Asian Sexuality and Romantic Comedies: A Love Story?

A Critical Analysis of the Construction of Asian Sexuality in
Hollywood Romantic Comedies from 2018 to 2019

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Abstract

The long history of the misrepresentation of Asians in Hollywood movies has been well-studied by media and culture scholars. Portrayals of Asian characters are often riddled with stereotypes – many of which take on a decidedly sexual nature as the Asian women are depicted as hypersexualized or submissive, and the Asian men as asexual and emasculated. By 2018, the representation of Asians and Asian Americans in movies seems to be transforming, particularly in romantic comedy – a genre that has traditionally been characterized by problematic portrayals of racial minorities. *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) is a major box office success, while Netflix's *To All The Boys I've Loved Before* (2018) and *Always be my Maybe* (2019) earn praises from audience and critics alike. These movies are often lauded for their representation of Asians and Asian Americans, but with so few existing studies critically analyze their portrayals, it would be hasty to make any assumptions. Within this context, this thesis seeks to examine the construction of Asian sexuality through the characters featured in these three romantic comedies. The focus of the analysis is on the maintenance and challenge of existing Asian sexual stereotypes, to understand the possible evolution of Asian sexuality onscreen and highlight areas that still require future improvements. Given the interconnection between textual and visual materials in a movie, this thesis adopts a multimodal approach, combining Critical Discourse Analysis to study the scripts and Visual Discourse Analysis to examine the images of these three romantic comedies.

The results reveal that while not entirely unearned, the praises these movies received for their portrayals of Asian characters seem to have glossed over the more problematic aspects. Traditional Asian sexual stereotypes such as the submissive Asian women or the Dragon Lady continue to exist in the storyline, especially in the depiction of Lara Jean Covey of *To All The Boys I've Loved Before* (2018). The portrayals of the Asian female characters are generally found to be more stereotypical than those of their male counterparts, with the only significant stereotype being the elevated status of Eurasian males compared to Asian males. This is mostly observed in the portrayal of Nick Young in *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), portrayed by half-White Henry Golding, whose inclusion in the movie might signify Hollywood's continued favoring of romantic heroes with Caucasian features. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that these romantic comedies are more committed to building new narratives about Asian sexuality than sustaining stereotypes. Asian females are depicted as strong and independent women who take charge their sexuality, while Asian males are masculine and sexually desirable. These movies showcase the beauty in diversity, as the sexual attractiveness of Asian characters are portrayed as far from monolithic. The findings of this thesis point to an evolution in the representation of Asian sexuality taking place – one that demands both celebration and caution. It serves as a reminder that while these movies are ground-breaking, it should not be treated as the final victory in the fight for accurate Asian representation, but rather as the beginning of a new era.

KEYWORDS: *Stereotype, Representation, Asian, Sexuality, Hollywood movies*

Table of Contents

Introduction

2018 was a historic year for Asian representation in Hollywood. For the first time in 25 years, a movie was produced by a major Hollywood studio featuring an ensemble cast largely made up of actors of East and South East Asian descents. This movie was titled *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018)*,* a romantic comedy adapted from the best-selling novel of the same name written by Kevin Kwan. The last time that Hollywood had released a feature film with an all-Asian cast, it was 1993 when *Joy Luck Club* was released (Sio, 2018). After a quarter of a century, the story line was no longer about the immigrant experience, broken English, or anything else that marked Asian Americans as perpetual outsiders of contemporary American society. Ellen Oh, best-selling young adult author, said:

> For a long time, Asians have been defined by the immigrant experience, but now second and third-generation Asian-American are finding their own voices (Oh, 2016, as cited in Hess, 2016).

There is a process of *world making* taking place, with *world making* understood as the recreation of existing cultural worlds through the arts to establish a new sense of hybrid belonging for marginalized groups (Petersen & Schramm, 2017). Recent movies allow ethnic minorities to assert their presences in society in ways that would no longer compromise their own cultural identities. For example, *Black Panther*'s depiction of Afrofuturism has carved out a space for people of African descent, especially African Americans, to become relevant in popular science fiction narratives not by trying to integrate into dominant White superhero cultures, but by showcasing a reimagination of a utopic Afro-future (Bhayroo, 2019).

1.1.   The days of misrepresentation are not over

The industry has a long history of problematic casting and portrayal when it comes to the Asian community and it is a tradition that is impossible to erase with just one, or two, or even three progressive movies. Hollywood has risen to the top of the United States (U.S.) and global markets as the biggest and more influential mass manufacturer and distributor of popular cultural. At the core of this century old industry, the decision makers have been almost exclusively White men, with hardly any space left for women and ethnic minorities

(Erigha, 2015). As a result, these groups are heavily underrepresented in Hollywood productions, with their onscreen numbers sitting far below their real-life U.S. population proportions (Chin *et al.*, 2017; Erigha, 2015; Smith *et al.*, 2018). Of all the minorities in the U.S, Asian Americans experience the fastest growth in their population, with their numbers rising to 6 percent of the U.S. population from just 1 percent in 1970 (US Census Bureau, 2016, as cited in Lee & Ramakrishnan, 2019). Yet, despite their growing prevalence in the population, Asian Americans remain conspicuously invisible in most of the stories being told on screen. Smith *et al.* (2018) notes that of the 21 top-grossing films to feature protagonists of color in 2017, only four were actors of Asian descent and all were male. The situation continues to be dismal in 2019 as Asian actors accounted for only 5 percent of all film roles that year (Hunt & Ramon, 2020).

Next to quantity, lack of quality portrayals of Asian characters is also a concern. For Hollywood, practices like reusing common tropes or typecasting simplify the work of writers, producers, directors, and actors (Yuen, 2004). Utilizing well-known physical attributes and behaviors onscreen also reduces the cost and the risk of alienating the audience. The consequence of relying on stereotypes is that it creates a false image of the group being represented (Yuen, 2004), affecting not only their psychological well-being and identity formation, but also their treatment in society (Besana, Katsiaficas, & Loyd, 2019; Ono & Pham, 2009). Since the 20th century, Hollywood has consistently produced movies riddled with stereotypes about Asians and Asian Americans (Behm-Morawitz & Ortiz, 2013). The mediated image of the Asian women is typically associated with traits like submissive, meek, exotic, seductive, or nefarious. Hollywood production strips them of their humanity and multitudinous identities, and stuffs them into manufactured molds created to fit the Western expectation of how they should look and act (Rajgopal, 2010). For Asian men, their roles are typically limited to working at the laundromat, being a gangster in Chinatown, acting as the kung-fu master or acing whatever academic challenges they might face. Onscreen, their existence is mostly relegated to the background and they are regularly denied of being depicted as masculine, attractive or sexy (Hillenbrand, 2008). Laden in these stereotypes is a myriad of assumptions about the sexuality of these men and women – assumptions that have existed in Hollywood for over a century and might have or might not have been adopted by more recent productions.

