

# **Diverse Love: How Interracial Relationships are Portrayed in Film: A Personal Journey**

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## ABSTRACT

The following paper aims to explore and analyse the consequential impact of how interracial and cross-cultural relationships are portrayed in film. It highlights the perspectives of those who have subjective lived experience within interracial relationships through first-hand research. Further explanation is provided towards how these findings have shaped the approach to developing *Diverse Love*, a point-of-view style autobiographical documentary depicting my own experience in an interracial relationship.

To achieve this, a mixed-methods approach has been employed; combining primary academic research through small-sample questionnaires, reviews of relevant literature or media and a reflective writing journal, as a supplementary narrative to the ideas and topics presented in *Diverse Love*. Throughout both the creative and written aspects of this project, the core motivation has been to accurately and authentically represent my own lived experience as a white English woman in an interracial marriage with a black South African man. To ensure I was creating a piece of work which addresses a socio-political need and to recognize the context in which it will be placed, I start by briefly outlining South Africa's more recent history, with a specific focus on race politics.

Delving into the process behind creating the film, whilst understanding the key themes of interracial love, we both learn about the challenges that can be experienced, as well as celebrate the positive interactions. This is further complimented by interviews with other interracial couples who share their experiences with stereotypes, and how they feel this is represented in visual media. As there is limited research previously undertaken on this topic, it was important to not only include my perspective, but also the opinions of others, to address commonly occurring prejudices. To create a well-rounded piece of writing, I also explored through academic research the themes of documentary and the topics of race.

The key conclusions drawn from this research indicate a significant lack of representation of interracial couples in film and that the majority of portrayals follow stereotypes and are not accurate to the lived experiences. There is also a lack of academic analysis on films which exhibit themes of interracial relationships, with the majority of papers focused on discussing *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner* (Kramer, 1967). Not only that, many of the studies are situated within the context of American film or political context and neglect to represent a global audience, as well as being outdated and in need of a more current lens. This study adds value to the field as it blends elements of personal experience with academic research, within a niche and under-represented topic. This gives an in-depth and emotive result, with an overarching recommendation that the film industry can look to evolve, ensuring a more diverse and accurate representation of in the interracial relationships portrayed.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

This paper is a supplementary piece to a documentary film that shows the current dynamics between a mixed heritage family based in Cape Town titled *Diverse Love*. The motivation for this research study originates from my personal life experience as a white filmmaker from England who is married to a Xhosa musician. Both the dynamics of race and culture are explored in the documentary film *Diverse Love*, naturally leading to research on why interracial relationships are still viewed as unusual, uncovering the prejudice they face and understanding their underrepresentation in film.

To study oneself through the reflection of visual media is “a representation of the self as a performance” that is “not a fixed form but is in constant flux” (Russell, 1999). Throughout this filmmaking process, vision of the end-product was ever changing, bringing frustration and confusion, yet creating a research study in parallel aided the outcome by including suggestions from potential audience members. I can choose which aspects of our lives to display, influencing the overall message of the film. Still, I must consider my gaze as a white female filmmaker who is documenting a culture that I was not born into, yet my life has been intertwined with through love, marriage and parenting. This style of documentary film making can be classified under the term autobiography which can be simply described as a way to “systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto)” (Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. 2011). Realising that these definitions fit well with the context and style of my film, I can confidently say that the category is relevant to my documentary. Through the reflectivity of this writing, as well as learning through communications from society in South Africa, my understanding of how I may be seen as a white filmmaker documenting my relationship with a man of Xhosa culture has opened my life to be vulnerable for inspection by the watching world. Analysing my positionality as a white filmmaker in South Africa can be a sensitive field to navigate considering the history of racial tension. However, my choice was to include a participatory style production method where I utilised and appreciated the time and skills of friends and colleagues who were keen to be involved in a film that shares a positive outlook on interracial families. I also felt that it was vital for me to include my husband in the entire process to represent him and his culture in a manner that he finds appropriate. Yonelisa, (my husband) also assisted in the editing for translation of language and composition of the music. It is important that I represent his culture in an accurate and positive light, sharing information that can help the audience to see why their traditions hold special meaning to them. The overall aim of this study process, both written and visual, is to help society understand that cross-cultural relationships are formed of two people who grew up in varying traditions yet despite this, are still able to share their worlds with each other in successful and lifelong happiness, just like any other relationship.

To grasp the context of my relationship, it was imperative to learn about the history of South Africa. For many years, “South Africa has historically been a country of racial tension with legislation seeking to keep the races apart” (Morrall, 1994). Imposed by a white political party called the Apartheid Regime, people of colour were segregated into “racial categories” which were then “imposed through violence and used to uphold inequality” (Dalmage, 2018). In 1991 the Population Registration act was abolished followed by the 1994 “first democratic elections” which led to “ending the reign of white minority rule” (Morrall, 1994). Despite this change, still today the after affects are rippling through society as generations of suffering caused pain, conflict and systematic oppression. People of colour are left without trauma therapy, in states of extreme poverty, expected to form peaceful relations and reconciliation with all inhabitants of this rainbow country. To move from prohibition of “mixed marriages between the white and non-white population groups” (Morrall, 1994) to demanding that the nation gets along in a friendly manner, South Africans have been left confused and scarred. Given the complexity of this background, these themes are explored further in relation to the documentary film as part of this project.

