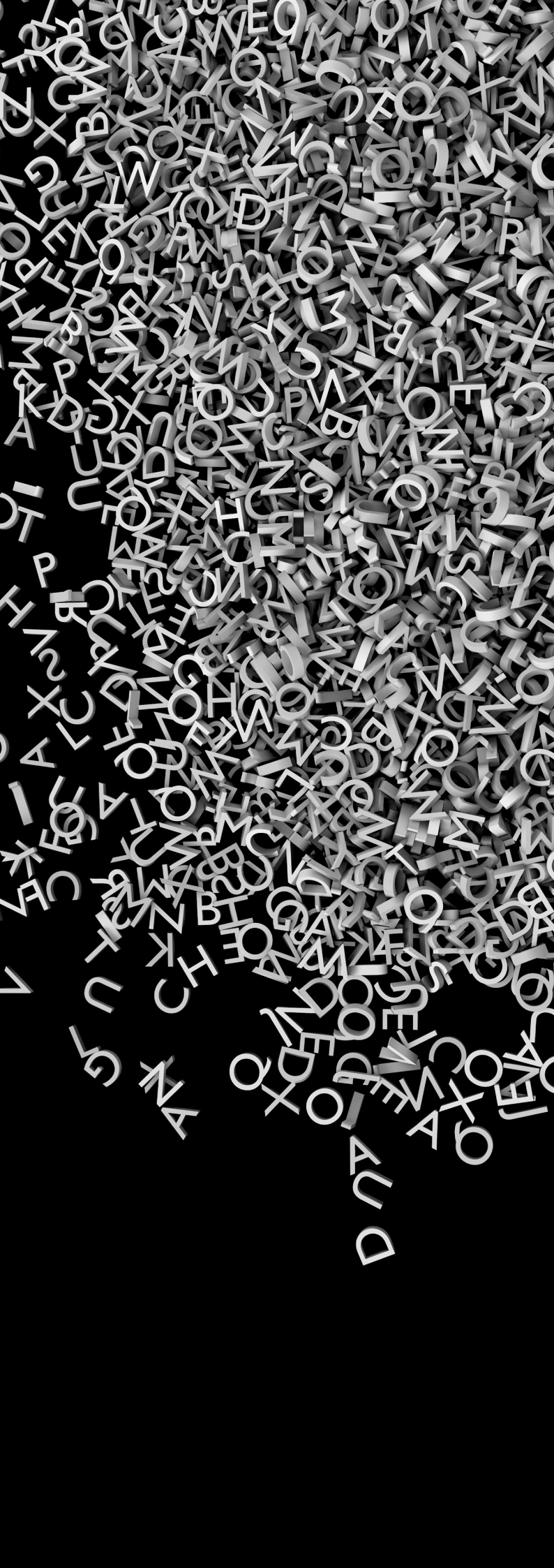




## Can I say that?

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How comfortable are we talking about race in the workplace?



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## Foreword

One crucial lesson we have learnt through our extensive experience supporting clients in creating diverse and inclusive workplaces is that the ability to discuss issues openly is vital to driving change. An environment of silence benefits no one.

This is especially true when it comes to discussions of systemic racism within business. Last year the BLM movement's upsurge provided an opportunity for us to break this silence, and at last begin the necessary, albeit uncomfortable, conversations on race which were long overdue.



However, I believe that these important conversations were, and remain, stunted by the lack of confidence that those in positions of power have using the language surrounding race. If a white manager feels unable to even say the word 'Black' or 'Asian' within the workplace, what hope is there that this manager will be the vocal, necessary advocate and driving force for action for these groups?

This research provides hope, but also cause for concern. Hope in that it suggests race is a topic that is now being discussed within the modern workplace and therefore a general understanding amongst those in decision making positions that these conversations are necessary and that they are attempting to educate themselves to participate. However also concern that the vast majority of the respondents for the research still feel uncomfortable and unclear on the specific language to use and nervous about having conversations about the issues of race.

If there were further evidence needed that breaking down these barriers is a crucial goal for business, the final statistics within this report say it all. Of those surveyed for this research, 72% stated that they have witnessed one, or more than one instance of racism in the workplace over the last 3 years.

Until we are able to alleviate discomfort and provide employees with the tools to have conversations about race, progress will stall. This report provides some insights on how much more needs to be done and provides some recommendations that we can all utilise to take action.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Suki Sandhu'.

**Suki Sandhu OBE**

Founder and CEO, Audeliss & INvolve

## Introduction

When the upsurge in the Black Lives Matter movement received global attention in May 2020 it was clear that not only had businesses not done enough about racial inequality, but many struggled even to start the conversation. A fear of causing offence, using the wrong language, and being uncomfortable were often cited as barriers which needed to be breached if action was going to be taken by those in the positions within organisations to make change happen.