1.2. Theoretical relevance

In terms of analyzing portrayals of ethnic minorities in U.S. media, a majority of content analysis performed tends to center around television programs such as news broadcasts, advertisements or shows, with the most studied racial group being Black. Meanwhile, content analysis of media representation of Asians and Asian Americans remains scarce (Behm-Morawitz & Ortiz, 2013), especially in the case of movies produced in the last two or three years. The success and attention *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) garnered has prompted a few studies. However, the topics of these studies are often far removed from the issue of racial representation, focusing instead on the neoliberal undertones of the movie (Liu, 2019) or the city branding of Singapore (Tan, Tan, Baskaran & Chong, 2019). An exception is Besana *et al.*'s (2019) analysis of movies featuring Asian characters from 1998 to 2018, which includes *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) and *To All The Boys I've Loved Before* (2018). The main purpose of the analysis is to study the extent to which the portrayals in these movies are stereotypical or non-stereotypical.

While the result gathered from this study is useful in ascertaining the continuation of Asian stereotypes in recent Hollywood movies, discussion on the portrayal of sexuality is far and few in between. Given the prevalence and complexity of its depiction in mainstream media in the U.S., it is necessary to pay attention to how sexuality is discussed in movies (Ward *et al.*, 2014). As a theoretical concept, sexuality is studied in this thesis from the perspective of social constructionism. Studying the portrayal of Asian male and female sexuality in Hollywood movies fills in the gap of sexuality research from the perspective of social constructionism, which has too often focused on queer identities or feminism. For queer theory, the focus is on homosexuality, gender fluidity, sexuality minorities, and discrimination (see Epstein, 1994; Kimmel, 2005; Namaste, 1994). Feminist theory, meanwhile, is concerned with issues of masculinity and femininity, gender roles, gender inequality in relation to sexuality. Analysis of movies on how the sexuality of Asian men and women are portrayed tends to center around the experience and perception of the LGBT community, particularly regarding their struggle with belonging to an ethnic minority that has long suffered from overt sexual stereotypes (e.g. Calzo & Ward, 2009; Chung & Szymanski, 2008; Han, 2006; Leong, 1996).

Shimizu's (2006, 2007, 2012, 2016) works stand out among the few which explore the relationship between race and sexuality in the media representations of Asians and

Asian American men and women. Even then, many of her data and arguments are based on feature films produced in the 20th century and early 21st century, privately screened stag films or pornography. Movies produced by Hollywood tend to mirror the social context of the periods in which they are distributed, and representations of race and ethnic diversity will reflect the struggles and gains of racial movements at the time (Smith, 2013). As such, this study aims to contribute to existing research by analyzing the construction of Asian sexuality as portrayed in recent Hollywood movies. The results produced from this analysis allow researchers to gain a scientific understanding of the evolution (or lack thereof) of the representation of Asian sexuality, as well as acting as a point of comparison for other researches focusing on the representation of the sexuality of minority groups. To do so, this thesis will attempt to answer the following research question:

How is the sexuality of Asians constructed through the portrayals of Asian characters in Hollywood romantic comedies released in 2018 and 2019?

To answer the research question, it is necessary to first clarify what the term *Asian* construes for this thesis. Within the context of the U.S., Asian is defined by the U.S. Census Bureau as a racial category referring to people "having origins in any of the original people of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent" ("About race", 2020, para. 5). However, this official definition often fails to align with the idea of the American people about who is, and is not, Asian. A popular misconception that many have regarding this term is that Asian is synonymous with East Asian – which refers to people of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean descents – thus effectively reducing the inherent diversity that comes with being Asian (Lee & Ramakrishnan, 2019). Additionally, South Asians (Indians and Pakistanis) are often disregarded as Asians by Whites, Blacks, Latinos, and even East and Southeast Asians (Lee & Ramakrishnan, 2019). This misalignment between official racial assignment and real-life perception means that using the definition as provided by the U.S. Census Bureau for this thesis is ill-advised. Thus, in this thesis, *Asian* will be understood as the racial group consisting of people of East and Southeast Asian descent.

1.3. Some clarifications

Throughout the history of the cinema, romantic comedy has proven itself to be one of the oldest genres on the silver screen and has especially gained prominence after the inception of sound (Grindon, 2011; Mortimer, 2010). As its name suggests, it is a cross between the romance genre and the comedy genre, featuring a story line whose main focus is on the development of a romantic relationship that would lead to a happy ending (Mortimer, 2010). Part of the reason why this thesis studies Hollywood romantic comedies is because of its intimate relationship with sexuality. The genre discusses the dramatic conflicts surrounding human lives, giving rise to the portrayal of conventions regarding gender, relationships, and sexuality (Grindon, 2011). Additionally, the consistent failure to feature romantic leads from minority backgrounds (Moddelmog, 2009) means that romantic comedy has garnered a negative reputation regarding racial representation. This is especially evident when it comes to depicting Asians and American. A prime example of this is the character Long Duk Dong, an Asian foreign exchange student who appears in *Sixteen Candles* (1984). In the movie, Long Duk Dong is utilized as the comedic relief, frequently acting in a foreign way (talking in heavily accented speech or acting in unique behaviors) which results in him being used as the butt of many jokes (Ono & Pham, 2009). His portrayal is such that he is a negative combination between nerdy and lustful, on the one hand lacking any sense of style and on the other hand chasing after a well-endowed White female the first chance he has (Shek, 2006). Given the relation between romantic comedy and sexuality, and the genre's problematic portrayals of Asians in the past, romantic comedy lends itself as an interesting object of study for this thesis.

