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I Choose You, or Maybe You: Understanding the Prism of Intersectionality Using Reality Dating Television Shows

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I Choose You, or Maybe You: Understanding the Prism of Intersectionality Using Reality Dating Television Shows

Introduction and Rationale

Intersectionality is a Black feminist theoretical perspective that calls for a particular focus on the multiple and complex identities housed within single bodies and the ways in which we evaluate, interpolate, and embrace identity as plural, fluid, and difficult to define (Crenshaw, 1989; Nielsen, 2011). A term coined by Crenshaw (1989), Intersectionality theory argues that our identities are comprised of intersecting social positions such as race, sexuality, gender, class, religion, and ability. Intersectionality has two core projects: the inclusionary project designed to remedy specific instances of intersectional stigma or invisibility, and the analytical project designed to reshape how categories of difference are conceptually related to each other (Hancock, 2016). This teaching activity is primarily concerned with the second project, and adopts an understanding of identity where analytical categories like race, class, nationality, gender, and so on are fundamentally shaped by another. This activity serves as an entrance point for students to flesh out the complexities of identities and representation, and allows me to facilitate my student's process of witnessing how mediated representations inform ways of understanding intersectional identities.

To bridge the gap between theory and analysis, this activity grounds mediated popular culture as a site of public pedagogy (Giroux, 2000). Public pedagogy "refers to the education provided by popular culture; popular culture teaches audiences and participants through the ways it represents people and issues and the kinds of discourses it creates and disseminates" (Sandlin, 2007, p. 76). Because mediated representations serve as the largest purveyor of popular culture, this activity asks students to analyze reality television dating shows to witness how mediated constructions of romantic love and attraction work to complicate our understandings of romantic love, attraction, and intersectional identity. Depending on the course focus, this activity can be used to further discussions surrounding a wide range of topics: gendered language, gendered performances, dating, romance, hookup culture, gender and sexuality as social constructions, gender binaries (and pressures associated with it), and stereotypes.

Learning Objectives

The aims of this class activity are to (1) illustrate the basic concepts and properties of Intersectionality theory; (2) further student understanding of intersectional identity through an analysis of reality dating television shows by applying themes of romance and attraction to the construction of intersectional identity; and (3) critically consider the implications of witnessing mediated representations of identity using conceptions of romantic love and attraction.

Activity

This activity is appropriate for any interdisciplinary course that includes topics or modules on intersectional identity, mediated representations, or mass communication. This assignment was originally developed for a lower-level Mass Media and Society communication course of 24-32 students, but could be easily adapted by size and class level. Depending on time allotted for class discussion and group discussion, the exercise requires a minimum of 75

minutes of instructional time, although I typically divide the activity across three 110-minute class sessions.

In planning for the activity, it is important for students to have a foundational understanding of intersectional theory. While the activity may be enhanced with any number of out-of-class readings, in-depth background knowledge of Intersectionality is not a precondition for meaningful engagement or conversation. Instructors should, however, be well acquainted with Intersectionality theory and prepared to summarize the theory through a short lecture or facilitated discussion.

Once students are acquainted with Intersectionality, a jigsaw grouping technique is utilized to divide the class into smaller “expert” groups of four to six students. The jigsaw method involves a dissection of material whereby learning groups are assigned specific portions of content, followed by a collaborative pooling of information wherein group members serve as learning resources for other groups (Aronson & Patnoe, 2011). Each group is assigned a reality television dating show to analyze by way of a trailer or commercial and a few instructor led comments regarding the show. The television shows I chose represented a wide spectrum of intersectional identities, ranging from class, race, religion, sexual orientation, and gender performance.