Almost one year on, and with systemic racism remaining a critical issue for business to address, we set out to discover if the conversations about race in the workplace that so badly needed to happen are happening, and whether language and the fear of uncomfortable conversations remain a substantial barrier to progress.

In conjunction with Censuswide, INvolve and Audeliss conducted a survey of 1,000 non-HR Business Decision Makers within companies of over 250 employees. The research centred on assessing how comfortable individuals in positions of power are in choosing appropriate language for everyday interactions, as well as having conversations specifically on the topic of race and racism in the workplace. To allow for a comparative study, 500 respondents were surveyed from the US, and 500 from the UK.

This report contains the key findings from this research and draws some conclusions on how the conversation on race is developing and the challenges that still need to be overcome for further progress to be made. Using the findings as a basis, it also includes some recommendations for businesses looking to move the conversation forward within their own organisations so they can enact effective action to address racial inequality.





Research commissioned by:

the inclusion people



INvolve is a consultancy and global network championing diversity and inclusion in business. Through the delivery of events, programs, thought leadership and advisory solutions, INvolve helps firms drive cultural change and create inclusive workplaces where any individual can succeed.

for a new perspective



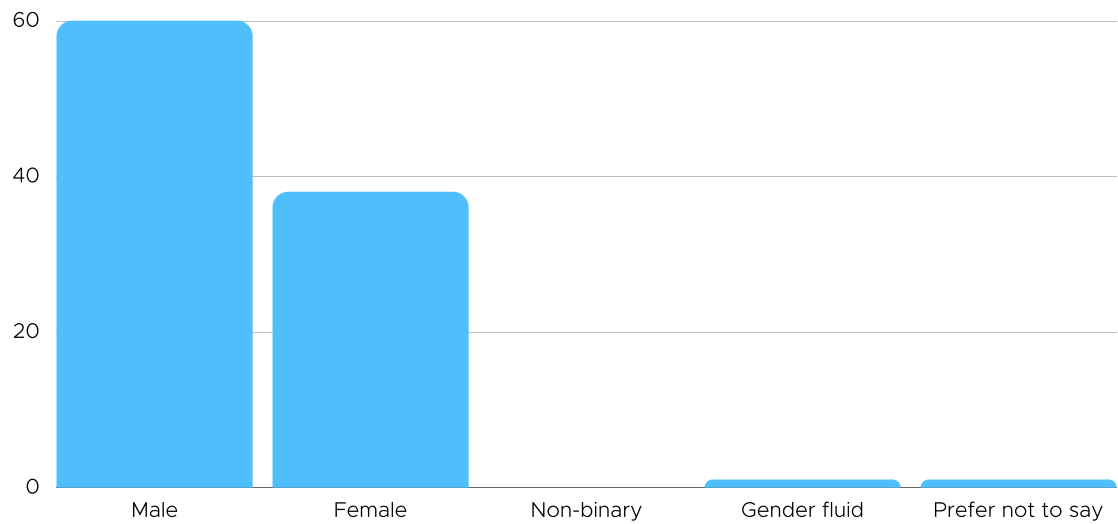
Audeliss Executive Search level the playing field for diverse leaders in executive and board appointments. We believe diversity of thought is one of the biggest competitive advantages to any leadership team, so we engage our unique global networks to find exceptional talent who can bring a new perspective to your organisation.



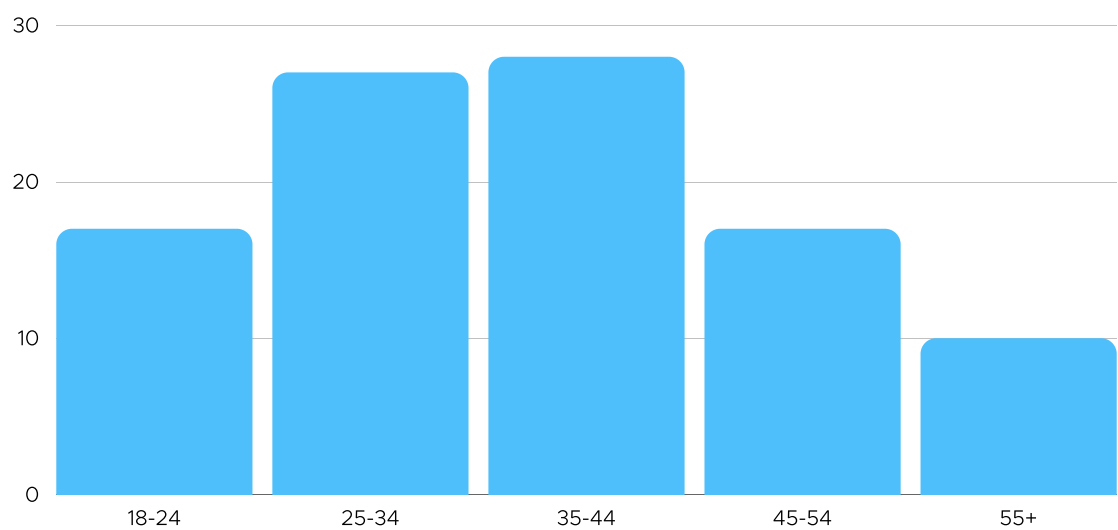
# Breakdown of respondents

500 respondents were surveyed from the US, and 500 from the UK.

