

We Love to See It: Diversity in Romantic Comedies

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Abstract

In considering the levels of representation in the casting, ethnicity of the characters, and the common stereotypes employed in the narrative, this thesis analyzes how diversity is presented in romantic comedies through a textual analysis of the following six films: *27 Dresses* (2008), *The Proposal* (2009), *Hitch* (2005), *Maid in Manhattan* (2002), *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), and *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018). The romantic comedy genre has changed over time but remained a favorite across the industry. Studies show that they have a diverse audience made up of members for various racial and ethnical groups. The Hollywood Industry producing these films, however, is not nearly as diverse. The six film will show the industry as it is while acknowledging what could and should be done to make improvements. This thesis shows that Hollywood should seek to improve the diversity of romantic comedies because the audiences are in dire need of proportional representation.

Introduction

Romantic comedies have ranked amongst the most popular films since early film history. *The McGraw-Hill Encyclopedia of World Drama* defines the romantic comedy as “a comic tradition of the Elizabethan drama, as best exemplified in the plays of Robert Greene (1558-1592) and Shakespeare,” blending characteristics of romance and comedy (Hochman). From a study conducted in 2018, 84% of the female respondents as well as 67% of the male respondents cited the genre as one of their favorites (Morning Consult). These films have been a consistent crowd favorite across the industry.

For many, romantic comedies offer lighthearted and joyous perspectives on the world of love and relationships. Conventionally, a romantic comedy centers on the story of two individuals in love (whether they realize that themselves) and the humor that ensues. Some of the most classic romantic comedies are Shakespeare’s plays, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Much Ado About Nothing*. Yet, as the world of entertainment changed over time from stage to screen, so did the world of romantic comedies. Today, audiences identify with the 1993 *Much Ado About Nothing* film starring Emma Thompson and Kenneth Branagh. Although audiences may not know *The Taming of the Shrew*, many know the 1999 film reimagining, *10 Things I Hate about You*, starring Julia Stiles and the late Heath Ledger. On average, romantic comedy films have been the sixth most popular film genre in the United States since 1999 and that does not look to be changing any time soon (Morning Consult).

Popularity of the romantic comedy was thriving during the 1990s and early 2000s. At that time, some of the major films from the genre to reach audiences were *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* and *Hitch*, two of the highest-grossing romantic comedies of all time. As

the industry has transitioned throughout the years, *27 Dresses* and *The Proposal* also made the highest grossing list. Most recently, the crowd favorite was *Crazy Rich Asians* which premiered in 2018 and made history as the first box office romantic comedy with an all Asian cast (Ho).

In contrast to its overwhelming popularity, the romantic comedy genre is notoriously known to be lacking in diversity. The inclusion of people of color is rare and, when it happens, it is normally to play the part of a supportive sidekick to a white lead. People of color are cast as witty, minor characters or comic relief. It is rare for a person of color to have their own screen time, independent relationship, or character development outside of their time with a white character. This tradition minimizes the role of people of color in the genre.

Some of the hindrances to progress in diversity in romantic comedies has been due in part to Hollywood's historical racial discrimination. As an example, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), starring Spencer Tracy, Sidney Poitier, and Katherine Hepburn, was one of the first films to distinctly highlight and celebrate interracial marriage. An interracial relationship is a union between a member of one racial group and a member of a different racial group. It was released mere months after the illegality of interracial marriage was overturned in the United States ("Loving"). Not only did the movie feature a Black male as a romantic lead but it was also highly successful and critically acclaimed by The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (IMDb). This film helped change the perception that movies with a Black lead or an interracial relationship would not do well across the board and made way for the diverse future towards which the industry is still working.

Typically, the diversity of a film's cast is measured based on percent minority, or the ratio of non-white cast members to white cast members. UCLA publishes an annual Hollywood Diversity Report which details the levels of diversity in various genres. Of course, non-white actors are underrepresented in most genres including romantic comedies (Hunt and Ramón). This can be clearly seen through a comparison of casts and the percentage of non-white actors who make it to screen.

Beyond the casting, the stories themselves lack diversity. A common trope is to set a romantic comedy in a big, urban city or a small, rural town. In either setting, the community ends up being predominantly white. As times have progressed, comedies have started adding in "token" people of color to combat diversity backlash. But the industry is not yet where it could be. Diversity is more than including one or two non-white actors to meet a minimum threshold. Of the many elements that create a diverse film, casting is only the beginning. It continues through the story, the culture representation, the intended audience, and the production of the project. To be authentically diverse is not a checklist but a process.

The process of creating diverse movies has often been dismissed as too much effort or too great an expense. Successful romantic comedies like *Coming to America* and *Crazy Rich Asians*, however, prove that the reward of a diverse project is worth the work and the money, and these are not the only films to prove this. My project will aim to highlight and analyze these films in conjunction with each to prove that diversity is a worthy cause in the industry and should not be dismissed.

Methodology

Research Question

This thesis textually analyzes six popular romantic comedies that have premiered over the last few decades. To begin, this project considers the extent to which diversity is constructed in the films. It also classifies the identities of the main characters to see whether they represent racial minorities or underrepresented demographics. This project investigates each film's narrative to see if the story is devoted to a culture and if it is told by someone who authentically understands the culture. It also accounts for whether the ethnicity of the character matters to the film's narrative. Finally, this project addresses some popular tropes commonly used in romantic comedies and investigates whether they perpetuate or challenge racially motivated stereotypes.

Sample

27 Dresses (2008), *The Proposal* (2009), *Hitch* (2005), *Maid in Manhattan* (2002), *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), and *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) are among the highest-grossing romantic comedies of all time. Each film brings a unique aspect to the industry, and all of them have varying levels of diversity from a white cast to a non-white cast.

27 Dresses features very few non-white, minority characters, and uses them for comedic relief. *27 Dresses* follows Jane, a seasoned bridesmaid, as she plans a wedding for her secret crush who is marrying Jane's younger sister. Along the way, Jane finds out her favorite wedding columnist is a cynic who is smitten with her despite being anti-wedding.

The Proposal uses the few minorities on screen as a punchline and a source for laughs. In *The Proposal*, Margaret ends up in a fake engagement to her assistant, Andrew, as an elaborate ruse to fool the immigration office into delaying her deportation. On an unexpected trip to Alaska to meet his family, she finds herself falling in love.

Maid in Manhattan tells the story of Marisa, a maid in a five-star hotel, who accidentally catches the eye of politician Chris Marshall when he mistakes her for a Manhattan socialite. The relationship turns rocky when her identity is revealed leaving both of their careers at stake. While this film features a Latina in the lead role, it perpetuates the maid/cleaning lady stereotype often used across the film industry which is why it is part of the sample.

The blockbuster romantic comedy, *Hitch* is about Alex “Hitch” Hitchens, the renowned date doctor. His client, Kevin, falls for starlet, Allegra. But Hitch does not realize his own new interest, Sara, is a gossip columnist covering Allegra’s every move. The relationship is tested when Hitch’s job makes the front page. There was some controversy about the race and casting of the film’s leading lady so it is included in the sample.

