, culture, and society" and BBC (n.d.) described quality press as more factual and straightforward rather than sensationalist and

emotive. Conversely, tabloids are described to tend to focus on opinion and sensation rather than providing in-depth analysis, covers celebrities and scandals, and stories tend to be quite short. They also tend to be more explicit about political stance. Conboy and Eldridge (2017) described a polarisation in press that consigns public discourse to being either information-driven, “working in the public interest”, or market-driven, “serving up what is of interest to the public” (p. 166).

To select the articles, a purposive sampling method was used. Purposive sampling differs from other sampling methods in that it requires the researcher to actively engage with the material they wish to collect. Mason (2002) offered the following explanation of this method:

selecting groups or categories to study on the basis of their relevance to your research question, your theoretical position, your analytic practice, and most importantly the argument or explanation that you are developing (p. 124).

Drawing onto Mason, Emmel (2013) deduced that the researcher should thus showcase reflexivity during the entire process of their research, not merely at the beginning of the research. Stewart (n.d.) described purposive sampling as selecting information-rich cases that are relevant to the topic of the study and that can provide in-depth understanding into the research question. An advantage to purposive sampling is that the method is very versatile and can be adapted to the needs of the research. Due to its focus on information-rich, valuable data, the sampling method also does not need a large sampling size—thus it is befitting of a small-scale qualitative study such as in this thesis. However, there is the disadvantage of limited generalisability. Because the sample is specifically chosen for its attributes and characteristics, no generalisation can be made for the larger population. There is also a risk of unintentional bias, seeing as “the method relies heavily on the researcher’s judgement in selecting” cases (Stewart, n.d.). Due to the “inherent subjectivity” of the researcher, it is also challenging to replicate the study as each researcher might select different subjects or cases, which may unintentionally reflect their individual bias. These limitations can be reduced by means of a thoughtful and structured sampling process, where articles are considered based on keywords and phrases that are relevant to the research question and topic of this thesis. All 21 articles were selected through a combination of two groups of keywords: those that referred to the series and terms that described the situation and controversy. Table 1 below provides a complete overview of the keywords used in the search engine.

Table 1*Keywords used for data collection*

Series	Controversy
Rings of Power	(Racist) backlash
Lord of the Rings series	Racism/Racist(s)
Amazon's Lord of the Rings	Woke
LOTR series	Diverse/Inclusive cast
	Review-bombing
	Controversy
	Actors of colo(u)r
	Negative reviews

The results were narrowed down by two conditions. First, articles were required to be 300 words or longer to be qualified among the sample. Second, because this research focused mainly on mainstream news outlets as well as trade, I decided to exclude alternative news outlets, such as far-left or far-right alternative media. Articles from trade press and mainstream press were selected for this study. The 21 selected titles, along with the journalists, publication date and news outlet, are depicted in table 2 below.

Table 2*Selected samples for research*

	News outlet	Author and Date	Headline
1	CNN	Andrew, S. (2022, September 8).	<i>When 'wokeness' comes to Middle-Earth: Why some say diverse casting ruins the new 'Lord of the Rings' series</i>
2	CNN	Blake, J. (2022, September 5).	<i>Elijah Wood and original 'Lord of the Rings' cast shut down racist critics of 'Rings of Power'</i>

3	Deadline	O'Hara, H. (2023, June 15).	<i>'The Lord Of The Rings: The Rings Of Power' creators break the bank to bring a new reality to the fantasy genre</i>
4	Far Out Magazine	Russell, C. (2022, September 24).	<i>'The Rings of Power' and the absurdity of the diversity 'debate'</i>
5	Forbes	Kain, E. (2022, September 1).	<i>'The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power' is not pushing a woke agenda</i>
6	FOX News	Hume, A. (2022, September 3).	<i>'Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power' becomes Amazon's most-watched premiere ever with 25 million viewers</i>
7	Mail Online	Payne M. & Matthews, C. (2022, February 22).	<i>'Go woke, go broke... respect the source material!': Lord of the Rings fans in race row as they slam Amazon's \$1billion 'Rings of Power' series which has cast black actors to play dwarves and elves</i>
8	Mail Online	Reinl, J. (2022, September 21).	<i>Sorry, trolls. Most viewers SUPPORT the casting of black actors as elves, dwarves and other fantasy characters in The Lord of the Rings and Game of Thrones spinoffs, and die-hard fans are even bigger backers, poll shows</i>
9	MSNBC	Holland, J. J. (2022, September 8).	<i>Some 'Rings of Power' and 'House of Dragon' fans are letting their racism roar</i>
10	The Conversation	Fimi, D. & Rios Maldonado, M. (2022, February 25).	<i>Lord of the Rings: Debunking the backlash against non-white actors in Amazon's new adaptation</i>
11	The Conversation	Young, H. (2022, September 8).	<i>The Rings of Power is suffering a racist backlash for casting actors of colour –</i>

			<i>but Tolkien's work has always attracted white supremacists</i>
12	The Hollywood Reporter	Chuba, K. (2023, May 31).	<i>'Rings of Power' star Sophia Nomvete on fighting racist backlash: "My place in this show is not just a celebration, it is an act of defiance"</i>
13	The Hollywood Reporter	Hibberd, J. (2022, October 5).	<i>'The Rings of Power' showrunners break silence on backlash, Sauron and season 2</i>
14	The Hollywood Reporter	Newby, R. (2022, September 2).	<i>A racist backlash to 'Rings of Power' puts Tolkien's legacy into focus</i>
15	The Independent	Sachdeva, M. (2022, September 8).	<i>The Rings of Power cast condemn 'relentless racism' against fellow actors: 'We refuse to tolerate it'</i>
16	The New Yorker	Livingstone, L. (2022, September 16).	<i>"The Rings of Power" is true to Tolkien's mythmaking spirit</i>
17	The Washington Post	Suliman, A. (2022, September 8).	<i>Elijah Wood supports diverse 'Rings of Power' cast after racism backlash</i>
18	The Wrap	Chitwood, A. (2023, May 29).	<i>How 'The Rings of Power' navigated great expectations to bring 'Lord of the Rings' to Prime Video</i>
19	Variety	Barracclough, L. (2023, June 18).	<i>'Rings of Power' cast slams racist backlash at Monte-Carlo television festival, teases 'action-packed' season 2</i>
20	Variety	Sharf, Z. (2022, September 7).	<i>Elijah Wood and 'Lord of the Rings' cast champion diversity in Middle-earth amid racist 'Rings of Power' backlash: 'You are all welcome here'</i>

21	Vulture	Sanders, S. (2022, September 16).	<i>Tolkien acknowledged that black people exist in Arda, so why can't everyone else?</i>
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Analytical Framework and Operationalisation

Before conducting CDA, I first conducted a thematic analysis to grasp the scope of major themes and patterns found within and across the samples. Coding was done according to the steps proposed by Boeije (2010), and data was examined in thorough rounds. Open coding refers to segmenting the data through comparison, conceptualisation and categorisation. This phase ended once the addition of new codes would lead to oversaturation, and once all data was covered. The next round was axial coding, where the list of codes resulting from the open coding round were analysed and categorised. Thus, the data from the texts were transformed into a more “abstract framework” (p. 111). Once the salient codes and sub-codes were identified, selective coding aimed to find connections between the categories and to reassemble the data. As with the purposive sampling method, selective coding requires reflexivity, returning to the previous rounds of coding to make sense of the data. To manage and analyse the codes and themes, I employed the coding tool and programme Atlas.ti, which provided a visual overview of all the data. I considered it useful to conduct the thematic analysis as a “pre”-analysis in this study, as it provided a visual overview (i.e. a coding tree) of the controversy surrounding the diverse casting in *Rings of Power*. It also created a firm foundation for conducting CDA.

