

Research Article

# Performing Whiteness in Intercultural Marriages: A Critical Analysis of the Film *You People* in Pop Culture

Gertrude Misornu Nartey\* 

Department of Communication, University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, Milwaukee, United States

## Abstract

Scholars have asserted that the idea of whiteness has often re-emerged as invisible, non-labeled, and unmarked, and this idea is continuously propagated through media representation. Furthermore, many scholars have argued that media representation functions as a tool for (re)constructing a particular worldview. Hence, the representation of intercultural relationships in popular culture (pop culture) often emphasizes cultural differences and conflicts, especially when the performance of whiteness is involved. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the representation of intercultural relationships by analyzing how the film *You People* depicts cultural differences and conflicts in the context of intercultural relationships and why whiteness is performed and propagated in these narratives. A critical thematic analysis was used to analyze the dialogues in the movie. The findings align with existing research demonstrating that the film emphasizes cultural differences and often employs negative stereotypes to highlight conflicts between cultural groups. However, a significant new theme emerged, showcasing how the characters navigated and worked through their differences to maintain their relationships. This theme presents a more hopeful perspective, suggesting potential pathways for intercultural understanding and collaboration, which also brings out nuances that question whether the media is challenging or perpetuating whiteness. This study contributes to intercultural communication by highlighting the dual role of pop culture both as a site for reinforcing stereotypes and as a space for imagining possibilities of intercultural harmony. Ultimately, the study highlights the need for a more nuanced intercultural communication representation.

## Keywords

Intercultural Marriages, Intercultural Relationships, Whiteness, The Performance of Whiteness, Representation, Pop Culture

## 1. Introduction

Some scholars have argued that the early media representation of cross-cultural relationships (marriages), usually referred to as intercultural relationships in literature, especially alongside the performance of whiteness, portrayed cross-cultural marriages as exotic and problematic and often emphasized cultural differences and conflicts [10, 11]. In such representations, cultural differences are often reduced to superficial markers such as clothing, food, and music while ignoring

deeper cultural values and beliefs stemming from different positionalities and experiences navigating structural contexts. Also, cross-cultural marriages in pop culture are seen to perpetuate stereotypes and promote cultural appropriation, as well as a lack of understanding and respect for different cultures [10, 11]. The performance of whiteness in pop culture is one of the lenses this paper draws on to examine the representations of intercultural relationships in pop culture.

\*Corresponding author: [gertrude@uwm.edu](mailto:gertrude@uwm.edu) (Gertrude Misornu Nartey), [gmisornu@gmail.com](mailto:gmisornu@gmail.com) (Gertrude Misornu Nartey)

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Whiteness has long been an engrained and privileged identity in society, influencing every facet of the aspects of our lives globally and in popular culture [3]. Furthermore, the discourse of whiteness has been a central part of American culture since the country was founded [27]—these ideas above shape how ethnicity and race are represented mainly and perceived globally in the media. Even though there have been more recent calls for a better and more robust representation and performance of equal race in pop culture, whiteness continues to dominate the cultural landscape, and it is also a dominant cultural force in many forms of media, including film, television, and music [6, 13, 37].

This paper explores the representation of intercultural relationships by critically examining the film *You People* through the lens of the performance of whiteness in pop culture, its effects on shaping culture, and how it impacts our understanding of identity, race, and racism. This research is essential because, as Nakayama and his colleagues said, the idea of whiteness has re-emerged as invisible and non-labeled [23]. Similarly, Dyer asserts that whiteness is invisible and unmarked [7]. Both scholars argue that it makes it difficult for people to recognize whiteness and its power and influence. This invisibility and non-labeling of whiteness have become normalized [7, 23]. One huge field is seen in popular culture in how whiteness is performed, portrayed, and represented in films or movies, music videos, television shows, social media, etc.

Over the years, the performance, representation, and portrayal of whiteness and intercultural relationships in pop culture have become increasingly essential and shape how people think, perceive, and interact with the world around them. For example, one scholar argues that “Bollywood-esque movie functions as a tool for (re)constructing a particular worldview” (p. 289) [22]. Hence, it is essential to examine how whiteness continues to be performed and represented and to examine how it operates to be able to challenge it and talk about it. As stated earlier, this paper critically examines the film *You People*. This film was released on Netflix as a romcom but has stirred a lot of reviews about how the intercultural relationship was portrayed through the performance of whiteness and how that continues to perpetuate the invisibility and normalization of whiteness and white dominance culture in everyday life.

## 2. Literature Review

This literature review covers the material and explains some key concepts the paper will draw on. These are the representation of cross-cultural (intercultural) relationships, whiteness and identity, and popular (pop) culture. According to some scholars, intercultural relationships are common and include relationships that span race, ethnicity, nationality, gender preferences, age, social class, religious preferences, and physical and mental abilities [20]. A person’s relationships with culturally different people may include people they

meet through friendships and colleagues at the workplace or school, traveling, families and marriages, the workplace or school, and the community.