My Big Fat Greek Wedding is included because it is the highest grossing romantic comedy of all time. In the tale of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, Toula comes from a boisterous Greek family but falls in love with a non-Greek, Ian. The wedding is big as the two worlds collide and Ian does everything he can to fit in. Nia Vardalos both wrote and starred in this autobiographical romantic comedy. The casting of the film needed to reflect Greek culture.

Crazy Rich Asians rocked the industry with its incredible all-Asian cast which is why it is included. It is based on a novel by Kevin Kwan. The heroine, Rachel, does not know that her boyfriend, Nick, is rich enough to be royalty until they visit his hometown in Singapore for a wedding. Her Chinese-American background poses a problem for Nick's mother and grandmother and Nick is faced with a choice. This film highlights the lavish and extravagant lifestyles of upper-class Asians and does so with an all Asian cast.

Conducting the Research

To conduct this research, a textual analysis was used. First, each film in the sample was viewed, with critical notes taken on the characters, relationships, dialogue, narratives, and overarching aesthetics. For the research questions, the nature of each role, whether it was a main or supporting character, whether it was cast ethnically or whitewashed, and the cultural reception of the character were recorded. The following questions guided the analysis: Is the race of each main characters identified? If so, how was race constructed in the storyline? What is the relationship between the racial majority and racial minority groups throughout the movie, if applicable? Were stereotypes perpetuated? How were these indicated in terms of visual and verbal cues? Did narratives or characters challenge stereotypes? What were the visual and verbal cues that indicated that stereotypes were challenged to the audience?

Thesis Statement

Although movie audiences are very diverse, the romantic comedy movie industry fails to reflect that diversity. This characteristic of the culture remains underrepresented. Diverse stories deserve the same amount of attention and dedication as their primarily white counterparts because they are paramount to the culture and profitable in the industry. The dynamics of the traditional romantic comedy may change because of race or culture. Often the impact is minimal and does not injure the traditional form of the romantic comedy. Diverse romantic comedies with non-white leads are among some of the genre's most profitable films. Much of the film industry is still under the impression that diversity is an added expense instead of an added benefit. That perception needs to change to make way for the increasing diversity in the industry. Diverse romantic comedies are beginning to gain popularity because the audiences are starving for representation. Through studying a carefully curated selection of films, I will analyze the effects of diversity on their stories, production and profitability to prove that diversity is worth the presumed risk.

Findings

To examine diversity in romantic comedies, a textual analysis was conducted on six films: *27 Dresses*, *The Proposal*, *Hitch*, *Maid in Manhattan*, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, and *Crazy Rich Asians*. From this analysis, three levels of diversity were identified. The first level of films that has a non-diverse cast, meaning very few characters with speaking roles represent minority groups. The second level has a mixed cast where characters with speaking roles represent majority and minority racial groups. The third level has a mostly diverse cast made up of members from underrepresented racial groups. These films tell stories that are culturally diverse using characters and actors from that culture. Most romantic comedies fall into the lower levels with a select few reaching the highest levels of diversity. Next, the role of ethnicity in the films' narratives was examined. Finally, this study investigated the extent to which the romantic comedies perpetuated or challenged stereotypes. Combining these characteristics explains the diversity of a film from casting to screen.

Levels of Diversity

First level of diversity

The films *27 Dresses* and *The Proposal* can be classified in the first level with minimal diversity represented. Each film features one or two supporting characters who are minorities. While these characters do have speaking roles, they are not part of the primary romantic storyline. For example, in *27 Dresses*, Pedro and Trent represent two of the only apparent minority characters. In *The Proposal*, the only minority character is Ramone. Since none of these characters has an independent storyline or development, these films sit firmly in the first level of diversity.

27 Dresses is the story of Jane, a forever bridesmaid and dedicated assistant to her boss, George. She has fallen in love with George, but he is in love with her sister, Tess. Paths cross even further when Jane's favorite wedding columnist Kevin "Malcolm" Doyle is covering the spectacle for a front-page feature in the *New York Journal* wedding section.

In *27 Dresses*, Trent is Kevin's assistant at the paper is one of the only people of color to have a speaking role in this film. His screen time is limited to interactions with Kevin – they share a quick walk-and-talk through the office. Later, Trent is by Kevin's side once again as they walk through the city. This time, Kevin does most of the talking and Trent is on screen for a mere twenty-three seconds. During Trent's last scene, his interactions branch out as he flirts with Jane's best friend, Casey, and checks her out as she walks down the aisle as Jane's bridesmaid. Again, his scene is short - less than thirty seconds with very few lines. Trent's role is that of a supporting character whose presence does little to add to the film's narrative. Such is the case with many minority characters on screen.

George's mentee, Pedro, only appears on screen with other characters and scarcely contributes to the overarching narrative. The other characters are kind and dote on the young boy, but he is not part of the romantic storyline. He is seldom on screen, save for a few scenes with the other main characters and his lines are limited. Pedro is the focus of jokes about his Hispanic heritage and language, and used as a vehicle for stereotypes whenever he is on screen. In one instance, Tess, Jane's sister, overdoes her "Hola, Pedro" exaggerating the fact that she thinks Pedro is incapable of understanding English. Later, Tess hires Pedro to clean the apartment, which she hides from Jane and

George. Pedro exhibits a greater sense of pride toward the end as he announces at the rehearsal dinner that he is starting a cleaning service. Pedro's underdevelopment and lack of screen time mirrors Trent's and mark another attempt at diversity fallen short.

Some other minor examples of the lack of diversity include the first wedding scene which only has one Black person on the screen. People of color do not appear in many of the scenes – absent in Jane's office, the bar scene, and the 50th Anniversary party that Jane accidentally crashes. In addition, as the film chronicles Jane's past 27 stints as a bridesmaid, few of the brides are non-white. Those minorities that are shown are used for comedic relief in short bit parts.

Similarly, with few instances of racial representation, *The Proposal* demonstrates the first level of diversity meaning that it has a non-diverse cast and only one minority on screen. The movie follows publishing powerhouse, Margaret, as she ropes her assistant, Andrew into a fake engagement scheme to save her from deportation. They must lie their way through a weekend with his family in Sitka, Alaska, and convince all of them that their love is real. Though the movie opens in downtown New York, there are barely any people of color. The main character, Andrew Tate, has an unnamed Black friend at the office who shares brief screen time. The first prominent non-white character in the film is Bob, an employee that Margaret, another main character, fires. In Bob's tirade, he refuses to be one of Margaret's "personal slaves." Without context, the remark could be either an interesting turn of phrase at best or an insensitive and offensive remark at worst.