This project has undertaken both primary and secondary research, encompassing previous academic studies and a survey to understand the opinions of couples who are currently in/or have been in relationships with someone of another race or culture. The survey consisted of open ended questions covering topics surrounding the portrayal of interracial relationships in film, stereotypes of interracial relationships, and how these reflect on their own experience. After presenting the findings, a personal reflective journal weaves together the insights gained and the lived experience which inspired this project.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Without solely focusing on how the colonisers of South Africa determined what race really is, we can look to other scholars for academic definitions, such as Lesley Morrall's 1994 study, titled; 'Interracial Families in South Africa', which states that; "the term race implies a broad range of cultural, ethnic, social and political definitions which are viewed differently by various nations, throughout various stages in history" (Morrall, 1994). This shows that there is difficulty in specifically describing how to define race, yet Morrall continues to say that it "should rather be interpreted as a construct which has a sociological and historical meaning" (1994). Therefore, the term race can vary from context and situation in each country, which will also evolve over time as we understand the complexity of what the term race holds.

Gaging from my own experience of being in an interracial relationship, most challenges are presented by other people around you; either family/friends or the public, in comparison to the actual differences between these cultures and ways of living. Yet it cannot be ignored that the coming together of cultures has potential to create hurdles due to the differences in upbringing which reflects in the gender role expectations each will hold such as careers/parenting/household duties etc. There are vaster variances in the obstacles that interracial couples may face, even the way that each person is treated in society will not be similar as a result of the prejudices that people of colour face across the world.

In the context of this paper, a stereotype is understood to be Carole Viola Bell's definition; "stereotypes are a form of schemas, which help us make sense of the social world. The problem arises not because we use schema as a shortcut to recognition and understanding, which is a natural process, as social psychologists point out, but because our racial schema or stereotypes are filled with negative and faulty information" (Bell, 2010). These can be based on class/race/education/economic status etc. or indeed people can create judgements from any personal beliefs as Morrall refers to the term prejudice as; "a special type of attitude, (generally negative) which an individual feels towards a particular group" (1994). These attitudes stem from many years of societal stereotypes and assumptions, yet why do people feel so inclined to pass judgement? "Another perspective on the origins of prejudice involves the process of social categorisation, that is, the propensity for people to divide their world into the distinct categories of "us" and "them"" (Morrall, 1994). This is particularly prevalent in a country such as South Africa where the racial divide has been intentional, yet regardless of "the origins of prejudice these negative attitudes can be quite difficult to change." (Morrall, 1994)

When my husband and I are in public with our child, we receive a variety of reactions from people compared to when we walk alone. Society sees us through lenses that have lived the history of "discrimination against interracial marriages" which "has been both normative and legal" (van der Walt and Basson, 2015). It was this constant intrigue from outsiders that prompted me to create an avenue which provides more information. In order to help create positive portrayals of interracial relationships, a non-fiction film is required, showing the real lives of a family instead of a stereotypical film cast. The documentary film that I created for this Master's degree is informative yet entertaining, showing the coming together of two cultures for the purposes of love. Complimented by a reflective research dissertation that explores 'How Interracial Relationships are Portrayed in Film'.

Not only is there a lack of films focusing on the theme of interracial relationships, there is also a lack of academic study of the existing films. Bell highlights this lack of study in her paper; 'Women, Film and Racial Thinking: Exploring The Representation and Reception of Interracial Romance' (2010). This study has been of great information regarding the issues around representation of race in the media, as well as discussing how the "scholarly study of entertainment media discourse involving intimate interracial relationships has been extremely limited" (2010). I will be further analysing the study in this paper, regardless of the difference that Bell's paper focuses on the American population, whereas I am coming from the perspective of someone with a British/South African outlook.

The most commonly reviewed film across academic papers is Kramer's *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner* (1967), which demonstrates the need for current research and more current films. When researching other

academic papers, it was difficult to find texts that are directly relevant to my situation of a British/South African context. Most articles focused on America and its' history, whereas I must relay the context from which I am writing. As someone who is in an interracial marriage in Cape Town, we face daily encounters as "the very act of living across racial boundaries or borders is a challenge to existing ideologies and social structures" (Dalmage, 2018).

Race is a constant discussion in South Africa, as divulged by Dalmage who studied the experiences of interracial families in South Africa. The study concluded that "while legal sanctions against mixed race families and relationships have been removed, social acceptance lags" (Dalmage, 2018). It speaks a lot of relevance to my experiences with other members of the public who do not always react in the most positive and accepting of ways. This study is only partially relevant as it discusses race in a South African context yet does not involve any research into how these relationships are portrayed in film.

Whereas Ramoutar studied specifically how women in interracial relationships are portrayed in film (2006). I was able to reflect on myself as someone who fits into that category yet did not relate to the stereotypes that were presented in the analysis of films which implies that "no healthy or normal white woman would want to enter into a relationship, sexual or romantic, with a man of another race" (Ramoutar, 2006). This portrayal from Hollywood movies is created by a certain type of figure in society who perhaps generically disapproves of such mixed relationships; Ramoutar describes "Hollywood film as a 'white male utopia'" (2006). An interesting point as to why the interpretations of interracial relationships are not always accurate to reality is due to "white male creation of what interracial relationships look like" (2006) stated Ramoutar, who found that from 36 films being analysed, only 3 women (none of colour) were involved as a key role in the production. It is a concern that the audiences are absorbed by "the true power of a mass media like popular film" and "the mystical way in which the portrayal no matter how unrealistic is presented as natural or normal" (Ramoutar, 2006).

A similar study to the theme of Ramoutar's research is 'Women, Film and Racial Thinking: Exploring the Representation and Reception of Interracial Romance' by Carole Bell (2010). I have continued along a niche of research that discusses the representation of women and interraciality in film, as this is who I am as one of the key characters in my documentary. The resemblances within both these studies are the exploration of women in interracial films especially focusing on American context, both analysing films like Kramer's *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967) which was the most mentioned film across all the academic papers I reviewed.

