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Critical Mirrors: Diverse College Students' Perspectives on Stereotypes Depicted in Popular Films About College Life

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored diverse college students' perspectives on the portrayal of college life in recent popular films. Results from this study suggest that White college students dismiss stereotypes as comedic satire whereas their non-White peers readily identify the influence of negative media representations upon their academic and ethnic identities. These findings exemplify the need to promote positive representations of college students from racially and culturally diverse backgrounds. Findings suggest the need for Critical Media Literacy education to help young adults dismantle stereotypes in mainstream society while developing cultural competence.

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Critical Mirrors: Racial Stereotypes in Popular Film and Media about Attending College and Its Influence on College Student Perceptions of Ethnic and Academic Identity

Since the election of the United States' first Black president in 2008, some have described American society as "postracial" (Dawson & Bobo, 2009), which alludes to a society in which race-related issues are no longer a chief concern (Holmes, 2015). However, scholars such as Dr. Michael Eric Dyson combat claims of living in a postracial American society because of contemporary race related-issues across the nation (Bacon, 2014). Nevertheless, Millennials are prone to believing that society is indeed postracial (Johnston, 2014). Perhaps this is because college students today are more racially and ethnically diverse than previous generations (The Council of Economic Advisers, 2014) and more likely to embrace diversity (Johnston, 2014). Amid an increasingly diverse student body, higher education institutions are striving to foster a campus climate supportive of minorities (Caparoso & Collins, 2015). While colleges and universities are making an effort to adapt to the United States' growing racial and ethnic diversity, popular television and film have largely failed to do so.

The U.S. and its youth are becoming increasingly diverse yet popular television and film do not reflect such racial and ethnic diversity. A 2015 report revealed that racial and ethnic minorities were grossly underrepresented in both film and television despite constituting over half of the frequent moviegoer population (Hunt & Ramon, 2015). Even when non-White characters are present on the screen their portrayal may lead to the formation of stereotypes, particularly when the audience's experience with the depicted group(s) has been limited (Lee, Bichard, Irey, Walt, & Carlson, 2009). Prejudice is both normalized and reified through stereotypical portrayals of racial and ethnic minorities in the media (Hunt & Ramon, 2015). Comedies or sitcoms, in particular, often use humor based upon racial, ethnic, and gender-related

stereotypes (Caparoso & Collins, 2015). In a study of college students' perceptions of stereotype-based humor, Caparoso & Collins (2015) found that derogatory attributes of 'dark skin' (p. 210) racial and ethnic groups such as Blacks and Latinos were perpetuated. These findings are corroborated by a study conducted by Lee et al. (2009), which found that heavy viewers of television held more positive views of Whites than other ethnic groups. The aim of this study is to explore stereotyped-based humor depicted in recent popular films about college life. After providing a review of the literature, a discussion of the methodology used, findings, and implications are provided.

Review of Literature

Literacy Research

A common assertion is that TV and film are "just entertainment" and "too much is being read into" them, Tosi (2011) and other scholars argue that media industries spend and make billions of dollars a year; as such, there is a "great amount of attention paid to what viewers see and hear through media." Tosi (2011, p. 14) adds:

> But, more importantly, media reflects ideas and values about life and society, and if we see one group represented in limited ways, over time, society tends to accept those representations as truth. Hence, the need to critically examine media.

Qualitative research is often used to closely examine young people's responses to media. Childs (2014) explored social studies educators' integration of popular culture into their curriculum to unpack racial stereotypes in American society. Chung (2007) explored issues of sexism in hip-hop music videos and proposed ways to engage high school students in deconstructing their popular visual culture. Moody and Scott (2015) examined how rap lyrics influenced college students' perceptions about African American women and notions of independence. Findings from this study suggest that misogynistic lyrics and false claims of feminism contributed to

Millennials' perceptions of financial independence and reliance on family. Implications from this study support developing critical media skills for younger audiences to enable them to deconstruct media messages.

Kavoori (2007) engaged college students in challenging stereotypical media depictions of African Americans through various activities in a college-level media literacy course. Findings indicated that students became critically aware of the role of media in perpetuating racial stereotypes about African Americans and the potential influence of commercial media. In creating their own media products, however, participants relied on stereotypical portrayals of African Americans under the assumption that audiences would read their productions as satire (Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2015).