The CDA was conducted in accordance with Fairclough, mostly drawing from his synthesis of approaches in *Discourse and Social Change* (1992), as well as Machin and Mayr (2012) and Tonkiss (1998). Fairclough (1992) distinguished critical discourse analysis from discourse analysis, as a non-critical analysis focuses solely on giving a description of discursive practices. Critical discourse analysis, however, aims to uncover power relations and ideologies within the discourse as well as their (intended or unintended) effect “upon social identities, social relations and systems of knowledge and belief” (p. 12). It is precisely this effect that is of interest in this study. How do ideologies and power relations translate to the discourse in the press discussing *Rings of Power*, diversity and inclusion in the screen industry and racism? Does the press position itself as an impartial authority in the controversy online, or does it add to it? CDA might reveal subliminal stances or bias, or even narratives that are created, whether they were intended or not.

Fairclough (1992) described three dimensions of analysing a “discursive event” (p. 4). First, there is a textual analysis, where the language in the text is analysed. A text, in this case, is used in linguistic terms, meaning that they can be both written and spoken products. A textual analysis studies the writer or speaker’s semiotic choices. This study did so by using Machin and Mayr’s (2012) tools of analysis:

Overlexicalisation. This refers to a repetition of “quasi-synonymous terms,” in order to create emphasis, but also acts as “evidence that something is problematic or of ideological contention” (p. 37).

Suppression or lexical absence. This is the practice of leaving out words that one might expect to find in certain contexts. Often, this is the result of enhancing readability and simplicity for a wide public, such as the omission of legal terms in an online news article (p. 38).

Word connotation. Even though a set of words might have similar meaning, the choice for one over the other might be based on the connotation it has (p. 32). Some words might incite more emotionality than others, which is perfect for, for instance, the narration of a reality TV show.

Structural opposition. This can be created by addressing two groups or parties as extreme opposites, often tinged with bias (p. 39). It is often used to create an “us” versus “them” narrative.

Genre communication. This refers to lexical choices made to assert authority or dominance over the reader or listener (p. 42). For instance, a politician might use scientific jargon to justify their expertise of certain issues.

On its own, these tools would have made for a rather flat analysis, as they do not consider the dynamics of the text’s environment (i.e. changing power relations, political and social conflict). The text is also not seen as a practice, even though, as Fairclough observed, a text is nearly always written or spoken as a practice, for example in reaction to another (discursive) event (1992). Thus, Fairclough’s second dimension is an analysis of discourse as a discursive practice, where the reason for, effect and process of the production and interpretation of a text is studied. This dimension tackles the outer layer of the text, but is yet directly involved with the text. Tonkiss (1998) highlighted two central themes within CDA, one of which is the rhetorical context surrounding a discursive event. The rhetorical context involves the argumentation that allows for the establishment of authority. Rhetoric is dependent on the speaker’s or writer’s

purpose: is it to persuade or to incite? Or is it used to dismiss and deny? The discursive practice dimension will draw on this theme of rhetorical context.

Finally, the third dimension involves studying the social context surrounding the discursive event, usually at an institutional and organisational level (Fairclough, 1992). Tonkiss' (1998) second theme of interpretive context could aid in the analysis of the social practice dimensions. The interpretive context involves the larger social setting. People make stylistic choices in their language based on the situation they may find themselves in. This requires an analysis of large-scale societal contexts or smaller-scale contexts such as the type of interaction, the interlocutors' relation, and discursive aims (p. 250). A number of subquestions were devised to study these contexts of the discourse in the selected samples:

1. What is the large-scale interpretive context (e.g. larger societal issues) of the texts?
2. What is the small-scale interpretive context (e.g. discursive aims) of each text?
3. What appears to be the desired effect of the statements made in each text?

The first question considered the general socio-political and cultural environment in which these texts were written, read and subsequently studied. The second and third questions were answered for each singular text, considering the discursive aims and the position of the journalists of the text as well as the rhetorics used and the desired effect journalists might have on the reader. I did not expect to conduct CDA in three clean rounds as with the thematic analysis. Rather, I started with a textual analysis, where semiotic choices and the composition of words eventually pointed to the discursive and social practices. In this way, CDA was conducted in a much more fluid and reflexive way than described above. This also reflects how discourse occurs. Though I do not doubt there are discursive strategies at play in the selected texts, it must be noted that they may also be unintentional—or at the very least may point to subconsciously ingrained ideologies, habits of thought and values. It is important to acknowledge that covert and perhaps unintentional forms of racial discrimination may be perceived by one and may escape the notice of another. In order to ensure that the aforementioned inherent subjectivity of the researcher does not pose a risk to the reliability and transparency of the study, I maintained a record of personal reflections throughout the research process. In this way, I remained aware of any potential interpretations that may be influenced by my own personal beliefs and assumptions.

Results

This thesis' aim was to study the discourse in the press surrounding the reception of and critique on the inclusion of diverse characters in Amazon's *Rings of Power*. During the process of the thematic analysis and CDA, I utilised the subquestions to organise the results, as well as to apply and interpret these findings with the research aim in mind. This section is divided into subsections according to the following questions:

1. What is the large-scale interpretive context (e.g. larger societal issues) of the texts?
2. What is the small-scale interpretive context (e.g. discursive aims) of each text?
3. What appears to be the desired effect of the statements made in each text?

Controversy After Controversy

The large-scale interpretive context is best answered by means of providing a contextual background regarding the socio-political environment of the texts analysed in the present study. As described earlier, the concept of diversity and inclusion has become increasingly important to both filmmakers and audiences. However, film and television productions—adaptations of earlier texts in particular—seem to be met with controversy upon having a more diverse cast than either the original text or what audiences appear to be used to. *Rings of Power* was not the only recent adaptation to have been criticised for its diversity: *House of the Dragon*, prequel to the HBO series *Game of Thrones*, and the live-action remake of *The Little Mermaid*, were faced with disapproval and racism even before their official release (Hibberd, 2022a; Reid, 2024). The similarities found in the online upheaval apparently caused by the productions' diverse cast are noteworthy, as the discourse surrounding the productions themselves seemed to revolve solely around this controversy. These controversies serve as a reminder that though the screen industries are willing to change, certain audiences do not share that sentiment and instead oppose this change. There has also been an ongoing discussion about mainstream media outlets and their political or ideological orientation. Especially with the rise of rightwing alternative media outlets, mainstream media outlets are increasingly accused of being elitist and biased in their politically left orientation (Nygaard, 2023). In a 2017 report on journalism and trust among audiences, it is revealed that of the nine countries involved in the research most people in the USA and in the UK are concerned about political bias in the news media (Newman and Fletcher, 2017). The report also found that, in the US, those who identify as being on the political right are

more likely to distrust news outlets than those on the political left, whereas in the UK, most complaints about political bias came from leftwing respondents. Thus, there is a rising sense of distrust in media.

