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The Myth and Reality of Prom: A Qualitative Examination of the American High School Prom Experience

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THE MYTH AND REALITY OF PROM: A QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION OF THE
AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL PROM EXPERIENCE

A Thesis
Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Designation
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ABSTRACT

This research compares social and cultural myths about the prom with the reality of the high school prom experience. Data include content analysis of prom-related popular media, and ten qualitative interviews with individuals aged 20-25 about their high school prom experiences. Perceptions of what prom is supposed to be like are influenced heavily by the media; study participants' real prom experiences were quite different. Additionally, participants' prom experiences related less with popular media depictions and more with their actual social status in high school culture. Findings support that the media present a narrow, idealized depiction of the prom that rarely reflects the actual prom experiences of American teenagers.

INTRODUCTION

Arguably no night is considered more important in the life of an American high school teenager than the night of the prom. American society as a whole presents teenagers with the socially developed notion that the prom represents the ultimate in terms of idealized teenage romance and popularity. Teenagers are bombarded by societal norms and various media outlets stressing the notion that the prom will be the perfect culmination of their high school years. Movies, magazines, and television shows portray prom as the best night of a teen's life, and an event that is not to be missed. Parents can lend to this as well, with pastorally nostalgic and revisionist memories of the importance of prom relative to the life course. Friends also assist in created idealized and romanticized images of a prom that is elegant, romantic, and extremely memorable for years to come. However, in reality, the prom and the high school experience in general, almost always fail to measure up to students' socially developed expectations.

The purpose of this research is to discover how popular media portrayals of the high school prom vary from the reality of these experiences. In general, media portrayals of the prom conform to popular norms and favor the characteristics of the students in the dominant race, class, and sexual orientation. For most American schools, these norms reflect the preferences of white, upper-middle class, heterosexual, popular students. As such, students' perceptions and experiences at the prom are typically influenced by their conformity to the norms of their school communities and the degree to which these school communities reflect the popular images of the prom advanced by the media. This research is significant because it reveals one context in which real-life experiences significantly differ from cultural and societal expectations, and it also sheds light on what these social expectations reveal about the broader values of American culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although social scientists are just beginning to conduct research exclusively focused on the high school prom experience, prom and high school are mentioned more generally in diverse social science literature. This literature includes studies of teenage socialization by the media and their peer groups, the exclusion of minority teens in a variety of circumstances, and links between teenage culture and the broader societal context. Interestingly, very little existing literature discusses why the prom is considered such a significant event worthy of mention in studies regarding the previously mentioned topics. This is likely because prom is considered a staple of the American teenage experience that few regard as controversial. On the surface, it is difficult to see how one's prom experience is shaped by gendered, racial, and economic undertones. Research focused more exclusively on the prom will serve to unify the understanding of both the prom experience's independent significance along with prom's impact on other important facets of teenagers' lives.

Socialization

In addition to family socialization, media and peer groups are beginning to shape children's perceptions at younger ages than ever before. The media provide teens with distinct images of what is anticipated and ideal with regards to sexual experience, behavior, and physical appearance. In addition, teenagers are socialized by their peer groups to adhere to various gendered expectations and dating behaviors. The prom provides an ample public opportunity for teenagers to showcase their acceptance or rejection of social expectations and demonstrate their knowledge of ideals portrayed in the media and among their own peer groups.

Popular media put forth the myth that prom night often includes certain sexual expectations that may not be present on a normal teenage date night. The prom is often depicted

as a romance-infused event in which sexual interactions are to be expected and may even make the experience more memorable. Some popular films depict young couples planning to have sexual intercourse for the first time at the raucous after-prom party. The media advance images of prom that form narrowly defined expectations and stereotypes of young women's and men's behavior and appearance. Prom scenes in movies are generally highly predictable and often focus on the objectification of young women as visual prizes and sex objects (Farber and Holm 1994), and their virginity as a prize to be won by lucky young men.

In addition to infusing prom scenes with sexual images, television programs popular among teenagers contain significant amounts of sexual content in more mundane scenes, such as discussions with friends in school hallways. Although the number of popular teenage shows portraying sexual content has dropped in recent years, the amount of sexual content in shows containing sexual messages has remained constant. Among the most popular teenage television programs in 2001-2002 and 2004-2005, 83% and 70% respectively contained sexual content, while shows containing sexual content remained constant regarding the number of sexual messages portrayed at 6.7 per hour (Eyal, Kunkel, Biely, and Finnerty 2007). In this way, American culture bombards teens with images of sex and is also making it easier and more acceptable than ever before for teens to engage in premarital sex.

Cultural changes have also made it easier and more acceptable for teens to engage in premarital sex than in the past. Bogel (2008) suggests that the availability of birth control pills, the feminist notion of gender equality, and an American emphasis on personal choice in the 1960s made sex a more desirable and available option for teens prior to marriage. Furthermore, casual sex is becoming more prevalent among American teens outside of committed

relationships (Bogel 2008). As such, casual and premarital sex is extremely visible in the media and is also now more socially accepted in American culture.

The media also confront teens with very specific portrayals of appropriate gendered interests and behaviors. A study of *Seventeen* magazine revealed its gendered portrayal of young women's high school dance experiences. Aimed specifically at teenage girls, most *Seventeen* prom articles were focused on dates, dresses, and the commercial aspects of the dance, while few discussed nontraditional topics such as asking a guy to prom and what it is like not to have a prom date (Holm 1994). Media have tried to portray some women who do not adhere to all traditional feminine stereotypes; one such example is the fictional character, Nancy Drew. Although Nancy Drew rejects stereotypical femininity through her adventurous attitude and willingness to put herself in dangerous situations, she is still lady-like in most instances unrelated to solving mysteries (Gardner 1998). Encouragingly, Nancy Drew presents a possible new role for young women, but it was still done within the context of other socially acceptable gender norms, stressing that gender scripts may be challenged but not altogether ignored. Consequently, the media send clear messages to teenagers regarding appropriate gendered behaviors and expectations both generally and within the prom context.

The media also provide teens with specific guidelines for their physical appearance. Content analysis of music videos revealed that they portray high levels of gender-role stereotypes, and that frequent viewing of music videos is related to the onset of increased weight concerns and concerns about physical appearance (Borzenkowski, Robinson, and Killen 1999). The media advance standards that are both extreme and difficult for teenagers of varying body types to achieve. Additionally, the previously mentioned research on the fictional character Nancy Drew asserted that even though Nancy Drew displayed gender atypical behaviors, she

was still portrayed as attractive by Western-defined feminine standards (Gardner 1998). As such, even when the media invented a fictional character that broke stereotypical gendered expectations, she was still portrayed according to socially acceptable standards of feminine physical appearance.

The media are influential, especially over women, regarding appropriate clothing and style, stressing the importance of appearance in the overall gender performance of women. A content analysis of *Sears* catalogues throughout the twentieth century noted that young girls' clothing was often simply a smaller version of women's clothing. The clothes were tailored to a specific appearance, and items such as bustles or bodices were featured to aid women in achieving the narrowly defined ideal female body (Justice-Malloy 1998). The media provide a narrowly defined appropriate physical presentation of self, and these rigid standards of beauty are likely to carry over into young women's preparations and presentations of themselves at the high school prom.

While teens are socialized by the media regarding appropriate behavior and appearance, teens are no doubt also influenced by their peers. A qualitative study of New Zealand teens' perceptions of romance revealed that young men are faced with balancing a dual self. More specifically, women now demand men to be more sensitive and emotional in romantic relationships than ever before, while society and men's social groups still expect them to display traditional masculinity. The straight man's predicament is further complicated by the fact that sexuality and success with women is an important component of masculinity (Allen 2007). As such, young men must find a balance between their romantic partners and their social network, which most often compels men to play an active role in romance while women assume a passive

position. This is just one instance in which peer groups socialize individuals to accept traditional gender roles in their romantic interactions in dating and at the prom.

Teenagers also tend to turn to their peers and families to learn proper romantic and dating behaviors. A longitudinal study of the pre-teen transition into middle school found that sixth graders initially had smaller amounts of cross-sex interaction, yet interaction with their opposite sex peers increased at anticipated rates during their seventh grade year (Pellegrini 2001). This suggests that though they were increasing in age, they also saw cross-sex interaction modeled by students in older grades and emulated their behavior as they became accustomed to their new status as middle school students. Although it seems “natural” that teens would turn to their peers in order to learn appropriate romantic and sexual behaviors, it appears as though parents may have some mediating affect in this socialization process. Teens ranging from 13-18 years of age reported lower levels of sexual activity when they were raised in dual-parent families and felt that adults or their parents cared about them (Lammers, Ireland, Resnick, and Baum 2000). Consequently, parents may be able to monitor some of the sexual and romantic socialization teens experience in their peer groups by playing an active role in their teens’ lives.

Teenagers are socialized both by the media and their peers. The media influence teens’ perceptions of appropriate levels of sexual experience, socially acceptable gendered behaviors, and desirable physical appearance. Teenagers’ peer groups also influence their perceptions of appropriate gender roles and dating behavior. This socialization process may impact how teenagers present themselves at the prom and more generally in their everyday interactions with their peers. The next section will detail how proms and high schools are typically structured according to narrow standards, leading to the exclusion of minority populations.

