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*Interracial Relationships in Film: An Analysis of Hollywood Interracial Romance*

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## **ABSTRACT**

As norms regarding race and interracial relationships have evolved, so have depictions of these topics in Hollywood films. Yet portrayals in some ways have remained the same. This raises the question of how have changing ideas about race and interracial relationships influenced portrayals in film over the past 6 decades. Because so many people watch movies, how can depictions of interracial relationships influence audience beliefs and behaviors? In this study, 2 major codes emerged from a coding analysis of 6 films spanning from the 1970s to the 2020s: Familial Approval and Racial Cohesion. Utilizing a Critical Race Theory lens, it is shown that Familial Approval evolved throughout the sample as a reflection of the changing acceptability of racism while Racial Cohesion remained the same as it reflected the continued differentiation of people through racial categories. A Cultivation Theoretical perspective was also applied to show that the overarching commonality of conflict can perpetuate interracial romance stigmatization and influence behavior towards interracial couple formations among audiences.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In a world where media consumption is ever-growing, the concern for media's impact on consumers arises. In portrayals of the real world, how accurate is what is being shown on screen? The question of media's impact on people's behavior towards and perceptions of interracial romantic relationships is at the heart of this study. The U.S. has a reputation for being a "melting pot" of different cultures and backgrounds united under the shared culture of America (Apker 2022). The country's racial demographics are partially reflective of this, with the U.S. Census Bureau's discovery that the United States 2020 population has grown more diverse in the past

ten years (Jensen 2023). The growingly diverse nature of the country has implications for the emergence of interracial relationships. Wu et al. (2015) found that racially diverse populations facilitate the formation of interracial relationships “...because it increases the frequency of chance encounters between individuals from different racial groups.”

With interracial relationships becoming a more common phenomenon in real life, visibility of them in popular media has grown as well (Rightler 2008; Luders-Manuel 2019). In general, movies reach mass audiences every year, with approximately 831 million movie tickets sold in the U.S. and Canada in 2023 (Carollo 2024). Because depictions of interracial relationships reach such vast amounts of viewers, the nature of their portrayals is something that should be examined as they hold the power to shape and reflect evolving widespread understandings about said topic.

As major contributors to our belief systems, film and television have been established as substantial sources of socialization in sociology. Socialization is defined as “...society's principal mechanism for influencing the development of character and behavior” of people into society (Long and Hadden 1985). Many scholars argue that socialization is an ongoing process that lasts throughout our lifetime (Lutfey and Mortimer 2006). This is illustrated by the concept of secondary socialization, which proposes that adults continue to learn how to participate in society and understand societal values after having been initially socialized through primary socialization in childhood (Gecas 2001). Media as a source of socialization is becoming a topic of increasing interest, especially considering that as of 2023, American adults spend a daily average of 12 ½ hours consuming media (Guttmann 2024). Specifically concerning movies and television, scholars have identified that these outlets have the power to influence viewers’ outlooks. For example, Dong et al. (1998) found that teens from Beijing accepted American

values (i.e. wealth, freedom) portrayed in American movies and television shows after watching them for one month.

The implications of film portrayals of interracial romantic relationships on audience's perceptions of such continue to be of academic intrigue. Scholars have looked at women's (Ramoutar 2006; Bell 2010) and interracial couples' (Mallett 2022) perceptions, as well as potential takeaways by the general public (Rightler 2008). Because films reflect and perpetuate/create ideas of race, Critical Race Theory, the proposition that race is socially constructed, and Cultivation Theory, the premise that heavy media consumption skews people perception of the real world based on what they consume, are well-equipped frameworks for analyzing these characteristics of Hollywood cinema. In this study, I analyze the evolving depictions of race and interracial relationships in Hollywood cinema as well as their probable influence on audience perceptions of said topics. Understanding how films influence ideas about race and interracial relationships provides insight into how people form understandings about these topics.

## **BACKGROUND**

Even though most movies are fictional stories shown to mass audiences, scholars have found that what is shown on screen, such as interracial relationships, have real-world implications. For example, Lienemann and Stopp (2013) looked at the impact of portrayals of interracial romance and friendships on audiences in the United States. Using the extended hypothesis theory, they found that individuals who have a preexisting, personal connection with people in interracial relationships perceive them more positively after additional exposure in media, including in television and film. Likewise, Bell (2010) analyzed audience perceptions to

interracial relationships on screen, which varied by audience members' racial identities and film content. In her study, Black women were more moved by the films about race relations because they starred Black female protagonists whose portrayals were more relatable to them than to white women. Drawing from personal experience, white women were more likely to critique portrayals that challenged their views. Conversely, Black women's "deeply felt desire for a more racially amicable and equitable world," overrode the urge to correct depictions that did not align with their own histories with race relations (Bell 2010).

Both Bell (2010), and Ramoutar (2006) analyzed trends in portrayals of interracial relationships over time. Bell (2010) discovered that more favorable representations of interracial relationships were featured in the 2000s, and that interracial relationships were associated with an overarching theme of conflict. Her sample of movies featured concepts such as interracial violence, friend and familial opposition, incompatible coexistence, and fleeting relationships. Ramoutar (2006) had similar findings, including conflict through temporary relationships, societal stigmatization, familial opposition, and cultural differences. Having also looked at how portrayals of interracial relationships changed over time, Ramoutar (2006) found that the most top 10 box office releases featuring interracial relationships occurred in the 1970s, which were also less likely to feature conflict than other decades included in her study.

