



Assisting Identity Construction Through Coming-of-Age Films

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Abstract

This paper aims to combine developmental psychology with cinematic theory to raise awareness of how coming-of-age films could assist adolescents and emerging adults in identity development. To do so, I will draw upon the work of psychologists Erik Erikson and Jeffery Arnett, exploring the characteristics that distinguish identity development in adolescents and emerging adults. I will then juxtapose these characteristics with Dr. Vittorio Gallese and Dr. Michele Guerra's research in neurocinema to explore how films can support identity development, especially those centering intersectional identity representation (the female gaze). After parsing these works on child development and neurocinema, I offer a series of case studies of modern coming-of-age films from the last decade, detailing whether those narratives reinforce the female gaze and how they do so. I will conclude this paper by raising awareness of the importance of conscious consumerism and intentional exposure to increase the production and distribution of intersectionally diverse films.

Literature Review

Establishing a sense of identity is a fundamental milestone for most adolescents and emerging adults. It is an inevitable part of typical human development. According to Erik Erikson, a 20th-century psychoanalyst, identity construction during adolescence consists of conflict between identity achievement and identity confusion, or what Erikson additionally refers to as the identity vs. confusion stage of psychosocial development. During this stage of development, adolescents experiment with various identities. These identities are critiqued or affirmed by those who surround the adolescent. The adolescent then uses this feedback while factoring in their morals and goals to either adopt or reject the experimental identities. Successful resolution of this stage is achieved when an adolescent identifies and embodies an identity that compromises their vision of themselves and the expectations of family, peers, and the community. Erikson refers to this as the “sense of inner identity” stage:

The wholeness to be achieved at this stage I have called a sense of inner identity. The young person, in order to experience wholeness, must feel a progressive continuity between that which he has come to be during the long years of childhood and that of which he promises to become in the anticipated future; between that of which he conceives himself to be and that of which he perceives others to see him and to expect

him. (87)

According to Jeffery Jensen Arnett, a Senior Research Scholar at Clark University and author of *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties*, identity exploration is also a critical component of emerging adulthood. Unlike adolescents, Arnett theorizes that the identity development stage for emerging adults centers on solidifying their love and career aspirations:

Perhaps the most crucial feature of emerging adulthood is that it is the time when young people explore possibilities for their lives in a variety of areas, especially love and work. In the course of exploring love and work, emerging adults clarify their identities, that is, they learn more about who they are and what they want out of life. (8)

Arnett emphasizes that this identity exploration is possible due to emerging adults' rising independence. Their growing independence from their parents allows emerging adults to explore their inclinations in love and work (Arnett 8-10). Without looming parental pressure, emerging adults can become more self-focused, taking note of their individual preferences and ambitions. These preferences and ambitions set the foundation for identity development, emphasizing to emerging adults their existence beyond the family unit.

Now that we have explored the experiences associated with identity development for adolescents and emerging adults, I want to explore how technology's role may further support these populations' identity development. I want to preface that no definitive conclusions have been made about technology's impact on identity development. This area of study is contemporary and is in its preliminary phases of investigation and replication: therefore, the content henceforth is primarily exploratory and theoretical.

In the case study "Identity development in the Digital Age: An Erikson Perspective," researchers Dr. Katie Davis and Dr. Emily Weinstein open their study by quoting the following statistics regarding adolescent and emergent adults' technology use: "Among 18- to 29-year-olds, 85% own smartphones and 82% of those who use the internet are social media users," and, "Among a slightly younger group, 92% of 13 to 17-year-olds use the internet on a daily basis, 88% have access to mobile phones, and 76% use social media" (1). These statistics serve to stress adolescent and emerging adults' dependence on technology, the internet, and social media today.