Minority Exclusion at the Prom

High school proms are planned typically according to a very narrow set of standards reflecting race, gender, and class through the lens of the dominant population. This often results in the prom being dominated by notions of white, middle class, heterosexual ideals (Best 2000). These trends tend to reflect the general context of high schools, in which specific groups dominate the social scene at the expense of excluding minority populations. Economic status is related to teens' abilities to wear socially desirable clothing and have higher rates of school involvement and connectedness. In addition, race may have various affects on school status and levels of harassment experienced by teens. Finally, gay and lesbian teens endure heightened levels of harassment and exclusion by their peers. The exclusion of minority populations in the general atmosphere of high schools is inextricably linked to teens' experiences at the prom (Best 2000).

Several studies emphasize the necessity of money to conform to societal ideals. Research conducted regarding weddings discussed the explosion of consumerism in hosting the ideal ceremony and found that the wedding serves as a status evaluation for the couple and their families (Montemurro 2006). Wealth is valued highly in American society, and displays of wealth through consumerism are taken as a sign of one's heightened status. An in-depth study of a middle school found that students' popularity was most often linked to wealth, and the only way for working class children to be popular was through their performance in gender appropriate sports (Eder 1995). Consequently, one's social class is extremely important to his or her ability to conform to ideal social norms.

Students of lower socioeconomic classes within their schools are further disadvantaged by their inability to purchase clothes seen as fashionable and desirable by their peers. Qualitative

research regarding clothing selection among teens suggests that clothes provide a way to display economic status and competence, express oneself as an individual, and signal similarity to one's peers (Piacentini and Mailer 2004). It follows that being able to afford the proper clothing is not only important for a student's appearance but also matters in terms of social connectedness with one's peers. Piacentini and Mailer (2004) further suggested that the importance of proper clothing choice is heightened during school dances when dress codes are relaxed or no longer apply. Taylor and Consenza (2002) found that older female teens feel clothing brand is important, but the look, fit, and style of clothing matter most, inferring that this is likely related to the previously mentioned social connectedness that teens attempt to portray through their clothing choices. Consequently, teenagers unable to afford socially desirable clothing experience difficulty fitting in with their peers at a formal event, such as the prom, when clothing expectations are seen as even more important to connectedness with one's peers than usual.

Teenagers from lower socioeconomic statuses experience lower levels of school involvement and connectedness as they transition into high school. A study of poor, urban students found that their levels of perceived support from school personnel, enrollment in extracurricular activities, and involvement with school declined markedly as they entered high school. Furthermore, the study asserted that these specific changes in social relations were not directly related to gender or ethnicity (Seidman, Aber, Allen, and French 1996). This finding would suggest that the aforementioned experiences of teens as they transition into high school are predominately related to their low socioeconomic status. Additional research focused on the transition of low-income, urban, minority youth into high school found that perceptions of school connectedness were directly related to involvement in school activities. More specifically,

students who got involved in their schools reported significant levels of improvement in their relationships with their peers, while those students who failed to get involved reported no significant changes in their perceptions of their relationships with their fellow students (Reyes, Gillock, Kobus, and Sanchez 2000). Taken together, these studies suggest that level of school involvement is directly related to connectedness with one's peers, but that enrollment in extracurricular activities and involvement in school is likely to decline significantly among students of lower socioeconomic statuses. This feeling of disconnectedness among poor students with their school population likely not only influences students in their high schools but will also carry over to their prom experiences.

High school proms are often centered around the expectations of the racial majority. Minority races often feel forgotten and subordinated at their high schools in favor of the preferences and expectations advanced by the dominant race. In a predominately white school, minority students' parents described their families as having a "permanent guest status" within the school (Chalmers 1997). In this way, it appears nearly impossible for minorities to achieve full acceptance in a predominately white institution. Predominately white standards present in schools are also reflected in the planning and execution of the prom.

While racial discrimination is fairly common, racial differences are also often the source of harassment among high school students. The previously mentioned in-depth study of a middle school found that teasing was one way students attempted to assert their status within the social structure. For instance, racial jokes were often used by white students of working class families to mock more wealthy black students, and homosexuality was nearly always discussed in a negative, mocking manner (Eder 1995). As such, institutions often maintain narrowly

defined ideal populations and rigorously attempt to exclude those with less desirable minority characteristics both in the classroom and at the prom.

Perhaps one of the most severe and well-documented instances in which students experience exclusion based upon their minority status is with regards to sexual orientation. A qualitative researcher studying the experiences high school aged lesbians found that these young women associated being popular with being straight and often used these words synonymously (Payne 2002). They viewed homosexuality and popularity as a nearly impossible combination in their schools. The author further asserted that these young lesbians were automatically excluded from traditionally feminine peer groups, because a significant amount of time in such groups is devoted to attracting boys (Payne 2002). It follows that it is difficult for straight and gay/lesbian peers to relate to one another when it comes to dating and romantic interests. Further research found that contrary to popular belief, peer or parent support of one's alternative lifestyle does not significantly moderate the impact of an unsupportive or hostile school environment (Murdock and Bloch 2005). Even when lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) students are able to develop a network of friends within their schools, these groups cannot completely mitigate the feelings of rejection LGBTQ students feel by their school populations as a whole.

In addition to feeling ostracized among in their schools, LGBTQ students also face more severe forms exclusion through harassment by their peers. Interestingly, a study examining the prevalence of peer sexual harassment in high schools found that a slightly higher percentage of straight students had experienced sexual harassment than their gay/lesbian peers, but gays/lesbians that were harassed endured it on a much more frequent basis. In addition, harassment experienced by gays/lesbians was much more severe, as they endured more physical

harassment while their straight classmates were more likely to endure playful teasing by their social networks (Fineran 2001). This study's findings regarding harassment mirror those of a qualitative researcher who found that 11 of her 24 gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender informants had experienced some degree of physical assault in school (Wyss 2004). Clearly, such harassment fosters a school environment in which few LGBTQ students feel safe, let alone accepted by their peers.

A common reaction of LGBTQ students is to remove themselves from places or situations where harassment or other hostilities are likely to take place. The previously mentioned qualitative study of LGBTQ youth found that their most common approach to dealing with physical attacks was to avoid students prone to harassing them. One lesbian student explained she would hide during lunch and always stayed in the drama room to "rehearse" during her free periods (Wyss 2004). The tactic of avoidance has many negative effects on these minority youth. LGBTQ youth report significantly lower GPAs and feelings of school belonging than their peers, which may inadvertently lead to their higher self-reported levels of drug and alcohol use (Rostosky, Owens, Zimmerman, and Riggle 2003). More generally than these quantifiable negative effects, rejection by peers causes LGBTQ students to experience feelings of overall inferiority. Exclusion and harassment of LGBTQ youth leads them to construct a reality in which heterosexism is superior, and this reality is exacerbated by the fact that the vast majority of social events are planned according to heterosexual norms (Rostosky, Owens, Zimmerman, and Riggle 2003). The high school prom is a prime example of a high school activity designed to promote traditional heterosexuality. In this way, LGBTQ students are extremely unlikely to feel as though they have a proper place in the traditional high school prom.

The majority of research related to the high school experience discussed the subordinated treatment of individuals varying from the dominant population. Students' perceptions and experiences at the prom differ significantly in the context of their individual class, race, and sexual orientation (Best 2000). Students of lower socioeconomic classes experience higher levels of exclusion due to their inability to afford socially desirable clothing and their decreased likelihood of involving themselves in school activities. Racial minorities experience feelings of subordination in their schools and often endure harassment based upon their race. Students with diverse sexualities experience high levels of exclusion by their peers, heightened levels of harassment, and are more likely to avoid school functions in order to evade hostilities from their peers. Proms are typically organized around the social norms of the dominant population, forcing others to conform or assume outsider status. The next section explores the connection between the prom and the high school experience in general with the broader social contexts teens are being raised in today.

Connections to Broader Social Contexts

Several studies suggest that one's position in the popularity hierarchy of his or her high school is intricately connected to the broader social context of the society where one lives. Students' struggles to achieve popularity are clearly linked to efforts towards conformity and a willingness to engage in a competitive social environment. Other students' blatant rejection of the high school social scene reflects their simultaneous rejection of the larger social constructions of gender roles, appearance, and appropriate behaviors. Finally, evidence exists to support the notion that students' awareness of the standards of the popular crowd in their high schools may have implications on their futures with regards to how they measure success later in life and approach future dating situations.

The stereotypical image of the perfect prom attendee most often involves a student who conforms successfully to the socially developed expectations of the popular crowd at his or her school. Prom has a distinct connection to the social hierarchy of the broader educational context (Best 2000). It follows that a student's performance at the prom is likely influenced by his or her ability or willingness to conform to the desired expectations of the institutional culture. Peer pressure and conformity with one's peers are strong predictors of risk behaviors such as delinquency, substance abuse, poor performance in school, and engaging in sexual activities (Santor, Messervey, and Kusumaker 2000). Taken together, a student's successful performance at the prom is related to his or her ability to conform to the standards of the popular crowd, but striving to conform may confront students with various detrimental side effects.

