

**UNDERSTANDING ASIAN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES ON INTERRACIAL
COMMUNICATION AND RACIAL REPRESENTATION THROUGH THE FILM**

CRAZY RICH ASIANS

By

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(Under the Direction of SOROYA MCFARLANE)

ABSTRACT

The current study explored Asian American perspectives of *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) and racial representation in Hollywood. Using Critical Race Theory and Encoding/Decoding Theory as theoretical frameworks, this study involved in-depth interviews with Asian Americans in order to understand their experiences with racial representations of them in the media. Participants were asked questions regarding the extent to which they related to the stories and characters depicted in the film. Thematic analysis was used to identify 10 themes that emerged as being central to the meanings embedded within *Crazy Rich Asians*. A major finding was how the film's depiction of culture clash resonated with participants' feelings of identity negotiation. One theme regarding communication approaches revealed that participants mostly experienced apprehension when communicating interracially about racial representation; however, some participants did use interracial conversations specifically to educate others about race in media and their Asian American identity.

INDEX WORDS: Asian American, Race and media, Critical race theory, AsianCrit, Encoding and decoding theory, Interracial communication

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the two men in my life who inspired the work itself.

In honor of my husband, Austin, who encourages my passion daily and has shown me how to
make following your dreams into living your reality.

&

In memory of my brother, Hong-Gyu Henry Patrick Youn, who lived his life to the fullest and
encouraged me to always speak my mind.

We are always in mischief.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Historically, racial/ethnic representation in North American (i.e., U. S.) media, specifically in film, has been skewed for the western audience (Kim, 2017). Media depictions tailored to western audiences have traditionally limited lead roles and main storylines to those of white characters, while casting people of color as primarily supporting or background characters. What is most notable about those roles is that these racial representations primarily have been filled with negative depictions of characters or people of color (Borum Chattoo, 2018). People of color have been devalued through incessant, inaccurate portrayals in film that are focused on stereotypical images and assumptions (Martin, 2018). Often, these characters and stories are inaccurately presented because Hollywood's producers or storytellers are mostly non-people of color (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). This is problematic because White storytellers in media have a limited understanding of or interest in these stories surrounding race and ethnicity and, therefore, do not have the skills or knowledge necessary to accurately represent characters of color and their stories (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

One way to address this issue is by having more people of color in control of the accurate and realistic racial representations of them in media, which is important because people in general are highly dependent on media for understanding different racial and ethnic groups (Kim, 2017; Yosso, 2002). Because most people typically have limited interracial interactions (Orbe & Harris, 2015), the only exposure they have to these outgroup members is through the media. Thus, it stands to reason that these individuals will come to rely on media to learn about and understand racial and ethnic groups (Kim, 2017). It is problematic when individuals are exposed

to inaccurate racial and ethnic representation in films and they see popular characters such as Long Duk Dong in the cult classic *Sixteen Candles* (1984) or more recently *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood's* (2019) portrayal of Bruce Lee. Viewers may misunderstand these typically underrepresented groups (Shih et al., 2019) and assume that these images are accurate and true. Among these underrepresented groups are Asian Americans, who account for about 5.6% (Asian alone or multi-racial) of the United States population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). While this percentage might seem small, the Asian population has the fastest growth rate compared to any racial or ethnic group in the United States (Lopez et al., 2017). The growing number of Asian Americans is one of the contributing factors to why it is imperative to portray Asians and Asian Americans appropriately and accurately in the media. It is necessary because the increase in the Asian American population means there is a greater need to understand and learn about Asian cultures since American society is continuously being influenced by these cultures and their members. One way that people seek to learn is through film and television, which is why it is important to produce accurate media content that may ultimately function to educate audiences about cultures different from their own.

In order to produce the most accurate media representations of Asian Americans and other underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, members of those groups should be in control of the storytelling (Lynn et al., 2013; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Not only is it essential to give underrepresented voices power, it is imperative for people of color to conduct studies that focus on advancing scholarship by, about, and for people of color (Shih et al., 2019). Currently, there is a limited number of scholars in the field of communication exploring how individuals engage with depictions of Asian and Asian Americans (Borum Chattoo, 2018; Kim, 2017; Rodríguez & Kim, 2018). Research shows that Asian Americans have been portrayed in media and literature

as members of a singular or monolithic racial and social group (Balaji & Worawongs, 2010; Dobson, 2018; Ono & Pham, 2009). Audiences are rarely exposed to characters who represent the different ethnic groups that are within the broader racial category of Asian. These representations are further complicated by the fact that they are typically negative portrayals and often depict Asians and Asian Americans with racially charged stereotypical roles (Ono & Pham, 2009), such as the exoticized Asian woman Christine in *Vice Principals* (2016-2017), the token Asian friend Lane and her tiger mom Mrs. Kim in *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2020), and the perpetual foreigner Long Duk Dong in *Sixteen Candles* (1984).

The tide seems to have slightly shifted in that the Hollywood film industry has slowly begun to depict Asian and Asian American characters through more positive images (Lopez, 2018). The gradual shift is a result of Asian and Asian Americans taking control over the Asian narratives in film and media (Lopez, 2018; Trazo & Kim, 2019). This is an example of how the media is becoming somewhat more responsible in creating accurate racial representations of historically marginalized groups. Additionally, Asians and Asian Americans are taking on a more critical role in bringing their own stories to life through film in order to ensure that their representations are accurate (Museus & Iftikar, 2013). While media tends to portray Asian Americans as a monolithic community, current research has done little to explore the nuances among the many Asian American ethnicities. It is important that more research is conducted to understand more of how Asian Americans could influence how their stories are portrayed in media. Examples of research that could be conducted are studies that explore how Asian Americans perceive current media representations and how that may relate to the impact of future portrayals of Asians and Asian Americans. For this reason, analyzing film is an important

critical approach to exploring and understanding the interpretation of messages between producers of film/messages and consumers/audiences.

Statement of the Problem

The importance of Asian and Asian American misrepresentation in film stems from the lack of racial representation in the production of media. Historically, storytellers in media have been White, giving little voice to those to whom the stories belong (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Included in the voiceless are Asians and Asian Americans, whose portrayals in media often surround stereotypes (Kolano, 2016). Several of these stereotypical depictions stem from historical economic frames based on tensions between Western and Eastern cultures (Ono & Pham, 2009). One of the first stereotypical images of Asians and Asian Americans depicted in media is one rooted in the “yellow peril” phenomenon (Ono & Pham, 2009). The ideology behind yellow peril is that the Asian economy was perceived as a threat to Western cultures, which led to Asians being framed as heathens threatening to take over/invade Western societies (Eguchi, 2013; Ono & Pham, 2009). The current U. S. socio-political climate has some people believing that Americans currently exist in a post-racial society (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). Despite the false assumption that we as a society have moved beyond institutionalized racism, the threat of yellow peril continues to exist. The baseless threat of yellow peril is prevalent in Hollywood and contributes directly to the all too familiar stereotypical images of Asians, all of which are based in historical and economical frames such as the stereotypes of Asians overtaking Western economies or that Asians are aggressive or villainous (Ono & Pham, 2009).

The yellow peril threat originated in the late 1800s and resulted in a U.S. federal law titled The Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), which was a discriminatory law that limited Chinese immigration to the U.S. (Ono & Pham, 2009; Umeda, 2018). The threat of yellow peril was

heightened in North American print media immediately following the Chinese Exclusion Act (Umeda, 2018). On-screen mediated images began displaying anti-Japanese discourse in the early 1900s during the U.S. and Japan's World War II conflict (Ono & Pham, 2009; Umeda, 2018). Anti-Japanese sentiment is a disdain for or hatred toward Japanese government or culture that was present in the U.S. and the Asian countries that were subjected to the Japanese colonist movement (Buell, 1922; Moon, 2003). Displaying an ongoing anti-Japanese sentiment is a form of negative propaganda in the U.S., and it was then followed by another anti-Chinese movement in the 1990s where media depicted Asian characters as gangsters in film (Ono & Pham, 2009). It is safe to assume that the depictions of Asian characters as villainous and devious engenders fear among audience members, which serves to maintain negative stereotypes associated with both Asians and Asian Americans.

Negative stereotypical depictions driven by race can lead to harmful thoughts about and negative interactions with members of the dominant racial group (Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2015). For example, in a study exploring Asian, Black, and White views on the racial stereotypes in the blockbuster interracial buddy film *Rush Hour 2* (1998), Park et al. (2006) found evidence that Asian participants recognized Asian stereotypes but associated them with a Chinese identity more than an Asian American identity. Identifying with the ethnic identity more than the racial identity allowed them to relate to the positive portrayals of Asian characters and disassociate with the negative portrayals. Black participants found the film's racial stereotypic depictions of Black characters to be exaggerated, but entertaining. Similar to Asian participants, Black participants focused on the positive representations of Black characters over the negative ones; however, White participants were not only aware of the racial stereotypes presented in the film, but they felt the film's racial portrayals confirmed their own positive and negative beliefs about

the aforementioned racial characteristics. Based on their analysis of the White participants' engagement with the film, Park et al. (2006) determined that, because the White viewers are aligned with a dominant racial perspective, their understanding of *Rush Hour 2*'s (1998) Asian and Black characters was fixed within racial stereotypes. Park et al. (2006) demonstrated how, despite a film's presentation of positive racial depictions with negative ones, White viewers may still observe these portrayals as a representation of realistic racial characteristics and give more credit to negative depictions in understanding racially different others.

The phenomenon of yellow peril was fueled by the notion that the dominant culture of the West was under attack following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 (Ono & Pham, 2009). Hollywood pushed production on films with negative depictions of Asians, which involved presenting them as a perceived danger or the perpetual foreigner in films including *Across the Pacific* (1942), *Destination Tokyo* (1944), and *American Guerrilla in the Philippines* (1950) (Pollard, 2017). According to Pollard (2017), the rise in Hollywood's film production of negative images of Asians was intentional and propagandic in order to create fear of Asians in Western audiences. Using racialized propaganda is an example of media representation created by Western producers to perpetuate negative depictions of a racial or ethnic group. Stuart Hall's (1985) theory of representation recognizes how mediated representations of ethnic groups in Western contexts is oftentimes manufactured. In other words, the depiction of Asians and Asian Americans as heathens of yellow peril is not an *actuality*; rather, it is a manufactured threat designed to create fear among Western audiences who were also society members (Ono & Pham, 2009; Pollard, 2017; Zhu, 2013). The producers of these harmful depictions were usually Whites or people of European descent who created methods of controlling stereotypes, which have

become normalized depictions historically marginalized heterogeneous group (Ono & Pham, 2009).

Yellow peril continued to be a controversial topic within Asian American communities, especially during the 1960s when Asian Americans attempted to reclaim the term (Weik, 2020). Notably, “Yellow Peril Supports Black Power” was a slogan used during the civil rights movement for Asian Americans to show solidarity with Black Americans against racial oppression. According to Weik (2020), the slogan has resurfaced during today’s Black Lives Matter movement in an effort to provide some Asian Americans a voice of similar support from the 1960s civil rights movement; however, most Asian Americans still believe that yellow peril is a divisive term because they do not identify as yellow and they believe it to be a derogatory term. A reason for these beliefs is that the term is western-made for the purpose of otherizing Asians. As previously noted, these stereotypes evolved because of Western resistance to Eastern cultures and economies (Said, 1978). Said (1978) explored the origin of the concept “orientalism,” and explained how the term was created by Western colonists to patronize Eastern cultures. Labeling the East as “oriental” by the West was a tool designed to exaggerate the “distinct” differences between the two cultures and in a very stereotypical manner (Said, 1978). Oriental became a problematic term because it created a divide between Western and Eastern ethnicities and cultures, which contributes to our understanding of the enduring influence yellow peril has had on negative media depictions and perceptions of Asians and Asian Americans as the threatening other.

In response to negative stereotypes of Asian Americans resulting from yellow peril, Eguchi (2013) discusses an *intercultural dialectic* lens of one of the contradicting identity negotiations Asian Americans are presented with, the model minority – yellow peril dialectic.

Based in Martin and Nakayama (1999)'s dialectical approach to intercultural interactions, Eguchi (2013)'s mirroring dialectics suggests that Asian Americans are either a threat or docile like a model minority who is avoidant of conflict. The definition of a model minority is an Asian who is perceived as hardworking yet subservient, which contributes to an ideology of colorblindness and post-racism (Eguchi & Starosta, 2012). Seemingly, the model minority stereotype is a compliment to Asians and Asian Americans; however, the assumption that stereotypes can be positive brings to light how language and portrayals that are exclusionary are benefitting the dominant racial group. The model minority stereotype appeases White audiences by framing an ethnic minority group as passive and no longer a threat to the Western culture (Ono & Pham, 2009), thus perpetuating ethnocentric ways of thinking.

One characteristic of a model minority is that the person(s) is an asset to Western/American economic society, which contributes to the expectation of Asians and Asian Americans to perform "honorary" Whiteness (Ono & Pham, 2009). The expectation implies that there are similarities between the model minority and White identity behaviors; thus, model minorities are conforming to the expectation that ethnic minorities should behave a specific way in order to be accepted in a White-dominated society (Eguchi & Startosta, 2012). Not surprisingly, when Asians and Asian Americans are perceived as honorary members of the White-dominant racial group, it minimizes and extinguishes their Asian ethnic identities. Unfortunately, the model minority stereotype is also useful for the dominant racial group to maintain control over the narrative about Asian identities that were created by the White American culture (Ono & Pham, 2009). Because Asians and Asian Americans are viewed as the passive model minority due to media representations, the controlling image encourages thinking

that reinforces a subservient image of Asians and functions to maintain White viewers' social power within a White-dominant racial group.

Media representations of people of color have been one of the most effective ways to perpetuate racial stereotypes in American culture (Lopez, 2016; Ono & Pham, 2009). Negative and controlling mediated images of Asians and Asian Americans teach non-Asians that these images are a true portrayal of Asians. At the same time, they also present Asian Americans with stereotypical identities that they struggle to identify with or distance themselves from, such as the model minority or the dangerous foreigner (Eguchi & Startosta, 2012; Ono & Pham, 2009). According to Orbe and Harris (2015), because interracial interactions are limited in society, individuals rely on mass media representations to shape their racial and ethnic perceptions of people of color. This means that people often expect people of color to behave similarly to how characters of color in mass media are portrayed; therefore, it is important for the mass-mediated portrayals of Asians and Asian Americans to be represented appropriately. If portrayals of Asians and Asian Americans are created by Asians, then they will very likely be accurate while providing Asian Americans with positive and affirming images with which they can identify. Ultimately, these depictions can serve the greater purpose of educating others about a multiethnic group that is too often misunderstood and unappreciated.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

In 2015, the viral hashtag #OscarsSoWhite called out historical and persistent issues of homogeneity (read no diversity) within Hollywood films. The hashtag brought attention to the inequity of representation in Oscar nominees' racial and ethnic identities (Borum Chattoo, 2018). The hashtag #OscarsSoWhite works within the framework of critical race theory (CRT) by demonstrating how the entertainment industry is a largely white industry. Its portrayals of race assume we live in a post-racial society; however, CRT challenges scholars and citizens to engage critically with how we think about these misrepresentations (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Museus & Iftikar, 2013) and social injustices that continue to suppress and oppress communities of color.

To best understand to what extent these films failed to represent people of color and women, Borum Chattoo (2018) conducted a content analysis of U.S. Oscar-nominated documentary feature films between 2008-2017 because it was the first decade that the Academy included documentaries streamed via digital platforms because of the "elevated accessibility to audiences" (p. 369). She focused on documentary features primarily because of their non-fiction nature and influence on social justice. Borum Chattoo (2018) recognized that the premise of documentaries is that they are often a reflection of real life; so, she sought to determine if there were patterns of inequity in diverse representations. Her primary interest in documentaries was because despite the significance of documentaries in the entertainment industry, the genre was left out of the #OscarsSoWhite conversation. It was found that the stories represented in the documentaries were influenced by the creators' racial/ethnic identities, which further indicated a lack of racial diversity in the directors and producers of documentary featured stories being told

about, for, and through people of color in Hollywood (Borum Chattoo, 2018). When white creators write stories belonging to people of color, they are doing so mainly for the benefit of mainstream (White) audiences (Gates, 2013; Orbe & Harris, 2015), resulting in a considerably high level of misrepresentation in storytelling when it comes to the experiences and images of POC (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Additional examples of misrepresentations in film with Asian portrayals from a colonist perspective are *Charlie Chan Carries On* (1931), *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932), *A Christmas Story* (1983), *The Love Guru* (2008), *Aloha* (2015), *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961), and *The Tuxedo* (2002). Of the seven films listed, five casted white people instead of Asians as Asian characters. Casting white people as Asian character is the practice known as whitewashing, which is common in Hollywood and contributes to ethnic erasure in Western societies. The topic of whitewashing will be further discussed in the literature review section exploring yellowface in Hollywood. Understanding the history of offensive portrayals of Asians and Asian Americans and how it connects to what negative perceptions individuals have about Asians and Asian Americans is important for the purpose of this study. This chapter will review the literature that explores that history and the theories utilized to understand the effects of those images.

The goal of this literature review is to demonstrate how media representation of Asians and Asian Americans has typically been depicted in the U.S. With misrepresentations in mind, the literature review will also focus on how the movie *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) is an excellent example of how racial diversity in Hollywood is critical to accurate representations of a very heterogeneous group of people. The first section reviews the literature that is related to Asian American representations in film. It will also explore the intersections of race and gender of Asian misrepresentations in film, the use of yellowface in Hollywood, how diversity of Asian

Americans is observed in media, and how *Crazy Rich Asians*' production occurred and how the film was overall received by international audiences.

Raced and Gendered Stereotypical Representations in Film

Among the harmful stereotypes of Asians and Asian Americans is a clear gendered stereotyping of Asian and Asian American males' and females' social attractiveness and sex appeal. The differences between Asian male and female depictions are some of the most glaringly derogatory representations of non-white people. One racialized and gendered stereotype of Asian men is that they all know kung-fu (Wu, 2019). The stereotype contributes to the idea that Asian men can only be seen as acceptable to the Western audiences if they are exhibiting overt masculinity (Wu, 2019). An example of is Bruce Lee's hypermasculine kung-fu films such as *Enter the Dragon* (1973) and *Game of Death* (1978). While these martial arts films are an example of the promotion of one stereotype, they do so while resisting an ascribed negative stereotype of the Asian man (Nishime, 2017a).

The negative gendered stereotype is associated with caricatures of the Asian man as cartoonish, emasculated, asexual, effeminate, and sexually undesirable (Nishime, 2017a; Orbe & Harris, 2015). The cartoonish caricature was used to depict Bruce Lee's persona in Quentin Tarantino's film *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* (2019), played by actor Mike Moh. Tarantino's portrayal of Bruce Lee faced criticism from fans of Bruce Lee and his family because they believed his character was exaggerated in order to show him as arrogant rather than confident, thus framing him in a negative and unappealing light (Yamato, 2019). Specifically, Bruce Lee's daughter Shannon Lee found the portrayal to be far from an actual character of quality in a movie and more of an insulting caricature of her father and, by extension, Asian men (Yamato, 2019). Tarantino used Bruce Lee's persona as comic relief to showcase the fictional

White character Cliff Booth's fighting capabilities, which is an example of how White producers of Asian stories ultimately create humiliating misrepresentations of Asians and Asian Americans (Yamato, 2019).

These negative and emasculating stereotypes of Asian men present them as being less masculine than Black and White men or lacking strong social skills and have been used in Hollywood for a very long time (Nishime, 2017a; Ono & Pham, 2009; Park et al., 2006). One such example is John Hughes' cult classic feature film *Sixteen Candles* (1984), which centers these negative stereotypes through Japanese-American actor Gedde Watanabe's cliché-filled character Long Duk Dong. Long Duk Dong speaks broken English with a thick accent, is viewed as "uncool," and triggers the sound of a gong whenever he appears in a scene. As Orbe and Harris (2015) note, this character also reflects the stereotype of the perpetual foreigner, or someone who is assumed to be from another country and never believed to be a U. S. citizen. Although the character is an exchange student from Japan, all of his mannerisms and behaviors coupled with his identity tell audiences that an Asian person is never a native; rather, they are directly from another country.

Currently, Hollywood portrayals of Asian men are experiencing a surge of positive depictions due to Asian and Asian American storytellers controlling the Asian narrative, as with *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018). The male characters throughout the film appear intelligent and not nerdy, attractive yet not exotic, friendly but not passive, and romantic. The Asian female characters are also portrayed in a respectful (i.e., nonsexualized) and positive light, which is otherwise unseen in contemporary media (Goldstein, 2018; Jansen, 2018; Li, 2018b). The depictions of Asian and Asian American women are of them being confident, intelligent, and kind individuals throughout the film, which is in stark contrast to the typical mediated images of

Asian women as docile, hypersexualized, and vengeful (Orbe & Harris, 2015). Hai and Dong (2019) examined American movies with Asian actresses in order to identify binary representations of Asian American women as both sexualized exotic women and the perpetual foreigner. Hai and Dong (2019) used Stuart Hall's framework of binary representation to understand two opposing representations where there is a distinction between positive and negative representations. The authors found that Asian women are shown in American films as exotic sex objects (Hai & Dong, 2019).

Lucy Liu, an Asian American actress, is noted as starring in the film *Payback* (1999) as an Asian prostitute. Since then, Liu has been cast in *Charlie's Angels* (2002) as an overtly sexualized detective, *Chicago* (2002) as an exotic woman who commits a crime of passion over a White man, *Shanghai Noon* (2003) as a damsel in distress love interest, and *The Man with the Iron Fists* (2012) as a prostitute who owns a brothel. These racialized stereotypes depicted in media control how Asians and Asian Americans are seen in America. Controlling images such as these make people think that Asian and Asian American women are subservient to and driven by White men's sexual desires. On television, Liu played a hypersexual character on *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002); however, more recently, she played Dr. Watson in *Elementary* (2012-2019), a version of a Sherlock Holmes' character that is usually reserved for White male actors, which reflects an attempt to portray Asians in a respectful, nonsexual manner. Another way Hollywood controls Asian narratives is through the use of *yellowface*, which is the controversial practice of using make-up and costumes to portray an often-ethnocentric version of Asian personas (Umeda, 2018).

Yellowface in Hollywood

According to Ono and Pham (2009), explicit yellowface is the practice of having non-Asian actors, who are primarily White, play Asian and Asian American characters due to political xenophobia against racial miscegenation. Implicit yellowface is the practice of having Asian and Asian American actors perform their Asianness in roles of other Asian ethnicities with which they do not identify. In their book *Asian Americans and the Media*, Ono and Pham (2009) explain that “the logics of explicit and implicit yellowface that entail employment discrimination, anxiety about miscegenation, the necessity of misrecognition, mocking humor, visual technologies, and Orientalist cultural imaginings” (p. 53). Whitewashing is considered explicit yellowface where White actors used makeup to play Asian characters in very disparaging and unflattering ways, which not only perpetuated the aforementioned stereotypes, but also denied Asian and Asian Americans actors the opportunity to accurately represent themselves and their culture in films such as *The Mystery of Dr. Fu Manchu* (1923), *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961), *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* (2007), and *Cloud Atlas* (2012).

The use of yellowface works for White audiences in two ways that have contrasting yet negative outcomes. The first way relates to yellow peril by creating a fear of Asian culture through villainous characters, and the second way creates a humiliating image of Asian culture through mockery. Although yellowface dates back to 1913 (e.g. Matheson Lang in *Mr. Wu*), it continues to be used explicitly and implicitly in mediated contexts by White producers as a means to control the Asian and Asian American narrative (Ono & Pham, 2009). For example, White actors and actresses with very obvious European physical characteristics have been assigned to Asian roles, which is a troubling trend in and of itself. Audiences are expected to believe that Scarlett Johansson is Japanese in *Ghost in the Shell* (2017), Emma Stone is of

Chinese and Hawaiian descent in *Aloha* (2015), Emile Hirsch's character is based on a Japanese anime character in *Speed Racer* (2008), and Jim Sturgess is the White lead who is based on a Chinese-American's real life in *21* (2008). The problem with these casting decisions is that directors purposely chose White actors to perform in Asian stories while diminishing cultural and ethnic components of Asianness.