This is where this area of study stands out from previous research in the field, the understanding of interraciality in film is placed through a British/South African context. I was unable to find any academic papers that explored the history of South Africa and how interracial relationships are portrayed in film, compared to many studies that described the affects of the Civil Rights Movement in America on portrayal in Hollywood film (Ramoutar, 2006). The hypothesis proposed is that due to a lack of representation in film, interracial relationships are subject to prejudice as a result of misinformation and inaccurate portrayal in film characters and scenarios. If there were more films showing a diverse background of interracial relationships that steer far from the stereotypes, that dive into the cultures and the experiences of their lifestyles, then perhaps society would feel less surprised by the existence of interracial families.

Despite few positive aspects to stereotyping, there is a lot of harm placed on those being stereotyped through misrepresentation. In the world of technical revolution and a pandemic lockdown, people are consuming more through screens in the current years. This illustrates the incredible need for film that have positive and truthful themes as "films also serve as a powerful means to transmit culture from one generation to the next in a society" (Ramoutar, 2006). Therefore, filmmakers hold the power of portrayal, and are responsible for hearing the public plea for more accurate and diverse representation on their screens, hence why non-fiction films are so important, or narratives based on a true story. The weight falls on my shoulders as a female filmmaker in an interracial marriage to accurately represent interracial relationships and to display real life experiences from learning each other's culture and way of life.

### **3.0 METHODOLOGY**

As found in the literature review, there is an apparent gap in academic documentation of the lived experience of being in an interracial relationship in South Africa. In order to understand what an accurate representation of interracial relationships looks like, I created a survey to gain insight into the lives of people in interracial relationships, what the stereotypes are, and if this is reflected within film. To gain more insight into this as a pre-cursor for developing the documentary film, a primary research method was adopted where 17 people from a variety of countries and backgrounds formed the sample for the questionnaire. The aim of this survey was to interview people who are in/or have been in interracial relationships, therefore having personal experience of the challenges and if they feel this is correlated on the big screen.

The survey consisted of 12 open-ended questions (see section 4.0, RESEARCH FINDINGS, for further detail). A group of 17 people from various countries and backgrounds responded to the open-ended questionnaire with 12 options to answer, yet none were mandatory. The questions started with which films they had seen that feature interracial relationships and ended with how this is reflected in their own lives. Naturally, this study is exploratory, aiming to understand the experiences of being in an interracial relationship and how accurate the representation in film is. Employing a qualitative research method through an open-ended questionnaire was chosen to ensure the data received was as rich and subjective as possible, allowing participants to retain their voice and participate in their own time and space.

One limitation of the study was the lack of specificity to the countries in which the participants reside, due to interest of all experiences globally. When initially seeking respondents, the aim was to focus on the South African interracial experience, however, there was difficulty finding people – perhaps because interracial relationships are not common in South Africa, compared to the westernized environment I come from in the UK. There was a low response rate which I hypothesize could be due to a scepticism towards involvement as the research lead was a white British woman. This highlights the issues discussed in the literature review, that there is generally a lack of representation which has isolated people in interracial relationships from having a platform to be a part of the cultural discussion. There could be potential bias in the results, not only due to the global nature of the sample, but also the size, they may not be an accurate representation of all lived experiences.

Participants were able to answer or skip any questions at will, with many choosing to further comment that they found the survey “an interesting thought process”, “highlighting an important topic” whilst making them more aware that “there was such a lack of portrayal”. With one participant expressing desire for further communication to be able to fully articulate their feelings towards this study. There could also have been more detailed questions about the participants themselves, yet the survey had to be kept short and anonymous. A recommended next step to solve this and progress the research would be through one-to-one interviews or focus groups.

Regardless of the small sample size, quality data with depth and vital information was received that can inform the future development of interracial representation in film. Almost all respondents displayed displeasure in the prejudice they have received, and most regard the representations in film to be inaccurate.

## 4.0 RESEARCH FINDINGS

After surveying people in interracial or cross-cultural relationships, it was evident that there is underrepresentation as well as misrepresentation within film. Previous studies have failed to address how accurately the real life experiences of interracial relationships are portrayed. Simply by opening the discussion on race with people who are living the experiences daily, we can understand whether film truthfully expresses this. Drawing the conclusion that more films need to be made that detail cultural traditions and the experiences that two people go through when in a relationship with someone outside of their own culture. The issues that have been identified will create opportunity for further in-depth research in the future, such as focusing the questions to people who have experienced race in a South African context. Further research could also discuss families that have lived in more than 1 country and to compare their experiences from different locations.

The primary research interview questions are presented and analysed below, beginning with an opening question that prompts the interviewees to think about the variety of films available that specifically focus on the theme of relationships that are interracial. From the films mentioned by participants, *A United Kingdom* was one of the most viewed, which is about the challenges faced by being in an interracial relationship and is based on a true story. The context of this film is closely relatable to my personal experience, which will be detailed further in the Reflective Journal section later in this paper.

### **4.1 Question 1: Which films have you seen that feature interracial relationships?**

The most commonly occurring answers listed; *To All The Boys I've Loved Before* (Johnson, 2018), *Get Out* (Peele, 2017), *A United Kingdom* (Asante, 2016), *Guess Who* (Sullivan, 2005), *Save The Last Dance* (Carter, 2001), *The Bodyguard* (Jackson, 1992).