Engaging in competitive, exclusive behavior also helps maintain one's popularity. An in-depth study of a group of popular girls in an upper-middle class suburban middle school found that once a girl is labeled as popular, she runs the risk of losing this popularity if she should subsequently be labeled as stuck-up. Being nice to everyone demeans the reward of achieving popularity, but that maintaining one's popularity may also be achieved by acting mean (Merten 1997). While this may seem counterintuitive, given that popular girls are often thought of as the most well-liked girls in school, Merten (1997) asserted that the linking of popularity and meanness results in power. In this way, it is very difficult to both achieve and maintain a popular reputation in school, and the majority of students are left feeling like outsiders in the classroom as well as at school dances.

In choosing to ignore deliberately their schools' socially developed constructions of popularity, research suggests students' blatant rejection of social norms is linked to a rejection of broader societal standards. A study of young girls at community sponsored dances discussed the

importance of clothing to a girl's gender performance. While most girls tried to appear more traditionally sexy in crop tops and high heels, others dressed in outward displays of non-conformity (Bloustein 2003). Their failure to conform to the traditional appearance of attractive teenage girls more broadly alludes to their rejection of the desired norms of the dominant population. Appearance is just one way for both genders to display their distaste and rejection of mainstream ideals.

Young adult women are also beginning to display their outward rejection of traditional gender roles. One example of their rejection of societal gender norms is found in the development of the bachelorette party. Though many women in their 20s and 30s choose to have both a bachelorette party and a bridal shower, the development of the bachelorette party stemmed from a rejection of more traditional domestic, virginal expectations of brides (Montemurro 2006). Though the message of these women in relation to the broader social context was clear, their rejection has hardly gone unnoticed. This is just one instance in which mainstream culture is not entirely comfortable with such blatant displays of rejection of dominant norms.

As stated previously, research indicates that rejection of social norms is linked to certain high-risk behaviors. A study of cocaine use in young adulthood among various types of adolescents found that rebellious teens were the most likely to use cocaine, while conformists had the lowest probability of experimenting with the drug. More specifically, social connections to schools, families, employment, and religion lowered one's likelihood of engaging in cocaine use (Hamil-Luker, Land, and Blau 2004). Students rejecting the values of these mainstream institutions are much less likely to have strong ties to the aforementioned institutions, thereby making them more likely to engage in risky behavior. Significant proportions of all high school

students engage in some rejection of mainstream rules, as indicated in a national survey of over 16,000 high school students where it was found that 16% of students reported driving after drinking in the previous two weeks, and 15% reported having driven after smoking marijuana in the previous weeks (O'Malley and Johnston 2003). Some level of rejection of social norms is to be anticipated among high school students. Engaging in high-risk behaviors is just one form of teenagers' rejection of social norms.

Students' ability and willingness to conform in high school may have specific future implications. While studies conflict in their outcomes, multiple sources have found that popularity is related to students' academic performance. Higher levels of popularity were related to more unexcused absences and lower GPAs among high school students, suggesting that the achievement of popularity may become an all consuming activity, subordinating academic concerns among popular students (Schwartz, Gorman, Nakamoto, and McKay 2006). However, other research found somewhat conflicting results. For example, a study of adolescent dropouts found that men who dropped out of school were more aggressive and less popular than their peers, and women who dropped out of school were isolated and significantly less popular than their peers (Farmer, Estell, Leung, Trott, Bishop, and Cairns 2003). These findings would suggest that less popular students do worse in school than their popular peers. Farmer et al. (2003) further asserted that the students most likely to drop out of school are those typically excluded from social activities that promote school engagement, which would imply activities such as the prom. While further research is necessary in this area, there is an established link between popularity and academic success and its future implications for less successful students.

Success as defined by the dominant population in high school also impacts how people go on to judge their future success or failure later in life. A study of high school reunions found

graduates felt judged on their career, physical appearance, family, and finances. Furthermore, reunion attendees felt forced to make jokes or avoid the event altogether if they were unable to conform to their school communities' socially developed definitions of success, even when these definitions do not align with their own personal goals (Vinitzky-Seroussi 1998). In these ways, people may often feel pressured to adhere to the valued social norms of the dominant population even when these norms vary from their individual values.

Outside of the academic realm, evidence exists that adhering to traditional notions of romance in high school, such as those promoted by the high school prom, may impact the prevalence and outcome of subsequent romantic relationships. Adolescents of both genders involved in romantic relationships are more likely to cohabitate and marry in early adulthood, with adolescents involved in sexually active relationships two times as likely to cohabitate and marry in early adulthood compared to their peers with no adolescent relationships (Raley, Crissey, and Muller 2007). The prom presents only one such way that romantic relationships are encouraged among traditional adolescent social groups. Raley, Crissey, and Muller (2007) further reported that early marriage and cohabitation typically do not result between individuals involved with one another in adolescent romances. As such, it appears teens involved in romantic relationships early in life continue to pursue these types of relationships throughout their early adult years.

Relevant scholarly literature suggests strongly that the physical and social atmospheres promoted at high school proms have distinct correlates with broader societal norms. Standards of high school popularity are directly linked to one's ability to conform to specific societal expectations and one's willingness to engage in competitive interactions to sustain such popularity. Rejection of the popular norms promoted by the prom is often linked to rejection of

the high school atmosphere in general, traditional gender roles, popular appearance norms, and appropriate behaviors. Achieving the standards of the dominant population may also affect students' future successes, self-perceptions of their achievements, and subsequent relationship behaviors.

This section has detailed how the prom experience is influenced by teenagers' socialization by the media and their peers, exclusion of minority teens in high schools, and connections to broader societal contexts. The media shapes teens' conceptions of appropriate sexual experience, behavior, and appearance, while teens' peer groups influence their gendered expectations and ideas about appropriate dating behavior. Studies of minority populations suggest that teenagers are disadvantaged in the high school social scene when they are poor, belong to a minority race, or are of a diverse sexual orientation. Research focused on high school popularity, gendered behaviors, and future implications show distinct links to the broader social contexts of high schools. Future research focused more directly on the actual prom experience will reveal how the aforementioned topics influence teenagers' experiences on their actual prom nights.

METHODS AND DATA

The central issue of this research is to develop an understanding of how popular media portrayals of the high school prom experience compare to U.S. teenagers' actual experiences at the prom. This study is focused on four main research questions. First, this research aims to discover why the high school prom is considered such an important event in the lives of teenagers. The importance of prom will typically be explained by both the media and the research participants using generic expressions. Secondly, this study includes an exploration of how teenagers' expectations of prom vary from their actual prom experiences, speculating that

virtually all college students' prom experiences differed from their initial expectations to various extents. Thirdly, this research seeks to discover how media portrayals of the prom shape students' expectations of the prom and compare to their actual prom experiences, anticipating that media portrayals of prom will be much more idealized than students' accounts of their actual prom nights. Finally, this study examines how one's experience and performance at prom is linked to broader social and economic trends—both the actual prom event and the individual students' expectations of prom will be intricately linked with the broader social climate of the school and will shape students' expectations and perceptions of the event.

Two distinct methods of qualitative data collection were employed to seek answers to these questions. The first half of this research was conducted using data collection and content analysis of a total of 15 media forms, including movies, magazines, and television shows, depicting images of the prom. The second half of this research was dedicated to conducting in-depth interviews with 10 college students or recent college graduates about their past prom experiences.

Part I: Media Analysis of Prom

Various media outlets were examined in order to gather detailed data regarding societal and cultural portrayals of the prom. Each media source was explored independently, and detailed notes were compiled regarding the portrayal of the prom. Initial notes focused on demographic factors, including the race, sexual orientation, social class, and physical appearance of featured individuals. Subsequent notes were taken regarding the context in which the prom experience was portrayed, the primary characters' beliefs about the prom, and the portrayal of the actual prom experience. Upon completing detailed notes on each of the included sources, the data were coded to search for patterns and distinct differences among the prom portrayals of the

various media outlets. This data collection provided a general basis of knowledge regarding the media's portrayal of the prom and its potential influence on teenagers' beliefs and expectations of the prom experience.

Data was collected on five sources of each media form. Television shows reviewed in this research included prom depictions in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Laguna Beach*, *Full House*, and *Dawson's Creek*. These shows covered a variety of genres and were aimed at various audiences, thereby providing a more comprehensive perspective of the television industry's portrayal of the prom. Movies included in this research were *Carrie*, *American Pie*, *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion*, *She's All That*, and *Pretty in Pink*. Similarly, these movies were selected because they presented a range of prom depictions aimed at varying age groups. Finally, magazines included in this study were *Seventeen Prom*, *Teen Prom*, *Your Prom*, *Cosmo Girls Prom*, and *Teen Vogue*. Exploring these various media outlets provided a comprehensive understanding of media depictions of the high school prom experience.