Yellowface is explicitly racist because a non-Asian or non-Asian American actor is portraying a character that could easily and more appropriately be played by an Asian or Asian American actor (Masuchika, 2012; Ono & Pham, 2009; Umeda, 2018). The role often requires the actor to wear heavy make-up, use a contrived Asian accent, adopt nonverbal behaviors, and wear costumes stereotypically reflective of Asian/Asian American identity. In order to better understand the pervasiveness of this phenomenon, Masuchika (2013) surveyed American university academic libraries to determine how many Asian and Asian American films included depictions of yellowface. Among the yellowface movies was the film *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961). White American actor Mickey Rooney portrayed a Japanese landlord, Mr. Yunioshi, who was a caricature full of stereotypical physical features and behaviors believed to reflect Japanese culture. His Oriental depiction included him having buckteeth and squinted eyes and speaking fumbled English with a heavy Japanese accent. At the time of its release, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* received positive reviews without a mention of Rooney's offensively exaggerated performance (Weiler, 1961). The rave review positioned Mr. Yunioshi as the subject of a racial joke in both the film and society for the purpose of serving and entertaining a predominately White audience.

A more recent example of a film that offers evidence that Asian and Asian American characters are still subjected to yellowface is the aforementioned movie *Aloha* (2015). White American actress Emma Stone was cast to play a mixed-raced Asian American woman named

Allison Ng. Not surprisingly, there was considerable backlash from the Asian American community (Nishime, 2017b), which is a stark contrast to the nonexistent negative reactions to *Breakfast at Tiffany's* released over 50 years prior. The gap in criticism could be largely due to the fact that the Asian population is much larger than it was at the time of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* release. Up until *Aloha*, Asian Americans may not have been as outspoken until around the time Emma Stone's portrayal possibly because of the film's blockbuster status and the character's lead role (Nishime, 2017b). Despite the fact that Allison does not embody any physical features reflective of what many believe denotes her biracialism or being partly Asian, the criticism was primarily about the producers choosing a White actress to assume a role that could have easily — and appropriately — been played by a mixed-race Asian actress (Nishime, 2017b). The failure to accurately depict the racial identity of this Asian character ultimately functioned to reduce the Asian identity of the character to a caricature (Nishime, 2017b).

Other contemporary films that exemplify yellowface are *Speed Racer* (2008) starring Emile Hirsch, *21* (2008) starring Jim Sturgess, *The Last Airbender* (2010) starring Noah Ringer, and *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) starring Scarlett Johansson, among others. In each film, producers made the decision to have White American actors portray lead Asian roles and surround them with Asian characters in an attempt to socialize audiences into believing that it is appropriate to de-center Asian and Asian American actors when telling Asian stories. Rather than cast an ethnically accurate actor, producers chose to center Whiteness and whitewash a narrative that was originally from a marginalized space. Even when Asian and Asian American actors are cast as racially accurate characters, implicit yellowface is still occurring (Ono & Pham, 2009). The “authentic Asian” look allows for Asian identities to be interchangeable, thus implying that Asian ethnicities have no unique qualities or cultural differences, thus leading to Asians being

viewed as monolithic. According to Ono and Pham (2009), implicit yellowface trivializes the lived experiences of Asians and Asian Americans and further perpetuates the falsity of orientalism as marketable entertainment for American audiences.

Mainstream (read White) audiences are none the wiser because they are not familiar with the different cultures, thus perpetuating the believability of the portrayal. Even in the case with the critically acclaimed film *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), Asian and Asian American audience members criticized the casting of an all-Asian cast because the actors are not of Chinese descent despite the fact that they were portraying Singaporean Chinese characters (Sio, 2018). These types of false representations contribute to an invisibility of distinct characteristics that are salient to the various ethnicities and cultures that make up Asian and Asian American identities. While all audience members are active participants in shaping the meaning of media content, Asian American consumers are in the unique position of articulating for themselves and others the societal consequences these racial (mis)representations have (Lopez, 2016) in reflecting their racial, ethnic, and cultural identities. Thus, the current study explores how a film challenging longstanding Asian stereotypes introduces audiences to counterimages of Asian Americans that are missing from current popular culture. It is important to critique films such as *Crazy Rich Asians* in order to understand how diverse Asian identities can be more accurately and fairly represented in Hollywood in ways we have never before seen.

Diversity Among Asian Americans

Asian and Asian American ethnic groups are made up of a multitude of cultures, each with different languages, customs, foods, and rituals. While these ethnic groups are aware and appreciative of their diversity, that is not typically the case with mainstream audiences (i.e., Whites) or other outgroup members. Best explained by McGuire (1978)'s theory on

distinctiveness, McGuire argues that qualities viewed as being salient to ethnic minority groups are not seen as such by ethnic majority groups or outgroup members. For example, a Chinese American's experience as an Asian American will differ from a Korean American's experience as an Asian American. In terms of whiteness, the distinct characteristics of Asian ethnic groups become invisible, as evidenced by the many failed attempts at media representations of Asian cultures (i.e. Korean American comedian Bobby Lee who guest stars in *The League* (2009-2015) as a Chinese patron at a Chinese restaurant. Lee is actually speaking Korean to the Chinese restaurant owner who speaks Mandarin, but it is to be believed by the audience that both characters are speaking and understanding the same language. The one-dimension portrayal of Asian Americans fails to acknowledge the diversity that occurs with Asian ethnic groups in terms of how Asian American experiences and identities differ from one another (Lopez, 2016). Thus, the current study aims to better understand Asian Americans' diverse perspectives on their media representations, specifically in film.

Asian Americans are also subjected to racial discrimination in real life (Dobson, 2018). For example, in an interview following the Harvard admissions process scandal where a lawsuit claiming that the university was discriminating against Asian Americans during admissions, Nicole Gon Ochi, an Asian-American advancing justice attorney, commented that, "Asian Americans are often lumped together as a monolith in the world of college admissions but there are so many factors to consider" (Dobson, 2018, p. 56). For many Asian Americans, checking a box on a form that reads "Asian" or "Asian American" is stripping them of their ethnic identity and forcing them to choose one that is not articulated as clearly through their Asianness. Constraints of the monolithic Asian is replicated in media, specifically film. While social reality influences media content in narratives on film, media portrayals have an influential effect on

society as well (Larson, 2002). The current study is interested in how Asian Americans' interpretation of media portrayals may influence how they communicate about these portrayals.

The Hollywood film industry has slowly begun to depict Asian and Asian American characters through more positive images (i.e., Devi Vishwakumar in *Never Have I Ever* (2020), Lara Jean Covey in *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (2018), Dev Shah in *Master of None* (2015-present), and Eddie Huang in *Fresh Off the Boat* (2015-2020)) (Lopez, 2018). A gradual growth in positive portrayals can be attributed to Asian and Asian Americans taking control over the Asian narratives in film and media. Currently, Hollywood portrayals of Asians are experiencing a surge of positive depictions due to Asian and Asian American storytellers being in positions of power where they have direct control over the Asian narrative, as with *Crazy Rich Asians*. The male characters throughout the film appear intelligent, attractive, friendly, and romantic, which are in stark contrast to past images that presented Asian men specifically as exotic, asexual, effeminate, nerdy, and passive. The Asian female characters in *Crazy Rich Asians* are also portrayed in a respectful and positive light, which is rarely seen in contemporary media (Goldstein, 2018; Jansen, 2018; Li, 2018b).

Rather than perpetuating tropes of docile (i.e., Lotus Blossom), vengeful (i.e. Dragon Lady), hypersexualized, and the newer stereotype of "Suzie Wong" where the Asian woman assimilates to the dominant culture and is partnered with a White male (Orbe & Harris, 2015), the depictions of Asian and Asian American women are centered on presenting them as confident, intelligent, and kind individuals throughout the *Crazy Rich Asians* film. Considered collectively, these nonconforming films offer further evidence that there is tremendous power in representation both onscreen and in the creation, development, and execution of stories by and about Asian Americans. Of all the movies discussed here, *Crazy Rich Asians* is of particular

interest because it defies the misconception that “mainstream” films are relatable to all people; instead, we see that people of color are in need of popular culture images that accurately reflect who they are as heterogeneous people who have been misrepresented in media for centuries.

***Crazy Rich Asians* and Asian Americans Audiences**

John Chu’s *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) is based on Kevin Kwan’s novel of the same name. *Crazy Rich Asians* is the first Hollywood feature film to showcase an all-Asian cast since *The Joy Luck Club* (1993). The romantic comedy *Crazy Rich Asians* showcases Rachel Chu (Constance Wu), a Chinese-American professor, as she travels to Singapore with her boyfriend Nick Young (Henry Golding), a Singaporean Chinese, to visit his hometown during his best friend’s wedding. Rachel learns of Nick’s wealthy family lineage, which culminates in the film telling a narrative of conflicts surrounding family, class, and ethnic/cultural divides. The notion that Rachel assumed her Chinese identity would be accepted by Nick’s Chinese family was immediately rejected because of Rachel’s American (i.e., U. S.) identity, which caused Nick’s family to perceive her as a lower-class individual (Chen, 2019). This also caused Rachel’s Chinese American identity to be dichotomized, which is possibly quite similar to what Asian American audience members may be experiencing in their real lives.

The ability of Asian American audiences to identify with narratives presented in *Crazy Rich Asians* can be largely due to the novel’s author Kwan identifying as Asian American (Sun, 2015). Before Kwan moved to the United States as an adolescent, he was born and spent his childhood in Singapore, where the majority of the novel takes place (Jose, 2018). Kwan’s story of *Crazy Rich Asians* is inspired from his experience as a Singaporean Chinese, but with a satirical twist (Andriakos, 2013). His goal for his novel was to bring attention to a modern Asia for a Western audience (Govani, 2017). According to Kwan (2018), the novel received praise

from both the United States and Singapore, with readers identifying strongly with characters with Asian American identities and who were Singaporean Chinese. In an interview, Kwan recalls personal friends and fans fawning over the book because of the relatable characters and, more importantly, the relatable stories (Jose, 2018). With the reception of the novel being so positive, the rights to *Crazy Rich Asians* were acquired in August 2013, just two months post-publication (Jose, 2018). During those two months, Kwan was initially approached by a producer who expressed interest in his story, but there was a condition that the character Rachel Chu (the protagonist and heroine) would be changed to a white woman (Sun, 2018). Kwan turned down the offer because the ethnic and racial identity of Rachel is central to the plot and themes of *Crazy Rich Asians* (Sun, 2018). It is important to stress that his insistence on portraying Rachel as an Asian American is a direct reaction to the perpetual whitewashing of Asian bodies in Hollywood films. The representation of Asian producers and actors was important to Kwan, as well as the representation of Asians from America, Hong Kong, Singapore, and mainland China (Sun, 2018). Staying true to his story allowed Kwan to challenge the many tropes associated with the different Asian ethnicities while also showcasing the ethnic and cultural diversity within a stereotypically monolithic collective of people.

The film's reception by Asian Americans has been positive due to the promotion of racial diversity in the casting by the movie's producers where about 38% of viewers opening weekend were Asian (Barnes, 2018; Sio, 2018). According to Warner Bros. president of domestic distribution Jeff Goldstein, this percentage of Asian moviegoers is much higher than the typical 10% of opening-weekend audience members who are Asian (Barnes, 2018). Actually, the film was well received across the U.S., as it earned the top billing spot of opening weekend with \$25.2 million in ticket sales compared to the second highest of the weekend *The Meg* (2018)

with \$21.2 million and the third highest *Mile 22* (2018) with \$13.6 million. *Crazy Rich Asians*' popularity did not stop there; the film focusing on Asian characters and stories grossed \$174 million domestically, thus making it the U.S.'s top-grossing romantic comedy in a decade and the U.S.'s sixth highest ever.

As mentioned earlier, an all-Asian cast had not been seen in a Hollywood feature film in over 20 years since *The Joy Luck Club* in 1993. While the representation of Asian diversity in America had been applauded and praised, an all-Asian cast is traditionally produced through Asian films in China, India, Japan, and Korea (Sio, 2018); therefore, one's assumption that *Crazy Rich Asians*' casting is progressive may only be so through a Western lens. This begs the following questions: Who is the intended audience? Will diverse racial representation only be salient for Asian audiences in Western societies? It is particularly evident in how Asian Americans identify with specific characters in the film. For example, Chen (2019) noted in a review of the film how Nick's mother, Eleanor strips away Rachel's Chineseness because she is perceived as *too* American. Because Rachel focuses on her own happiness over the Youngs' values of sacrifice and family, her racial identity is immediately dichotomized. Thus, it stands to reason that, if audience members identify with Rachel's character, then it may reflect a belief that their Asian and American identities are clashing with one another.

To date, there is a dearth of research on Asian and Asian American audiences and their experiences with film. While most of the studies have been critiques of media representations, very few have used interviews or focus groups to understand the experiences that these audiences have with the ways they are depicted and how these negative images can potentially impact self-esteem, self-perception, and connections with their community. There is a lack of scholarly attention, which is problematic because it is ignoring a very important segment of the world's

population. Much like other groups, Asians and Asian Americans use film as a form of entertainment and escape, and they are equally concerned with how they are reflected in the media (Lopez, 2017; Pollard, 2017; Sun, 2015). Specifically, there is concern that they are relegated to all too familiar tropes such as the model minority, dry cleaner owner, scientist, geisha, and “perpetual foreigner” (Orbe & Harris, 2015). In response to these restrictive images and representations, Kwan (novel author), Chu (director), and Chiarelli and Lim (screenplay) created the film *Crazy Rich Asians*. The film was an attempt to offer a counternarrative filled with characters who do not conform to the aforementioned stereotypes that have become all too familiar and commonplace in mainstream media. As such, Lim chose to undertake the tremendous task of creating a story that was relatable to and resonated with the different ethnic and cultural groups within the Asian and Asian American communities and beyond.

It is important to note that *Crazy Rich Asians* also reflects the multidimensionality existent within a seemingly single Asian ethnicity by showcasing how one’s amount of wealth suggests one’s social class has a strong influence on one’s culture. The characters in the film all come from different ethnicities and classes, and by showing their multiple identities, it further proves that they are from cultures that have a tremendous amount of diversity. When Rachel is rejected by her boyfriend’s Singaporean Chinese family, it is partly due to the perception that she is of a lower social class (Chen, 2019). A divide in social class is apparent among other wealthy Singaporean Chinese families in the film as well, as evidenced by Rachel’s friend Peik Lin Goh (played by Awkwafina). She comes from a wealthy Singaporean Chinese family but is perceived by both her own family and Singapore’s upper class to be of a lower status than the very rich Young family. Thus, diversity in social class among people of the same ethnicity offers further evidence that Asians and Asian Americans are not monolithic.

The positive reception from Asian American audiences is largely due to the producers of the film's narrative and qualities they assigned to the characters (Pallotta, 2019; Sun & Ford, 2019). Asian and Asian American film producers engage in media activism by taking control of racial representations in mainstream entertainment media (Sun, 2018). The box office success of *Crazy Rich Asians* is largely due to the fact that the project involved writers, producers, and actors who all wanted to present Asians and Asian Americans as being racially and ethnically diverse with the purpose of defying and challenging the many stereotypes associated with them that are perpetuated through mainstream media (Beck, 2018; Erbland, 2018; Pallotta, 2019; Sun, 2018; Truffaut-Wong, 2019). According to Chiarelli and Lim (2018), the *Crazy Rich Asians*' screenplay contains intentional messages that oppose explicit and implicit yellowface. Rather than portraying Singapore as oriental and foreign, it was depicted as a contemporary and modern city. Similarly, the producers purposely avoided having actors and actresses perform with contrived or inauthentic accents and, instead, chose to allow them to use their native tongue within the film. Asian characters were not used to serve as racial jokes or to depict Asianness as unattractive; rather, the film invited audience members to be a part of this particular narrative's contemporary Chinese culture (Sun, 2018). The invitation is further extended by the music that accompanies the film, which is consciously and subconsciously communicating an Asian American identity through the fusion of two cultures through U.S. American songs with Chinese lyrics.

Crazy Rich Asians' soundtrack is a collection of multilingual songs, filled with contemporary American pop songs and Chinese songs from the 1950s and 1960s. In order to address the film's themes of culture clash and a fusion of those cultures, it was critical for the

director to use Chinese and Chinese American singers to sing in both English and Mandarin Chinese (Li, 2018a).

The most difficult song rights to obtain were Coldplay's "Yellow" (Sun, 2018). In attempts to obtain the rights, director John Chu wrote a personal letter to the bandmates of Coldplay pleading his case for why the song was so important to not only himself, but also the film's function of expressing Asian American identity to the masses (Sun, 2018). In his letter, Chu detailed how his relationship with the color yellow has been surrounded by negative connotations and derogatory name calling (Sun, 2018); however, when Chu first heard the song, it allowed him to reclaim the meaning of the word (Sun, 2018). Director Chu and *Crazy Rich Asians* immediately received the rights (Sun, 2018), and he used "Yellow" in the film as a score celebrating a triumphant and empowering moment for Rachel when she defended herself to Eleanor and made the unexpected sacrifice of declining a marriage proposal. Chu used the song as a narrative for Rachel's identity (Sun, 2018), which can be interpreted as a form of media activism that reclaims derogatory language and uses the film as a media platform to address social change.

The purpose of the current study is to identify the impact of *Crazy Rich Asians*' messages of media activism on Asian Americans' and how they communicate about their identity with others. The director's intentional messages throughout the film act as a framework for understanding how, if at all, Asian Americans will interpret these messages in accordance with the encoding/decoding theoretical framework of this study.

Theoretical Frameworks: Critical Race Theory and Encoding/Decoding Theory

This next section reviews the literature that is related to the theories used to conduct the study. This section will first be an overview of CRT (Crenshaw et al., 1995), followed by an overview of Stuart Hall's Encoding and Decoding theory (Hall, 1973). Both theories have basic assumptions that speak to issues related to media representation and identity, and by using them, this study aims to offer insight into the ways in which Asians and Asian Americans engaged with a history-making film targeted to stigmatized and underrepresented groups of ethnically and culturally diverse people.

Critical Race Theory

One theoretical framework that has been applied to examining how individuals understand assumptions of race in society is CRT (Crenshaw et al., 1995). This study will use CRT to better understand how Asian Americans perceive Asian representations in the movie *Crazy Rich Asians*. CRT originated in legal studies and was developed by Kimberle Crenshaw, Derrick Bell, and Richard Delgado. They developed and designed CRT to challenge societal racism and confront issues that often intersect with race, such as gender, class, and other constructs surrounding divisions of power in a time of civil rights activism (Crenshaw, 2011; Mills & Unsworth, 2018).

In the early 1980s, Harvard's Black Law Student Association approached the Harvard Law School Dean to address the ongoing protests and conversations about racial representation in "curriculum and faculty hiring at Harvard Law School" (Crenshaw, 2011, p. 1263). Specifically, Harvard Law School had a problem because when their one faculty of color Derrick Bell left the institution, there was an allegation that there were no "qualified" candidates of color eligible for hire on the faculty. It even brought attention to an institutional issue surrounding

racism and whiteness. According to Crenshaw (2011), because the entire law school faculty was made up of white professors, it provided a much needed rationale for the perpetual issues of a lack of racial representation in the curriculum as well. Black Harvard law students' pursuit of social justice played a significant role in the development of CRT because they actively questioned the Dean's actions and resolution attempts, repeatedly called for more adequate racial representation in the faculty and curriculum and persisted together to point out issues with the racial hierarchy embedded within the Harvard Law School.

CRT provides a form of liberation for individuals, specifically when used in addition to in-depth interviews (Cuádriz & Uttal, 1999). The liberation of people of color through a critical race approach will be the focus of this study, which is done by first addressing and accepting some of the theory's assumptions of colorblindness, white privilege in association with power, and racism as a social construction and not a natural occurrence (Taylor, 1998). These assumptions are operationalized through the theory's main tenets, which are as follows: 1) racism occurs ordinarily for people of color, 2) racism serves the interest of those with power, 3) race is constructed and manipulated by society, 4) minority groups are racialized at the discretion of society's dominant white racial group, 5) one's racial identity is layered, and 6) storytelling is significant for voices of color (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT's tenets support the perception that most white people perceive race through a colorblindness construct, which denies people of color of their racial identity and, therefore, works to negate acts of racism (Crenshaw, 1995; Taylor, 1998).

Influenced by the impact critical race had on Black Americans and social change, several frameworks have been developed to examine the role of race for other underrepresented groups in our society such as LatCrit and AsianCrit. AsianCrit and LatCrit approaches are useful for

legal scholars as well as communication studies and media scholars because they investigate racial injustices beyond the historical racial binary of Black–White (An, 2016; Anguiano & Castaneda, 2014). LatCrit originated in 1995 during a Latina/o and CRT colloquium when Latina/o legal scholars found a need to address Latina/o voices in their work towards social policy in a racial binary society (Montoya, 1999; Valdez, 2005). In 2013, Museus and Iftikar developed AsianCrit based on critical race literature and Asian American studies in order “to provide a useful analytical framework for examining and understanding the ways that racism affects Asian Americans in the United States” (p. 23). AsianCrit is an approach that is useful for scholars studying critical race and Asian American perspectives on social injustice and racial oppression (An, 2016; Iftikar & Museus, 2018; Museus & Iftikar, 2013). I will further address the importance of AsianCrit in the next section of CRT. No matter the approach, CRT’s impact on scholarship is often linked to whiteness and its relationship with power and privilege (Crenshaw, 1995; Museus & Iftikar, 2013; Valdez, 2005).

The role of whiteness in CRT is important because of the relationship that power has with white privilege and the fact that it often puts people of color in unequal and inequitable positions (Crenshaw, 1995; Taylor, 1998). These assumptions have guided the theoretical framework for several studies in interracial contexts by examining the relationship between media and audience members (Borum Chattoo, 2018; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Yang & Wong, 2018). Specifically, one use of CRT in relation to media and audience engagement is the exploration of storytelling and its ability to liberate different racial and ethnic groups (Borum Chattoo, 2018). For example, Teebagy (2018) adopted CRT’s theoretical approach to understand the role of blackness in media storytelling in relation to white privilege. CRT used in the context of college athletes and race identified a relationship between black college athletes and sexual assault, which exposed how

news media's storytelling controls a narrative dictated by white privilege (Teebagy, 2018).

According to Teebagy (2018), news media were less sympathetic to Black offenders compared to White offenders. She also found that news outlets are likely to depict stories of Black suspects with images to convey danger, such as a Black man wearing an orange jumpsuit or pictures resembling a mugshot; however, stories about White suspects included images with a White man and his family or pictures of him smiling. Negatively portraying a Black man here highlights how the role of race in media is critical to how society is strongly influenced by media's depiction of people of color.

Another way society's perception of race is influenced by media is through the presentation of interracial communication in entertainment (Orbe & Harris, 2015). Orbe and Harris (2015) note that, when forms of entertainment media such as film and television depict racial and ethnic groups, they may be racial token representations and insignificant to the story. So, when these forms of interracial communication lack accurate images of racial/ethnic groups, they do not contribute to audience's interracial communication successfully because they are based on inaccurate depictions and often only told from the dominant White perspective. Again, it is due to mass media primarily creating stories for mainstream (read White) audiences. At the same time, when racial/ethnic characters have substantive roles in media, there is opportunity to have successful racial representation and interracial communication as seen in *Master of None* (2015-) with Aziz Ansari as Dev, an Indian American, actually having conversations about race with Denise, an African American woman played by Lena Waithe. In one particular scene from the fourth episode in season 1, Dev and Denise discuss racial stereotypes in media and how they impact society. *Master of None's* specific scene and episodes are examples of how successful racial representation in media is possible when people of color are telling stories. It is possible

through the storytelling component of media production, which involves creating intentional messages to promote racial representation.

Storytelling through media, specifically film, is one way we can dismantle racism (Saldaña, 2009). Films like *Crazy Rich Asians* use storytelling to engage audience members and allow them to witness racialized experiences being presented through a form of educational entertainment (edutainment) (Saldaña, 2009). One use of edutainment is as an interactive form of education in the classroom, which allows students to engage and interact with television or film as a form of learning (Saldaña, 2009). Edutainment has made enjoyable ways of learning for hundreds of years and has become utilized in many platforms such as music, toys and video games, and on-screen (film and television) outside of the classroom (Beato, 2015).