The backlash surrounding the diverse cast of *Rings of Power* is presented in a coding tree (figure 2, next page), which consists of the major themes, arguments and patterns found within and across the 21 samples studied for this analysis. The coding tree has two main nodes, where one encompasses the controversy surrounding diverse casting in *Rings of Power* and where the other provides context, background information and some rhetorical practices. The controversy has two parties: one that welcomes and defends the diversity within the series, and one that argues it has no place within the series. This latter party can be further divided into actions (e.g. sending actors hateful messages, leaving negative reviews that focus on the diversity rather than on the series' quality, and leaving racists posts and comments on social media) and criticism. The criticism revolves either around the casting of actors of colour in general, or a more specific phenomenon of so-called "forced diversity", where the producers are accused of forcing diversity into a narrative where it allegedly does not belong. People have also described diversity as forced when it takes the forefront in a production, rather than the plot or script. It is worth noting however, that most of the articles only describe rather than echo those who share these views. Kain (2022), however, in an opinion piece for *Forbes* about the topic, shares that forced diversity is not present in the case of *Rings of Power*—but it is in other productions:

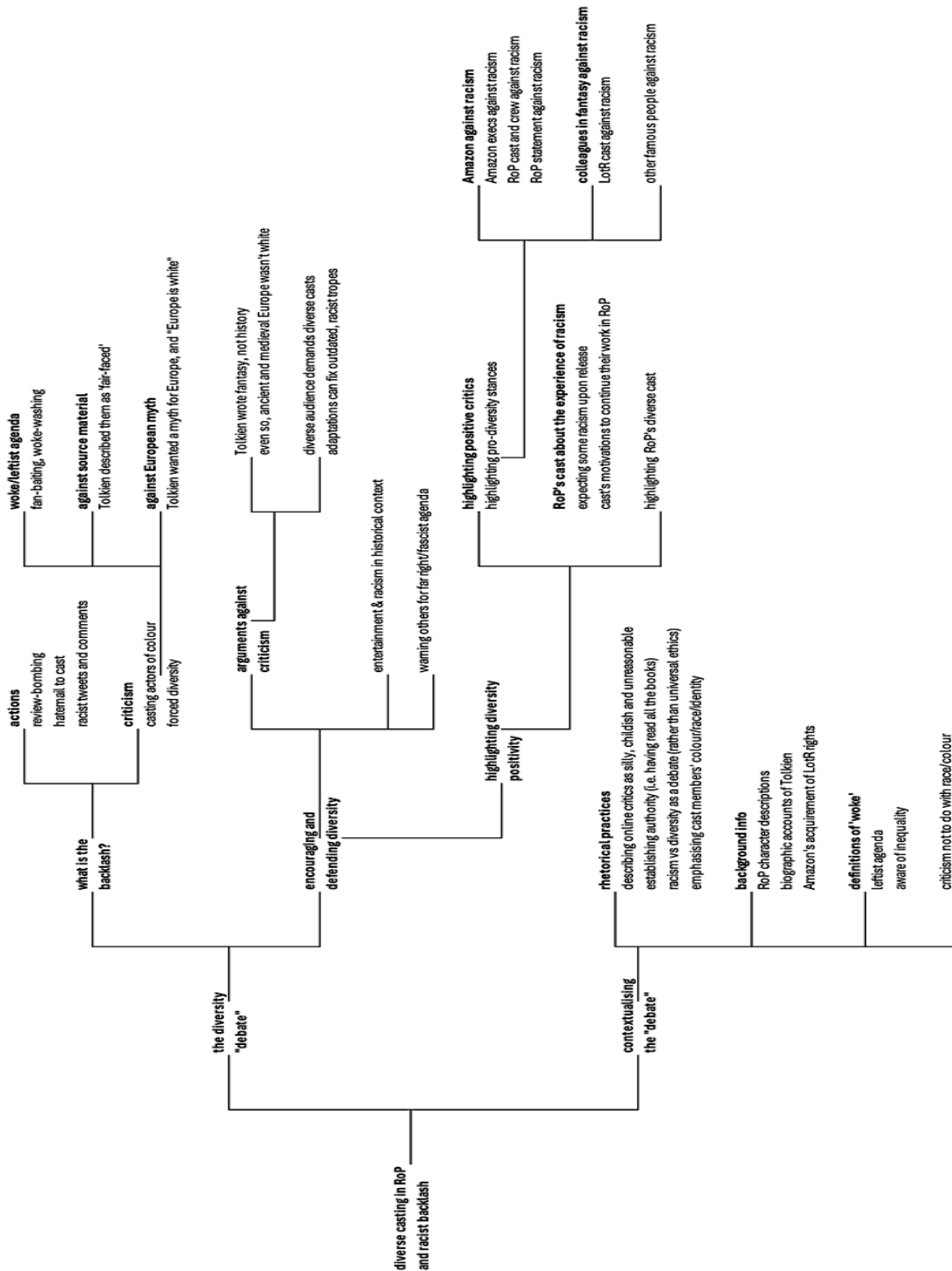
Excerpt 1

Tolkien was drawing on these histories and this lore but he was creating a fantasy, not a history. In a straight history, this level of diversity really doesn't make sense. It's why a black female Viking chieftain in *Vikings: Valhalla* was so jarring. That's a historical show, not a fantasy (Forbes, Kain, 2022)

Above all, journalists herald diversity in the series as a positive change, drawing on how the entertainment industry has failed in representing minority groups in the past. The diverse cast in *Rings of Power* is found to be a step in the right direction. Yet, some discursive strategies were found within the same texts that seem to justify racism and racist ideas, or that suggest certain discursive habits that are harmful and may even further polarise the controversy.

Figure 2

Coding tree of the controversy surrounding Rings of Power



Discursive Strategies and Aims

Of the 21 texts, eight were trade press articles. These were taken from news outlets that specialise in entertainment, or the film and television industries in specific, e.g. *Deadline*, *The Hollywood Reporter* and *Variety*. Two articles, both taken from *The Conversation*, had a more academic hue to them. Four articles, from miscellaneous news outlets, were opinion pieces, and two articles were narratives of interviews. Each of the 21 articles has a larger discursive aim of informing the reader or that of persuading, activating and convincing the reader. It is mostly in the opinion pieces where journalists directly make an argument against the racism surrounding *Rings of Power*, and in which the language is more emotive and personal.

Excerpt 2

I could very easily be discussing Middle-earth, but I'm not. What I'm discussing is our very real world, and social media as an extension of that world. For the past week, I've been bombarded with messages of hate, called the N-word, told to go back to Africa, and called on to be executed. The reason? The Lord of the Rings. It would almost be laughable if it wasn't so profoundly sad (*The Hollywood Reporter*, Newby, 2022)

Newby (2022) writes in first-person and uses personal anecdotes about his own connection to Tolkien and his works, as well as about how he has experienced racism simply for being a fan of Tolkien as a person of colour. With the article, Newby attempts to activate his readers to "make a little noise back" and declares that Middle-earth is for everyone, not just white people.