Other studies have focused on how portrayals of interracial relationships have evolved in broader media. For example, Magnuson-Cannady (2005) analyzed the presence of discussions about interracial relationships in newspaper and magazine publications. She found that writing about interracial relationships and their implications on race relations varied over decades before and after the appeal of anti-miscegenation laws in the United States. Associated legislation and social movements highly influenced how interracial relationships were talked about. For

example, the escalating protests of the Civil Rights Movement in the mid-1960s heightened conversations about racial amalgamation as a potential solution to racial divisions in the country.

Given the wide circulation of these depictions of race, and the broad influence of media on audiences in general, I argue that this area of scholarship could benefit from the utilization of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Cultivation Theory. CRT is most often associated with Kimberlé Crenshaw and Derrick Bell, legal scholars who sought to analyze the power of law in defining racial groups as a precursor to defining their rights (Delgado and Stefancic 2023; Kumaran 2023; Sambaraju 2023). CRT proposes that race is a social construct maintained by social processes that coalesce at the level of institutions and group behavior; in other words, race as a lived experience is often reproduced by social practices (Nagel 1994 as cited in Burton et al. 2010; West and Fenstermaker 1995). This means that CRT is highly relevant to media production, which can itself be framed as a social practice. For example, Hollywood, as both a media source and an industry, has the potential to influence, maintain, and/or perpetuate ideas of race to mass audiences. In this vein, some CRT scholars have already started to analyze how perceptions of race are shaped by popular media. Mills and Godley (2018) found that interactions between different racial groups on social media facilitated conversations that debunked racial stereotypes.

Such portrayals have the ability to shape audience's beliefs and behaviors about race and interracial relationships. Cultivation Theory, originally proposed by George Gerbner in the 1960s, suggests that "... that those who spend more time watching television are more likely to perceive the real world in ways that reflect the most common and recurrent messages of the world of fictional television" (Morgan and Shanahan 2010). For example, Busselle (2003) (as cited in Morgan and Shanahan 2010) discovered that parents who frequently watch programs

featuring violence and crime had a higher tendency to warn their children in high school about crime. As seen in Busselle's (2003) study, the utilization of Cultivation Theory can influence people's behaviors as well. For example, Graves et al. (2017) used Cultivation Theory to show that young adults' increased exposure to interracial relationships on television also increased their acceptance of these relationships and their willingness to participate in one. In short, both CRT and Cultivation Theory can further illuminate potential outcomes of widespread interracial representation on screen.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Building from existing studies on interracial romance in film, I apply CRT and Cultivation Theory to ask...

- How have changing ideas about race and interracial relationships influenced portrayals in film over the past 6 decades?
- How can depictions of interracial relationships influence audience beliefs and behaviors?

## **METHODS AND DATA**

### *Sample Selection*

To conduct this study, I constructed a sample of 6 Hollywood films released from the 1970s to the 2020s, with one film representing each decade. My overall goal was to look at how depictions of interracial romantic relationships in film evolved over time. This time period was chosen because the prohibition of interracial marriage was not found unconstitutional until the 1967 Supreme Court case, *Loving v. Virginia* (Ware et al. 2015). Furthermore, the illegal status of interracial marriage in several states beforehand heavily suggests a significant level of

unacceptability among American audiences. A Gallup poll from 1958 found that only 4% of Americans approved of intermarriage (McCarthy 2021). Although intermarriage's change in legality did not signify total approval of interracial relationships amongst the general public at the time, it marked a major shift in a trend toward normalization. I wanted the movies I analyzed to be from a period when interracial couples were less stigmatized, with the law being a reflection of this. Additionally, I wanted to pick movies from a period of time when interracial couples in real life were more common. With less cultural stigmatization, it is plausible that more interracial couples are more likely to form. Hollywood, as a powerful social actor with broad influence over culture and society, would have an incentive to depict more interracial couples as they become more common in reality.

By looking at the role of Hollywood movies in presenting and perpetuating cultural norms related to interracial romance, I also considered how the media produced in United States contributed to common understandings about race and interracial romance in a country with a reputation for being a “melting pot.” As discussed in my Results, my findings reflected how U.S. industries attempt to attract, appeal to, and indeed, construct “American” audiences via perceptions about race, romance, and relationships. After all, Hollywood produces movies that executives believe will sell not only tickets but an American way of life. Films produced in other countries were not included in my sample.

A Wikipedia list of movies depicting interracial relationships served as a starting point for building my sample. The list, titled “List of interracial romance films,” can be found on the Wikipedia website (Wikipedia 2025). Despite its mixed reputation, Wikipedia is a valid source for this information because of its thorough inclusion of external citations. For a film to be included on the Wikipedia list, the following criteria needed to be met:

- A professional critic or film scholar has identified it as an interracial romance film.
- The film has been released.
- The film is feature length (e.g. not a segment from an anthology).
- The film features a romantic relationship, not just partnering, between people of different races.
- The film's inclusion or casting of interracial romance is not incidental.
- The film is not about romance between species or fictional races (e.g. *Star Trek*, *The Twilight Saga*, *Shrek*, *The Little Mermaid*). (Wikipedia 2025)

I then looked through the plots and trailers of the movies on the list to assess whether they were appropriate for my study. Only movies that showcased interracial, heterosexual relationships as the primary focus of the film were selected. Other criteria that informed my sample included the following:

- The movie should clearly feature one “main” interracial relationship
- The main interracial relationship should be current, as opposed to being portrayed as a relationship that existed in the past
- The main interracial relationship had to be a monogamous relationship, i.e., no affairs, cheating, or crushes on other people
- The main interracial relationship should not break up and remain broken up after the second half of the movie
- The movie should be live-action, not animated
- The movie should show clear elements of romance, as opposed to it being a purely physical or sexual relationship

- The film had to take place during the decade it was produced (Ex: no movies from the 1970s about the 1800s or the future)
- The film had to take place in the U.S.
- The film could not take place in science fiction settings

I chose to focus on heterosexual couples as a way to apply some consistency to my study, especially considering that films depicting interracial, LGBTQ+ couples were not as common in the 20th century as they are now. That said, including only heterosexual interracial relationships is a limitation of my study. It was also important that movies could be easily accessed, i.e., available on major streaming platforms via subscription or rental.

I also needed to identify a clear definition of “interracial” before proceeding with my study. In popular culture, the meaning of “interracial” tends to signify people who identify as monoracial and yet, within the unit of a relationship, perceive themselves as racially different from each other. Another definition, in terms of marriage, can be sourced from the U.S. Census Bureau as “...as a marriage in which the spouses are identified as falling into different [racial] categories” (Kreider 2000).

Another limitation to note is that ethnicities, nationalities, and multiracial dimensions of identity were not part of the criteria that determined the sample selection. However, when available, I included information on ethnicities in my fieldnotes while watching the films in my sample. Moreover, the racial identities of the actors in the movies were not under consideration, but the characters they played were. For instance, Zoe Saldña, one of the actresses featured in a film within my sample, identifies as Black Latina (Z. Saldña 2013), but her movie character identifies as Black.

While building my sample, I made a conscious effort to select a variety of interracial pairings. For instance, I did not want to select films that only featured Asian and White couples. I also aimed to include a variety of racial and gender pairings, i.e., not feature exclusively Black men in all the pairings when a Black partner is included. This is because I wanted to look at diverse depictions of interracial couples rather than specific racial pairings. In the process of researching studies about interracial couples, exclusively Black and white couples or a limited selection of racial pairings were featured. This bothered me because this is not fully representational of interracial couples, which was a motivator to include a variety of racial pairings. Although multiple movies featuring interracial couples have been released since the 1970s, applying my criteria to the Wikipedia list helped narrow down the films to include in my sample. I also found myself prioritizing that were on streaming services that were free or that I already paid for.

By looking at 5 decades of interracial relationships in Hollywood films, I was able to observe the evolution of acceptability and social norms associated with interracial relationships over time. Although I had initially wanted to build a sample of 10 films in order to ascertain a more thorough sense of these trends, feedback from the Honors College Committee recommended a smaller sample given the time limits associated with my study. I adjusted my sample size to include 6 films, which was then approved by the Committee. The following films are in my sample:

Film 1: <i>Aaron Loves Angela</i> (1975)	Film 4: <i>Guess Who</i> (2005)
Film 2: <i>China Girl</i> (1987)	Film 5: <i>The Big Sick</i> (2017)
Film 3: <i>Cinderella</i> (1997)	Film 6: <i>You People</i> (2023)

Table 1. Sample of Selected Films (1970s to 2020s)

### *Producing Fieldnotes*

Initially, my research question centered on racial stereotypes rooted within interracial relationships. However, after watching all 6 films, I noticed several common threads that prompted me to focus on how each couple and others perceived of their relationship. While watching each film, I took fieldnotes on the dialogue, music, settings, and other components related to the central interracial relationship. For each film, I typed fieldnotes into a Google Document while I watched. During my viewings, I enabled captions and opened each movie's script online, when available, in a different window. I found most film scripts from the Scripts website ([www.scripts.com](http://www.scripts.com)).

Each time the dialogue mentioned approval or disapproval of the main relationship, the race of the partners, racial differences, the couple's interracial status, interracial violence and conflict, threats of violence against the couple, racial cohesion, judgment of the couple, the couple's fear of being caught, racism, racial stereotypes, I paused the movie and typed the lines into a document. I also took note of music with lyrical content and racial/cultural ties to the context of the pair in the relationship. For example, Lou Reed's "Walk on the Wild Side" was playing during a scene with Ashton Kutcher's and Bernie Mac's characters in "Guess Who." In this scene, Kutcher's character, who is White, is dating Mac's character's daughter, who is Black. The father, who is also Black, does not approve of the boyfriend, so he drives the boyfriend to a hotel to stay at rather than his home. As they are in the car, the radio turns on and the song plays at the part where Reed sings, "And the colored girls go do-do-do." They look at each other uncomfortably, and the radio is turned off. The song's mention of a dated, offensive term for Black women causes the boyfriend and father discomfort because of their racial differences.

While both individuals know that the lyric is unacceptable, it is more offensive to Mac as a Black person than to Kutcher.

Settings that also had racial or cultural ties to the main relationships were also taken note of. For example, “China Girl” takes place in New York City across several racially segregated neighborhoods; the neighborhoods featured consisted of communities of people whose race were also represented in the main couple, so I felt compelled to include details describing these areas. I then expanded upon my observations in memos produced after I watched a film. I used memos to capture additional thoughts that traversed multiple films, which eventually helped me identify codes and concepts.