Some forms of on-screen edutainment are unmistakably educational, such as children's television shows that focus on the teaching component (i.e. *The Who Was? Show* (2018), *Bill Nye the Science Guy* (1993), *Sesame Street* (1969)). An edutainment example of teaching viewers about race and interracial communication is the film *Dear White People* (2014) (Harris, Wade, & Dudney Deeb, in-press). *Dear White People* (2014) educates viewers by displaying realistic stories of racism and addressing then-current societal issues (Harris et al., in-press) through a fictional predominately White institution (PWI) rife with racial tensions.

Representation of race through educational entertainment as seen in *Dear White People* (2014) is important for viewers to have effective communication in the classroom with their classmates about race in society openly and honestly. A relationship between racial representation and edutainment is still effective when education is not as apparent in film and television. One way to effectively educate about race in film and television is through creating more overt messages during the storytelling component of production. By producers

intentionally using narratives to present subtleties of racial representation, they are able to still educate about race through media. Storytelling is an important tenet of CRT and is useful in how people of color gain power over the representation of their own experiences (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Critical Race Storytelling. One assumption of CRT is that storytelling is an effective way to provide significance to voices of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Storytelling in the form of education on social injustices surrounding race is important because it gives people of color power and control over their own stories, voices, and identities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Moffitt, 2019). In Western media, Hollywood depictions of people of color's stories are in line with CRT's tenets in that these stories have historically been told to serve the interests of white audiences, showcase racial depictions that are manipulated by white society, and presented characters of color who are secondary to white protagonists (Moffitt, 2019; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Yosso, 2002).

Examples of these characters and stories are found in popular films such as Laurence Fishburne's portrayal of Morpheus in *The Matrix* trilogy (1999, 2003a, 2003b); Finn (John Boyega), Poe (Oscar Isaac), and Rose (Kelly Marie Tran) in *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017); and story portrayal of the MIT Blackjack Team in *21* (2008). Morpheus is seemingly in the highest position of power in *The Matrix* (1999); however, the primary purpose for his existence is to serve the film's white protagonist, Neo (Keanu Reeves). While Finn, Poe, and Rose are newer characters in the ensemble cast of *Star Wars* characters, these three characters of color lack the character development and in-depth character background, unlike that of their white counterparts Rey (Daisy Ridley) and Kylo Ren (Adam Driver). The lead characters of color's

stories are not the focus and primarily support Rey's story, and their characters are portrayed in a way to serve the white characters.

The movie *21* (2008) is based on the true story about a blackjack team from MIT made up of mostly Asian Americans. When casting for the film, the main individuals (Asian American) in the story were rewritten as white characters but included Asian American characters in secondary roles (Aaron Yoo as "Choi" and Liza Lapira as "Kianna"). As an example of whitewashing, it further identifies how deeply troubling it is that white producers of stories of color are committed to the act of racial misrepresentation. Thus, it is the purpose of critical race storytelling to give these portrayals back to those to whom they belong (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). CRT argues that the use of storytelling not only provides space for people of color to be in control of their own representation, but it also aims to liberate and empower them (Yosso, 2002).

Storytelling is significant in people of color's liberation because of the utility it has toward challenging the stories often told by society's dominant group (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Liberation as a form of storytelling is considered by CRT as counter-storytelling because it specifically counters stories that were previously told by white storytellers (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Counter-storytelling has been widely used in studies that use CRT's offshoot frameworks such as LatCrit and AsianCrit (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Museus & Iftikar, 2013; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Counter-storytelling is significant to the Asian American community because they serve the greater purpose of challenging long-held stereotypes that many people believe to be true (i.e., the model minority myth) and that there is a monolithic Asian identity, which is problematic in many ways (Museus & Iftikar, 2013).

Films such as *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) present a counter-storytelling narrative by using Asian American storytellers, in the case of Kevin Kwan and John Chu, in order to challenge how Asian Americans have been historically portrayed in Hollywood. It has been argued by many scholars across multiple disciplines that CRT can be used to demonstrate how film can be used as a form of social justice, specifically when counter-storytelling is utilized (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). When used in this manner, film advances the issue of social justice by educating audiences about racial misrepresentations and systemic racial oppression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Using film and other entertainment media to address racial oppression draws from the critical race framework as a pedagogical tool (Solorzano & Yosso, 2000; Yosso, 2002). Edutainment identifies that film, television, pop culture, and other forms of entertainment can be critiqued as media literacy to challenge racial injustices in order to educate on such matters (Yosso, 2002).

Critical Race Pedagogy. Critiquing film to identify relevant images related to racial misrepresentations invites audiences to question the process of how stories in film are told and where these stories originated (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Solorzano & Yosso, 2000; Yosso, 2002). When one challenges or critiques films and their narratives, they are practicing a form of critical race pedagogy. Critical race pedagogy within the framework of CRT “can challenge students to critically ‘read’ the racism, sexism, and classism in entertainment media” (Yosso, 2002, p. 54). Critical race pedagogy was first used by Marvin Lynn (1999), an education scholar who conducted an exploratory study to connect the principles of CRT to educational research. In his study of CRT and teachers who are dedicated to social justice, Lynn (1999) conducted interviews with urban schoolteachers of color to understand what type of resistance to social justice they experienced from administrators and other teachers. Consistent with one of the tenets

of CRT, the teachers practiced a form of “liberatory pedagogy” (p. 619) where teachers encouraged their students to think about and critically discuss subjects surrounding race. One teacher participant noted that, during the students’ self-affirmation exercises, she noticed that her students of color were able to process their cultural and racial identities (Lynn, 1999). Lynn’s foundational study exemplifies how critical race pedagogy liberates people of color and provides them ownership over their own stories.

Alongside Derrick Bell’s work on critical storytelling, Lynn, Jennings, and Hughes (2013) explored the impact of critical race pedagogy on research inside and outside of education. Two of their key findings were the broadly accessible and influential Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) article “Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education” and application of counter-storytelling as a critical pedagogical methodology. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argued for a theoretical perspective of critical race in education because of CRT’s legal scholarship impact on racial social justice in the United States. Ladson-Billings and Tate’s (1995) article has been cited widely in disciplines outside of education, which highlights the broad importance of critical race pedagogy in the academy. In the law classroom, Bell used a student-centered approach in his teaching philosophy (Lynn et al., 2013). A student-centered practice was found useful to Bell because it encouraged a “community-based” environment (Lynn et al, 2013, p. 606). Bell’s use of counter-storytelling as a methodology allowed students to critique societal constructions like race, class, and gender in relation to their own experiences with rejection in “governmental institutions” such as colleges (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Lynn et al., 2013, p. 607). This example of critical race pedagogy further shows how counter-storytelling as a form of CRT can highlight the lived experiences of people of color .

Current research on critical race pedagogy has continued to be applied outside of the

education discipline while still contributing to race-related social justice and pedagogy. According to Martinez et al. (2020), one way that critical race pedagogy has been used is by giving youth of color some autonomy in creating their own public health initiatives and curriculum. The youth of color participants reported that it gave them feelings of self-empowerment and increased awareness in social justice movements occurring within their community.

The application of film as a pedagogical tool is another way to create racial discourse as a way for viewers to interact with the media (Harris, 2001). In her study of college students and their experiences with viewing film, Harris (2001) found that students do, in fact, recognize the educational component of visual narratives, which in this case were the documentary *The Color of Fear* (1994) and the film *Rosewood* (1997) shown in an interracial communication classroom. *Rosewood* (1997) is a docudrama focusing on a real race riot targeted against Black Americans, and *The Color of Fear* (1994) presents eight men (two Asian Americans, two Black Americans, two Latino Americans, and two White Americans) discussing race relations in America. Students shared that the films provided them with examples of real-life perspectives surrounding race and racism.

Their reactions also highlight the importance of film as a form of critical race pedagogy because it can provide realistic perspectives and interactions that viewers have not experienced. Some students' reactions were emotionally charged with feelings of guilt, shame, or shame. Some key occurrences that the students experienced with the films were that they thought the films heightened their awareness of racism and race relations in the U.S. and the films had them thinking about racial misrepresentations throughout U.S.'s history. Harris's (2001) finding is a clear example of how film is an effective pedagogical tool. Critical race pedagogy can be

broadened and applied to also educate viewers about Asian American experiences through film and media.

Other scholars have used a critical race pedagogy approach to understand Asian Americans and how media depictions influence social perceptions of people who identify as Asian or Asian American (An, 2017; Dickmeyer, 2015; Museus & Iftikar, 2013; Neilsen et al., 2017). One common media depiction is of Asian American men's masculinity. The depiction is often misrepresented in film based on stereotypes such as the eunuch or perpetual foreigner (Chiang, 2017; Pollard, 2017). These stereotypes may be inappropriately applied to depict Asian men as sexually undesirable and feminine (read unmasculine) (Pollard, 2017). The misrepresentation of Asian bodies has been explored as a subject of AsianCrit pedagogy and is used to educate non-Asian scholars about how Asian American stories and portrayals are at times driven by a colorblind-like approach where a lack of authenticity is present (Rodríguez & Kim, 2018). When the Asian man's body is continuously portrayed with feminine features and lacking Eurocentric definitions of masculinity (i.e., Jian-Yang in HBO's *Silicon Valley* (2014-2019) and Raj Koothrappali in CBS's *Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019)), a narrative that perpetuates society's view of Asian and Asian American men as being undesirable romantically (Johnson & Wilson, 2019; Orbe & Harris, 2015).

Critiquing media is an important component of CRT and pedagogy that calls on scholars and the lay public to question these depictions and engage in dialogue with each other about the inaccuracies of these misrepresentations and their impact on people of color such as Asians and Asian Americans (Lynn, 1999). According to Griffin (2010), it is important to communicate about how these racial misrepresentations impact society and how we communicate interracially. It is important because there is often the misconception that we live in a post-racial society, and

when we communicate about racial misrepresentations, we are actively challenging misconceptions (Griffin, 2010). Specifically, challenging misrepresentations of Asians and Asian Americans is critical to our field because it largely contributes to how Asian Americans are perceived in our society (Griffin, 2010; Iftikar & Museus, 2018). One way to bring more attention to the subject of effects of misrepresentations on racial and ethnic identities in our discipline is through the classroom and with the use of film as a pedagogical tool to encourage students to discuss and analyze films critically with one another (Harris, 2001; Yosso, 2002). Critical race pedagogy is important for this study because *Crazy Rich Asians* is an example of a film that represents Asian American stories that can be used as a pedagogical tool to encourage critical discussion and analysis, which can ultimately function to liberate Asian American students from racially oppressive media images, as suggested by a key tenet of CRT.

Critical race scholars typically focus on films related to Black narratives (Lee, 2013; Wing 2007), understandably so. Thus, it stands to reason that little attention is given to films related to Asians. When research is dedicated to Asians and Asian Americans, critical race researchers and AsianCrit researchers have typically focused on Asian Americans as a homogenous community whose members share similar identities; however, attention is rarely given to how diverse identities and experiences are within the Asian American community. For example, experiences and identifying as an Asian American within the Asian American community can differ ways including cultural and ethnic traditions. Because storytelling through film can teach viewers about underrepresented groups, Asian American storytellers can use edutainment to capture and portray the intricacies of their own Asian American identities and experiences (Kim, 2017). The inclusion of Asian American stories and storytellers in Hollywood is more valuable than ever before because of the increase of racial discrimination directed toward

Asian Americans in light of pandemic stereotypes related to Covid-19. The rapid progression in racial violence and discrimination toward Asian Americans in the United States is why this work is important now more than ever. Films portraying Asian American stories that break down historical stereotypes encourage us to rethink how society perceives Asian American identities (Museus & Iftikar, 2013).

Crazy Rich Asians is an example of counter-storytelling being used to challenge and re-present Chinese American identity. The film is a narrative form filled with encoded messages intended to liberate Chinese Americans and Asian Americans. An encoded message as an intended message is a component of Stuart Hall's Encoding and Decoding Theory (1973). Hall's encoding and decoding theory will also be the theoretical framework for this thesis.

Encoding and Decoding Theory (Hall, 1973): Theoretical Application

This study uses Hall (1973)'s encoding decoding theory to better understand how Asian Americans interpret messages within the film *Crazy Rich Asians*. It will also discuss the theory as a methodological framework for thematic analysis. Hall's (1973) encoding/decoding theory was developed as a critical response to how messages in media are "distorted" during the communication process (sender to receiver) between the production and the reception and feedback of these messages. The process of encoding and decoding is dependent on the intention of the producers of the message and how audience members interpret the message received. This creates a duality, which is an influence from both producers and audiences of messages, within the theory's single framework (Hall, 1973). The benefit of using the encoding and decoding process to explain meaning making in media is also through the power of the audience's influence on the meaning of a decoded message (McQuail, 2010). While the production of a message is encoded with specific symbolic content, Hall (1973)'s theory assumed that the

message interpretation process has a multidimensional component whereby the message could be decoded in three ways a) dominant/hegemonic, b) oppositional, or c) negotiated. To further discuss the encoding/decoding theory, this study will expand on the encoding component of the theory, followed by the three types of decoding listed above.

Encoded Messages. Hall (1973) described encoded messages as the sender's intended meaning for the receiver to interpret. The encoding process involves an implied audience, wherein mediated messages are constructed with primary audience members in mind to address (Deming, 1991). The concept is typically used in order to create images in media that resemble the implied audience, which will allow the audience to envision themselves through them and, therefore, accurately receive the message as intended (McQuail, 2010). The construction of the meaning in encoded messages is an approach designed to appeal to an audience who will receive the *dominant decoded message* as intended; however, encoded messages are open to multiple meanings or polysemy. The polysemic nature of mediated messages allows for messages to be decoded in multiple ways, which empowers the audience (Hall, 1973). In order for a message to be meaningfully decoded, audience members rely on their previous knowledge through lived experiences to frame their understanding of a message (Hall, 1973). Hall (1973) recognized that the encoded symbolic content may appear difficult to resist but is open to rejection or re-interpretation of the intended message, which is referred to as an *oppositional* or *negotiated* decoded message.

Dominant Decoded Messages. The first way audiences decode or interpret messages is through the dominant code. Hall referred to the communicative outcome as *perfectly symmetrical*, which is when the degree of understanding between the encoder (producer/sender) and decoder (receiver) is perfectly matched. In other words, *perfectly symmetrical* outcomes

occur when the decoder interprets the message exactly as it is intended by the encoder. The presence of a perfectly symmetrical communication process describes the first type of Hall (1973)'s decoding codes: the *dominant or hegemonic code*. When an audience member receives an encoded message and interprets it exactly as the sender intended, Hall (1973) stated that this message has been decoded dominantly by the intended audience. The dominant code represents when a receiver interprets the message in the most ideal way, indicating the sender's success in message transmission. A message interpreted through the dominant code gives power to the producers of messages, specifically those in media, which signifies a dominant interpretation as a hegemonic interpretation. The presentation of mediated messages involves the use of particular images, performances, and narratives that help illustrate the intent behind producers' ideas (Hall, 1973). The audience is not always aware they are decoding these messages through the dominant code; rather, they are most likely interpreting the messages subconsciously and implicitly, thus preserving hegemony (Hall, 1973).

Oppositional Decoded Messages. When individuals begin to question their interpretation of a mediated message and decode differently than what was intended, they have created another decoding code, which Hall (1973) refers to as the *oppositional code*. The oppositional code refers to when the receiver decodes a message differently than how the producer intended, and the message is no longer "perfectly symmetrical" as it is evident in the dominant code. Using an oppositional code accounts for an individual "re-signifying" or restructuring the meaning of a mediated message (Hall, 1973). Individuals interpreting a message differently from the intended meaning of a message is likely when the receiver is not the primary intended audience. Similarly, viewers of *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) may not interpret the encoded message as intended if they believe they cannot relate to or understand the message because they

are interpreting the content through a lens or worldview different from those of the movie's writers and producers. Thankfully, that has not been the case for the groundbreaking film. According to Press (2019), the film resonated with Asians and Asian Americans from all ethnicities, thus demonstrating their appreciation of and need for films that reflect their experiences and that they can connect with. Although the loss of symmetry between the producer and receiver is believed to indicate some level of failed communication, the receiver can maintain the ability to still understand the connotative meaning of the encoded message (Hall, 1973). This describes the third type of Hall's decoding codes, *negotiated code*.

Negotiated Decoded Codes. The negotiated code is a combination of both the dominant code and the oppositional code because receivers are able to negotiate the meaning of the message. Audience members negotiate the meaning received mediated messages based on the producers' presentation as well as the comparison to their prior knowledge, allowing them to question the preferred meaning of the message and create a new meaning based on some degree of the intended message. At the very moment one misreads an encoded message, the connotative meaning of the message has been impacted by the receiver's social environment, lived experience, or previous knowledge about the message's context. The negotiated code assumes the receiver is aware of some of the producer's intent and questions it while operating within the rule of the dominant code; therefore, the negotiated code possesses elements of both the dominant code and oppositional code (Hall, 1973). Because how an audience member interprets (or decodes) mediated messages can be influenced by their prior knowledge and lived experiences, it is important to that one's ethnic identity can have an impact on how they decode specific images of Asian or Asian American film representation, hence the first research questions:

RQ1 a): What influences do the Asian American participants' ethnic identities have on the interpretation (or decoding) of the *Crazy Rich Asians* film?

Few studies have been conducted to better understand the diversity among Asian American ethnicities (Dobson, 2018; Lee, 2006). *Crazy Rich Asians* focuses primarily on Chinese American and Singaporean Chinese identities, which may not be fully representative of all Asian American experiences. In accordance with the encoding/decoding theory (Hall, 1973), when Asian Americans do not interpret encoded messages in *Crazy Rich Asians* dominantly, this may be due to some messages having specific messages for a primary or intended audience; therefore, if participants question or misunderstand encoded messages in *Crazy Rich Asians*, they may not interpret those messages dominantly or exactly as intended, hence a follow-up to research question one:

RQ1 b): What do participants believe the intended audience and intended (or encoded) messages in *Crazy Rich Asians*?

One of this study's focuses is on understanding how Asian Americans communicate with others about their experiences with Asian and Asian American film representations. Specifically, attention is directed towards how the film, *Crazy Rich Asians*, has impacted Asian American perceptions of their racial and ethnic groups. The perception of racially charged storylines in film has a high likelihood of affecting interracial interactions and conflicts (Holt et al., 2017); thus, it stands to reason that Asian Americans communication approaches about racial representation in film may vary dependent on their ethnic identity. Research has included few studies on the possible differences among Asian Americans' communication approaches (Eguchi, 2013; Park et

al., 2006), which ultimately contributes to media's longstanding commitment to producing images perpetuating the belief of Asian Americans as being monolithic. This treatment is parallel to the communication discipline's holistic generalizations of Asian American bodies and identities (Ono & Pham, 2009; Park et al., 2006).

Hall recognized that a critical component of audiences' interpretation of encoded messages is how they then communicate about these messages. When audience members talk about their thoughts about and reactions to a movie, it can influence how they interpret the film (Hall, 1973). This process of decoding is somewhat impacted by who the audience member chooses to talk to, what messages of the film they choose to talk about, and how they communicate about the film. Because of the decoding process, understanding how audiences communicate about mediated messages in film is necessary in order to understand how it may impact their interpretations of those messages; therefore, in this study, based on how Asian Americans decode the messages in *Crazy Rich Asians*, their interpretation of the messages may influence how they communicate about the film and other topics related to racial representation in film. Thus, the second research question focuses on how Asian American participants decode mediated messages and how they then communicate about *Crazy Rich Asians* and race-related topics with family, friends, partners, and others in their interpersonal network.

RQ2: What approaches do Asian American participants use to communicate about Asian and/or Asian American media representations a) intraethnically, b) intraracially, and c) interracially?

In order to understand how Asian American participants communicated about *Crazy Rich Asians* and Asian and/or Asian American media representation, it is important for the participants to have already watched *Crazy Rich Asians* prior to coming to their interview. Having the

participants watch the film prior to the interview allowed them time to have talked or to have not talked about *Crazy Rich Asians* with others. This application of the encoding/decoding theory as a methodology for exploring Asian American media presentations can help bring attention to voices of Asian American storytellers and audiences. These research questions are asked because this thesis gives Asian Americans an opportunity to voice their understandings and beliefs about racial representation.

Chapter Three

Method

In order to better understand how media storytelling and depictions of people of color has impacted society, researchers using a critical race approach have used qualitative methodologies such as in-depth interviewing (Cuádriz & Uttal, 1999). In-depth interviewing with a critical race theoretical framework has often been applied to bring attention to how interviewees have experienced acts of racism, specifically systemic racial oppression. I used in-depth interviewing as a qualitative approach for this study to explore Asian American perspectives on and communication about *Crazy Rich Asians* and other depictions of Asian and Asian American narratives in film.

Statement of Subjectivity

I am a Korean American woman who grew up consuming media's misrepresentations of Asians and Asian Americans. As an Asian American, my experiences with interracial communication and racial representation allowed me insight and relatability into my participants' experiences. Because of this, I am particularly aware of how my perspective can be subjective when analyzing the data. For this reason, I was rigorous in interpreting the data according to the encoding/decoding theory, and continuously checked for how participants' responses indicated decoding of explicitly encoded messages. For example, the first three thematically analyzed categories in the findings are grouped based on the three decoding codes. These analyses allowed me to explain different themes, after Owen's (1984) three criteria process, that became a part of my major findings.

Rationale for In-depth Interviewing as a Methodology

In-depth interviewing was developed through different disciplines, but early forms of interviewing as a research methodology can be found in the 1930s utilized by ethnographers such as Margaret Mead (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). According to DiCicco-Bloom et al (2006), early uses of in-depth interviewing were found with sociologists such as Howard Becker and Edmund Husserl. In-depth interviewing is a way a researcher's knowledge can guide an interview by generating questions that allow the interviewee to vocalize how they see their experiences broadly in the world (McCracken, 1988). According to David Schuman (1982), one of the main assumptions of in-depth interviewing is that participants will make meaning out of their experiences throughout the process of the interview. This highlights an important goal of in-depth interviewing, which is to understand lived experiences and the meaning of those experiences made during the interview process (Schuman, 1982). In order to generate compelling in-depth interviews, the goal of this research should not be to evaluate or produce answers. The goal of understanding experiences is essential to this thesis because it aligns with one of the primary goals of this thesis, which is to understand Asian Americans' experiences surrounding racial representation. The relationship between an interviewer and interviewee is important because it is necessary for the interviewer to build rapport with the interviewee (Seidman, 2013). According to Seidman (2013), when conducting interviews exploring intimate and controversial experiences based on race and discrimination, it is important the interviewer is of the same race or ethnic identity as the participants in order to build a strong rapport and trust. For example, Park et al. (2006) facilitated their eight focus groups (three groups of Asian Americans, three groups of Black Americans, and two groups of White Americans) discussing *Rush Hour 2* (1998) with moderators of the same racial background as the participants in order to create an

atmosphere of comfort for participants. While Park et al. (2006) conducted focus groups, having an interviewer of the same race as participants is of equal importance as a same race moderator. Thus, Asian American participants in this study were interviewed by an Asian American because this approach created a comfortable environment where participants could feel safe and open when possibly discussing sensitive race-related topics such as racism.

In-depth interviewing is utilized in this study because it is one the most effective methodology for exploring interpretive and critical paradigms. Specifically, it has been effective in studies that seek to understand communication in cultural and racial contexts (e.g. Eguchi & Starosta, 2012; Harris et al., 2018). For example, Eguchi and Starosta (2012) conducted in-depth interviews with eight self-identified Asian American males to inductively identify emerging themes surrounding the “model minority” image in the workplace. According to Eguchi and Starosta (2012), Eguchi’s Asian American identity was utilized to “recruit Asian American professional participants” (p. 90). This approach was intentional because of how a same-race interviewer/interviewee relationship can impact the interviewing process and possibly a participant’s willingness to self-disclose. Each Asian American participant had a different ethnic background; so, in-depth interviews served as an effective methodology for data collection by constructing questions and a dialogue specific to the participant. While all participants agreed that Asian American identity was homogenized within the workplace, they perceived workplace interactions based on other social identities, such as sexual orientation (e.g., same-sex romantic relationships) and socioeconomic status (Eguchi & Starosta, 2012). The current study offers evidence that an in-depth interview is an optimal methodology because it encourages participants to disclose information about their experiences in one interview setting (Brinkmann, 2013). In-depth interviews provide an opportunity for the interviewer and interviewee to form a brief

relationship based on trust and to share one's personal lived experiences (Minkel-Lacocque, 2019).