I want to stress that an excess of anything can become problematic; however, if adolescents and emerging adults can use technology, the internet, and social media in moderation, I propose that these mediums can be a tool to assist these populations in their identity formation. For adolescents, access to technology and the internet increases exposure to a more significant number of identities for experimentation, including identities outside their physical family unit and community. This increased exposure could give adolescents the variety necessary to find an identity that best compromises societal acceptance and personal morals and ambitions. Furthermore, social media can serve as a setting for adolescents to embody identities to gain further feedback regarding their experimentation. I urge readers to consider that the additional identities and the additional space for experimentation could catalyze the number of successful resolutions of Erikson's identity vs. confusion stage of psychosocial development.

On the other hand, access to technology and the internet could give emerging adults the illusion of independence at an early age. Similarly, emerging adults could use the internet as an

additional place to experiment with love and work. Social media and dating networks increase an emerging adult's ability to explore intimacy preferences. Furthermore, the internet and social media could also serve as a place of work, allowing emerging adults to develop and distribute content and creations anywhere, anytime. This increase in love and work experience could assist emerging adults in determining their life preferences and ambitions, which is, again, the foundation of their identity development.

If, theoretically, technology, the internet, and social media can support identity formation, I pushed myself further to question what other technology-dependent mediums could potentially assist identity development. This led to the consideration of film.

A film has the ability to transport a viewer, providing them with the sensation of being transported to an alternate reality. This sensation largely derives from the brain's response to a film's movement. The parts of the brain that are responsible for processing movement and social interactions are *also* engaged when watching a motion picture. Professors Vittorio Gallese and Michele Guerra raise awareness of this in their book *The Empathetic Screen*. In *The Empathetic Screen*, Dr. Gallese and Dr. Guerra provide a neurological framework for understanding what happens in the human brain when viewing a film:

When we watch a movie, not only do we focus our attention exclusively on the screen, but our immobility releases all our resources of embodied simulation and uses them to create an absorbing relationship with the characters of the plot. (43)

Dr. Gallese and Dr. Guerra argue that this "absorbing relationship" between a protagonist and the audience is a direct response to a film's cinematography. Dr. Gallese and Dr. Guerra explain this feeling is onset from a movie's composition:

Movement, action, interaction, gestures, sentiments and emotions, which unfold in a bi-dimensional space that gives the illusion of being three-dimensional and in which we feel we know our way around, even to move around. Our brain-body system not only gives us experience of that virtual space and allows us to process a spatial cognition that we need to live a given experience, it also puts us in a position to share the situation, actions, gestures, and emotions that take place in the other dimension represented on the cinema screen. (44-45)

Through the cinematic experience, adolescents and emerging adults get the sensation of navigating the fictional world with the film's protagonist. Similar to social media, I propose that cinema can function as another space for identity exploration. In a film, the protagonist's identity is a point of further identity experimentation. Adolescents can note how society and the protagonist's family react to the character's identity, which acts as a substitute for their real-world identity exploration *or* providing an additional identity available for experimentation. On the other hand, emerging adults can use the protagonist's experience navigating love quarrels and/or work-related hardships to aid in the construction of their intimacy and career drive.

Another critical aspect that Dr. Gallese and Dr. Guerra highlight in the quote above is the viewer's ability to empathize with the protagonist's fictional situation, experiencing the protagonist's emotions as if they were the viewer's own. Dr. Gallese and Dr. Guerra attribute this sensation to the film's ability to stimulate the cerebral brain regions that are activated in daily living:

The emotions and feelings experienced by others, independently of whether they are

real or not, are first of all constituted and directly understood through a reusing part of the same neural circuits on which our first-hand experience of these same emotions and feelings are based. (38)

In tandem with physically feeling as if they were navigating the fictional world with the protagonist, the viewer, consequently, gets to endure the character's emotional burdens. For example, if a protagonist is ostracized from their family due to their sexuality, an adolescent viewer could also experience the character's sense of isolation. If a protagonist becomes infatuated with the neighbor next door, an emerging adult may also fall for that neighbor. If a protagonist completely botches a job interview, an emerging adult may experience that disappointment alongside the character.