UK participants by gender



UK participants by age



UK participants by ethnicity



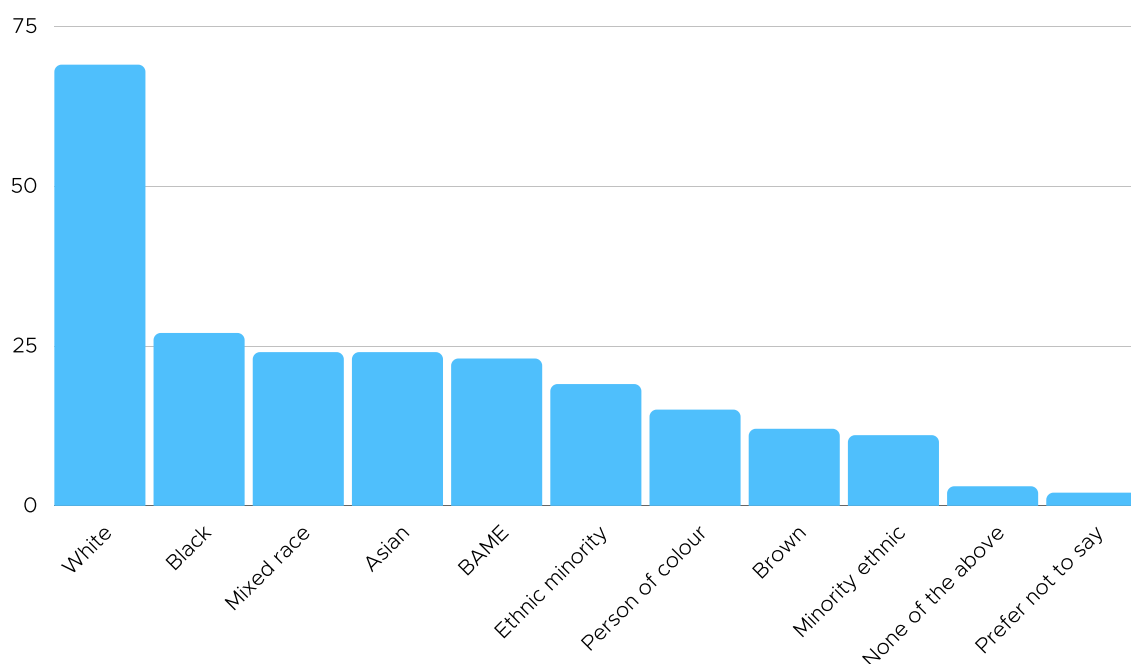
It should be noted that this sample is not representative of the UK population as a whole as reflective both of structural challenges related to representation in business and in particular in senior positions. Conclusions of this report relate directly to the sample surveyed and should be assessed with this representation in mind.



# Results

## Levels of discomfort using race related terms when talking about or to individuals in the workplace.

Which of these descriptors about race, if any, would you be comfortable using when talking about/to individuals in the workplace?



The research shows a high level of discomfort using specific descriptors other than 'White' when talking about or to individuals in the workplace. Only 27% of UK respondents felt comfortable using 'Black' as a descriptor in the workplace, while under a quarter (24%) felt comfortable with using the term 'Asian.' or 'Mixed Race'. This compares to 69% of people who were comfortable using the term 'White'.

There was even less comfort from respondents in using more general terms such as 'Ethnic Minority' (19%) and 'Person of Colour' (15%) when talking about or to individuals in the workplace.

Alongside a general discomfort in describing individuals via their racial identity, the responses also show uncertainty and inconsistency in the types of terms to use. 'White', 'Black', and 'Brown' for example are all similar denotations based on skin colour, but