The interview process provides the researcher with a better understanding of personal or taboo topics, as it allows the interviewer and interviewee to be present with one another, and the interviewee to have the freedom to be as expressive as he or she prefers through verbal and nonverbal communication (Brinkmann, 2013). This method of data collection is also beneficial for interviewees because it presents them an opportunity to make meaning of their lived experiences. Because internalizing experiences is encouraged for the interviewee during the actual interview process, talking about some experiences during an interview may actually impact the way interviewees previously understood the meaning of those lived experiences (Blumer, 1969); therefore, it is possible that an interviewee changes the meaning or makes new meaning of those experiences. In this study, it is assumed that Asian American participants either may not have given much thought to or had the opportunity to discuss any connections that may exist between their lived experiences and their engagement with film representations. As such, the interview will achieve the goal of providing participants with an opportunity to think more critically about these experiences in an intimate and private setting. This next section will look at this study's research design.

Design of Study

To answer the research questions, this qualitative research study involved interviews with participants of diverse Asian American backgrounds (see Appendix A) in the southeast region of the U. S. In-depth interviews were the study's sole methodology because it aligns with the tenets of CRT by giving Asian Americans an opportunity to vocalize their own stories and experiences (Crenshaw et al., 1995). The study was designed to provide an opportunity for Asian Americans

to talk about their experiences as an Asian American and their thoughts about racial media representations. Because the participant identifying as an Asian and as an American is an important component of this study, it was determined that it is most appropriate to exclude international students from participation. While international students from Asian countries identify as Asian and lived in the U.S. at the time of recruitment, their identity does not align with the previously mentioned social identity definition of an Asian American (Eguchi, 2013). All interviews were conducted one-on-one in a conference room in the Communication Studies department at a large public university in the southeastern U.S. Interviewees were asked to arrive 10-15 minutes prior to the scheduled time so that we could begin promptly at their scheduled interview time. Interviews were audio- and video-taped and lasted around 60-90 minutes. While participants were asked pre-established questions from an interview protocol (see Appendix B) to facilitate discussion, they were encouraged to freely express their perspectives on the various topics in any way that they felt most comfortable.

Participant Criteria and Recruitment

To recruit eligible participants, it was intended to utilize various recruitment strategies. The intended recruitment strategies included recruiting through the same public university's Asian American Student Association (AASA), a communication studies departmental research pool, snowball sampling, and stratified sampling of multiple Asian American ethnic populations with an equal number of participants from each ethnic group; however, participants were only recruited via the communication studies departmental research participation subject pool because data saturation was achieved after this initial recruitment. This recruitment entailed participants either accessing the Communication Studies departmental research website or by notification from their communication studies instructor via email about an opportunity to participate in this

study, which directed them to the aforementioned departmental research website (see Appendix C). Participation in the study allowed participants to either fulfill a course requirement or earn extra credit for a course.

Recruitment of participants was limited to Asian American ethnicities. In this study, an Asian American is defined as an individual who is of the Asian diaspora and was either born to U.S. parents of Asian descent, transracially adopted, or self-identifies as multi-ethnic/multi-racial. These Asian American identities are in line with Eguchi (2013)'s social identity definition of Asian American. Initially, stratified sampling of Asian Americans was intended meaning the number of participants were to be an equal number of five interviewees from the top Asian American ethnic groups in the U.S. based on population size. According to the Center for American Progress, the largest six Asian American ethnic groups are Chinese American, Filipino American, Indian American, Japanese American, Korean American, and Vietnamese American (Ramakrishnan & Ahmad, 2014); therefore, 30 participants who self-identify ethnically as an Asian American were initially sought for this study. Thirty participants were determined appropriate because it was approximate to the average number of interviewees in similar interview studies that focus on racial identity, media, and/or use encoding/decoding theory as a methodology (e.g. Harris et al., 2018; Tindi & Ayiku, 2018; Urban & Orbe 2010). Stratified sampling was to be used because it would ensure a diverse representation of Asian American ethnicities; however, immediately after recruitment started for this study, several Asian Americans from the largest six ethnic groups and other Asian American ethnic groups expressed interest in participation. At this point, prior to sending out any further communication related to the study, eligibility was open to any self-identifying Asian American. This change in criteria

allowed for a more diverse and equitable opportunity for participation, which resulted in more inclusivity.

In order to participate, participants needed to meet each of the following recruitment criteria: a) self-identify as an Asian American, b) have recently watched *Crazy Rich Asians* prior to taking the pre-screening questionnaire (see Appendix D), c) college-aged (18-24 years old), and d) are comfortable discussing their experiences with race and culture. Potential participants were sent a pre-screening questionnaire in order to establish eligibility. The pre-screening questionnaire included demographic items (e.g. “do you self-identify as Asian American?”) and guaranteed they watched *Crazy Rich Asians* by requesting individuals to select the films they have seen from a provided list. The criterion of watching *Crazy Rich Asians* was not revealed at this point to ensure individuals were truthful about watching the film. Age requirement is limited to college-age due to convenience sampling within a departmental research participation subject pool at a large public university. It was also ideal to limit the age range because participants were asked during the interview questions about what movies and television shows they watched while growing up and what characters they remember from their childhood. By limiting the age range, the timeframe of movies and television shows available were similar among participants’ childhood and adolescence.

Eighty potential participants were interested in this study and took a survey to determine eligibility. Twelve of the 80 potential participants took the eligibility survey after data saturation had been reached, which excluded them from the interview portion of the study. Twenty-six of the 80 potential participants were excluded from eligibility because they did not self-identify as Asian American and/or were an international student or they had not watched *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018). Participants who did not meet eligibility were notified via email (see Appendix E). This

email did not provide a rationale for why they were ineligible because the requirement to have watched *Crazy Rich Asians* was not disclosed in any recruitment information. If ineligible participants were informed about this, they could possibly share that information with other potential participants, which would hinder an important component of the recruitment process. Forty-two met all eligibility criteria and were notified via email (see Appendix F) that they were able to participate in the in-person interview portion of the study. Of the 42 eligible participants, 36 responded to the opportunity to schedule an in-person interview. Out of those 36, the first 30 participants (see Appendix A) to respond were selected and participated in the in-person interview portion of the study. Participants are assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities. Of these, six were Korean American, five were Indian American, four were Chinese American, two were Filipino American, two were Vietnamese American, one was Taiwanese American, one was Bangladeshi American, and nine self-identified as multi-racial or multi-ethnic. Of those Asian Americans who identify as multi-racial or multi-ethnic, three were of Japanese and Caucasian descent, one was of Chinese and Caucasian descent, one was of Caucasian and Indonesian descent, one was of Indian and Pakistani descent, one was of Korean and Caucasian descent, one was of Laotian and Caucasian descent, and one was of Laotian and Thai descent. Of the 30 participants, 19 were female and 11 were male all between the ages of 18 and 24. All participants have been assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

Interview Protocol

An interview protocol guide (see Appendix B) was constructed based on assumptions of Hall's (1973) encoding and decoding theory. Questions were designed to first create a comfortable environment and establish a history of the interviewee's experience with their ethnicity and culture. The next component of the interview guide was to have interviewees

consider their race and ethnicity in relation to media. In line with the encoding and decoding theory, the interview guide was created to prompt interviewees to think about mediated messages in *Crazy Rich Asians* and what those messages mean to them. Because participants were unaware that *Crazy Rich Asians* was a main focus of the interview, six, short video clips (see Appendix G) from the film were used as stimuli during the interview. In order to test the encoding/decoding theory, each video clip was chosen because the producers explicitly said what encoded messages were embedded within these scenes. Questions about each clip are the same and based on the encoding/decoding theoretical framework in order to gain participants' interpretations of the movie. Participants were also encouraged to write notes while watching each clip and were asked to leave the notes with the interviewer if they felt comfortable. The next portion of the interview guide has interviewees describing how they talked about *Crazy Rich Asians* with others and to consider how Asians and Asian Americans are portrayed in media. The purpose of conducting these interviews is to obtain rich and descriptive narratives of participants' lived experiences and their understanding of *Crazy Rich Asians* and other forms of Asian and Asian American media representation.

As mentioned earlier, all 30 interviews were conducted by the author, a self-identified Asian American woman. The author managed all notes, audio-, and video- recording that took place during interviews.

Interview Process

Upon arrival to the interview, interviewees were invited into a conference room and instructed to complete the IRB-approved consent form (see appendix H) and the pre-interview questionnaire (see Appendix I). Interviewees were informed that confirmation of consent would allow audio- and video-recording of the interview for the purpose of keeping record. They were

also informed that their identity and audio- and video-recordings would remain confidential. Participants were then informed that if they felt uncomfortable, they could end the interview at any time and all records would be terminated. The interviews ranged from 43 minutes to 118 minutes.

During the interviews, participants were encouraged to describe and explain their interpretations and communication of mediated messages in accordance with the encoding/decoding framework. Interview questions from the guide were asked unless participants already provided an answer earlier in the interview. While a few questions were skipped if participants could not provide an answer, some occasionally asked to go back to a previous question after they had more time to think about the question. At the end of the interview, interviewees were asked if they had anything further to share prior to being thanked for their participation and informed about confirmation of their extra credit or research credit requirement. The interview audio-recordings were first transcribed by an online transcription service and then re-transcribed for accuracy by the author. The interview transcriptions yielded 463 pages.

Data Analysis

In order to understand the relationship between Asian American participants, racial media representations, and their approaches to communication, the data were analyzed according to Owen's (1984) thematic analysis process. Owen's (1984) thematic analysis has been useful in identifying meaning and generating themes from individuals' responses to visual texts, racial media representations, conversations about race, and intercultural communication (Bell & Harris, 2016; Kinefuchi & Orbe; 2008; Minniear & Soliz, 2019). Specifically, Owen's (1984) three criteria for thematic analysis have been adopted to generate themes in Asian American

perspectives on racial identity and their communication strategies (Baig et al., 2014; Jun, 2012). Following the three criteria of identifying themes, the data analysis process included paying attention to the: a) *repetition* of keywords or phrases, b) *forcefulness* of interviewee's vocal inflections or emphasis on words, and c) *reoccurrence* of meaning that is connected throughout the interview that can be conveyed through different words or phrase (Owen, 1984).

Emerging themes were based on codes that were labeled in accordance with the encoding and decoding theory. Analyzing *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) as a visual text presented encoded messages. Coding for encoded messages in the film included analyzing interviews and the film's audio commentary from the director, author, and producers. All interview transcripts were coded independently by the author with NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software. Interviews were first categorized into four categories. The first three were the three decoding codes; dominant, oppositional, and negotiated. The fourth category included Asian American participants' communication approaches about media representation. Analyzing interviews for the decode categories also referred to a comparison of the encoded messages embedded within the film. Then, refined coding for concepts occurred to determine themes within each category, which resulted in ten total themes: three themes of the dominant code, one theme of the oppositional code, three themes of the negotiated code, and three themes of communication approaches.

Chapter Four

Findings

This chapter reviews the categories and major themes that analysis of *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) and interviews with Asian Americans yielded. The research questions aimed to understand how Asian Americans' ethnic identities impacted their interpretation of *Crazy Rich Asians*, what did they believe were intended messages of the film, and how they approached communicating about racial media representations. The quotes used in this chapter are from the participants that best exemplify the following themes. Each time a participant is mentioned in this section, their pseudonym will be accompanied by their participant number (see Appendix A).

The findings of these research questions yielded ten themes categorized within three decoded interpretations of the film *Crazy Rich Asians* and Asian American approaches to communicating about the film. The first category – dominant code includes the first three themes: 1) love conquers all, 2) self-empowerment, and 3) Asian values. The second category – oppositional code – includes the theme of 4) resistance to the movement. The third category – negotiated code – includes three themes: 5) edutainment, 6) comparison to other media, and 7) culture clash. The fourth category – communication approaches – also includes three themes: 8) intraethnic communication, 9) intraracial communication, and 10) interracial communication. Included with the quotes from participants are conversations between *Crazy Rich Asians*' director, John Chu, and the novel's author, Kevin Kwan. Their dialogue is included in order to reference participants' decoding of messages. *Crazy Rich Asians*' audio commentary version

provided John Chu and Kevin Kwan an opportunity to explicitly state what encoded messages are embedded throughout the film.

Dominant Code

The first set of themes is identified as being interpreted within the dominant code. To identify these themes, participants were specifically asked during the interview to “think about the messages you think the producers, director, and writers were trying to communicate to audiences with the film itself.” Participants were also asked immediately after watching six separate scenes, “What are your initial thoughts about this scene?” and “What do you think is the main message of this scene?”

Love Conquers All

Crazy Rich Asians is a romantic comedy and is a story about love. In addition to the themes about and culture, there are encoded messages about love throughout the film. This theme included responses participants had to re-watching a scene from the movie. The scene takes place right after Rachel announces to Eleanor that she declined Nick’s marriage proposal and ended their relationship, which Eleanor pushed for the entire movie. Katharine Ho’s Mandarin Chinese song cover of Coldplay’s *Yellow* is playing throughout the scene. The theme of love conquering all was related to the encoded messages of love. During the audio commentary between John Chu and Kevin Kwan, Chu remarks that he wanted this scene to depict one of the most classic scenes from a romantic comedy, the airport or airplane scene. Then the film shows Eleanor appearing at Nick’s hotel room, and they are seen sitting together, having no dialogue. The screen shows Rachel with her Mom boarding a plane back to the U.S. from Singapore. As Rachel makes her way down the aisle to the coach seats in the back of the plane, Nick is heard yelling for Rachel and pushing his way through to see her.

Participants seemed to enjoy seeing a romantic storyline between Asians in a Western film because it normalized the relationship. Many participants expressed that one of the film's main messages is that "love conquers all." This was in regard to how *Crazy Rich Asians*' Nick and Rachel's romantic relationship was able to endure the obstacles because they loved each other.

Y'vonne (P6) (Chinese American) and Kurt (P5) (Chinese American) expressed that because the film is a romantic comedy, they felt that the "power of love" was an emotionally moving theme. Y'vonne (P6) described how the story of Nick and Rachel's love shows that love can be influential in unexpected and unexplainable ways. In her words, Y'vonne (P6) said, "the power of love..., you can't get in the way of it. It just happens." Her description of love shows its overall power to conquer all, but Kurt (P5) points out specifically what barriers love can break. He considered how in *Crazy Rich Asians*, Rachel's family and upbringing intertwined negatively with her romantic relationship with Nick. Kurt (P5) saw love as being between two people rather than how Nick's family saw it as between two families. Kurt (P5) noted about the power of love, "I guess the message is that your family background shouldn't interfere with your love life." Kurt (P5) focused on the intersection of love and family because it attributed to making the story relatable to a mainstream audience. Another way that participants interpreted the film's theme of love was how it connected with cultural barriers.

For some Indian American participants, they saw love and culture as going hand in hand with one another. For example, Pam (P11), an Indian American participant, saw the film's portrayal of Nick and Rachel's love as a way to bridge two cultures. She said, "It was very sweet how their relationship worked out and their culture too." Marco, another Indian participant, also saw a connection between the power of Nick and Rachel's love as breaking the barrier between

their two cultures. Specifically, Marco thinks of the theme of love from the perspective of Rachel. In his own words, Marco described rooting for Rachel throughout the film and thinking she was a “cool character.” He wanted Rachel to break the tradition that Eleanor talks about in the film and break the cultural boundaries dividing them. Marco is describing both themes of “love conquers all” and “culture clash,” but because he observes a resolution in the culture clash due to the power of love, this decoded message represents the theme of “love conquers all” more than the theme of “culture clash.”

Participants described the “love conquers all” theme as less significant as the next two dominant decoded themes, but thought it was a necessary element to the film because it is a romantic comedy. Participants found it important and necessary because the producers can tell a common Hollywood love story with classic romantic comedy tropes in order to tell the less common story about Asian cultures. This means that having elements of love and romance as main messages in the film provided opportunities for messages of Asian values. This leads to the next theme, “Asian values,” that was dominantly decoded by participants.

Asian Values

This theme is called Asian values because it describes participants’ relationship with the film’s Asian values and their own. The most frequent Asian values that participants recalled were those considered to be Asian cultural values or traditions. Participants’ responses included in this theme were in response to the six clips shown during the interview and questions that asked what stood out to them in the film and how the film reminded them of their own lives. This theme is broken down into two subthemes: 1) family and food and 2) respect.

Family and Food. This subtheme reflects participants relating food to family and Asian values. Family and food are included in one theme because when discussing each one's role in the film, several participants explained them together. There was little expression from participants about family without food and vis versa. One of the clips shown during the interview that participants decoded dominantly in relation to food involved Rachel meeting her friend, Peik-Lin's family. The scene opens with the camera panning over a large dinner table filled with several Chinese dishes served in elegant dishes. The sound of dishes and silverware clanking can be heard as members of Peik-Lin's family reach for food with chopsticks. The scene then focuses on Mr. Goh (Peik-Lin's father) introducing himself to Rachel. In the audio commentary, the director, John Chu, praises the food team on set that made all of the food look beautiful and authentic. The presentation of food throughout this film was critical to reflect Chinese Singaporean culture as accurately as possible. Regardless of their ethnicity, participants acknowledged and understood that this specific presentation was purposeful to promote the food in Chinese culture. One participant, Danielle (P26) (Laotian/White American) focused more on the opening food shot than the later dialogue between the characters, Mr. Goh and Rachel. She knew that without any characters mentioning or talking about the food, it was still important. When asked what she thought was the main message of this scene, Danielle (P26) said that:

They definitely emphasize the food and they made sure to pan over the food. I'm sure there's a reason that they panned over the food, but I don't know Chinese food that well. I don't know if that's food that they typically... I don't know if that's traditional food or not, but they definitely made a point to kind of pan over.

This scene in particular did not have a strong consensus among participants of what they thought the main message was, but Danielle (P26) was the only participant whose initial thought did not

involve any of the characters in this scene. For Danielle (P26) to find the presentation of food in this scene as significant was important to how she decoded this scene's message as dominant because the director considers food to be one of the characters in the film. The observation made by Danielle (P26) emphasized the role that food had in this film, specifically in relation to how food is connected to family traditions. The recognition that the food presented could possibly be Chinese food is an example of how Danielle (P26) sees the uniqueness of Chinese food from her own Laotian culture's food. Another participant, Dana (P16) (Japanese/White American) was actually reminded of her own Japanese family and culture when she saw in *Crazy Rich Asians* how Peik-Lin's family surrounded a dinner table to eat together in this scene. She personally related to this aspect of the film. For example, she shares that, "I have gone to a lot of big family dinners, and they're set up the same. It's very elegant and a lot of different things." This description from Dana (P16) expresses how, to her, Peik-Lin's family and her Japanese family eat meals together in a celebratory fashion, which entails that the food be presented in a beautiful and "elegant" way especially when the entire family can come together for a big gathering.

Another clip shown during the interview involved Rachel with Nick's family at another large dinner table. This time, everyone is making dumplings together, and Nick teaches Rachel how his Ah-Ma (grandmother) showed him how to make a dumpling. Earlier in the film, Rachel and Nick are at Newton Hawker Centre, a prominent Singapore center for food stalls, which are booths where food is prepared and sold in typically a large outdoor gathering space. Director John Chu and author Kevin Kwan discuss in the film's audio commentary that filming at Newton Hawker Centre was intentional because it was Kwan's favorite hawker center (open-air food complex with a variety of food stalls) growing up in Singapore and because the director felt it represented a side of Singapore with which people may not be familiar. Chu and Kwan felt that

hawker centers are the “heart of” Singapore because it is about family and friends from multiple ethnicities sharing food together. The director says in the audio commentary that the presentation of food and including it in the film was so important to him. The editors of the film actually felt it was too much and wanted to cut most of the scenes. Chu recalled this moment during the audio commentary when he defended his directing decision by telling the editors, “No, the food is the language of this. The sharing of the food is how we communicate.” Chu and author Kwan knew that the audience would love seeing the food in this film. Most participants interpreted the intended message of the relationship between food and people as important in Asian culture.

The most prominent food message decoded dominantly by participants was the dumpling-making scene with Nick’s family. In this scene where Nick teaches Rachel how to make dumplings, they are surrounded by four generations of his family helping make dumplings. His mother, grandmother, aunts, cousins, and their children help make the dumplings together in Ah-Ma’s home. For example, two Korean American participants reflect on Korean traditions that involved family sharing specific foods for specific celebrations. Seeing Nick’s family in the film talk about their traditions surrounding food reminded Charlie (P20), a Korean American participant, about his own traditions related to food and his Korean culture. When asked what traditions this scene reminded him of, Charlie (P20) said, “When we celebrate birthdays, there’s a specific soup we’re supposed to eat every birthday morning.” He’s reminded about this tradition specifically because of how similar the way Nick’s family in *Crazy Rich Asians* and his own family talks about the tradition. Nick’s family in the film and Charlie (P20) refer to food as a way to teach children about traditions related to their Asian culture. Another Korean American participant, Janet (P22), responded similarly when asked about what traditions she thought of after watching this scene. In her own words, Janet (P22) said about her family, “Well, for New

Year's, we'll eat the traditional rice cake soup. Then birthdays, we have another soup that we eat." Janet's (P22) initial thoughts about Nick's family making dumplings together in this scene shows how the theme of food and family together is important to some participants' Asian culture and values. This message was decoded dominantly because in the audio commentary, Chu talks about when and why he decided to make this dumpling scene have encoded messages of the importance of family.

In the audio commentary, it is revealed that this scene was originally written to have their conversation take place in a restaurant, but director Chu realized that the element of family was lost. They chose to film the conversation about family and sacrifice while they made dumplings together to emphasize the history and loving memories of Nick's family. Author Kwan praised this decision because it was a true representation of his childhood in Singapore where he would go to his grandmother's home to make wontons with family members from all generations. Re-watching this scene in the interview, participants expressed a similar praise to Kwan's. The importance of spending time with family, often in relation to the making of food was a significant Asian cultural value to participants. For example, in this quote, Clark (P28) (Taiwanese American), related images from the film to his own family practices centered around food and tradition:

My grandma would teach us whenever she was making dumplings. So, I did learn how to make some dumplings... In Asian culture, we just make food. It's one thing that you do to bond with the family. It's enjoyable cause my grandparents love to cook so they really like it. That was their passion back then.

Clark (P28) identifies with *Crazy Rich Asians*' Nick and his family because hearing Nick say who he learned how to make dumplings was similar to his own experiences growing up. He

specifically noted how he believes that making food together to bond is rooted in Asian culture and traditions. When he is reminded of how his grandparents' passion growing up was cooking, it resembles how Nick's family finds cooking to be something passed down from one generation to another but is a tradition lost with Americans. While Taiwanese and Chinese cultures have similar roots in East Asian (e.g. Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Taiwanese) cultural traditions, Southeast Asian (e.g. Filipina/o, Indonesian, Laotian, Thai, and Vietnamese) and South Asian (e.g. Bangladeshi, Indian, and Pakistani) ethnicities expressed similar initial thoughts about this scene's main messages. Paul (P13), an Indian American, immediately pointed out how this scene's main message was in regard to family. He valued that making dumplings together portrayed how important family was, which is a tradition he finds similar in his own Indian culture. Meredith (P8), a Filipina American, interpreted the main message of this theme as well and said this about how this Asian representation was the most relatable in the film:

I feel like I couldn't relate to all of the different traditions in it (the film), but just how they would all come together with food and sit with each other and have conversations around that and have events surrounding food. That's a huge thing in my immediate family and extended family.

This quote from Meredith (P8) exemplifies how the director was able to make the message of family and food clear enough for those who do not practice Chinese or East Asian cultures.

For another Southeast Asian participant, Charlene (P27) (Laotian/Thai American), re-watching this scene reminded her of the first time she saw it with her family. Watching the food throughout the film was a huge talking point for her family, and it brought up their memories of sitting together and making food. When asked about her initial thoughts, Charlene (P27) said why her family saw themselves in this scene, "I think the part with the family making the food

was definitely a big part of my family... that's a big part of the culture is just spending time together but also doing something productive in the meantime." How Charlene (P27) describes the reason why her family felt connected to this film expresses the impact messages can have when they are decoded dominantly. The quotes in this subtheme highlights the participants who best connected the main messages to not just themselves, but to their beliefs about their Asian values.