Given the information from *The Empathetic Screen*, I cannot help but ponder whether a film could be a surrogate for identity experimentation. Could an adolescent or emerging adult's journey "with" a protagonist be enough for them to embody or reject an identity? In the following sections, I proceed as if the mentioned speculation is hypothetically so: therefore, if adolescents and emerging adults *are* using film as a mode of identity exploration, I aim to explore the types of identities these two populations are being exposed to.

Upon examining common identities in cinema, I often came across Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze. In her essay "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey, a British feminist film theorist, explains how classic cinema was aimed to feed a man's scopophilic urges or need for visual pleasure. She explains that heterosexual white men have predominantly run the film industry and, thence, produce films that also target a similar male audience. Mulvey goes on to explain that directors feed into scopophilic urges by recognizing its two drives: "pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation" and "identification with the image seen on screen" (61). The first form of pleasure plays off man's sexual instinct, his natural/biological urges to reproduce. In contrast, the second form of pleasure satisfies man's ego, being a spectator and finding recognition of what he likes being represented in the outside world. Film directors can satisfy these pleasures by manipulating camera shots to glorify women's physiques.

These findings suggest that a large portion of films are dedicated to objectifying women and centering heterosexual, white male protagonists. In return, a minuscule portion of identities are captured on-screen; thus, I am concerned that the male gaze could thwart identity exploration via film. To increase the number of identities portrayed in cinema, I suggest that a new gaze is needed in the film industry — a *female gaze*. The female gaze I urge for would not subvert the male gaze by flipping the male and female binary but rather spotlight more intersectional identities.

The idea of showcasing intersectional identities stems from the work of civil rights activist and critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw. Over the years, Crenshaw has coined and raised awareness about the topic of intersectionality. According to the definition she shared at the 2020 MAKERS Conference, intersectionality is "the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect, especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups" (Crenshaw 02:07). Crenshaw uses the overlapping arrows on her slide to suggest how identities (i.e., race, class, gender, ability, ethnicity, religion, language) can interact together to create

unique sets of experiences.

In my definition of the female gaze, I play into Crenshaw's definition of intersectionality. I argue that the female gaze can be a perspective in which intersectional identity experiences are the center of a film's plot and character development. If a male gaze is narrow, limiting, patriarchal, and domineering, a female gaze should be the opposite of these characteristics, opening a space for characters and viewers to explore. Thus, reducing the prominence of the male gaze and implementing a more representative female gaze increases audience exposure to the experiences, values, and cultures of a multitude of races, classes, genders, abilities, ethnicities, religions, languages, and sexualities. For adolescents, the perspective of the female gaze can potentially increase the number of identities available for experimentation. In addition, the film medium theoretically functions as a space where adolescents can feel the illusion of embodying an identity, thus being able to decide whether to embody or reject a given identity in the real world. For emerging adults, the female gaze and film could work together to provide the sensation of navigating love and work experiences. The display of intersectional identities theoretically allows emerging adults to find a protagonist that best resembles their own set of intersectional experiences. They can then use the protagonist's experiences in the fictional world to help solidify their intimacy preferences and career ambitions.

Again, I want to stress that researchers have yet to determine whether technology impacts adolescent and emerging adults' identity development. The prediction above is pure correlational speculation, given existing research on identity formation, technology usage, and the cinematic experience. I use the above speculation as the focal point of this exploratory research. If film can be a mode and a medium for identity experimentation, then what identities are adolescents and emerging adults being exposed to today? To answer this question, this study sought to perform content analyses of coming-of-age films, examining intersectional identity representation within them. The coming-of-age genre was intentionally chosen given its dependency on an identity exploration narrative and its marketing toward adolescents and emerging adults.

Methodology

I conducted case studies of 5 selected coming-of-age films from the last decade. Films were chosen based on popularity and notability, chosen with the knowledge that they will likely be familiar to a broad audience. In addition, I avoided choosing films released in the same year. This choice was implemented with the intention that choosing films from different years would unveil possible trends in intersectional identity representation.