### 2.1. The Representation of Cross-cultural (Intercultural) Relationships

Spivak used two German words — ‘vertreten’ and ‘darstellen’ (meaning represent [speak for, proxy] and re-present [depicts, portraits]) to define the term ‘represent’ [32]. Spivak used these two words in the same sentence. Other researchers have asked, “How are different national groups represented in depictions of globalization?” (p. 265) [30]. Even though globalization is not the focus of this paper, my focus is on the representation and depiction of different national groups, which may include intercultural relationships. Shome and Hegde use these two different ‘forms’ of representation in the same sentence. Hence, as Spivak explains, one can argue that media representations speak for and depict someone or something in a certain way or as being of a particular nature. We cannot talk about representation without communication. Other scholars have argued that communication, which includes media representations, is the primary vehicle for both representation and re-presentation of different subject positions, including intercultural relationships [2, 22, 31]. Some scholars have also talked about the role of communication in primarily facilitating (or inhibiting) structures of knowing and knowledge [2, 22, 31]. The way popular culture represents and re-presents intercultural relationships shapes people’s knowing process and knowledge and influences how people see intercultural relationships.

Furthermore, Gao defined cross-cultural (intercultural) relationships as relationships across national boundaries [10]. Gao further explains that cross-cultural relationships include people from different backgrounds, cultures, families, and settings that transcend beyond people’s current physical locations, hence the idea of national boundaries [10]. Due to differences usually associated with interactions between people from different backgrounds, deliberate efforts are made with communication to create that sense of shared meaning and understanding regardless of differences. However, the representation of such relationships may foster or hinder communication processes that can create shared meaning and peaceful coexistence. That is why it is important to study the representation of cross-cultural (intercultural) relationships continuously.

Various academic disciplines, including cultural studies, sociology, critical race studies, and anthropology, have explored intercultural relationship representation. For example, one scholar explored the complexity of family relations in neoliberalism compared to the familial structures in *The Big Bang Theory* [35]. Even though this paper did not directly study intercultural relationships, the researcher argued that the show reflects many of the core ideological beliefs associated with neoliberalism through the characters’ behaviors [35].

This points to how powerful media representation, especially in pop culture, can be in the process of knowing and acquiring knowledge about someone or something, as mentioned earlier. Another example is *The Big Sick* [26]. This is a romantic comedy film based on a true story. It depicts an intercultural relationship between a Pakistani-American man and a white woman. It explores the cultural differences and challenges faced by the two cultures, the American culture represented by Emily and the Pakistani culture represented by Kumail and their respective families, as well as their reactions to their relationship through the lens of representation [11]. Nikita and their colleagues concluded that the American culture was portrayed as positive and open-minded, whereas the Pakistani culture was portrayed as closed-minded and negative [26].

Similarly, some scholars have critically examined the representation of intercultural relationships in books and novels. The general knowledge is that books are one of the major channels through which pop culture is communicated. For example, the book *Mixed Race Amnesia: Resisting the Romanticization of Multiraciality* explores the experiences of mixed-race people and challenges the romanticized narratives often associated with multiracial identities, though not solely focused on intercultural relationships [19]. Moreover, Mahtani argues that whiteness can be seen as a normative reference point and emphasizes the need for critical engagement with the representation of whiteness in intercultural contexts. Some scholars based their books on interviews and ethnographic studies [19].

For instance, another book focuses on intercultural relationships between white men and black women in Brazil [12]. Wynn examines intercultural relationships in modern Egypt, particularly between Egyptian women and Western men [40]. These scholars both delve into the complexities of racial dynamics, hierarchies, power, and the intersection of race, gender, and class in influencing the experiences of individuals and families and how whiteness is constructed and negotiated. They argue that racial hierarchies may shape family relationships in ways that reflect and perpetuate racial inequality, yet Black Brazilian families actively negotiate these hierarchies to assert their citizenship and humanity. [1, 39]. In the same vein, other novels explore themes of race, identity, and cultural differences in their intercultural relationship [1, 18] and the challenges and complexities of negotiating cultural differences, family expectations, and personal identity [16]. Adichie's novel presents the story of Ifemelu, a young Nigerian woman who moves to the United States and circumnavigates her relationships with people, including a romantic relationship with a white American man, and Lahiri's novel explores the experiences of Gogol, a second-generation Indian American, and his relationship with Maxine, a white American woman [1, 19].

This pool of literature offers a rich starting point as it offers different intercultural perspectives from male and female points of view. There is a perfect blend of males from the white American perspective and an ideal blend from other

cultures' perspectives. They offer insights into the challenges, dynamics, and cultural intersections that can arise in these relationships and the impact of societal norms and expectations. These examples demonstrate how popular culture reflects and explores the representation of whiteness in intercultural relationships. It's essential to approach these representations critically, as they can both reinforce and challenge stereotypes and assumptions about whiteness and intercultural relationships. This paper would add to this pool of research by looking at whether recent representations still emphasize differences or whether there is a more robust and nuanced representation of intercultural relationships that fosters a shared meaning and understanding and peaceful coexistence, especially when it comes to the performance of whiteness.