Though the articles taken from *The Conversation* also made a direct argument against the racism, journalists did so by highlighting socio-political context as well as the history of Tolkien's works. Fimi and Maldonado (2022) defend Amazon's choice for a more diverse cast by shedding light on Tolkien's racialised, orientalist characterisation of Sauron's allies (i.e. Orcs, Easterlings, Haradrim), and argued that this stereotypical portrayal is outdated and not befitting of the era we live in now. In doing so, the authors use more academic language. Excerpt 3, for example, has a considerable number of lexical words (i.e. nouns, verbs, adjectives with inherent meaning) in comparison to excerpt two, which has many functional words (i.e. words that have no meaning and are grammatical, such as articles, pronouns and conjunctions). The excerpt also

demonstrates how the writers include wider concepts and ideologies in their discussion of *Rings of Power* and the racist backlash it is receiving.

Excerpt 3

Tolkien's portrayal of the Orcs (legions of evil creatures) and the men who ally themselves with Sauron (the arch-villain of LOTR) uses many stereotypes associated with orientalism and the language of prejudice often found in literature from the era of British imperialism (Tolkien was born and grew up in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods). Reproducing this white/non-white divide along moral lines would endorse a very old fashioned and harmful equation of physical characteristics with moral choices.

Overall, the articles from trade press outlets were milder in language use and describe and highlight how cast members have dealt with the racist backlash and the personal hate mail they received. Other samples from more mainstream media outlets tended to put emphasis on those that have been vocal about defending the series' casting choices or diversity in general, such as other actors of colour or the cast of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings*. The language in these articles is milder than the language highlighted in the previous excerpts, which is likely due to the intention of taking on a neutral and objective stance towards the controversy, rather than adding to it. However, language can never be truly neutral, and though the journalists might have the aim to be neutral and informative, discursive strategies are employed that—either subtly or blatantly—reveal a more subjective stance.

Correlation and Causation

A major red thread and theme found in nearly all 21 articles is racism and the justification of racist ideas. Though naturally the samples were selected based on the appearance of terms having to do with this very subject (see table 1), it might not be insensible to establish that this racist backlash predominates the discourse surrounding the series. Even in the articles that focus on the production process or that mostly speculate on what might happen in the second season (which is set to release this summer), and do not refer to the controversy in the title, eventually the controversy is mentioned and discussed. The controversy is often framed as a result of the fantasy genre having been predominantly white in the past, something that has only now begun

to change with other adaptations such as *House of the Dragon*, *Star Wars* and the Marvel Universe. Fimi and Rios Maldonado argue (2022) that especially previous adaptations of Tolkien's works have established the aesthetics and iconography of the legendarium—an iconography that is mostly white. The excerpts below demonstrate how the backlash against the diverse cast in *Rings of Power* ties back to these issues:

Excerpt 4

As a popular element of 21st-century culture, fantasy's issues with race, racism and white privilege are subjects the genre has not yet fully addressed (*The Conversation*, Fimi and Rios Maldonado, 2022)

Excerpt 5

[T]he inclusive cast of *The Rings of Power* shows a societal progression of positive ideals ever since Peter Jackson and New Line Cinema chose to cast zero black actors in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (*Far Out*, Russell, 2022)

Russell (2022) points to Peter Jackson and New Line Cinema in the lack of people of colour in the visual adaptations of Tolkien's stories. Likely due to the films having been so widely and critically acclaimed, the writer holds the director and producers accountable for not casting inclusively. Like Fimi and Rios Maldonado (2022), he acknowledges the fact that the fantasy genre has a tradition of being white, but also commends the "true range of diversity that exists in Tolkien's world". In light of the literary discussion concerning Tolkien and race in section 2.2, it is interesting that Russell mentions this. It is likely that he fuses Tolkien's conceptualisation of race (e.g. elves, humans, dwarves and orcs) with our conceptualisation of race that is deeply intertwined with skin colour and ethnicity. In any case, both excerpts adequately demonstrate that the aesthetics and iconography of Tolkien and fantasy in general involve a "habit of whiteness", which may have fueled the controversy surrounding the diverse cast of *Rings of Power* (Fimi and Rios Maldonado, 2022). However, the controversy is also framed as the direct result of diverse casting. The casting of actors of colour is often said to have "sparked" an online racist backlash from "fans" that say this diversity is contrary to the source material (Newby, 2022; Reinl, 2022; Sachdeva, 2022). Yet, this is not an isolated phenomenon—as mentioned

earlier, these backlashes seem to recur whenever new adaptations feature cast members of colour in leading roles. In his opinion piece for *MSNBC*, Holland (2022) describes not only the backlash *Rings of Power* received, but also that of *House of the Dragon*. Likewise, Suliman (2022) highlights how the team of *Star Wars* expressed their support for the cast of Amazon's new fantasy series, as its actors of colour, too, experienced racist abuse for starring in the franchise. In his interview with writer Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, Sanders (2022) also points how the casting of Halle Bailey was reason for people worldwide to boycott Disney's *The Little Mermaid*, simply because the actress was found to be too dark to be Ariel. Pointing to *Rings of Power*'s diverse casting as the cause of racist backlash positions racism as a phenomenon that only arises when creators or producers do not adhere to the perceived iconography of the source material, not as something that has been and remains systemic in the screen industries and among certain audiences.

Lexical Choices: The Racism Behind the "Critics"

While most of the authors seem to agree that the backlash actors of colour received for starring in Tolkien's legendarium has involved racist abuse, simultaneously a number of discursive practices were employed that, whether intended or unintended, minimise the weight of racism in this context.

Excerpt 6

This clash is part of a larger debate about including non-White, LGBTQ and other nontraditional characters in fantasy and science-fiction stories (*CNN*, Blake, 2022)

The lexical choices in this excerpt are interesting. Blake, too, acknowledges this "habit of whiteness" that is mentioned in Fimi and Rios Maldonado's article, seeing as those who are anything other than white are described as being nontraditional. More interestingly, however, is that the controversy is referred to as a diversity "debate". According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, the term "debate" can both be a formal discussion between two opposing parties and "a contention by words or arguments" (Merriam Webster, n.d.) Yet, referring to the controversy as a "debate" diminishes the severity of the racist backlash, as well as the ethical and moral dimensions of racism. Racist posts and comments on social media, highlighted in the articles

discussed, are in that sense rationalised as the “opposing party” to diverse casting. In their article on *Mail Online*, the web version of the *Daily Mail*, the rhetoric of Payne and Matthews (2022) reinforces this rationalisation. Published months before the release of the series, they describe that “fans were divided by the decision to reimagine J. R. R. Tolkien’s story with a diverse new cast” and imply that, since the producers do not have “such a strict canon to draw from”, they were able to add more diverse characters. This reinforces the notion that what is canon in Tolkien’s world equals employing a white cast. The authors also describe the manners in which the “die-hard fans” disapprove of the diverse cast in paradoxal terms: at first, they are “up in arms” and protest fiercely against it, and at one point they are only “unsure why Amazon seemed to have veered from these [European] influences”. Thus, the severity of the disapproval is softened by euphemisms such as referring to the controversy as a debate and describing fans as “unsure” when in fact alluding to their online anger and hate.