Following a grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss 2015), I used previous sets of fieldnotes and memos to inform the next round of data collection. For example, after viewing the first film, “Aaron Loves Angela,” I noticed that the main interracial couple was prompted to meet in secret. I then looked for similar behavior in the second film, “China Girl”. Again, I made note of these similarities and differences in behavior across multiple films in my memos.

### *Analyzing Fieldnotes*

After I completed viewing all 6 films in my sample, I prepared my fieldnotes for coding, again being informed by a grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss 2015). I also referred to Saldaña (2013) while applying best practices to coding, generally following a descriptive coding approach, followed by eclectic coding (refining codes). I generated over 100 codes after several rounds of reading my fieldnotes, memoing, and recoding. I documented these codes in a spreadsheet, which also helped me compare how they appeared from one film to another.

Within my spreadsheet, codes were highlighted in different colors based on their similarities. For example, codes relating to wealth were highlighted in green, while codes relating to hiding the relationship were purple. After color-coding similarities throughout the entire set of codes, I looked for the most frequently occurring codes across all six movies. I discuss two major codes, Familial Approval and Racial Cohesion, in my Results below.

## **RESULTS**

The two most prominent codes that emerged from my study are Familial Approval and Racial Cohesion. Familial Approval signifies a concern about what family members think about the main interracial relationships. Racial Cohesion indicates an established norm for people to become romantic partners with members of the same race. For this study, I chose to elaborate on these two codes because of their prominence within each movie and throughout the sample as a whole. Furthermore, the theoretical frameworks I am employing to analyze my codes, CRT and Cultivation Theory, have strong ties to these codes, as I will discuss below. The excerpts found below, produced by combining dialogue from the Scripts website with my own fieldnotes, represent and expand upon these codes, which are then analyzed by applying these two frameworks. The most poignant examples of each code are analyzed below.

### *Familial Approval*

The code of familial approval appeared in every film in my sample. Although the name of the code suggests acceptance from family, instances of this code varied in approximately three different ways: avoiding or mitigating the risk of familial disapproval by hiding the relationship from family members, familial acceptance of a partner based on status and wealth, and familial

disapproval as a sign of a faulty relationship. These three variations can be roughly organized by decade, with the first appearing in the 1970s and 1980s, the second in the 1990s and 2000s, and the third in the 2010s and 2020s. As Familial Approval evolved, so did the overt racist undertones. Only the first two films included racist characterizations, specifically with disapproval from society and people outside of the family. In the last four, sources of disapproval were all from within the family.

In “China Girl” (1987, Film 2), the movie begins with Tye (Asian, Chinese, young adult female) and Tony (Italian, young adult male) being caught dancing together by Tye’s brother’s gang members, who are all Chinese. Tony gets chased by the gang before an Italian gang comes to his rescue. Both Tony and Tye know that their families, who are intertwined with the rivaling gangs, disapprove of them being together. However, this does not deter them from seeing each other. Gang members report back to family members sightings of the two together. Tye and Tony meet outside of their hometown and hide from their families as best as they can in order to continue seeing each other. In the dialogue below, Tony and Tye discuss the risky nature of their relationship.

[Tony and Tye are at a diner outside of Little Italy and Chinatown together. He gives her flowers.]

Tye: “They're nice. Thanks. What's gonna happen now if they find out about us?”

Tony: “They won't. We just gotta be careful.”

Tye: “I'm scared for us, Tony.”

Tony: “Don't be scared. We can't let them ruin our lives, Ty. Nothing matters but you and me.”

[They leave to go to an abandoned apartment and sit down in a room with a makeshift bed on the floor. They have intercourse.]

Tye: “Wish we would never had to go back.”

There's a clear difference between Tony and Tye's attitudes towards their families' disapproval of their relationship. The stakes of their interracial relationship are high because their two families and their affiliated gangs are in the middle of a race/turf war. Tony has already been threatened with violence by Tye's brother's gang. Tye is worried about the possibility of them and their families getting hurt. Meanwhile, Tony is not worried and wants the two of them to act like nothing is wrong now that they are in a different part of town. Only in an abandoned apartment can they be together in private without the fear of violence and retaliation from their families. Tye wishes that they could stay there but knows that they have responsibilities back at home. In an ideal world, the two of them could run away together.

Similar to other studies covering film portrayals of interracial relationships, the presence of interracial violence was also prominent. For example, Ramoutar (2006) found that, among the films in their sample, the women in an interracial relationship often ended up dead. "China Girl" likewise fits this pattern, with both the female and male leads deceased by the end of the movie. Indeed, throughout the movie, the fear of their relationship being found out is rooted in the potential for violence. While conflict as a whole has been a prevalent finding within this area of research, familial opposition holds a significant presence in the literature on interracial relationships. Within studies that use a CRT framework, Bratter and Campbell (2023) found that interracial couples' inability to wed can prevent potentially closer familial bonds, such as "in-laws," because of the maintenance of racial boundaries. In Ty and Tony's newborn relationship, familial and societal disapproval maintains racial boundaries such that the relationship itself is infused with risk and violence.

In "Guess Who" (2005, Film 4), Simon (white, male) is in a serious relationship with Theresa (Black, female). The two take a trip to Theresa's parents' house, where the parents meet

Simon for the first time. Although she has talked about him to her parents before, they do not know that Simon is white until they meet face-to-face. All the parents know prior to his arrival is that Simon has a well-paying, prestigious job, which is the main criterion that the father, Percy, uses to approve of Theresa's boyfriend. Right before their initial meeting, Percy brags to his coworker about Simon's position.