The year 2018 is particularly significant for romantic comedy, as well as for Asian representation in Hollywood movies. While the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s witnessed the releases of classics such as *When Harry met Sally* (1989), *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) or *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* (2003), this golden era of the romantic comedy eventually fizzles out after 2010, with no major studio wide release in 2017 (Guerrasio, 2017). The year 2018 sees a revival of the genre when *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) grossed over 238.5 million dollars worldwide, earning itself a place in the top ten highest-grossing romantic comedies of all time – the only romantic comedy produced in the 2010s to do so (Roper, 2020). As previously stated, 2018 is also significant for marking the first time in a quarter of a century that a Hollywood movie featuring a full Asian and Asian American cast is produced (Sio,

2018). Following the release and success of *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), other romantic comedies with Asian American leads are introduced, namely *To All The Boys I've Loved Before* (2018) and *Always be my Maybe* (2019). As the three most prominent romantic comedies featuring Asian American leads, they were analyzed using Critical Discourse Analysis and Visual Discourse Analysis.

1.4.   Societal Relevance

Studying the portrayal of Asian sexuality in popular Hollywood romantic comedies can have a significant effect for Asian and non-Asian Americans. Representation of Asian Americans in mainstream media affects non-Asians Americans in the sense that it can help form (mis)conception about people of Asian descents (Ono & Pham, 2009). This can have serious and long-lasting consequences for how Asians and Asian Americans are treated in the U.S, as representations of a group in the media can be indicative of the inclusion or exclusion of that group in the public domain (Morley, 2001). Thus, studying how Asian sexuality is being represented in Hollywood movies can potentially reveal current popular perceptions and attitudes towards Asian and their sexuality in the U.S. The results gathered from this thesis can point to how Asians in the United States are being included or excluded in current public discussions and considerations, especially regarding issues of romance, sexuality, and gender. Additionally, mediated representation of Asian sexuality can influence the perception of other racial groups regarding the attractiveness of Asian Americans, especially Asian males (Mok, 1999). Attractive individuals are often considered wealthier, more social, and more confident compared to less attractive people, as well as receiving better treatments from others (Langlois *et al.,* 2000). Hence, beyond the issue of inclusion and exclusion, this thesis can also help to reveal the type of narratives which might be affecting how other racial groups think of Asian Americans, thus affecting the ways Asian Americans are treated and the (dis)advantages they have to face in their daily lives.

This also extends to within the Asian American community, as perception of attractiveness influenced by mainstream media can sustain intraracial discrimination when it comes to issues such as dating or marriage (Mok, 1999). In this way, the current thesis provides an understanding of the extent to which stereotypes about Asian sexuality have, or have not, changed, which can have an impact on how Asian Americans view members of their own community as sexual beings. Another point to consider is the prolonged

psychosocial impact of the (mis)representation of Asians and Asians Americans (Ono & Pham, 2009). The media act as a "major socializing force that can sustain and perpetuate these stereotypes and can positive or negatively impact Asian Americans' identity development" (Besana *et al.*, 2019, p. 204). Studying recent portrayals of Asians and Asian Americans in Hollywood movies, especially regarding their sexuality, can reveal what kind of images they are being exposed to. This is the first step in understanding how their identity development is affected.

1.5. Outline of the Thesis

The following chapter will establish the theoretical foundation of this thesis, starting with a review of previous literature on the concepts of discourse and stereotype in relation to the representation of Asians and their sexuality in Hollywood movies. The third chapter contains a detailed outline of the research design and the methodology of this thesis. The data collection process, including the criteria for movie selection, script collection, and screenshot creation, and the operationalization of the concept of sexuality will be discussed. In the fourth chapter, the results deriving from the analysis are discussed using previous literature and research findings. The results are divided into three sections: *across genders* (findings which pertain to the sexuality of both Asian males and females), *the Asian women*, and *the Asian men*. The final chapter wraps up this thesis by providing the answer to the research question, which is that Asian sexuality is constructed in the three Hollywood romantic comedies through a combination of sustaining stereotypes and building new narratives. This thesis then concludes with a discussion of its societal and academic implications, as well as its limitations.

Theoretical Framework

Italian novelist Umberto Eco once stated that 70 percent of our knowledge is taken from Hollywood movies. Regardless of whether this number is exaggerated or not, it remains that Hollywood plays an important role in providing many of its audience information about the world around them – especially about countries and groups of people that they might not come into contact with on a daily basis (Auge, 2002; Lawless, 2014). Movies can, in many cases, play a role in the formation and shaping of discourses.

Thus, to examine the construction of Asian sexuality in Hollywood movies, it is relevant to analyze the notions of the discourse and stereotypes from the perspective of cultural studies, and how they influence the process of racialization in the media. Moving on from there, the representation of Asians onscreen is discussed, starting from the 20th century when Asian characters were first introduced in Hollywood to contemporary times. In the final section of the theoretical framework, the concept of sexuality is established as a social construct, one that is political by nature and is riddled with stereotypes concerning Asian sexuality.

2.1.   Discourse and Stereotyping the Other in Media

2.1.1.   Discourse and Racism

The social life that we have come to know is characterized by a diverse system of discourses (Fairclough, 2012). Our 'will to knowledge' is understood to represent, and be represented by, a set of rules, systems and procedures that make up what we know as discourse. These discursive practices – these sets of rules, systems, and procedures – generate knowledge (Young, 1981). The relationship between discourse and knowledge is one of duality where on one hand, the function of the discourse is to accumulate knowledge and on the other hand, discourse is produced, as well as understood, by knowledge (van Dijk, 2010). Because of this function, discursive practices render it irrational and unacceptable to think beyond the confines of discourse (Young, 1981). The working of discourse is intricately intertwined with power, in the sense that discourse encourages both the circulation of power and the challenge to power (Hall, 1995). On the one hand, discourse is a product of the social system that dictates the norms and accepted behaviors of those within it; on the other hand, the continued existence of the social system is guaranteed by discourse as it actively maintains the order of things (Young, 1981). The staggering ideological power of discursive practices is seen in their construction

and reconstruction of unbalanced social relations between different classes, genders, and racial groups through their representation of things and people (Fairclough & Wodak, 2000).