Part II: Interviews about Prom Memories

This portion of the research focused on students' actual experiences at the prom in light of their original media-laden expectations. I conducted qualitative interviews with 5 women and 5 men between the ages of 20-25 who attended at least one of their own high school proms. Participants were required to have attended at least one of their own high school proms so that they could comment on how their prom experiences played out within the broader social contexts of their high schools. I attempted to collect data from students from varying social backgrounds and school sizes. Prior to conducting the interviews, I completed Internal Review Board paperwork with the University of Northern Iowa and was granted approval for engaging in this

research. Additionally, prior to conducting the interviews each participant signed an informed consent form (See Appendix C).

Interviews were conducted primarily in the participants' or researcher's private residences. I asked each participant a similar set of questions based upon the interview guide (See Appendix D), but participants were also prompted on a case-by-case basis to elaborate further on specific issues based upon the initial answers they provided. Interviews lasted approximately 40-60 minutes based upon each individual participant's willingness to naturally elaborate or provide background information on his or her experiences. I took notes during each interview for the purpose of highlighting especially interesting answers and generating a basic outline of the interview conversation, and each interview was also audio-recorded for subsequent review and to ensure direct quotes were available.

Upon completion of data collection, I coded the data according to their relevance to specific areas of inquiry. This coded interview data was compared in order to search for overall similarities and differences between participants and similarities and differences based upon varying characteristics, such as socioeconomic status and gender. Upon completion of coding each type of data source individually, coded data from media sources and interviews were compared to search for patterns and inconsistencies between media portrayals and actual students' experiences. This information was then used to address the study's research questions in the findings section.

FINDINGS

Although some aspects of media prom portrayals may reflect the actual prom experiences of American teenagers, the majority of these depictions contrast with teenagers' lived experiences. In general, media portrayals of the prom appear to be much more sensationalized

and meaningful experiences to the fictional characters than they are in the lives of actual teens. Though teenagers tended to view prom as an important event, prom was not a pivotal moment in their lives and relationships. In contrast, media portrayals of the prom dramatize the prom experience and relate it to other significant life occurrences.

The following explores how media portrayals of the prom experience compare with college students' memories of their actual prom experiences. First, I discuss displays of teenage socialization at the prom. While the media tend to portray prom as the perfect night for teens to display their competence of adult romance, maturity, sexual experience, and knowledge of appropriate gender norms, interview data suggest prom is not nearly as romantic or significant in teenagers' lives as the media lead them to believe. The next subsection examines minority exclusion of certain groups of teenagers at the prom. The media disproportionately display dominant norms of white, heterosexual, upper class, popular, thin students having the best prom experiences, while interview data suggests that dominant standards are ideal but prom atmospheres are generally more conducive to varying students' circumstances. The final subsection will explore prom's relation to broader social contexts. The media illustrate strong connections between prom and the broader cultural values of conformity, excessive consumerism, and the importance of heterosexual mate selection which interview data reflect as important, but not vital, to a successful prom experience.

Socialization

The media tend to portray the prom as an extremely significant moment in time in the life of an American teenager in terms of socialization in romance and maturity. In many media portrayals, prom represents teenagers' first attempts at adult romance. Prom marks the culmination of one's life as a teenager and a high school student and provides the perfect

backdrop for one's first instance of mature romance. The media sensationalize the prom experience as a night conducive to heightened romance, maturity, sexual experience, and gender socialization.

The majority of media portrayals depict the prom as an extremely romantic night that culminates in a very happy ending for the couple. In multiple instances, a fight or disagreement between the couple is magically resolved by the end of prom night with a dramatic kiss between feuding prom-goers. *She's All That* takes a negative turn when the main character, Laney, learns her date only asked her to the prom according to the terms of a bet he made with his friends, and Laney becomes upset even though her date has fallen for her over the course of their prom preparations. However, the night ends with a romantic poolside dance and kiss during which Laney exclaims, "I feel just like Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*." In this way, media portrayals of prom tend to adhere to the notion that love conquers all, and many media couples' conflicts are instantly resolved when they become caught up in the romance of the high school prom.

Other media portrayals of the prom that did not adhere to the norm of the ideal happy ending for the central couple depicted prom as the perfect last night between couples about to embark on separate paths after high school. Though these prom depictions were typically underscored by a certain degree of sadness, it seemed to be dulled by the couples' ability to enjoy one last romantic night together. Very rarely was the prom depicted as a negative experience by the media. *Dawson's Creek* ends the senior prom with the breakup of two of the show's dominant couples based upon the fact that their lives are headed in separate directions at the end of the school year. The only other included media source that portrayed prom in a negative light was *Carrie*, an unrealistic horror film that ends with the death of the prom-goers.

Another very common theme throughout media portrayals of the prom is the sentiment that prom is the pinnacle of a student's high school experience and life as a teenager. For example, in *Grey's Anatomy* the chief of surgery orders the hospital interns to throw a prom in order to fulfill the wish of his 18-year-old niece who is dying of cancer. This idea is also emphasized in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* when Buffy explains that her friends deserve one night to be normal teenagers when it appears that their prom night might be compromised by a vicious hell hound. Lending to the credibility of these depictions were scenes from *Laguna Beach*, a reality television show following high school teenagers in Laguna Beach, CA. The morning after prom, a group of girls are shown at home discussing how going to prom really highlighted the fact that the end of high school is quickly approaching. In these ways, several media depictions of prom portray it as a significant event in the culmination of the high school experience.

Another common theme among high school prom depictions in the media is the prevalence of sex, especially first-time sex, on prom night. In several instances, prom was depicted as the perfect time to lose one's virginity, or the perfect opportunity to have sex with a new romantic interest for the first time. The plot of *American Pie* is based upon four high school men who make a pact to lose their virginity before their high school graduation, and they decide the ideal time to accomplish this is on their senior prom night. Even the more family-friendly sitcom *Full House* depicts oldest sister D.J. Tanner with intentions of going up to a hotel room for a prom after-party with her boyfriend and various other couples. While tuxedo shopping for the senior prom in *Dawson's Creek*, Jack asks main character Dawson, "Are you or are you not gonna fulfill the long-standing teenage tradition of after-prom sex?" and later depicts Dawson buying condoms at a convenience store for the anticipated loss of his virginity to his older

girlfriend. As such, several media depictions of prom suggest sex is a very integral element of the prom experience.

In contrast to television and film portrayals, only one of the reviewed magazines discussed the topic of sex on prom night. *Seventeen* magazine did not devote an entire article to this issue, but rather included a small section on prom night sex under an article entitled *Prom Myths*. The main point of this section was to convey the notion that while sex may seem like an integral part of the prom experience in theory, in practice the night is more about spending time with friends and making some final high school memories. As such, this notion seems to strongly challenge the prevalence of prom night sex featured on television and film depictions of the high school prom.

Finally, the media very strongly socialize teens to accept traditional gender roles in their depictions of the prom. Nearly all media portrayals show men asking women to prom and making the majority of the subsequent arrangements. This is especially true in instances where the guy is considered to be more popular among the school community than his date, such as in *Carrie*, *Pretty in Pink*, and *She's All That*. In *Dawson's Creek*, Pacey becomes upset when his date says she does not care that the purchasing of their tickets, flowers, and limousine did not go perfectly, because he wants her to believe he is capable of successfully fulfilling these responsibilities. In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Buffy is generally depicted as a strong young woman, but she falls apart when her boyfriend breaks up with her before the prom and later easily forgives him when he shows up in time for the last dance. Nearly every media depiction of the prom places men in the dominant role of arranging dates and plans, while women are only in charge of arranging their personal appearance.

Media portrayals appear to have a significant influence over teenagers' perceptions of prom. Of the ten participants included in this study, over half cited the media as having shaped their perceptions of prom before actually attending the dance. The next most popular response was learning about the prom through the stories of older friends and family members. The vast majority stressed the inaccuracy of media prom portrayals, like Shawn indicated:

Teen movies really gave me an inaccurate portrayal of what it was gonna be like. It was not nearly what I was expecting. I was expecting it was going to be like the typical teen movie: big parties, everyone's drunk or having a lot of fun, and it turned out that most people didn't actually—most of the guys—didn't actually wanna be there. (Shawn, age 22)

As such, media portrayals of the prom are often sensationalized when compared with students' actual prom experiences.

Though not every student interviewed thought prom was going to be one of the most important nights of their lives, the vast majority felt it was something he or she should partake in. Nearly all students said prom was one of the most significant events of the school year, and most students and their friend groups attended. In addition, the vast majority felt that the experience was somewhat important to their parents, though a few parents may have been stressed about the expense of attending the event. Neal states, "My parents said everybody needs to go to prom. They encouraged you even if you didn't have a date, but I always had a date, just because it's part of growing up. It's one of those milestones I guess" (Neal, age 23). Overall, it seemed that regardless of one's personal beliefs about the significance and importance of attending the prom, most participants felt the value of the experience outweighed the possible setbacks and determined it was worth attending.

One way students' prom experiences varied significantly from media portrayals was with regards to their romantic expectations. While the majority of media portrayals depict

romantically involved couples attending the prom together, only half of the students interviewed had ever attended the prom with a boyfriend or girlfriend. The majority went with friends, and two students discussed attending prom with dates they did not know all that well before the prom. Consequently, students interviewed had rather limited romantic expectations of their dates. None of the interviewed students ended up in new relationships as a result of the prom, and two students in relationships even discussed fighting with their dates before or during the prom.

