

The Illusion of Diversity: A Comparative Study on the Impact of Media Scrutiny and Institutional Reform in the Metropolitan Police and London Fire Brigade

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Abstract

This article examines how public sector organisations, like the police and fire service in London, adopt a crisis management approach in response to media scrutiny related to race issues by using performative and symbolic gestures rather than implementing sustained structural and cultural reform. This study aims to fill the existing gap in knowledge by addressing the key issues surrounding diversity initiatives within the London police and fire brigade not bringing positive changes towards ending racial disparities, with little research focused on the wider benefits and opportunities that racial diversity can bring within these services. The study introduces the theory of Media-Influenced Racial Dynamics and Tokenism Theory (MIRDATT) model, a method for assessing diversity influenced by media across various fields that emphasises the importance of transparency and ongoing improvement beyond moments of crisis. This innovative framework integrates Critical Race Theory with Tokenism Theory and Symbolic Interactionism to analyse media influence on race dynamics. The quantitative analysis is conducted using data obtained through Freedom of Information (FOI) requests and published sources to compare the highly scrutinised London Metropolitan Police Service with the relatively overlooked London Fire Brigade. The article concludes that the police tend to reactively engage in performative actions to boost minority employment rates, whilst the fire service, subject to comparatively lower levels of media scrutiny, often demonstrates institutional inaction, even in instances where racism is evident.

Keywords: *Tokenism, Race, Diversity, Media, Police, Fire Brigade.*

Contextual Background

Within the UK public sector, the police and fire services have been subject to mounting scrutiny from the public as well as the British news media due to concerns over insufficient religious and racial representation and, in turn, inequality. In cases of racialised injustice, institutions experience a detrimental surge in public and media scrutiny (Nair, 2024). Although the police have exhibited some commitment of grandeur through diversity hiring events, symbolic action plans (e.g., [The Police Race Action Plan in 2022](#)) and pledges to reform, many scholars have begun to question the authenticity of these efforts and discuss whether they truly signify advancement or are merely strategic means of controlling the institution's image (David & Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2023; Gonçalves & Mello, 2021). Prior research has identified a developing pattern by which institutions embrace symbolic diversity through tactics, such as performative apologies backed by no significant changes, targeted hiring with fewer available promotions or meaningful roles, and temporary promotions alongside diversity programmes with unrealistic deadlines, as direct (albeit quicker) responses to reputational threats rather than allocating more time and genuine commitment to resolving such inclusion issues (David & Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2023; Rim & Ferguson, 2017). Though the efforts seem progressive, they often fall short of tackling deeply rooted inequalities within institutions. Researchers like Wright and Taylor (1998) and Kalita (2023) point out that merely including marginalised groups does little to dismantle the pervasiveness of institutionalised racism. The notion of “tokenism” highlighted in this article refers to surface-level inclusion that lacks any shift in authority or policy alterations (Domke et al., 1999; Gonçalves & Mello, 2021).

The media plays a key role in this scenario, as its simplification of issues like racism into attention-grabbing stories can prompt institutions to respond visibly (Chen, 2024). This media tactic not only heightens organisational anxiety but also pressures them into seeking short-term tactics in pursuit of reputational repair rather than longer-term reform of institutional structures. To pierce through this veil, there must be a stronger understanding of the correlation between performative diversity and media pressure. Comparing the London Fire Brigade and Metropolitan Police Service enables the study to examine how varying levels of media scrutiny shape institutional responses to racial inequality. Thus, this article seeks to answer the following questions:

How do the police and fire services differ in their approaches to diversity and organisational reform?

What do these differences reveal about the barriers to achieving meaningful organisational change in each service?

This article explores how London police and fire departments respond to media-initiated racial criticism, particularly analysing whether these reactions are performative (i.e. tokenistic in nature, meaning symbolic inclusion without structural change) or intended to kickstart genuine and sustained structural reforms. Moreover, it explores whether these responses vary between institutions, with a particular focus on organisations that may attract less media scrutiny or be notably resistant to structural changes. Although this article is based on data sourced from the UK police and fire services more broadly, the focus of this research remains on a comparative analysis of the London Metropolitan Police Service and the London Fire Brigade (LFB), namely their efforts to establish the perceptibility of workplace culture and diversity hiring initiatives. In doing so, the article offers a streamlined approach to detecting tokenism by implementing a theoretical framework, the Media Influenced Racial Dynamics and Tokenism Theory (MIRDATT) model, that has been adapted to highlight media-influenced performative diversity. Earlier studies on this subject have investigated media influences, Critical Race Theory and tokenism, but this study unifies these factors into a singular diagnostic tool. By implementing MIRDATT to case studies, individual experiences, hiring data and media scrutiny, this study highlights a gap in how symbolic diversity operates across governmental institutions and media projections ([Grant, 2014](#)).

Literature Review

Existing literature and theories relevant to this article's research hypothesis, public sector responses to racism may evolve into tokenism and performative diversity when pressured by the British news media are reviewed through several theoretical lenses, including Cultivation Theory, Agenda-Setting Theory, Critical Race Theory (CRT), Symbolic Interactionism, Theory of Tokenism and Social Identity Theory (SIT), all while considering their applicability to and interoperability with the public services

(Rowley, 2004). In this way, race, media and institutional behaviour have been combined to achieve a deeper understanding of the reviewed literature, enabling assessment of critical issues within the topic at hand, including the strengths and limitations of existing models that may seem outdated. This study cross-examines these theories alongside media case studies and performative accretions to highlight and map any common intersections while explaining their practical relevance, of how symbolic inclusion may be perceived by Black and other minority workers within these organisations and why these older frameworks may fall short when applied to the complex situations and cases.

Theoretical Frameworks and Limitations

This study extends Creswell's (1998) five traditions of inquiry, particularly phenomenology, to explore how institutions respond symbolically to media-triggered racial pressure. Critically, Kanter's work shows how cosmetic diversity can be used to make criticism less severe (Stichman, 2010). CRT outlines how racism operates through the normal functioning of public services (Rosiek, 2019; Salter & Adams, 2013). However, SIT offers an understanding of group processes and the development of ingroup vs. outgroup biases (Mummendey & Schreiber, 1983; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). SIT explains individual prejudice, but CRT reveals how such biases are systemically supported by organisational policies and structures (Sheppard et al., 2024). The racial integration of these institutions requires an evaluation of their institutional actions through their actual effects as well as their planned objectives, organisational framework and symbolic meaning.