Ramasubramanian (2007) examined the effects of two strategies for reducing stereotype accessibility: (1) an audience-centered approach that explicitly instructs audiences to be critical media consumers and (2) a message-centered approach using stereotype-disconfirming, counter-stereotypical news stories. Participants viewed either a literacy or control video before reading stereotypical or counter-stereotypical news stories about African Americans or Southeast Asians. Findings indicated that a combination of audience-centered and message-centered approaches might reduce racial stereotypes activated by news stories.

Notions of Power

Scholars often use a meta-theoretical approach to media study that combines critical social theory, literacy research, communications studies and cultural analysis to tackle media messages. Media scholars may focus on the production and reproduction of stereotypes through media whereas educators might focus on literacy and curriculum development. The concept of ideology is important because dominant ideologies serve to reproduce dominate and subordinate

social relations. Ideologies of gender might promote sexist representations of women while ideologies of race often perpetuate discriminatory representations of people of color (Kellner, 1995).

As such, it is important for critical studies to focus on how the media support and reproduce dominant ideologies about difference and culture. Scholars using this model often encourage educators to focus their curricula on the relationship between media, government, ownership and the rhetorical and production techniques employed by media makers. Gramsci's (1971) notion of hegemony can serve as a lens for deconstructing mass media messages. Hegemony does not refer to a deceitful plan crafted purposefully by those in power to manipulate the system to serve dominant interests but it is "manufactured consent" (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Hegemony aims at building consensus among the masses that a certain ideology is normal and that any contradictions to it are deviant (Gramsci, 1971). Gitlin (1980) explicated that those in power do not directly maintain the status quo: "The task is left to writers, journalists, producers and teachers, bureaucrats and artists organized within the cultural apparatus as a whole" (p. 254).

Consent is evident in the normalization of stereotypical, one-dimensional representations that under other circumstances would be inappropriate. Examples include institutions such as religion, education, and the mass media that serve to inspire consenting to the dominant order. Media play a crucial hegemonic role in justifying the status quo and perpetuating the ideology of the natural and rightful superiority of political, social, and cultural elites over subordinated groups (Hall, 1973; Lull, 1995). One particularly effective strategy that reinforces the myths of the deviance and inferiority of oppressed groups is the use of media stereotypes.

Stereotypes

Other methods put race and gender-related concerns at the center of analysis and highlight notions of power in different ways. According to Orbe (1998), an embedded social hierarchy exists that privileges some groups above others; these privileged groups establish means of communication. While early theorists emphasized the commonality between women as an oppressed group, they tended to neglect profound differences between women regarding class, age, sexuality, religion, and race. For instance, women of color experience sexism in the context of racism. Intersectionality emphasizes that women do not experience discrimination solely based upon gender but also due to age, ethnicity, class, and sexuality (hooks, 1992; Collins, 2000; Conrad, Dixon, and Yuanyuan, 2007; Krohn & Suazo, 1995; Ludvig, 2006).

Gendered and racialized stereotypes are of concern because they can lead to prejudices that represent gendered racism (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, & Browne Huntt, 2013). Black women have been stereotyped as strong, hardworking, dominant, welfare queens, who are often sexually promiscuous. These stereotypes contrast to those of White women, who are stereotyped as good, ladylike, and proper (Collins 2000; Jordan-Zachery 2009). Similarly, stereotypes of Black men persist. Nineteenth century literature and theater, particularly minstrel shows, helped to formulate stereotypes of Black men as lazy, shiftless, and not very bright. Stereotypes of Black men shifted in the 1980s and 1990s to characterizations as drug lords, crack victims, the underclass, the homeless, and subway muggers (Drummond, 1990). Entman (2000) found that African Americans were more likely to emerge as perpetrators in drug and violent crime stories on network news.

Stereotypes can be especially detrimental because the media helps citizens make sense of the world around them, especially people of different backgrounds. Media-focused studies are particularly relevant with the advent of social media and digital technology, which enable

individuals to watch older media on demand. Sun, Liberman, Butler, Lee & Webb (2015) comment on the importance of media literacy curriculum and developing production skills, "Only then can students not only know how to "read" the underlying meanings of media images and the conditions of why and how they are produced but also how to "write" new and alternative texts."