Here is a sample of reality television dating shows I have assigned to groups in class:

1. *The Bachelor (ABC)*
2. *The Bachelorette (ABC)*
3. *Love Island (Netflix)*
4. *Ready to Love (O Network)*
5. *Love is Blind (Netflix)*
6. *Dating Around (Netflix)*
7. *Love on the Spectrum (Netflix)*
8. *Bachelor in Paradise (ABC)*
9. *Sexy Beasts (Netflix)*
10. *Married at First Sight (Lifetime)*

Each expert team is assigned two episodes of the most current season of their television dating show to watch. While watching their designated show, students are encouraged to look for manifestations of their understanding of intersectionality and mediated representations. Each team is given analytical prompts to direct their viewing and analysis of their show. Example prompts include: What aspects of identity are discussed and expressed by participants? How is identity presented by the participants on the show? What aspects of identity are not discussed? Are certain constructions of identity prominent in the participants’ narratives? How do the participants discuss romance and attraction via identity?

During the following class, the teams reconvene and meet with each other to discuss the observations they made from their dating show connected to the analytical prompts provided in the prior class. In addition, I ask them to identify moments in the show that visually represent what they observe. The students discuss the themes and moments they observed in common and discuss their individual observations. I ask each group to select moments from their designated

shows to share as exemplars. Once each expert team has “mastered” their show and analysis, teams work jointly to formulate more concrete responses to the prompts and prepare a 10-12-minute group presentation. Each group shares their selected media moments, observations, and theoretical connections.

Debriefing

Learners debrief through a full class discussion focusing on examples, theory, observations, and questions from the reality television dating shows. The following questions may be used to encourage critical reflection on the activity:

1. How do the reality dating shows position the audience as witness to frame an understanding of romantic attraction and identity?
2. How are the mediated representations in the dating shows connected to dominant narratives of identity (i.e., race, gender, class)?
3. What representations of identity are challenged in the media moments analyzed?
4. What examples of Intersectionality theory are in the show?
5. Overall, what are the implications of our observations? Why do these representations of identity and romance matter?

In lieu of whole-class discussion, students could also provide individual responses to these questions through a brief in-class write-up or lengthier take-home assignment requiring a synthesis of this information and furthering critical reflection on Intersectionality theory, the construction of attraction, desire, and romantic love.

Appraisal

The activity offers students an interesting and engaging way of applying Intersectionality theory to mediated presentations. Students’ reactions to the activity have been exceedingly positive, with many expressing a deeper and more profound understanding of the construction of mediated representation and the articulation of identity in popular culture. Feedback frequently suggests that students appreciate the straightforwardness of the activity, have an increased motivation to learn due to peer interaction, and value the way the exercise engages them in active, cooperative learning. Students have also been generally enthusiastic about the reality dating shows selected for the activity.

As discussed previously, the activity can be modified in several ways to suit the specific learning and pedagogical interests of students and instructors. While the activity was initially designed for a lower-level course, contingent on class size and learning outcomes, students may be asked to watch the reality dating television shows independently, focusing more closely on a specific presentation of identity (i.e., race, gender, class, sexuality). More advanced classes may

be required to complete a textual analysis essay of their show using Intersectionality as their theoretical lens. If time is limited, instructors may require teams to meet outside of class to discuss their observations and analysis as a group. For online courses or classroom situations mediated by videoconferencing platforms, similar learning outcomes can be achieved through the strategic use of virtual student groups, live breakout sessions, or discussion boards.

Lastly, this activity offers a pedagogical tool for reflective communicative practice. For communication courses, the opportunity for students to engage directly in group activity to make sense of theory and representation makes the process of “interacting” an overt object of consideration. It may be possible, for instance, for students to contemplate explicitly how effectively their groups integrated perspectives, utilized theory, stayed on task, and interpreted information. If used as a type of formative assessment, the activity might offer educators important feedback about students’ abilities to retain and implement “what they’re learning” in the course—that is, procedural knowledge associated with competent communication skills.

Overall, this activity has come with great success and offered a lively discussion about identity, mediated representations, and the ways in which reality dating television shows promote constructions and performances of identity, all while encouraging students to reflect on their own identity performances in a meaningful and relevant way.

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