From the above results, there is a lack of current films within the past 5 years that feature a theme of interracial relationships as the key narrative. There were 4 participants who were not able to name any films, with comments such as "I can't even name one". This is a clear result concluding that there is a significant lack of representation of interracial relationships within film. There are a few films mentioned that have been made recently, yet there are also films which date back as far as 1992 such as *The Bodyguard* (Jackson, 1992). In comparison the films mentioned in Ramoutar and Bell's studies where they review a lot older films like Kramer's *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner* (1967). This film wasn't even watched by 1 participant from my study. The need for more recent research and analysis of interracially themed films is very apparent.

### **4.2 Question 2: How do you feel interracial relationships are portrayed in film?**

This question was answered in response to the specific films that each participant had viewed, and therefore does not cover a broader perspective of how people in interracial relationships could possibly feel. One participant responded with; "I do still feel that they just put a person of colour into the narrative to kind of 'tick boxes' to seem like the production is 'woke' and aware of diversity. There are also inclusions of interracial couples which has been done in a very 'true to life' way - naturally and organically - because race is irrelevant to why two people get together, but it's acknowledged and not ignored within the relationship." This participant appreciated both sides of representation, that not all portrayals are negative, yet most of the films have so far shown typecasting. With another participant commenting that "there are always clashes between cultures/races involved, however there usually is a positive outcome after a challenge." That is a key element to magnify, resulting in overcoming obstacles and showing strength and durability.

The family and friends surrounding an interracial couple are stereotyped in film with not approving of the relationship, as noticed by one participant who stated "there is generally some sort of tension from the parents in the film around their children being in this kind of relationship. Sometimes it's masked with humour." To avoid the direct topic of why the parents don't feel comfortable, by making a comedy out of

the scenario, causes damage to important values that the audience can learn from if a discussion is initiated approaching the actual issues with feelings about interracial relationships.

When participants were asked how they feel interracial relationships are portrayed in film, there were mixed results but mostly with negative connotations, such as “forbidden/hidden/frowned upon”. The majority discuss unrealistic misrepresentation that is exclusive to the stereotypes created by characters of Hollywood film, with some relationships being “fetishized and exoticized”. This portrayal seeps into daily experience as mentioned by a participant; “some black people in South Africa think white people are sex maniacs.” The narrative in films “don’t acknowledge or discuss each other’s race” which is “integral to how you understand the experience of your partner” stated one participant. These issues are faced daily by couples in interracial relationships and should not be ignored in film if they are to portray the relationships accurately. Another participant stated that film “doesn’t really show the reality of the coming together of different cultures and lived experiences” and that “almost every interracial couple is a black man with a white woman. Not the other way around or with any other race other than white.” Lack of diversity in film has always been evident and using a stereotypical black/white mix seems like an easy go-to. Even though most of the answers to this question focused on the inaccuracy of portrayals, there were answers that highlighted the overall issue of “extreme underrepresentation” as expressed by one participant.

This was followed with the question of how accurate to reality these depictions are, with one respondent stating, “it actually bothers me when films/TV don’t acknowledge or discuss each other’s race in the narrative - I feel like in real life, there are definitely discussions about it, that it is important and is integral to how you understand the experience of your partner.” Whilst other topics of fetishization and exoticism were raised, other people commented that the portrayal was fairly similar to their experiences of challenges faced.

#### **4.3 Question 3: How fair or accurate to truth (from your experience) have these films represented interracial relationships?**

A couple of participants made similar comments stating, “somewhat accurate when it comes to challenge’s faced” and others sticking with “not accurate at all, they focus on stereotypes” there is a divide within the participants on this question. One participant strongly felt “that the film representations were opposite to my personal view as the child of an interracial marriage and family.” In contrast to another participant who stated that it “can be quite true but should not be generalized as it’s not the same everywhere”. Overall, there is a general feel that it “doesn’t really show the reality of the coming together of different cultures and lived experiences” and occasionally “feels like the person was only cast for the production to seem integrated.” A different participant commented that “more modern films seem to get it right a little better than older films.” This can be seen as reflected by the film A United Kingdom where they based the narrative on a true story. Each participant experiences race and racism differently, “but it depends on the family and their culture or your surroundings”. Some people have support from those around them, whereas other people have had to choose between their relationship and their family; “although the people around me have accepted the relationship now” mentioned another participant. It was also stated that the representations can be “fairly accurate especially the older ones as sentiments were different 25-30 years ago. In SA mixed relationships weren’t as popular as they now are.” It is a general mixed response as their opinions will be based on their individual journeys in life. It also differs depending on the age of the participant and location. Yet in reflection, there are many elements that will affect peoples’ view of what accurate portrayal means to them.

#### **4.4 Question 4: After seeing these films, what was your opinion on interracial relationships?**

The consensus followed one participant’s statement; “I do sometimes feel quite positive after watching these kinds of films - but real life, the experience is a bit different.” A theme occurred around the topic of reality and its’ reflection in their own lives. It was uplifting to see a participant comment; “I get really excited and happy when I see interracial couples on screen that don’t land up breaking up, remain in a healthy and functional relationship, and that the partner is understanding and educates themselves about their partner’s

experiences.” This further affirms the requirement for more films that convey a positive outlook on interracial relationships.

Another participant mentioned; “that they can and will work, it will come with its’ own challenges.” This highlights the balance of displaying the joys yet also the obstacles that come with cross cultural relationships, and the importance of showing both sides equally as much, as the relationships are; “a beautiful yet very difficult, troublesome journey through society.” A comment from a participant discusses acceptance from others as a topic to further explore; “some of the films I mentioned highlight the hurdles couples from different cultures sometimes have to negotiate to get acceptance”. This implies that people who are not in interracial relationship have less difficulty being approved of by others.