Kanter's (1977) Theory of Tokenism is crucial for understanding symbolic inclusion, demonstrating how organisational diversity efforts often result in superficial change rather than structural reform. Stichman (2010), along with Glover, Pallais and Pariente (2016) and Hallett (2003), show how symbolic inclusion typically restricts career-advancement opportunities and perpetuates tokenistic positions for racialised staff members. Moreover, CRT expands this understanding by revealing that racism operates systemically through the daily functioning of institutions (Rosiek, 2019; Salter & Adams, 2013). As a result, CRT argues that only a complete system-wide transformation would truly eliminate racial inequality rather than merely implementing superficial changes (Lincoln & Stanley, 2021; Sulé, 2020). Additionally, SIT provides a

sound understanding of ingroup favouritism and outgroup bias, which is crucial for understanding staff dynamics within racially homogenous institutions. SIT's core processes include categorisation, identification and comparison, which collectively explain how group-based identities shape perceptions and prejudice (Choi & Hogg, 2020; Jenkins, 2000; Mummendey & Schreiber, 1983; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). SIT also explains why people hold on to "ingroup" dominance, but CRT examines the systems that support this dominance (Sheppard et al., 2024). Together, the two approaches offer a strong mutual understanding, as SIT focuses on psychology while CRT examines power dynamics (Brown, 2000; Hernández, 2020; Rocco et.al., 2014).

Media Events and Institutional Reactions: Visibility, Response and Tokenism

It has been periodically observed that, following media or public inquiry reports on high-profile discrimination cases, some police forces focus on hiring minority officers as a quick fix, which fails to improve the long-term retention, promotion or progression of Black and minority staff (Bowling, 2007). Thus, prior research has examined the relationship between media-reported incidents and hiring patterns among UK police (Bowling & Phillips, 2007; Souhami, 2014). Media attention strongly influences both institutional actions and the public understanding of events. After scandals garner extensive media coverage, police forces face intense public pressure to implement visible diversity recruitment initiatives (Maia, 2009; Domke et al., 1999). According to Agenda-Setting Theory, ongoing media coverage of scandals makes institutional racism a primary public concern despite the subsequent reforms being symbolic (Hermann et al., 2023). According to Cultivation Theory, the repeated use of symbolic gestures (e.g., recruitment campaigns) produces the appearance of progress, making the public feel secure, despite not fundamentally changing the institutional practices (Rosiek, 2019). Symbolic Interactionism shows how media-exacerbated scandals modify public and police interactions via officers' diversity displays influencing public perceptions of trust, legitimacy and accountability (Blumer, 1969; Kanter, 1977). Evidently, media exposure prompts institutions to adopt superficial reforms while simultaneously influencing the public's understanding, giving way to false impressions of institutional advancement.

Fire services, in contrast, receive minimal media attention, leading to delayed and gradual transformation and, in turn, the persistence of overt racism. While media

attention produces symbolic changes, the lack of any such attention allows explicit racism to persist openly. The London police and fire services exhibit different responses to public accusations of racism due to the varying media intensity and duration to which they are subjected. The police implement symbolic diversity measures following press coverage, while the fire service continues without issue despite severe internal racism cases. Notably, police behaviour has shifted from overt to covert racism via WhatsApp ([Wicks, 2025](#)), arguably due to media scrutiny.

The Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) has long been involved in race-related controversies, many of which have been nationally reported. Public statements of progress are contradicted by evidence of persistent racism behind the scenes. WhatsApp and other social media platforms facilitate a culture that normalises hate speech and prejudice ([Dearden, 2021](#)). The case of Wayne Couzens, the officer known as “the rapist” by colleagues, who remained in post for years, illustrates this ([Yorkshire Live, 2025](#)). In another case, two officers took photos of the victims Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman's bodies, sharing them via WhatsApp ([Dodd, 2021](#)). Evidently, racist and sexist behaviour persists in private digital spaces, supporting the conclusion that, despite adopting more cautious methods, the MPS remains institutionally racist ([Dodd, 2023](#)).

The [Casey Review \(2023\)](#), created after Sarah Everard's murder, concluded that the MPS was “institutionally racist, misogynistic, and homophobic” ([Casey, 2023](#)). The Met accepted this publicly, responding by tripling recruitment of Black and Asian candidates and launching diversity branding initiatives without implementing any structural reforms to promotion criteria or misconduct accountability ([Abelson et al., 2018](#); [Marsh, 2023](#)). Following the death of George Floyd (2020), UK protests against disproportionate police stop and search policies prompted the MPS and other forces to launch minority recruitment initiatives and public statements on racial justice (BBC, 2020), increasing visibility without meaningful reform. This reflects Cultivation Theory's assertion that symbolic displays create the mere illusion of progress ([Hermann et al., 2023](#)).

The WhatsApp racism convictions in 2023 involved six Met officers convicted for circulating racist, sexist and violent messages, including references to lynching and Holocaust denial ([BBC, 2023](#)). The MPS announced internal diversity training in

response but no institutional disciplinary reform, exhibiting the prioritisation of image restoration over systemic change ([Glover et al. 2016](#); [Rosiek, 2019](#)). The Child Q scandal in 2020, involving a Black 15-year-old strip-searched by MPS officers, prompted the addition of Black officers to safeguarding teams but left policy unchanged a clear case of tokenism ([BBC, 2023](#) & [Kanter, 1977](#)). Black deaths following police restraint in 2023 revealed disproportionate deaths of Black men under police restraint ([Guardian, 2023](#)). In turn, police increased training frequency but made no direct changes to oversight, reflecting symbolic reassurance over structural accountability ([David & Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2023](#)).