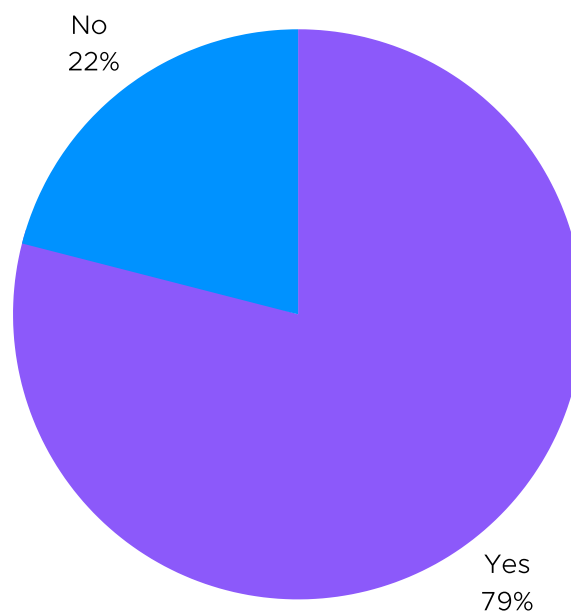
are not used with equal comfort with only 12% of respondents indicating they felt comfortable using 'Brown' compared to higher levels of comfort using 'Black' (27%) and 'White' (69%). It is possible that this is connected to how commonly these descriptors are used by others, with 'Black' and 'White' being much more widely used and commonly heard than 'Brown' in conversations regarding race.

When responses are broken down by ethnicity, it is interesting to note that those who are racially diverse do not necessarily have greater levels of comfort using these descriptors when compared to White respondents. This suggests that it is not just white employees who struggle and feel uncomfortable when talking about or to individuals of other races within the workplace but is a more general barrier for individuals at large.



## The use of the term BAME in the workplace.

Do you think BAME is an appropriate term to use in the workplace?

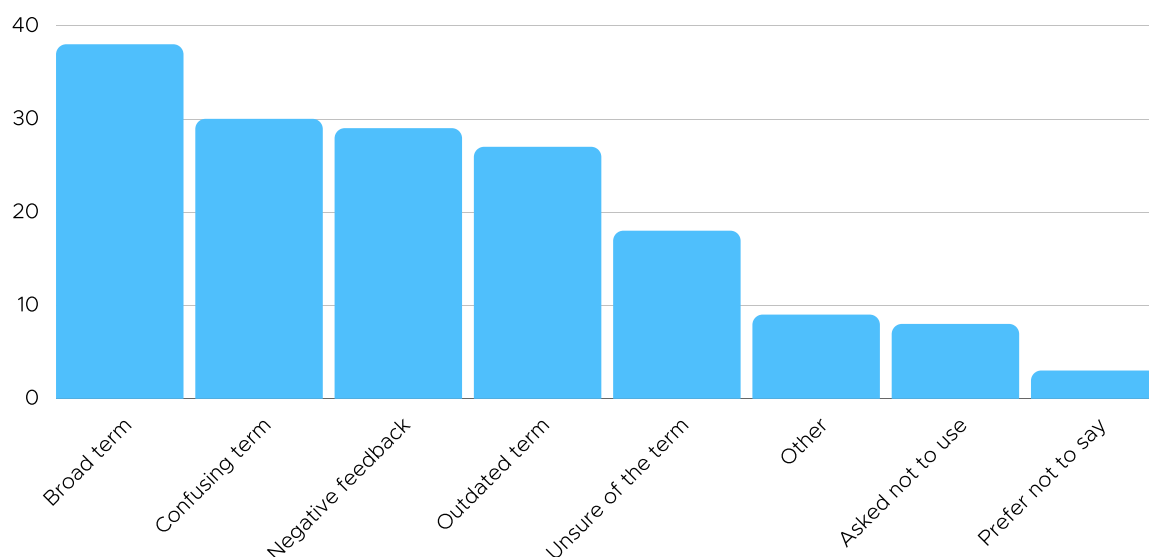


Despite lots of recent discussion on its appropriateness as a generic term, almost 4 in 5 (79%) of UK respondents think the term BAME is appropriate to use in the workplace.

The research also points to differences in opinions on BAME depending on both gender and age, with more male respondents (82%) stating that they think BAME is an appropriate term than female respondents (68%). Fewer respondents aged 18-24 consider the term to be an appropriate term compared to any other age group with respondents aged 35-44 most likely to consider BAME an appropriate term for use in the workplace.

Although a clear majority (79%) of UK respondents consider BAME an appropriate general term to use in the workplace it is interesting to compare this to US respondents and the use of 'People of Color (POC)' or 'BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and other People of Color)' as an equivalent term. 93% of US respondents consider POC and BIPOC as appropriate workplace term suggesting a greater comfort in the US with using a generic categorisation which covers multiple racial identities. However, it should be noted that the US survey sample was also far less diverse, with just 2% of respondents being persons of colour - making like for like comparisons difficult.

## Why do you think BAME is not an appropriate term to use in the workplace?



For those who stated that they don't think BAME is an appropriate term to use in the workplace, almost all respondents cited that the term is too broad (37%).

In addition, almost a third (32%) of all respondents said that they think the word is not appropriate because the term is confusing and almost 3/10 (29%) of respondents reported that they have heard negative feedback about it from others.