Due to the stereotypes and portrayals, another participant felt that some of the films “propagate negative connotations about interracial relationships and black people.” It doesn’t help “that race issues aren’t spoken about openly in relationships” commented a different participant. Despite this, there were a few answers that focused on the power of love always winning saying that “love doesn’t choose a colour, so why do we want to”. A powerful and progressive message to share with the world. This positivity was shared by another participant who stated that; “my opinion on interracial relationships would remain unchanged no matter how they are portrayed in film – which is to say that I support relationships of any kind, but especially relationships that break down barriers”.

#### **4.5 Question 5: What would you like to see more of in film around the theme of interracial or cross culture relationships?**

For this study to be of use, we must determine a way of moving forward in the future to enable more and accurate representations of interracial relationships. The best way to understand this is by asking this question, with responses consisting of; “how to overcome the indifference” and “I also want to see the conversations being had between couples on screen”. Addressing the conflict directly helps people to understand better the reasons behind the difficulties faced, showing “the reality of what it’s like from both sides” which is what another participant wished to see more of.

One participant suggested; “I guess the interracial relationship being more normal in films for example not necessarily as the main feature but as background relationships in scenes. Like not necessarily drawing specific attention to it and I guess that would come about by making more film roles available to people other than white people and focusing of their history other than the standard issues they usually deal with: hip hop, drugs, guns, violence etc”. Another participant wanted to see “the perspective or reality of the black person” which is the angle that I have aimed to create in my documentary, allowing my husband to share creative direction so that his voice is heard as well as my own. I have come to understand that this causes a blur between the definitions of an autobiographical documentary and an ethnographic film.

Another response stated, “I think they should stop try to make the focus of the films being about an "interracial relationship" and more on a relationship. Race has no bearing on love or how you feel about someone”. This is further confirmed by another participant, “more films where the interracial relationship isn’t the storyline i.e. it’s just not talked about and isn’t part of the plot” and “the couples treated as more normal and usual instead of special and unique”.

A suggestion that I feel reflects similar to my documentary film is “the actual learning of another culture, language barriers, customs and traditions. Having children and the problems they may face one day.” My aim was to bring awareness to why the elements of the Xhosa culture mean so much to them, and to start introducing global audiences to the ancient ways of the Xhosa people. Perhaps I could have gone into further detail at the end of the film to discuss what issues my child will face being bi-racial. Yet as I reflect upon this, I have the inspiration to continue making films that inform and entertain, to help the audience learn about lifestyles of other people, but also to enjoy the experience of watching visual art.

There were two other participants who shared similar outlooks stating they wish to see “couples embracing each other’s culture more and positivity and inclusivity from both cultures”. As well as; “the understanding of cultures between the two people, exploring their roots and background”.

More inclusion in general will help “to see it normalized” comments one participant, which they believe will “encourage people who have conservative/racist families to still follow their heart”. This includes the lack of diversity within interracial couples portrayed in film as there is need for “more different types of interracial (White/Asian – Latin/Black etc) not always just the standard of Black/White.” This ‘standard’ that a particular participant was speaking of is a common stereotype of interracial couples which was expanded upon in the following question:

#### **4.6 Question 6: In your opinion, what are the stereotypes around interracial relationships?**

This question brought about the most varied of responses yet, with very few having similar opinions, even though they were all negative responses. This shows how vast the stereotyping of interracial relationships is. Firstly, someone stated that; “there has to be justification as to why you are with a person of colour and vice versa - is it about money, their sexual abilities, their appearance and so forth - and not just be about the fact that you really like the person's company, their thoughts and ideals, are sexually attracted to them, and things that would not otherwise be considered in a same race relationship”.

Continuing to say that when revealing the race of their partner, they received “a response of shock or surprise” and that “the idea of being able to ‘do better’ / ‘couldn’t do better’ when you are dating someone of colour, because apparently that means you are ‘stooping down a level’.” These various stereotypes may not be obvious to someone who is not involved in an interracial relationship themselves due to the majorities of experiences coming from “micro-aggression that are often not outwardly acknowledged but is felt and said in round about ways”.

Judgement is experienced by most of the participants with a key theme around approval or lack of. Despite the couples themselves not always requiring approval from others, society tends to believe that acceptance from the outside will make or break a relationship. One participant mentioned; “that I need my ‘Dad’s’ (specifically) permission to be married to a black man”. With a lot of judgement coming from “people of their own culture” more than the broader public. Another stereotype that is commonly placed among mixed relationships is; “that people are fetishizing the other person and not truly in love with who they are”. There does seem to be a common trend across the survey of wider acceptance in the younger generations in comparison to older generations who “don’t like it when their children mix with other races” responded a participant. With further comments such as; “don’t you want a kid of your own colour”. These types of comments can be demoralising and offensive especially when being heard from close support groups.

Another participant’s answer came across strongly when they said the stereotype meant that “we hate our own race so we marry another race” or that people engage in interracial relationships “just to have mixed kids” that “are going to look like exotic animals”. Some remarks that are heard can create a lot of trauma and stress for individuals and families at whole with no regard for their wellbeing. There appears to be a large focus around the fascination of mixed race children with another participant commenting; “it’s a fetish for a white and black couple to be together in order to produce mixed race kids”.

A deep analysis can be undertaken on this particular comment made by a participant; “I think race and culture are often confused. Inherently people from different cultures have larger barriers/divides, and if this is accompanied by a different race it is compounded.” When a couple are of different cultures, as well as different races, there are many more challenges that they must face, alongside the regular obstacles that couples must go through. With some people believing that; “they will never work as the two races will not understand each other (different culture and upbringing)”.