I annotated these films for intersectional identity representation amongst the leading and supporting characters. Notable annotations were determined through the external appearances of characters, dialogic mentioning of one or more of the six aspects of Crenshaw's intersectionality, and its impact on a given character's experiences and sense of self.

Results

CASE STUDY 1: The Perks of Being a Wallflower (2012). *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* is a coming-of-age film that is based on the Stephen Chobsky novel of the same title. The film

centers around Charlie, a high school freshman who struggles with mental illnesses that stem from the trauma and death of his aunt, Helen. When Charlie starts high school, he meets and befriends two seniors named Sam and Patrick. Sam and Patrick welcome Charlie into their friendship circle, exposing him to new experiences involving music, drugs, and love. Through their friendship, Charlie begins to overcome his symptoms of depression, anxiety, and PTSD, allowing him to enjoy more aspects of life.

Focusing on the protagonist Charlie, the intersectional identities captured in this film include disability and sexuality. Throughout the film, Charlie struggles to manage his symptoms of mental illness. The audience learns that Charlie suffers from depression, anxiety, and PTSD, stemming from the death of his Aunt Helen. At times, Charlie expresses through his monologues being consumed and frustrated by his mental illnesses in his day-to-day life:

CHARLIE. If my Aunt Helen were still here, I could talk to her. And I know she would understand how I am both happy and sad, and I'm still trying to figure out how could that be. (00:08:00 – 00:08:08)

At another points in the film, Charlie discusses his trauma with other characters, such as his sister, Candace:

CHARLIE. Candice, I killed Aunt Helen, didn't I? She died getting my birthday present, so I guess I killed her, right? I tried to stop thinking that, but I can't. She keeps driving away and dying and I can't stop her. Am I crazy, Candace?

CANDICE. [Candace motions to one of her friends] Call the police and send them to my house! [back to the phone] No, Charlie, listen to me. Mom and Dad are going to be home with Chris any second.

CHARLIE. What if I wanted her to die, Candace? (01:30:07 – 01:30:33)

To manage his depression, anxiety, and PTSD symptoms, Charlie can be observed both taking medication and communicating with his therapist. However, despite this support, Charlie's mental illness symptoms still impede his ability to form close relationships. This can be seen in Charlie's relationship with Sam.

Upon meeting Sam and Patrick, Charlie is immediately drawn to Sam's charm and personality. As Sam and Charlie spend more quality time together, their relationship transforms from platonic to romantic. This connection, however, becomes complicated because of Sam's feelings for her ex-boyfriend, Craig, and Charlie's struggles with mental illness. The audience observes the interference of Charlie's mental illness in his and Sam's relationship when the two talk about how Charlie never had the courage to ask Sam out in high school. In this situation, Sam exasperates, "You can't just sit there and put everybody's lives ahead of yours and think that counts as love" (01:25:36 – 01:25:41). Sam finds herself frustrated with Charlie's lack of social skills and confidence, which we, as the audience, know stems from Charlie's social anxiety as a result of his previous trauma.

While Charlie's mental illness creates obstacles in his and Sam's relationship, it does not wholly exclude the two from falling in love with each other. For example, during a secret Santa gift exchange, Sam takes Charlie to her room to share the typewriter she purchased to support his writing career. While there, Sam goes out of her way to reassure Charlie that despite his past experiences, he, too, deserves love. Sam validates this message by sharing her own feelings for Charlie and also sharing his first kiss with him:

SAM. Charlie, I know that you know I like Craig. But I want to forget about that for a minute, okay?"

CHARLIE. Okay.

SAM. I just want to make sure that the first person who kisses you loves you. Okay?

SAM. [Sam and Charlie kiss. Sam pulls away] I love you, Charlie.