The executives at the New York publishing firm where Margaret works are all white men. Broader camera shots of the office reveal a few more faces of color, but these other characters do not have names or lines of dialogue. This all occurs within the first

few scenes of the film but that is where the diversity ends. Once Andrew and Margaret arrive in Sitka, Alaska for a weekend with his family, there is only one person of color – Ramone – in the entire city. Ramone is a Hispanic character used throughout the film as fuel for different stereotypes and bit scenes. His scenes are limited to providing comedic relief through his muddled accent, several jobs, and odd fascination with Margaret. Also, while Margaret is in Sitka, she learns that Andrew’s grandmother is a descendant of the Tlingit people in North America. Most of what the audience hears about the Tlingit people in this film is lighthearted and humorous. With only one minority character on screen and no independent storyline or development, this film does not have enough to reach a higher level of diversity.

Second level of diversity

The second level of representation includes films with mixed casts and a higher percentage of minorities shown on screen. Members on screen represent a variety of ethnically diverse groups. From the sample set, *Hitch* and *Maid in Manhattan* can be classified into this category. Both films have casts representative of a variety of backgrounds. Latina women star as the romantic female leads in both films, and *Hitch* has a Black romantic male lead. The remainder of the casts represent a mix of white actors and minority actors. In addition, their non-white characters on screen have independent storylines and ample screen time and development. These films are unique because of their interracial relationships that are front and center.

Maid in Manhattan follows Marisa, a dedicated single mom and a hardworking maid, through her job at the upscale Beresford Hotel in New York City. Beyond Marisa’s character definition and racial background, it is important to note how the other

characters in the film treat her, both as a maid and as a human being. Manhattan socialite Caroline Lane, from the hotel's most exclusive suite, immediately begins taking advantage of Marisa. From their first encounter, Caroline begs Marisa to do things outside of her job description such as running errands and returning clothes. When Marisa accidentally interrupts Caroline's workout with fellow socialite Rachel, she offers to come back and clean the room later. Caroline dismisses this and claims that Marisa can just "work around us." This comes with complete disregard for Marisa's time or even other rooms or guests needing her attention. She goes as far as to call Marisa "Maria" for the entire movie instead of learning her correct name. To Caroline, Marisa is not a mom or a hard worker or a friend; she is simply a maid.

Maid in Manhattan features an interracial relationship between a Latina woman and a white man, which sets it apart from the many romantic comedies that feature white couples. It is impossible to analyze the racial elements in this film without discussing the relationship between Marisa Ventura and Christopher Marshall. Christopher is a politician who has his whole future to think about. Every move he makes must be calculated to ensure the greatest possible exposure and success. Of course, that is all thrown to the side when he meets Marisa under the assumption that she is Caroline Lane.

Their lives become further intertwined when they run into each other on the street and Christopher's assistant, Jerry, finds out that her name is Marisa Ventura. After the surprise of her Spanish surname, the conversation quickly turns to Christopher's upcoming speech in the Bronx. She is incredulous as she recommends to Christopher, "Maybe you both should spend some real time in the projects, and then you wouldn't have to make up speeches." When Jerry questions how she would know about the

projects, she explains that she grew up there and lived within the same four blocks for her whole life. This sets the notion of her and Christopher coming from two different worlds: he talks about the problems in the Bronx, she was raised in them. Without saying directly, this subtly hints at the class differences between Latino families and white Americans.

Maid in Manhattan presents an overall diverse cast. At the hotel where Marisa works, the staff comes from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, and there is no discussion about their races or racial differences. This film also contains diversity in the background. More people of color are featured on screen during scenes set in New York City and the surrounding boroughs. Yet *Maid in Manhattan* is not consistently diverse. During the party scene, where Marisa and Christopher dance among a predominantly white crowd, the casting feels very intentional. The paparazzi outside the hotel when Marisa and Chris leave the first time are all white, as is Christopher's campaign team. It follows Marisa's observation that Christopher's world of political elites truly does not know about the true New York she knows from growing up there.

The film *Hitch* also exemplifies the second level of representation with a mixed cast and higher percentage of minorities. This movie tells the story of Alex Hitchens, a secret date "doctor," who falls in love with Sara, a gossip columnist whose words could end his hidden career. Within the first few minutes, *Hitch* presents a variety of races and features several interracial couples. The film's opening montage showcases a Black couple, a white couple, and an interracial Asian/white couple. The man working the newspaper stand is an Asian man named Young, and Ross, Sara's second photographer, is Filipino. Sara's right-hand man is Black. Other examples include the Black bartender

and the Black security guard, Larry, at Ellis Island. While they do not play prominent roles in the film, these supporting characters have names and spoken lines.

Here the ethnic diversity is unspoken. Sara Melas is never called Hispanic or Latina and Hitch is never called Black. In one scene, Sara thanks Hitch for the Spanish wine, and calls it “thoughtful.” Although it is never explained why, it can be assumed that it is because she is Hispanic. Later in the film, we briefly see Sara’s sister, Maria. Her name is a common name for a Hispanic character, but there is no reference to her being decidedly Hispanic. This film does a wonderful job of subtly reinforcing cultural differences in the details. In *Hitch*, the characters played by minority actors are not the supporting roles but the leads. They dominate the screen for the duration of the movie and carry the film’s narrative. Hitch and Sara are vital to the film. Race is not the primary driver of relationship tension. Instead, this tension comes from debates about expertise about dating and relationships. While this film is more diverse, it still follows the conventions of other romantic comedies, not addressing race or culture. For this reason, it is considered in the second-level of diversity.

Third level of diversity

My Big Fat Greek Wedding and *Crazy Rich Asians* exemplify the third level of diversity which features cast that are predominantly representative of minority culture and center around those cultures. The two films share their focus on non-American cultures, as their titles suggest, and their casts reflect that. They masterfully create relatable stories from within another culture and bridge the gap by showcasing stories that do not often receive screen time. Here, the lead female characters both represent

minority cultures, and the leading man in *Crazy Rich Asians* does as well. Since these films have storylines directly related to ethnicity and cultural identity, they both land in the third and highest level of diversity.

As the title and Greek music playing during the opening credits suggest, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* is decidedly about Greek culture. Toula Portokalos is a self-proclaimed “frump girl” until she begins a life outside of the obligations to her very large Greek family. She meets Ian and quickly falls in love with him. The families clash as her parents want her to marry a nice Greek boy which Ian is not. A central location in the film is Dancing Zorba’s, the restaurant that Toula’s family owns and operates. She is the main “seating hostess,” and this is where she meets Ian Miller. Their whole relationship highlights the difference between her large Greek family and his small white Anglo-Saxon one. For example, Toula has 27 first cousins and Ian only has two. His parents expect him to get married in the county club, where Toula must get married in the Greek Orthodox church. But instead of ruling this as problematic, Ian remarks, “We’re not different species, we come from different backgrounds.” From the beginning, the film deals with diversity between cultures as a primary foundation of the storyline.