There was a topic around disposability of the relationship with comments such as; “some people say that partners are accessories, like the latest trend. Or people want to be like celebrities and those they see on screen”. This can imply that interracial relationships are not seen as long term and sustainable, whereas

something that people pass through as a phase to make a statement. The assumptions that are made about superficiality of these relationships can cause negative stereotypes to be created. Another stereotype that participants face is the perception; “that he married me for a visa”. This creates the impression that a deep connection between the couple is not the intention, and that they are only together for convenience of situation. This could be the case for a few couples, yet this stereotype perpetuates these negative connotations. There are so many spoken and unspoken stereotypes that cause people to judge situations, making assumptions and prejudices about other peoples’ lives. Knowing this, the following question explores these effects on their own journey in life.

#### **4.7 Question 7: To what extent do stereotypes reflect your own experiences?**

Not everyone chose to answer this question, and others stated that their relationship didn’t reflect any stereotypes. At this stage in the survey, the type of questions required reflection about the personal experiences of the participants. Some participants didn’t fill out as much detail from here onwards, which I consider could be due to them not feeling ready to self-reflect on their position, in comparison to myself who is undertaking a very personal journey. This I must just accept and appreciate that they still answered some questions regardless.

There seemed to be a lot of focus on being stared at in public as one participant stated; “of course, we are all to some degree influenced by what we watch and hear. Coming from London it is not normal to stare at another person however here [in South Africa] it is very normal and now I do it. I found myself looking at interracial couples out of curiosity sometimes even though I know it makes me feel uncomfortable when people stare at me”. Perhaps not all stares are out of shock, and some come from a kind heart. Yet in brief moments of passing, it is too quick to make a judgment unless comments were made. One response of someone who agrees with the overwhelming public attention comments; “as a child of a mixed family, I think we have probably experienced every single bit of stereotyping and prejudice in terms of an interracial marriage. While these may appear to be stereotypes on a hypothetical basis, it’s very clear that society hasn’t progressed past the days of racial segregation. Interracial families are not objects to be gawked at”.

Another perspective that was shared by a participant is that “the financial difference has become a realization of how much I don’t have as a black person... we honestly live in the same world but have different realities”. This is coming from the context of a South African man who is in a relationship with a European woman, and touches on a topic that could be delved into with further studies due to the complexity of the nature. Other replies to the question about stereotypes felt that the stereotypes do not reflect their own relationships but confirmed that they have seen it reflected in other interracial relationships. Many reported to have experienced comments and unsolicited opinions rather than stereotyping. Concerns were expressed about family acceptance such as; “my own family were against my relationship at first as they thought my Caucasian husband would not fit in or understand my Nigerian culture.” An interviewee also commented that they were “having to justify (your) decision to be with someone of colour, instead of it just being because he was a great person” and that “for him to be with me is 'he got lucky' or 'he levelled up'.”

This last comment came from a white woman and is something that I have also noticed. People will comment on my husband’s decision to marry a white person and they congratulate him as if I am a trophy wife. When opening this discussion with my husband he explained that in a way it is a medal-worthy occasion, as not many people get the opportunity to come out of the township environment. He was only able to achieve this when he met me and moved into my place. Otherwise, there is such little opportunity, support and prosperity for someone living in the township who is not educated. Lack of job opportunities and a ridiculously unaffordable minimum wage mean that people of colour in South Africa struggle. My husband continued to explain how he has been able to benefit from white privilege just by being married to me. These discussions on race are key to be had between couples in interracial relationships. Some questions in the survey had similar elements, but the way in which I posed the questions helped to instigate a variety of responses that perhaps the participants couldn’t think about in a previous question. The following question relates to the previous yet invites the responder to delve deeper into their personal experience.

#### **4.8 Question 8: What assumptions do people make about you/your relationships?**

This question prompted a range of comments, assumptions and judgements so varied that they are listed for ease of review:

- “That we eat strange food at home. That my husband isn’t around”
- “That I hate my own kind because I’m dating outside of my race”
- “They may assume that my parents/family do not agree or accept the relationship”
- “Some black people in South Africa think white people are sex maniacs.”
- “For years people thought we wouldn’t last (10 years later we are married with a child).”
- “Some may think [my wife] is with me for what my family has”
- “My ex-boyfriend was an older white man. I got the impression that people expected me to be with someone that looked more like myself. Mixed race.”
- “Initially when my husband and I first started our relationship, most people believed that he was of either a lower class or poorer than I was. The assumption was that white lower-class men have relationships with women of colour.”

We can now look at the answers from this question and compare them to what they believed stereotypes look like. The key themes that have emerged are family acceptance and fetishization. This also correlates to the stereotypes that are discussed by Ramoutar who states that “women and men who want interracial relationships are portrayed as being overly interested in sex with no interest in romance or the well-being of their partner” (2006). It seems that regardless of the question I ask or how it is phrased, one answer that continues to reappear is “just feeling judgment when we were out in public together, holding hands or showing affection - people will still stare, and make no attempt to hide it.” Across the questions and responses, there appears to be a key theme of being stared at in public, and how uncomfortable that makes the person feel. Yet it doesn’t stop there, some couples experience disapproval from their friends and families which is why I posed the following question:

#### **4.9 Question 9: How do people of your own culture react?**

Responses can be grouped into negative and positive ones. Some respondents reporting reactions from their own cultures commented that “white people have made jokes about it and degraded the legitimacy of it” and “there may be other people of my culture who may hide their true feelings - which are negative, judgemental, possibly racist.” One person felt that other people are “Fairly open yet I am sure it provides the best gossip” and another that “most of my extended family were not privy to the relationship at all, because I knew I would receive judgement, which in turn would spill over onto my parents and become a reason to interrogate where ‘they went wrong raising me’”. This familial reputational concern is clear in the response; “my Asian family would rather I be with a White man over a Black one”.