CHARLIE. I love you, too (00:46:16 – 00:47:08).

Despite Charlie's battle with mental illness, Charlie and Sam were able to nourish and grow in their relationship. Specifically for Charlie, his love for Sam became the additional support he needed to better manage his symptoms of depression, anxiety, and PTSD.

Because Charlie's mental illness is seen as a point of connection *and* interference in his romantic relationship, the relationship between Charlie's disability and sexuality illustrates how *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* takes an intersectional approach.

CASE STUDY 2: The Fault in Our Stars (2014). *The Fault in Our Stars* is a romantic coming-of-age film based on the John Green novel of the same name. The film captures the love story of two teenage cancer patients, Hazel and Augustus, who meet at a support group and fall in love. Despite their illnesses, the two motivate one another to enjoy the little things in life: traveling, reading, and picnics, thus making the most of the limited time they have together.

Through the characters Hazel Grace and Augustus Waters, the film *The Fault in Our Stars* showcases the intersection between disability and sexuality. The intersection of disability is established at the beginning of the film with Hazel's opening monologue:

HAZEL. I believe we have a choice in this world about how to tell sad stories. On the one hand, you can sugarcoat it the way they do in movies and romance novels, where beautiful people learn beautiful lessons, where nothing is too messed up that can't be fixed with an apology and a Peter Gabriel song. I like that version as much as the next girl, believe me. It's just not the truth. This is the truth. Sorry. (00:00:36 – 00:01:06)

Hazel prepares her audience that this film will tell an authentic love story, a love story that is later revealed to be about two cancer patients: Hazel and Augustus. Hazel is depicted as a teenage girl navigating her adolescent years with stage IV thyroid cancer. She is often seen wheeling around her oxygen tanks, which are needed to support her weakened lungs. On the other hand, Augustus is a teenage male living with osteosarcoma. Due to his cancer, Augustus lost his leg and must maneuver through the world with his prosthetic leg.

Throughout the film, Hazel reflects on her cancer diagnosis, causing her to feel isolated by those around her. To show how her cancer separates her from the "normal teen experience," Hazel shares her daily routine with the viewer, noting, "that was my life. Reality shows. Doctors appointments. Eight prescription drugs, three times a day" (00:05:03 – 00:05:11). She even mentions that not only does her cancer foster isolation, but the knowledge that her cancer may become fatal leads her to also suffer from mental illness. Hazel explains, "The booklets and websites always list depression as a side effect of cancer. Depression's not a side effect of cancer. It's a side effect of dying" (00:01:28 - 00:01:41). Between Hazel's isolation and depression, Hazel's mother suggests that she attend a support group sessions. She encourages Hazel to befriend other teens who are also living with cancer, and it is here that Hazel meets her love, Augustus.

Through Hazel and Augustus's relationship after meeting in the support group, the two

are quick to support each other, pushing through their personal hurdles of cancer. They motivate one another to enjoy the little things in life: traveling, reading, picnics, and making the most of their lives. Sadly, towards the film's end, Augustus' cancer relapses, and the two must begin to process Augustus' limited prognosis. To do so, Grace and Augustus rehearse a funeral, where Grace can share her eulogy for Augustus:

HAZEL. Like all real love stories, ours will die with us. As it should... I'm not gonna talk about our love story, 'cause I can't. So, instead, I'm gonna talk about math. I'm not a mathematician, but I do know this: There are infinite numbers between zero and one. There's point one, point one two, point one one two, and an infinite collection of others... Some infinities are simply bigger than other infinities. A writer that we used to like taught us that. You know, I want more numbers than I'm likely to get, and God, do I want more days for Augustus Waters than what he got. But Gus, my love, I can not tell you how thankful I am for our little infinity. You gave me a forever within the numbered days. And for that, I am... I am eternally grateful. (01:42:52 – 02:05:51)

Through this tribute, Grace suggests that while her and Augustus' days are cut short, their relationship was enough to breathe life back into their numbered days.