## 2.2. Whiteness and Identity

The term "whiteness" has been used in the discourse of identity and race as a way of defining white identity and culture. Many scholars have defined whiteness as a socially constructed concept representing the invisible, normative central identity by which other minority identities are compared [21, 23, 25, 31, 35]. Some scholars have argued that whiteness is constructed and maintained through the performance and representation of white people in pop culture (media) [3, 18, 35]. Some of the early scholars to start talking about the concept of whiteness in academia, mainly through the lens of critical race studies and cultural studies, pointed out that the concepts of both whiteness and identity are a social construction [9, 23, 35]. Furthermore, different scholars have examined how whiteness is performed in specific forms of pop culture. For example, the representation of whiteness in news media is part of pop culture [23]. Whiteness is often constructed as the norm against which other racial identities are compared [12, 23]. Whiteness is also portrayed in Hollywood films, which reinforces dominant cultural norms and perpetuates racial inequality [12]. Precisely, reducing the representation of cross-cultural relationships to conflict about superfluous differences reproduces the invisibility of whiteness.

Most scholars argue that social construction means what people perceive as reality comes to be due to their interaction with others and the world around them. For example, as people interact with the world around them, they find that there are existing conditions that are bad and need to be done away with or need to be drastically transformed. Hence, "through perception and experience, and social input from language and practices as the cycle of the social construction of reality or ideas continues [5]. Some literature has argued that most of the time, when people think about whiteness, they think about the big overt things that are associated with whiteness, such as white privilege, white supremacy, and white nationalism, among others. But "whiteness (and its accepted normality) also exists as everyday microaggressions toward people of color. Acts of microaggressions include verbal, nonverbal,

and environmental slights, snubs, or insults toward nonwhites” [39]. Also, as some literature on the social construction of reality suggests, to fully understand whiteness, we need to take a closer look at how whiteness plays out in the everyday. More straightforwardly, “the small things, small moments in which what we say, what we do, how we gesture or look, reproduce racism” (p. 452) [35]. Also, shifting the conversation from the structural elements of racism, which are embedded in our discussions and daily actions, to overt acts of violence is precisely how racism is reproduced in and through our everyday lives logics [35]. In essence, putting the discussion of the social construction of reality and that of pop culture together clearly shows that the everyday culture of the people (pop culture) and through everyday interaction with their world continues to perpetuate the dominance of whiteness.

Despite more recent calls for a better and more robust representation and performance of equal race in pop culture, whiteness continues to dominate the cultural landscape, and it is also a dominant cultural force in many forms of media, including film, television, and music. The representation of intercultural relationships has been explored in various academic disciplines, including critical race studies, cultural studies, sociology, and anthropology, but not directly through the lens or context of the performance of whiteness yet most of the existing literature has not gone beyond the complexities and challenges faced in intercultural relationships to explore the ways in which these challenges can be overcome or minimized leading to the following research questions:

*RQ 1: How are intercultural relationships (marriages) depicted in the film ‘You People,’ and what themes emerge from this representation?*

*RQ 2: How is whiteness portrayed and performed in the film ‘You People,’ and what are the cultural and social implications of this portrayal?*

### 3. Methodology

This research uses a critical thematic analysis [17] to analyze the discourses in the movie *You People* by drawing on Owen’s (1984) thematic analysis, focusing on reoccurrences, repetition, and forcefulness [28]. Critical thematic analysis is a “method of closed coding that identifies the prominence of ideologies, power relations, and status-based hierarchies” (p. 92) [17]. Critical thematic analysis is particularly well-suited for exploring this study as it allows for a detailed examination of underlying themes, ideologies, and cultural discourses embedded with the film *You People*. This method aligns with the study’s goal of critically examining how whiteness and intercultural dynamics are performed and problematized in pop culture. The cultural studies framework guided the research, emphasizing the importance of cultural context and the intersectionality of race, ethnicity, and culture. The data was analyzed using critical thematic analysis to identify themes and patterns related to the performance of whiteness

alongside cross-cultural (intercultural) relationships in the film *You People*. The study examined the visual representation of whiteness and non-whiteness, the language used to describe these identities, and the narrative and plot developments in the film related to whiteness and the other.

#### 3.1. The Film - You People

The public and mass media largely influence pop culture [4]. Also, the fundamental source of pop culture “is the mass media, especially popular music, film, television, radio, video games, books, and the internet” (p. 3) [4]. Some scholars have similarly defined pop culture to consist of films or movies, music videos, television shows, and social media [8, 34]. This paper focused on pop culture through the film - *You People*.

According to several reporters, *You People* is a romantic comedy that explores the complexities of intercultural relationships and marriage, generational conflicts, and cultural stereotypes. The film follows Amira (played by Lauren London), a black Muslim woman, and Ezra (played by Jonah Hill), a white Jewish man, as they navigate their growing romance intertwined with the challenges posed by their respective families. Ezras’s parents, Shelley and Arnold, embody a well-meaning but often oblivious form of liberalism, while Amira’s parents, Akbar and Fatima, are protective and skeptical of Ezra’s intentions. Their main challenge was how their families would come to terms with modern love amidst ‘clashes, societal expectations, and generational differences. The cultural and religious differences between the two families create a series of comedic yet poignant misunderstandings, highlighting issues of privilege, bias, and identity. These challenges lead to a breakup, but the couple remains committed to love, working to reconcile their family differences. Eventually, their families come to terms and arrange for the couple to get married as they desire [14, 15, 3]. The film was released in selected theaters on January 20, 2023, and released on Netflix on January 27, 2023, and was produced by Kevin Misher, Jonah Hill, and Kenya Barris [36].