Among the students who did attend prom with a significant other, most did not have any differing expectations of their date compared to other nights out together. Anna, age 21, said of going to prom with her boyfriend, "My junior year was just a lot of fun. I mean there wasn't like anything he did. It was just a fun time for like both of us, but it wasn't any more romantic than usual." While four students admitted to some degree of sexual activities with their significant others, none implied that it was the most important part of the evening, nor was it the first time they had engaged in these activities with their partners. Consequently, it seemed romance was an element of students' actual prom experiences, but prom was not considered exceptionally romantic and did not significantly impact their romantic lives thereafter.

Another significant contrast between lived high school experiences and media portrayals of the prom is the level of significance placed on the experience. The vast majority of the students interviewed felt that prom was going to be a much bigger deal than it actually turned out to be once they had experienced it: "It's not that big of a deal. People make it out to be a bigger deal than it needs to be...It's not very significant. I have better memories" (Matt, age 21). While prom may have been less significant than they had originally anticipated, none of the participants said they regretted attending the prom. A majority said they had a good time, but

that they realize now it is not as big of a deal as they had originally expected. Several participants also discussed feeling that the experience may not have warranted spending all the money that many students put into their prom experiences. Mike, age 21, explained, “It was a good time. It wasn’t really worth all the money, but it was fun.” As such, though nearly all participants felt prom was something worth experiencing as a teenager, all but one expressed the fact that prom is probably not as significant of an experience as they had been lead to believe it was by media portrayals and by those around them who shaped their prom perceptions.

Aside from the general belief that prom is an important and fun event, the media portray the prom in a much more sensationalized manner than real life teens do when discussing their past prom experiences. The media was the most commonly cited influence on teens’ prom perceptions, but most felt their prom experiences fell short of the level of importance portrayed by the media. In general, the media tended to portray the prom as a much more romantic and sexually charged event than what students experienced in real life. The media does tend to represent accurately the importance of the prom event as a sort of culmination of one’s teen years and an important teenage experience, but participants stressed that this significance fades over time. Overall, the media present a rather narrow script of the prom experience, while teens’ actual experiences are much more varied.

Minority Exclusion

The media very disproportionately exclude minority students from their prom portrayals. Typical prom depictions portray the experiences of students according to the norms of the dominant population. As such, prom is often depicted in a very one-sided fashion that excludes the experiences of students unable to conform to dominant norms. Most media portrayals of the

prom favorably depict students that are predominantly white, heterosexual, upper class, popular, and thin.

The media overwhelmingly cast white students in their depictions of the prom. Of all the movies and television shows in this study, almost none include a non-white main character. While most have some minority students sparsely spread throughout group shots of the dance, only *She's All That* and *Grey's Anatomy* include main characters of other races. In addition, there are nearly no depictions of interracial couples among media portrayals of the prom. Minorities included are nearly always African-American, although the majority of people in these minorities' friend groups are white. None of the media outlets depict an all-minority or predominately-minority friend group. As such, it appears as though the minorities that are depicted are often included due to their ability to conform to the standards of their predominately white friends. However, the central couples in the included media sources were always white.

Magazines portray different races in a somewhat more prevalent manner, yet minority portrayals are nonetheless disproportionate. For example, *Seventeen* magazine portrayed the most minorities at just over 40, most of which were black women, but these portrayals were limited considering the magazine was 437 pages long. While most magazines pictured a handful of minorities, these ads were sparse and tended to feature one minority among a group of white teenagers. Blacks and Asians were portrayed in almost all the magazines, while *Cosmo Girl* and *Your Prom* were the only magazines who pictured women of Mexican or Indian descent. *Teen Vogue* did not picture a single minority in their entire prom section. Finally, interracial couples were extremely rare in magazine depictions. *Teen Prom* and *Cosmo Girl* each featured two ads with interracial couples, but one of these ads was the exact same in both magazines. As such, minorities are heavily excluded from print portrayals of the high school prom.

Another heavily excluded group of students among prom depictions are homosexuals. The only depiction of a same-sex couple that occurred in any of the included media sources was in *Dawson's Creek*. In this show, one of the main characters, Jack, is a gay student who asks another guy to prom when his female friend forcibly sets them up. Though they are depicted having a good time talking, Jack becomes upset when Tobey, his date, asks him to dance. Jack later apologizes and becomes comfortable with the idea of dancing in front of their peers, but is initially upset at the idea of being openly gay in front of his peers. The only other depiction of a non-heterosexual couple at the prom is in *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion* in which Romy and Michele attend their high school prom together. However, they are not lesbians in actuality and only go to prom with one another because they are unable to get dates with guys from their school. In this way, the media very disproportionately depict students in heterosexual couples at the prom, and very rarely depict students attending the prom with a date or friend of the same sex.

Another common theme of media prom depictions is a disproportionate focus on the importance of conforming to the standards of upper class students in order to truly have a good time at the prom. In many media portrayals, upper class students are the candidates for prom king and queen and the most sought after prom dates. In nearly all these depictions money translates into popularity. Rich students are depicted as having the best dates and ensembles, and they also have the highest expectations for their prom experiences. Furthermore, lack of money is often depicted as a source of shame during the prom date selection process. In *Pretty in Pink*, the main character Andie becomes very upset when her much more wealthy potential prom date Blane wants to drive her home after a pre-prom date. When he prompts her to explain why she does not want him to take her home she explains in a panic-stricken voice, "Because I don't want

you to see where I live, okay?” before she hesitantly gets into his car. This depiction implies Andie somehow feels unworthy of a prom date of a much higher socioeconomic class. It follows that students of more privileged economic backgrounds feel more comfortable and deserving of their prom experiences.

Closely linked to portrayals of typical gender roles, another overwhelmingly common theme among media prom depictions is the portrayal of a highly popular guy asking a socially inept girl to the prom. In this, the guy is depicted as the “prince charming,” while the girl is portrayed as extremely lucky and instantly more popular after having been deemed worthy of attending the prom with a more popular boy. This concept forms the basis of the plot in *Pretty in Pink*, *She’s All That*, and *Carrie*. Interestingly, in each of these movies, the main female character has a dead or estranged parent, and she is subsequently portrayed as economically disadvantaged and as a social outcast. Presumably meant to add to the notion of romance on prom night, such portrayals reflect very traditional gender scripts in which women are at the mercy of men for their social status.

Finally, an unanticipated finding among media portrayals in light of existing literature is the disproportionate depiction of thin characters in prom portrayals. In nearly every media prom portrayal included in this study, the main characters are depicted as thin and attractive. Even in instances when the girl is initially depicted as rather eclectic, she is easily transformed into a more attractive character once she decides to alter her physical appearance to conform to the norms of the dominant population. The only media source that included overweight main characters in their prom depiction was *Grey’s Anatomy*, but their prom was held in a hospital for a dying patient and included adults as well as teenagers. Interestingly, the only overweight main

characters were adults attending the prom who undoubtedly would not have been subjected to the same social pressures as high school students.

Among magazines, heavier women are featured with a similar frequency as minorities. Heavier women are present, but rare, and are most often featured in a group of thin teens. However, it is important to note that magazines dealt with heavier women in a more positive manner than film and television portrayals, as four of the five magazines featured articles such as *Dress for Your Figure* and *Calling All Curves*. These articles attempted to inspire confidence in heavier women to feel proud of their bodies and find flattering styles for their prom nights. While these articles were encouraging, it is also important to note that three of the five magazines featured articles about pre-prom workouts to achieve one's ideal body. As such, the importance of being thin was still very obviously stressed in these types of articles and the disproportionately overwhelming amount of thin models portrayed in prom ads.

The schools of interviewed participants did not vary significantly from media depictions in terms of race, given that all ten participants said their schools were predominately white. All estimated their graduating classes to be over 90% white, and one participant said not a single minority attended her school. However, despite lacking racial diversity, the schools of students interviewed surpassed media depictions in that seven participants recalled an interracial couple attending their prom. All but one student said this was not, or would not have been, an issue among their school community. The one participant who attended an exclusively white school stated, "I would imagine there probably would've been a little gossip just because our school had absolutely no like racial variance whatsoever" (Anna, age 21). As such, it appears that contrary to media depictions, interracial couples are rather prevalent and generally accepted at the prom.

All of the participants interviewed identified themselves as heterosexuals, and they all attended their proms with a date of the opposite sex. Though half the participants claimed there was at least one openly homosexual student at their school, only Neal recalled a same-sex couple attending his prom. He described his classmates' reactions by stating,

Some people were like kind of shocked, but honestly for the most part everyone was just like 'oh cool, whatever.' Like this sounds bad but like all the girls were pretty much like 'oh, that's awesome,' and some of the guys were kind of like 'oh that's kind of weird,' but like nobody said anything to them ever or like called them names. None of that went on that I know of. (Neal, age 23)

While few LGBTQ students went with same-sex dates, the vast majority of participants recalled openly LGBTQ students attending prom with a date. Jennifer attended both of her proms with a friend she suspected was gay although he did not come out until after high school. In contrast to the majority of the participants, she felt same-sex couples would not have caused much controversy at her school and stated:

I really don't think it would've been a problem. From what I gathered, my school was extremely open to homosexual students. We had a quite a few and they were popular and they were well perceived by our community, so I don't see how it would've been an issue. (Jennifer, age 23)

Jennifer's experience may reflect the fact that she was from the largest city of any participant and her school had more openly gay students than any other participant. Overall, the majority of the participants expressed a level of ambivalence towards same-sex couples at prom that is reflective of the majority of media portrayals.