Upon news of their engagement, Toula’s family emphasizes how different he is from them. Her father and family patriarch, Gus Portokalos, refers to Ian as a “xeno” multiple times.” That prefix indicates something foreign and is a slang term for those not of Greek culture or descent (“Xeno”). Ian’s heritage is difficult for Gus because he does not know anything about this man. “Is he a good boy? I don’t know. Is he from a good family? I don’t know,” remarks Gus. The Greek culture is a close-knit network of families where they share information and news travels quickly. But Ian does not come

from that culture. There is no information to share about him or his family or his upbringing. He is an outsider. Furthermore, as an outsider, Ian Miller is not part of the Greek Orthodox church. To appease Gus Portokalos and make his marriage to Toula valid and official, he gets baptized as a Greek Orthodox. Toula is ecstatic but the process of welcoming him to the family is not easy. Mixing up words and anglicizing pronunciation is only the beginning of this merge of cultures.

Crazy Rich Asians showcases the most elite Asian cultures through the eyes of Chinese-American Rachel as she finds out her boyfriend is one of Singapore's richest and most desirable men. The entire cast is of Asian descent. While this film is primarily about various cultures throughout Asia, it also touches on how those cultures interact with and differ from American culture through interactions with food and relationships with family. Throughout the film, *Crazy Rich Asians* juxtaposes the two cultures in a narrative where diversity truly is the foundation.

A comparison comes at the beginning of the film with a flashback to a childhood trip to London in 1995 as Nick and his family arrive at the legendary Calthorpe hotel for their reservation. The hotel staff and manager refuse to honor their reservation because the family is Asian. The front desk clerk makes a rude remark about the Calthorpe being a "private hotel" before the manager tells Eleanor, Nick's mother, and the family to "go explore Chinatown." Felicity, Nick's aunt, responds with a Cantonese insult along the lines of "go to hell." The staff does not even allow them to use the hotel's phone but sends them out in the storm to use a pay phone down the street. When Eleanor reenters the hotel, the manager threatens to call the police, even though they have caused no disruption or done anything wrong. As Lord Calthorpe, the owner of the hotel, exits from

the elevator, the manager apologizes for the “disturbance” which Lord Calthorpe ignores, greeting Eleanor instead. He congratulates her on her husband’s purchase of the Calthorpe Hotel, and introduces her as the “new lady of the house.” This comparison highlights the differences between London society and the Asian elites.

The instance of the characters’ American and Asian cultures interacting comes with Rachel meets her college roommate, Goh Peik Lin, at her family mansion in Singapore. She greets Rachel with an enthusiastic “New York in the House” and this subtly enforces the cultural differences between Asian-Americans and Asians.

Immediately, Peik Lin relegates Rachel to a purely American status. Around the girls’ feet run Astor, Vanderbilt and Rockefeller, the Goh family’s pets. They are named after some of America’s richest businessmen, yet they are small, fluffy, white dogs.

Throughout the entire scene, the Goh family pokes fun at American culture. When Rachel enters the house, she marvels at the gold centric interior design. Neenah, Peik Lin’s mother, explains the inspiration as being the Hall or Mirror in Versailles to which Peik Lin adds, “and Donald Trump’s bathroom.” This film uses some pieces of American history to humorously distinguish between two cultures.

This relationship between American culture and Asian culture is further explored in the scene where the extended Young family is working together to make dumplings for the Khoo wedding rehearsal dinner. While one of the aunties is worried that they are making too many dumplings, the last thing Eleanor says “Better to have too many than have people say we’re stingy.” Food is used as a status symbol to show the wealth of the family and their ability to provide. When Rachel asks if they all know how to make the dumplings, the Young aunties use this as a chance to distinguish themselves from the

“ang mohs” (a Hokkien phrase meaning “red hair” that Singaporean people use to describe white people) who microwave food for their children with very little care (Zaccheus).

Rachel’s character and upbringing are the subject of a lot of criticism from her single mother’s occupation to Rachel’s career and personal pursuit for happiness. None of these are enough for the Young family, specifically Eleanor and Nick’s Ah Ma. When Rachel is introducing herself to Eleanor at the tan hua party, she stumbles over her words and whether to call Eleanor “auntie.” Auntie and Uncle are terms of reverence and endearment for the older generation, regardless of familial connection but Rachel does not know this. When Eleanor senses this, she subtly expresses her distaste by not giving her full attention to the conversation or Rachel.

Eleanor blatantly tells Rachel that she “will never be enough” to satisfy her expectations, and explains why during a feisty game of mahjong. Rachel genuinely wonders why Eleanor has hated her the entire time, even before the truth came out that Rachel was born out of wedlock. Eleanor’s reasoning stems from the Hokkien phrase meaning “our own kind of people.” Simply put, “You are not our own kind,” she tells Rachel. It is not the wealth or the education but because she is American, and “all Americans think about is their own happiness” says Eleanor. For the films exemplifying the third level, diversity is built into every aspect, breaking conventions of the romantic comedy genre.

Characters’ Ethnicity and the Overall Narratives

To investigate romantic comedies for their levels of diversity is to look into the ethnicity of the main characters represented on screen, and the extent to which it

substantially affects the film's narrative. The films address ethnicity in various ways. For the films on levels one and two – where the casts do not have many minority members – the races of the characters do not dictate the story's narrative. Movies in the second level moderately address ethnicity. Films like *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* and *Crazy Rich Asians* that have high levels of diversity often have racial and cultural elements to their scripts and the ethnicity of the character is vital to the narrative. The ethnicity of the main characters directly affects a film's overall narrative.

For films like *27 Dresses* and *The Proposal*, the ethnicity of the main characters does not impact the storyline. All the main characters are white, yet to switch the racial background of the character would have minimal effect on the plot of the film. The diverse characters are solely there as support for the main characters. Pedro and Trent are the only non-white characters with spoken lines. Their combined screen time is mere minutes out of the film's running-time. Jane and Kevin in *27 Dresses* could have easily been any other race without sacrificing major details of the film's narrative. Changing this would have had little effect on the overall plot of the film although it would affect other casting choices. For example, when changing Jane's race, it would also affect Tess and their dad's race or require additional backstory information. Given that Kevin is unattached from any other characters, his race truly has very little affect.

In a similar way, in *The Proposal*, the ethnicities of Margaret and Andrew are not crucial to the storyline. To change Andrew's ethnicity would mean changing the ethnicity of his family as well or providing an explanation for the racial difference. With Margaret, part of her story is that she does not have any other family, which leaves her character

open to racial interpretation. Neither change would have large effects on the overall integrity of the film's narrative.

The same goes for the main characters in *Hitch*. A racial change for Alex Hitchens would not affect the film. Sara Melas, however, may provide a more difficult transition although not impossible. This was a discussion for the producers of the film who felt an interracial relationship would not play well with audiences. For films on the first and second level, often racial specifications are decided based on star power and have little to do with the narrative. These provide great opportunities to explore other racial options beyond the typical white option that floods the romantic comedy industry.

Maid in Manhattan specifically uses the main character's ethnicity to affect the storyline of the film. By creating a Hispanic character, the film employs the use of a popular stereotype and uses it to build the story. Changing Marisa Ventura's ethnicity would directly affect the film's storyline. For Christopher Marshall and the other supporting characters, their racial identification is of little consequence to the overall film.