Because Hazel and Augustus' cancer diagnoses facilitated their meeting, thus catalyzing their love story, it suggests how disability and sexuality are intertwined in both Grace's and Augustus' identities.

CASE STUDY 3: Moonlight (2016). *Moonlight* is a coming-of-age story that centers around the life of a black male protagonist, Chiron. The film is divided into the three stages of Chiron's life: his childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Each stage captures Chiron's struggle with his identity arising from ongoing conflicts in his relationship with his mother, sexuality, and drug exposure. Overall, the film works to showcase the lasting impact early experiences can have on one's life trajectory.

Through the characters Chiron (also known as Little) and Juan, *Moonlight* highlights the intersection between race, class, and sexuality. The film portrays how systemic racism impacts the life of Chiron and his Miami community. For example, Chiron's mother struggles with addiction and poverty, which are both exacerbated by a lack of resources and opportunities in the poverty-stricken neighborhood of Liberty City. This particular instance becomes complicated for young Chiron, who learns that the individual responsible for supplying his mother with drugs is the man he looks up to the most as a fatherly figure, Juan. While sitting at the dining room table one afternoon, Chiron questions Juan about his profession:

CHIRON. Do you sell drugs?

JUAN. [pause] Yeah.

CHIRON. And my mama...she do drugs, right?

JUAN. [nods] Yeah. (00:34:53 – 00:35:24)

While Juan supplies Chiron's mom with the drugs that perpetuate her cycle of addiction, poverty, and maltreatment of Chiron, Juan does take the time to educate young Chiron about the importance of taking ownership over one's identity. Regarding race identity, Juan shares a story about the nickname "Blue":

JUAN. Let me tell you something, man. There are black people everywhere. You

remember that, okay? No place you can go in the world ain't got no black people, we was the first on this planet. [pause] I've been here a long time. I'm from Cuba. Lotta black folks in Cuba. You wouldn't know that from being here, though. I was a wild little shorty, man. Just like you. Running around with no shoes on when the moon was out. This one time, I ran by this old... this old lady. I was runnin' and hollerin', and cuttin' a fool, boy. This old lady, she stopped me. She said... "Runnin' around, catching up all that light. In moonlight, black boys look blue. You blue, that's what I'm gon' call you. 'Blue.'"

CHIRON. So your name 'Blue'?

JUAN. [chuckles] Nah.

JUAN. [pause] At some point, you gotta decide for yourself who you gonna be. Can't let nobody make that decision for you. (00:19:29 – 00:21:07)

In this scene, Juan stresses the importance of being one's true self. He urges Chiron to overlook the labels of others because this will give him the authority to take control of his own life. Juan gives a similar speech to Chiron when he asks about his sexuality after some boys at school bully him for being a "faggot":

CHIRON. What's a faggot?

JUAN. [pause] A faggot is... a word used to make gay people feel bad.

CHIRON. [pause] Am I a faggot?

JUAN. No. You're not a faggot. You can be gay, but... you don't have to let nobody call you a faggot. (00:33:27 – 00:34:05)

Similar to his racial identity, Juan again tells Chiron not to be confined by the labels of others. Juan validates Chiron's sexuality and encourages him not to allow others to belittle that part of him.

Through Juan and young Chiron's relationship, the audience learns about the impact and consequences of systemic racism. For example, Juan supplies the residents of Chiron's town with their drug needs. For Chiron, those drugs mean little money at home and an absent motherly figure who leans on him, a child, for stability. This creates an unsupportive home environment for Chiron, forcing him to navigate his sexuality independently. These domino effects reinforce the interconnected nature that race, class, and sexuality play in Chiron's identity.