Adding to this, it is important to note that the terms “critics”, “trolls” and “racists” appear to be used interchangeably in and across some of the articles. These lexical choices reflect how the people arguing against the diversity in *Rings of Power* are viewed and positioned within the narrative. The term “trolls” typically refers to the fans that mostly express their distaste online on social media platforms, and are often accompanied by the term “racist” as well as wording that describes “racist trolls” as childish, unreasonable, silly and “tiresome”. Usually, emotive language is used to describe how this group of fans complain. Russell (2022) wonders why fans “get into such a huff,” and describes how they use “racist rhetoric in their hate-filled rants”. Reindl (2022) discusses the “online racist trolls who kicked up a fuss”, and Holland (2022) mockingly describes the “flaming” and “whining” of “white fanboys spew[ing] outrage” over the series’ diversity. These word choices blatantly demonstrate where the authors stand in the controversy.

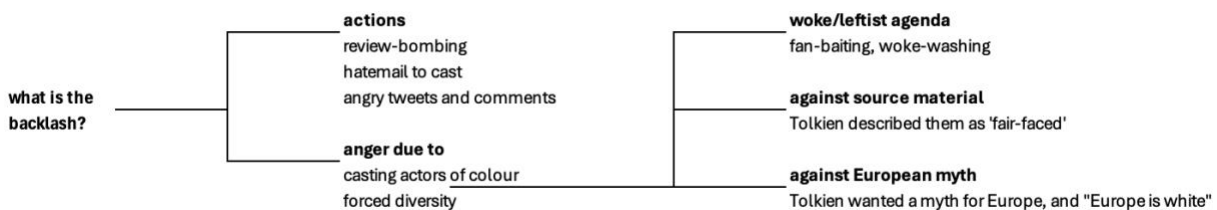
The term “critics” however, tends to blur the lines between what can be considered as criticism and when this becomes racism. In his in-depth overview of the controversy, Blake (2022) attempts to make room for all sides. With his use of the term “critics” to refer to those against “casting non-white actors” in the series, he might want to establish a more objective attitude towards the different perspectives. However, to what extent is “critics” neutral in the discourse of this controversy? In other texts (O’Hara, 2023; Hume, 2022), the term is used to refer to those who critique film and television productions as a profession. It might be argued

then, that with the use of “critics,” Blake (perhaps unintentionally) gives this group of fans the same authority as professional critics. Especially in the context of the social media backlash, where many fans have reacted hatefully to the series, the term “critics” is a euphemism for their actions, words and the effect they have had on cast and crew members, and even fans of colour. The notion of racism appears to be detached from these anti-diversity views.

To recapulate, the use of terms such as “debate” and “criticism” act as a euphemism in reference to online hate and racist backlash. However, this detachment is mostly seen in how journalists describe the arguments that are used by the Tolkien “fans” who are angered by the diverse cast. Figure 3, a close-up of this “criticism” against Amazon’s casting choices, demonstrates the arguments below. These arguments give this group of fans the opportunity to argue that “it is not racism”, but that it is simply about being faithful to the lore of Tolkien (Blake, 2022; Payne and Matthews, 2022). However, the fact remains that they willingly exclude people of colour from existing in the series.

Figure 3

The backlash against Rings of Power’s diverse cast



Omission and Overlexicalisation

Another euphemism—or rather omission—occurs in an article of *Fox News*, which mostly discusses the success of the series worldwide. At one point, Amazon’s decision to suspend reviews is discussed:

Excerpt 7

On Friday, Amazon made the unusual move of suspending user ratings for the show. According to The Hollywood Reporter, the step was taken to prevent "review-bombing." Review-bombing occurs when a large group of users or users with multiple accounts

leave negative reviews online to lower the aggregate score of a product or service in order to hurt its popularity and/or sales. The motivation behind review-bombing is often associated with the product's perceived cultural or political issues as opposed to its quality (*Fox News*, Hume, 2022)

After this excerpt, Hume describes how Amazon has implemented review suspension for all its shows. She does not discuss the extent to which fans have been reviewing negatively, and why—only that it concerns the series’ “perceived cultural or political issues”. Instead, she focuses mostly on the “unusual move” of taking such a step. The article of *The Hollywood Reporter* Hume refers to, which was not part of the sample, likewise discusses and questions Amazon’s measure to “weed out trolls and ensure each review is legitimate,” but provides more detail of the reviews that were posted on websites such as Rotten Tomatoes (Hibberd, 2022c). This omission seems deliberate, especially as it is a noteworthy exception within the sample to avoid discussing the controversy.

Another discursive practice that occurs widely across the samples is emphasizing the novelty of including characters of colour in fantasy overall as well as Tolkien’s legendarium. The following excerpts highlight in bold the overlexicalisation that takes place in these instances, where authors lay emphasis on actors’ ethnicity or colour, and in some cases gender.

Excerpt 8

Sophia Nomvete also stars as a dwarven princess named Disa - making her the first **black, and female, woman to play a dwarf in the Lord Of The Rings universe** (*Mail Online*, Payne and Matthews, 2022)

Excerpt 9

Asked by Calderón Kellett about the negative reaction, Nomvete — whose character is **the first female dwarf of color in The Lord of the Rings universe** — said her casting “was a huge moment, both personally and professionally” (*The Hollywood Reporter*, Chuba, 2023)

Excerpt 10

The new prequel series, set thousands of years before director Peter Jackson's trilogy of films, features **many actors of colour, in contrast to the all-white cast** in earlier depictions of the fictional Middle-earth. **Black British actor** Lenny Henry, for example, appears in the series as a hobbit (*The Independent*, Sachdeva, 2022)

Though it is not strange that the authors highlight the actors' colour or ethnicity, seeing as the entire controversy revolves around it, these excerpts demonstrate the perceived abnormality of having characters of colour in a fantasy series. After shedding light on the experience some cast members have had with racism—again putting emphasis on their ethnicity and race—Andrew (2022) refers to Morfydd Clark simply as “other members of the cast,” omitting her race. This is likely due to the fact that the actress is white and has not experienced this racism, thus her race need not be mentioned.

Another recurring phenomenon is how the cast members of Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* are perceived somewhat as an authority within the controversy.

Excerpt 11

Elijah Wood, Sean Astin and the core cast of Peter Jackson's “Lord of the Rings” film trilogy are understandably protective of the beloved fantasy property. But they won't tolerate racism or hatred toward the new generation of Tolkien actors. [...] Cast members have spoken out about the racist comments they've received, and now, they have the support of original hobbits Wood, Astin, Dominic Monaghan and Billy Boyd, who played Frodo, Samwise, Merry and Pippin, respectively (*CNN*, Andrew, 2022)

Among the 21 texts, three articles mention Elijah Wood supporting the *Rings of Power* cast in the title, which points to how the opinions of the “original” actors are held in high esteem. The actors of this movie trilogy are positioned as the original, first-generation Tolkien actors, and their opinion on diverse casting appears to be treated as if they could very well be decisive over who is “wrong” and who is “right”. It also creates a sense of loyalty between these “generations” of actors, which might influence readers' loyalty as well.