Interview data suggest that the media grossly under-represent the prevalence of prom-goers who attend their high school prom in a group of friends without an exclusive date. All ten of the participants recalled groups of students who attended their high school proms without dates, though none of the participants attended prom without a date. Reactions were mixed regarding this practice. Tara, age 21, described these students by saying:

They weren't like very outgoing. It wasn't surprising that they didn't like have a date. And at the prom, you know the tables they have set up? They would just sit at the tables, you know what I mean? They were kind of secluded away. (Tara, age 21)

None of the participants discussed groups of guys attending the prom together as friends. Each of the participants was only able to recall groups of girls attending the prom without a date. This seems to reflect previously discussed gender role depictions by the media in that asking a date to prom is considered the responsibility of the man, so groups of men attending the prom alone would seem to reflect the fact that they failed in their ability to fulfill their masculine duty of finding a date to prom.

Women participants spent more money on prom regardless of their social status. The five men all identified themselves as average or above average in socioeconomic status compared to the students in their schools, and their estimated expenses ranged from \$90 to \$250. The man who spent the most money on his prom experience estimated his family's wealth to be among the top 10% of the students at his school, while the two men who estimated their families to be of average socioeconomic status both calculated their expenses at \$100. The women spent markedly more money on their prom experiences regardless of social class. The one woman who said her family was of a higher socioeconomic status than the majority of the students at her school spent around \$500, the three women who estimated themselves as average spent between \$200 to \$500, and the one student who claimed her family's socioeconomic status was low for her school community spent \$400. These results suggest strongly that it is important for women to conform to the spending abilities of the upper class students in order to fit in at prom. Women in the study were also much more likely to discuss having spent money on extravagances, like tanning, nails, and new makeup, while men were more likely to stick to the basic purchases of tuxedos and shoe rentals.

Somewhat contradictory to media portrayals, interview data suggest that even less popular and students not very involved in school activities are still able to have a good time at the prom. While participants expressed a variety of school involvement, ranging from minimum commitments to very involved, all suggested that prom was a relatively fun and enjoyable time or that it is an experience everyone should have for themselves. Two participants who had the most positive reactions to their prom experiences were also the two students who spoke the most highly of high school. Neal, age 23, stated, "I loved high school. I had a lot of different friends in different cliques I guess you would say. I pretty much got along with everybody." As such, it appears that contrary to some media portrayals, even less popular students may have a good time at prom with their friends, but in keeping with media portrayals, students considered to be the most popular and involved in high school also had the most enjoyable prom experiences.

Overall, the media present an image of the prom as an event that will be enjoyed by white, straight, wealthy, popular, thin high school teens the most. While these assertions may hold some truth, participants' actual perceptions of their prom experiences varied based upon a combination of factors. Though prom may be planned around the standards of the white race, participants stressed that interracial couples and minority students are common at proms. The media somewhat more accurately portray the situation of homosexuals, whom participants felt may experience more difficulty trying to assimilate their alternative lifestyles to the norms of the prom. Social class did not appear to affect the spending habits of participants, and popularity may have contributed to who had the best time but did not significantly hinder any participant from enjoying his or her prom. Finally, the media disproportionately depict thin students as the only students able to truly fit in and enjoy their prom experiences. As such, while there may be

some truth to the media's assertions, the media depict a very one-dimensional portrayal of the ideal prom, while actual proms appear to play out in a more diverse manner.

Broader Social Contexts

In typical prom depictions, the media portray the connection between the social norms of the prom and the social norms of the school atmosphere in general. It is clear that the most popular students are expected to have the best time at the prom. Popular students are disproportionately represented on fictional prom courts and nearly always secure the best dates for the big event. In addition, reflecting the social structure of the school, less popular students are portrayed as much happier when they conform to the standards of the more popular students at the prom. The media draw connections between the prom and the broader social structure of a school through depicting the importance of conformity, excessive consumerism, and securing a desirable date in order to have a successful prom experience.

In several prom depictions, girls that are seen by the popular crowd as less desirable dates are subjected to external pressure to conform to the physical appearance and social endeavor standards in order to enjoy properly their time at the prom. For example, in both *Pretty in Pink* and *She's All That* the main women characters attend large parties with their prospective prom dates hosted by kids in the popular crowd. It may be inferred that the women's social performance at these events would predict their ability to behave in a socially acceptable manner at the prom. In addition, both these women, as well as the main character "Carrie" in *Carrie*, underwent physical transformations by way of changing their makeup, hair, switching out glasses for contacts, or style of dress in order to conform their look more appropriate to the dominant crowd. For example, in *Carrie* Mrs. Collins (a friend's mother) encourages Carrie to gain confidence in herself before the prom by standing with her before a mirror and saying,

Look at your eyes—a little mascara to bring it out, huh? Your lips—try some lipstick. You have nice pretty lips...Look at your hair—it's beautiful hair. You could just put it up a little, maybe add a little curl. What do you think? (*Carrie* 1976)

In this manner, the media examples of prom portray continuously the idea that teens will have a better prom experience if they conform to the standards of the popular crowd.

Most magazines portray women and men dressed in a traditional manner for prom. Girls are largely featured in fancy ball gowns and men are shown wearing tuxedos. However, a few magazines featured articles encouraging teens to embrace their alternative style. *Teen Prom* featured an article entitled *Prom Your Way*, while *Teen Vogue* featured a pictorial entitled *Party Animals* displaying teens dressed in nontraditional prom attire. These articles encouraged teens to embrace their personal style and suggested that it is acceptable to break tradition in selecting one's prom attire.

Another common theme in prom portrayals that seems to connect with the broader social context is the importance of excessive consumerism in order to truly have a good time. This concept is very clear in the reality series *Laguna Beach*, in which the students spare no expense in creating the best prom experience possible. Even the manner in which guys ask their dates to prom is very elaborate and often includes flowers and special clothing among other expenses. Even students depicted as nonconformists among their high school crowd are shown spending significant amounts of money in order to buy everything considered appropriate for an ideal prom night. For instance, in *Dawson's Creek* the main characters purchase new clothing, flowers, and a limousine for the big event though they had previously mocked the significance of the prom.

Important rules of consumerism in general at high schools also seem to apply to the prom. For example, in *Full House*, main character D.J. scoffs at her boyfriend when he asks if

she is going to buy the same dress as another girl in the store. As such, though there are specific rules about what types of purchases must be made, some purchases must not be the same as anyone else in one's high school or attending one's prom. Furthermore, the media depict the idea that consumerism is not a step that can easily be bypassed in preparing for the perfect prom. In *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion*, Romy and Michele are mocked by their classmates during a prom flashback that portrays them dressed in outfits they designed and made themselves. In this way, the importance of consumerism as a means of conformity during the prom mirrors the importance of consumerism to fit in to the dominant school social scene in general.

All of the featured magazines are undoubtedly centered around consumerism and its necessity to the prom experience. All five of the magazines endorsed multiple designers and products in articles regarding the perfect dress, hair, and makeup for the prom. In addition, multiple magazines featured a variety of shoes, accessories, and purses for the big night. *Seventeen* magazine even had articles on tanning, skincare, and perfume. While some of the magazines featured articles about shopping on a budget, the majority of the ads and articles featured expensive designer items. Only *Teen Vogue* included an article with instructions for altering an existing dress to create a new prom look. However, the overwhelming sentiment of all the included magazines was the necessity of spending money to achieve one's ideal prom night.

Another very common theme of prom depictions that mirrors the broader social context of schools is the importance of the perfect date. In the same manner that a popular boyfriend or girlfriend may elevate one's social status among his or her high school community, the perfect date to prom is depicted as having the propensity to assist even the least popular student in

achieving an instant increase in social status. At the same time, taking a less than desirable date to prom may easily lessen one's status among his or her high school community. Such was the case with Blane in *Pretty in Pink* who faces strong criticism and ridicule from his friends for asking a less popular girl to the prom. However, the media generally depict the idea that the perfect prom date is all a less popular student needs to achieve instant acceptance at his or her school.

The media also suggest strongly that a date is a necessary element of a fun and enjoyable prom experience. None of the included sources depict a guy or girl attending the prom alone and having a good time. In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Buffy attends the prom by herself after her boyfriend breaks up with her, but she stands looking lonely at the edge of the dance floor until her ex-boyfriend shows up at the last minute to dance with her. The main characters in *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion* attend their prom with each other and appear to have a decent time, though they are mocked by their classmates for not having dates to the prom. It is clear in prom depictions that attending the prom alone or with a group of friends is not a socially desirable option.