At first glance, the idea of discourse and racism seem to have little to do with one another. However, in thinking about discourse as produced and reproduced by text and talk, van Dijk (1999) notes that it is through text and talk that contemporary racism is maintained. People's knowledge about the Other is manufactured and influenced by the operation of discourse, which utilizes diverse means of representation deeply embedded within the power relation between different groups (Hall, 1997). Racism operates on two levels: a social level that deals mostly with discrimination at the micro-level and power abuse at the macro-level, and a cognitive level of bias stemming from deeply ingrained prejudices about Us versus Them (van Dijk, 1999). These ideas are socially constructed and acquired through a dialogic process where discourse serves to create, sustain, and legitimize these racists representations. In other words, racism is learned (van Dijk, 1999). One of the ways that it is learned is through the media. Hall (1990) asserts that the media often operates based on a "racist common sense" (p.28) that is rarely questioned. This common sense (or discourse, when properly phrased) prevents individuals from thinking outside of it (Young, 1981). This is particularly dangerous, given that audiences rely on the media to deconstruct and understand their social reality, as well as the role they play within it (Petersen & Schramm, 2017). How racial groups think about themselves and others is heavily influenced by representations in public media (Blumer, 1958; Zhou, Ocampo & Gatewood, 2007).

2.1.2. Stereotyping the Other

Prejudices regarding Us versus Them originate from a person's awareness about differences, which leads to a process of othering that triggers the formation of stereotypes. Regarding stereotyping, Hall (1995, 1997) conceptualizes stereotype as the reduction of the diverse traits of a person to a few recognizable, exaggerated, and immutable archetypes. It is a meaning-making process that draws from various different perspectives, such as the social psychological perspective (which considers stereotype as a strategy for a person to understand their social surrounding), the psychological perspective (where stereotype is a mean of determining one's unique identity in society), the ideological perspective (where

stereotype is utilized to uphold hegemonic ideologies) or the psychoanalytical perspective (which uses stereotype as a way to fetishize those who are different from the norm) (Berg, 1990). According to Berg (2002), a defining characteristic of stereotype is that it is never a simple means of value-neutral categorization, but almost always negative by nature. Negative stereotyping manifests from the existence of two specific elements: ethnocentrism and prejudice. Ethnocentrism, or the belief that one's own group is the standard with which all other groups are judged, dictates that the out-group (Them) is always inferior when appraised by the values of the in-group (Us) (Berg, 2002). This assumed inferiority stems from the prejudice of Us in the face of Them who are different from Us (Berg, 2002).

The object of stereotyping is, in most cases, the Other. While the Other can be thought of in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation or socioeconomic status, this thesis will focus on the concept of the Other as the racialized Other. Along with gender, race is an important social divider that reduces the world to binary, manufactured and stratified categories (Delphy, 1984, as cited in Gianettoni & Roux, 2010). The creation of the in-group (Us) and out-group (Them) frequently employs race as a deciding factor intricately tied to a person's social identity (Hewstone, Hantzi, & Johnston, 1991). From this process of racial categorization, the notion of the Other is birthed and certain groups are then designated as the Other. The one with the power to control this process is the dominant group, while the dominated is the one who is othered (Gianettoni & Roux, 2010). In doing so, the dominated is stripped of their right to name and define themselves by the dominant, who are afforded the privilege of not only determining their own identity but also limiting the identity of the Other to a few characteristics which have been designated as different (Pickering, 2001).

For Saussure and several other scholars, awareness of differences is integral to the process of meaning-making (Hall, 1997). The manufacture of meaning takes place when things are classified as groups with clearly defined boundaries between them (Kawai, 2005). The maintenance of these boundaries is performed by the stereotype, which draws a clear line between what is normal and therefore accepted, and what is different and therefore frowned upon (Dyer, 2000; Hall, 1997). This serves to uphold a social order that celebrates sameness and binds together the Us that is accepted by popular discourses, while excluding the Other that is marked as the outsiders (Hall, 1997; Pickering, 2001). For Hall (1997), meaning making based on differences is problematic because it is often

simplistic and essentialist, rarely ever allowing or accounting for the existence of the different shades of grey between the rigidly defined black-and-white binary. This form of rigid categorization flourishes in the face of gross inequality of power (Hall, 1997), subjecting stereotyped groups to a subordinate position that they cannot easily escape from (Pickering, 2001).

Berg (2002) makes a clear distinction between stereotypes as mental constructs and stereotypes produced and perpetuated by mass media (specifically movies). While the former tends to be confined to a person's mind and therefore private, the latter is depicted onscreen for a high number of audience and therefore public. In the case of Hollywood production, the audience is not only local or regional, but often global (Berg, 2002). In the privacy of a person's mind, the mental stereotype exists in the form of a specific (usually negative) trait which is then assigned to people that we meet. The mediated stereotype, however, combine several of those traits and materialize them into a widely accepted image of the Other. For Hollywood, stereotypes are a powerful narrative tool economic wise. As it already exists in a shared system of meaning, introduction or explanation becomes unnecessary, rendering stereotypes an inexpensive and effective way of delivering a story onscreen (Berg, 2002).

The problem of mediated stereotypes is that cultural stereotypes sustained by movies render movies as the source of ethnic prejudices and ideologies (Behm-Morawitz & Ortiz, 2013; Lawless, 2014). For example, Givens and Monahan's (2005) research testing the extent to which exposure to mediated stereotypes of African American women can influence a person's judgement reveals that African American women are more likely to be associated with negative racial concepts and ideologies compared to White women. Similarly, popular stereotypes like the *Latin lover* and the *buffoon* (a character who is depicted as dense, lazy, and undeserving of respect) continue to be used to describe Latino Americans in present times (Behm-Morawitz & Ortiz, 2013). In the next sections, specific mediated stereotypes about Asians and Asians Americans are discussed, with a focus on how they are represented in terms of their sexuality.