Fred: Hey, boss. Did I hear Theresa's bringing a new boyfriend to your anniversary party?

Percy: Yes. What? I'm fine with it.

Fred: So, you met him?

Percy: Nope. I pulled his credit report.

Fred: You didn't.

Percy: I sure as hell did. Fred, this young brother is a stockbroker for J.P. Oliver.

Fred: Theresa? I don't believe it.

Percy: Marilyn said she's crazy about him. And this boy's credit report, I'm telling you, is a thing of beauty. I almost cried.

Fred: Wow, this guy sounds too good to be true.

Percy: He probably is. But the brother has a job.

Fred: I'm glad you think that way...

Percy: That's right, my friend. A J-O-B!

Aside from the fact that Percy thinks that Simon is Black, he approves of him as a suitable partner for his daughter largely because he has a good-paying job and a good credit report. Presumably, this comes from him wanting his daughter to have someone in her life who can provide for her and give her what she wants. He doesn't seem to want to know more about him and already approves. Little does Percy know, Simon has just quit his job, losing the only quality that made Percy approve of him.

The assumption that Simon is Black on top of Percy's praise for his well-paying job displays Percy's preference for his own family's lineage and his own benefit rather than concern for his daughter. One of the tenets of CRT is that race as conceived in America is rooted in unequal power dynamics (Walker 2015 as cited in Kumaran 2023). Along with the desire to ensure his daughter can have whatever she wants by having a well-off husband, Percy also has a desire to uplift the oppressed status of Black people, specifically in his family, through Theresa's

prestigious spouse. Later in the film, Percy tells his Black coworker that Simon is “The Great Black Hope,” who is a successful, Howard graduate Black doctor. When he finds out that Simon is white, he is disappointed because whites are the dominant, oppressive racial group in America (Tripp 2025).

In “The Big Sick” (2017, Film 5), Kumail, a Pakistani man, has parents who want to set him up in an arranged marriage with a Pakistani woman, but he doesn’t want them to. Secretly, he dates and falls in love with a white woman, Emily, while going on the dates his parents set up for him. Emily finds out that Kumail hasn’t told his parents about her while she has told hers about him. He explains that his parents will never approve of her, which she takes as a dealbreaker and leaves him. The discrepancy in their understandings of the situation is seen below.

Kumail: You know what we call arranged marriage in my culture, Emily? Marriage! Okay? We just call it marriage. There's another type of marriage that's called "love marriage" and that's bad. My cousin Rehan married an Irish woman and he was kicked out of the family! And nobody is allowed to talk to him.  
Emily: Why didn't you tell me any of this?  
Kumail: Because I didn't think you'd fucking understand and I was fucking right!  
Emily: You don't think I could fathom your life in any fucking way?  
Kumail: I'm fighting a fourteen-hundred-year-old culture! You were ugly in high school! There's a big fucking difference! I'm sorry. I can't lose my family.  
Emily: Can you imagine a world where we end up together?  
Kumail: I don't know.  
Emily: I have to go. Don't fucking call me.

Kumail is defensive because there’s a cultural difference between him and Emily that she won’t understand. He risks being kicked out of the family for simply dating outside of his race. Emily really wants to be with him, but this is something she wishes she’d have known before getting in too deep. In her eyes, he’s led her on, and she feels hurt.

In Ramoutar's (2006) study, cultural differences fed into the overarching trend of conflict in interracial relationship film depictions. Here, the cultural differences between Emily and Kumail drive a wedge between the two. This adds to Ramoutar's (2006) and Bell's (2010) studies that interracial relationships are depicted as incompatible and fleeting. Additionally, Kumail explicitly addresses that Emily's race disqualifies her as a suitable partner in his family's eyes by mentioning his relative who got ousted for marrying Irish. Although race as a disqualifier for a romantic appears offensive at face value, this is not as offensive because Emily is white. CRT acknowledges that white people have the most power and privileges out of all the racial categories (Tripp 2025). Discriminating against a white person is not as offensive as discriminating against a Pakistani person.

Finally, in "You People" (2023, Film 6), Amira, a Black woman, and Ezra, a Jewish white man, are a couple who both have parents who do not get along well with their partner. Throughout the movie, both members try to navigate their relationships with each other's parents to no avail. It is not until they are at the rehearsal dinner for their wedding that they realize they cannot deal with this anymore and that their relationship will not work. In their conversation, they confront the reality of their situation, much to their dismay.

[At their rehearsal dinner for their wedding]

Amira: Ezra, I don't know how this is gonna work.

Ezra: Okay.

Amira: It's just, you know, your family, my family, the whole thing. I don't know if it's supposed to be this hard, and if I'm being honest, I just... Oh God, I don't have it in me. I'm so sorry.

Ezra: I don't disagree. The stuff with our families, like... my mom, your dad. Yeah, I guess I don't see it changing, so... I do want you to know that this time with you has been the happiest time of my life so...

Amira: I feel the same way.

[Both of them have trembling voices and teary eyes]

Ezra and Amira have gotten so far into their relationship, almost marriage, before realizing that the situation with their parents is something that they cannot handle anymore. They truly love each other, but the difficulty of Amira's dad's lack of approval overpowers this. Both of them are heartbroken because they gave all that they could to make it work, but it just won't work out.