These findings suggest that both the generic and specific language used currently to discuss race is avoided or thought of as not appropriate due to the confusion surrounding or broad nature of their meanings. This does signal the importance of education with regard to which terms are and are not appropriate, while also indicating the necessity to alleviate confusion surrounding the existing language.

## The willingness to self-educate on the most appropriate language.

Over 8 in 10 (83%) respondents overall \*agree that they are educating themselves to understand the most appropriate language to use when talking about race or referring to different ethnicities. More US respondents agree that they are doing this than UK respondents (92% vs 75%). This suggests a general inclination towards learning and an understanding that knowing what the appropriate language is to use when discussing race is important. This also shows an apparent willingness to have these conversations, given the proportion of respondents who stated that they are actively educating themselves on the

topic. In fact, just 5% \*\*disagree that white people should educate themselves on what is the most appropriate language to use when talking about race or referring to different ethnicities.

Overall, just under two thirds (65%) of respondents agree that they change their natural choice of language when talking with people who are a different race to themselves. However, far more US respondents (85%) agree that they do this than UK respondents (44%).

\*Statistic obtained by combining "strongly agree" and "somewhat agree" responses.

\*\* Statistic obtained by combining "strongly disagree" and "somewhat disagree" responses.





**83%**

*respondents overall are educating themselves to understand the most appropriate language to use when talking about different ethnicities.*



**65%**

*respondents agree that they change their natural choice of language when talking with people who are a different race to themselves.*

## Opinions of race discrimination in the workplace.

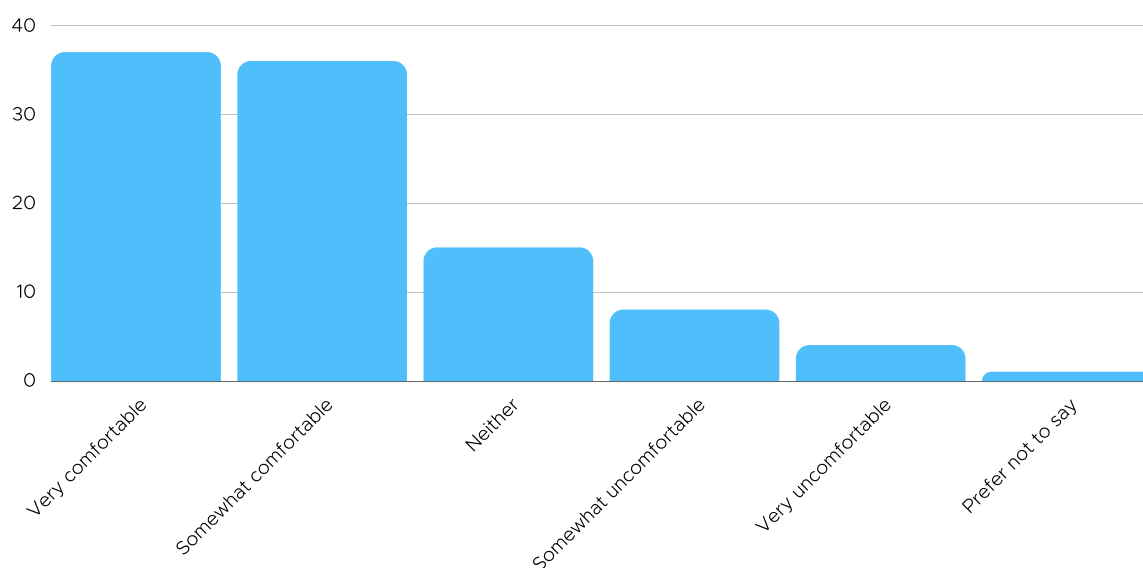
Three quarters (75%) of all respondents agree that non-white people face discrimination because of their race in the workplace. However, more US respondents (87%) \*agree that this is the case than UK respondents (62%). Again, it should be noted that the overwhelming majority of the US sample (98%) was white, thus this subject in particular requires further research to compare these geographies more accurately.

While these statistics suggest a general understanding that those who are racially diverse face discrimination in the workplace, a high number of respondents (63%) also agree that white people face discrimination because of their race in the workplace. Overall, male respondents (70%) are far more likely to hold this view than female respondents (41%). US respondents are also just over twice as likely to hold this view than UK respondents (85% vs. 42%).

\*Statistic obtained by combining "strongly agree" and "somewhat agree" responses.  
\*\* Statistic obtained by combining "strongly disagree" and "somewhat disagree" responses.

## Levels of comfort with talking about race within the workplace.

How comfortable or uncomfortable are you talking about issues of race within your workplace?