<center>Theoretical Framework</center>

This study aims to examine the perceptions held by racially and ethnically diverse undergraduate students on media stereotypes of race and college attendance. This study was theoretically analyzed through the lens of Critical Media Literacy. Critical Media Literacy aims to not only expound the notion of literacy across various forms of media but also to deepen the potential of literacy education to critically analyze the relationships between media and audiences, information and power (Kellner & Share, 2007). Using an intersectional approach to cultural studies, critical pedagogy, and the traditional tenets of media literacy, Critical Media Literacy examines issues of gender, race, class, and power to challenge media messaging that funnels mainstream perspectives.

Kellner and Share (2007) provide rationale for Critical Media Literacy:

…new information communication technologies and a market-based media culture have fragmented, connected, converged, diversified, homogenized, flattened, broadened, and reshaped the world. These changes have been reframing the way people think and restructuring societies at local and global levels. (pp. 1-2)

Critical Media Literacy to helping audiences to navigate and mitigate new modes of communication and popular culture in order to critically analyze and process a message's positioning within social, cultural, economic, historic, political, and global contexts (Kellner & Share, 2007). Through Critical Media Literacy, the use and practice of techniques empower

young adults to create their own messages that can challenge media texts narratives of college students, in particular.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore diverse college students' perceptions of stereotypes in contemporary popular films featuring diverse college students as characters. As previously mentioned, popular films often fail to reflect the U.S.' racial and ethnic diversity. This study was designed to explore audience perceptions of popular films that reflect America's increasing diversity yet rely upon stereotype-based humor. Stereotypes are potentially dangerous as individuals may use them to form their opinions of others (Domke, Garland, Billeaudeaux, & Hutcheson, 2003), though they are often used for comedic effect. Through this study, the researchers sought to answer several research questions:

(1) How do media stereotypes influence generalized perceptions about college students?

(2) How do diverse college students perceive media portrayals of racially/ethnically-based stereotypes?

(3) How do diverse college students perceive media portrayals of gender-based stereotypes?

(4) How do stereotypes perpetuated through popular films influence a student's cultural and academic identity?

Students enrolled in two sections of the same course, pulled from a variety of majors and classifications, were invited to participate in this qualitative study. Participants were diverse in terms of gender and race/ethnicity (56% White, 21% Black, and 21% Latino) though the site of this study was a private, predominantly White university. Scenes from two recent popular films, *22 Jump Street* (2014) and *Pitch Perfect 2* (2015), were selected as most participants previously

watched both films. This further enabled them to focus on analyzing the selected scenes. Both films are comedies, which as previously stated, often incorporate stereotyped-based humor. Multiple sources of data were collected including surveys, focus group sessions, and blog posts.

Prior to the first film screening, a pre-survey was administered to study participants in order to collect demographic information from them (i.e. race/ethnicity, classification, major, etc.) in addition to their initial understandings and perceptions of media. The first focus group session occurred in class immediately following the screening of the first film, *22 Jump Street* (2014). Study participants were given an opportunity to respond to the film in a more discrete manner through a blog post, which they completed independently outside of class. Scenes from the second film, *Pitch Perfect 2* (2015) were shown, and the second focus group session was held in class immediately following this screening. Again, participants were given time to share their unique personal responses to the film via second blog post. Finally, a post-survey containing the same survey was administered to the participants to help the researchers more readily identify growth in the participants' knowledge of media and principles of media literacy. Key findings are discussed below.

<div align="center">Findings</div>

Four major themes emerged through data analysis. First, racial/ethnic minorities were seemingly more adept at recognizing racially-based stereotypes present in both films, which led to vocalizations on the need for cultural competence. Second, study participants as a whole disagreed with the accuracy of the portrayal of college students in both films; however, they expressed the potential influence of these inaccurate portrayals on the audience, even over themselves as current college students. Third, study participants' awareness of bias in the media grew, and students expressed a need for media literacy. Finally, study participants were more

appreciative of stereotype-based humor when it satirized stereotypes as opposed to blatantly portrayed stereotypes.