I chose this film because it presents multiple cultural and identity perspectives on intercultural communication. The story ultimately emphasizes the importance of communication, empathy, and understanding in bridging cultural divides, offering a hopeful perspective on navigating diverse relationships in a multicultural society. Pop culture influences and shapes people’s views of the world around them. Portrayals and representations in films, movies, television shows, social media, etc., can shape people’s cultural attitudes towards others and customs, as people are likely to imitate what they see on the screens.

#### 3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

The first step involved generating a transcript with time stamps of the movie’s dialogue between the two main characters (Ezra and Amira) and some supporting characters under

review, including detailed annotations of nonverbal behaviors such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and gestures. These annotations captured the nuances of the interactions between the characters, providing comprehensive data for analysis. Next, I began coding with initial in vivo codes extracted directly from the transcripts using the character's exact words and phrases to preserve the contextual significance. A second coding round grouped the in vivo codes into broader descriptive categories. The iterative method, through multiple transcript readings and repeated constant comparison of codes, was used to refine both in vivo and descriptive codes to identify emerging patterns and themes. Finally, patterns were grouped into two themes based on reoccurrences, repetition, and forcefulness. For example, reoccurrences reflect patterns of dialogue and behaviors reflecting similar sentiments or actions. Repetitions reflect frequent references to key concepts. Lastly, forcefulness reflects emphasis conveyed through tone, nonverbal cues, or narrative significance.

## 4. Findings

Upon conducting a thorough analysis of the primary characters as well as several supporting figures in the film, three significant themes come to the forefront: biases, stereotypes, and racial dynamics; cultural adaptation and exchange; and the overarching narrative of love conquering all. To elaborate, the theme of biases, stereotypes, and racial dynamics highlights how characters navigate various preconceived notions that influence their interactions and relationships. For instance, certain characters face discrimination based on their backgrounds, which shapes their identities and experiences throughout the story. The theme of cultural adaptation and exchange explores how characters from diverse backgrounds learn from each other and grow as individuals. This aspect is particularly evident in moments where characters share traditions, values, and perspectives, leading to a richer understanding of one another. Lastly, the love wins narrative illustrates the power of love in overcoming societal obstacles and personal struggles. This theme is exemplified through key relationships in the film, demonstrating that love can triumph over hatred and misunderstanding. In the following sections, I will delve deeper into these themes, supported by specific examples from the film that highlight their significance and impact on the characters and the overall storyline.

### 4.1. Biases and Stereotypes

The analysis shows that *You People* continued to portray the biases and stereotypes identified in the examples cited earlier in the paper. Multiple scenes and instances depicted the biases and stereotypes generally associated with interracial, intercultural relationships, the biggest one being the cultural differences associated with such relationships, especially romantic intercultural relationships. These examples are explored below.

#### 4.1.1. The First Encounter

Ezra had ordered an Uber. As he stepped out, there was a car he presumed was his ride, and he just opened the door and sat in the back seat. Amira, who appeared to be already frustrated from being lost after driving in circles for a while, started screaming and attacking Ezra. Below is an excerpt of their conversation:

Ezra: what the f\*\*k! What are you doing?

Amira: Get the f\*\*k out! Get out! Help, oh my God, I'm being attacked!

Ezra: You are attacking me! Stop. Please, relax! Fine, okay! ... this is f\*\*ked up! But you are not getting a five-star rating...

Amira: F\*\*k you! I'm not an Uber driver!

Ezra: You're not?

Ezra: I'm sorry!

Amira: No, you're not! ... You saw a black woman in an inexpensive car and thought it was your God-given white right to get in my back seat and tell me where to go. It's a tale as old as time with your racist a\*\*. Get out!

Ezra: I know it seems like a racism.

(00:13:46 – 00:14:21)

Amira's words immediately highlight the power dynamics, privilege, and racial complexities associated with intercultural relationships, specifically through the lens of whiteness. Amira's assertions suggest that Ezra felt entitled due to his whiteness, placing him in a more powerful position than her, a Black woman representing a minority group. This depiction also fits into the typical representation of the black woman as angry and a white man as a middle to upper-class cool, calm, collected person. Ezra then tries to explain to Amira that his Uber driver drives the same car and looks exactly like her (Amira), showing Amira the profile from his phone. She admits to the resemblance and becomes calm eventually. They both decided to help each other out, with Ezra offering to show Amira where she was going since she was lost, but Ezra knew his way around the city. Amira probably dropped Ezra off at his planned destination. This reflects the stereotypes and biases of both races represented in this film. Another example is seen in the conversation Ezra and Amira had when she did not get the job she interviewed for (01:23:06 – 01:24:15). Again, Amira alludes to the fact that white people are privileged and would not even accept Ezra's offer to help.