2.2. Asians in the eyes of Hollywood filmmakers

2.2.1. The yellow peril and The model minority

Asia might be the most populated continent on Earth, and East Asia might be home to some of the oldest and most influential empires in the history of mankind, but onscreen in

the West, Asians are largely invisible. The 20th century witnessed a tentative introduction of Asian characters to Hollywood movies, although these portrayals were riddled with stereotypes (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004). The construction of these stereotypes is heavily influenced by the historical and contemporary political and social contexts of the U.S. and its relations with Asian countries (Kawai, 2005). In the media, there are two enduring stereotypes beginning from the 20th century: *the yellow peril* and *the model minority* (Palumbo-Liu, 1999). According to Okihiro (1994), *the yellow peril* is a racial stereotype manifesting from the fear of the threat of the yellow race (Asians) towards the supreme position of the White race. This perceived threat stems from the large population of the Asian continent, the potential military and economic power of China, as well as the cementing of Japan as a world power after her success in the Sino-Japanese war against China in 1885 and the Russo-Japanese war against Russia in 1905 (Okihiro, 1994). Particularly for the U.S., *the yellow peril* embodies the notion of the threat the Asian immigrants' foreign bodies and cultures pose towards White Americans and Western civilization (Lee, 1999). Kawai (2005) suggests that this fear perpetuates and upholds the alienation of Asian immigrants in the U.S.

On the other end of the spectrum is *the model minority* stereotype, which is considered to have been manufactured in the 1960s (Kawai, 2005). *The model minority* paints the picture of a racial group that, while not belonging to the White majority, is nonetheless well integrated into American society, of decent socio-economic status, poses no threat politics wise and, most importantly, is not Black (Wu, 2015). As a result, this excludes Asian American from being seen as disadvantaged like other ethnic minority, thus dictating that Asian Americans no longer need, nor deserve, the sensitivity and consideration afforded to other groups (Palumbo-Liu, 1999). Together, these two stereotypes work to ground Asian Americans into a very specific type of narrative. *The yellow peril* posits Asian Americans as the perpetual foreigners and the masculine bodies which continue to jeopardize the White, Christian identity of the U.S., while *the model minority* illustrates the docile and feminine nature of Asian Americans who silently work hard to achieve success and recognition without demands or complaints (Kawai, 2005). This narrative was translated into portrayals of Asian characters onscreen and continues to appear even today.

2.2.2. The olden days of representation

In the 20th century, representation of Asians in films was severely limited. Typically, movies that featured Asian characters would cast White stars for the role and had them done up in what was called the yellowface make-up to make them appear Asian (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004). The yellowface tradition, similar to its blackface sibling that was fast becoming unacceptable at the time, features White actors utilizing accent, makeup, body language and costumes to turn Asian characters into the comic relief of the film (Moon, 2005). For Phruksachart (2017), iconic films which whitewashed Asian characters like *Madame Butterfly* (1915), *Broken Blossoms* (1919) or *Charlie Chan* (1926 – 1981) signifies the perverse preference of the yellowface over the appearance of authentic Asian actors and actresses. Furthermore, this is also an example of what Yuen (2004) terms the *unmarked site of privilege,* where White escapes the racialization Hollywood applies to all other groups and where White actors can seamlessly travel across racial boundaries to play people of other races, while the same freedom to portray White characters is never afforded to ethnic minorities.

In the rare instances where an Asian character was included, this character would often appear as a servant or in many cases, the villain. Hollywood boasted a collection of stock characters that often embodied the Oriental man or woman with "shifty behavior, broken English, and above all, slanting, narrow eyes that seemed to suggest a diabolical cunning" (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004, p.116), embodying the idea of *the yellow peril*. The Asian men, for example, appeared in iconic films as the aggressive and brutal man (*The Cheat*, 1915), the pedophile (*Broken Blossoms*, 1922), the masochist (*Son of the Gods*, 1932) and the criminal (the *Fu Manchu* series) (Shimizu, 2012). The 1993 film *Rising sun* employed both *the model minority* and *the yellow peril* stereotype by portraying the Asian man as an imitator of the White man, but eventually tried to surpass him and took away the White woman (Kawai, 2005). The female counterpart of the Asian male criminals manifested in the trope of the Dragon Lady – a form of Asian *femme fatale* who was evil, violent and a seductress who would attempt to ensnare the virtuous White heroes (Benshoff & Grififn, 2004). The Chinese women were often shown in traditional Chinese clothing such as the *cheongsam* that signifies their exoticness and their unique 'Chineseness'. This dressing style was in line with a need for Chinese women to appear authentic onscreen at the time – an authenticity that was based merely on the eyes of

Western men who viewed Chinese women dressing in Western clothing as strange and intolerable (Wang, 2012).

2.2.3. Contemporary Asian representation

By the 1980s, due to consumer demands and the formation of media watchdog organizations such as the National Asian American Telecommunications association, blatant stereotyping and the yellowface tradition started to be criticized (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004). However, while there have been some improvements regarding representation, historical portrayals of Asians and Asian Americans continue to influence the directorial decisions being made on the big and small screens (Ono & Pham, 2009). A new generation of Asian and Asian American actors and filmmakers trickle in, but rather than changing the game, they are merely being included for very specific roles in an attempt to boost Hollywood's reputation as an open and welcoming industry (Pham, 2004). Afraid of alienating White audience, Hollywood producers tend to include only a select few minority actors to ensure that movies remain race-neutral (Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Weaver, 2011). In the same vein, Chin *et al.* (2017) note that specifically for television broadcasters, there is a widespread reluctance to cast more than one Asian actor per show out of fear of turning it into an 'Asian show', thus heightening the likelihood of tokenization. As a result, Asian actors continue to be assigned supporting and stereotypical roles, reduced to essentialist and distorted images such as *the nerd*, *the exotic girl,* or *the martial arts master* (Huh, 2016). As caricatures of real-life Asian Americans, these characters tend to be one-dimensional and completely removed from their cultural backgrounds (Chin *et al.*, 2017; Yuen, 2004). Due to this lack-cluster directorial decision, Asian American actors rarely attain the sort of mainstream popularity that their White and occasionally African American and Hispanic counterparts enjoy (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004).

Multiple Asian stereotypes travel seamlessly between Hollywood production and television. For example, Chin *et al.* (2017) reveal that a popular trope for shows is depicting Asian Americans as the forever foreigners through the use of broken English and turning heavily accented conversations into jokes. Similarly, regardless of an Asian American actors' English fluency, Hollywood regularly require them to speak with typical Asian accents (Yuen, 2004). Another stereotype on television is the portrayal of Asian men as emasculated and the Asian women as exotic (Chin *et al.,* 2017). This is also an issue on the

big screen, where Asian women are commonly shown as the spoils of war, sex workers, or madams, thus limiting Asian American female actors to select exoticized roles – roles which are rarely (if ever) leading roles (Yuen, 2004). Additionally, the tradition of whitewashing Asian characters continues as White actors are routinely casted for roles that should have gone to Asian actors (Behm-Morawitz & Ortiz, 2013). This includes *Aloha,* a 2016 romantic comedy featuring Emma Stone playing Allison Ng – a quarter-Chinese fighter pilot – or *Doctor Strange,* the Marvel superhero movie which casts Tilda Swinton in the role of a Tibetan monk (Hess, 2016). Overall, this lack of representation onscreen, in terms of both quantity and quality, is a result of the non-existent presence of Asian Americans in civic life (Huh, 2016). Together, the invisibility of minority groups in the public sphere and their poor representation in mainstream media further strengthen the discourse of them as the outsiders of Western society (Morley, 2001).