Theme 1: Racial/ethnic minorities more adept at recognizing racially-based stereotypes

Overall, study participants were not forthright in stating their recognition of racially-based stereotypes in either film. However, racial/ethnic minority participants were more vocal in regards to their recognition of racially-based stereotypes in both films. One scene from *22 Jump Street* (2014), in particular, exemplifies the recognition of racially-based stereotypes by racial/ethnic minority participants and reluctance of White participants to acknowledge the presence of this form of stereotype-based humor. In the scene, Captain Dickson (Black male) becomes infuriated when he finds out that his subordinate, Schmidt (White male), has been engaging in casual sex with his daughter. Captain Dickson causes a scene during a parents' weekend breakfast by yelling, cursing, and throwing food. In the focus group session, a Black female participant remarked, "he (Captain Dickson) was kind of like loud and aggressive whereas Schmidt's parents were very mild and passive...I guess that could be a racial thing. I guess saying that black people are more loud and…aggressive." Though a Black male student seemingly agreed with her comment by adding that Black males are often stereotyped as "boisterous," White participants quickly dismissed the assertion that this scene involved a racially-based stereotype. One White female student countered, "I don't think it has to do anything with race at all. I think it's just a dad being protective of his daughter." This assertion was echoed in blog posts following the focus group as one participant wrote,

> Some stereotypes were stretched. For example, in the scene where the dad overreacts and is very angry about his worker dating his daughter. Some people were saying that the movie was representing how African Americans get more angry. I don't think this is true and the movie was only being comical and creating the point of how overprotective fathers can be...I don't think Ice Cube was being "Black" but more so just a dad.

The recognition of racially and ethnically based stereotypes by non-Whites and seemingly lack of recognition by Whites is expected. As Entman and Rojecki (2001) posit, Blacks are portrayed in popular films as using more profanity, being more physically violent, and having less self-control than White characters. Whereas mainstream consumers may negate this as a stereotype because they can relate to reasons or rationale for becoming angry, they are less conscious about how being "angry" and "Black" are two characteristics that often typify men and women in popular culture and media.

While discussing *Pitch Perfect 2* (2015), Black and Latino participants again voiced their recognition of racially-based stereotypes. A blog post from one participant read,

> The way Hispanics were presented in this movie was awful. They are portrayed as poor, uneducated people who are always dealing with a crisis -- while the movie tries to make fun of them. It desensitizes that bad things do happen.

As with *22 Jump Street* (2014), some White participants failed to recognize the gravity of racially and ethnically based stereotypes in popular films. For example, a White male participant wrote:

> The Hispanic woman was very strongly stereotyped, however, the audience should know that we do not pick on them specifically. We joke about everything and everyone and it is a comedy. Its also a satire so it exaggerates modern day social issues.

The sentiment shared by this participant is surprising, particularly because during the preceding focus group session several Black students expressed the hurtful manner in which they too had been stereotyped while in college. For example, during the *Pitch Perfect 2* (2015) focus group discussion a Black male participant expressed,

> Anytime like a racist joke is brought up or a gender joke or a sexual orientation joke is brought up...especially like whenever somebody brings up my race or like stereotypical African-American features that I may possess or may not possess 'cause you know, they don't really know me, they just assume based off of my race and the things that they assume about my race, they just say things. I have to explain to them, 'No, that's not the case. Could you not say that anymore, or don't say things like that around me or about

me?' And they're like, 'Why?' And in my head, it's just like, 'Why do I have to explain why to you? If I feel uncomfortable with you sayin' something to me, if you don't want a retaliation.' Because people like to say things to you and want you to be like, 'Aw, it's good. It's fine. Your feelings aren't hurt. You don't care.' You know, especially when you're a guy. The stereotype is that guys aren't supposed to care about anything and so it's like yeah, it like creates a fire inside you like it hurts when people tell you things like that and then you have to explain to them, 'Oh yes, this did hurt me because you shouldn't be saying that's like that. That's offensive to me,' and having to explain to someone why it's stereotypical.

The preceding comment led to several non-White students expressing their willingness to build

the cultural competence of their peers in an effort to mitigate racial/ethnic-based stereotypes. A

Black female participant shared:

A lot of times I'm okay with explaining because at the same time, you can't expect people to know. Like if you don't know, you just don't know, and I'm here to let you know and like educate you on it...This is why this is offensive to me. This is why this matters.' Because some of it is just not, you know, extreme to where people are just saying really derogatory things...people will ask me if I play sports. Like as if that's the reason why I'm at (institution) or something like that. Yeah, it's kind of like 'mmm...' but at the same time, I can't get really that mad. I'll just say, "No. I am on an academic scholarship...' and kinda just make them understand like why. And that's cool of me as long as you're receptive of it and like willing to learn and like willing to grow from that experience because I think that's how we become culturally competent as people.