Respect. This subtheme is a reflection of how participants decoded Asian cultural symbols that signified respect. This subtheme also represents how the participants thought respect was communicated in the film in relation to their cultural expectations. Participants were shown a clip from the film where Rachel and her mother are discussing how Rachel should present herself to Nick's family for the first time. Because *Crazy Rich Asians*' Rachel is Chinese American, her mother believes she will be perceived as different from Nick's Singaporean Chinese family. Immediately after watching the clip, participants were asked what their initial thoughts were about the scene. There were 20 participants who agreed with the message of wearing the color red as having significance to Asian culture. In the audio commentary, director Chu discussed the significance of the use of color throughout the film. He used different colors to signify specific meaning because of each color's importance to Chinese culture; however, this was not always his intent. Chu continued to tell the story of how his director's point-of-view needed to change in order to portray an accurate depiction of colors in Chinese Singaporean culture. Chu said in this commentary that in one of the original sets for an ornate party, he had the event decorated with all white lanterns. From a film director's perspective, he thought the all-white look was aesthetically beautiful for a film. When Michelle Yeoh, who plays Eleanor in the film, arrived on the set, she told director Chu that Chinese Singaporean culture would not use

white lanterns for this party because it signifies funeral and death. Chu immediately had all of the white lanterns replaced with red lanterns, which signified more positivity than white. John Chu says that this moment between Michelle Yeoh and him was essential for the production of *Crazy Rich Asians* because it showed the importance of representation in front of and behind the camera in order to present accurate cultural symbols.

Even as a Chinese American, there were a lot of things he did not know about the culture, and he corrected some things along the way. Director Chu noted that this conversation with Michelle Yeoh was “the beginning of a bigger conversation to figure out their own rules of telling our own story” (Chu, 2018, 35:40:00). The representation of color was a production message of respecting Chinese Singaporean culture and a way to signify specific meaning to Asian and Asian American audiences. After re-watching the scene discussing Rachel getting ready to meet Nick’s family, two Chinese American participants’ initial thoughts were about color and Asian culture. Kurt (P5) is reminded of when and where colors are appropriate to wear. When asked about how this scene relates to his own life, Kurt (P5) said this about the importance of color in Asian culture at formal events, “I know at Asian weddings, they all wear red. Then (at a) funeral, we all wear white.” This quote is an example of the direct ways a Chinese American could decode this message colors signifying respect dominantly. For Quinton (P2), he delves deeper into not only what colors are important but what they represent to his Chinese culture when asked the same question as above and said this:

The blue and white colors equal funeral and then the red, it’s a good color to wear. It means luck and being fertile. We do not have particular colors that we wear, but it’s definitely super traditional and very authentic.

This quote from Quinton (P2) places the same value of color as Rachel's mom does. His description of the significance of color shows how color can communicate certain messages when interacting with others. Another element of respect that stood out to participants in this scene is the idea of what makes a good Chinese or Asian child, which participants identified as a common value in Asian culture. Participants' whose initial thoughts related to this message could relate the good Asian child ideal to their own family and expectations.

When asked about how Rachel's conversation with her mom reminded her of her own life, Danielle (P26) reflected on how seeing this portrayal in *Crazy Rich Asians* made her feel that her family looked like good Asian children:

Saying "good Chinese children" because that's definitely a real thing. Like I have family members that still send money overseas back to Laos to people they know and families over there. That definitely hits home and it just made me laugh.

How Danielle (P26) described her positive feeling toward the "good Chinese children" statement was similar to how someone might feel when they are included in an inside joke. Danielle (P26) enjoyed this sentiment because, to her, sending money to family overseas is a significant way to show respect in Asian culture. This indicates how respect is decoded dominantly through one accurate portrayal in the film.

Another way that participants decoded messages of respect in the film was through the depiction of respect being communicated among characters. When participants were asked what they thought was accurate or inaccurate about the film's portrayal of Asians and Asian Americans, Charlene (P27) responded that the representation of how respect was communicated between Rachel and Eleanor was culturally significant to Asians:

In the end, it wasn't that Nick's mom really loved her (Rachel) or anything, but she definitely respected her, which I liked because that showed that the mom was still herself. She still didn't really believe that Rachel belonged in the family, but she had respect for her. I think respect is a big thing in Asian culture because some things you just can't help but will do civilly.

This description of respect involves a component of sacrifice. Charlene (P27) expressed how a part of respect in Asian culture is accepting some things even when you do not want to but because it is for the family's greater good. Similar to how Charlene (P27) interpreted the film's portrayal of Eleanor's actions as a form of respect toward Rachel, Hannah (P14) (Indian American) interpreted some of Rachel's actions as a form of respect toward Eleanor. Hannah (P14) noted that because Rachel showed excitement to participate in some of Nick's family traditions, she was showing respect to his culture. Her perspective on how Rachel shows respect is one way that Asian Americans see how respect is communicated between the Asian and American cultures.

When asked the same question, Dana (P16) also articulates how respect is an expression among people that can be communicated. In her Japanese culture, Dana (P16) noted how respect is an essential part of daily life. In regard to giving respect in Japan, she said, "Respecting elders is a big thing. In Japan, you always have to show respect and a lot of people bow to everyone no matter who you see, even in a super casual setting everyone bows to each other." In her example of respect in an Asian culture, it shows how there are different ways of expressing respect to each other. While *Crazy Rich Asians* has some subtle forms of respect, in this quote, Dana (P16) pointed out specific and apparent ways to communicate respect.

This next quote is from Wendy (P23), a Korean American participant who was transracially adopted from South Korea at birth by White parents. Wendy (P23) was the most profoundly impacted by the film, and quotes from her interview are used most often as findings for these themes. As previously mentioned, culture clash is another major theme that has also had messages decoded as Asian values. For Wendy (P23), culture clash was a prominent theme that overlapped with several other themes, including this subtheme. This quote from Wendy (P23) is included in the subtheme respect because one way she interpreted messages in the film was how it is important to respect your culture and other's:

The main message is probably to start appreciating culture a little bit more, whether it's appreciating other people's culture like what Rachel did when they were speaking Cantonese. Another message is to respect your own culture because I feel like a lot of people dismiss it when you really should try to make sure that those traditions don't disappear like she said.

Wendy's (P23) decoding of respect in the film is important to why this is a subtheme of Asian values because she was the only participant to describe how there are two elements to respect for specifically an Asian American. She expressed how *Crazy Rich Asians* implies messages of how in the film Rachel, an Asian American, respects the Chinese culture of Nick's family but that respecting her own culture as a Chinese American is valuable because Asian values can easily be lost in American culture. This notion to respect your own culture is an important element to Asian values, and it in some ways influences the next theme of decoded messages, self-empowerment.

Self-Empowerment

This theme reflects responses from participants when specifically asked, “What are your initial thoughts about re-watching the scene with Rachel and Eleanor playing mahjong?” In this scene of *Crazy Rich Asians*, Rachel starts the game by telling Eleanor that her mother taught her that mahjong teaches the life skills of “cooperation, negotiation, and strategy.” Then Rachel asks Eleanor why she does not like or accept her. The camera pans to Eleanor as she explains that, because Rachel is a foreigner and an American, she does not understand the importance of family and sacrifice because Americans only care about themselves and happiness. Rachel reveals that Nick proposed to her at the same time the camera pans over to show Rachel’s mahjong tiles. When Rachel tells Eleanor that she declined his marriage proposal, she discards a mahjong tile. Eleanor sighs with relief at Rachel’s decision, and she picks up the discarded tile to win the game. Rachel immediately looks Eleanor in the eyes and tells her that when Nick and Eleanor have the ideal life that Eleanor envisions for him, it is because of Rachel. Rachel then describes herself as “a poor, raised by a single mother, low-class, immigrant nobody” at the moment that she reveals her hand, it is intended for audiences to understand that Rachel discarded the mahjong tile that would have won her the game.

Participants related to Rachel in this scene and responded with a feeling of self-empowerment. For some participants, they responded to the question, which asked what they thought the main message of this scene was, that Rachel’s self-empowerment was mostly related to being an Asian American. Kim (P10), an Indian American participant, saw the film’s portrayal of Rachel’s self-empowerment as a moment of release from all the resistance Rachel felt building up against her throughout the film. She saw Rachel breaking away from the traditions Nick’s family focused on as a form of self-empowerment. For example, Kim (P10) said,

“Breaking out of the traditions and also making something of yourself. Even if you have certain characteristics or just certain parts of you that might prevent you from being successful.” Kim’s (P10) description expresses how a part of Rachel’s self-empowerment is overcoming the pressure she felt to conform to Asian values or culture. On the other hand, Rina (P18) (Japanese/White American) saw Rachel’s self-empowerment through an acknowledgement that her values can be blended between her two cultural identities of Asian and American. In her own words about how she interpreted Rachel’s empowerment, Rina (P18) said, “It was pretty empowering, and it doesn’t really matter that she (Rachel) is from America. She can still have the same values that Eleanor and Nick’s family does.” For Rina (P18), Rachel’s self-empowerment is connected to her own feelings of how her values as an American is not separate from her values as an Asian. While Kim (P10) and Rina (P18) decoded this message of self-empowerment differently, they both decoded it dominantly because the intention was for Asian American audiences to feel their own self-empowerment. This is an example of how decoding a message of empowerment dominantly is possible for Asian American participants through more than one way.

Charlie (P20) interpreted self-empowerment as one of the main overall messages of the film. He thought that the film successfully showed non-Asian audiences the portrayals of Asians that are not otherwise seen in media. When asked how the overall message of self-empowerment made him feel, Charlie (P20) said, “It’s encouraging. Empowering.” When asked to elaborate on how *Crazy Rich Asians* has made Charlie (P20) feel empowered, he expresses how the film has impacted the way he sees himself and other Asians in America. Charlie (P20) processed his emotions about finding empowerment through the film:

No, I'm definitely starting to feel more pride about it. I wouldn't pin the whole changing my mindset on the film. It's just changed my perception toward certain things. I don't know really how to articulate it. I used to not super care about the casual racism Asian people get. Now I notice it a lot more, and I've noticed the difficulties we as Asian Americans deal with. Yeah, I don't know. I feel like in media Asian men especially are shown as not as masculine as other races. It's weird. [laughs] And that effect definitely affected my perception of Asian guys.

This quote exemplifies how the producers of the film successfully encoded messages of self-empowerment. Charlie (P20) is an example of an Asian American participant who used to have feelings of negativity toward his Asian identity. After re-watching scenes from the film with the intention to think about the messages critically, he described how those messages influenced a change in his perception of Asian American men including himself. Charlie (P20) explained how media in the U.S. does not typically portray Asian men in positive ways, which contributed to why he had negative feelings about himself. Because he thought *Crazy Rich Asians* depicted Asian men in a positive way, he realized how those negative feelings are primarily influenced by media depictions. Asian American participants who identified as women also found the depiction of their gender portrayed positively in *Crazy Rich Asians*.

Another element of self-empowerment in participants' responses is the message of empowering women and specifically, Asian women. Kim's (P10) response to how the mahjong scene reminded her of her own life reflects participants' initial thoughts about how Rachel represents a self-empowered Asian woman. She is reminded of how her mom was the first woman in her family to attend and graduate from college. When her mom was still living in India with her family, attending college for the women in the family was not common. Kim (P10)

described how her mom was similar to *Crazy Rich Asians*' Rachel and said about her mom, "She broke that (barrier) and actually something for herself because she wanted to and didn't let their economic status hold her back." For Kim (P10), Rachel represented an empowering Asian woman in her own life. For Yuri (P19) (Korean/White American), the portrayal of Rachel's empowerment encouraged her to feel self-empowered in her own life. When asked what she believed was the main message of this scene, Yuri (P19) said, "I think female empowerment and empowering women. Asian women specifically because Rachel was able to stand up for herself at the end and make her own decisions and not let Nick's mom intimidate her or control her." Yuri's (P19) interpretation of self-empowerment is decoded dominantly because she believes the main message is that Asian women should feel empowered by Rachel's actions and to feel encouraged to stand up for herself. Self-empowerment was a significant theme of decoded messages in *Crazy Rich Asians* because it actively called of Asian Americans to see themselves in the film and challenge how they were typically portrayed in media. This next theme includes findings of participant quotes that expressed a rejection of some of the encoded messages of the film, including ones of Asian American self-empowerment.

Oppositional Code

This category describes encoded messages that were not interpreted as the producers intended. Only one theme of oppositional code was present in participants' responses specifically to the question that asked how they thought *Crazy Rich Asians* impacted Asian and Asian American media representation.

Resistance to Movement

This theme reflects responses from participants when specifically asked during the interview, “How do you think *CRA* might have changed how Asian Americans and Asians have been typically represented in film?” and “How do you think *CRA* might have impacted how Asians and non-Asians relate to films?” A few participants felt that an all-Asian cast felt forced in a Hollywood film and that the movie’s intention to change Asian representation in the U.S. would not be successful. Two examples of participants who thought the film’s overall goal of highlighting Asians and Asian Americans in Hollywood was already lost on the audience before anyone watched it are expressed by Justin (P17) (Japanese/White American) and Quinton (P2) (Chinese American). For Justin (P17), he thought the film’s portrayal of Asians felt forced and not natural. He understood the message that producers wanted to show, but he actively rejected the feelings of empowerment. He considered the effort from producers to “make Asian people seem more normal” was “too much.” Similarly, Quinton (P2) expressed that he wished the producers took a different approach to portray Asian Americans in Hollywood. In his own words, Quinton (P2) said this about his expectation for the film before watching it:

For this film specifically, I don’t think it changed how Asian Americans are represented. I don’t think it changed me. I think the fact that it was a comedy, I don’t think it had a major impact on Asian Americans, especially at this time. But if it was less comedy, more of a soap or drama, if it was more drama oriented, I think that would maybe have had more impact. But the fact that it was “Crazy Rich Asians!” just the name, just literally threw everything off for me.

Quinton’s (P2) opposition to the film’s title was partly because he felt it would not change how Asians are viewed in the U.S. but add to the notion that Asians are used for humor in films.

Another opposition to one of the film's encoded messages was expressed by Danielle (P26) (Laotian/White American). Danielle (P26) felt that the central conflict in the film between Asian culture and American culture was done inaccurately. She felt that the portrayal of Eleanor depicted Asians as being divisive with Asian Americans, which has not always been her experience. Here she reflects on why the Asian American portrayal was negative:

I think some of it was kind of negative toward Asian Americans. They kind of made it seem like all Asians were kind of like, "If you're American, you're not one of us." Which that's definitely not how everyone is at all. But then with Asians it's negative because they make them sound like they're super sticklers on things, and they're not.

What Danielle (P26) is describing is how the portrayal of culture clash was achieved through the film by negatively portraying Asians and Asian culture. In some ways, she finds the film perpetuating inaccurate portrayals of Asians typically seen in Hollywood rather than depicting the uncommon accurate ones.

Another observation made by participants that showed they believed *Crazy Rich Asians* had inaccurate portrayals of Asians and Asian Americans was that the film lacked inclusivity in its representation of Asians. Two participants felt that, while *Crazy Rich Asians* did promote the need for more Asian representation in Hollywood, it negatively promoted a specific physical appearance of an Asian. These two participants articulated why they felt *Crazy Rich Asians* missed a mark on accurate Asian and Asian American representation, which was influenced by their own experiences as Asian Americans. Lisa (P30) (Vietnamese American) and Wendy (P23) (Korean American) both expressed that while *Crazy Rich Asians* was an influential and empowering film for Asian Americans, its success was largely due to the portrayal of the typical Asian in Hollywood. For Lisa (P30), one typical portrayal of Asians in Hollywood is the East

Asian. As a Southeast Asian, Lisa (P30) explained how at times it felt that the film only portrayed a specific Asian community. In her own words, Lisa (P30) said this:

There was no representation of Southeast Asians. It was mostly focused on East Asians.

There wasn't that much representation when it comes to different types of Asians. I guess there were just East Asians and there weren't really darker skin Asians.

Lisa (P30) oppositional decoding comes from the feeling that this film cannot completely claim inclusive Asian representation when it only portrays one or few types of Asians. For Wendy (P23), she also felt that *Crazy Rich Asians* had the platform to represent more inclusive portrayals of Asians that are not typically seen in Hollywood. She believed that the message of Asian representation matters would have been more impactful if they also normalized more body shapes in the film. When asked to elaborate on how the film could have more accurate Asian representation, she said,

I kind of wish that it wasn't so focused on being Asian. Like, you know, those movies where there was a thicker girl and the entire movie is about her coming to terms with her weight.... But the best way to integrate all body shapes into mainstream media would be not making a big deal of it, just having more characters with thicker bodies. So that's what I mean. So, instead of highlighting that they're Asian, just have it there and pretend it's normal and more mainstream.

All participants who decoded some messages as oppositional were also participants who decoded some messages as dominant. This exemplifies that while some parts of the encoded messages were not achieved, all participants believed *Crazy Rich Asians* contributed to a conversation about how Asian Americans are and need to be represented in the media. The oppositional messages are important for this study because it exemplifies the influence that

participants believe mediated messages can have on audiences. This leads to the next code, negotiated code, which involves elements of both the oppositional code and dominant code.

Negotiated Code

This code represents themes of participants accepting encoded messages and interpreting them as intended while also comparing the messages to their own experiences to produce new meaning. Participants discussed two themes coded as negotiated messages. The first two themes are “edutainment” and “comparison” of *Crazy Rich Asians*’ representation of Asians to other representations of race in media. The third and most prominent theme coded as negotiated is “culture clash.” Participants who responded with statements related to culture clash identified two sub-themes of culture clash they have experienced: Asian culture vs. American culture and in-between cultures.

Edutainment

This theme represented quotes from participants who saw the film as a pedagogical tool for learning about an Asian culture and an Asian American experience. Many participants thought an Asian American’s experience was accurately portrayed in order to educate audiences about what it is like to be an Asian American. For example, when asked if *Crazy Rich Asians* was an accurate or inaccurate portrayal of Asians and Asian Americans, Kim (P10) expressed that the film did a good job showing audiences how inaccurate portrayals of Asians are viewed as negative and how the accurate ones are considered positive. In her own words, Kim (P10) explained what the depictions meant to her:

I feel like they represented the area very well because it showed both sides. So, it showed what people see when they think of when they see Asians, but also how much goes into...
I don’t know how to explain it. I just feel like the way that they were portrayed

sometimes seemed as weak, but also strong at the same time. So, it showed the reality of being an Asian American or just what it's like in today's world.

Similar to Kim's (P10) thoughts about the film's effort to represent Asian and Asian Americans accurately, Winston (P3) (Chinese/White American) believed the accurate representation of Asian culture was important because it is not commonly seen in mainstream (read White) media. His explanation of how the producers' use of storytelling was intentional to tell an Asian story differently than told before is influenced by how Winston (P3) considered how media has influenced his own perceptions of Asian culture. In this quote, Winston (P3) describes why he thinks there was intention to teach audiences about Asian culture:

The main message was they just wanted to tell a good story, but they didn't just tell a good story about this relationship. I think they wanted to show us more Asian culture in it because a lot of Hollywood beforehand hasn't really shown that much. It hasn't been a big part of Hollywood films and I think they wanted to introduce a majority Asian cast and show more just of Asian culture in general. Because a lot of Americans in general... because I don't really know too much about my Asian culture. I've been... I feel like I've been kind of Americanized.

Two participants, Sarah (P24) (Korean American) and Lawrence (P25) (Korean American), expressed the belief that *Crazy Rich Asians* was a groundbreaking film because it changed people's minds about what they previously thought of Asians and Asian Americans. For Sarah (P24), she said about the film, "I think it could make people realize that we have the same story. Like we have the same experience, we can identify with each other." Her belief was that anyone watching the film will learn that being Asian does not mean you are different but rather, it shows people have the same experiences. Lawrence (P25) also thought the film taught

audiences about Asians, but specifically Asian American teenagers because it is teaching them there can be positive Asian representation in media, which was something Lawrence (P25) was not used to growing up. These examples of edutainment are describing how participants interpret the film as a pedagogical tool for broad audiences to learn about Asian and Asian American experiences.

Another way that some participants interpreted messages as edutainment was that they believed the film was a useful pedagogical tool for them to use to teach themselves and others. For example, the song that director John Chu wrote a letter about resonated with one Korean American participant, Charlie (P20). Charlie (P20) researched the film's use of the song, *Yellow*, after his first time watching *Crazy Rich Asians*. When Charlie (P20) read how the director initially thought of the word "yellow" as derogatory towards Asian people, he related to that feeling of how "yellow" used to make him feel negatively about himself. Charlie (P20) then explained how the intention behind the song was to create the image of yellow as beautiful to make Asians feel empowered. He described how that song taught him a new way to think pridefully about his own skin color. The strategy of including this song was specifically for the purpose of encoding messages of culture clash and a way for the director to address culture and identity. This example exemplified how *Crazy Rich Asians* can be used as a form of edutainment for Asian Americans to learn new and positive ways to think of themselves.

As a transracially adopted Korean American, Wendy (P23) found *Crazy Rich Asians* to be a perfect way to teach her parents about her experience as an Asian American. Wendy (P23) described how she previously had difficulties having race discussions with her parents and did not know how to articulate her struggles as an Asian American. She explained how the film portrayed serious topics that Asian Americans dealt with but also small symbols that are

meaningful to Asians like when Rachel jokes about Asians and lactose intolerance. In her own words, Wendy (P23) described how she used the film's relatability to educate her parents:

I was trying to explain to my Caucasian parents that all Asians are lactose intolerant and they didn't believe me until they saw this movie. And then when (Rachel's) mom was saying that although she's Chinese, she grew up in the United States so that in a way makes her different. I can relate to that because I'm Korean, born in Korea, but grew up basically all my life here, so I can relate to feeling different.

Wendy (P23) noted that her parents did not understand how she felt different from them but that watching the film with her helped them see exactly the ways that Wendy (P23) previously described.

One participant also interacted with the film's messages after watching it the first time. Janet (P22) (Korean American) had an emotional experience while watching *Crazy Rich Asians* because of the Asian representation throughout the film. In this example, Janet (P22) described how the film impacted her emotionally:

I liked the dumpling-making scene. I'm not (Chinese), I'm Korean, but we still make it. We all sit around the table, and it just felt so familiar. I didn't think I'd see that kind of scene in an American movie. And so that kind of stuck out to me. I'm not the one who would typically cry when I see TV shows or movies. I just kind of got tears in my eyes, not because of the storyline or the plot, but just about how far we've come with representation and the fact that I can see an all-Asian cast, it's just so interesting. Then afterwards, I looked up the actresses or actors' names to see last names that I was so used to... It's just, it's just really nice and different.

This quote from Janet (P22) described how an Asian American was impacted significantly even when they knew to expect an all-Asian cast. Janet (P22) was not sure what an all-Asian cast in Hollywood meant to her until she actually was able to see it with her own eyes in theatres. This example is a form of edutainment because through accurate depictions of Asians, it taught Janet (P22) that seeing Asians and Asian Americans in mainstream media should be normal. This brings up the next theme that is considered a negotiated code from participants, which is how participants responded to what other films or television shows they were reminded of after re-watching clips from *Crazy Rich Asians*.

Comparison of Media's Racial Representation

One way for people to negotiate the meaning of encoded messages is when they compare the messages to their previous knowledge and experiences. After re-watching scenes from the film, participants were specifically asked, "What other films or television shows have you seen that have similar characters or messages?" The three most prominent responses included mentioning international films or television shows from Asian countries, films and television shows with Asian characters in the U.S., and specifically relating messages in *Crazy Rich Asians* to messages in *Black Panther* (2018).