The success rate of newly recruited police officers in 2023 revealed that Black and Asian applicants achieved comparatively lower grades within the police education framework. Police launched marketing campaigns and diversity fairs but did not alter selection procedures ([Dodd, 2023](#)). This aligns with the assertions of [Glover et al. \(2016\)](#) and [Martinez and Paluck \(2020\)](#) regarding superficial inclusion and the corresponding perpetuation of systemic exclusion. The [NPCC Internal Racism Survey \(2022\)](#) revealed that 30% of Black officers faced racist treatment, though the NPCC notably avoided labelling this as institutional racism, using internal focus groups and “culture mapping” instead ([Dodd, 2023](#)). This aligns with CRT’s interest convergence principle, whereby reform occurs only when reputational risk is high ([Delgado & Stefancic, 2001](#); [Sheppard et al., 2024](#)).

Fire Services and the Absence of Response

The London Fire Brigade, in contrast, often takes little to no action against serious racist incidents, such as a noose being left for a Black firefighter, or pork being stuffed into a Muslim officer’s locker ([Syal, 2022](#) & [Taylor, 2024](#)). There is a lack of diversity awareness and training within the fire service to encourage respect for individual differences. The LFB receives less media attention than the police despite similar misconduct. [Afzal’s \(2022\)](#) “Independent culture review” of the LFB found evidence of institutional racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia and disability related discrimination, yet the organisation failed to take any effective measures to rectify this. His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services ([HMICFRS, 2023](#)) reported uncovering microaggressions, racism and cultural exclusion within the fire service in the absence of sustained media scrutiny. Still, the

symbolic gestures from leadership are often insincere, and few changes are made (Ahmed, 2012). However, Bonilla-Silva (2014) contends that any pressure from the media would simply lead to covert racism that's harder to detect and challenge, similar to what is happening within the police. CRT identifies this situation as institutional interest divergence, reform taking a backseat when there is no reputational threat. Evidence supporting this divergence includes a comparative analysis of race-related scandal coverage, which reveals the MPS's involvement in at least five major media-covered incidents between 2020 and 2024 in comparison to the LFB's involvement in only two such incidents, garnered far less public attention (BBC, 2024; ITV News, 2023; Quinn, 2024; Rise Associates, 2024). The volume of media coverage matches institutional behaviour, tokenistic or not.

This comparison gives way to this study's main argument; media attention serves as an active trigger for symbolic action. Organisations rush to demonstrate progress upon receiving media scrutiny. The absence of media pressure allows racial injustice to persist without any intervention. Afzal's report shows that institutional racism, even when documented, rarely provokes reform unless amplified by media attention. The LFB case highlights the importance of understanding how media attention (or the lack thereof) influences the path of anti-racist reform (or, again, the lack thereof) within the public services.

The Prevalence and Psychology of Tokenism

Tokenism persists within UK public services because it helps them to maintain a positive public image via quick and risk-free means of addressing criticism while maintaining fundamental operational frameworks (Kalita, 2023 & Meltzer et al., 2020). King, Schneer and White (2017) show that diversity committees have had no power following scandals, while Gonçalves and Mello (2017) reveal that recruitment initiatives without corresponding cultural change often leave minority recruits feeling isolated. These patterns repeat across public institutions. Media narratives are satisfied by symbolic gestures (e.g., diversity statements, apology videos), but these gestures rarely lead to genuine reform (Rim & Ferguson, 2017). This aligns with Cultivation Theory, which warns that visible inclusion often generates a false sense of progress (Hermann et al., 2023); this adds to the illusion of progress, disincentivising further reform. Moreover, according to Symbolic Interactionism, these gestures are

often hollow, with even minority staff viewing such efforts as placation rather than empowerment ([Blumer, 1969](#); [Zimmer, 1988](#)). According to [Domke et al. \(1999\)](#) and [Chen \(2024\)](#), media simplification fosters such cycles of performative reform because public pressure rewards appearances over substance.

Every theory, however, has its limitations, even those that are foundational in their field, and it is important to be aware of these limitations. For instance, Agenda-Setting Theory fails to capture the current fragmented and reactive characteristics of digital media ([Almakaty, 2024](#)). The Theory of Tokenism fails to consider how different social categories (e.g., race, gender, class) intersect ([Martinez & Paluck, 2020](#)). The current Cultivation Theory framework does not provide a comprehensive explanation of how social media affects perception nonlinearly ([Loeberbach et al., 2021](#)). Symbolic Interactionism effectively analyses personal meaning but fails to examine broader social structures ([Gross, 2009](#)). These models remain useful, but they are not equipped to offer clear insight into how institutions perform rapid symbolic actions in the digital age. MIRDATT extends their value by creating a single operational framework with which to measure institutional performance amid racial scrutiny ([Affirmity, 2022](#)).

Media, Race and Institutional Behaviour

To address the limitations of the existing theoretical framework, this article introduces a combined theoretical approach: Media-Influenced Racial Dynamics and Tokenism Theory (MIRDATT). This integrated model provides a more comprehensive perspective on why public institutions resort to superficial diversity strategies when under intense media pressure, taking a unique approach that no individual theory could.

MIRDATT draws from four key frameworks:

- Critical Race Theory (CRT) for systemic analysis
- Kanter's Theory of Tokenism for internal exclusion
- Agenda-Setting Theory for media influence
- Symbolic Interactionism for individual meaning-making

Through this synthesis, MIRDATT can understand the actions of organisations (including the motivations behind them) and the impact on others. The founders of CRT, Derrick Bell and Kimberlé Crenshaw, established the framework to demonstrate how racism exists as a fundamental element of existing laws, institutions and everyday operating systems (Crenshaw, 1988). MIRDATT is grounded in CRT to reveal how institutional racism persists in the face of reforms that only engage in transformations that advance institutional interests. Kanter's Theory of Tokenism (Kanter, 1977) explains how minority individuals, despite being made hyper-visible in organisations, are excluded from real power. MIRDATT incorporates this to assess symbolic hiring and stalled promotion. Agenda-Setting Theory demonstrates how media attention determines which issues become institutional priorities (Childress, 2017; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). MIRDATT employs this to track how visibility of scandals influences inclusion efforts. Finally, Blumer (1969) developed Symbolic Interactionism as a formal theory after George Herbert Mead (1934) concept to study how people create meaning in social roles. MIRDATT employs this framework to examine how racialised staff members understand inclusion as either authentic or insincere (Mead, 1934).