Similar to findings from Bell (2010) and Ramoutar (2006), Ezra and Amira's interracial relationship is portrayed as fleeting and incompatible. The obstacle of their relationship is irrelevant to the way they feel about each other, but their families' behavior and disapproval. Up to this point, the two have been able to navigate the obstacles surrounding their relationship. Amira's father's disapproval in particular is rooted in maintaining racial cohesion. The maintenance of racial boundaries, although coming from Amira's Black father, serves the interests of whites to preserve white privilege (Tripp 2025). But the father perpetuates already established racial boundaries through his actions.

### ***Limitations of Familial Approval***

Although this code appears in every movie within my sample, this does not indicate that it will appear in every movie featuring an interracial relationship. Furthermore, the trends found throughout the decades in this sample are not fully representative of trends found in all interracial romance movies over time.

### *Racial Cohesion*

Family, friends, and communities of the main interracial couple tended to assume and prefer that the main characters want to be with someone of the same race. As a consequence, racial identity as “criteria” for a successful romantic relationship was preserved not only for the main characters but also for their communities. When people dated outside of their race, it came as a surprise to others or as disapproval within their racial communities. Interracial relationships were seen as out of the norm because same-race couples are the norm. It is important to note that while this code was prevalent within my sample, it did not appear in every movie. More specifically, it did not appear in movie 3, *Cinderella* (1997), where race was not acknowledged. Another thing to note is that portrayals of Racial Cohesion did not evolve over time like Familial Approval did. The strongest examples of Racial Cohesion are found below.

In “Aaron Loves Angela” (1975, Film 1), Aaron (a Black male teenager) and Angela (a Puerto Rican female teenager) are in a relationship that they hide from their parents. The two sneak around, lie to their parents about who they are hanging out with or where they are going, disguise their conversations on the phone, and have a secret hideout where they meet. While they do not know explicitly whether their parents approve or not, they do not take the risk of finding out. An excerpt from the movie dialogue below illustrates this:

[The two men speak Spanish and they signal over a teenage Hispanic couple who look the same age as Aaron and Angela and seem to be talking about Aaron]

[The couple looks around and the girl says “Which one?”]

[Aaron is aware of this and looks nervous, assuming they’re talking about him, he runs away and the two men chase after him]

[A chase scene then commences]

[Aaron gets trapped in a dead end and they catch up to him, they grab him and hold up a knife]  
Man 1: "We don't like no outsiders fucking with our women, man!"  
Man 2: "I'll teach you a lesson, maricon!"

In this scene, it seems like the two men are patrolling the neighborhood and spot Aaron. They do not like that he is there, so they directly and violently confront him. The two state that they are not fans of "outsiders" being with "their" women. This upsets them so much that they are willing to kill or seriously harm Aaron. The cultural norm of Puerto Rican women being with only Puerto Rican men seems to be so sacred to these men that they are willing to go to extreme lengths to preserve it.

Again, interracial violence has been noted as a prominent theme in interracial relationship film depictions (Ramoutar 2006). The overlap of interracial violence and maintaining racial boundaries is present in this dialogue. CRT proposes that group behavior maintains categories of race through social practices (Nagel 1994 as cited in Burton et al. 2010; West and Fenstermaker 1995). Here, the "purity" of the New York Puerto Rican community is maintained by the two men through monitoring the neighborhood and getting rid of outsiders. Like Percy in the Familial Approval example of "You People," the NYC Puerto Rican community maintains racial boundaries, even though CRT states that race is categorized by whites for their benefit (Tripp 2025). The community is also racially characterized as taking extreme measures to maintain cohesion although New York Neighborhoods are historically redlined and racially segregated. This displays the CRT tenet of racial differentializing, which proposes that racial categories are characterized to fulfill needs of whites (Tripp 2025). Both in the redlining example and the portrayal of Puerto Ricans, this benefits whites' needs (former example financially, latter for dramatic source of conflict).

In “Guess Who” (2005, Film 4), Theresa’s dad, Percy, presumes that her partner, Simon, is Black. When Simon, a white man, shows up to Percy’s home, he is disappointed. Up to this point, Theresa has been talking to her parents about Simon but never mentioned that he is white. Under the assumption that Simon is Black, Percy warmly greets the Black cab driver as Simon while treating the real Simon coldly. As seen in their interactions, it takes a while for Percy to realize the truth.

Percy: Hey, my man. Percy Jones, baby.  
Cab Driver: (A Black man) Pleasure to meet you.  
Percy: Man, look at this here. I like this, man. Nice, solid, strong grip. Wow. That's something else. Listen. You doing everything you can to make my daughter happy?  
Theresa: No, Dad, it's...  
Percy: Hey, sweetheart. You can take that to the front door for me.  
[said to Simon] Thank you.  
Theresa: No, you see, this...  
Percy: Don't interrupt. I'm giving your friend a once-over here. Sir? Don't stand like a statue. Take it to the front door. That's that square with the hole. Look inside, you see furniture. Thank you.  
Simon: Yes, sir.  
Percy: You doing everything in your power to make her happy?  
Cab Driver: I'm not sure if I am, but I'd sure like a crack at it.  
Percy: Boy, I ought to drill you, man. I like him.  
Simon: Okay, all right, listen.  
Percy: Young man, don't worry about it. Relax. I figure, what, \$30? Get yourself some candy or something.  
Theresa: Dad, this is Simon.  
Percy: Simon? That's her boyfriend's name.  
Marilyn: That's right.  
Percy: Well, who are you?  
Cab Driver: Wesley Thompson. That's my cab. But if you're still down with me making your girl happy... I'm good to go.  
Percy: Why don't you just go?  
Simon: I wish Theresa would have told me you guys were Black. That would have saved an awkward moment.  
Marilyn: Kind of like this one.  
Simon: Yeah.  
[Percy stares intensely at Simon]  
Marilyn: Welcome home, sweetheart.  
Theresa: Thanks, Mom.  
Percy: Baby, let me get that.  
Marilyn: I got it. Lemonade.  
Percy: Damn!  
[Percy winces with his back turned on Simon and Theresa, looks taken aback/shocked]