For films in the third level of diversity, ethnicity is positively the focus of the narratives. Changing the Greek family in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* would undermine the integrity of the film, just as *Crazy Rich Asians* would not be the same story without the clash of cultures. Both contain authentic casts and give authenticity to the cultures through the narratives.

As *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* primarily deals with highlighting one culture and its beauty, it makes sense that the cast is made of Greek actors. Nia Vardalos, who plays Toula, and Michael Constantine, who plays her father Gus, are Greek-American. What is

interesting is that the rest of the Portokalos family are not played by identified Greek actors. It is possible that some have Greek ancestry but they come all over the United States, and Canada and Australia to name a few additional countries. In a film like this, casting Greek actors is interesting because the physical features of many people of Greek descent are shared by many other cultures. Here, the emphasis was on looking Greek, not actually being Greek.

Crazy Rich Asians solidifies its place on the third level of diverse films and boasts an almost purely Asian cast. All the major and supporting characters in the film are played by actors who are of Asian descent. Even most of the extras share Asian heritage. The only white characters with spoken roles in the film make up mere minutes on screen. There is not one simple instance of cultural diversity but many layers of culture compounded to create this film. *Crazy Rich Asians* tells the story of how this vast Asian culture interacts with American culture.

The differences in Asian culture and American culture come to a head when analyzing the film's heroine, Rachel Chu. She is Chinese-born but American raised as her mother, Kerry, escaped an abusive relationship in Asia to raise her daughter in New York City. As Rachel prepares to go to Singapore with Nick and meet his family for the first time, she is worried that she does not know enough about them but confident that they will like her nevertheless. Her mom is less sure. Kerry understands the dynamics and differences between Chinese-Americans and their overseas families. "They're Chinese, I'm Chinese," Rachel says. "I'm so Chinese, I'm an economics professor with lactose intolerance." Kerry sees the similarities but they are outshone by the vast differences in Rachel's heart. In Mandarin, Kerry tells her, "Your face is Chinese. You speak Chinese.

But here and here..." she says, gesturing to Rachel's head and heart, "you're different." The movie makes the point that being Chinese by birth and speaking Chinese is not enough to easily please an overseas family; their expectations are high and demanding.

This is such a culturally specific film that to change the ethnicity would significantly alter the film. Given the title, the main characters are to be Asians, and played by actors of Asian descent. This includes the heroine, Rachel Chu, despite the attempts to whitewash her for the sake of the audience reception. Additionally, most of the film is set in Singapore. Scenes not set there take place in New York City, in the classroom at New York University, and in the local café Rachel and Nick visit after work. The class, taught in a large lecture hall, features students from all racial and ethnic backgrounds as Rachel teaches them about game theory. The extras in the café scene also make up a racially diverse crowd behind Nick and Rachel's night out. For the extras, none of the casting choices pull the audience out of the wonderful world crafted on screen. Each person seems appropriately placed and comfortably mixed with the scene.

Overall, first-level diversity films do not address culture, other than generic American white culture. On the other hand, as evident with *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* and *Crazy Rich Asians*, third level films incorporate ethnicity throughout the narratives, using authentically ethnic characters to accurately address culture.

Commonly Employed Stereotypes in Romantic Comedies

Racial and ethnic stereotypes were identified in the films studied, particularly for those representing the first and second levels of diversity. Stereotypes of people who are Hispanic or Latin-American appeared in several of the films studied. At the same time,

films in the third level of diversity offered competing representations, both reinforcing and challenging stereotypes.

One stereotype perpetuated was that Hispanic or Latinx immigrants have menial jobs, in which they serve other people. In *The Proposal*, glimpses of the immigration office are shown during Margaret and Andrew's meeting there. Margaret refers to the immigrants waiting in line as "gardeners and delivery boys." In addition, behind Andrew and Margaret's interview, there is a non-white couple being dragged out screaming. The subtitles indicate that they are speaking Spanish although there is not a direct translation provided for their words, suggesting that their words are not important, nor do they impact the plot.

Ramone is the only minority in Andrew's hometown, Sitka, Alaska. One trope used for Ramone's character is that he works various jobs throughout the small town. We first meet him as the waiter at Andrew's family home during a party. He comes very close to force feeding hors d'oeuvres to Margaret at her refusal. He also makes an appearance as a grocery store worker when Margaret goes into town to use the computer. As he tries to pet her hair, he makes lewd references to their interactions on stage at the strip club the night before, and his most memorable job in the film.

Hispanic and Latinx are also stereotyped as housekeepers or cleaners. In *27 Dresses*, the character Pedro starts a cleaning business. Tess secretly hires him to clean George's apartment to get him started. Jane is understandably outraged when she finds out, as Tess is allowing Pedro to play into an outdated stereotype. Similarly, in *Maid in Manhattan*, Marisa and her Latina friends are all hotel housekeepers and wear maid uniforms throughout the film. Other characters assume that they are uneducated because

of their positions and ethnicity. However, in this instance, Marisa is highly educated and intelligent. Instead of acknowledging this, guests lump Marisa in with other maids, and belittles her by assuming she fits the stereotype of Spanish-speaking and illiterate.

A major instance of stereotyping in romantic comedies is the language barrier between culturally diverse groups on screen. Examples of this can be found in *27 Dresses*, *The Proposal*, and *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. In *27 Dresses*, when Tess meets Pedro for the first time, she exaggeratedly says, “Hola, Pedro” and leans closer to him. Her movements and language suggest that she thinks Pedro speaks Spanish. He speaks fluent English, in fact, and has no trouble understanding Tess who took his Hispanic heritage as a sign that he lacked English skills. This presents the stereotype of a language barrier, and a non-existent one at that.

When looking at the romantic comedies in question, Ramone from *The Proposal* is a prime example of this stereotype on screen. Ramone is played with a rather thick Spanish accent. There are multiple jokes about how the white characters – including Canadian, Margaret – cannot understand Ramone’s words, although he is speaking in English. This includes the last scene where the immigration worker asks Ramone to repeat a sentence “in English this time” as if he did not say it in English the first time. The thick accent is used to make Ramone appear blundering and less intelligent. It plays directly into the language stereotype that Hollywood has used for numerous decades. While this fault is penned on Ramone, truthfully it speaks to the greater issue of language barriers between cultures, and reinforces the stereotype.

To deal with the negative side of the maid stereotype in *Maid in Manhattan*, Caroline Lane’s friend, Rachel, only addresses Marisa using racially insensitive

language. She mixes English and Spanish words together, not to be compassionate but to be condescending. Despite Marisa speaking in full, complete, and perfectly worded English sentences, Rachel rudely remarks, “She barely speaks English” as if to imply that maids are uneducated and do not speak English. When Marisa offers a witty retort to Rachel’s fashion advice, Rachel calls her “Cinco de Mayo” and is appalled that a maid would even speak to her that way. She thinks Marisa is so obviously beneath her both as a Latina and a maid.

