

‘Bachelor’ fans have been talking about diversity issues for years. Now they’re at their breaking point.

By [Anying Guo](#)

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When Myah Genung saw the disastrous interview between “The Bachelor” host Chris Harrison and former franchise star Rachel Lindsay, she was reminded of a saying: “I’m shocked, but I’m not surprised.”

“If you even just pay attention to some of the interviews that Chris Harrison has given over the years, his responses were always in defense of why [they didn’t have a lead of color] instead of how this is something that needs to happen,” says Genung, who works as an associate director of industry relations at the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School for Communications and Journalism. “Almost like, ‘We have a winning formula right now. Why are you asking us to be something that we aren’t?’”

Genung has been a fan — and a critic — of the franchise for years. An avid “Bachelor” viewer since she was a preteen, her hopeless romantic side melted at the show’s premise. What started off as a guilty-pleasure watch became a vehicle of critique for Genung and other fans of color to gossip about and deep dive into issues of racism and sexism in the show, all in the same breath.

In pockets of the show’s wide-reaching online presence, groups such as Brett’s Bachelor Buds, formed and moderated on Facebook by “Bachelor” Twitter personality [Brett Vergara](#), and [r/TheBachelor_POC subreddit](#) have a through-line of comfort for many viewers of color: validation.

“As a Black viewer, I can’t escape that aspect,” Genung says. “I can’t watch the shows without that lens of critical analysis.”

Fans of color have long understood that “The Bachelor” wasn’t quite made for them. The optics of the show are “[embarrassingly White](#),” as this paper has previously described, and others have [criticized](#) its slow, often nonexistent strides in representation. But these fans see through the tiresome tokenization in the franchise’s belated attempts at inclusivity and want visible, genuine change on a series they hate to love and love to hate.

The franchise’s laundry list of issues — which include contestants of color rarely making it to the final rounds and a dismissed lawsuit alleging discrimination against people of color — culminated last week in a much-criticized interview between Harrison and Lindsay. After Harrison was called out for interrupting and talking over her, and he walked back comments in which he asked for “grace” toward this season’s front-runner Rachael Kirkconnell’s racially insensitive actions, he announced a leave of absence from the franchise.

Everyday discussions on these online forums include big news like Harrison’s temporary departure, but also allow for rants and raves that let participants feel they’re not alone for being invested in (and disturbed by) issues surrounding the series. Yes, others also felt strange about former Bachelorette [Kaitlyn Bristowe](#), a White woman, promoting a hair

vitamin by likening her relationship with her tresses to Chelsea Vaughn's, a Black contestant on James's season who had a vulnerable on-air conversation about her decision to shave her head. Yes, others thought Hannah Brown's Instagram apology was not enough after she was recorded singing along to a track that included the n-word.

Vergara sees the conversations in the group as unavoidable and important — “a mirror of society, for better or for worse” — and openly welcomes the discussion in his own group.

“If I’m casually watching with my parents, and [the contestants and lead] are talking about Black Lives Matter, we can have a more natural discussion than me bringing that up out of the blue,” Vergara says. “The show’s like a conduit for entering some of those conversations.”

“These issues still exist in this country, outside of my liberal New York bubble,” Vergara says. “I think it’s important for a franchise [like this] with such a huge megaphone to middle America to have messages around Black Lives Matter and mental health. It’s reaching the people who need to be reached.”

Why even watch something so overwhelmingly White and behind on the times? New fans and long-haulers alike have all sorts of reasons as to why they joined #BachelorNation. The franchise, an inescapable cultural force that prompts thousands of live tweets an episode, has remained the blueprint and touchstone for reality dating shows since its premiere in 2002. Some viewers feel an overarching social pressure to wade into the national conversation, so they tentatively test out an episode. (Given how the show frequently snags the prize viewership in adults 18 to 49 years old, surrendering to the pressure is warranted.) Some fans, particularly people of color, started watching when Lindsay was selected as the first Black Bachelorette. And some, like Genung, just want to see some good, old-fashioned romance grace their screens for a few hours each week.

Matt James's season was supposed to mark a new change in the Bachelor sphere: the first Black Bachelor and the most diverse cast the show has ever seen. Yet, these historic (by series standards) strides have been overshadowed by a birdbath of histrionics fixated around “the White Contestants and their drama,” as Genung puts it, and a front-runner who participated in an antebellum-themed formal in college and has been accused on TikTok of racism.