Percy assumed that the cab driver, a Black man, was Simon, Theresa's boyfriend. He also assumed that Simon was the cab driver. It doesn't take much for Percy to like the cab driver, presumably because he is Black too, assumed to be rich, and had a good handshake. Percy is cold to Simon under the assumption that he is the cab driver. Once their true identities are revealed, Percy is surprised. He expected his daughter to be with a Black man but is disappointed when he finds out that Simon is white.

Assuming that Simon is Black, Percy again projects his own ideals for his family, rooted in maintaining racial similarity. Under CRT, Percy aims to maintain his family's distinct racial identity through his expectations and treatment of Simon when they first meet (Nagel 1994 as cited in Burton et al. 2010; West and Fenstermaker 1995). Percy's initial treatment of Simon is a reversal of racial power dynamics, where the person of color is prejudiced against the white person (Walker 2015 as cited in Kumaran 2023). In this scene, Black people are characterized as being automatically friendly to each other and cold to whites. This portrayal acts as a justification of why Black people should stay together. From a CRT perspective, it is clear this racialization is depicted to benefit whites as a reason why the infrequency of Black-white pairings is not the fault of whites (Tripp 2025).

### ***Limitations of Racial Cohesion***

Again, while these codes appear in the majority of the films in my sample, this is not indicative of all films featuring interracial relationships. Film 3, "Cinderella," is an example of this, where race is not acknowledged at all.

## Discussion

Throughout the 6 decades of film, Racial Cohesion portrayals remained the same while Familial Approval portrayals evolved in my study. The discrepancies between this nature of the codes raises questions about why this is so. Ideas about race and interracial relationships have evolved over time, so why is this not reflected in the Racial Cohesion code?

Since the 1970s, overt racism has gradually become less acceptable in society. This is reflected in Familial Approval in which only the first two films in the sample contain external sources of interracial relationship disapproval versus the other four films which feature internal sources of disapproval. In the first two films, society acts as the disapproving force, which is reflective of widespread norms of the time. In the last four, only the families have an issue with the interracial relationship, which is not reflective of the audience's views as racism has become less acceptable.

In the first two films, the couples hide or mitigate the risk of familial disapproval by hiding their relationship. However, general society and racial communities act as major disapproving forces in their place. For example, "China Girl" (1987, Film 2) features offensive conversations about Chinese people from a white, Italian perspective from Mercury and Nino who are not familial to Tony, the protagonist.

Alby: That was wrong. [To Tony] How many times I gotta tell you to stay away from these people? They're nothing but trouble.

Mercury: People? They don't even look human.

[Tony glares at him]

Nino: Look at em. Do you ever see one without a camera in his hand?

Mercury: Do you every notice that they're squinting even when it's cloudy?

The explicit deployment of racial stereotypes is striking from a modern perspective, something that was likely not seen as a big deal back in 1987. What is especially striking is the offensive commentary from white individuals about a community of color. The power imbalance between white people and Asian people, who are also immigrants in the film, is substantial. One of the tenets of Critical Race Theory proposes that unequal power dynamics are rooted in conceptions of racial differences. As such, conceptualizations of race are formed to privilege and benefit whites (Tripp 2025). This is displayed in the dialogue through Mercury's derogatory characterization of Chinese people as lesser than human.

On the other hand, "The Big Sick" (2017, Film 5) features disapproval from within Kumail's, the protagonist, family, specifically his mom, about dating outside his race/ethnicity/religion.

Sharmeen: Kumi, if you don't want to be a lawyer, fine. If you want to do the stand-up comedy and embarrass us as a family, fine. There is only one thing that we have ever asked from you: that you be a good Muslim and that you marry a Pakistani girl. That is it, one thing!

Although his mom's desire for Kumail to marry Pakistani is rooted in cultural norms, the film and audience recognize that this is a bit unacceptable. The film wants viewers to root for Kumail and Emily because they are in love. This angle positions Sharmeen as a bit of a villain. She does not disapprove of Emily merely because she is white but because she is not Pakistani. The framing of interracial relationship disapproval based on race in this film is not rooted in racist prejudice like in "China Girl." Rather, it coincides with the Racial Cohesion code in Sharmeen's desire to maintain a Pakistani lineage. Even if she was to belittle Emily for being white, it would not have nearly the same impact because white people are not a disadvantaged racial group. Because of this dynamic, conflict is represented in a more acceptable way than if it were the

other way around. The power imbalance principle of CRT is illustrated here once again but in a fashion that does not disadvantage people of color. This also reflects another tenet of CRT, interest convergence, "...where the interests of people of colour are served only when they converge with advancing the interests of white interests" (Kumaran 2023). Because "The Big Sick" premiered in the U.S., it was released to American audiences. Appealing to Americans, a country where whites make up the majority of the country's racial composition (Jensen 2023), automatically has white interests in mind. While racism originates from white supremacy and privilege (Tripp 2025), overt racism is no longer acceptable, so the conflict is portrayed in a manner that does not make whites look bad. This phenomenon of disapproval coming from the partner of color's side of the family in pairings where the other partner is white is present in my sample from the 2000s onward.