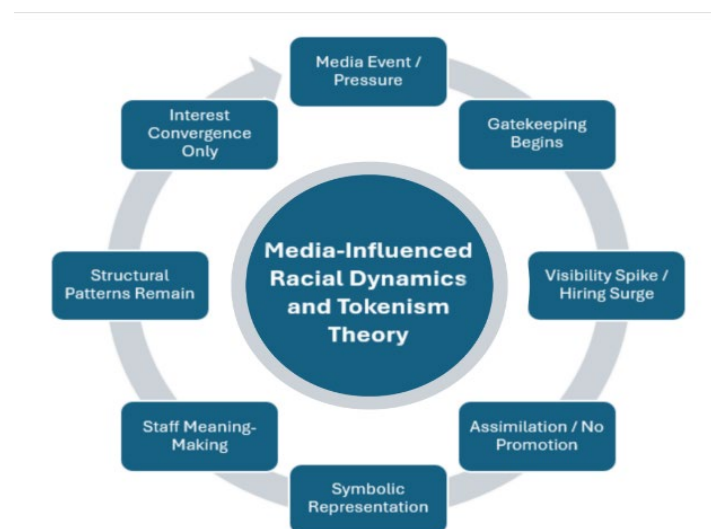
Table 1: Breakdown of Theoretical Contributions

MIRDATT: Theoretical Bricolage		
Theory	Component Used in MIRDATT	Excluded Elements
Critical Race Theory (CRT)	Structural Racism, Interest Convergence	Intersectionality, Legal Critique
Tokenism Theory	Visibility, Assimilation	Token Stress, Cultural Norms, Contrast
Agenda-Setting Theory	Issue Salience, Gatekeeping	Media Framing, Public Opinion Influence
Symbolic Interactionism	Social Symbols, Meaning-Making	Role-Taking, Labelling, Self-Concept Formation

The integration of these theories enables MIRDATT to identify symbolic diversity actions, connect them to media events and gauge their effects on racialised staff. This table delineates the elements that MIRDATT incorporates as well as those that it excludes from each theory. From CRT, interest convergence is important to the theory, as it shows how institutions may act to prioritises self-image above all else, meaning that purportedly progressive shifts lack a genuine commitment to equity. From the

Theory of Tokenism, visibility and assimilation show how people are often hired simply for the associated reputational boost, even though, even if they were to be placed in a position of power, they would still need to conform and adapt to the behaviour of the dominant group, suppressing their ability to transform the organisation's structure from within. From Agenda-Setting Theory, salience refers to an issue being projected by the media in a way that makes organisations feel compelled to act quickly via symbolic rather than structural changes, which would take a long time. Gatekeeping, linked to assimilation, refers to filtering of potential employees to ensure that they would willingly conform to institutional norms, thereby limiting the potential impact of heightened minority inclusion while still presenting them as social symbols to please the media. Meaning making, from Symbolic Interactionism, refers to how institutions can grant meaning to their projected symbols in their responses to racial controversies, thereby shaping the public's understanding of and expectations for progress in a way that suits the institutions' aim to preserve the status quo.

Figure 1: The MIRDATT Cycle: A Diagnostic Framework



Evidently, each theory adds a critical dimension to MIRDATT, giving way to a multifaceted framework capable of addressing institutional racism's simultaneously symbolic and structural nature. According to Kanter's theory, visible roles are used to recruit minoritised individuals as a means of exhibiting diversity, yet they are not given real power or long-term opportunities (Grant, 2017). Agenda-Setting Theory explains why these practices may be intense after periods of high public scrutiny, especially among police services, which are more consistently under the media spotlight than fire

services ([Brown, 1998](#)). Symbolic Interactionism links institutional structures with firsthand experiences, enabling the researcher to examine how performative diversity is interpreted by those within ([Musolf, 1992](#)). These theories all individually lack sufficient explanations to explain the phenomena at hand on their own; Kanter's Theory of Tokenism explains inclusion without cause; Agenda-Setting Theory offers motive without social context; Symbolic Interactionism gives meaning without institutional critique; and CRT highlights the systemic power dynamics sustaining these inequalities, but MIRDATT addresses these gaps by unifying the four. This enables the researcher to move beyond isolated variables and examine how media-driven racial performance operates on both structural and symbolic levels ([Robinson, 2011](#)).

MIRDATT is designed for the context of British public services but is flexible enough to be employed more widely. It also enables the researcher to challenge hiring and promotion patterns not only as numbers but as reactive, often performative strategies to manage public image rather than address inequality ([Kutlaca, 2022](#)). The result is a theory that can identify, critique and explain patterns of media-influenced tokenism among public-facing institutions ([Flores, 2008](#)). The theoretical contribution of MIRDATT is that it moves beyond explanation towards prediction. Rather than simply describing institutional racism, tokenism, media influence or employee perceptions in isolation, MIRDATT predicts interaction between these processes over time. This makes it a stronger analytical framework for examining diversity reforms in public institutions, particularly where organisational responses are shaped by reputational concerns following periods of intense public scrutiny. It also provides clear hypotheses that can be tested across different public-sector organisations, making it both theoretically integrative and empirically falsifiable, for example, if minority recruitment is matched by equivalent promotion into senior leadership positions or employees consistently report that inclusion initiatives are authentic and transformative.

Methodology

The study applies a mixed-methods approach with a phenomenological research lens. This phenomenological framework uses triangulation, as it combines the

systematic patterns of institutional conduct with the firsthand experiences of lived events ([Maruna, 2009](#)). The triangulation of data was achieved by merging quantitative and qualitative data from secondary sources (e.g., published employee data for police and fire services) as well as data obtained through Freedom of Information (FOI) requests. Moreover, in-depth critical analysis of recent case studies from credible news and media sources has been conducted to enhance the validity and depth of the findings ([Heale, 2013](#)). The methodology supports MIRDATT's goal of exposing the institutional behaviours and experiential realities of racialised individuals in public services.