Rhetorics: When Racism Becomes a Political Issue

It has become clear that the language used in the texts is far from neutral and objective. In fact, neutral language appears to be difficult to attain and maintain. The previous subsections provided in-depth analysis of discursive strategies and practices that brought to light the involvement of racism and racist ideas in the controversy surrounding diverse casting in *Rings of Power*. It also showed the coexistence of condemnation and justification of such racism. It is important to note, however, that these discursive strategies may not always be deliberate. Yet they do point to certain discursive habits that seem recurrent when discussing certain topics—or even groups of people. In many of the samples, the journalists attempt to incite empathy from the reader toward the topic or the people they write about. Typically, these journalists write about the actors' intimate thoughts of and their experience with the hate and racist backlash, and it is in this way that journalists may display their own subjectivity towards the matter. Other journalists—specifically *CNN* journalist Blake (2022) and Matthews and Payne (2022) from *Mail Online*— explicitly condemned racism, but simultaneously tended to soften the blow of the backlash by putting relatively large emphasis on the “critics” and their reasons for claiming the diverse cast was unfaithful to Tolkien's lore. The reader appeared to be encouraged to see and understand the total picture. In the opinion pieces, the journalists likewise seemed to be caught between two rhetorics: raising awareness of the racism the series has received, or dismissing the “trolls” and “whining white fan-boys” as childish, unreasonable and pathetic.

A significantly recurring rhetoric involves a strategy of structural opposition—an opposition that appeared to have the tendency to become political. To briefly recapulate, those against diverse casting in the series have made the following arguments: 1) It is not what Tolkien would have wanted, further drawing on how he seemingly meant to devise a mythology for England; 2) because Tolkien's legendarium is also based on Germanic and Scandinavian mythology, people of colour “logically” could not exist in his stories; 3) the diversity is forced and draws attention away from the narrative and plot; 4) the diversity in this series is part of a political, leftwing agenda that seeks to impose its opinions onto “the masses”. Thus, this group of Tolkien fans either draws on what Tolkien would have wanted or on leftwing ideologies and opinions. The latter argument seeks to make the controversy—or the “debate”—political:

Excerpt 12

People become devotees of fantasy books, movies and TV series in part because they offer an escape from the bitter divisions of our mundane everyday world. But the reception to the new Amazon series reveals that even the enchanted world of Middle-earth is no longer immune to political divisions (*CNN*, Blake, 2022)

First, notice how the author made a clear opposition and contrast between “the enchanted world of Middle-earth” and “our mundane everyday world” that deals with political divisions. This contrast also suggests that these two opposites are supposed to be disentangled: readers escape to fantasy worlds to escape from the real world. This disregards the fact that texts are always surrounded by a political, cultural and social environment. It also suggests that questions of diversity and inclusion should not enter these fictional fantasy worlds because this is one of the “political divisions” readers escape from. However, it can be argued that most of these readers that do not want diversity “infiltrating” their favourite series are those who already see themselves represented in this genre, whereas those who are underrepresented continue to be confronted with the lack of these diversity issues. Yet another reading of the excerpt could be that Blake refers to those who are underrepresented, who want to escape from the racism in the real world to fantasy worlds like Tolkien’s legendarium, only to find it there, too.

The same article highlights an editor of conservative news website *Red State*, who argues that focusing on “the leftist obsession with identity issues that only go skin deep” leads to a lacking story or plotline, and even likens it to “effectively making propaganda” (Blake, 2022). In the case of *Rings of Power*, *Forbes* journalist Kain admonishes that this is a “tiresome complaint”, a “silly critique [...] drive by idle speculation” (2022). Yet, he also appears to agree with the notion of an agenda behind diverse casting:

Excerpt 13

There has been a concerted effort by those peddling identity politics to get that message—or ‘The Message’ as it’s come to be known in some circles—into games and shows and movies, often at the expense of quality (*Forbes*, Kain, 2022)

The lexical choice of “peddling” is interesting here. Peddling refers to selling, promoting or dealing out, often in relation to illicit affairs and thus has a rather negative connotation. Identity

politics is a complicated term to mention casually. The term refers to political and social movements based on interests and perspectives of as well as identification with social groups such as race, gender, class and sexuality. Identity politics, as Heyes (2002) describes, “is intimately connected to the idea that some social groups are oppressed” and puts emphasis on the recognition of the experience and struggles that come with identifying oneself as part of such a social group. Heyes also points out that critics of identity politics tend to use the term as a “philosophical punching-bag” that fails to cover the meaning and vision of the movement, of which this excerpt of Kain is the case. The phrase “those peddling identity politics” suggests that these actors are selling and promoting political ideas in cultural products, and frames this as furtive and unwanted. Additionally, describing this as “a concerted effort” is not so dissimilar from those “tiresome complaints” of there being an “agenda” that forces “identity politics on the masses” (Kain, 2022). Though Kain certainly supports the diversity in *Rings of Power*, the employment of such rhetorical devices suggests he agrees that certain ideologies are imposed onto both cultural products and audiences.

At this point, the word “agenda” is mostly found in combination with “woke” and appears to be typically used by those who are against diverse casting in either *Rings of Power* or in general. In her article for *The Conversation*, Helen Young (2022) sheds light on the other side of the political spectrum, and points to the extreme right, fascism and “a dangerous anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian agenda”. In agreement with other critical Tolkien scholars, Young observes that far-right political actors are attempting to enter the mainstream by weaponising the controversy surrounding diverse casting and by polarising the existing views on the controversy.

Excerpt 14

Fans who feel they are defending Tolkien’s legacy are being used as pawns to serve dangerous anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian agenda and siding, whether they mean to or not, with racist extremists (*The Conversation*, Young, 2022)

Note how another structural opposition is established between the woke agenda and the anti-egalitarian agenda. Both sides point to the “Other”, creating an “us versus them” pattern, where the Other is accused of serving a larger underlying ideological motive. Though Young (2022) contends that not all racism is by default fascist, she does warn that far-right politics always

includes racist elements. Considering how the controversy surrounding *Rings of Power* was “whipped up” by far-right political actors, Young suggests that the fans who are “used as pawns” are the manifestation of these racist elements in a larger, fascist ideological movement. Such discursive strategies, whether they intend to address social injustice or not, create a clean divide among the public. The articles discussed further polarise the different attitudes and stances towards diversity in *Rings of Power*, by contrasting them as “woke versus fascist”.

Several questions arise upon examining the texts from a political perspective: Has diversity and inclusion in film and television become a political issue or is it a moral one? And by extent, is the topic of racism a political issue or a moral one? Are they becoming mutually exclusive?

Especially in a two-party system, such as in the USA and in the UK, it would be rather problematic if racism were to be reduced to a political issue. Racism is, by default, unethical and immoral. It arranges races in a hierarchy where those at the bottom are systemically oppressed. The literary discussion about media discourse on woke and the findings have shown that “wokeism” is perceived as a leftwing ideology that seeks to uproot western civilisation through the imposition of left cultural hegemony. This assumes that vouching for diversity and inclusion (which is what wokeism is accused of) is an inherently politically left object of interest—and it enforces the notion that racism can be diminished to something that one can vote for or against. By extent, it also encourages people to put the Other into a box according to whom they vote for. It blurs the lines between political preferences (which extend to economic welfare, health and other strands of politics) and (anti-)racist views. Such a notion also leads to further polarisation on the topic of racism, and to a dismissal of social justice movements as simply being “woke”.