Some participants responded to this question by comparing *Crazy Rich Asians* to international film and television. For example, some participants of South Asian descent would relate themes and stories from *Crazy Rich Asians* to Bollywood. Paul (P13) (Indian American)'s quote best exemplifies how South Asian American participants related the film's messages to their previous knowledge of Bollywood films. He was reminded by the film's relationship between Eleanor and Rachel because it resembled a common relationship in Bollywood films between a mother-in-law figure and a son's girlfriend or daughter-in-law. He is reminded

because he commonly saw in Bollywood films that a mother would not like her son's girlfriend because she does not speak the language, or she does not understand their family's culture. He was also reminded of Bollywood films because of how the film presented the grandmother as the matriarch of the family. Paul (P13) valued the portrayal of Ah-Ma and said this about a scene with her, "Another thing I could see in an Indian movie is how respected the grandma is inside the house. When she walks in the room, people get up. I could see this coming straight out of an Indian movie." Another comparison to international film and television came from East Asian participants who noticed commonalities with the film and Korean television soap opera shows known as K-dramas. During the month that some of these interviews were conducted, U. S. awards shows such as The Golden Globes and The Oscars were going on. East Asian participants pointed out the significance of the South Korean thriller *Parasite* (2019). Participants who compared *Parasite* to *Crazy Rich Asians* were acknowledging specifically Asian representation and the types of people who would watch these films. They felt that both films broke down barriers in some ways. When Clark (P28) (Taiwanese American) was asked what film and television shows *Crazy Rich Asians* reminded him of, he immediately thought of *Parasite*. He considered *Parasite* and *Crazy Rich Asians* to have an influence in the U.S. because he believed they both were intentionally breaking barriers in Hollywood. These examples exemplify this theme as a negotiated code because Paul's (P13) comparison to his previous knowledge of Bollywood tropes impacted how he interpreted Rachel and Eleanor's relationship in *Crazy Rich Asians*, and Clark's (P28) example of comparison shows that his association with films shown in the U.S. with an all-Asian cast are significant in how Asian representation is changing. In fact, several participants were reminded of *Parasite* when asked the aforementioned question. Sarah (P24) (Korean American) negotiated with who she considered *Crazy Rich Asians*' intended

audience to be by comparing the film to *Parasite*. She considered that South Korean films are intended for an Asian audience, but *Parasite* was able to go beyond an Asian audience and hit mainstream Hollywood. Sarah (P24) explained how because of how Asians were portrayed differently in *Parasite* and *Crazy Rich Asians*, she believed, “The film *Crazy Rich Asians* was meant for an American audience.

When relating the film to media in Hollywood, participants' responses were similar by mentioning one television show and movies that have Asian leads or Asian stories. The movies included were *Always Be My Maybe* (2019) and *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (2018), which are both only available for streaming through Netflix. The one television show with Asian cast members and Asian stories was *Fresh Off the Boat* (2015-2020), which always stars Constance Wu. One participant had difficulty thinking of a current example in media. Meredith (P8), a 20-year-old Filipina, had difficulty thinking of a film or television show that she was reminded of, but then she eventually remembered one. She was excited when she was finally able to think of an Asian character in media, but it was not a television show that she would watch. Meredith (P8) replied, “Not off of the top of my head. Oh! ‘*Grey’s Anatomy*.’ I mean I don’t actually watch it, but I know that there’s an Asian doctor.” Meredith’s excitement over remembering an Asian character on television is significant to this study because it exemplifies how infrequent Asian representation in media is especially because the *Grey’s Anatomy* character that she references is Christina Yang played by Sandra Oh, who has not appeared in the show since 2014. This example emphasizes the importance of the process of comparison in order to interpret what a message means. For Meredith (P8), this meant that she interpreted *Crazy Rich Asians*’ representation of Asians as very influential because she sees it so little in today’s media.

One Hollywood film that stood out to participants when they were asked what other forms of media *Crazy Rich Asians* make them think about was the film, *Black Panther* (2018), a Marvel Comics film about a Black superhero directed by a Black director, Ryan Coogler. Several participants noted similarities in how both films impacted communities of color in the U.S. Five participants recognized that part of *Crazy Rich Asians*' and *Black Panther*'s success was due to the cultural significance both films had especially for Y'vonne (P6) (Chinese American) and Winston (P3) (Chinese/White American). Both Y'vonne (P6) and Winston (P3) found *Black Panther*'s portrayal of Black culture to be beautiful and respectful. Y'vonne (P6) considered that because *Black Panther* and *Crazy Rich Asians* were both released in the same year, 2018, it was natural to compare the films' significance to their respective cultures. Winston (P3) believed that *Black Panther* portrayed specifically an African culture that has not been seen commonly in mainstream media, and he connected this to *Crazy Rich Asians*' portrayal of an Asian culture. His explanation of why he compared the films to each other emphasized how comparison of *Crazy Rich Asians* to other media is important to how an Asian American interprets portrayals in the film.

One participant in particular, Nico (P29) (Vietnamese American), actually watched *Crazy Rich Asians* because he was inspired by *Black Panther*'s impact on Black Americans. When asked to elaborate on how *Black Panther* played a role in his intention to watch *Crazy Rich Asians*, Nico(P29) said,

The reason why I saw *Crazy Rich Asians* was because I really wanted to see what that movie was doing to represent Asian people. I remember when I saw *Black Panther*, I believe the entire movie was of African and African American descent as far as the actors are concerned. *Crazy Rich Asians* was sort of similar in the sense where there's a lot of

representation for one ethnic group as far as Asians are concerned. Not everyone in the movie theatre was Asian. Especially because I knew nothing about the story, I knew nothing about the book, I sort of just caught on with the movie just because there were a lot of Asian people in it.

This example from Nico (P29) reflects how powerful comparing one's previous experiences and knowledge can be to how they interpret intended messages in media. Because Nico (P29) believed *Black Panther* was empowering for Black Americans with the positive portrayal of Black stories, he interpreted that *Crazy Rich Asians* intended to do the same with Asian American audiences. For several participants, their use of comparing racial depictions in media to *Crazy Rich Asians* contributed to how they negotiated their interpretation of Asian and Asian American representation throughout the film. This act of comparison in some ways contributed to the next negotiated coded theme, culture clash. Culture clash was the most prominent theme within the negotiated code.

Culture Clash

This theme reflects participant responses when specifically asked after re-watching scenes from the film, "What do you think is the main message of this scene?" and "How, if at all, does this scene remind you of your own life?" Responses are also to these specific questions that asked about the film overall, "What do you think you think of the portrayal of Asians and Asian Americans in this film?" and "What made you feel connected to or a part of this film?" Several participants related to Rachel's Asian American identity because of the clash between her Asian identity and American identity. When *Crazy Rich Asians*' Rachel felt rejected because of her Americanness, participants compared the rejection to their own experiences as an Asian American. Specifically, participants revealed during the interview that they experienced culture

clash while growing up in that they did not feel fully accepted in the Asian culture or the American (read white) culture. These experiences left participants feeling as if they are in-between cultures or that they do not belong in either Asian or American cultures. Kim (P10) (Indian American) and Heather (P9) (Filipina American) reflected on how the film's depiction of Rachel's in-between culture reminded them of how they were unaccepted as Asian Americans while growing up. Kim (P10) noted that she felt more disconnected from her Indian culture and Hindu religion than other Indians, which made her feel less Indian than them, but she also pointed out that because of her Indianness, it made her feel different than other Americans. Heather (P9) described similar feelings during her upbringing because she remembered feelings of having to participate in Filipino culture growing up but did not feel included in American culture because no one could relate to her. This feeling made it hard for Heather (P9) to relate to either of the cultures she identified with. Kim (P10) and Heather's (P9) examples emphasize how one way to interpret culture clash is the comparison to experiences of feeling unaccepted from Asian and American culture.

Another participant who was reminded of her own experiences with culture clash as a child was Wendy (P23). In response to the scene with Rachel and Eleanor playing mahjong with each other, Wendy (P23) spoke on her initial thoughts and feelings about re-watching the scene and how it portrayed a clash between Asian and American cultures. In this quote, Wendy (P23) described how this scene was the most significant to her as an Asian American, and explained how she felt while re-watching the scene during the interview:

Intense. It's a very emotionally loaded scene. I almost started crying. I love this movie so much. It's just very emotionally charged. Rachel can barely hold her emotions in, she's almost crying. I think it's also significant to the message of the movie. It's repeating over

and over again, she (Eleanor) literally said, “our own kind of people.” She called her, “a foreigner” and “an American.” She kept using the pronouns “we” versus “you.” I think it’s just really overall summing up the message of the movie.

Wendy (P23) identifies strongly with Rachel’s character in this scene and focuses on the language that Eleanor uses to create a divide between her and Rachel. Her description of what she felt while re-watching it showed that she so strongly identified with Rachel that it felt Eleanor’s message was directed towards her. For Wendy (P23), who is transracially adopted by a White family, she specifically related to Rachel identifying as an outsider. Her interpretation of a culture clash between Asian and American cultures was different from other participants because it was directly rooted in race and not just culture. Here, Wendy (P23) continued her experience with culture clash and described a significant childhood experience that she was reminded of while watching *Crazy Rich Asians*:

Rachel feels like an outsider looking in. I feel like that a lot too. When I was a kid, I think seeing Asians was my favorite because they had black hair. At the time, I felt like they looked a lot like me because I’m adopted, and I have two Caucasian parents. When I was super young, we lived in a predominantly Caucasian area. They (parents) used to say that whenever we had Asian people visit our church sometimes, my brother (also adopted from Korea) and I would always stare at them. In the crowd of people, we could pick them out and stare at them, which was weird. I’m not sure if that’s a thing, but we both did it.

Wendy’s (P23) experiences with culture clash felt validated when she watched Rachel throughout the film. It was because of her previous experiences that she was able to interpret the messages of culture clash as accurate. Heather (P9), Kim (P10), and Wendy’s (P23) experiences

reflected how Asian Americans experienced a divide between Asians and Asian Americans while they were children in America. In acknowledgement of a divide between Asians and Asian Americans, Lawrence (P25), a participant born in South Korea who moved to the U.S. ten years ago at 11-years-old, provided his perspective about Koreans born in America and the feelings of culture clash. His perspective of Koreans born in the U.S. is similar to Eleanor's view of Rachel in *Crazy Rich Asians*, but he discussed how media's portrayal had a significant impact of how he believed Koreans born in America view culture clash:

I was raised as a Korean and I'm still a Korean, not Korean American. I was old enough to learn most of the Korean traditional culture and all that stuff. I cannot relate (to Rachel) since I was raised in Korean. A lot of my friends who are Korean American... they're not used to Korean culture like respecting and speaking differently towards the elders. They're American but see themselves as Korean. There's this whole conflict where people say, "Oh, you're not fully American. You look different." And other people say, "Oh, you look Korean, but you are different inside." So that's where the kids are having a mental issue with identity; then there's no media portrayal showing them, "Oh this is a Korean American or Asian American guy."

Lawrence's (P25) perspective on the culture clash between Koreans and Korean Americans was significant because it provided a different perspective than the other Asian American participants. Because Lawrence's (P25) Asian American social identity is considered a member of the Asian diaspora, his insight is helpful in understanding how an Asian and Asian American culture clash is perceived from someone who identifies more strongly with his Asian identity.

One participant who expressed how *Crazy Rich Asians* revealed feelings of being in-between cultures was Charlie (P20) (Korean American). Charlie (P20) expressed that he had

struggled a lot in his life with his Asian American identity because he felt like he did not fit in anywhere or with any one community. In this example, Charlie (P20) talked through why Asian Americans are unaccepted in the U.S.:

This movie emphasized that Asian Americans kind of don't have a place but where we fit in except with ourselves. Mainland people see us as foreigners then American people don't see us as American. The strange thing in America is we always need that tag in front *African-American*, *Asian-American*, *Spanish-American*. We don't say we're just American. We just say we're Asian-American Americana. So that's weird. We don't fit in anywhere.

Charlie (P20) internalized *Crazy Rich Asians*' message of culture clash significantly because Rachel's feelings of an outsider reflected his own struggles of not fitting-in in the U.S. as an Asian American. His interpretation of culture clash in the film best reflects the overall sentiment from this study's Asian American participants perspective of how *Crazy Rich Asians* accurately portrayed their experiences with culture clash in the U.S. Culture clash as a theme that was considered a negotiated message in the film is important because it was the most prominent message that the Asian American participants related to, specifically when culture clash was encoded through scenes with Rachel. The next set of themes include how participants communicated about Asian representation and messages such as culture clash to others.

Communication Approaches

This next section will address findings related to the second research question asking about Asian Americans' approach to communicating about *Crazy Rich Asians* and Asian and/or Asian American media representation. The following findings are participant responses organized by intraethnic communication, intraracial communication, and interracial

communication. This theme represents participants' responses when specifically asked, "What conversations did you have with others about this film?" and "How, if at all, do this scene remind you of anything from your own life?" after each stimuli clip. These responses were guided in how participants communicated with others about *Crazy Rich Asians* but continued with how they generally communicated with others.

Intraethnic Communication

This theme represents responses from participants that reflect their experiences of communicating with other members of their own Asian ethnic community (ex. a Korean American participant communicating with another Korean person). Participants did not specifically address communicating about the film with people of the same ethnicity, but they would have conversations about the film with members of their family. For example, Danielle (P26) (Laotian/White American) wanted to talk to her extended family about the film because she felt the representation of an Asian family in *Crazy Rich Asians* was relatable and similar to her experiences as a Laotian American. In this next quote, Danielle (P26) excitedly described her conversations with her Laotian family in a positive way:

I've definitely talked about it with my cousins. We've all watched it and we just crack up with each other because we're like, "That scene is – that's our family!" and "That person, that's like aunt so-and-so," or "This person is like someone from our family!" It's definitely that we watched it, and we talked about it as if it's our family.

Danielle (P26) felt that approaching her family to talk about the film was natural because the storylines and portrayals were similar to her own family's interactions. She enjoyed having a movie that portrayed a family similar to her own Laotian family, which made it easy for her to talk about themes in the movie with them.

For some participants, when they were asked who they communicated about *Crazy Rich Asians*' racial representation with, they responded that it was mostly friends of the same ethnicity. This then reminded the participants about how they already communicate with others in the same ethnicity. For example, Quinton (P2) (Chinese American) film's theme of cultural divide between Asians and Asian American to his own experience of how that divide impacted his own communication with members of his Chinese ethnicity. Here, he took a moment to explain how Chinese Americans and Chinese individuals distinguished one another where he grew up in the U.S. In his own words, Quinton (P2) broke down the phrase "ABC" and how it is used among Chinese people:

They (Asian Chinese) identify us as "ABC," American Born Chinese. They like to call us that. I was talking to an international student and he asked me, "Are you an ABC?" So, there's two types of identifications, (1) American Born Chinese (ABC) and there's (2) international from China. Me? I'm "ABC".

This quote is an example of how intraethnic communication was used between Asian Chinese and Chinese Americans in order to identify one another. Quinton (P2) used these identifiers to make clear how Chinese Americans and Chinese Asians see each other differently, which he related to the divide between Rachel and Nick's family in *Crazy Rich Asians*. Quinton (P2) claimed his identity as an "ABC" with pride and welcomed others to refer to him and other Chinese Americans as an "ABC." Similarly, Hannah (P14), an Indian American, mentioned how she has heard "ABCD," American-Born Confused Desi used among Asian Indians and Indian Americans when asked who she talked to about *Crazy Rich Asians*' racial representation. After she said that she chose to talk to her friends who are also considered "ABCD," she clarified how "Desi" means "person who is South Asian." Even though the term includes "confused," Hannah

(P14) expressed how her Indian American friends and she used it lovingly with one another. For other participants, the film reminded them of the difficulties or hesitations they experienced when communicating with people of the same ethnicity.

Unlike Quinton (P2) and Hannah (P14), Clark (P28) (Taiwanese American) did not have immediate feelings of pride to talk about *Crazy Rich Asians* with others of the same ethnicity. Instead, he describes how he actually does not talk to many Chinese or Taiwanese people outside of his family. In reference to a scene where Nick's family asked Rachel if she spoke Cantonese, Clark (P28) felt they used Cantonese to exclude Rachel when she said she did not understand the Cantonese language. Even though Clark (P28) speaks Mandarin fluently, he found speaking Mandarin in public to be something he tries to avoid. When asked to elaborate on this approach of intraethnic communication, he noted, "I hear in school a lot of Chinese people talking, and I can hear their accents straight up. I'm like, "Oh wow. I would never be caught dead speaking Mandarin out in public." Clark (P28) suggested that speaking Mandarin could be interpreted negatively, and he was not eager to have those conversations with other Chinese or Taiwanese people. Dana (P16), who is a bi-racial Japanese/White American, was similarly reminded of how it was difficult for her to speak Japanese with other Japanese people. She interpreted the scene as Nick's family assuming Rachel did not know Cantonese because she is American. When asked how this scene reminded her own life, she described how communicating with people of her same ethnicity made her feel more of a divide. Similar to Clark (P28) knowing Mandarin, Dana (P16) is fluent in Japanese, but she had reservations about speaking Japanese outside of her home: She noted:

Rachel kind of reminded me of myself in a way because I could tell that she felt a little uncomfortable at times and out of place, which I definitely have felt before when I was in

Japan. Yes, I can speak it and understand it but not to the extent that everyone else can. So, sometimes I would get really lost, and I don't know what they're talking about. It's overwhelming.

Dana's (P16) experience with intraethnic communication has made her hesitant to have conversations with other Japanese people. While the quotes used in this theme were mostly describing general intraethnic communication and not how participants intraethnically communicated about the film, it exemplifies how Asian Americans' everyday approaches to intraethnic communication influenced how they interpreted the intraethnic communication portrayed throughout the film. Some Asian American participants, who were hesitant to have intraethnic conversations about general topics expressed the same hesitance when it came to communicating about *Crazy Rich Asians* and racial representation.

Intraracial Communication

This theme represents responses from participants that reflect their experiences with communicating with other members of Asian descent, whether it is of their own ethnic background or not. Some participants felt more comfortable talking about the film with other Asian people than with non-Asians. For a few participants, re-watching scenes from *Crazy Rich Asians* brought up difficult experiences with cultural clash. Winston (P3) (Chinese/White American) grew up without feeling a part of his Asian or Chinese culture. When he got to college, he sought out other Asian communities even when his own Chinese community did not have an organization on campus. He felt that being a part of any Asian community on campus would make him feel closer to his Asian identity. According to Winston (P3), because he grew up in a predominantly White neighborhood, he felt that he was not introduced to a lot of the Chinese culture. When he joined Asian American Student Association (AASA) and Vietnamese

Student Association (VSA) in college, he felt that he got to learn a lot more about not just Chinese but Asian culture in general. His positive experience with other Asian Americans in college gave him an opportunity to talk with members of AASA and VSA about the racial representation in *Crazy Rich Asians*. Specifically, because his intraracial communication about general topics has been a positive experience, it made him comfortable enough to talk approach communicating about the film intraracially.

Some participants like Charlie (P20) and Quinton (P2) had negative experiences communicating within their race and ethnicity. When asked about whether they talked to Asians and/or non-Asians about *Crazy Rich Asians*, both brought up derogatory terms used intraracially that influenced why they felt hesitant to communicate with other Asians about the film and racial representation. Charlie (P20) mentioned his feelings toward people who he considered “FOB.” The term “FOB” or Fresh Off the Boat is a popular derogatory term used by Asian Americans to label Asian immigrants who do not assimilate to American cultural norms. When asked to elaborate why he did not talk to other Asians about the film, Charlie (P20) noted that when he was in high school, he did not want to interact with anyone who was a “FOB.” He elaborated and said this, “They didn’t want to interact with us. They used to really actually piss me off because they just seem super arrogant and it’s like “Why? You’re in America now.” You have no reason to be arrogant.” Charlie’s (P20) feelings of frustration stemmed from the thought that the Asians in his high school who were not assimilated to American culture thought they were better than the high school’s Asian Americans. Charlie (P20) used FOB” to express animosity towards Asian immigrants, and he reflected on how his interactions with them have primarily been negative. His response is an expression of resentment from his previous intraracial interactions and why he still felt hesitant to communicate with other Asians.

Calling an Asian American “banana” is another derogatory term that has been used to refer to an Asian American who appears Asian or yellow on the outside, but they are white on the inside. Quinton (P2) recalled a few bad memories with being called a “banana,” but has come to find it as a term of endearment with his other Asian American friends. Because of his negative experiences with labels from non-Asian Americans, he decided on a way to reclaim the term and use it in a loving way among friends. Quinton (P2) explained, “I watched the preview of the movie, and I kind of got the feeling it was a movie really aimed towards Asian Americans a.k.a. bananas. I always get called that all the time.” For Quinton (P2), intraracially communicating with other Asian Americans about racial representation or the film was not an issue because he felt *Crazy Rich Asians* was for Asian Americans; however, he felt some hesitancy intraracially communicating with Asians who are not American. Using the terms “FOB” and “banana” are two examples of previous experiences that Asian Americans have had when communicating intraracially. For Charlie (P20) and Quinton (P2), their negative intraracial interactions with non-American Asians impacted how they communicate about media related to race.

More often than not, when it came to discussions about the film, several participants felt most comfortable when they talked to people of the same race or ethnicity. They felt that other Asian Americans would be able to understand the same cultural undertones as they did. Kim (P10) (Indian American) pointed out a sentiment that was shared with most of the other participants. When asked why she only talked about *Crazy Rich Asians* with Asian people she said, “Well, because they’re the same race as me.” Many participants had not yet realized that their conversations about the film were with mostly other Asians, and therefore, they had not yet considered why that was the case. Janet (P22) (Korean American) reflected on the possible reason why that was the case for her. When asked why she chose to communicate with other

Asians about the film, she explained that, “I guess because we understood it on a level that other people maybe couldn’t.” Janet (P22) described how when she talked with her Asian American friends about the film, they pointed out how detailed and accurate it was for Asian representation. She noted, “it was like we got down to the details and each scene and what it meant to us and how we felt like it did us justice.” Janet’s (P22) explanation of why she approached intraracial communication to talk about the film emphasizes how Asian Americans want to be portrayed accurately in media and that Asian representation matters.

Lizzy (P7), a Chinese/Indonesian American female, took an opportunity to talk to her friends about her new favorite movie and recommended it to those who had feelings of shame related to their racial identities. Lizzy (P7) has felt shame herself about being Asian but was able to find ethnic pride in this film. Here she described in detail her conversation with one of her Asian American friends and how the movie impacted them:

I’ve told them that it’s one of my favorite movies and I feel like it represents Asians pretty well. My friend Katie, she’s half Vietnamese and half Taiwanese. She told me that she had that same feeling of “I wish I wasn’t Asian.” And after I watched the movie, I recommended the movie to her. She watched it, and she hadn’t realized that so many people felt the same way and it kind of connected her more with her Asian American identity.

Lizzy’s (P7) decision to communicate about the film intraracially was impacted by her interest in seeing other Asian Americans feel pride about their racial and ethnic identity. She specifically talked with other Asian Americans for the purpose of recommending it to those who felt shame in the Asian identity. Lizzy’s (P7) reason for recommending the film exemplifies how an Asian American approached intraracial communication in order to empower another Asian American

and feel included in a community. The quotes included in this theme were chosen because they best exemplified the different approaches that the Asian American participants used to communicate intraracially. The next theme of communication approaches is focused on how Asian American participants communicated about *Crazy Rich Asians* and racial representation with non-Asians and non-Asian Americans.

Interracial Communication

This theme represents responses from participants that reflect their own experiences with communicating with non-Asians and non-Asian Americans about *Crazy Rich Asians* and racial representation in media. Participants discussed interracial communication when they were specifically asked questions about what conversations they had about *Crazy Rich Asians*. While most participants talked in-depth about the film with other Asians, some participants describe the differences in communication with non-Asians. For some, having conversations with other people of color about the movie occurred because they felt they could understand some of the cultural themes. This was evidenced when Danielle (P26) and Meredith (P8) shared how their conversations went with a boyfriend and a close girlfriend. For Danielle (P26), “I talked to my boyfriend about it. He’s Hispanic, and he kind of can relate to it. The ways that Hispanic people are also huge in their culture with tradition. He also can laugh with me because when they’re making food, he’s like, ‘Oh yeah, we do that too!’” Danielle (P26) felt comfortable talking about the values of Asian culture she saw in *Crazy Rich Asians* with her boyfriend because she felt his Hispanic culture had similarities to her Asian culture. For Meredith (P8), she felt her friend’s experiences as a person of color would help her understand the Asian American experience more than one of her White friends. When asked who she talked to about *Crazy Rich Asians* with, Meredith (P8) said, “One of my closest friends, she’s... there’s only one that’s African

American, but I think they thought they had a clear understanding of what it's like to have Asian culture." This example from Meredith (P8) emphasizes that when Asian Americans communicate interracially, they may generally approach other people of color with a sense of kinship because they are also not part of the dominant race in the U.S.

Overall, most participants reported that they refrained from conversations about the film and racial media representation with White friends and/or White family. There was a general consensus that having conversations with White people about the film and race was the most difficult for them. When they did have conversations about the film, the discussion mostly surrounded whether the movie was enjoyable or not and not about race. Justin (P17) (Japanese/White American) pointed out a specific moment in the film that resonated with him personally and was an example of why he essentially avoided conversations with his White friends. He noted:

I talked with my friends about it and I couldn't really relate with a lot of them... Like the dumpling making, they didn't make dumplings when they were kids. But I mean with all of the regular story arc and movie stuff, they're like, "Yeah, that was a good movie."