Two key data sources were used for the assessment of the police: first, publicly available hiring reports, which provide institutional statistics regarding recruitment, promotion and attrition trends over the last decade and across all regions ([Church, 2002](#)); second, FOI requests were submitted to all 43 police forces across the England and Wales, including the British Transport Police, to obtain numerical data (covering the period between 2020 and 2024) on racially minoritised officers' treatment and career advancement ([Clifton-Sprigg, 2020](#)). These sources facilitate the assessment of police departments' reactive hiring patterns following media scandals or public inquiries ([Thuma, 2020](#)).

Consulted data on the fire service came from academic research, government documents and published case studies ([Barker, 2013](#)). The fire service receives minimal national media attention, which, according to MIRDATT, could result in decreased performative diversity efforts and, in turn, more unaddressed racism ([Zigerell, 2019](#)). The considered case studies feature currently serving or former officers describing their experiences in public service, facilitating a nuanced approach ([Cibangu, 2016](#)). These qualitative accounts help the researcher to assess how race is felt and experienced, providing a symbolic interactionist lens through which to interpret institutional data ([Sauder, 2005](#)). This approach follows best practices and ethical FOI legislation guidelines ([Mueller, 2019](#)).

Notably, some of the datasets obtained through FOI requests were inadequate, and other requests were rejected entirely due to privacy concerns or exceeding the cost threshold, suggesting that something is being hidden purposely, limiting the broader applicability of the study's results. Due to a lack of scrutiny against British fire

services, hiring data was much harder to obtain beyond the published data sources. However, for this article, the focus remains on a comparative data analysis between the MPS and the LFB.

Findings

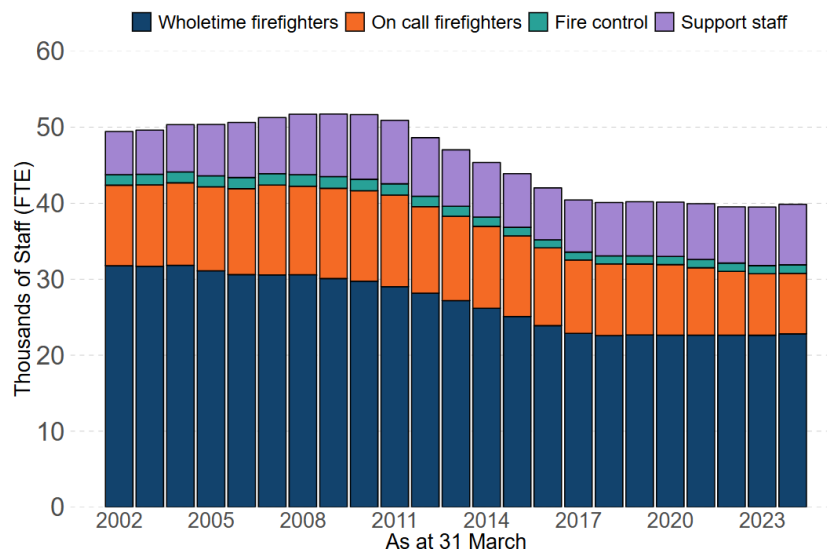
This section summarises the study's key findings regarding racial representation and the institutional behaviour of the MPS and LFB. The analysis, based on a review of statistical data, FOI responses, case studies and testimonies, provides an understanding of how media visibility affects institutional racial inclusion through application of MIRDATT.

London Fire Brigade: Racial Representation, Media Scrutiny and the Absence of Tokenism

Currently, overall ethnic minority representation in England's fire and rescue services stands at 5.4%, significantly lower than the 26% among the general population and even the 8.4% among police. The proportion of minority representation in this workforce increased by just 1.1% from 2019 to 2024 ([GOV.UK, 2025](#)). Notably, the LFB experienced multiple severe racial incidents that served as testaments to the institutional racism in the organisation, yet these failed to trigger immediate hiring growth. Black firefighters have shared stories about experiencing traumatic incidents, including mockery and even symbolic threats. The organisation seemingly failed to launch any effective public diversity campaigns or reforms following these revelations. These patterns matched the theoretical expectation (based on Agenda-Setting Theory and CRT) that institutions with low media scrutiny face less pressure to engage in either symbolic or structural reform ([Chen, 2024](#); [Rosiek, 2019](#)).

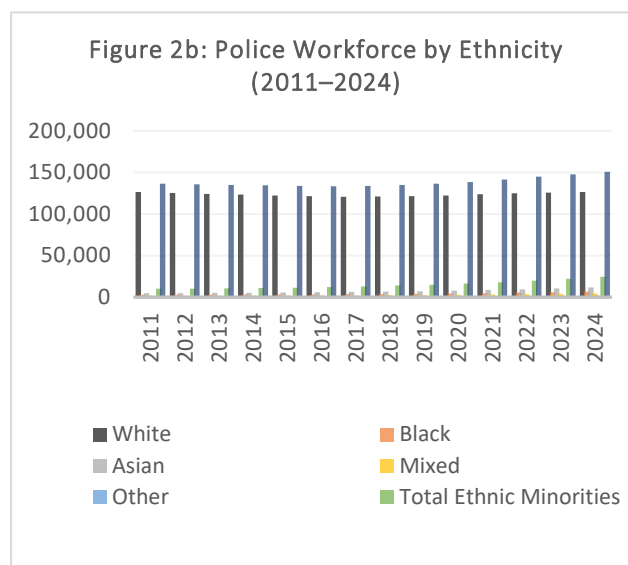
Comparison of institutional workforce diversity

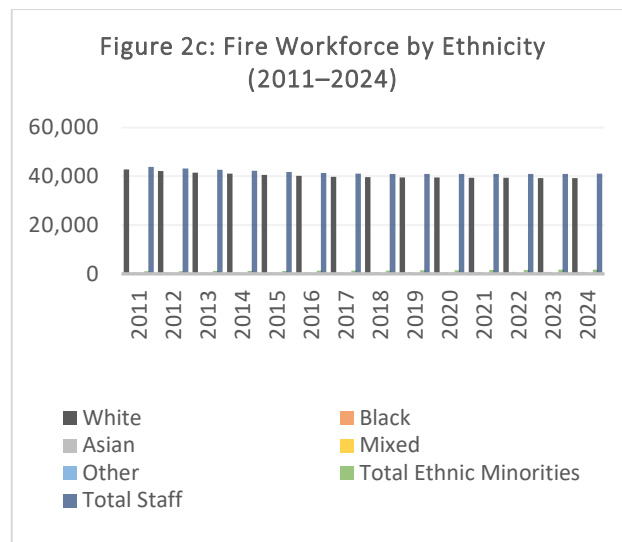
Figure 2A: Total Fire and Rescue Workforce by Role (2002–2024)



Source: Home Office, 2024

The data in Figure 2A shows a 17% decline in the overall firefighter workforce over the last ten years due to a reduction in on-call roles.