More positive responses provide more cultural acceptance in comments such as “people I know, amazingly. People we don’t know sometimes not too great” and “They are amazed because where I’m from we hardly see white people. It’s celebrated in my culture”. The most positive comment stated that “They (their own culture) are not against it and to be honest they don’t care as long as the person treats me well (and has a) good personality.

I am privileged that my family and friends have been accepting too, it is only occasionally that you get the remark which they have attempted to phrase in a way that won’t sound as bad as it really is. When a participant mentioned that “older generation family members expressed mildly racist tendencies”, it made me think back to many years ago when I was in school. My Grandmother was speaking with me about my partner at the time and with a smile she commented “he has lovely skin”. I didn’t know how to react because of course he has lovely skin because black is beautiful, just like brown is beautiful and just like all races have

their beauty. It comes back to the older generations of either not being aware of what they say and how it will be received, or of just not caring.

#### **4.10 Question 10: How do people of your partner's culture react?**

Again, a variety of responses to this question were received, ranging from “they're unaccepting” to “some people seem uncomfortable but hate to show it” to “no one mentions it”. However just because it is not spoken about, that does not mean things are smooth sailing. In fact, this can sometimes be even more uncomfortable. Other interviewees commented that in their partner's culture “some (are) proud, some envy, some think he is now something better and not so much part of them/their community anymore” and that “I've had words with women from an older generation that believe white women are taking all the men”. Comments such as; “I think my ex's family saw me as some kind of token to my ex. I think he did too”, and “they find it hard to understand that our connection has nothing to do with our race”, can leave “you're unsure of where you stand”. This reflects my own experience.

In these situations, I always trust my instinct and feeling for someone's energy. Sometimes the silence is a cause of further harm. Race should always be discussed so that perspectives can be understood, and mindsets can be changed.

One participant who is a white male living in Cape Town stated that he suffered “worse abuse in Sea Point as opposed to in the township. Someone was calling [my wife] a bitch as we walked past.” To put this into context; there are rarely white people living in the townships here in Cape Town, yet this participant received a warmer welcome there compared to at Sea Point which is a very affluent and prominently white area where his wife receives verbal abuse. This issue is correlated in another participant's statement that “families of the person of colour often (not always, but often) react with more kindness and with openness to the white partner, than the white family does to the person of colour”. This was also reflected in a response from a black female participant, who is married to a white male, expressed that “we saw the lack of support or understanding from his side of the family when the traditional Nigerian marriage took place”. This was reflected by another respondent, who stated that; “my partner's grandmother and distant family were upset that he isn't with a woman of his own race”, with another saying; “they didn't think it was a serious relationship or that it had the potential to be long lasting”.

Yet there were some contrary responses such as: “I have been welcomed by them, no negative experiences”, “the people we know only have good things to say about us”, and; “I was never made to ever feel uncomfortable or unwelcome”. This shows that despite the stereotypes, and despite some peoples' negative experiences, there are cases of acceptance.

#### **4.11 Question 11: How does the public treat you when you're together? And compared to when you are alone? Are there any positive or negative interactions that you have experienced?**

The responses to this question were both enlightening and concerning. The quotes are presented in bullet format to emphasis the significance of the feedback:

- “The surprise when people found out he was of colour when I had spoken about him without mentioning his race”
- “When we were together, people would often stare”
- “Bunch of guys thought I was a prostitute that my ex-boyfriend must have been paying me to be there with him”
- “Staff asked if I needed any help and was I being kept against my will just because I was with my husband”
- “A lady poked my child in the head and told me he's a sin because he should be either black or white and not coloured”

- “There’s this misconception that black men run away after children so it’s almost as if people over praise something that’s not needed”

In general, the majority of responses were negative with other participants stating; “closed minded”, “people don’t like it”, “negative and difficult”, “people are kind of sceptical”, “I would notice the looks and stares”. One participant admitted that she and her partner chose to leave an African wedding they were invited to because, “the whole room including children were just staring at us (my husband was the only Caucasian), possibly one of the most uncomfortable situations we had been in”. This is supported by Childs, who states; “despite social location, there seems to be a sense that being an interracial couple will bring forth a response” (Childs, 2005).

Some people expressed that they were most comfortable around loved ones in comparison to the stereotype that family and friends reject the relationships, affirmed by a participant who said; “the most positive interactions come when we are surrounded by our friends in similar relationships as there is no judgement or “othering” of our own”. Unfortunately, there is no quick fix for the problems faced with bridging borders and overcoming boundaries. Just know that if you see a family in public that doesn’t make sense to your understanding, give them a smile anyway, you don’t need to know their story or fit them into a box.

#### **4.12 Question 12: Do you have any further comments or questions?**

The final question was an opportunity for participants to express any final opinions;

- “Love the questionnaire”
- “great questions”
- “very interesting questionnaire, highlighting an important topic thank you!”
- “thanks for an interesting thought process. I actually never realised there was such a lack of portrayal.”

Without the participants’ help and responses, there would be a lot of questions left unanswered. Now though, we have gained a deeper understanding of the problems that people in interracial couples have to go through on a daily basis, not just between themselves as a couple, nor just between their close circle, but also how society treats them.

## 5.0 SELF-REFLEXIVE JOURNAL

To accompany the research and documentary film, I have chosen to include a self-reflexive journal to demonstrate how the topics and themes discussed can feel for someone with lived experiences of being in an interracial relationship. I will also discuss the decision behind the choice of topic, the process and the outcome of the project.