When Justin (P17) explained what his conversations were like with his White friends, he had not realized why he refrained from talking to them about the film's messages that resonated personally with his Asian identity.

Several other participants had similar feelings where their conversations with White people did not include cultural or racial topics embedded in the movie. For these participants, many of them expressed they did not want to talk to White people about the film because they did not think they would understand or recognize the Asian cultural messages. For example, for Quinton (P2), he felt that his White friends would not understand the messages of cultural divide

that Asian Americans experience. He said about his White friends, “They didn’t really understand the cultural division between Asian and Asian American, but that’s just them though.” Rather, he said those friends would give a basic comment about the film overall and say, “Oh hahaha! It’s so funny.” This is an indication that some participants believe that White people do not negotiate the film’s encoded messages the same way Asian Americans do. For example, when asked why they did want to talk to White people about the film, Danielle (P26) (Laotian/White American), Lizzy (P7) (Chinese/Indonesian), and Janet (P22) (Korean American) all responded that they do not think White people could relate to *Crazy Rich Asians* the same way that Asians or Asian Americans relate to the film. Danielle (P26) said, “I don’t want to say uncultured, but they definitely don’t get it... There are certain things that they could relate to, but I feel in general they don’t really relate to it and they’re just kind of watching.” Lizzy (P7) described her hesitance was mostly due to White people not understanding the expectations put on Asians, especially Asian Americans. She said, “I don’t think they really realized how sometimes the culture is kind of different. Whereas (in Asian culture) there’s a lot expected, there’s a lot to be given up.” Janet (P22) was a participant who engaged in interracial communication with her White friends, but she expressed how her conversations with her White friends differed from her previously mentioned conversation with her Asian American friends. When asked what her conversations about *Crazy Rich Asians* with her White friends were like, Janet (P22) said, “I guess when I talked about it with my non-Asian (White) friends, it was just the basic plot line about how rich they were and how amazing their parties and life is and this plotline of the story.” These quotes are examples of how Asian American participants felt prepared to talk about the film with White people in a very general discussion about movies, but that they were not interested in those conversations because they specifically wanted to talk

about the cultural and racial significance in the film, which they did not feel comfortable talking about with White friends.

Lisa (P30) (Vietnamese American) is one participant who actually used the film as a way to have a conversation with her White roommate about her experiences as an Asian American. She explained how she invited her roommate to watch *Crazy Rich Asians* with her sister and her, and she felt that it was impactful watching the film with one of her White friends. Lisa (P30) used the interview as an opportunity to reflect on how her conversation with her roommate was a way to show and teach her about being Asian American. Lisa (P30) stated that her roommate was excited to watch *Crazy Rich Asians* and had similar emotional reactions while watching together. Because Lisa (P30) thought Asian representation was so little seen in Hollywood, she thought it was important to talk with her roommate about why *Crazy Rich Asians* was so significant for Asian Americans and racial representation. After watching it together, she approached her roommate to talk about the accurate Asian representation. Lisa's (P30) description of her conversation shows that she had an engaging and meaningful interracial conversation with her roommate because she felt her roommate was being open-minded. Lisa (P30) described her conversation and said, "She (roommate) told me that she really enjoyed seeing so much culture that she didn't know about. She was like, 'Oh, really? Is that really how you make dumplings?' And I was like, 'Yeah, this is how we do it.' I even talked to her about being born in America compared to being born somewhere else, and she said, 'I never knew that was something that you guys struggled with.' I told her, 'Yeah, it's a lot of little things that Asian Americans struggle with that they put it in this movie.'" Lisa (P30) felt that *Crazy Rich Asians* provided Asian Americans a platform and opportunity to talk about race in an open-minded space.

Similar to Lisa (P30), Wendy (P23) used this film to educate others about her race and struggles as an Asian American. She thought the film provided an opportunity to have a meaningful interracial conversation about her Asian identity with her parents. After watching *Crazy Rich Asians*, she wanted to watch the film again with her White parents as a way to talk to them. Showing her parents Rachel's struggle as an Asian American gave her a platform to convey her own struggles she has dealt with. Wendy (P23) said that,

I made my mom watch it with me. I just really wanted her to understand. Because sometimes you know how people say, 'Whatever you're dealing with, your parents have dealt with the exact same thing.' Well, they've never dealt with being a person of color growing up. So sometimes we just have this border between us. So, I genuinely thought that making her watch his movie would help a little bit because I related to Rachel so much.

For Wendy (P23), she did not express the same hesitance to interracial communication with White people as most of the participants did. Her experience was unique because she does not have an Asian parent who taught her or showed her what it meant to be Asian in the U.S. Instead, watching *Crazy Rich Asians* portrayed how she felt as an Asian American and wanted to teach her parents what it meant for her to be an Asian in the U.S.

The categories discussed in this chapter included quotes from participants who best exemplified each theme. The findings from this study were chosen based on how participants decoded the main messages of *Crazy Rich Asians* and how they chose to communicate about those messages. This next chapter will be a discussion of these themes and how they fit within this study's research questions.

Chapter Five

Discussion of Analysis

The primary purpose of this study was to explore, from the perspective of Asian Americans, the perceptions of positive racial media representation through *Crazy Rich Asians* and communication about it with other Asian Americans. Findings from this study are consistent with research on CRT (Crenshaw et al., 1995) and the encoding and decoding theory (Hall, 1973). This chapter focuses on the summary of this study's major findings, how these findings contribute to CRT, and the implications of this study. Interpretations of the major findings of this study will be organized in the order of the research questions.

Asian American Ethnic Identities' Influence on Decoding

RQ1a asked, "What influences do they Asian American participants' ethnic identities have on interpretation of the *Crazy Rich Asians* film?" This study found that, in general, the ethnic identity of the Asian American participants did impact how they interpreted *Crazy Rich Asians*. Participants' ethnicities had an influence on what messages stood out to them as culturally significant to their racial or ethnic culture. Specifically, the film's portrayal of Asian culture was focused on elements of Chinese Singaporean and Chinese American culture; therefore, Chinese American participants dominantly decoded messages more than any of the other participants. Two major findings of how Asian American ethnic identities influenced interpretation of the film are (1) how strongly participants were able to see themselves represented in *Crazy Rich Asians* and (2) what Asian cultural representation participants recognized in their own ethnic culture.

This study found that participants who identify with Southeast Asian (e.g. participants identify as Filipina/o, Indonesian, Laotian, Thai, and Vietnamese) and South Asian (e.g. participants identify as Bangladeshi, Indian, and Pakistani) ethnicities felt *Crazy Rich Asians* represented East Asian bodies and not their bodies more than participants who identified as East Asian (e.g. participants identified as Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Taiwanese). While most participants related to Rachel's Asian American identity, only East Asian participants felt Rachel represented their physical characteristics. This finding is reflected in the oppositional code theme because, while the film encodes messages of positive representation of Asians and Asian Americans, some participants wanted to see more Asians with dark skin in *Crazy Rich Asians*. This is evident in the director's intention to tell a Chinese American story (Chu, 2018); however, this points to a symptom of a larger problem existing in Hollywood that was previously mentioned. While *Crazy Rich Asians* is an American film created by Chinese Americans for an Asian American audience, it in some ways still presents Asian representation that is of the interest of mainstream or White audiences. By showing primarily East Asians and East Asian Americans who are considered thin and beautiful, *Crazy Rich Asians*, in some ways, is still projecting the mainstream image of how Asians and Asian Americans are expected to look in Hollywood. This finding contributes a clearer understanding of how the Asian American identity is more diverse than it is typically portrayed in media.

For all participants in this study, they believed that the story being told was about Asians and Asian Americans from the perspective of Chinese culture. Understanding the storytelling is framed by a Chinese American experience is an example of successful dominant decoding, which is attributed to the power of the director and author's counter-storytelling. Specifically, for Chinese American participants, they were able to identify very closely with cultural elements

throughout the film. Because Chinese American participants recognized the language, food, and cultural practices represented in the film as their own, they interpreted many messages as they were exactly intended by the director. This was evident in how Chinese American participants interpreted the mahjong scene as something positive, thus attributing their understanding to their ethnic identity. Many Chinese American participants either grew up learning and playing mahjong or have seen it portrayed in Chinese films and television shows; therefore, they related to Rachel's description of how mahjong teaches life skills because they were taught the same concept growing up as Chinese Americans. This understanding also shows that Chinese American participants felt that stories told in *Crazy Rich Asians*, in some ways, belonged to them and taught non-Chinese audiences about their culture. Based on existing literature on critical race storytelling, this finding illustrates the positive impact that Asian and Asian American counter-storytellers can have when re-presenting and challenging the Asian images that have been perpetually misrepresented in Hollywood by White storytellers (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). By telling a story about a Chinese American's experience, *Crazy Rich Asians* producers are actively working to break down the perception of a monolithic Asian identity.

It is also important to note that counter-storytelling works to educate audiences about racial misrepresentations in media (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Breaking the monolithic Asian identity through Asian representation in film is possible when audiences are able to understand what the intended messages are. This brings to question what participants believed were intended messages in *Crazy Rich Asians* and whether they influenced their perception of the film.

Asian Americans' and *Crazy Rich Asians*' Intended Messages

RQ1b asked, “What do participants believe the intended audience and intended (or encoded) messages in *Crazy Rich Asians* are?” This study found that some Asian American participants believed Asian Americans were the intended audience, and others believed all Americans, both Asian and non-Asian, were the intended audience. Regardless of who they believed the intended audience to be, all participants believed that one of the main intended (or encoded) messages was to educate audiences about Asian culture and show Asian representation is important. Participants who specifically believed Asian Americans were the target audience tended to believe one encoded message was to portray the clash of culture that Asian Americans experience with their racial or ethnic identities. A major finding of the study was that all Asian American participants were able to interpret the importance of inclusive Asian representation even through the depiction of one Asian ethnic identity, which in this case was Chinese.

One theme that was interpreted as a negotiated message was the film’s representation of culture clash between Asian and Asian American identities. This finding is built on Hall’s (1973) process of negotiated decoding because, in several ways, participants compared the message to their prior knowledge and experiences. Re-watching scenes from *Crazy Rich Asians* that portrayed Asian and Asian American culture clash was especially an emotional experience for several participants when they compared it to their own experiences of struggling with their racial or ethnic identity. This shared perception of a culture clash seems to indicate that *Crazy Rich Asians* reignited participants’ struggles with identity negotiation. This major finding is consistent with Eguchi’s (2013) analysis of Asian American identity negotiation, specifically when describing an Asian American’s contradicting identities of collectivism/interdependence (Asian identity) and individualism/independence (American identity). According to Eguchi

(2013), one's Asian American identity is continuously negotiated and renegotiated, which is apparent with the participants in this study. An example of a culture clash between collectivism and individualism occurs in *Crazy Rich Asians* when Eleanor tells Rachel that, because she is American, she only thinks about her own happiness. Messages of culture clash mirrored many of the feelings that participants reported experiencing internally as an Asian American due to feelings of culture clash and the thought that because they are American, they must only think of themselves. In line with one of the major tenets of CRT (Crenshaw et al., 1995), these results demonstrate how a person's racial identity is layered. When an Asian American with layered identities saw typically monolithic media portrayals of Asians, it diminished those layered identities and suggested that Asians are only accepted as the previously mentioned "authentic" Asian, which is the idea that there is one type of Asian based on "Orientalist cultural imaginings" (Ono & Pham, 2009, p. 53). Instead, what *Crazy Rich Asians* does is ask Asian Americans to renegotiate their identities but in a way that does not diminish their layered identities. In accordance with critical race's counter-storytelling, *Crazy Rich Asians* creates a relatable narrative that Asian Americans do not have to choose between the two identities. Instead, they should feel empowered by Rachel's acceptance of her layered identities. This finding suggests that Asian American participants are using media's representation of Asians and Asian Americans to understand their own racial and ethnic identities.

As stated previously, this film's representation of Asian Americans shown through a Chinese American's storyline broke the typical perception that there is a monolithic, authentic Asian. While participants' ethnicities did influence how they interpreted *Crazy Rich Asians*, it did not impact how they interpreted the overall message that media representations of Asians and Asian American matter. In fact, non-Chinese American participants felt that a culturally

significant representation of Chinese culture was still relatable to them as Asian Americans. For example, some non-Chinese American participants were unaware of mahjong prior to watching this film, and none of the non-Chinese American participants knew the rules or concepts of mahjong. Even though some participants did not understand how mahjong was played, all of the Asian American participants were able to accurately interpret that the use of mahjong in the film simultaneously communicated the tactics and strategies players typically use in the game and those that were used between Eleanor and Rachel during their conversation. This encoded message was successfully decoded due to Chu's effective directing skills and goal to portray conflict to audience members knowing they may not be familiar with mahjong. This research strongly supports the assumptions from the critical race frameworks of AsianCrit and critical race pedagogy that state the importance of portraying the intricacies of Asian American experiences and identities as a pedagogical tool for racial identity (Museus & Iftikar, 2013; Pollard, 2017; Rodríguez & Kim, 2018). The major finding that *Crazy Rich Asians* is a pedagogical tool for educating audiences about racial representation should be taken into account when considering how people talk about film and media representations. This next section will discuss how participants communicated about racial representation in *Crazy Rich Asians* as a form of pedagogy in their daily lives.

Asian Americans and Approaches to Communication about Racial Representation

This study's second research question asked, "What approaches do Asian American participants use to communicate about Asian and/or Asian American media representations intraethnically, intraracially, and interracially?" The major finding was that, while there was little to no difference in their intraethnic and intraracial communication, Asian American participants approached interracial communication less frequently and with more apprehension than the other

forms of interpersonal communication. When participants did communicate interracially about *Crazy Rich Asians*, a few of them used the film to teach their White family and White friends about their experiences as an Asian American. This finding about how Asian American participants approached communication interracially with White Americans can possibly be attributed to avoiding communication because of outgroup bias or the importance of using *Crazy Rich Asians* as a form of edutainment. The similarities in participants' communication approaches with those of the same ethnicity and same race can be explained by ingroup behavior in communication. Participants describe their approach to communicating intraethnically and intraracially in line with Tajfel et al.'s (1979) social identity theory and ingroup favoritism. For the purposes of this study, ingroup favoritism refers to Asian American participants having a preference for communicating about *Crazy Rich Asians* and racial representation with other Asians and Asian Americans over non-Asians. The common sentiment among Asian American participants who communicated in-depth about the film's Asian and Asian American representation involved the feeling that other Asians would not only understand the cultural significance in some messages, but they would also relate to and have experienced them as well. Participants used the film to relate to and connect with those who share similar racial and ethnic cultural values as them, which was clear when participants mostly recommended that and were encouraged by other Asian Americans to watch *Crazy Rich Asians*. This finding is an example of how Asian Americans want to talk about racial representation, but in a space where they feel accepted and comfortable with others like them. In fact, six participants stayed in the room after the interview concluded to continue talking with the interviewer about Hollywood's Asian representation and topics surrounding Asians in the U.S. Weeks following the interview, other participants were still so excited about the opportunity to share their experiences that they

reached out to the researcher via email to send articles and movie suggestions related to Asian representation in media. This is a clear example of Asian Americans wanting to be represented in media and communicate about them to others.

For several of the participants, Asian and Asian American media representation matters in a significant way; however, most of the participants shared that they refrained from communicating about Asian representations in *Crazy Rich Asians* with White Americans. These participants felt they would not understand the cultural components of the film that felt so relatable to Asian Americans. The fact that participants tended to only talk with a White person about the film in objective ways (i.e. whether they enjoyed it or not) is an example of Asian Americans viewing White people as outgroup members who do not share similarities in racial identity. This suggests that these specific Asian Americans are selecting avoidance approaches to interracial communication about racial representation. This finding is in line with other studies on Asian Americans' communication that found that they utilize this approach as a way of avoiding consequences of these difficult interactions, such as racial discrimination (Jun, 2012). For two participants with an assertive communication approach, *Crazy Rich Asians* motivated Lisa (P30) and Wendy (P23) enough to use the film as a form of edutainment with White people and engage interracially about their experience being an Asian American. *Crazy Rich Asians* provided the participants an opportunity to discuss racial topics that were previously difficult to articulate before they watched this film.

For Lisa (P30), a Vietnamese American, watching the film with her White roommate allowed her to point out the importance of racial representation in film and how Asians and Asian Americans are often left out of Hollywood. She attributed her ability to communicate with her roommate because she was receptive and open to having the conversation with Lisa (P30).

Although not explicitly stated in her interview, it is very likely that there was a considerable amount of trust between the women that allowed Lisa (P30) to feel vulnerable with her friend and share with her the identity struggles she has dealt with as an Asian American. This is but one example of the many potentially positive outcomes that may occur when audiences view film as a form of critical race pedagogy. In the case of Lisa (P30), *Crazy Rich Asians* helped her learn how to better process and understand her racial identity than prior to watching the film; it liberated her by challenging her to connect with the stories in *Crazy Rich Asians*.

For Wendy (P23), she too, used the film specifically with the intention to communicate interracially about her racial identity struggles in her family. She is a Korean American who was transracially adopted by White parents, and it is because of these two identities and her familial context that allowed her to strongly identify with multiple instances of the culture clash theme throughout the film. In order to address the racial divide that she felt between her White parents and her, Wendy (P23) asked them to watch *Crazy Rich Asians* in order to educate them about her experiences as a person of color. This is an excellent example of how accurate representations of race and ethnicity in media can empower people of color to speak up about their negative or confusing experiences related to race (Yosso, 2002). This major finding offers further evidence to the argument that those within and outside of communities of color gain a clearer understanding of racialized experiences and realities through counter-storytelling when done by people of color, thus fulfilling the goal of educating audiences about race. It is not always likely that Asian Americans will use film and media to talk with non-Asians about racial representation. Nevertheless, this is exactly a reason why it is important to highlight Asian and Asian American stories accurately. If Asian Americans have difficulties with interracial communication and centering their own racial identities in those interactions, then using films or

television shows might be an easier way to clearly articulate those experiences and it is a way to educate more easily.

Implications

As seen with other studies (Allahverdi & Farajiha, 2014; Espiritu, 2011; Yousman, 2013) that utilized Hall's (1973) encoding and decoding theory as a methodological framework, the results of this study support the theory's assumption that, when encoding mediated messages with an implied audience, it is likely the messages will be dominantly decoded. In other words, *Crazy Rich Asians'* encoded messages for an implied Asian American audience were successfully and accurately decoded by this study's Asian American participants. Asian Americans are one of the largest consumers of film and television with 82% of Asian Americans subscribing to multiple streaming services compared to 72% of the total U.S. population (Nielsen, 2020), and they make up 5.6% of the U. S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Their experiences with film are markedly different from White audiences in that White audiences have the privilege of experiencing the world and mass media through a non-raced lens. Moreover, people of color rarely see positive depictions of themselves in film and other forms of media, and when they do, it is usually those stories told by writers, producers, and actors who are of the same race that really resonate with them. Scholars and filmmakers alike would greatly benefit from research that further explores this mutually beneficial relationship because it would produce evidence that storytelling via a critical race framework is a powerful tool for helping researchers understand the production of messages intended for people of color. As seen with the findings, one way the encoding and decoding theory works with CRT in that understanding is with the application and use of counter-storytelling.

This study bolsters the argument for the use of counter-storytelling and other forms of critical race pedagogy to teach society about why racial representation in media is important and needs to be critiqued. The findings of how *Crazy Rich Asians*' positive portrayals of Asian Americans empowers Asian Americans to feel confident and proud about their racial identity is an example of power that exists within such films that center otherness in positive and affirming ways. Counter-storytelling literature often explores the critiquing of film and audience engagement. The findings in this study highlight how the use of counter-images emphasize one specific way counter-storytelling effectively challenges common racial misrepresentations. The director's use of counter-images confronts and challenges the controlling images that we typically see in Hollywood such as the hypersexualized Asian woman or the perpetual foreigner. *Crazy Rich Asians* is a positive and effective example of how a film can use counter-images to distance Asians and Asian Americans away from those controlling images. Counter-storytelling and counter-images are especially effective for one's interracial communication because those with limited interracial interactions often rely on media's racial representation to learn about people of color (Orbe & Harris, 2015). *Crazy Rich Asians* takes it one step further by telling a Chinese American story, which challenges the stereotypic authentic Asian. In this study, understanding the uniqueness of how Asian American participants' ethnicities impacted their positive perceptions of *Crazy Rich Asians* serves as an example of the usefulness of CRT vis-à-vis AsianCrit (Museus & Iftikar, 2013) in challenging the negative race and gendered images associated with the different ethnicities within this very diverse racial group.

AsianCrit was developed because of how race and racism are impacting Asian Americans in society (Museus & Iftikar, 2013). By providing an Asian American perspective on social justice, AsianCrit research is interested in how to break barriers put in place at the institutional

level as seen with the Harvard Asian Americans admission scandal (Dobson, 2018). The major finding of how Asian American participants used interracial communication to engage in racially sensitive topics with White people is an example of how AsianCrit should explore breaking barriers at the interpersonal level. Through such strategies as counter-storytelling in order to debunk controlling images in media (e.g. the authentic Asian), which *Crazy Rich Asians* clearly encourages as seen through these findings, some participants were empowered enough to engage in interracial interactions that they were previously apprehensive about. Communication barriers between Asian American participants how they approach discussions about race with White people could be due to their White friends and family not ever being in a position to think about race. Meaning, a barrier is created because whiteness is never a discussion for them. It is not necessarily important for White people to talk to their friends of color because they have never experienced racial discrimination, and therefore, never experienced communication barriers due to racial discrimination.

A practical implication of *Crazy Rich Asians* and how participants communicated about race and identity is that there is an identifiable need for Asian Americans to have multiple communication strategies available to help them manage interracial communication apprehension. Techniques would center around Asian Americans having effective interracial conversations about accurate racial representation post-viewing films or television shows with the purpose of improving one's intercultural communication competence. An example of accurate racial representation is seen in *Crazy Rich Asians*' portrayal of an Asian American's identity negotiation with an Asian and an American culture.

As evident from the findings, the necessity to depict a balance between the typically clashing Asian and American cultures speaks to the importance of Asian American media

activism for how Asian Americans identify with both cultures. Media activism is the fight to have specific cultures and cultural practices represented in media in order to be included within a nation that lacks accurate cultural depictions made by underrepresented groups (Lopez, 2016). Asian American media activism recognizes that media can be a tool for impacting social change in American society. Communicating interpersonally about accurate and inaccurate depictions as a form of social justice asks Asian American audiences to challenge the racial misrepresentations they see in media. When Asian Americans recognize the misrepresentation of their identity in film or any other media platform, they are able to bring attention to the issue even at the interpersonal level.

By communicating with others interpersonally about Asian misrepresentations in media, Asian Americans invite others to think about how misrepresentations influence audiences to have negative stereotypes about Asians and Asian Americans. Asian American audiences communicating with others about how they were impacted by a film is one way to expand edutainment. When research looks beyond the educational impact on the immediate viewer and explores how the viewer is encouraged to educate others, this strengthens the visual images used to educate about culture and race through film. Through this type of edutainment or activism, it creates a change in who typically acknowledges Asian misrepresentations by expanding to more people who challenge those negative portrayals. The contribution to media activism at the interpersonal level is specifically effective when it is taking place in interracial contexts. The recommendation for an interracial communication strategy for post-viewing conversations is one way to approach Asian American media activism in interracial interactions.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

This study is an investigation into what Asian Americans' perceptions were about *Crazy Rich Asians*' racial representation and how they communicated about it. *Crazy Rich Asians* was an important visual text to use to explore questions about Asian and Asian American representation in mass media. This study looked at *Crazy Rich Asians* because of the historical significance it has for Asian Americans in Hollywood and Asian American audiences in today's society such that the film was Hollywood's first all-Asian cast in 25 years to be in a feature film and the top grossing romantic comedy film in 10 years. *Crazy Rich Asians* showed that people want to see Asians and Asian Americans in Hollywood. The findings indicate that Asian American participants' ethnic identities do influence how they interpret racial representations in *Crazy Rich Asians*; regardless of who they believed the intended audience was, participants believed the main message of the film to be that Asian and Asian American representation matters. While this study observed little difference in how participants communicated with people of the same race and same ethnicity about racial representation, most described an avoidant approach to interracial interactions, with the exception of two participants who pointedly used the film as a point of discussion with whites with whom they were close, namely a friend and their adoptive parents.