Source: Home Office, 2024

Figures 2b and 2c offer a direct comparison of Black and minority hiring between the police and fire services in the UK. Amid overall reductions in its workforce, fire services showed little effort to increase their hiring from marginalised communities, signifying a hesitance to reform through visible measures and a general lack of reputational urgency, having avoided media scrutiny ([Domke et al., 1999](#)), unlike the police forces. They did not appear to engage in any forms diversity or hiring initiatives. Police services, in contrast, have achieved relatively steady growth in minority hiring after several race-related scandals came under media scrutiny in recent years. However, the organisation is still facing significant challenges in making good progress in terms of promoting its Black and minority officers and staff to leadership positions. Figure 2b shows that, between 2018 and 2024, police services reported recruitment spikes among Black and minority officers, with the Casey Review, the publication of the Police Race Action Plan and the Black Lives Matter protests (sparked by the death of George Floyd at the hands of US police) being the primary catalysts, indicating that diversity drives were reactive ([Home Office, 2024](#)). However, following a recruitment freeze due to financial and economic austerity between 2008 and 2017, Prime Minister Boris Johnson, as part of a 2018 political manifesto, promised to raise the numbers of police officers by 20,000 by March 2023 (worth noting is that this target was achieved by 2023, and the new Labour government maintained this police uplift programme with an added focus on improving gender and ethnic diversity across all UK police forces). Beyond traditional entry routes, three new entry routes were introduced by the police

uplift programme for all 43 forces. The findings support the use of Agenda-Setting Theory in the analysis of public institutions' responses (Domke et al., 1999). However, the data analysis revealed that diversity initiatives among the police services remained superficial. Black and Asian officers encountered two layers of career barriers, which [Adisa \(2025\)](#) described as "double-glazed ceilings", a concept denoting the compounded effect of visible promotion barriers and hidden cultural exclusion.

Racism and Media Scrutiny of the Fire Services

Table 2: Black Firefighters in the UK – Case Studies & Media Events

Name	Role & Organisation	Year of media release	Actual occurrence	Source
Nazir Afzal OBE	The Independent Culture Reviewer of the London Fire Brigade	2022	The report paints a picture of poor behaviour and painful experiences over many years. It highlights that women, Black, Asian and minority ethnic, LGBTQ+ and neurodiverse staff experience poor treatment and do less well in their careers. Additionally, the report includes examples of behaviour towards members of the public which are completely unacceptable.	LFB, CJI, Fire Brigades Union
Jaden Francois-Esprit	Firefighter – The London Fire Brigade	2023 (He committed	A young London firefighter who took his own life after experiencing	The Guardian, BBC,

		suicide in 2023)	persistent bullying and racism. Before his death, he applied sixteen times to be transferred from his station, where he reported he was teased for eating Caribbean food, given the nickname "lazy boy", and humiliated by reprimands given over the station PA. His transfer request was rejected until the time he took his own life.	Emergency Services Times, Fire Brigades Union
<u>HMIVFRS report - Values and culture in fire and rescue services</u>	<u>HMICFRS</u>	2023	In at least eleven services, found evidence of racism, sexism and homophobia and a culture where staff, including managers, did not always feel confident to challenge poor behaviour, such as bullying, harassment and discrimination.	HMICFRS, Govt UK
<u>Avanos Biney</u>	Firefighter - Gloucestershire Fire Service	2024 (He committed suicide in 2017)	Avanos was "subjected to racial slurs and derogatory comments" and found the n-word written on his T-shirt after a volleyball game.	ITVX, BBC, Daily Echo, Gloucestershire Live

			"Avanos experienced being ignored by colleagues, subjected to intimidating stares, and found glass in his shoes. His food was tampered with, and itching powder was placed in his kit and bed," the report says. Swastikas were also placed in his belongings. Mr Biney took his own life in 2017.	
<u>Mr John James</u>	Firefighter - Gloucestershire Fire Service	2024 (He died of a brain tumour in 2019)	He suffered terrible racism while working for the fire service, saying staff members would ignore him, would not sit with him at lunch, and that he was ostracised during his time. In 2014, Mr James was successful in a tribunal against the service over accusations that he was victimised at work. His widow, Sarah James,	ITVX, BBC, Daily Echo, Gloucestershire Live

			claimed, "He suffered terribly because of the colour of his skin. But even with all the apologies, I still feel bitter. It won't bring him back." Mr James died of a brain tumour in 2019. His family believe was brought on by the stress and a hostile working environment contributed to his declining health.	
<u>Wayne Brown</u>	Chief Fire Officer - West Midlands Fire Service	2024/25 (He committed suicide in 2024)	Brown, the UK's first black fire chief, had been under pressure because of a "barrage" of harassment and complaints about his character in the form of emails, Freedom of Information requests and letters to his workplace. There were also social media posts making allegations about him. He had left a note for the police saying the last 18 months of his life had been "absolutely awful" and "I can't do this anymore", and	ITVX, BBC, The Guardian, Birmingham Live

			took his own life. A case of over-scrutiny of Black officers.	
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The table above depicts the “everyday institutional racism” within UK fire brigades (Salter & Adams, 2013). Critically, the independent culture review of the London Fire Brigade in 2022 and the HMIVFRS report on values and culture in fire and rescue services published in 2023 had little to no effect on these services.