Similarly, a Latina participant echoed this sentiment by remarking that she often has to educate

people that Latinas have an array of physical characteristics; for example, this particular Latina

participant has blue eyes and is frequently assumed to be White.

Theme 2: Participants found media portrayal of college students inaccurate

Eighty-five percent of our study participants expressed the belief that films often portray

college students in a negative light; however, students also expressed the potentially powerful

influence of media portrayals. Partying, engaging in casual sex, being irresponsible, and abusing

both legal and illegal substances were some of the negative characteristics identified by study

participants frequently portrayed in films about college life. Participants expressed that their

personal collegiate experiences involve balancing schoolwork, work, and having a social life.

During a focus group session, one participant commented:

> I think that it's kind of funny just seeing how these movies are portraying college students, but they don't show the stresses of studies. That's kind of like why people are in school, but they focus more on, you know, being accepted...or winning a competition that's not gonna be ideal for their future.

Participants voiced that college students are often stereotyped based upon their race and ethnicity. A female participant wrote that popular films portray college students as "White and rich (whereas) minorities are in college because of scholarships only." According to one participant, however, both films mirrored the institution at which this study was conducted as this participant remarked, "The student population in many of these films are White and wealthy students which is highly similar to (institution). Minorities, especially Latino and Black are never portrayed as the stars." Similarly, a non-White participant stated, "Being African American at a PWI (predominantly white institution), many people think I am only here to play sports not that I got here on based on my academics."

Yet non-Whites are not the only ones to express being stereotyped in terms of their race/ethnicity. A White male participant wrote, "People assume because I'm a white male at (institution) that I'm rich…far from the truth" Similarly, a White female participant expressed, "I'm usually stereotyped into a spoiled white girl who is incompetent and only interested in superficial (expletive)." Nevertheless, participants recognized the potential influence of media messages even when they deem them to be inaccurate. For example, one participant wrote:

> *22 Jump Street* portrays many of the students drinking and taking drugs, with their schoolwork taking a backseat. I don't usually consider myself to be a typical college student, i.e. a person who is interested in drugs and alcohol, so movies still influence my views of college students, even though I am a college student.

As study participants recognized the inaccuracy yet potential power of the media, they also expressed a need for engaging in media literacy.

Theme 3: Participants' awareness of media bias grew resulting in an expressed need for media literacy

Overall participants acknowledged the influence of media in their lives. One participant wrote via blog post, "I have been surrounded and shaped by media my whole life. It has influenced me in innumerable ways." Another student admitted, "I have found myself judging many ethnicities by their stereotypes in popular media." One student reflected on media portrayal of race and ethnicity by sharing:

> Somebody in class mentioned that usually in films, only Caucasian and African American races are represented. I agree with this and definitely think that other races are misidentified and underrepresented. Even African Americans aren't seen as often. Thus, for the most part I don't think films impact my thoughts on races other than Caucasians and African Americans.

Though our pre-survey revealed that 96% of study participants believed that media bias exists, this figure increased to 100% on the post-survey, which lead to their realization of the need for media literacy. Study participants identified promoting an agenda and misrepresenting reality as two factors contributing to media bias. During one focus group session, the researchers asked the participants whether they believed that popular films contribute to cultural competence or exacerbate the need to develop it. One participant responded:

> I think it will only help you if you watch it in the sense of how we're watching it--where we take time to discuss the movie and the flaws that we see in it. Like we're recognizing the satire and we're talking about how it would make us feel in real life if it actually happened to us. But besides that, if we all just sat here and just watched the whole movie and just watched it to watch it, we'd probably just laugh and not think too much about it anyway.

Another student shared a similar sentiment by expressing, "The film is funny just watching it with a friend. Upon analysis, however, the film loses its commercial effect." In this way, students remarked that perhaps the explicit nature of demonstrating stereotypes was intentional for film creators and producers. While many found this to be a humorous aspect of the film, some

recognized the potential of reifying stereotypes for various racial/ethnic college student groups. Thus the need for media literacy education for people of all ages was exemplified.