Discussion

This research analysed the media discourse in the USA and the UK surrounding Amazon's *Rings of Power* in light of the racist backlash the series and its cast members faced due to its diverse cast. It intended to reveal how various news outlets approach and may affect the reader's perception on the controversy, by means of critically analysing discursive practices and strategies. The large-scale interpretive context—or larger societal setting—can be interpreted as a time where political divisions influence the reception of cultural products among audiences. The screen industries appear to be willing to change and to adopt diversity and inclusion efforts, but this change is not always heralded as a positive one. The small-scale interpretive context and discursive aims are mostly found through discursive strategies such as omission, overlexicalisation and word connotation. Lexical choices were seen to significantly influence the reader's understanding of the conflict. And finally, media coverage of the conflict for a large part created a rhetoric of structural opposition, which further polarised the conflict and the political aspect of this conflict.

The key findings point to an overall support of the diverse casting in *Rings of Power*, mostly by means of sharing personal experiences of cast members and how they felt about the racist backlash, or through the author making a direct argument against the backlash. Yet upon examining language use and the authors' lexical choices therein, unintended covert racist discrimination or condonement has been found as well. Many journalists seem to be rather careful to condemn the racist backlash, fail to acknowledge the inherent racism of excluding people of colour from participating in a series, and instead attempt to reduce the controversy to a “debate” that consists of “critics” and supporters. Such discursive strategies include euphemisms in reference to those against the diverse casting in the series as well as overlexicalisation when referring to many of the actors and celebrities that support the diverse casting—specifically when it comes to celebrities of colour, as their race or ethnicity is always mentioned.

The two central themes that were found in the analysis are the justification of racism and political polarisation. The texts that were studied have shown that there is some hesitancy around the term racism. This hesitancy manifests itself through the above described euphemisms in language use or through a process of rationalising some of the inherently racist arguments this group of fans make. At the same time, other authors are quicker to use terms such as “racist”, “racists” and “racism”, often in combination with denigratory words like “trolls” and “haters”.

Thus, there seems to be somewhat of a divide when it comes to the question of whether those who are against the diverse casting in *Rings of Power* are by default racist, seeing as the racism that cast members have experienced is, more than a few times, detached from these views. This divide fuels, but at the same time is fuelled by, another divide that is political. The controversy is not only framed as a debate, but also as another case of political divisions tearing a fandom apart—the other instances being fans of *House of the Dragon*, *The Little Mermaid* and *Star Wars*. Both sides of the political spectrum are accused of being part of a political agenda by arguing for or against diversity in film or television productions. Though there are many authors who debunk these conspiratory views, it seems that they are only adding to the political polarisation that is already occurring in the USA and the UK.

These themes relate to the research question as they shape the understanding of the controversy's scope and depth among the public, and because they can shape the reader's views. A reader may sympathise with those who are against the diverse cast in the series upon reading Payne and Matthews' article for *Mail Online*, due to its focus on the arguments these protesters give and due to the authors referring to them as “fans” and “critics” that are simply “unsure why Amazon seems to have veered from these [European] influences” (2022). That same reader may sympathise more with the cast members and those who support diverse casting upon reading Sachdeva's article for *The Independent*, as it puts emphasis on the effects the racist backlash has had on the cast members and on the celebrities who have openly supported the series' casting choices (2022). The focus and emphasis on particular aspects of the controversy in each of the text may influence the reader to “pick a side”.

Drawing on Machin and Mayr's tools of analysis (2012), three salient discursive strategies were found: omission, overlexicalisation and structural opposition. As mentioned earlier, omission was mostly utilised through euphemisms that often reduced the severity of the racist backlash. People that justify the exclusion of people of colour in *Rings of Power* are referred to as “critics”, “die-hard fans” or “Tolkien purists”, positioning them as fans with deep knowledge of Tolkien's work and thus granting them more authority than is accurate. Overlexicalisation has clearly been used to highlight how diverse casting is a deviance from what has been perceived as traditional and normal in the fantasy genre. It has also been used by authors to mock racist social media uses for their hate, comparing them with “miserable” or “ruinous” online “trolls”. These two discursive strategies further added to the manifestation structural opposition. An “us versus

them” narrative was created through political divisions, that being “left versus right”, or, in more extreme cases, “woke versus fascist,” where either party was perceived as being part of a political agenda. Especially in the opinion pieces, there was a clear “people of colour versus racists” opposition. These discursive strategies all create a conflict narrative, a “culture war” where readers are activated and mobilised to agree or disagree with either the protesters or the supporters of the series’ casting choices. Though many of the texts visibly attempted to maintain an objective and neutral stance, the discursive strategies contribute to further polarisation on the topic of diversity and inclusion, “wokeism” and racism.

Contextualising Findings

The findings of this study align with previous research conducted on media and accusations of wokeism. A key concern in this research is that inherently racist views (i.e. arguing for the exclusion of certain groups of people in a fantasy series because they do not belong there) are treated as criticism, arguments and opinions. Cammaerts (2022) echoes this concern and argues that in such a construction of agreement/disagreement, various opinions are managed as being morally equal. This overlooks ethical dimensions that are innate to the combat against fascist and racist ideologies. Moreover, instances of the use of “woke” in reference to the series’ casting choices demonstrate that the meaning has indeed been reduced to a definition of inauthenticity (e.g. forced diversity, woke-washing, etc.) and self-indulgence, which can be seen through the accusation of the producers disregarding Tolkien’s lore, as Davies and MacRae (2023) similarly observed. And even though there seems to be an overall support for the casting choices of *Rings of Power* across the samples studied, some discursive strategies reveal, as Martinez Guillem describes it, “covert, ‘well-intentioned’ forms of racial discrimination” (2018, p. 368). Studies on Tolkien and his works have also seen the appearance of research strands that shed light on and consider certain racist elements in his lore (Kim, 2004; McLarty, 2006; Redmond, 2008; Young, 2016; Flieger, 2017; Reid, 2017; Stuart, 2022), a question that has been reiterated in many of the samples that were analysed for this research. However, this has also mostly been used to propell the support for diverse casting, as the racial colour-coding of certain races in Middle-earth demonstrate how some tropes are outdated and in need of contemporary and ethical considerations when creating new adaptations.

Instead of focusing solely on the racist backlash the series received upon release, and instead of focusing solely on media discourse, contemporary political, social or economic news and how they approach these events in the world, this thesis analysed the press' discourse on racism and racist hate speech. The hesitancy around referring to this particular group of fans as "racist" demonstrates that though mainstream news outlets do not overtly condone racism, some journalists may do so subliminally, even if the general argument of the text does not have that intention. Cultural products such as film and television have the unique characteristic of acting as a mirror for society, while at the same time it also offers individuals an escape from society. By extension, this means that certain shifts and dynamics in society will eventually make its way in film as well, and if these changes are experienced as threatening by some audiences, its function of offering an escape for them disappears. The present study is an addition to what little literature exists on audience reception and racism towards contemporary adaptations of fantasy texts that have been "traditionally" white, while also considering how news media navigate this change as well as how they might oppose it. The thesis has also found that—beside the hatespeech and racist slurs found on social media—the backlash and protest against casting people of colour in *Rings of Power* is a very covert form of racial discrimination, which is for a large part enforced by news outlets.