“I watch ‘The Bachelor’ because reality TV is a form of escapism. I can focus on these people for two hours and not anything else in the world,” says graduate student Grace Chitam. “But I can’t separate the real structural issues that are happening on ‘The Bachelor’ as I watch it. So, am I really escaping?”

At its core, the franchise promises a happily-ever-after despite life's odds. But the romance operates alongside silence and slow progress, a paradox that has long frustrated viewers. In the wake of protests against racial injustices and police brutality last summer, a few members of color from the Brett's Bachelor Buds group started discussing concerns they had and what they wanted from the series. That turned into the Bachelor Diversity Campaign, a group that released a Change.org petition that directly called on the nearly two-decade-old franchise to "feature Black, Indigenous, People of Color ('BIPOC') relationships, families, and story lines" that should "reflect and honor the racial diversity of our country — both in front of and behind the camera." The campaign acknowledged the "diversity of casting Juan Pablo Galavis, JoJo Fletcher, and Peter Weber as Bachelor franchise leads" but urged the franchise to "build upon this and further diversify casting."

"We had a whole list of things we hope production takes into account, and [with James's casting,] they went with the most visible one," says Ariana Arestegui, a member of the campaign. "I'm glad they did do that. But it's just a starting point."

The campaign and general audience backlash prompted the series' executive producers to drop a brief statement promising significant changes in representation on-screen, ending with a pledge: "We can and will do better to reflect the world around us and show all of its beautiful love stories."

Yet Ayanna Maddox-Semper, who also worked on the initial petition, notes how BIPOC, particularly Black audiences, have been consistently excluded from substantial conversations about the series. Maddox-Semper saw viewers make excuses as to why there hadn't yet been a Black Bachelor — that because Lindsay's season had low ratings, there wouldn't be any interest in another Black lead.

"I know so many more Black women who tuned in the last two seasons [with Tayshia Adams and James] than any other season," Maddox-Semper says. "[The series] being more diverse is going to pull more audiences, more people from different backgrounds, even more than they even realize."

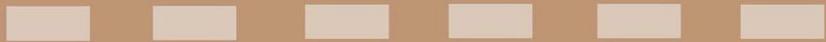
The contestants from the current season have also signaled their frustration with the franchise amid the recent firestorm of controversy with a singular message of solidarity reposted by many on Feb. 11, which reads in part: "We are the women of Bachelor Season 25 ... Any defense of racist behavior denies the lived and continued experiences of BIPOC individuals. These experiences are not to be exploited or tokenized."



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We are the women of Bachelor Season 25. Twenty-five women who identify as BIPOC were cast on this historic season that was meant to represent change.

We are deeply disappointed and want to make it clear that we denounce any defense of racism. Any defense of racist behavior denies the lived and continued experiences of BIPOC individuals. These experiences are not to be exploited or tokenized.

Rachel Lindsay continues to advocate with “grace” for individuals who identify as BIPOC within this franchise. Just because she is speaking the loudest, doesn’t mean she is alone. We stand with her, we hear her, and we advocate for change alongside her.

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“What’s clear about this season is that the show is really not equipped to handle race in a nuanced manner,” says Genung. Viewers point out how several episodes have revolved around the brash antics of “Queen” Victoria, whose proclamation of royalty and penchant for bullying have taken precious time away from getting to know the other contestants. Educator Stef Woods wonders whether a woman of color who spoke the way Victoria did would have garnered the same attention (and a “Good Morning America” debut).

And contestants and fans are fed up with how “The Bachelor” has consistently treated its contestants of color. After Lindsay and Harrison’s talk, r/TheBachelor called for boycotts of the show. Former and current series members have thrown support behind Lindsay, who recently decided not to renew her contract with the franchise. Since her season ended, Lindsay has simultaneously been an outspoken voice for diversity and a target for graphic, racist bullying, proving that the series’ diversity problem can’t be repaired by a Bachelor or Bachelorette of color every few seasons, but should be treated with nuance and care, on- and off-camera.

“I think at the end of the day, we as fans love this franchise and want it to be better and do better,” says Ria Ali, another Bachelor Diversity Campaign organizer. “It’s in the best interest of production to create a product that is diverse and inclusive — both of which are inherently good things. And because it opens up a wider audience and helps them not feel alienated and enjoy what’s on the screen.”

CORRECTION

An earlier version of this article misrepresented the current scope of the main r/TheBachelor Reddit thread. The forum does not deprioritize conversations about politics, religion and race. The moderators on the main thread recently called for a boycott of the show in reaction to Chris Harrison’s interview with Rachel Lindsay, not r/TheBachelor_POC, as originally reported. The article has been updated.