From the opposite perspective, the films in the third level of diversity directly present and then challenge stereotypes, adding depth to the characters. In *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* the majority American culture is juxtaposed against the Greek culture. *Crazy Rich Asians* sets the love story before a cultural clash between the elite Asian cultures and middle-class America. The most common stereotypes shared by the two films center on relationships with food, familial relationships, and community interactions. As with all stereotypes, these representations are based on an aspect of truth. In these two films, each storyline builds from stereotypes about Asian and Greek cultures.

In *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, the stereotypes are used to explain the vast differences between Greek and American culture. The film shows Ian Miller and his parents as more mellow compared to the lively Portokalos family. They closely resemble a stereotyped white, upper-class, family. Dinner is served on time and conversations are quiet and quaint. While dinners are still a family affair, the small and intimate gathering is a far cry from the traditional Portokalos meals. On screen, the Miller family dinner

truly appears dull and the quiet conversations fail to keep Toula's interest. This scene paints the American dinner as boring compared to the boisterous Greek family meals.

Crazy Rich Asians presents a similar issue. During the scene with the Young family making dumplings for the Khoo rehearsal dinner, they are talking about the difference between Asian and American families. Nick's Auntie Alix claims that a major difference between American and Asian culture is the way food shapes relationships. Because they make the dumplings together and share them as a family, their relationships are closer and stronger. On the American side, because parents stereotypically make the television or microwave dinner, they have weaker relationships with their children.

My Big Fat Greek Wedding plays with language in a different way and compares how Greek words work with the English language. A running joke in the film is how Toula's father claims that every word comes from the Greek language. While Greek is a root language for many American words, some of these connections are stretched thin for comic relief such as when Gus tries to prove that the Japanese word "kimono" comes from the Greek language. During the last scene, Gus claims that the name Miller has close associations with the Greek word for "apple," and notes that the Portokalos family name means "orange," like the kind you eat. It all comes down to apples and oranges, he jokes.

The Miller family has a difficult time grappling with the language barrier. When Ian joins the Greek Orthodox church and celebrates his first Easter, his heavily Anglicized pronunciation of Greek words make for a great laugh. For example, instead of "Christo anesti" he mispronounces it as "Cheestro anasty." This speaks to the perception

of the American inability to pronounce words from other languages, and their tendency to mispronounce them.

Ian's parents are the stereotypical white family with the cardigans, quiet dinners, and membership to the country club. Harriet, Ian's mother, asks Toula about her name and if it means anything in her language (by which she means Greek). When wondering about her ancestry, she remarks about her last name, Portokalos, and explains that it means orange – the fruit not the color. Yet, the most interesting part of this cultural analysis is Harriet and Rodney's side conversation about his secretary and her nationality. They start by questioning if she was Greek, too. And they conclude that she was Armenian, or possibly Guatemalan. Truthfully, they do not know which serves to emphasize subtle class differences. Rodney Miller had no reason to know his secretary's nationality or heritage; it was of no importance to him. Additionally, he seems to be perfectly content with mixing up unrelated cultures and countries. The dinner with the Miller parents and the whole Portokalos family reveals the vast differences with a comic scene regarding the cake Harriet Miller brings. It is a Bundt, which Maria mispronounces as "bun" and "buck" before settling on it simply being a cake. Where Harriet is frustrated with Maria's mispronunciation, Maria is doing her best to be a welcoming host despite another language barrier.

Of all the romantic comedy tropes, the inclusion of stereotypes is a popular one throughout the industry. The Latina maid stereotype is changing form but has not died out yet. The stereotypes about the American culture are still present in the romantic comedy industry. Romantic comedies that feature speaking other languages or accents

often use the presupposed language barrier between cultures as an opportunity for comedic relief.

Discussion

Overall, the films studied were classified into three levels of diversity, which corresponds with both the number of characters of color, their roles in the narratives, and the extent to which cultural stereotypes were perpetuated. Examining the films themselves, along with background information on the films, helps to demonstrate the need for a dramatic expansion of diversity in film.

The first level films *27 Dresses* and *The Proposal* contains only a few token characters that do not play significant roles in the narrative. Scenes easily could have become more diverse. For example, instead of having offices with only white people in *27 Dresses*, each workspace could have featured a variety of cultural backgrounds. The film is set in New York in 2009; it is not unreasonable to believe that more than one minority individual works at a major news publication. It is more likely that the office *would* have minorities present given the diversity quotas most major companies attempt to reach. Similarly, it would not have been difficult to cast the extras in the bar scene or the 50th anniversary party scene with more diversity. For the climactic yacht scene and Jane and Kevin's wedding, there is one Black man shown and a brief glimpse of a non-white waiter, but that appears to be it. Those are scenes in which the races of the background characters are not exactly pivotal to the flow of the film, and offer the perfect opportunity to change up the casting.

27 Dresses also misses opportunities for the few minority characters to have more integral roles in the narratives. Trent could have had a developed backstory. Similarly, instead of presenting Pedro as a stereotype, the film could have explored his backstory and his membership in the Big Brothers, Big Sisters organization. With a few extra

scenes, they could have turned Pedro into more than a stereotypical minority and fleshed out an interesting character.

The Proposal had the opportunity to shine positive light on the Tlingit and Native American cultures and instead trades it for a comedic moment. In the industry, it is not wholly unacceptable to make a joke out of one's cultural background. It does, however become quite dangerous and borderline offensive when the film is predominantly white and showcasing minorities is minimal. The same logic should be applied to Ramone's character. He is not given dimension or backstory, and serves as a vehicle for comedic relief. Again, this is great when a cast is diverse and there are more serious moments to juxtapose the hilarious ones.

Creating a diverse romantic comedy out of *The Proposal* would not be difficult. It would mean adding more people of color in Margaret and Andrew's offices, and increasing the numbers of minorities on screen throughout the New York City scenes. Changes like these are small enough to go virtually unnoticed but large enough to make a difference. Since the extras do not have lines or backstories, it is easy to change their racial identity without hurting the film's narrative. For Ramone, the situation is different. Clearly, his heritage is directly affecting the comedic nature of this romantic comedy so would not be an easy change. It would be possible, however, to amend the way in which these jokes play out to deal less with stereotypes and more with the character himself. For *The Proposal*, the lack of diversity is evident but it would be easy to correct.

27 Dresses and *The Proposal* are not alone in this first level of films. In fact, many romantic comedies effortlessly join them. When that same effort when applied to creating diversity, it can spark change in the industry. For these films and others like

them, minor casting changes are simple steps to take toward creating a more diverse world on and off screen. Though it may start with adding more people of color as non-speaking extras, this effort should end with people of color in starring roles as often as their white counterparts.

The films *Hitch* and *Maid in Manhattan* both contain interracial couples. The popularity of these movies demonstrates that romantic comedies do not need to only feature white couples. That said, background information on *Hitch* demonstrates the struggle to feature an interracial couple. The original love interest in this film was supposed to be Caucasian. It truly comes down to race, according to star Will Smith: “There’s sort of an accepted myth that if you have two black actors, a male and a female, in the lead of a romantic comedy, that people around the world don’t want to see it.” The producers did not want an African-American leading lady to play opposite Smith as they feared a Black couple would have limited the audiences by turning people off from the movie. But they also did not want a white female as the leading lady because they reasoned that it would offend viewers in the United States (they conceded that it would play fine in international markets).