#### 4.1.2. Amira Meets Ezra's Family

Another clear instance where biases and stereotypes came to the fore was when Amira met Ezra's family after six months of dating. One could argue that Ezra's mom, Shelley (played by Julia Louis-Dreyfus), genuinely was fascinated by Amira's 'beauty', but reactions from the rest of the family clearly showed that her sense of amazement was based on stereotypical ideas and biases she has about black people. The presentation also showed that this entire white family (Ezra's mom, dad, and sister) had some preconceived stereotypes about black culture and black people. Ezra's family, espe-

cially his mom, was picking on Amira's esthetics rather than focusing on her as a person (which, later in the film, Amira confronted her about). They brought up black culture-related kinds of stuff, "language," and things happening in the black community (such as police brutality against black people, black music, Pimp My Ride show, etc. --- (00:28:00 – 00:34:10). Below are some excerpts examples of the conversations (transcripts) that transpired during the visit.

Ezra: Mom, this is Amira! Amira, this is my mom, Shelley!

Amira: Hi Miss Shelley, it's so nice to meet you.

Shelley: (gasps) Miss Shelley!

Amira: Oh, my mom will kill me if I didn't address you in that way.

(00:25:28 – 00:25:38)

This conversation showed how surprised Shelley was to be addressed as 'Miss Shelley.' It could also be interpreted as Shelley not expecting that Amira, as a Black girl, would show that level of respect and modesty. On the other hand, Amira's response could be interpreted as her coming from a good home and being well-trained and natural to show respect and modesty to her seniors.

Shelley: ... Oh, my gosh, you are so beautiful. I love your hair. I love your fingernails. Look at these rings. I love them.

Amira: Thank you.

Shelley: (gasp) Look at that (pointing to her necklaces), with your name.

Ezra: What about her earlobes and the bottom of her feet?

Shelley: Oh, shut up. He loves to give me sh\*t. But I think your earlobes are good too...

(00:25:43 – 00:26:00)

This conversation focused mainly on Amira's physical appearance and the accessories she was wearing. One would think that Ezra's sardonic question would shift the conversation at the moment, but she went on, still standing outside with her guest. Finally, Shelley invited them in and called her husband to join the conversation.

Shelley: Honey, honey, come and meet Amira. I hope I am saying that right. Amira.

... We've got cheese and crackers, but if you need something else, I can have Lupita run to Whole Foods... She's from Guatemala. ... Uh, but, you know, we're like sisters, actually. She's literally like family. I mean, it's not even like work for her, really...

Ezra: I'm pretty sure it's like work for her...

Amira: Thank you, but that's not necessary. This looks nice.

(00:26:04 – 00:26:55)

When I first observed this scene, I found myself questioning the protagonist's underlying assumptions about Amira's preferences. Her dismissal of the offerings suggests a deeper, perhaps subconscious bias that may stem from societal stereotypes about minority groups. The introduction of the house help being "like family" serves to reinforce a troubling narrative that equates proximity with empathy. By emphasizing

her close relationship with Lupita, who hails from Guatemala, she attempts to present herself as unprejudiced. However, this perspective raises critical questions about the dynamics of power and privilege at play. It subtly implies that familiarity with a minority does not inherently dismantle biases; rather, it can serve to perpetuate them by exoticizing or oversimplifying their experiences. This scene invites a closer examination of how well-meaning intentions can mask deeper prejudices that linger beneath the surface of personal relationships. And the conversation continued...

Shelley: Oh, fabulous... So, I understand you're a stylist.

Amira: Yeah, kind of, I'm, um—I'm a costume designer. But that's kind of like styling.

Ezra: And she has the best style.

Shelley: No, that I can tell, yes... Yeah, I actually do, uh, a little styling myself.

Amira: Really? ... Oh, Ezra never said anything to me about that.

Ezra: I know, 'cause it's 100% not true. It's the first-time hearing of it, so...

Shelley: ... Yeah, I ... I audit their closets.

(00:26:56 – 00:27:29)

Again, as Shelley is performing whiteness, her line of conversation can be interpreted to mean that as a white woman, she is well-informed and knowledgeable. If Amira is a stylist, then she also is a stylist, and so on. It appeared that Shelley was trying to be competitive. Eventually, Ezra's sister joined the conversation (00:28:30 – 00:28:46). The way she greeted Amira clearly showed that she had some predisposition about how black people greeted each other and wanted to imitate that. This idea also reinforces some biases and stereotypes.

#### 4.1.3. The Proposal

Another instance where biases and stereotypes were presented was the scenes building up to the proposal. First, Ezra tells his friend Mo about how he plans to propose to Amira. Again, Mo, as a black woman, asked Ezra some simple questions that are essential to the black culture when it comes to marriage. For example, Mo asked if Ezra had met Amira's family before considering the proposal (00:34:10 – 00:35:06). Mo's line of conversation portrays some biases and stereotypes that black people also have about white people. After this conversation, Ezra decided to meet Amira's parents, tell them his intentions, and ask for their blessings before proposing. Below is an excerpt of the transcript of the conversation between Ezra and Amira's parents.

Ezra: It is so nice to meet you guys. What's going on? Tell me about life. How are you? How's work? Talk to me.

Fatima: Work...work is fine.

Ezra: Grinding. I know. I know. I'm in the grind myself.

(Mother chuckles)

Akbar: So, do you hang out in the hood all the time, or do you just come up here for our food and women?

Fatima: It's a valid question.

Ezra: It is. I guess I'm one of those guys who kind of goes wherever.

Akbar: You go wherever?