Originally, I was inspired to create a documentary film about spirituality, yet as suggested by my supervisor, this would have been difficult to convey into a moving visual piece. The supervisor then went on to suggest that my personal life story would make an interesting film. To begin with, I was anxious to put myself on screen, afraid of the vulnerability and judgement that would be experienced. Yet after planning how the film could look, I became in love with the idea of understanding myself further through a visual project. We have faced a lot of challenges from the outside world whom cannot grasp how a relationship like ours can exist. The importance of rising above this kept me driven to create an authentic narrative that reflects our lives and experiences as an interracial and cross-cultural couple in South Africa.

My overall idea of the film's outcome was continuously changing throughout the process. This wasn't helped by an unprecedented global pandemic that changed life as we knew it. Through various lockdowns and restrictions, not only did my relationship develop but so did society. It became difficult to film our daily interactions whilst we experienced reduced social interactions. This negatively affected my choice to include participatory elements to the film due to social distancing and other public restrictions that required citizens to not mix with other households for a long time.

Through the literature review and academic analysis I spent time reviewing a film with similar story line to mine; *'A United Kingdom'*. It was heart-warming to watch, with the feeling that someone else understood what I was going through via a shared experience. It was beautiful to see them overcome the challenges with a big theme of 'love always wins'.

Interestingly, the primary research showed that *'A United Kingdom'* was prominently referenced by participants, as on the surface it appears to contradict all of the stereotypes written about by academic scholars but does strongly reflect my personal experience as a British woman falling in love with a man from Southern Africa. I have never felt so connected to a movie until I saw this recently. Even down to the details of Ruth giving birth alone due to the British causing border problems, I too gave birth alone as the British wouldn't grant my husband a visa. I cried at the scene when she introduced her husband to their child, a moment that I had to wait 2 months for. I was surprised to feel so much similarity to the experiences of the characters in *'A United Kingdom'*. In my opinion, this film has the most accurate portrayal of an interracial relationship, not only because it is based on a true story, but also because I can relate to so many elements of the story. The film resulted in a positive ending where the family were represented as having a strong bond, whilst being able to live happily in their own way, regardless of the numerous obstacles they have faced. As Erica Childs concluded that "all of the couples have come together despite any opposition that may exist, thereby minimizing the importance of race or racial boundaries." (Childs, 2005). Many people who are in cross-cultural relationships focus on their love and daily goals rather than the problems outsiders may have with their innocent love.

Due to the existence of stereotypes it is common to have uncomfortable or negative experiences when out into public. Often when walking to the shops, I simply forget that the members of my family don't match the assumptions of what a family of a white woman should look like. When at home it doesn't cross our mind as we are used to each other's company, yet as soon as we step out the house, peoples' reactions remind us that we are different from other families. It is a constant daily encounter that you just cannot do anything about. Except perhaps changing the portrayal of stereotypes through film, so that the public become more accustomed and feel less need to stare.

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

Combining the information collected from both the first-hand qualitative research survey with the secondary academic articles, the conclusion can be drawn that there is a significant underrepresentation as well as misrepresentation in the portrayal of interracial couples in film. It was interesting to receive the opinions of people who have experience of being in interracial relationships to see how much of their own encounters are reflected in film. Most of the respondents agreed that stereotypes have a negative effect on their lives and that judgements are common occurrence.

Recognising that there are gaps in the research, the areas which could be covered in more detail are the specifications of the survey participants; their racial identities, their cultural upbringing and current place of residence. I chose to keep the survey anonymous for the privacy and comfort of the people taking part. I also chose to keep the survey fairly small, with under 20 participants, so that the data collected can be thoroughly analysed. The reason for choosing open ended questions for the survey is to encourage the participants to freely express themselves without limitations.

My research can be used to help build more positive and accurate stereotypes by including more diversity in the cast as well as the narrative of films, but also in the production team who are involved in the creation process. I have personally started this through participatory elements to my autobiographic documentary *Diverse Love* where I invited family and friends do capture their perspective of my life.

I felt that it was important to not only show my perspective of life as a woman born in England, but also to provide a perspective from my Husband's eyes of our relationship. Including a brief overview of the cultural traditions of the Xhosa people, whilst explaining why their rituals are so meaningful. This has become a continuous lesson of understanding during my relationship in order to share information that will help to bridge boundaries between cultures by showing positive reflections and that regardless of background, two people can be together.

The original hypothesis for this study was the underrepresentation of interracial couples in film, the primary and secondary research has confirmed this hypothesis, demonstrating that there is both an underrepresentation and misrepresentation of interracial relationships within film and the academic surrounding the industry. What wasn't expected during inception of this project was the westernized nature of media and messages around interracial relationships, where the bias is heavily American influenced and doesn't account for global experiences. There is also a lack of positive representation, which has been the centre of the accompanying documentary film *Diverse Love*.

## **7.0 CITED FILMS**

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Asante, Amma (2016) *A United Kingdom* (111min.), BBC Films/BFI/Ingenious Media Pathé, Czech Republic/France/UK/USA, dist. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox/Pathé Distribution/Fox Searchlight Pictures.

Johnson, Susan (2018), *To All The Boys I've Loved Before* (99min.), Overbrook Entertainment/Awesomeness Films, USA, dist. Netflix.

Peele, Jordan (2017), *Get Out* (104min.), Blumhouse Productions/QC Entertainment/Monkeypaw Productions, USA, dist. Universal Pictures.

Carter, Thomas (2001), *Save The Last Dance* (112min.), MTV Productions/Cort/Madden Productions, USA, dist. Paramount Pictures.

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