8 in 10 (83%) respondents are \*comfortable talking about issues of race within their workplace, with just under 1/10 respondents (8%) stating that they are \*\*uncomfortable. Upon breaking this down further, male respondents reported being more comfortable talking about these issues than female respondents (88% vs. 69%) and UK respondents aged between 35-44 are most comfortable talking about issues of race within their workplace (92%) compared to just 71% of respondents aged 18-24 who said the same.

Between the UK and US, UK respondents are slightly more uncomfortable talking about issues of race within their workplace than US respondents (12% vs. 4%) with white US respondents more \*comfortable talking about issues of race within their workplace than white (English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British) UK respondents (94% vs. 76%).



These results suggest that Americans are more comfortable having these conversations, and are doing so more commonly when compared to UK respondents. Underlying cultural factors may be impacting the level of conversation taking place openly. In the US, for example, with more publicity and events on the topic, conversations naturally stem from these more frequently as a result.

We often hear that conversations around race at work are challenging and often perceived as uncomfortable. The research validates this assertion and shines a light on some underlying reasons for this. Almost half (49%) of respondents who are uncomfortable talking about issues of race within their workplace state that this is because they are worried using incorrect or inappropriate language, with

female respondents (62%) more likely to be worried about using incorrect/inappropriate language than male respondents (42%). This indicates that a common reason for being uncomfortable talking about issues of race is that people are unsure about the language, and the fear of offending others or being inappropriate. This is also evidenced by the 44% of respondents who stated that they are uncomfortable talking about issues of race within the workplace because they fear causing offence.

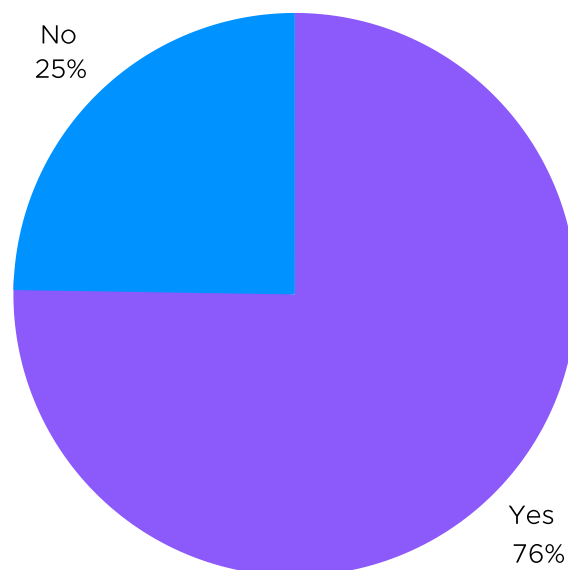
It's worth noting that 4 in 10 (40%) of those surveyed stated that they do not think race and racism should be discussed in the workplace at all, with 18% stating that they are uncomfortable because they do not think racism exists in the workplace.

\*Statistic obtained by combining "very comfortable" and "somewhat comfortable" responses.  
\*\* Statistic obtained by combining "very uncomfortable" and "somewhat uncomfortable" responses.



## Conversations about race in the workplace.

Have you ever had a conversation in the workplace that is explicitly centred around race or racism?



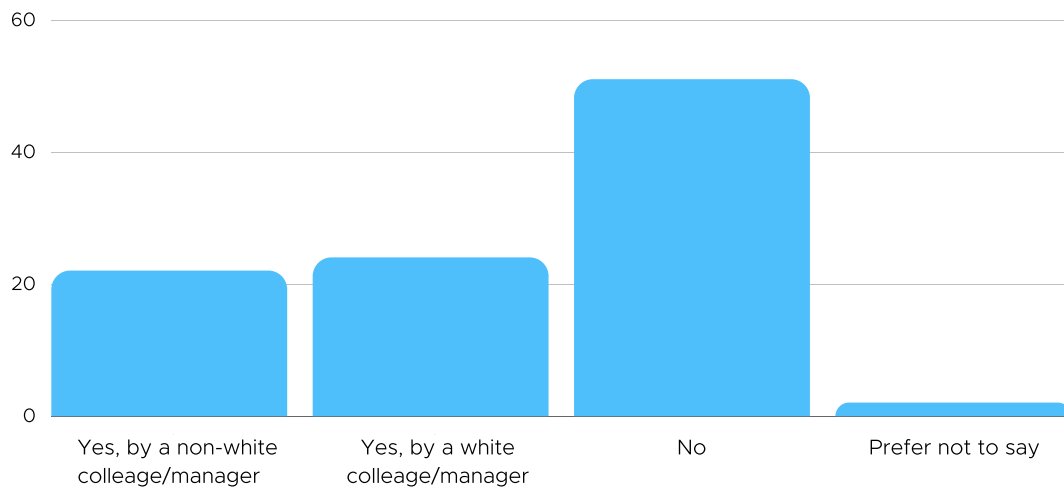
Over three quarters (76%) of all respondents said that they have had a conversation in the workplace that is explicitly centred around race or racism, with more US respondents stating that they have had this type of conversation than UK respondents (85% vs 66%). This suggests that conversations about race are indeed happening in the workplace and that there are opportunities to create spaces for these conversations that include everyone.