Those who attend their proms alone are also frequently depicted giving excuses as to why they do not have dates. For instance, in *American Pie* the character Jess tells Finch she is alone at the prom because she is keeping her options open. Even an adult surgical intern attending the prom at the hospital for the dying cancer patient in *Grey's Anatomy* feels the need to provide an excuse for not attending the event with a woman. When asked if he has a date, Alex responds, "Nah, this thing is cheesy. I wouldn't waste a decent chick on this." Consequently, the media send a clear message that it is best to attend the prom with a date. The desirability of being

paired up during the prom tends to mirror the general sentiment of most media outlets that being in a relationship is far desirable to life as a single.

Finally, media portrayals of the prom date selection process tend to reflect the general notion that men should take the lead in the mate selection process. Just as men are typically depicted in the lead role of pursuing potential romantic partners, men are also portrayed as being responsible for selecting and arranging prom dates. For example, in *Pretty in Pink* Blane asks Andie to attend the prom, breaks off the date with her, and then shows up at the dance to make up with her in the end. Similarly, in the reality series *Laguna Beach*, one of the most popular girls in the senior class is shown stressfully discussing with her friends what she is going to do if nobody asks her to the dance. Even though she is viewed as very popular by her classmates, it is never suggested that she should ask someone herself. The only media source in which the general notion of male dominance was slightly more relaxed was *Grey's Anatomy*, but the only women depicted as selecting their own dates are adults and many of the pairings are obvious because of existing relationships. As such, in the same manner that women are typically portrayed as subordinate to men in the dating arena, media depictions of the prom typically portray girls patiently waiting to be asked by a guy to attend the dance.

Several of the magazines featured articles discussing the topic of prom dates. Magazines were much more egalitarian in discussing the importance of gender in determining who should ask their date to prom. While *Your Prom* featured an article entitled *Will He Pop the Question?*, *Teen Prom* and *Seventeen* had articles respectively entitled *Get Any Guy to be Your Date* and *Ask Your Crush to Prom*. Consequently, some magazines suggest that women asking men to prom is an acceptable and welcome alternative to the tradition of men asking women to be their dates.

In actuality, participants were divided in their excitement levels about attending their first proms. Three of the men expressed some ambivalence or very little expectations, while two were rather excited to attend their proms. Interestingly, the man who was the most excited about attending his prom spent the largest amount of money on the night and the longest amount of time on his preparations, at \$250 and two months respectively, in comparison with any other man. In contrast, the men who expressed more ambivalence or very little excitement about the prom experience spent \$100 or less and put between a couple of weeks to one month of time into their prom preparations. In the end, the only man who expressed full satisfaction in his prom experience was the man who spent the most money and time on his preparations. Though the other men also expressed some level of satisfaction in their prom experiences, these results suggest that high levels of conformity with the traditions of prom and a willingness to engage in the commercial aspect of the experience may be linked to one's overall satisfaction with his or her prom experience.

In contrast, all the women participants expressed some excitement about the idea of attending their proms. In addition, all five women felt they were popular during high school and viewed their high school experience positively. Only one participant expressed some disdain towards the idea of the prom experience prior to attending the prom and stated, "I used to think it was stupid, like I didn't wanna go to any dances. I don't know. I just thought it was dumb to spend money—like a lot of money—on a dress unless you were going with someone you really liked" (Tara, age 21). Despite her reservations about investing a great deal of money in the prom, this student was interestingly the participant who spent the most on her prom preparations. The two women who expressed the highest level of satisfaction in their prom experiences spent between \$400 to \$500, began their preparations the longest in advance at between two to four

months, and spent an average of five hours the day of prom preparing. The three women who expressed some level of disappointment or ambivalence towards their prom experience spent between \$200 to \$500, began their preparations between three weeks to two months in advance, and spent between three to four hours getting ready for the dance. These results seem to suggest that conformity and consumerism were important to these women in keeping with their initial expectations of the prom experience, but that these measures did not always pay off in the end with the materialization of their ideal prom experiences.

Interview data also suggest that attending the prom with a date was very important to the participants. As previously mentioned, none of the participants attended his or her prom without an exclusive date, though three participants did not attend one of their proms. All five men said they would not have attended the prom without a date, despite their general level of acceptance towards those who did at their own proms. The women in this study expressed a range of acceptance towards this practice, with two saying they would not go without a date, two saying they would, and one who felt fairly sure she would have gone without a date:

I probably would not have gone alone. I probably would've at least found a friend to go with, you know? It's one of those things where you always told other people 'it doesn't matter, go by yourself' but then you know, like, you wouldn't. (Tina, age 21)

These findings are consistent with the previous finding that though all ten participants had students attend their proms without exclusive dates, none discussed groups of men attending the prom alone or in groups. As such, these findings additionally align with the media's suggestion that dates are a highly important part of the prom experience, but women participants tended to suggest that attending the prom without a date would not have been as tragic as some media outlets may suggest.

The media also fail to represent the prevalence of women asking dates to prom. While this was an extremely rare occurrence among included media sources, interview data suggests otherwise. Among ten participants, two women asked their dates to prom and two men were asked to prom by their dates. Though three of the four of these arrangements were made with either sophomores or graduates who would have technically been unable to make the arrangements in the traditional manner, these findings suggest that asking a date to prom may not be as gender-traditional as the media suggests. While most prom arrangements occurred in a more traditional manner, those involved in a woman-established couple did not express significant shock or embarrassment in their stereotypically nontraditional arrangements.

One aspect of the prom experience that the media fails to portray in proportion to its actual occurrence is the prevalence of the prom after-party. While several prom depictions end with a romantic kiss on the dance floor, students' actual prom experiences almost always last well beyond the final dance. All ten participants attended an after-prom event that was either planned by the school or the students themselves. The prevalence and importance of the after-prom party mirrors the broader social atmosphere of most schools, as several participants expressed a higher level of comfort at post-prom parties and a desire to let loose with their extended freedom for the night. Tyler stated:

My friends thought it [prom] was just an opportunity to party basically. I don't think they really got into the aspects of the whole dance and all that and dressing up and whatnot. (Tyler, age 20)

To these students, prom was clearly linked to the social culture and network of their high schools.

Most participants' after-prom plans lasted until around 5:00 a.m. Though all students stated their school had a formal post-prom event which they attended for varying amounts of

time, seven participants also attended private parties thrown after prom or spent time alone with their dates. In addition, six participants admitted alcohol was involved in various stages of their prom experience. One participant stated, “After promenade on the way to the dinner is when everyone drank, or during prom in the bathroom. It was funny. Girls were drinking alcohol from empty perfume bottles” (Tina, age 21). Furthermore, half the participants spent the night with groups of friends or their dates. These findings suggest that prom is a much bigger event than simply attending the dance with friends, and post-prom activities appeared to provide students with an extended opportunity to engage in more normal social activities according to the norms of their social networks.

Though somewhat exaggerated, the media portrays a relatively accurate depiction of the importance of conformity and consumerism in achieving the ideal prom experience. While the importance of excessive consumerism may not have been extremely vital to men’s prom experiences, all the women engaged in extensive levels of preparation and spending in hopes of achieving their ideal prom night. In addition, the media somewhat accurately depict the importance of attending the prom with a date, but most often fail to depict the perceived ability of some students to attend the prom without a date and still have an enjoyable time. Furthermore, the media largely fail to represent the prevalence of women asking their dates to prom in contrast to the more traditional depiction of male-dominated date selection. Finally, it appears that the media fail on a rather regular basis to portray the connection of prom to the broader social environments of the students, as after-prom activities were an extremely important part of the event for interview participants.

CONCLUSION

The prom is a longstanding tradition deeply rooted in American culture. Both existing literature and study data suggest prom represents a culmination of teenage socialization, involving aspects of romance, sexual expression, and adherence to hegemonic gender norms. Furthermore, while prom is widely enjoyed by a variety of students, this research has demonstrated that proms are frequently based upon the norms and standards of the white, heterosexual, upper-middle class, popular students. In addition, the prom event is related intricately to the broader social context of American high schools in terms of the strong emphasis placed on conformity, consumerism, and heterosexual mate selection. In these ways, the prom is a much more complex event than the fun, romantic evening it is traditionally portrayed to be in the media.

The main purpose of my research was to compare the social and cultural myths about the prom with the reality of the high school prom experience. Findings indicate prom is considered an important rite of passage on a societal level in America, but that individual perceptions and experiences at the prom do not always measure up to the notions advanced about this cultural ideal. As anticipated, the media shape teens' perceptions of the prom in a rather idealistic and unrealistic fashion that invariably differs from their actual experiences at the prom. However, while teens may discuss this sentiment on an individual level, a societal-wide discussion of the shortcomings of the prom experience would seem to conflict with various other cultural values intricately linked to the prom.

This study is not without limitations. One of the most significant limitations of this study is the sample sizes of the various data sources. Largely due to time constraints, data collected in for this research was limited to information provided by ten participants, five magazines, five

movies, and five television shows. Though some strategic consideration went into source selection, the fact that these samples are relatively small may compromise the generalizability of the study findings.