The fire brigades maintain their silence, aligning with CRT’s notion of “interest divergence” (Delgado & Stefancic 2001): a lack of interest in confronting racial hierarchies. After all, there is no public or media pressure. According to the Theory of Tokenism, symbolic actions are used to manage image (Glover et al., 2016); in this case, however, the total lack of action implies that they faced no reputational threat. This is consistent with the idea that tokenism is most prevalent when institutions are under observation (David & Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2023).

Policing and Tokenism: Racial Diversity as Performance

Table 3: Racism and media scrutiny of the Police – case studies and media events

Name	Role & Organisation	Year of media release	Actual occurrence	Source
<u>BBC Panorama</u>	London Met	2025	Panorama's secret filming shows officers making sexualised comments to colleagues and sharing racist views	BBC, The Guardian, ITV, Sky News, London Met

			about immigrants and Muslims.	
<u>WhatsApp Scandal</u>	London Met	2023	Six Met officers convicted over racist messages – targeted at Meghan Markle.	ITVX, BBC News, The Guardian, The Independent
<u>Sam Kerr case</u>	London Met	2023	Chelsea striker Sam Kerr was found not guilty of causing racially aggravated harassment after calling a Metropolitan Police officer "stupid and white" – public backlash.	BBC, The Guardian, Sky Sports, Sky News,
<u>Baroness Casey Review</u>	London Met	2023	A review into the standards of behaviour and internal culture of the Metropolitan Police Service found that the Met is institutionally racist, misogynistic and homophobic.	BBC, The Guardian, The Police Foundation, London Met, The College of Policing
<u>David Carrick</u>	London Met	2023	An elite firearms officer, David Carrick, was found to be a serious sex offender. He pleaded guilty to	BBC, The Guardian, Sky News

			forty-nine charges of sexual offences, including rape. Despite the police being warned of his behaviour around 8 times.	
<u>Daniel Morgan</u>	London Met	2023	This was the murder of a private detective. Where the Met police were found to be institutionally corrupt. Where a long 34 years of struggle for justice for the family. Where police took over the investigation.	BBC, The Guardian, Sky News
<u>Police Race Action Plan</u>	NPCC, NBPA – All forces	2022	The Police Race Action Plan sets out changes across policing to improve outcomes for Black people who work within or interact with policing. The plan was developed jointly by the College of Policing and the National Police	All forty-three forces, CoP, NPCC, Police Foundation, NBPA, Race Equality Foundation

			Chiefs' Council (NPCC), working in collaboration with Black communities and partners. It has the commitment of all forty-three chief constables in England and Wales – addressing • disparities affecting Black people. • lower levels of trust and confidence in the police among some Black people	
<u>Sarah Everard's murder case</u>	London Met	2021	Met officer Wayne Couzens has been sentenced to a whole-life term for the kidnap, rape and murder of Sarah Everard. This horrific crime was deeply concerning and raised questions about the police vetting system and	BBC, The Guardian, The Independent, The Police Foundation, London Met, The College of Policing

			internal culture of the Met that eventually triggered the Independent review led by Baroness Casey.	
<u>Bianca Williams & Ricardo Dos Santos case</u>	London Met	2020	Two Met Police officers were sacked after carrying out a stop-and-search of two athletes, British world championships medallist Bianca Williams and Portuguese Olympic sprinter Ricardo Dos Santos believed to be racially profiled. They were handcuffed and searched outside their west London home while their baby was in the car.	BBC, The Guardian, Race Equality Matters, IOPC
<u>Child Q case</u>	London Met	2020	On 3 December 2020, police officers strip-searched a 15-year-old Black female child on school premises, involving the removal of the	BBC, The Guardian, The Independent, The Police Foundation,

			child's underwear and exposure of her intimate parts. Following investigations, both officers were found guilty of gross misconduct and dismissed without notice.	London Met, IOPC, House of Commons, Young Hackney
<u>George Floyd – Black Lives Matter protests</u>	London Met	2019	Demonstrations against racism across the UK following the killing of George Floyd in the US, a Black Lives Matter protest on Whitehall, outside Downing Street in central London, turned violent – nearly 20 officers were injured and 30 people were arrested.	BBC, The Guardian, Sky News, Police Foundation,
<u>Dale Semper Case</u>	London Met	2017	Dale Semper, a bank manager, was stopped by police when he was driving and wrongly accused of involvement in gun crime. Mr Semper	ITVX, BBC, The Guardian, Daily Mail, Scottish Financial News

			was handcuffed in front of neighbours while his car and home were searched for firearms and suspended from his job – the case was settled for £1 million.	
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Table 3 summarises relevant cases and events from the past decade when the MPS has been subject to sustained or intense media scrutiny over high-profile incidents, triggering controversial debates over the force’s culture, accountability and legitimacy. The combined impact of these cases has raised significant concerns over systemic issues within the organisation.

The involvement of police officers themselves in serious criminal activities as in the case of the “WhatsApp scandal” or the unmasking of former firearms officers David Carrick and Wayne Couzens as Britain’s most prolific sex offenders, severely undermined confidence in the MPS’s vetting and oversight processes. Independent reviews of and noticeable racial disparities in the police’s handling of stop-and-search and other investigations have confirmed deep-seated cultural problems. As stated earlier, the 2023 Baroness Casey Review concluded that the MPS is “institutionally racist, misogynist and homophobic”, echoing earlier criticisms made in the wake of historic cases like the Daniel Morgan murder investigation, where the force was found to be “institutionally corrupt” after decades of obstruction and a failure to secure justice. Public protests have also shaped this narrative. The 2020 Black Lives Matter protest, triggered by the killing of George Floyd in the US, brought tensions over policing and race issues into sharp focus in London, as did the 2022 launch of the national Police Race Action Plan, which demanded commitments from all UK police forces to address disparities affecting Black communities.

Together, these events have fuelled a cycle of media scandals, criticisms and demands for public scrutiny. Each incident gives way to media attention, which, in turn,

places greater pressure on the MPS to engage in cultural and procedural reform. Given the historic patterns and scale of the problems of racism, misogyny, homophobia and corruption, the MPS is likely to remain under intense scrutiny for the foreseeable future.