Theme 4: Participants were more appreciative of "satirized" stereotype-based humor

Study participants voiced their recognition of stereotyped-based humor in both films. As previously mentioned, participants stated that the films falsely depicted college life. However, most agreed that *22 Jump Street* (2014) was a favorable film amongst current college students because of it's seemingly purposeful stereotypes in order to master comedic satire. For example, participants claimed that the film "reversed" gender-based stereotypes. In one scene, for instance, the lead female character was nonchalant after a one-night stand, which study participants attributed to a stereotypically male role. One participant expressed this sentiment during a focus group session by stating:

> The whole like satire of this movie is that it's flipping all of it around. Like when they're in the bedroom, when they're in the dorm room, the girl is like, 'Alright, are you gonna make this a big deal?' And then like, everything is like flipped on it's head and all the stereotypes are like backwards and so that's what's so funny about it. I find that a positive thing, that we can like see these instances and these stereotypes and like laugh at them, but it's--I think it's really cool how they like did it all backwards, you know, to where it's not like directly racist or sexist, but it's like making fun of, you know, sort of how we approach different things.

In a blog post, a participant wrote of *22 Jump Street* (2014): "I think the film makes fun of both racial and gender stereotypes. I think that is the point of this film, you're not supposed to agree with the stereotypes." In this way, the participant mentions that comedic appeal is the result of identifying and disagreeing with stereotypes such as the ones presented in the film. However, another student stated that becoming insensitive to stereotypes is an unintended consequence of watching popular films. He shared: "while they may be offensive, we laugh. I feel that if we can laugh at ourselves and it isn't a hurtful joke, it's okay." The notion of an "unhurtful joke" with

regards to stereotyping is not only damning in that offensive media content can be a 'funny reflection of oneself' but it is also highly detrimental in eliminating stereotype threat.

Pitch Perfect 2 (2015) featured a primarily female ensemble cast that included racial/ethnic minorities. However, this film relied more on conventional stereotype-based humor in which non-White characters were often the brunt of stereotype-based humor. As previously mentioned, the Latina character, in particular, was portrayed in a stereotypical manner. During a focus group, one participant remarked:

> She (Latina character, Flo) as a character really personifies the stereotype, and I feel like it is really--like a lower class of humor because it does kind of de-legitimize the fact that (kidnapping) does happen, and it's trying to make a laugh at it…

One participant captured the sentiment of other study participants through a blog post by writing, "It (*Pitch Perfect 2,* 2015) is funny at times, but tries to humor with a lot of crude, discriminatory, and stereotypical comments and jokes."

The participants in this study found the "satirized" stereotype-based humor of *22 Jump Street* (2014) funnier than the more conventional stereotype-based humor present in *Pitch Perfect 2*. One participant shared:

> Overall I feel like the *Jump Streets* (*21 Jump Street and 22 Jump Street)* were just a little more transparent in that, yeah, it was all exaggerated but there's was a little more, I feel, closer to the dot to where [*Pitch Perfect 2*] was just way far out there like we were saying earlier. Just trying to push it to get ratings or something like that.

The findings revealed that students are privy to racially-based stereotypes in the film, however, depending on racial/ethnic background have different ways in which to deconstruct these messages from popular films. Next, a discussion of the findings will follow.

Discussion

Findings in this study support Tucciarone's (2007) claim that film teaches college students about perspectives and differences of opinion in people who share the same context of

college life. Participant in this study were familiar with the institution at which they were all enrollees, and they employed critical thinking skills that allowed them to question and evaluate the accuracy of the media's content. As current college students, their real-life experiences served as a comparative basis for the attitudes and beliefs that the media conveyed about college life (Hawk & Hill, 2016.)

One limitation of this study is that the selected films were not produced as pedagogical tools to offer insights into critical thinking about the attitudes and cultural beliefs systems that students develop. In response, the researchers were purposeful in their choice of films that targeted media-induced stereotypes. The type of Critical Media Literacy that is proposed focuses on: (1) ideological critiques and analyses of the politics of representation of crucial dimensions of gender, race, class, and sexuality, (2) incorporating alternative media production, and (3) expanding textual analysis to include issues of social context, control, resistance, and pleasure. (Kellner,1998). Findings from this study revealed that media stereotypes do not as heavily influence generalized perceptions about college students. For the most part, students were more critically aware that some of the stereotypes presented in the film were intentional and purposeful for comedic value. However, the second theme shed light on how the constant and continual themes surrounding perceptions of college students caused some co-eds to consider the influence the stereotypes had on their own identities.