When this film premiered in 2005, an interracial couple on screen was still considered taboo by producers. Their final decision was to cast a Hispanic female lead. Conversations like this happen in production boardrooms across the industry. Sony Pictures casted Eva Mendes who is of Cuban descent. Her pairing with Smith would be a safe way out of this dilemma, they reasoned. Producers are afraid that the racial dynamics of the lead couple will push away parts of their targeted demographic (Whites). Audience perception plays a huge role in the casting of the film. For this project, the conversation

ended with a Hispanic lead actress which is a wonderful choice. Often things do not turn out as well, and talks of audience perception leave films with more Caucasian leads for the sake of the audience.

Crazy Rich Asians shows that having two non-white leads does not inherently make a movie less successful, especially in the realm of romantic comedies. This film also made a statement for Asian representation in Hollywood which is severely lacking. According to a recent UCLA Hollywood Diversity Report, in 2019, only 5% of the leading roles in the top films were played by Asians which is a drastic underrepresentation. That includes over 1,100 roles during the year yet a mere 56 of them went to Asians. In 2019, minorities held 32.7 percent of the major film roles across the industry (Hunt and Ramón).

When dealing with diversity in romantic comedies, many films employ the use of various stereotypes and caricatures to comedically enhance the script. From those, the most popular in the sample set are the Latinx working class stereotype, the American stereotypes, and the language barrier stereotype. Often, these moments provide comedic relief and give minority characters minimal screen time. In the Hollywood film industry, minorities are often afforded very little screen time. Instead of playing leading roles, they are relegated to the ranks of extras and supporting characters.

Minorities are often limited to stereotypical roles. For example, Hollywood's history is littered with Hispanics playing roles about bandits, dancers, peasants or buffoons (Woll). Most recently, audiences have seen Hispanics on screen as maids and service professionals. In romantic comedies, the most common examples of this stereotype are in *The Proposal*, *27 Dresses*, and *Maid in Manhattan*. This speaks to the

fact that many immigrants, legal or illegal, often find themselves working lower-paying jobs to support their families. Yet, not all Hispanic or Latinx immigrants are “gardeners or delivery boys” or house cleaners as Margaret remarks in *The Proposal*. Reducing them to such is ignoring large parts of their immigration story.

Housekeeping is a profession commonly held by people of color, reflected by the way house cleaners are casted in movies and television. Actress Lupe Ontiveros is a prime example of the lasting effects of this stereotype on the industry. She has played a maid character over 150 times, with minimal recognition. The characters were predictable: matronly, heavily accented, names like Rosalita, Camilla, and Margarita. Playing these roles, Ontiveros says, is sacrificing her identity, her culture, and her dignity to become a star. She is thankful that the sacrifice is not one that future Latina stars like Jennifer Lopez will have to make (Bryce).

Lopez’s role in *Maid in Manhattan* allows the character to break away from the stereotype. She is a hardworking and diligent employee on her way towards a promotion. Her intelligence is clear through her conversations with others. Marisa values education and pushes her son, Ty, to study hard and learn as much as he can. Where many would limit Marisa to the stereotypical illiterate maid, she exceeds expectations and breaks the boundaries of those ill-conceived notions.

There has been progress, but not enough. According to a study conducted by Children Now, Latino characters on screen are still limited to low-status occupations, including service workers (Navarro). Even within the industry, these negative stereotypes influence perceptions. Patti Miller works with Children Now to study Latino representation in media and entertainment. She has noticed the detrimental effects of

stereotypes, and wonders “what message does that send to a Latina girl about her place in the world?” But if there is a progression in the way of diversity, the roles and onscreen portrayals will change as well. Former President of NBC Entertainment says that “As diversity increases, the span of roles increases. It’s an evolution.” Jennifer Lopez has been helping this progression along, using her status in the entertainment world as leverage to bring in new Latino centric projects.

Crazy Rich Asians challenges the stereotype that Americans are self-serving and happiness driven through Rachel’s character development. To Eleanor, the only thing Americans can care about is their own happiness and success, which is different from her value of family. Rachel originally reflects this attitude as demonstrated by her initial focus on her and Nick’s happiness at the beginning. By the end of the film, Rachel sacrifices her happiness and her relationship with Nick so that his familial obligations do not suffer. When she turns down Nick’s proposal, she challenges the stereotype and puts her happiness last so that Nick does not sever ties with his family. *Crazy Rich Asians* allows Rachel to break away from the mold of this stereotype and lets her character develop.

As Ian learns to pronounce the Greek words in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, it is a joke and fun to laugh at Ian’s mistake. This scene mirrors a real problem for many minorities especially for those who have non-English names. They learn early to expect mispronunciation and resulting jokes. Scenes like this serve to enforce the stereotype that it is a funny joke to mispronounce another’s language. By the end of the movie, the narrative pulls away from the stereotype of the language barrier. Rodney and Harriet Miller are laughing along as Gus jokingly explains the Greek root of their last name:

apple. Portokalos means “orange” and so the families are all fruit together. Not only do the Millers laugh at the joke, Rodney finds him himself saying “y’iomas” and pronouncing it correctly as he downs his shot before dancing. It is a Greek way of saying “cheers” or to wish one good health (Doyle). His correct pronunciation shows how he has grown from being passive towards the Greek culture to breaking the language barrier and becoming an active participant. Breaking stereotypes allows for characters to develop in surprising ways.

Conclusion

While diversity in romantic comedies is currently lacking, it is not an impossible fix. Films on the first and second level of diversity have work to do to increase diverse casting and establish narratives about minority characters. On the top level of films, the goal should be to make sure that their narratives and representation on screen are equal to those working behind the cameras. Across the industry, an increase in minority representation makes more authentic and genuine projects. Beyond the addition of minorities to the casts, it is important to ensure that their presentation on screen is not limited to stereotypical roles. Allowing minorities to break away from those notions leaves room for more cultural exploration. Romantic comedies can do this by having films set in other countries or featuring non-white leads. This genre can take steps toward diversity by ensuring that their minority actors are not relegated to supporting roles. To achieve better representation for minorities on screen, the industry will have to be intentional in making the necessary changes happen.

The beginning of this project's research lead with what the industry looks like now based on UCLA's 2020 Hollywood Diversity Report. This section will now focus on what the future of the industry should look like and steps to create a more diverse and inclusive workforce. The goal of achieving higher diversity and inclusivity in the entertainment industry is to match the industry to the audience. What does that look like? Audience diversity is measured in terms of population demographics. The United States has a 40.2% minority population. Given that, we should expect to see a 40.2% minority population in every part of the film industry – behind the camera, on the screen, and in the executive offices – to reach proportional representation (UCLA). When the level of

diversity in the industry matches the demographics of the audience, that is the lowest threshold. The film industry has failed to reflect that number as of now. Minorities are underrepresented in all aspects of the process from those in front of the camera to the crews up to the executives. Films are progressing towards this goal at a glacial pace and the numbers are far from comforting. It begins at the top.