Asian American actors, especially female ones, are also confronted with the issue of gender inequality. Chin *et al.*'s (2017) analysis of popular television shows reveals that at 8 hours and 53 minutes, Asian American and Pacific Islander female actors appear onscreen roughly two hours less than their male counterparts. This underrepresentation is also present in feature films, where Smith *et al*. (2018) report that in the top-grossing films of 2017, Asian American male actors were twice as likely to be casted compared to Asian American female actors. A study of 25 movies featuring Asian characters from 1998 to 2018 shows that only 28.6 percent of protagonists were females, while the remaining 71.4 percent were males (Besana et al., 2019). By 2019, this situation has somewhat improved as out of the 1134 actors in the top films of 2019, 32 were Asian males and 25 were Asian females (Hunt & Ramon, 2020).

Over the years, portrayals of Asian characters in Hollywood movies have slowly improved. Besana *et al.*'s (2019) analysis on the general portrayals of Asian characters in movies from 1998 to 2018, which include *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) and *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (2018)*,* reveals a pattern of resistance against popular Asian stereotypes for both male and female characters. For female, this mostly happens in the genre of romantic comedy, where the Asian American female actors are given the opportunities to play leading characters who exhibit traits beyond the typical submissive, exotic, or menacing stereotypes of Asian females. Rachel Chu of *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), Lara Jean of *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (2018)*,* and Stacy de Novo and Lady Margaret of *The Princess Switch*

(2018) are found to be compassionate, romantic, brave, playful and funny. As romantic interests, Asian male characters break free of the emasculated and unattractive mold they have traditionally been forced into. This is especially evident in the character of Nick Young from *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), who is lauded as a sex symbol by the audience. Across all gender, Besana *et al.* (2019) reveal that the stereotype of Asians as cunning and manipulative is also challenged by depictions of characters who are reliable and supportive. This thesis enriches these results by delving further into the sexual portrayals of Asians in *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) and *To All The Boys I've Loved Before* (2018), as well as putting these two movies in comparison with Always be my Maybe (2019), which was not included in Besana et al.'s (2019) research.

2.3. Representation of Asians Sexuality Onscreen

2.3.1. Sexuality as a Social Construction

To analyze the construction of Asian sexuality in Hollywood movies, it is necessary to first understand that sexuality is a social construct. The study of sexuality dates back hundreds of years, with the concept traditionally naturalized in the understanding of human biology and reproduction. At the time, the hegemonic ideology dictated that human sexuality was something that served the biological function of the body to further humankind (Epstein, 1994). This scientific discourse was forced upon the view of sexuality at the time by the medical field (Irvine, 2003), which decided that expressions of the sexual self were limited only to those which were considered as natural, while the rest was seen as unnatural and therefore unacceptable. Beginning the in 1960s and 1970s, a new conceptualization of sexuality emerged, one that saw sexuality as an integral part of systems of meaning-making, molded by the interaction between social institutions (Epstein, 1994). For Gagnon and Simon (1984, as cited in Epstein, 1994), sexuality is a form of performance with its own rules and guidelines. Reiss (1986) echoes this idea by arguing that human sexuality is made up of a complex system of cultural scripts whose main function is to arouse genital responses from the intended partner. These scripts contain behavioral guidelines accumulated by people through their social interactions to prepare them for sexual encounters and activities (Ferrante, 2014). Thus, rather than being predetermined by nature and biology, sexuality is something that is learned in a social context (Reiss, 1986).

For Foucault (1980), sexuality constitutes a wide range of rules, guidelines, and discourses which are tied in with the course of history and power. Similar to what has been

discussed regarding discourse, sexuality – as a set of discourses – can be viewed as on the one hand maintained by the social system that controls what is accepted and what is not, and on the other hand upholding this very system (Young, 1981). Sexuality has an intimate relationship with ideology – a set of fundamental beliefs about human norms and practices which are shared by the majority in a society (Reiss, 1984). Caplan (1987) views sexuality, because of how deeply embedded it is in ideology and power, as a concept that is political. In the next part of this section, the idea of sexual politics is explored, making way for the discussion of how Asian sexuality is portrayed onscreen.

2.3.2. Sexual Politics and the Portrayal of Asian sexuality

Shimizu (2006) asserts that "sexuality is a racialized process and racialization is a sexualized process" (p. 236). For Asians and especially Asian Americans, their sexuality is built and developed in a way that would uphold the dominant positions of Whites, especially White men, in society and in politics (Chou, 2012). Collins (2004) terms this *sexual politics* to refer to a set of discourses surrounding gender, race and sexuality that predisposes the treatment of all men and women as individuals and towards each other. This form of politics is evident in the oppression of Black Americans that takes place not only through race, but also through the domination and regulation of their sexuality for the purpose of asserting White supremacy (Collins, 2004). Similarly, a unique form of sexual politics exists for Asian Americans through which they are constantly subjected to and confronted with "gendered and sexualized racial stereotyping and discrimination" (Chou, 2012, p.2). This type of prejudiced ideologies has a profound impact on how Asians are viewed as sexual beings. A person's sexuality is never free from the surrounding context of society: constructed and learned beliefs about masculinity, femininity, and race play an important role in our selection of partners. We often accept the dominant tenet of society as common sense (Chou, 2012). For example, Nakayama (1994) theorizes a unique form of marginalization where minority males are excluded from participating in any significant process due to lacking the White phallus. Once again, we see how discourse exerts its power as it impacts and even dictates who appear and do not appear attractive to us.