Ezra: Yeah, I'm kind of a chameleon in that way, I guess. You know, I'll pop into Marathon and grab a hoodie and some socks, ... and Roscoe's is obviously one of my go-to's. I mean, the Carol C. Special. Come on! Where's our waiter? I'm gonna go see if the waitperson's here because I feel like we should get it, 'cause I think you guys deserve more than this.

(00:35:15 – 00:36:21)

So, Ezra left the table to get a waiter. But the conversation continued between Amira's parents. Akbar accused his wife that "this is your white granddaddy coming back to haunt" him, and that is why their daughter is dating a white guy (00:36:26 – 00:36:45). The line of conversation between Ezra and Amira's parents may suggest that white people feel privileged and entitled. However, this meeting didn't go as he wanted, and he came home feeling frustrated, unsure if he should proceed with the proposal. Ezra came home to meet Amira, angry with him because her mum had already called and told her about the supposed 'date' Ezra had with her parents. Eventually, the proposal happened after Amira caught a glimpse of the ring (00:40:20 – 00:42:35). Amira's parents showed some biases against Ezra and played into some stereotypes against white people.

#### 4.1.4. The Job Interview

Apart from the intercultural challenges related to biases the romantic couple encountered, the film also portrayed other intercultural biases and stereotypes that could be associated with other forms of intercultural relationships from the viewpoint of casual or first-time acquaintances. Amira attended a job interview and below is an excerpt of the conversation:

Interviewer: Man, can you remind me again when you graduated Harvard? It's just maybe we know the same people.

Amira: Oh, um I ... I didn't go to, um Harvard. I went to Howard.

Interviewer: Hoooward. Sounds kind of familiar.

Amira: It's like the black Harvard.

Interviewer: Interesting!!!

(01:13:25 – 01:13:58)

This line of conversation, coupled with the interviewers' gestures and facial expressions, could mean that 'your credentials are good, but since you didn't go to Harvard, we are sorry.' It ended with Amira not getting the job. *You People* had several instances or scenes that depicted biases, stereotypes, privilege, power, and racial dynamics. It also depicted several differences and challenges these intercultural relationships encounter, which require some level of cultural assimilation/ adaptation and interchange, which is the next theme I discuss.

## 4.2. Cultural Assimilation/Adaptation and Interchange

Another portrayal or representation of Ezra and Amira's potential relationship as intercultural is the idea that such relationships are near impossible because of cultural differences and the need for cultural exchange and adaptation or assimilation, which a lot of pop culture representations of intercultural relationships have portrayed as impossible because both sides are not ready or willing to learn, exchange, and adapt to 'new' cultures. For example, a few scenes before their first encounter, Ezra spoke to his best friend, Mo, with whom he runs a podcast. Mo is also an African American woman. Mo tells her friend (Ezra), as she is helping him shop to pick an outfit for the date with Amira, that he should not expect any relationship from the date because such a relationship was way out of his league unless he wanted "someone to end up dead" (00:19:45 – 00:20:45). Then, the way Amira and Ezra complimented themselves and the line of conversation in the first scene of the first date shows how they were trying to blend in with each other's differences, and Ezra mainly made statements that portrayed him as someone who understood some black culture (00:20:18 – 00:21:45).

Amira also met with her brother and father (00:15:55 – 00:19:23). Both conversations implied that Ezra and Amira were planning on an official date. Still, family and friends questioned the possibility of an intercultural relationship emerging from Ezra and Amira's encounters. For example, Mo later vehemently voiced her opinion that "black and white people will never be cool" (01:09:08 – 01:09:58), which Ezra later admitted (01:38:52 – 01:38:54). On the other hand, Amira spoke freely with her brother that her date was with a white guy, but the moment her father – Akbar (played by Eddie Murphy) joined them at the table, she lied that the person she was going on a date with, was an African and a Muslim. Why would she have to lie to her dad about who her potential partner was? This representation shows that since it would be difficult for Amira's dad to accept Ezra as a white guy and the cultural differences that come with such a relationship, Amira had to lie in the moment. Also, going back to the scene of Amira's visit to Ezra's family, there were clear portrayals of cultural differences and the need for cultural adaptation and exchange.

Another scene that emphasizes cultural exchange and adaptation is the scene of Ezra and Amira's parents' luncheon date. Ezra left the table to go check on their waiter, but Akbar and Fatima (Amira's parents) continued the conversation:

Akbar: This is your white granddaddy coming back to haunt me...

Fatima: Those children got beautiful cultural experiences from those moments with my granddaddy, so please stop.

Akbar: What they got was confused, clearly.

Fatima: They are not confused.

(00:36:25 – 00:36:52)

Fatima's responses show that cultural adaptation and ex-

change are possible and result in a rich cultural experience for their children.

Regarding bridging the cultural difference gap and creating room for some cultural exchange and adaptation based on the conversation after Ezra finally quit his job (00:46:22 – 00:46:59) was to have a family dinner with both their parents at their (Ezra and Amira) house (00:46:59 – 00:54:02). The before dinner conversations saw Shelley practically criticizing almost everything from colors in the house Akbar's hat, to their jobs. She would mostly end her critiques in words such as "but it's a good thing. Then, the conversation about the comparison of the Jewish holocaust and black slavery came up. Eventually, that dinner that was supposed to, in a way, unite these two families ended badly. From the after-dinner conversation, Ezra and Amira brainstormed about what they would do about their parents. Ezra and Amira decided to spend more time with the 'problem' parent from each side. So, Ezra went out to spend some time with Akbar (barber shop, basketball), and Amira went out to spend some time with Shelley at the spa (00:57:42 – 01:09:06).