Recently, the media, specifically in film, have been more conscious and proactive in addressing the issue of racial and ethnic representation of historically marginalized groups and the impact of these negative depictions on people of color (Borum Chattoo, 2018). Media

depictions in the U.S. have traditionally reserved lead roles and main stories for White characters; however, people of color are challenging the ways stories are being told in film and television shows. This is largely due to the impact of people of color's work in media activism and social justice (Lopez, 2016). The positive, ongoing changes that are happening in Hollywood's racial representation is evidence that people of color can have an influence on how they are being portrayed. For example, for Asian Americans, the percentage of Asian-speaking characters in U.S. films grew from 3.4% to 8.2% in ten years, where White characters with speaking roles has decreased by 13.9% (Nielsen Company, 2020). Additionally, in 2020, South Korean film *Parasite* (2019) became the first non-English-language film to win the Oscar Award for Best Film, which participants in this study lauded. *Crazy Rich Asians* is an example of what happens when people of color are in control of their own narratives. This study's findings show that, when Asian Americans are telling their own stories, Asian American audiences interpret the racial representation as both positive and accurate. This is a stark deviation from how characters and stories of color were usually portrayed inaccurately in Hollywood. This was primarily due to the fact that the stories were created and told by whites (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Just as negative and inaccurate portrayals of Asians and Asian Americans in popular culture have led audiences to believe those depictions to be true as previously mentioned with the character of Long Duk Dong from *Sixteen Candles* (1984), portrayals of accurate Asian stories can effectively teach audiences about Asians and Asian Americans in non-offensive ways (Kim, 2017). This is because people typically rely on media to teach them about people of color when they do not have a lot of interracial interactions (Orbe & Harris, 2015). If people seek film and television as a form of educating themselves about race, this is why it is important for media to portray racial and ethnic identities as accurately as possible.

This qualitative study involved the understanding of how Asian American perceive their interracial communication and the Asian and Asian American representation in *Crazy Rich Asians*. Overall, this study's findings argue that having Asian and Asian American storytellers is important because people rely on media representations of Asian stories to understand their cultures. *Crazy Rich Asians*' presentation of an Asian American's struggle with culture clash is an example of an Asian American story that is not typically seen in Hollywood. People who actively engage with encoded messages in *Crazy Rich Asians* understand more clearly how Asian Americans struggle with culture clash and why that has influenced their identity as an Asian American. Additionally, participants' experiences with interracial communication in this study are examples of how communicating with non-Asians about Asian American representation can be empowering for an Asian American and educational for a non-Asian about the Asian American identity. Interracial communication is one way to start small changes as a form Asian American media activism. This study exhibits how small forms of social justice such as communicating about racial representation with the participants; communicating about the participants' Asian American identities; and communicating about their intraethnic, intraracial, and interracial interactions contribute a change in how Asian American participants want to be seen in media.

Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations in this study that are important to note. The first set of limitations concerns the sample of this study. While most criticism would note that this study is not generalizable, this is not the goal of the study or qualitative research. The use of convenience sampling from a university departmental undergraduate research pool limits is not fully representing an Asian American population, as all participants were currently living in the

Southeastern U.S., it should be considered that this study reflects the perspectives from this region. From the six participants who self-identified as multi-racial, all were Asian and White bi-racial individuals. This representation of multi-racial Asian Americans is not an accurate enough representation to build conclusions about multi-racial Asian Americans; however, it does represent perspectives from Asian/White Americans who had experiences that were uniquely different from participants who were not multi-racial. Because this was not one of the major findings of the study, a recommendation for future research is to explore the experiences of multi-racial Asian Americans as those experiences are uniquely significant within the Asian American community.

Sampling from only an Asian American population is both a limitation and a strength. Some may argue that, in order to fully understand the influences of Asian and Asian American media representation on society, non-Asians and non-Asian Americans' perceptions of Asian representation in media should be included in future research. Such findings might be informative; however, in line with CRT, it was important for this study's purpose to place emphasis on Asian American voices and how they perceive these depictions of their own identities. Excluding non-Asians and non-Asian Americans in this study is one of its strengths because the findings indicate that White participants are no longer viewed as the standard by which all other groups are measured.

A methodological limitation is that, while having an Asian American interviewer created a safe and open environment for Asian American participants, it may have also discouraged participants from sharing their negative opinions of Asians or Asian Americans related to this study due to social desirability, which is the tendency for participants to give what they consider socially desired or socially acceptable responses (Nederhof, 1985). For this study, it was not ever

apparent that participants felt uncomfortable with the interviewer or refrained from sharing their thoughts and experiences due to initial rapport built between the interviewer and interviewee, open-ended questioning with follow-up probing questions, and the request for interviewees to tell stories about their experiences. Rather, the researcher's field notes indicate that Asian American participants were ready and excited to talk about racial representation in media.

Future studies should consider conducting focus groups with Asian Americans as Park et al. (2006) did when gathering Asian, Black, and White participants to watch *Rush Hour 2*. The responses gathered during a focus group should utilize this study's findings on Asian Americans' approaches to interracial communication about racial representation in media in order to understand how Asian Americans actually communicate during the interracial interactions. Based on participants who identified as being a part of the Asian diaspora considered themselves different from other Asian Americans, future quantitative research could measure Asian Americans' acculturation to American culture to understand what effects acculturation has on perceptions of racial representation. Understanding the relationship between Asian American acculturation and the impact of media's racial representation on Asian Americans perception of their Asian American identity could contribute to understanding how Asian American identities are influenced beyond the differences of their ethnic identities.

Goals of future research beyond this study include research to understand non-Asian and non-Asian American perceptions of Asian media representations. The findings could ultimately assist in creating racial representations of Asian Americans that are encoded with pedagogical messages intended for non-Asian audiences. As previously recommended, a goal for future research based on the findings of this study would be to conduct focus groups with Asian Americans and non-Asians with the goal of understanding what interracial interactions underlie

Asian Americans' non-assertive communication approach about racial representation with non-Asians. Moreover, this researcher will conduct future research that identify ways to help Asian Americans have positive perceptions of themselves through studies aimed to promote interracial communication. Specifically, interracial communication that encourages Asian Americans to effectively dismantle Asian and Asian American racial discrimination.

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APPENDIX A: Table 1

Participants' Demographic Information

P#	Pseudonym	Age	Ethnic Identity	Asian American Social Identity	Born in US	Gender
P1	Kandice	22	Bangladeshi	Second- or more generation	Yes	F
P2	Quinton	19	Chinese	Second- or more generation	Yes	M
P3	Winston	19	Chinese, White	Multi-racial	Yes	M
P4	Lauren	18	Chinese	Asian diaspora	No	F
P5	Kurt	22	Chinese	Second- or more generation	Yes	M
P6	Y'vonne	19	Chinese	Second- or more generation	Yes	F
P7	Lizzy	19	Chinese, Indonesian	Multi-ethnic	No	F
P8	Meredith	20	Filipino/a	Second- or more generation	Yes	F
P9	Heather	22	Filipino/a	Asian diaspora	No	F
P10	Kim	18	Indian	Second- or more generation	Yes	F
P11	Pam	19	Indian	Second- or more generation	Yes	F
P12	Mark	20	Indian	Second- or more generation	Yes	M
P13	Paul	19	Indian	Second- or more generation	Yes	M
P14	Hannah	19	Indian	Second- or more generation	Yes	F
P15	Vincent	19	Indian, Pakistani	Second- or more generation	Yes	M
P16	Dana	18	Japanese, White	Multi-racial	Yes	F
P17	Justin	18	Japanese, White	Multi-racial	Yes	M
P18	Rina	19	Japanese, White	Multi-racial	Yes	F
P19	Yuri	19	Korean, White	Multi-racial	Yes	F
P20	Charlie	24	Korean	Second- or more generation	Yes	M
P21	Sandra	19	Korean	Second- or more generation	Yes	F
P22	Janet	19	Korean	Asian diaspora	No	F
P23	Wendy	19	Korean	Transracially adopted	No	F
P24	Sarah	18	Korean	Second- or more generation	Yes	F
P25	Lawrence	21	Korean	Asian diaspora	No	M
P26	Danielle	18	Laotian, White	Multi-racial	Yes	F
P27	Charlene	19	Laotian/Thai	Multi-ethnic	Yes	F
P28	Clark	19	Taiwanese	Asian diaspora	No	M
P29	Nico	19	Vietnamese	Second- or more generation	Yes	M
P30	Lisa	20	Vietnamese	Second- or more generation	Yes	F

APPENDIX B: Interview Protocol

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview guide for one-on-one interviews with Asian Americans

As you know, the focus of this project is on the experiences that Asian Americans have with film. In order to better understand that, I will be asking a series of questions that will give you the opportunity to discuss the various images and films you believe have directly or indirectly impacted your thoughts about racial and representation in film.

- 1. I would like to begin by having you reflect on your experiences with popular culture and representation while growing up. [Personal Identity]**
 - a. What character or characters in television or movies did you love while growing up? In other words, who were your favorites?
 - i. What was it about those characters that was so appealing? What was it that attracted you to them?
 - ii. Is this an international or US character?
 - iii. In what ways do you feel you were represented by this character racially or ethnically?
 1. Why? What about the character or show's storyline made you feel that way?
 2. If not, who was a character you did feel best represented by? Why?
 - b. In general, how do you remember feeling about your race or ethnicity being represented in television or movies growing up?
 - c. How do you ethnically identify?
 - i. Asian Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, etc.
 - d. While growing up, what specific information or lessons were you taught about your ethnicity and/or culture? In other words, what were you taught that define what it means to be a part of your culture?
- 2. Now, I would like you to think specifically about the blockbuster movie *Crazy Rich Asians*. General Film Related**
 - a. Think back to the first time that you saw the film.
 1. What was it that inspired you to see it? What drew you to it?
 2. When did you first see it? The premiere weekend, a few weeks later, Netflix?
 3. Who did you choose to watch CRA with? Why or why not?
 4. How many times have you seen CRA?

- b. What were your initial thoughts and feelings about CRA immediately after watching it?
 - i. What moments in the film stick out to you? Why?
 - ii. What did you like most about the film?
 - iii. What did you like least about the film?
3. **Now, I would like you to think about the messages you think the producers, directors, and writers were trying to communicate to audiences through the film itself. Encoding/Decoding (Hall, 1973)**
- a. What do you think was the main message or messages of the film?
 - i. Why do you believe they chose that specific message?
 - ii. Do you think the message was intended to be positive or negative? Why?
 - iii. Who do you believe that message was targeted to? Why?
 - b. What scenes were most significant to you? Why?
 - i. What specifically about those scenes made them so important to you?
 - c. There are specific scenes that I would like you to now pay close attention to. I will be showing them to you and would like to discuss each one afterwards.

*Provide them with a piece for paper to take notes on the scenes.
Pause for a few minutes in between scenes to allow for refocusing.*

SHOW SCENES TO INTERVIEWEES

- i. 1. Rachel and Mom shopping
 - ii. 2. Rachel meets Peik Lin's family
 - iii. 3. Rachel makes dumplings with Nick's family
 - iv. 4. Eleanor confronts Rachel on the staircase, Nick and Rachel talk in car
 - v. 5. Rachel plays mahjongg with Eleanor
 - vi. *probe for all scenes*
 - 1. What are your initial thoughts about this scene?
 - 2. What do you think is the main message in this scene?
 - 3. How, if at all, does this remind you of anything from your own life?
 - 4. What people in your life would you say any of the characters remind you of?
 - 5. What other films to television shows have you seen that have similar characters or messages?
- d. Who do you think was the intended audience?
- i. What about this scene made you feel connected to or a part of the film?
 - ii. What specifically made you feel that you were being represented in this film?
 - 1. Why or why not?
 - 2. What made you feel misrepresented? Why or why not?
- e. After watching the film, what conversations did you have with others about this film?

- i. What specifically did you talk about?
- ii. Would you describe those conversations as primarily positive or negative? Why?
- iii. With whom did you have these conversations?
 - 1. Why did you choose to speak to them about the film?
- iv. Who initiated the conversations?
- v. Who would you recommend this film to?
- f. Overall, what do you think of the portrayal of Asian Americans and Asians in this film?
 - i. What about the characters or storyline were positive?
 - ii. What about the characters or storyline were negative?
- g. How did the film either accurately or inaccurately portray Asian Americans and Asians?
- h. How do you think CRA might have changed how Asian Americans and Asians have been typically represented in film?
 - i. How might this have impacted how Asians and Asians Americans relate to films?
 - ii. How might this have impacted non-Asians relate to films about Asians and Asian Americans?

4. Closing Remarks

As you can see, this interview was about your experience with popular culture as an Asian American. I was specifically interested in your experiences with the film *Crazy Rich Americans* and how it and other films have chosen to represent different Asian and American ethnicities. I have chosen this topic because *CRA* revealed to Hollywood and the world that representation matters. I thank you for taking the time to share with me your thoughts and beliefs about this very important topic.

- a. Before I conclude this interview, is there anything you would like to add to our discussion? Is there anything that I did not ask that you want to share?
- b. Thank you very much for taking the time to share your experience with me today.

APPENDIX C: Notification of Study Availability

SUBJECT: New Research Credit Opportunity [2 credits]

Good Morning All,

I am writing to inform you that a new study, “Asian American Perspectives on Racial Representation in Film,” is now available for registration online. This is a 2 credit, interview lab-based study.

Registration can be found here: <http://spcmweb.franklin.uga.edu/research/view/360>

Students enrolled in COMM classes that offer credit for research participation are eligible to participate. They must self-identify as Asian American and be college-aged (18-24 years of age). Participation in the interview portion will grant the 2 credits. Interviews will take approximately one hour.

Please help by sending the link/information to your students and anyone who may be interested. If there are any questions, please contact Younf@uga.edu (Farrah Youn-Heil).

Thank you and have a wonderful rest of your week!

Farrah Youn-Heil

APPENDIX D: Pre-screening Questionnaire

Asian American Perspectives on Racial Representation in Film

In order to best understand racial and ethnic experiences with film, I would like to gather basic demographic information from you. The following questions are designed to determine your eligibility for participation in the study. *An asterisk (*) has been placed next to items where your response is required.* This information will help in describing and understanding participant experiences with the film *Crazy Rich Asians* as members of different Asian American communities.

Please fill out the questions below. Be aware that this information will remain private. You will be given a pseudonym, and only basic descriptive details (i.e., age, ethnicity) will be presented in the final analysis.

1. Your Name*

2. Age*

3. Racial Identity (You can select more than one) *

- African American
 Asian
 Caucasian
 Hispanic
 Native American
 Pacific Islander
 Other: _____

4. Do you self-identify as an Asian American? *

- Yes
 No

5. If you marked “yes” to the previous question, what is your ethnic identity? (select all that apply)

- Chinese
 Filipino/a
 Indian
 Japanese
 Korean

Vietnamese
 Other: _____

6. Please mark all of the films you have seen. (You can select more than one) *

- Always Be My Maybe* (2019)
- To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (2019)
- Crazy Rich Asians* (2018)
- Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017)
- Aloha* (2015)
- Social Network* (2010)
- Charlie's Angels* (2000)
- Rush Hour* (1998)
- Joy Luck Club* (1993)
- Sixteen Candles* (1984)

7. COMM instructor (if applicable)

8. UGA email address *

9. Phone number (only used to contact if eligible for participation in study) *

APPENDIX E: Notification if Ineligibility

SUBJECT: COMM Research Requirement Ineligibility

Hello,

Thank you for registering for a research opportunity with the department of Communication Studies. Unfortunately, you are ineligible for the study, "Asian American Perspectives on Racial Representation in Film."

Thank you,
Farrah Youn-Heil

APPENDIX F: Notification of Eligibility

Subject: COMM Research Requirement Interview Registration (Asian American Perspectives on Racial Representation in Film)

Thank you for registering for a Research Opportunity with the Department of Communication Studies.

Dear participant,

Thank you for registering for the research study "Asian American Perspectives on Racial Representation in Film" in the Department of Communication Studies.

This is a research project conducted by Farrah Youn-Heil and Dr. Soroya McFarlane at the Department of Communication Studies. The purpose of the study is to explore perspectives of Asian Americans.

You are now invited to sign up for the in-person interview portion of the study;<https://doodle.com/poll/i74ngg4y6wgcxw76>

Please access the survey as soon as possible once you receive this link.

Please include your name and UGA email address. If no times are available that fit your schedule, please contact Farrah Youn-Heil at younf@uga.edu.

Self-identified Asian American students at least 18 years old and enrolled in COMM classes that offer credit for research participation are eligible to participate.

You must participate in the in-person interview portion of the study to receive the full 2 credits towards the departmental research requirement.

All individually-identifiable information obtained will be treated confidentially. The results of the study may be published in the forms of conference papers and/or journal articles. However, the published results will be presented in summary form only; your identity and personal information will not be used.

Please let us know if you have any further questions. Thank you.

Farrah Youn-Heil (younf@uga.edu)

Dr. Soroya McFarlane (SoroyaJMcfarlane@uga.edu)

Sincerely,

Department of Communication Studies

University of Georgia

APPENDIX G: Stimuli Clips

Screenshots of *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) Clips Used for Interviewee Stimuli



Clip 1. In this scene, Rachel and her mom go shopping and discuss why Rachel is different than Nick's family.



Clip 2. This scene shows Rachel meeting Peik Lin's family for the first time. Peik Lin's father speaks with a heavy accent before revealing he can speak English with no accent at all.



Clip 3. This scene shows Rachel with Nick's family as they make dumplings together. Nick's family talks about growing up together.



Clip 4. This scene shows Eleanor approaching Rachel about why she will never be good enough for her son, Nick. Later, Nick tries to ease the tension while he talks to Rachel in the car.



Clip 5. This scene shows Rachel and Eleanor playing a game of mahjong where Rachel confronts Eleanor and defends her identity.



Clip 6. This scene plays a Chinese version of Coldplay's *Yellow* in the background as Rachel begins to leave Singapore for her home in America.

APPENDIX H: Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

CONSENT FORM

Asian American Perspectives on Racial Representations in Film

Principal Investigator: Dr. Soroya McFarlane
Communication Studies
SoroyaJMcfarlane@uga.edu

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of your experiences as someone who self-identifies as an Asian American and to discuss how you perceived the Asian and Asian American characters in the film *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) and your lived experience as an Asian American. I am interested in hearing stories about times you have had conversations about race and ethnicity with others.

Study Procedures

If you agree to participate, this is how the interview process will occur:

- This will be a 1 hour in-person interview with the researcher. You will be asked a series of questions regarding the film *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) and your experiences as an Asian American. A series of questions will be asked about your background, such as your ethnicity, age, major, and hometown, so that I can better understand your experiences. There is a set of questions that ask you to recall experiences related to race that we hope you are comfortable sharing. We recognize that it might be difficult to retell these stories, and if you feel uncomfortable doing so, you are free to say so. Because these experiences are important to how people perceive Asian Americans and their experiences, we hope you will find these questions appropriate and are willing to share your stories. The interview questions are designed to be very specific; however, it is at your discretion to disclose the information that you are comfortable sharing with me.
- The interview will begin with a greeting/welcome, questions about your background (e.g., age, race, major), followed by a series of questions about your life as an Asian American general and then more specific questions about how you perceived and communicated about the film *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018). If at any point during the interview you feel uncomfortable with any question that is asked, then you are free to either not answer or terminate the interview. The question(s) may also be rephrased for your comfort or clarity.
- The interview will be audiotaped to ensure accuracy during data analysis.
- At some time in the future after the interview has been conducted, I will be available for a follow-up interview if there is anything else you would like to share. I may also ask for a follow-up interview to clarify the information you shared and make sure we accurately

interpreted your interview responses. This can be conducted either in person, over the Internet (e.g., Skype), or via phone.

Risks and discomforts

I do not anticipate any risks from participating in this research. Some people, however, do experience slight discomfort when discussing the topics of race, culture, and personal experiences. Please know that you may refuse to answer any question or stop the interview at any time. There is minimal risk of breach of confidentiality, as we will use pseudonyms when transcribing the interview. Also, we will destroy the audiotape after transcription, and we will not use specifics in my report so relationships cannot be identified by third-parties.

Benefits

The benefits of participation are that you are contributing to a recognition that Asian American lived experiences and perception of media differ from individual to individual. Your stories will be instrumental in identifying how Asian Americans communicate about these experiences. More importantly, your participation will help educate others about how Asian Americans' experiences related to race influence how they communicate with others. The final benefit, and quite possibly the most important one, is that you have the unique opportunity to share powerful stories on this topic, which we hope might change societal and communal perceptions of Asian Americans and what approaches can be used to foster positive communication and support within certain relationships. It is our hope that through this research, we can contribute to efforts to have a better understanding about the Asian American identity and through communication, how they differ among each other.

Incentives for participation

The incentive for a student is enrolled in COMM 1500/ COMM 1110 is that s/he will fulfill the research requirement for that course by participating in this study. If you prefer to not participate in this research, please ask your instructor about other options (that will involve the same amount of time and effort) to fulfill this research requirement. Most other participants will receive no direct incentives for participation. Their incentive will be satisfaction in knowing their participation is contributing to important social science research.

Audio/Video Recording

An audio recording device will be used to record the interview in order to ensure that all information shared in the interview is accurately recorded. This will also allow the interviewer to give the participant her undivided attention. The interviews will be transcribed for the purpose of data analysis; however, if there are inaccuracies or unclear moments in the interview, then a follow-up interview may be requested at your convenience. As previously noted, only pseudonyms will be used, and the transcriptions will be kept secure (under lock and key). After transcription, the audio files will be destroyed.

Privacy/Confidentiality

The data we collect will identify you indirectly through the use of a pseudonym. The project's research records may be reviewed by the Principal Investigator or another member of the research team as well as the University of Georgia's department responsible for regulatory and research oversight. Researchers will not release identifiable results of the study to anyone other than individuals working on the project without your written consent unless required by law. Any link between you and the pseudonym will be destroyed after completion of data collection. For any data collected via the Internet (e.g. Skype), your confidentiality will be

maintained to the degree permitted by the technology used. Specifically, no guarantees can be made regarding the interception of data sent via the Internet by any third parties.

Taking part is voluntary

Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your grades or class standing will not be affected by your decision about research participation. If you decide to withdraw from the study, the information collected from or about you up to the point of your withdrawal will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed, unless you make a written request to remove, return, or destroy the information that can be identified as yours.

If you have questions

The main researcher conducting this study is Farrah Youn-Heil, a graduate student at the University of Georgia in the Department of Communication Studies. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, then you may contact Farrah Youn-Heil at YounF@uga.edu. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, then you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at 706-542-3199 or irb@uga.edu.

To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. Your signature below indicates that you have read or had read to you this entire consent form and have had all of your questions answered.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date
_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

APPENDIX I: Pre-Interview Questionnaire

Asian American Perspectives on Racial Representation in Film

Please fill out the questions below

***Required**

1. Your Name *

2. Age *

3. Briefly describe your Asian ethnic identity. (ex. Chinese, Filipino/a, Indian, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, and etc.) You may describe more than one.

Please circle 1 (Not at all), 2 (Not very), 3 (Neutral), 4 (Somewhat), or 5 (Very much) for the following questions (*in relation to the Asian ethnicity described previously in question 3 of this questionnaire*).

1. How much do you identify with _____?

1 2 3 4 5 6

2. How much do you feel you have in common with people?

1 2 3 4 5 6

3. How proud are you to be a part of _____?

1 2 3 4 5 6

4. How much do you interact and associate with people from _____?

1 2 3 4 5 6

5. How much would you like to interact and associate with people from _____?

1 2 3 4 5 6

6. How negative do you feel about people from _____?

1 2 3 4 5 6

7. How well do you speak the language of _____?

1 2 3 4 5 6

8. How well do you understand the language of _____?

1 2 3 4 5 6

9. How well do you read and write in the language of _____?

1 2 3 4 5 6

10. How knowledgeable are you about the culture and traditions of _____?

1 2 3 4 5 6

11. How knowledgeable are you about the history of _____?

1 2 3 4 5 6

12. How much do you actually practice the traditions and keep the holidays of _____?

1 2 3 4 5 6

13. How often do you listen to music or look at movies and magazines from _____?

1 2 3 4 5 6

14. How much do you like the food of _____?

1 2 3 4 5 6

15. How often do you actually eat the food of _____?

1 2 3 4 5 6