CASE STUDY 4: Lady Bird (2017). *Lady Bird* is a coming-of-age film directed by Greta Gerwig. The film captures the story of high school senior Christine "Lady Bird" McPherson and her journey navigating her complicated mother-daughter relationship and the impacts of socioeconomic play in her day-to-day life. Throughout the film, Lady Bird aspires to leave her hometown of Sacramento, abandoning her past, to attend college on the East Coast. During her senior year, before her East Coast journey, Lady Bird can be seen enduring complications in many areas of her life, such as relationships, friendships, and family.

In the film, Lady Bird and Marion's mother-daughter relationship showcases the close connection between class and ability. Money can often be a point of tension between Lady Bird and her mother. In their family, Lady Bird tends to push her boundaries, encouraging her mother to splurge on items that are outside the family's budget. Consequently, Marion has to constantly remind Lady Bird of the family's financial state, insisting that she choose more affordable alternatives. An example of this can be observed while Lady Bird and Marion are out grocery

shopping:

MARION. We don't need to buy that.

LADY BIRD. It's only three dollars. I'm having a hard week.

MARION. Well, if you wanna read it, we can go down to the public library.

LADY BIRD. I wanna read it in bed.

MARION. That's something that rich people do. We're not rich people. (00:14:03 – 00:14:13)

Marion also goes out of her way to remind Lady Bird that wealth and happiness are not synonymous, and that she should not be equating the two. She urges, "Money is not life's report card... Being successful doesn't mean anything in and of itself. It just means that you're successful... But that doesn't mean that you're happy" (00:50:40 – 00:50:54). By constantly having to remind Lady Bird about the family's finances, it causes Marion to take on a more stern parental role with Lady Bird. This sternness interferes with a close mother-daughter relationship, leading Lady Bird to conceal the more intimate parts of her life, such as being on a waitlist for college. When the secret of Lady Bird's waitlist gets out, Marion is quick to isolate Lady Bird for hiding something behind her back, giving her the silent treatment. This silent treatment continues until the day Lady Bird leaves for college.

During her time living outside the family, Lady Bird comes to the realization of all the experiences she took for granted in Sacramento. Taking the step to mend her relationship with her mother, Lady Bird calls home:

LADY BIRD. Hi Mom and Dad, it's me, Christine. It's the name you gave me. It's a good one. Dad, this is more for Mom. Hey, Mom, did you feel emotional the first time that you drove in Sacramento? I did, and I wanted to tell you, but we weren't really talking when it happened. All those bends I've known my whole life, and stores, and the whole thing. But I wanted to tell you I love you. Thank you, I'm... thank you. (01:27:03 – 01:28:21).

Overall, because Lady Bird's abled body allows her to escape (through college) the confines of her mother alongside the confines brought on by Marion's stress of managing a low socioeconomic household, it suggests the interworkings that ability and class play in Lady Bird's identity.

CASE STUDY 5: Luca (2021). *Luca* is a Disney-animated coming-of-age film directed by Enrico Casarosa. Set in Portorosso, Italy, the film follows the life of Luca, a young sea monster, who wishes to explore the human world. Upon traveling above the sea's surface, Luca meets another young sea monster named Alberto. Working together, the two boys embark on a journey to win Vespa, the ultimate form of independence, in a local triathlon. During their training, Luca and Alberto meet a human girl named Giulia, who joins them in their race. Through these events, *Luca* showcases how one can overcome societal and cultural differences to achieve a common goal.



Figure 1: Sea Monster vs. Human Physical Traits. Image from Zach Johnson. “Meet the Characters of Disney and Pixar’s Luca.” D23, Disney, 15 June 2021, <https://d23.com/meet-the-characters-of-disney-and-pixars-luca/>.

In the film, sea monsters and humans are portrayed as two differing groups. These groups differ in aspects such as physical features and cultural values but overlap in areas such as aspirations. Given this information, the intersectional identity most prevalent in *Luca* is ethnicity. Concerning physical characteristics that notably distinguish the sea monsters from the humans, these features would include scales, fins, and tail. On the other hand, the physical features that notably distinguish the humans from the sea monsters include hair, skin, and legs. Both the sea monster and human characteristics can be observed in Figure 1.