Application of the MIRDATT Framework

Each stage of the MIRDATT cycle warrants a brief description drawing from both the literature review and the analysis.

Stage 1: Media event/pressure: Agenda-Setting Theory

The Sam Kerr case, together with Child Q and WhatsApp convictions, received widespread media coverage, leading to immediate reactive diversity responses according to [Domke et al. \(1999\)](#) and [Chen \(2024\)](#). The lack of media coverage on LFB's severe incidents explains its failure to act.

Stage 2: Gatekeeping to save reputational damage: Agenda-Setting Theory

There is a clear indication that the majority of the forces declined to provide and failed to publish precise data on the recruitment, retention and progression of minority officers, making it difficult for academics and researchers to observe relevant behaviours and patterns. This reluctance and non-cooperation conceal recruitment patterns and match the literature's framing of institutional image control ([David & Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2023](#)).

Stage 3: Visibility spike/hiring surge: Theory of Tokenism

Policing data revealed clear patterns of minority recruitment drives following major incidents and events, unlike the fire services. The "visibility principle" of [Kanter \(1977\)](#) supports this finding, which demonstrates symbolic actions rather than actual structural modifications.

Stage 4: Assimilation / no visible promotion and progression: Theory of Tokenism

The minority staff members faced both stagnation and exclusion from leadership positions ([Adisa, 2025](#)). These testimonies mirror CRT's view that representation without power reinforces inequality ([Rosiek, 2019](#)).

Stage 5: Symbolic representation: Symbolic Interactionism

The organisation launched appointments and campaigns only after receiving public criticism. The organisation implemented these superficial efforts, aligning with the “diversity optics” framework from [Zimmer \(1988\)](#) and [Gonçalves and Mello \(2017\)](#).

Stage 6: Staff meaning making: Symbolic Interactionism

The officers described their positions as tokenistic and isolating, emphasising being “poster faces” with no real influence. This reflects [Blumer’s \(1969\)](#) claim that minorities interpret such gestures as hollow.

Stage 7: Structural patterns remain unchanged: Critical Race Theory

The leadership structure did not undergo any structural modifications. The organisational hierarchies maintained their white male dominance, supporting CRT's assertion that racism operates at a systemic level and cannot be changed through superficial reforms ([Rosiek, 2019](#); [Salter & Adams, 2013](#)).

Stage 8: Interest convergence only: Critical Race Theory

The organisation acted only when media attention revealed that doing nothing would harm its public image, validating CRT's principle of interest convergence ([Delgado & Stefancic, 2001](#); [Sheppard et al., 2024](#)).

Possible future empirical tests may include:

MIRDATT Prediction	Evidence Required
Media scrutiny increases diversity initiatives	Compare recruitment campaigns, diversity statements and policy launches before and after major media events.
Recruitment increases more than promotion	Analyse workforce statistics to determine whether minority hiring rises without corresponding increases in senior leadership representation.
Gatekeeping limits organisational influence	Examine promotion rates, leadership appointments and interview data describing barriers to advancement.

MIRDATT Prediction	Evidence Required
Staff perceive diversity initiatives as symbolic	Conduct interviews or surveys measuring employee perceptions of authenticity, inclusion and organisational commitment.
Structural inequalities remain after media attention declines	Conduct longitudinal analysis of promotion, retention and disciplinary outcomes over several years following media scandals.

Conclusion: Results in Context

The MIRDATT model showed that each phase, including media-triggered events, hiring initiatives, assimilation and reputational containment, followed institutional patterns of performative actions in the police. However, the fire services exhibited no such patterns despite there being compelling evidence of racial abuse and exclusion. The lack of post-scandal tokenistic action demonstrates how media visibility determines institutional responses ([Maia, 2009](#)). The research supports the fundamental theory that tokenism is indicative of public pressure rather than actual institutional advancement. In other words, institutions act only when public exposure reveals their injustices rather than when these injustices occur.

The analysis was made more detailed through the examination of two essential comparative figures, revealing that Black firefighters face direct racist threats and traumatic experiences, which the institution fails to address. Previous research shows that Black female police officers generally gain public visibility yet remain excluded from actual power and organisational acceptance. These two different expressions of racism, overt discrimination in concealed spaces and formalised tokenism in public spaces, support MIRDATT's assertion that representation functions as a reputational tactic rather than a sustained structural and cultural transformation. The findings reveal that media presence determines both the occurrence of action and its specific manifestation of aesthetic inclusion and institutional neglect.

This article presented new knowledge with the introduction of the MIRDATT framework, which functions as a comprehensive tool for assessing symbolic

institutional behaviour. MIRDATT links media influence on structural racism and individual experiences, creating a multi-dimensional evaluation framework for institutional diversity-related actions. The model goes beyond traditional theoretical limits to present a unified framework that explains both the presence and absence of diversity initiatives. The study indicated that police and fire services' symbolic actions function as performative crisis-management measures rather than genuine progressive responses, bolstering our understanding of tokenism as a media-driven phenomenon rather than a genuine commitment to inclusion.

The research identified some notable obstacles, as several FOI requests were unsuccessful in getting a useful response, with 12 public-service organisations failing to respond and 11 delivering limited data. The police forces restricted the consistency of short-term recruitment data through their use of Section 12 (cost) and Section 40(2) (anonymity). The analysis of experiential data depended on secondary testimonies, leading to the overrepresentation of Black and Asian officers as well as female officers and the corresponding underrepresentation of other minority groups.

Future research should work to close the knowledge gap on efficient application of the MIRDATT framework across other public services, including healthcare, education and local government, as these sectors face similar visibility and reform challenges. The model requires additional longitudinal interview data from minoritised staff to enhance its symbolic interactionist approach. The incorporation of genuine media analysis, which measures racial scandal volume and framing, would enhance the model's capacity to show how media coverage affects institutional responses. Regardless of potential improvements, this research has demonstrated that MIRDATT has the potential to be used as an effective theoretical framework, highlighting public exposure as the main driver of institutional performance. The study challenges current diversity initiatives by recommending that future academics and decision-makers assess whether diversity metrics exhibit genuine institutional commitment or serve as defensive responses to external assessments.

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