In the UK, over 7 in 10 (71%) Black – African and over 9 in 10 (91%) Black – Caribbean respondents said that they have had a

conversation in the workplace that is explicitly centred around race or racism. This indicates that Black respondents are more likely than white respondents to have had conversations about race.

When compared to other industries, the Education industry (53%) and the Manufacturing & Utilities industry (55%) had the fewest number of respondents overall who said that they have had a conversation in the workplace that is explicitly centred around race or racism.

Have you ever been criticised for using the wrong language when talking about different races in the workplace?



Overall, more respondents have been corrected or criticised for using the wrong language when talking about different races in the workplace by a white colleague/manager

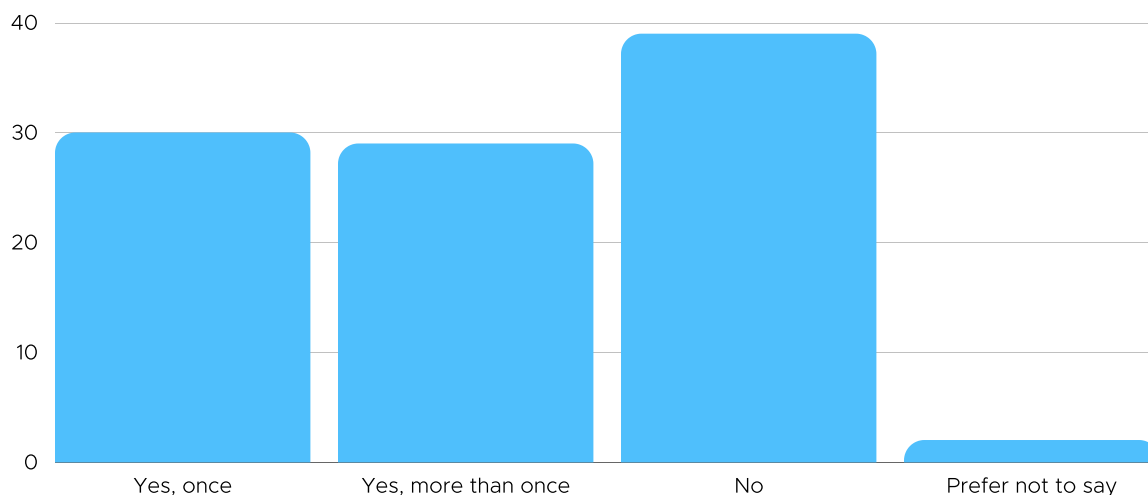
than by a non-white colleague/manager (39% vs. 25%) which could indicate allyship, or a heightened sensitivity amongst white employees to discussions concerning race.





## Racism in the workplace.

Have you witnessed any instances of racism take place in the workplace over the last 3 years?