The construction of Asians and especially East Asians onscreen is often full of stereotypes, with the women portrayed as sexually exotic and submissive and the men as emasculated and subordinate figures (Chou, 2012). Representations of Asian women tend to fall under the extreme, existing in a binary where one side is the dangerous Dragon Lady

and the other side the acquiescent China Doll (Wang, 2012). As a female version of Fu Manchu, the Dragon Lady is sexually desirable, but at the same time threatening due to her manipulative nature and her willingness to utilize her sexuality as a mean to attain power (Ono, 2017). Meanwhile, the image of the China Doll is often highly sexualized in her submissiveness, reflecting the evergreen figure of Butterfly in the opera *Madame Butterfly* (1904) – an Orient woman who is exotic and devoted to the Western man she loves (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004). The exoticness of the Asian women is also presented in her hypersexuality, which is depicted as the excessive and natural inclination of the Asian women towards sex (Shimizu, 2007). The experience of the Western colonizers has painted a picture where, because of cultural background, the Asian female is more likely to be exotically different and to partake in sexual adventures (Shimizu, 2006). Rooted in colonialism, the sexuality of the Asian and Asian American women is depicted as desirable, albeit in an obedient way that renders them ideal for White men (Ono, 2017). Additionally, in their analysis of 25 movies featuring Asian characters from 1998 to 2018, Besana *et al.* (2019) note that a common trope in portraying Asian female characters is to depict them as physically petite. This is found in movies across a variety of genre (romantic comedy, action, thriller, science fiction, fantasy, etc.) with notable examples include Meiying from *The Karate Kid* (2010), *Mantis in Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* (2017), Rachel, Peik Lin, Astrid and Araminta in *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) or Lara Jean, Margot and Kitty in *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (2018) (Besana *et al.,* 2019).

The Asian men, on the other hand, are often seen as desexualized (Huh, 2016), with their masculinity deemed to be severely lacking. According to Shimizu (2012), they tend to be portrayed as asexual, effeminate, and emasculated, except when they are the stereotypical powerful Kungfu masters. Once again, the colonial construction of sexuality comes into play as Asian and Asian American men are portrayed as immoral and lacking the sexual desirability that would allow them to be suitable partners for Asian and Asian American women (Ono, 2017). Nakayama (1994) asserts that the 1991 movie *Showdown in Little Tokyo* depicted Asian masculinity both as threatening and negative (for the White male), as well as non-sexual (judging by the reluctance of the camera to stray further down from the neck and waist of the Asian characters). The Asian male body here is considered as less than the White male body, with the White protagonist – Detective Kenner – showcased as the erotic center of masculinity, completely outshining and overpowering the

other Japanese characters (Nakayama, 1994). More recent examples of the emasculated Asian males can be found in early to mid-2000s films such as the *Rush Hour* series (1998 – 2007) (Besana *et al.,* 2019). An explanation for this can be found in the documentary *The Slanted Screen* (2007), where director Gene Cajayon points out:

> Mainstream America, for the most part, gets uncomfortable with seeing an
> Asian man portrayed in a sexual light (Shimizu, 2016, p. 46).

Thus, we can see that Asian American males are often forced into a straightjacket of sexuality where there exists a "narrowly circumscribed vision of masculinity, informed by a reactionary claim to male power and privilege" (Shimizu, 2012, p. 2). This vision is one that defines masculinity as the expression of power and domination, and Asian American male sexuality as asexual, feminine and, in comparison to the While male, weak (Shimizu, 2012).

The stereotype of the exotic female and the emasculated male continues to endure in the 21st century. In their research, Chin *et al.* (2017) provide several examples of television that perpetuate this stereotype. Notably, there is *Two Broke Girls* produced by CBS, which regularly showcases Asian American character Han Lee derided for being unable to maintain romantic relationships or to have sexual partners. Another series worth mentioning is *Vice Principals* (HBO) which features a scene where the Korean wife of a character is mocked by their neighbor using the reference of mail order brides (Chin *et al*., 2017). An analysis of 100 feature films in 2017 reveals that among all ethnic groups, Asian American males and female were least likely to be shown in sexy attire, partial nudity or be referenced as attractive. This was especially true for Asian males, who were not depicted as attractive 99.1 of the times (Smith *et al.*, 2018), thus confirming the enduring stereotype of Asian males being sexually unattractive. It is also interesting to note that compared to every other ethnic group (including White), males and female from Mixed Race background were the group most likely to be depicted as sexually attractive and desirable (Smith *et al*., 2018). This finding alludes to the complexities of the character of Nick Young in *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), who is played by a half-White, half-Malaysian actor (Besana *et al.*, 2019).

2.3.3. Reimagining Asian sexuality

As we have acknowledged the inherently problematic nature of the representation of Asian sexuality onscreen, it is also necessary to establish a way forward, one that can afford the complexities and multiplicities of the current social context. This can be found in the arguments of Shimizu (2007, 2012, 2016) across the different works she has published on this topic. Shimizu (2012) posits that the male experience of gender should not be characterized by his domination over other men and women, but rather by the feelings that his experiences can evoke in others through showcasing both strength and vulnerability. For Asian men onscreen, masculinity – which is often situated at the center of male sexuality – is something that should exist in a plurality that celebrates asexuality, effeminacy, queerness, and multitudinous other sexual formations. In other words, the sexuality of Asian men needs to be broken free from the straightjacket (Shimizu, 2012) that they have been forced into. Shimizu's (2016) analysis of the career of Hollywood romantic star James Shigeta demonstrates this idea of plural masculinity as well as the unbinding of this metaphorical straightjacket of sexuality.

As a second-generation Japanese American actor, Shigeta rose to stardom in the 1950s and 1960s. His characters in *Crimson Kimono* (1959), *Walk like a Dragon* (1960), *Flower Drum Song* (1961) and *Bridge to the Sun* (1961) illustrate that rather than a handicap, his race and gender play a crucial role in his attractiveness towards women. The female characters who pursue him do so in full recognition of his characters' racial difference and they are drawn to his sexuality (Shimizu, 2016). By utilizing the power of the cinema, Shigeta addresses issues of race, gender, and sexuality in relation to his characters' identities and seduces the audience with those identities. He shatters the illusion of heroic manhood as centering on the phallus and White identity and asserts that Asian American manhood is anything but lacking (Shimizu, 2016). This demonstrates Shimizu's (2012) argument that despite – and because of – racial, sexual, and gendered challenges, Asian American actors can comfortably and ethically exemplify how to be a man.