Next are the bachelor and bachelorette parties (01:14:02 – 01:22:09). Against the normal order, Amira invited her soon-to-be mother-in-law and sister-in-law to join her and her mother and friends for a girl's out-of-town bachelorette in the name of cultural adaptation and exchange. On the other hand, Akbar and Amira's brother invited themselves (uninvited) to join Ezra and his friends' out-of-town bachelor party. For Akbar, his intention was not to encourage cultural interchange or adaptation but to intimidate Ezra and look for mistakes that could stop the marriage from happening. Another big depiction of differences and the need for adaptation and exchange was the rehearsal dinner with family and friends, eventually leading to the breakup. But again, these strategies to spend time with the parents from both sides did not exactly go as expected, perpetuating the idea that intercultural relationship challenges are near impossible to overcome, even though they saw the need for some cultural adaptation and interchange. Another strategy is to encourage cultural adaptation and exchange to work through some of their differences. Apart from the near-impossible narrative that makes the cultural exchange and assimilation or adaptation seem impossible, *You People*, as a rom-com the film, also presents the 'live happily ever after' narrative that I call the love wins theme. This is discussed next.

### 4.3. The Triumph of Love: Hope and Reconciliation

From the literature reviewed above, most analyzed movies, books, and novels emphasized the differences and challenges that occur with intercultural relationships. None of these scholars [1, 16, 18] reported a sense of hope or people in the artifacts they analyzed being able to navigate their differences to arrive at a happy place. However, even though *You People* depicted some differences and challenges, making intercul-

tural relationships near impossible, especially for romantic ones, and not seeing this impossibility changing any time soon, the film also presented a glimpse of hope for the future and where there is true love in an intercultural relationship, challenges may come, but love can win against all odds.

*You people* presented the couple's families as a significant challenge, but if they see that there is true love, they can open up for the possibility of growing that relationship. In one of their (Mo and Ezra) podcasts broadcast after the breakup, when Ezra admitted that Mo was right that white people and black people can never be cool and passionate, they appealed to the public with the hope for change. It happened that Akbar was driving with his brother and was listening to the podcast, and both brothers talked and agreed that there was a need for change. In another scene, Shelley also watched and listened to the same podcast. It was then that the two 'problem' parents decided to work things around (initiated by Akbar) for the sake of the children's love (01:38:40 – 01:42:59). Then finally, the reunion and apologies happened, leading to the surprise wedding, which presented the happily ever after scenario (01:43:08 – 01:49:24).

This narrative underscores that identifying and addressing privileges, stereotypes, and differences play a critical role in creating hope and reconciliation outcomes depicted in the movie. By acknowledging their biases and the power dynamics rooted in cultural differences, characters like Akbar and Shelley took the necessary steps to reconcile. Their willingness to confront their roles in perpetuating the cultural divides fosters personal growth and creates a pathway for the couple's relationship to flourish, leading to the marriage. This act of dealing with privilege is portrayed as a catalyst for understanding, bridging gaps, and ultimately enabling love to triumph despite significant challenges. However, this type of representation can significantly influence the reinforcement of overly simplistic solutions to intricate cultural interactions and dynamics. When complex cultural issues are reduced to one-dimensional portrayals, they fail to address the underlying factors at play and risk perpetuating stereotypes and misunderstandings. These oversimplified narratives can lead to a lack of nuance in discussions, preventing deeper engagement with the multifaceted realities within different communities. Ultimately, such portrayals can hinder the development of effective strategies for addressing cultural conflicts and promoting understanding among diverse groups. Individual perspectives and cultural contexts play a significant role in shaping the representation of whiteness within intercultural relationships, primarily through pop culture representation. Therefore, it is essential to approach these discussions with sensitivity, open-mindedness, and a willingness to engage in dialogue that recognizes and respects diverse experiences and perspectives.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper aims to contribute to the growing literature on

the representation of intercultural relationships in pop culture through the lens of performance of whiteness in areas such as films or movies, music videos, television shows, social media, etc., by critically analyzing the film *You People*. The paper will show how popular culture reinforces or perpetuates systemic racism and inequality (or not). The paper attempted to answer two research questions: (1) How are intercultural relationships (marriages) depicted in the film *You People*, and what themes emerge from this representation? (2) How is whiteness portrayed and performed in the film *You People*, and what are the cultural and social implications of this portrayal? In answering the above research questions the following findings emerged: (1) *You People* depicted intercultural relationships in a way that reinforces the biases, stereotypes, white privilege, power, and racial dynamics that may exist in intercultural relationships, (2) as a result of these differences, the need for cultural assimilation/adaptation and interchange or exchange, and (3) presented the narrative that it is possible for love to win and that intercultural relationships are not necessarily doomed because of cultural differences and backgrounds but there is hope that people can work through their differences and have a happy life. I hope these findings promote understanding and respect for cultural differences in cross-cultural marriages. It would also provide valuable insights into the role of popular culture in shaping cultural norms and social structures. Even though the makers of *You People* argue that the film is purely a rom-com and fictional, there are a lot of lessons to learn about how pop culture represents intercultural relationships and whiteness.