Limitations and Implications

The findings contribute to CDA approaches by demonstrating that the news media reflect but are also molded by societal issues and public discourse. The media as an institution has a powerful position in society as it shapes the understanding and perception of certain societal issues, but we have seen that the media is also shaped by individuals and institutions.

This study did not come without its limitations. Due to the limited scope of this research, the focus was solely on written texts, which does not capture the full spectrum of public discourse regarding *Rings of Power*'s casting choices as well as diverse casting in general. Dialogue and other spoken forms of speech may cast a different or more complete light on the scope of the controversy. Similarly, the focus on mainstream news media meant excluding other forms of media. One example is alternative news media, which may draw people who are more engaged in leftwing or rightwing political discourse. The inclusion of such discourse might make the controversy explicitly more political and might reveal more about the (political) polarisation

within the controversy. Apart from several mentions of posts on X, social media was not included from the research design. It is important to note, however, that YouTube saw a large contribution of users that added to and fuelled the “debate”. YouTube is also an interesting intersection of spoken and written speech, as users tend to follow a script but may also improvise and be more spontaneous in their language. There is also a focus on English texts, and on texts from news outlets only in the USA and in the UK. As Newman and Fletcher (2017) have observed, readers in the USA and the UK are more likely to consider media outlets as biased, according to categorisations such as center, leftwing or rightwing, than readers from other countries who participated in the study. Both these countries have a two-party political system and contend with increasing polarisation, which is likely to be reflected in the media discourse. Finally, the purposive sampling method employed in the research design does not allow for a large number of samples or a large dataset. This means that findings cannot be generalised. Though this research and previous research do suggest that backlashes from groups of fans are recurrent for contemporary adaptations that also feature more diverse casts, more research must be conducted to truly make this implication salient and solid.

This study has shown how certain traditions of whiteness in the fantasy genre are maintained through discursive strategies, such as over-emphasising actors’ ethnicity and race, and referring to online racist commenters as “die-hard fans” and “Tolkien purists”. It also contributes to the understanding of discourse and political ideology, as there appears to be an alignment of diversity and inclusion efforts with leftwing political ideologies, which not only further polarises the issue but also serves to discredit *Rings of Power*’s efforts at diversity by framing them as politically motivated instead of as socially just. It is my hope that this research might encourage journalists and authors to critically examine their own texts for discursive slips and habits. In many of the texts that were analysed, it was clear the journalists had good intentions and intended the language to be as neutral as possible. However, no text can be neutral, and this intended neutrality has been seen to lead to a tendency of reducing words such as “racist” (which may have been perceived as an extreme word to use in journalism), which undermines the severity of the backlash some actors in *Rings of Power* but also other fantasy adaptations were confronted with. These rhetorical practices point to internalised and covert forms of racism, as well as the justification thereof.

There are several implications for the distinct research fields I contextualised in a previous section. Placing this thesis in the context of diversity and inclusion studies within the screen industries, this thesis brings to light the powerful roles of both the audience and the news media. Though cast and crew anticipated some racism, no one was prepared for a backlash that would command such attention even before the series' release. Even though this group of "fans" was relatively small compared to those who did enjoy the series, for a while their condemnation of characters of colour in the series overshadowed all other news regarding *Rings of Power* and its release—and upon its release, it overshadowed even the negative, professional critique the series received. The screen industries are, for a large part, governed by their audiences, which is a reason why the "nobody knows" principle from Caves (2003) is so leading among filmmakers. As Hunt and Ramón (2020) observe, diversity sells. Yet, if these backlashes recur whenever an adaptation features one or more lead characters of colour, and if the news media maintains a discourse focusing solely on this backlash—who is to say filmmakers will not start listening to the wrong group of fans? It might be interesting to see how this "nobody knows" principle functions in relation to diversity and inclusion as well as audience reception.

Though the thesis does not focus on Tolkien in particular, placing the thesis in the context of Tolkien studies provides a contemporary rendition of adaptation studies within the field. Seeing as the Peter Jackson films have already passed their twentieth anniversary and adaptations since have only been released in the medium of games, the release of *Rings of Power* may incite a new direction for studies on the adaptations of Tolkien's legendarium. This new strand of research may involve comparison studies between different adaptations or the reception of both distinct adaptations. It was only touched upon briefly in this thesis, but Peter Jackson's rendition of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* was met with a spark of sexist backlash regarding the rumored inclusion of the character Arwen as one of the leading characters. Perhaps there could even be a field of "backlash studies", given the recurrence of these fierce, negative reactions to contemporary adaptations.

Finally, this thesis can also be placed in the context of studies on media discourse and "woke" discourse, as it discusses precisely this. Yet, a great part of this research focuses on political actors and topics that are typically of explicit political interest. Cultural products have become increasingly scrutinised for its political bias and implications. *Rings of Power* is perceived as a ruse that conceals a greater political agenda, and this concern is echoed in backlashes against the

adaptation of *The Little Mermaid* and *Snow White*, of which the latter is yet to release. Critical discourse studies may be interested in studying the discourse and the controversy surrounding cultural products, as it provides a better understanding of how power, politics and ideology seep through the cultural sector and audiences' everyday life.

Future research might also involve a broader research design that includes news media from different areas of the world and countries that have different political systems. Such a design ideally should not focus solely on western media, as this is only partly representative of the discourse on diversity and racism—which through social media is at a global level. Researchers may be interested in using YouTube as a case study, seeing as YouTube is a platform that displays fierce fan culture—and also fierce backlash. The backlash studied in this thesis could, in future research, be approached from a fandom studies perspective, with YouTube as a platform of interest. Finally, future research might also be interested to analyse the broader scope and increasing recurrency of racist backlashes as a response to cultural products that make visible diversity and inclusion efforts.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted that even though a majority of the texts studied supports Amazon's *Rings of Power*'s casting choices and cast members, this condemnation appeared to exist in simulation with a more subtle justification of the racist backlash—even within a singular text. It has revealed that though journalists aim to maintain a neutral attitude towards the controversy, this is often not possible due to the inherent subjectivity of the writer. Even more, this poses the risk of creating a discourse that is harmful, seeing as this supposedly neutral stance at times might diminish the severity and ethical concerns of particular ideas, opinions and broader racist ideologies. Two central themes found were racism (including covert forms as well as the justification and condonement thereof) and political divide. This political divide was seen to be enforced particularly through an association of anti-racism with leftwing political ideologies. By demonstrating the interrelation between ideology, power and discourse in the media texts that were analysed, this study contributes to CDA approaches and the study of media discourse. Lexical and semiotic choices are often a reflection of ideology and of writers' inherent subjectivity, which subsequently have an effect on the reader's interpretation and understanding of the conflict. Future research should continue to focus on discursive patterns and strategies that

undermine the social and ethic dimensions of racism and racist ideologies, as well as on the recurrence of such online controversies concerning diversity efforts in film and television.

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