Another limitation is the relative uniformity of the study participants. All study participants were white, heterosexual, between the lower-middle and upper-middle class, and attended high school in Iowa. As such, these students' perceptions may have been significantly influenced by their more mainstream status within their high schools. Including students of minority populations, such as homosexuals or minority races, may have provided a more comprehensive view of the prom experience. Furthermore, this study was limited to participants who had attended at least one of their own high school proms. Discussing the concept of prom with a student who chose never to attend the event would likely have yielded different results.

Future research should explore the experiences of students considered less mainstream among their high school populations. Such data collection would provide further insight into ways the prom is based upon the standards of a narrow population. In addition, further research should explore the reasoning behind a student's choice not to attend the prom. Data collection from these sources would provide a more comprehensive understanding of American students' views of the prom in light of their varying characteristics. Furthermore, this research would provide further insight into the social and cultural significance attached to the American high school prom experience.

This study provides an initial inquiry into a largely celebrated American cultural event that is widely accepted yet virtually unquestioned. Prom is commonly thought of as a fun and harmless experience for American high school teens to enjoy. Very rarely, if ever, are the rituals of the prom examined with a critical eye to uncover deeper social implications of participation in

this event. This study establishes a first glimpse into a rather untapped area of sociological inquiry and paves the way for further researchers to engage in more specific and in-depth research regarding an age-old American tradition that is otherwise easily written off as nothing more than a fun teenage experience.

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APPENDIX A: MEDIA SOURCES**Movies:**

American Pie (1999)
Carrie (1976)
Pretty In Pink (1986)
Romy and Michele's High School Reunion (1997)
She's All That (1999)

Television Shows:

Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Prom, Season 3 Episode 20 (1999)
Dawson's Creek: Promicide, Season 4 Episode 20 (2001)
Full House: Prom Night, Season 6 Episode 22 (1993)
Grey's Anatomy: Losing My Religion, Season 2 Episode 27 (2005)
Laguna Beach: Our Last Prom, Season 2 Episode 12 (2005)

Magazines:

Cosmo Girls Prom (Winter/Spring 2008)
Seventeen Prom (Winter/Spring 2008)
Teen Prom (Winter/Spring 2008)
Teen Vogue (April 2008)
Your Prom (Spring 2008)

APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

Project Title: The Myth and Reality of Prom: A Qualitative Examination of the American High School Prom Experience

Name of Principal Investigator: Sarah Brandt
Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Marybeth C. Stalp

You have been selected to participate in a research project conducted through the University of Northern Iowa. The main purpose of this study is to compare social and cultural myths about the prom with the reality of the high school prom experience. A main component of this study is to compare people's expectations of prom with their actual prom experiences.

As a participant in this research, you will be asked a series of interview questions about your prom preparations, expectations, and experiences. Your interview will take approximately 45 minutes to one hour and will be audio-taped. In order to protect your privacy, your real name will not be used in any transcripts, publications, or oral presentations.

Information obtained during this study will be kept strictly confidential. The information obtained in this study will be used for an honors thesis project and a scholarly research conference. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalization. Risks of participation are very minimal, and there are no direct benefits for participating in this research.

If you have any questions about this study or your participation, or if questions arise throughout the course of your participation, please contact Sarah Brandt at 641-430-9444. You may also direct questions to Dr. Marybeth C. Stalp of the Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Criminology at 319-273-6235, or the office of the Human Participants Coordinator, University of Northern Iowa, at 319-273-6148, with questions regarding the research process and your rights as a research participant.

Please anticipate hearing from Sarah Brandt in the near future, in whichever manner you have deemed most convenient, to confirm or deny your willingness to voluntarily participate in this research project.

APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT

University of Northern Iowa Human Participants Review Informed Consent

Project Title: The Myth and Reality of Prom: A Qualitative Examination of the American High School Prom Experience

Name of investigator: Sarah Brandt
Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Marybeth C. Stalp

You are invited to participate in a research project conducted through the University of Northern Iowa. The University requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project. The following information is provided to help you make an informed decision regarding whether or not you wish to participate. The main purpose of this study is to compare social and cultural myths about the prom with the reality of the high school prom experience. A main component of this study is to compare people's expectations of prom with their actual prom experiences.

As a participant in this research, you will be asked a series of interview questions. Your interview will take approximately 45 minutes to one hour and will be audio-taped. To protect your privacy, your actual name will not be used in any interview transcripts, presentations, or publications. In addition, all audiotapes will be stored in a secure location and destroyed upon the completion of this project in May 2008.

Information obtained during this study which may identify you (e.g. interview transcript) will be kept strictly confidential. Information obtained in this study will be used for an honors thesis project and an undergraduate research conference. Participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw or refuse participation at any time without penalization. Risks of participation are minimal, and there are no direct benefits for participating in this research.

If you have questions about the study, or desire information in the future regarding your participation or the study generally, please contact Sarah Brandt at 641-430-9444. You may also direct questions to Dr. Marybeth C. Stalp of the Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Criminology at 319-273-6235, or the office of the Human Participants Coordinator, University of Northern Iowa, at 319-273-6148, with questions regarding the research process and your rights as a research participant.

Agreement:

I am fully aware of the nature and extent of my participation in this project as stated above and the possible risks arising from it. I hereby agree to participate in this project. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent statement. I am 18 years of age or older.

(Signature of participant)

(Date)

(Printed name of participant)

(Signature of investigator)

(Date)

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Demographics:

- Note gender.
- Note race.
- How old are you?
- What is your sexual orientation?
- What is the approximate population of the city you lived in during high school?
- How would you describe your family's socioeconomic status while you were in high school?
- How did your family's socioeconomic status compare to the rest of the people that attended your high school?
- Describe to me briefly your immediate family.
- Who else lived in your home while you attended high school?

School Information:

- Approximately how many people attended your high school (total/per class)?
- Describe the racial composition of your high school.
- How would you describe the socioeconomic statuses of the students at your school?
- How do you feel you compared with the rest of the students in your school (academically, socially)?
- Tell me about your involvement in your high school (groups, sports, etc.).
- How would you describe your high school experience overall?

Perceptions of Prom:

- At what approximate age did you first learn about prom?
- Prior to attending an actual prom dance, what were your perceptions of the prom experience?
- What do you think influenced or shaped your perceptions of the prom?
- Describe the level of significance of the prom among your school community.
- How would you describe your family's perception of prom?
- What was your friend group's perception of prom?

Prom Date:

- Did you attend prom with a date?
- Did your prom date attend the same school as you?
- How old was your date in comparison to you?
- How long in advance did you make arrangements to attend prom with your date?
- Describe how you asked your date to prom (or how he/she asked you).
- How would your classmates and peers have described your date?
- How well did you know your date before agreeing to attend prom together?
- Describe your level of comfort with your prom date prior to the actual dance.
- Were there any same sex couples who attended your prom?
- How was/would this be perceived by your school?
- Did students attend your prom alone or with groups of friends?

- Describe your perception of students who did not attend the prom with a date.
- Tell me about the prevalence of interracial couples at your prom?
- Describe your school's comfort level with interracial couples.

Prom Preparations (outfit):

- Approximately how long before the prom did you begin your preparations?
- Approximately how many dresses/tuxes did you try on before selecting your prom outfit?
- Estimate how much time you spent shopping for your entire prom ensemble.
- List everything you paid for in order to complete your prom look (clothing, shoes, hair, nails, makeup, tanning, etc.)
- Give me a rough estimate of how much money went into completing your prom look.

Actual Prom Experience:

- **Getting Ready:**
 - At what time during the day of prom did you begin getting ready?
 - Approximately how many hours did you spend getting ready for prom?
 - Did you get ready in a group or by yourself?
 - Who helped you get ready for the prom (hairstylist, parents, friends)?
 - How did you feel during these preparations?
 - Describe your level of satisfaction with your appearance?
- **Photos:**
 - Did you take photos before attending your prom?
 - Where were these photos taken?
 - With whom did you take photos?
 - Who made the photo arrangements?
 - Describe your thoughts/feelings while having prom photos taken.
 - Did you have professional photos taken at the prom?
 - How often do you look back at your prom photos?
- **Dinner:**
 - Where did you eat dinner the night of your prom?
 - With whom did you eat dinner?
 - Who paid for the dinner?
 - Estimate how much the dinner cost.
 - Tell me what you remember about the conversation during this dinner.
 - Describe your comfort level during your prom dinner.
- **Dance:**
 - What time was your prom scheduled to begin and end?
 - How long were you at the actual prom dance?
 - What were your impressions of the decorations?
 - Describe any food or drinks available at your prom dance.
 - What was the music like at your prom?
 - Who did you dance with at your prom?
 - What were you feeling during the prom dance?

- **After:**

- What were your plans after your prom dance?
- Who arranged your after-prom plans?
- How long did your after-prom plans last?
- Were alcohol or drugs involved in any part of your prom night?
- What were your romantic expectations of your date after prom?
- What were you date's romantic expectations on prom night?
- Where did you sleep on the night of your prom?
- Were you parents aware of your after-prom plans?
- Do you think your parents would have approved of your after-prom plans on a normal weekend evening?

Perceptions:

- Looking back now, what are your perceptions of your prom experience?
- Has your perception of your prom changed now from your perception when you were in high school? How?
- Was your prom experience what you expected it to be? How so?
- If you could change anything about your prom experience, what would it be?