Whiteness is often associated with historical and contemporary power structures, particularly in the context of colonization and imperialism [22, 29, 30, 32], and whiteness is also associated with privilege in many societies [21, 23, 25, 31]. Thus, through pop culture, intercultural relationship dynamics can often be exposed, and intercultural relationships involving whiteness can sometimes involve power imbalances, with white individuals potentially holding more social, economic, or cultural influence. These power dynamics can influence the dynamics and experiences within the relationship [1, 16, 18]. In *You People*, the power dynamics, as well as white privilege, were primarily subtle and alluded to. For example, Amira's line of conversation with Ezra during their first encounter with Uber confusion may imply some power structures and dynamics at play.

Another example is seen in the scene where Amira vented her frustration about not getting the job, and Ezra offered to help her. These and several other conversations implicitly alluded to the power structures and dynamics that the performance of whiteness exerts in intercultural relationships. Also, partners in intercultural relationships may usually have different experiences and challenges based on their racial or ethnic background, and these dynamics need to be carefully navigated and understood within the relationship. For instance, the dinner table's genealogy conversation reflects the privileges associated with whiteness as against other racial identi-

ties. Having the awareness and acknowledgment of privilege and its impact on the relationship is crucial for fostering an understanding of each other's background.

Additionally, the analysis brought to the forefront several biases and stereotypes in the representation of intercultural relations, with the performance of whiteness, which reinforces many of the stereotypes and biases previous scholarship has identified with intercultural relationships. For example, *The Big Sick* depicted the performance of whiteness as invisible and superior with all the good and positive stereotypes associated with whiteness and represented the other cultures as negative, inferior, and all the negative stereotypes associated with being a Muslim [26]. Similarly, *You People* portrayed the white family as more welcoming than the black family, also emphasizing the open-mindedness of whiteness against the close-mindedness of other cultures, in this case, the black culture. These stereotypes and biases can be both positive and negative, ranging from assumptions of superiority (Amira and Ezra's first encounter) to harmful racial stereotypes [1, 16, 18]. Partners in an intercultural relationship and their social networks must actively challenge and dismantle such stereotypes, promoting a more nuanced and respectful understanding of each other's identities and cultures.

For instance, "Bollywood-esque movie functions as a tool for (re)constructing a particular worldview" (p. 289) [22]. Such representations, I think, continue to perpetuate the structures of power and other institutionalized structures and make it difficult to undo or dismantle these structures. By creating a sense of universalism, (an)othering allows enlightened Western audiences to watch representations of the other without the guilt of racism [22]; the representation of whiteness, as performed by Ezra and his family, creates that sense of otherness. For example, Ezra was trying his best to support and help Amira escape the guilt of racism. Still, Amira pointed out that he was trying to shove his white privilege with the connections he had to get her a job she felt she was entitled to.

Furthermore, intercultural relationships involving whiteness can often involve a process of cultural exchange and adaptation. The white partner may have to engage with and learn about the cultural practices, values, and traditions of their non-white partner since it is assumed that the white partner is more ignorant of other cultures and perspectives because of whiteness invisibility [1, 16, 18]. However, partners and their social networks need to be open-minded to learn about and from each other as depicted in the film. This can lead to a richer understanding and appreciation of different cultures, but it can also pose challenges and require open-mindedness, flexibility, and respect for differences.

Again, *You People* projected some major issues and challenges associated with intercultural relationships but also the idea that people in such relationships can work on these challenges. The only problem is that even though the representation of the challenges seemed workable, the film depicted that the attempt to work out these challenges was

largely unsuccessful, as discussed above in the findings section. Yet ironically, the film also presents the ‘happily ever after’ narrative. The call for change depicted in the movie caused the parents to reflect and think about the relationship for the greater good of their children (Ezra and Amira). However, it is essential to remember that each intercultural relationship is unique, and the dynamics and experiences within these relationships can vary widely.

In conclusion, while the film *You People* explores the complexities of intercultural relationships, it also invites a deeper reflection on identity, race, racism, and whiteness in contemporary society. The portrayal of whiteness in the film highlights how systemic power structures and privilege are often subtle and invisible yet pervasive within intercultural relationships. The invisibility of whiteness, as seen through Ezra’s or Shelley’s character, mirrors broader societal tendencies where the racial advantages of white individuals are overlooked or denied. This reinforces the need to critically examine how racial dynamics influence personal and societal interactions in romantic intercultural relationships and various multicultural spheres.

Furthermore, the film’s depiction of the challenges and potential for change in intercultural relationships suggests that race and identity are not static but evolve as individuals navigate and confront these complexities. While the narrative offers a glimmer of hope through conflict resolutions, it does not acknowledge the deeper societal issues that continue to shape relationships. This leaves room for further exploration of how pop culture engages with and challenges these racial constructs meaningfully. Future research could examine how these dynamics play out in other media representations and whether such narratives genuinely lead to broader social change or if they reinforce existing power structures.

## Author Contributions

Gertrude Misornu Nartey is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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