By comparing the demographics of the United States population, it is possible to create what is called *proportional representation* in the industry. Where the nation's population has a 40.2% minority population, the industry should reflect that with 40.2% minority in all their offices, on every set and in front of the cameras. This is the threshold towards the diversity the industry needs. Here is what this specifically looks like: for the C-Suite officers, their team would have to go from having 7% of the members as representatives of minority groups to having 40% of the members as representatives of minority groups. Numerically this means that at least 4 of the top CEOs would have to be non-white. On the Senior Executive level, this goal of proportional representation means going from four minority individuals to at least 22. It is a larger margin but not impossible. In the Unit Heads, it means increasing the number of minorities from 14 to 40. In front of the camera, there should at least 58 non-white film leads, based on the 2019 numbers. That is not a significant jump from the 40 minority leads in the previous year (UCLA). With the trend already on a steady increase, it is not an unreasonable request.

Thankfully, within the past eight years, minorities have seen an increase in the number of leading roles that look like them. 2019 saw 27.6% of the leading characters played by minorities, which is nearly triple their roles from 2011. Only 40 of the major

roles from this season were played by minority actors (UCLA). This is good news but far from great. Although the industry appears to be on an upward trend, the goal of proportional representation is still a way off.

After the Oscar nominees' announcement in 2015, April Reign, a Black entertainment attorney, sent out a single tweet that sparked a change in the industry. “#OscarsSoWhite they asked to touch my hair,” she tweeted, to bring attention to the lack of diversity in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences responsible for the annual Oscars (Reign). The 2015 nominees for acting awards did not include a single person of color. The hashtag took off as many began sharing their own #OscarsSoWhite stories about the racially homogenous film industry. Unfortunately, the issue begged addressing, especially when the 2016 nominations were no better in terms of diversity. Yet again, all the acting nominees for awards were white (Buchanan).

Over the course of these past five years, the Academy has sought to remedy its own issues with diversity by way of initiatives that start with its voting membership. It set out to double its number of voters of color by 2020, and they were successful in doing so. Of this year's addition to the voting population of the Academy, 36% of the new members were minorities. While that may seem like great progress toward diversity, of the current voting members, only 19% of them are people of color. This is an improvement but the issue is far from resolved (“Academy”).

In another greater attempt at tackling the lack of diversity on screen, the Academy announced new standards for Best Picture nominees. Not only do these new “rules” affect the people on the screen but also influence those in the decision-making rooms. Some of the new provisions even extend down to the intern level for studios. They are easy

standards to meet which the Academy hopes will have positive effects on the diversity of the industry. But the problem here is not solely with the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences; it permeates the entire industry from the executives to the extras (“Academy”).

Jaia Thomas is a lawyer in the entertainment industry. Her position has given her a unique perspective behind the scenes of the film industry, where diversity is even less common. With a goal similar to that of the #OscarsSoWhite movement, Jaia Thomas founded Diverse Representation in the wake of high-performing box office favorite, *Black Panther*. Diverse Representation is a website and database designed to connect Black agents, managers, publicists, and attorneys with talent across the country (Diverse Representation). In June 2020, she wrote a piece for the trade magazine, *The Hollywood Reporter*, in which she talks about the importance of being on a racially diverse team. Thomas says, “[t]he thrills of watching such breathtaking production faded against the irony of Black actors discussing “Wakanda forever” with almost all-white teams.” Projects like Diverse Representation take away excuses by laying out the people of color in plain view and making it hard to say they could not be found (Thomas).

In addition to being a web-based service, Diverse Representation has expanded its reach into activism and education through partnerships with media conglomerates. Throughout the earlier half of 2020, they hosted African-American Entertainment Executive Roundtables to shed light on what it means to be a person of color in the industry. Partnering with WarnerMedia, they recently held a virtual Career Conversations week conference to bring forth job opportunities and offer trainings and insight. Diverse Representation features different executives of color on their LinkedIn and social media

pages and hosts masterclasses on various subjects (LinkedIn). “I would like us to begin re-imagining an industry,” Thomas says, “where Black faces not only permeate our screens but our boardrooms, conference rooms and press rooms” (Thomas). This way the diversity level can increase across the boards, on all fronts and for all races.

To increase diversity, there are various distribution efforts starting across the industry. Ava DuVernay (*Selma*) founded ARRAY as a film distribution and resource collective for people of color and underrepresented groups in the industry. Of course, their goal is to increase diversity in the film industry but they also serve to “positively [impact] racial and social justice around the world” (Array). They do so through a mentorship program, education projects, and grantmaking. ARRAY works to put inclusive images on screen because “all people deserve to see their experiences reflected in cinema with authenticity” (Array). They understand the vital role representation plays on screen.

People of color want to see themselves depicted as love interests and objects of affection on screen. I can personally attest to this as it was years before I saw a Black woman like myself depicted as a love interest in a romantic comedy. My childhood icons were Brandy in Disney’s *Cinderella* (from their Wonderful World of Disney series) and Audra McDonald as Grace in *Annie* (also from Disney’s Wonderful World of Disney series) (IMDb). People often used the excuse that movies with minority leads will not play well or be successful yet movies like *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* and *Crazy Rich Asians* prove otherwise. In fact, according to UCLA’s 2020 Hollywood Diversity report, movies featuring a greater percentage of minorities on screen are likely to do well and make more money at the box office. Despite the arguments to the contrary, diverse films

are more appealing to audiences. “Films featuring casts that were from 41 percent to 50 percent minority emerged as the best performers in 2019” while films with the lowest diversity levels (those under 11 percent minority) have been consistently low performers in recent years (UCLA).

The biggest fallacy is that diverse films are not worth the money it takes to make them. On average, the films that performed the worst in 2018 according to return on investment were those that were least diverse. And despite often being released in fewer markets, films with 21 percent to 30 percent minority cast shares had the highest median global box office at \$94 million. Movies with diverse casts continue to make back the money and show a good return on investment. But what about the audience? Is diversity really that important? Considering that people of color were responsible for over half of the domestic ticket sales for six of the top 10 films in 2018, the answer is yes. Furthermore, six of 2018’s top 10 films also featured casts that were at least 21 percent minority (UCLA). The industry is running out of excuses for avoidance and finding more reasons to act.

The romantic comedy movie industry consistently fails to reflect the diversity of their audience. The same attention and dedication given romantic comedies starring white leads should be extended to those with high levels of diversity. They are worth the money it takes to make them and increasing the diversity rarely affects the nature of the narrative. Diverse romantic comedies with non-white leads are among some of the genre’s most profitable films. To make way for the increasing diversity in the industry, the film industry needs to change their perception that diversity is an added expense – it

is a benefit. Audiences are hungry to see themselves on screen. This selection of films proves that diversity is worth the presumed risk.

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