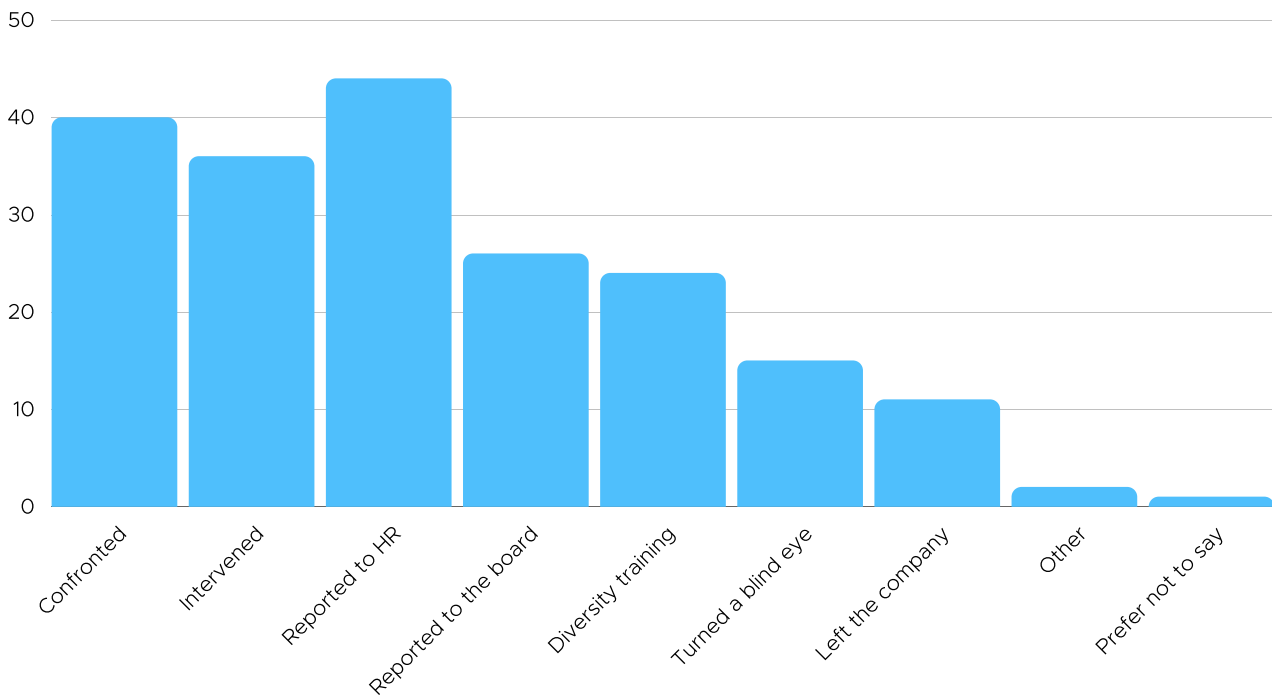


This research strongly suggests that racism exists, and is common, in the workplace – recognised by both white employees and racially diverse employees alike. Over 7 in 10 (72%) respondents stated that they have witnessed one, or more than one instance of racism\* in the workplace over the last 3 years. Instances of racism in the workplace appear to be more commonly witnessed in the US than in the UK, with 85% of US respondents said that they have witnessed one, or more than one instance of racism take place in the workplace over the last 3 years, compared to 59% of UK respondents who said the same.

The results suggest a potential difference in awareness of racism or perception of what constitutes racism. Diving more deeply into this finding, we find that age may be a determining factor of how likely an individual is to have witnessed discrimination. Only a third (33%) of respondents aged 55+ have witnessed one, or more than one instance of racism take place in the workplace over the last 3 years. This contrasts to 81% of respondents aged 35-44 who said the same.

\*Statistic obtained by combining “yes, once” and “yes, more than once” responses.

If you have witnessed an instance of racism take place in the workplace over the last 3 years, what did you do?



Overall, under half (45%) of respondents who have witnessed an instance of racism take place in the workplace over the last 3 years confronted the person. This indicates that racism in the workplace is often not being directly confronted. Supporting this assertion, just over a fifth (21%) of all respondents

explicitly said that they turned a blind eye when they witnessed an instance of racism take place in the workplace. This reaction was more common among male respondents (24%) than female respondents (13%). It was also more common among US respondents (26%) than UK respondents (15%).



# 76%

*respondents said that they have had a conversation in the workplace that is explicitly centred around race or racism.*



# 45%

*respondents who have witnessed an instance of racism take place in the workplace over the last 3 years confronted the person.*

# Conclusion

## Conclusion

It is clear from this report that there are several underlying factors that can deter employees from having meaningful conversations about race in the workplace. The level of discomfort, fear, knowledge of appropriate language and confronting instances of racism in the workplace can vary depending on age, gender, and industry.

Firstly, it is promising to see that employees are largely having, or have had, conversations in the workplace centred around racism and businesses should capitalise on this momentum to drive change. At a time when social justice movements, such as Black Lives Matter, are galvanising people to have difficult conversations and take much-needed action, this report indicates that employees are willing to learn and do understand the importance of having conversations about race in the workplace but lack the tools to do so.

Therefore, in the first instance, businesses must work to eradicate fear in order to equip employees to have conversations about race confidently and comfortably. A common answer in relation to discomfort describing individuals via their racial identity, for instance, was a fear or worry of offending through the use of incorrect/inappropriate language. Other reasons given for discomfort was that terms are too broad, confusing or are attached to perceived negative feedback, thus businesses

should take this as an opportunity to drive education on this topic for their employees. By introducing digital training sessions and creating safe spaces for conversations, employees can speak freely, without fear of judgement and in an environment of learning.

Secondly, this report strongly indicates that racism does exist in the workplace. It's of further concern that a high proportion of those surveyed admitted to not confronting the person when they witnessed racism. One reason for the lack of confrontation could be due to not knowing how to correctly intervene, which aligns with discomfort surrounding conversations due to a lack of knowledge and fear on the subject. In this case businesses should look to implement trainings, leadership initiatives and have a clear framework in place that is regularly signposted for employees so instances of racism can be effectively and appropriately dealt with.

It is vital that businesses become active in their advocacy in order to dismantle systemic racism within the workplace. The first step is being able to have confident conversations about race that will lead to tangible long-term change. If the language to speak about the issue remains confusing and employees don't feel equipped to discuss race, then the fear that exists in having them will prevent positive change.



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