Because both groups are not used to each other’s physical features, their differences instill fear, fostering prejudiced stereotypes against one another that each group is “dangerous.” An example of this instilled fear can be observed at the beginning of the film while Luca is herding his fish. While the fish were grazing, a motorized boat passes overhead, leading Luca to exclaim to them, “Land monsters! Everybody under the rock!” (00:05:40-00:05:46). The fish follow this command and huddle next to Luca under a cavern. Because the sea monsters have implemented safety practices to protect themselves from the humans, it suggests how their fear for them has ingrained itself into their culture.

A similar phenomenon can also be seen within the human’s culture. Contrary to the sea monster’s culture, rather than implementing safety practices, the town of Portorosso is littered with art displaying the murder of sea monsters (00:29:46-00:29:57). This art can be seen as a form of macroaggression. The humans are using the art as a form of propaganda that reinforces the stereotyping of sea monsters as scary, harmful beast, while also reinforcing that the appropriate response for a human when encountering a sea monster is violence.

As the film progresses, however, the sea monsters and humans begin to unveil similarities between the two of them. One of these similarities being their overlapping aspirations. For example, the sea monster characters Luca and Alberto hold the same goal as the human character Giulia: winning the town’s triathlon. Despite their differences, the three work together to

relentlessly train, which leads them to victory in the Portorosso Cup Race by the end of the film.

Ultimately, the sea monsters and humans defuse the tension between one another by accepting each other's "ethnic" differences and embracing their similarities.

Conclusion

After reviewing the five case studies, I found that 80% of the coming-of-age films showcased intersectional identities that contained two or more of Crenshaw's six aspects of intersectionality. The only movie that did not meet the standard of containing two or more of Crenshaw's six aspects of intersectionality was *Luca*, this film only showcased one.

However, my analyses uncovered another central identity not initially included in Crenshaw's six aspects of intersectionality; this identity is age. The influence of age made an appearance in each of the coming-of-age films reviewed:

The Perks of Being a Wallflower: Charlie notes the consuming infatuation of falling in love young.

The Fault in Our Stars: At her support group, Grace comments to everyone that death is inevitable and you do not have a say in when it happens.

Moonlight: Moonlight's narration style captures the impact that youth experiences have on future development.

Lady Bird: As an emerging adult, Christine changes her name to "Lady Bird," which symbolizes her first steps toward independence, separating herself from her family.

Luca: As an adolescent, Luca's transformation from sea monster to human symbolizes identity experimentation from Erikson's identity vs. confusion stage of psychosocial development.

Given the role that age plays in the life and experiences of the characters mentioned above, I argue that age could be a seventh aspect of Crenshaw's definition of intersectionality.

Discussion

Suppose intersectional identity representation in the coming-of-age genre has the potential to support the identity formation of adolescents and emerging adults. In that case, I argue that more attention should be directed toward the power of conscious consumerism and the power of intentional exposure.

Conscious consumerism acknowledges the fact that money holds power in our capitalist society. Money can purchase films that contain the representations individuals want to see. This transaction reinforces to producers the type of representations people wish to see in cinema. Furthermore, because producers need money to sustain their work, they are more likely to incorporate similar identity representation from selling films into future productions. This cycle could catalyze the flourishing of the female gaze in the film industry.

After purchasing the films, educators and caregivers can intentionally expose the film's

content to adolescents and emerging adults. Their exposure to intersectional identities, reinforced by conscious consumerism, could support the development of these populations as they navigate their journey to solidify a sense of self. However, intentional exposure can expand beyond just exposing youth to intersectional identities. It could also be practiced by sharing purchased films with other educators and caregivers or by sharing one's knowledge in person or online.

All in all, by practicing conscious consumerism and intentional exposure in day-to-day life, one has the potential to increase the production and distribution of intersectionally diverse films, which, in return, can support the identity development of our youth.

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