Yet, the question of why norms surrounding Racial Cohesion remained unchanged throughout my sample is still at hand. Using CRT's tenet of differential racialization as a lens helps explain why this is the case. The concept of differential racialization has "...drawn attention to the ways the dominant society racializes different minority groups at different times, in response to shifting needs such as the labor market" (Delgado and Stefancic 2023). Here, "shifting needs" is reflected in the specific ways that race in interracial relationships is portrayed to serve Hollywood's need to sell movie tickets. Because this code has stuck with films throughout my sample, it is an indicator that this type of depiction sells.

In my sample, 5 out of 6 films display Racial Cohesion despite the fact 5 different films end with the main interracial relationship intact. Although the success of the relationships appears to display a favorable outlook on the nature of interracial romance, the presence of

Racial Cohesion as an obstacle that couples have to navigate says otherwise. Portrayals displaying that people of all different types of races are expected to date and/or marry within their own race indicates that racial groups maintain racial groups as distinct and apart from others. However, CRT asserts that dominant groups conceptualize and assign people to racial categories to benefit themselves (Delgado and Stefancic 2023). In the United States, whites are the dominant racial group that in this study, who accredit the presence of racial categories and racial differentiation on minorities rather than a construct made by whites. Overall, the Racial Cohesion code serves as a discouragement and warning to people of what they should expect if they were to form an interracial relationship.

With CRT as a vehicle to explain why and how my codes emerged, the transition to Cultivation Theory helps identify implications of interracial romance depictions in Hollywood. Films can be reflective of societal norms and behavior but can also influence the audience's perceptions of acceptable norms and behavior. Although there is no direct proof that films impact behaviors and beliefs in this study, previous Cultivation Theory scholarship establishes that this is a very plausible outcome of film consumption. As mentioned earlier, Busselle (2003) (as cited in Morgan and Shanahan 2010) discovered that parents who frequently watch programs featuring violence and crime had a higher tendency to warn their children in high school about crime. This example illustrates that beliefs formed from media consumption about the world can also influence behavior. Based on the codes that emerged from my sample, interracial film depictions have the potential to discourage formations of interracial relationships because of their portrayals as conflict ridden. Although this is rooted in speculation, this gap invites other sociologists to test this theory.

## CONCLUSION

My findings uphold Critical Race Theory's assertion that race is a social construct, in which ideas about race continue to be shaped by institutions like Hollywood. As someone who identifies as mixed-race, my racial identity and interracial familial background motivates my desire to continue to learn more about origins of perceptions of race in society. In a world where media consumption continues to grow, the importance of recognizing media's role in socializing people grows as well. Based on current research trends, the average U.S. adult is projected to spend approximately 13.5 hours a day consuming media by 2026 (Guttman 2024).

In asking the question "How have changing ideas about race and interracial relationships influenced portrayals in film over the past 6 decades," this study examines how changing conceptualizations of race are reflected in Hollywood cinema. Although the Familial Approval code displays a shift away from overt racism, CRT shows that the characterizations of families of color illustrate them as the forces discouraging interracial relationships rather than whites. With Racial Cohesion, interracial relationships continue to be portrayed as conflict ridden as the norm for same race romance remains an obstacle for interracial couples to overcome. Additionally, an application of a Cultivation Theory lens shows that depictions of interracial relationships can influence audience beliefs and behaviors. This aspect of films contributes to a cycle of films changing norms about race, which are reflected in people's behavior and beliefs, later influencing how films portray race and interracial relationships. Although my hypothesized impact of films on audiences is merely speculation, it is grounded in established research findings on Cultivation Theory.

As representation of interracial relationships in films increases, so should the representation of diverse pairings in sociology academia. If we want to study social aspects of

people's daily lived experiences as sociologists, our studies should be truly reflective of real life. The narrow inclusion of Black/white couples in the majority of current interracial relationship studies is not truly reflective of interracial romance in reality. My study aims to expand sociological understandings of interracial relationships, something I encourage other scholars to do.

### *Limitations/Future Research*

Other codes emerged in my findings, but none were as common and prevalent throughout the different films in the sample as much as the ones that were discussed. Examples include assimilation, class stratification, and love as a distraction.

This is only a limited sample out of the plethora of movies out there. Furthermore, these codes are not fully representative of Hollywood's attitudes and their evolutions over time. Aside from my limited sample, my study focuses only on films, not television shows. Future research could investigate television, film industries of other countries, different films, and concrete implications of seeing interracial romance on screen.

Although Cultivation Theory proposes that heavy media consumption has the power to influence and potentially change people's outlooks on the world, the content of the media people choose to consume can be reflective of what people already believe. "Several studies have... [shown] that individual characteristics influence the types of media people choose to consume, including what they watch on television" (Bobkowski 2009; Brown 2006 as cited in Davignon 2013). If people want to watch a movie about interracial relationships, chances are they already approve of them. At the same time, an audience might go into a movie with an approving

outlook of interracial relationships but come out disapproving of them. Future research can address this by assessing audience viewpoints before and after film viewings.

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