The second research question sought to understand how diverse college students perceived the racially charged stereotypes perceived by the media. Some students shared that though popular films like *22 Jump Street* (2014) have comedic appeal, there is an intentional veneer of racial stereotyping that reinforces negative perceptions about minoritized students. One particularly strong response by a student demonstrated a racial theme that is prominent when

examining the minority student experience at PWIs. He shared, "Seeing how my race/culture is negatively portrayed inspires me to do my best while in college. I feel like I'm representing my race and culture." This sentiment is common for students who are racial minorities on college campuses as research supports that non-White students at predominantly White institutions are more racially marginalized and isolated in university-affiliated activities and events than their White counterparts (Scott, 2014). Another response about racial themes in popular films reaffirmed the mainstream Millennial perspective about living in a post-racial society. This participant noted:

> "I think that the movie focused on race more than what college is really like. Anyone in college is receiving the same education and academic opportunities, and therefore on an equal playing field."

This notion represents a naïve consciousness about the college experience for non-White students. However, the recognition of racial themes in the film evidences that some levels of awareness about how race influences the college experience is also very telling.

This study sought to examine the role of gender-based stereotypes in popular films. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, this area was less explored. While there were brief discussions to highlight ideas of masculinity, femininity, gender, and sexuality, prominent themes did not evolve in order to make sound conclusions for the study. However, ample research, as articulated in the literature review, supports the notion that gender-based stereotypes are present in popular films.

Finally, the study aimed to understand how stereotypes perpetuated through popular films influenced students' own cultural and academic identity. All participants mentioned that popular comedic films and media present a negative image about social behaviors in college; however, to some, these representations do not affect them. College students are frequently perceived as less

inclined towards academic and more keen on partying, drug-use, and under-age drinking, especially in the context of social organizations. Some participants echoed this sentiment of college-goers being negatively portrayed for social behaviors and challenged current media depictions for not showing the balance between social life and academics. From these responses, it is evident that college students are critically aware of how they are depicted in the media, and as most have stated, these representations do little to influence perceptions of self and ethnic identity.

From the information gathered, it seems that students readily connect what they see in the media to their perceptions about race. However, some may not link these ideals directly to their own ethnic identities. Similarly, other students commented that media and popular films did not influence their ethnic considerations. Students were asked to reflect on how this film influenced academic identities. Many agreed that there were not adequate depictions about the academic aspects and characteristics of college students in the film. Others connected concepts of race of perceived academic characteristics. One can conclude that the films have had little influence on students' academic identities, but it is important to note that this is perhaps a direct result of students' feelings of inaccurate portrayals on the importance of educational pursuits while in college.

Conclusion

This study reaffirms the need for Critical Media Literacy. As aforementioned in our review of the literature, popular media can be particularly influential in terms of one's perception of "others" and may perpetuate or reinforce negative stereotypes. As one participant in this study remarked, without viewing popular films and television through the lens of Critical Media Literacy, the audience is susceptible to accepting any negative stereotypical portrayals of

characters who race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or religion varies from their own. This study highlights the use of Critical Media Literacy to engage in conversations that explore negative portrayals of minorities (based upon race, ethnicity, gender, etc.) in popular film and subsequently use such conversations as a tool to build cultural competence.

The researchers, therefore, recommend that educators at both the secondary and post-secondary levels integrate Critical Media Literacy into their curriculum. Analysis and discussion of popular films and television can not only build students critical thinking skills but also lead to frank conversations about stereotyping "others." Oftentimes, students tend to think that prejudicial or discriminatory acts happen at other schools or in other communities yet through our focus groups, participants in our study realized that unfortunately, their peers are subject to being negatively stereotyped or prejudicial words or actions. Engaging in Critical Media Literacy through the examination of popular media will help to build the cultural competence of young adults, who will hopefully send a message to Hollywood that negatively stereotyping "others" for comedic effect is unacceptable through actions such as not watching such films and supporting films and television shows with diverse casts.

As there is a need to continue to explore this topic in greater context, future research could be derived from this study. For example, future studies could examine how racial stereotypes in popular films influence students who attend minority-serving institutions, such as HBCUs and Hispanic-serving Institutions (HSIs). The selection of films could also vary in terms of examining different types of postsecondary institutions (e.g. films set at a HBCU or HSI.) Other potential studies could examine historical perceptions of college students since the emergence of college-themed movies or explore if stereotype threat is correlated with

mainstream events which may have influenced the style and portrayal of students throughout the

films.

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