

# #OscarsSoWhite hashtag returns; it starts with the academy

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This year's debate over #OscarsSoWhite is once again highlighting Hollywood's race problem, sharpening the focus on just who is handing out the industry's biggest awards.

For the second year in a row, there were no people of color nominated for Academy Awards in any of the major categories, prompting social media to react with a continuation of last year's #OscarsSoWhite campaign: #OscarsStillSoWhite.

Others were outraged, too. Filmmaker Spike Lee and actress Jada Pinkett Smith have said they plan to boycott this year's Academy Awards.

Fans have rallied around their decision.

The demographics of the academy, which decides the nominees and winners, have long been a point of contention, as they don't reflect the diversity of moviegoers. According to a 2014 study (PDF), 25% of frequent moviegoers were Hispanic, 10% were African-American, and 9% were Asian or of another background.

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences is made up of more than 7,000 people who work in cinema.

According to its website, individuals cannot apply for membership but must be "sponsored by two Academy members from the branch to which the candidate seeks admission." Those who are nominated for Academy Awards don't have to be sponsored, as they are automatically considered for membership.

"Nominees and sponsored candidates are reviewed by branch committees and recommendations for membership are considered by the Academy's Board of Governors," the rules state. "The Board decides which individuals will receive invitations."

In 2012, a Los Angeles Times study of the academy found that "Oscar voters are nearly 94% Caucasian and 77% male" while "Blacks are about 2% of the academy, and Latinos are less than 2%."

"Oscar voters have a median age of 62, the study showed," the story said. "People younger than 50 constitute just 14% of the membership."

That same year, a study from the UC Berkeley School of Law titled "Not Quite a Breakthrough: The Oscars and Actors of Color, 2002-2012" (PDF) examined the industry since 2002, considered a big year because of the best actress and best actor Oscar wins by Halle Berry and Denzel Washington.

The study found that while there had been expectations of more diversity following that watershed moment (there had never before been a year in which two African-Americans won in the acting category), the reality was far different. “Oscar winners and nominees of color make fewer movies per year after their nominations than their white peers do,” the study found, and “Oscar winners and nominees of color are less likely than their white peers to receive subsequent nominations.

“The Academy should form a task force to examine its membership procedures and develop steps to make it more inclusive of people of color and women,” the study authors wrote. “In light of its exclusionary membership, the Academy’s passive stance toward diversity is inadequate.”

Today, it appears that not much has changed.

Lee and Low Books’ infographic on “The Diversity Gap in the Academy Awards” says that among the branches of the academy, 97% of the producers and writers were white, while 88% of the actors were white. Overall, 93% of academy voters were white and 76% were male in 2015.

“If you think back 10 years ago, the Academy was doing a better job,” actor and filmmaker George Clooney told Variety. “Think about how many more African Americans were nominated. I would also make the argument, I don’t think it’s a problem of who you’re picking as much as it is: How many options are available to minorities in film, particularly in quality films?”

Critics agree that the issue goes far beyond awards season.

The 2015 Hollywood Diversity Report (PDF) produced out of the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies at UCLA said that while minorities had made some gains in Hollywood, they still remained “underrepresented on every front,” most notably in terms of wielding leadership power.

“White males continued to dominate the positions from which green-lighting decisions are made in the Hollywood industry,” the study said.

In February, Dennis Romero wrote in L.A. Weekly, “The industry has a serious diversity problem, and it doesn’t appear that the business can quell critics by greenlighting a handful of minority-driven TV shows (Empire, Fresh Off the Boat, Jane the Virgin) or by celebrating a globe-trotting Mexican director (Academy Award nominee Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu of Birdman) who has little in common with the American Latino experience.

“Because there’s so much money on the line – it can take \$100 million (including marketing costs) to get a hit studio film off the ground – there’s an extreme reluctance to take chances when it comes to casting and choosing directors, experts say,” Romero wrote. “A white man can seem like a safe choice, especially now that half a film’s revenue can come from overseas markets, markets that often are paying to see a certain vision of American culture. Leads are by default taken to be white unless otherwise written, which is why it was big news when it was rumored that black British actor Idris Elba would be the next James Bond.”

On Martin Luther King Day, the president of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Cheryl Boone Isaacs – who is African-American – said in a statement that she was “both heartbroken and frustrated about the lack of inclusion” among this year’s nominees.

“In the coming days and weeks we will conduct a review of our membership recruitment in order to bring about much-needed diversity in our 2016 class and beyond,” she said. “We have implemented changes to diversify our membership in the last four years. But the change is not coming as fast as we would like. We need to do more, and better and more quickly.”

Viewers are eagerly waiting to see how Academy Awards host Chris Rock handles the controversy at the ceremony February 28. So far, he’s only said via his Twitter account that the Oscars are “the white BET Awards.”

By Lisa Respers France