As previously established, Asian women are regularly framed as hypersexualized beings in movies and television alike. By analyzing several types of texts featuring sexualized Asian American women (including Hollywood movies showcasing the trope of the Asian *femme fatales*, early stag films with white women in yellowface and mainstream pornography featuring Asian American stars), Shimizu (2007) argues that Asian American

women utilize the hypersexualized frame ascribed upon them to politicalize their desire and sexualities. As independent agents, they create a new form of race-positive sexuality by rejecting and transforming onscreen stereotypes (Shimizu, 2007).

Within the confines of discourse, mediated stereotypes frequently utilized by Hollywood movie makers embody the prejudices and discriminations ethnic minorities in the U.S. are subjected to. Stereotypes both produce and reaffirm misrepresentation about various racial groups, among which are Asians who are either the threatening *yellow peril* or the docile *model minority*. These two enduring stereotypes have influenced the portrayals of Asians in the Hollywood cinema since the 20th century, especially in terms of Asian sexuality. The construction of Asian sexuality is often informed by pre-existing colonial ideas that relegate the Asian women to the submissive doll or the Dragon Lady, and the Asian men to the emasculated and asexual. While the stereotype-laden nature of Asian representation has, overall, slowly improved in the past few years, it remains unclear whether the same can be said for the construction of Asian sexuality specifically. As such, this thesis seeks to investigate this matter using a content-centric approach, which is outlined in the following chapter.

Methodology

This chapter starts with a description of my samples and the collection process, including the criteria used to gather the movies, the scripts, and the screenshots. To examine these visual and textual materials, a combination of Critical Discourse Analysis and Visual Discourse Analysis was utilized. What follows is a detailed account of the process of data analysis, starting with a pilot phase and an analysis phase where I studied the full data set, keeping in mind the methodological implications obtained from the pilot phase.

3.1.   Sample and Data Collection

An integral aspect of any research is data gathering because the data is the means for the researcher to improve their understanding of a theoretical framework (Bernard, 2006). The method used for this thesis to gather data is purposive sampling, defined as the calculated selection from a population based on certain characteristics of a participant. It should be noted here that the term *population* is not restricted to humans, as it can also refer to things or cases (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2015). This is relevant in the context of this thesis, as the chosen sampling units are movies. Purposive sampling is particularly popular with qualitative research, where it proves its strengths in pinpointing the most relevant cases to maximize the limited resources the researcher has at hand (Patton, 2014).

The sampling unit of this research is the following movies: *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), *Always Be My Maybe* (2019) and *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (2018). The selection of these movies was based on four criteria. One, the movie featured at least two characters of East Asian or South East Asian descent (having one or both parents who are Asian) in leading or supporting roles. Two, the movie was produced and distributed by a Hollywood studio in 2018 or 2019. Only live-action movies were included for analysis, as it could not be guaranteed that animations would realistically and accurately portray the physicality of the actors, which was an important element in the construction of sexuality. Three, the movie was accessible through online streaming services (for example, Netflix). Four, the movie had to satisfy the blueprint of the genre of romantic comedy, which contains a distinctive narrative structure that revolves around the meeting of the main male and female characters, who overcome various obstacles throughout the course of the movie to finally united in a happy ending that is faithful to the comedy genre (Mortimer, 2010). The three movies listed above satisfied these criteria (see Appendix A) and thus were included

for analysis. Three movies are also in accordance with the requirement of the Methodological Guidelines (Janssen & Verboord, 2019).

As the focus of the romantic comedy storyline is on the central couple (Grindon, 2011; Mortimer, 2010), it was decided that the two leading Asian male and female characters from each movie would be selected for analysis. For *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), these characters were Rachel Chu (Chinese American) and Nick Young (Chinese Singaporean), while for *Always be my Maybe* (2019), they were Sasha Tran (Vietnamese American) and Marcus Kim (Korean American). An exception was made for *To All The Boys I've Loved Before* (2018), as Peter Kavinsky – the male lead – is established as a White character. Thus, only Lara Jean (half Korean, half White American) is selected from the central couple. The second character to be analyzed from this movie is Margot Covey, Lara Jean's older sister. All characters are played by Asian actors, except Nick – *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) – and Margot – *To All The Boys I've Loved Before* (2018) – who are played by Eurasian actors.

The scripts and the screenshots taken from the movies are utilized for analysis. The scripts were collected using Google search with the keywords: "[Movie name] + script". In the case of *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), its script is an official version released by Warner Bros. Pictures and is downloaded from the first result of the Google search. For the other two movies, no official version exists online, thus forcing me to use unofficial scripts uploaded onto two websites – *sublikescript.com* for *Always be my Maybe* (2019) and *blog.naver.com* for *To All The Boys I've Loved Before* (2018). To ensure that the scripts were accurate, they were compared to the actual movies by playing the movies as I checked for any missing lines. Overall, there was no inconsistency between the scripts and the lines spoken in the movies. The scripts were then converted into PDF format and imported into *Atlas.ti* for Critical Discourse analysis.

Due to the limited scope of the thesis in terms of time and methodology, I decided to perform the visual analysis on screenshots taken directly from each scene in the movies. A scene is a constituent of a movie (see Figure 1), with its beginning and ending marked by transitions, which utilize techniques like dissolving or fading to differentiate between two separate scenes (Ronfard & Tran-Thuong, 2003). When collecting the screenshots, I used the transitions to mark the different scenes in a movie, allowing me to determine what was necessary to capture in a scene. The scenes were arranged in numerical order, with their

time stamps noted down (see Appendix B). The purpose of the screenshots is to capture several shots within a scene, as a scene "contains a sequence of contiguous shots" (Ronfard & Tran-Thuong, 2003, p. 2). As a typical modern Hollywood drama can have more than 800 shots (Thompson, 1999), it is not feasible within the scope of this thesis to examine every shot. Thus, the screenshots selected focused on the appearances (clothes, hair, make-up, accessories, etc.) and the actions (interactions with sexual and romantic partners, with special emphasis on touch, kiss, and other sexual acts) of the two characters chosen for analysis from each movie. In total, 242 screenshots were studied for this thesis, with 74 from *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), 100 from *Always be my Maybe* (2019), and 68 from *To All The Boys I've Loved Before* (2018).
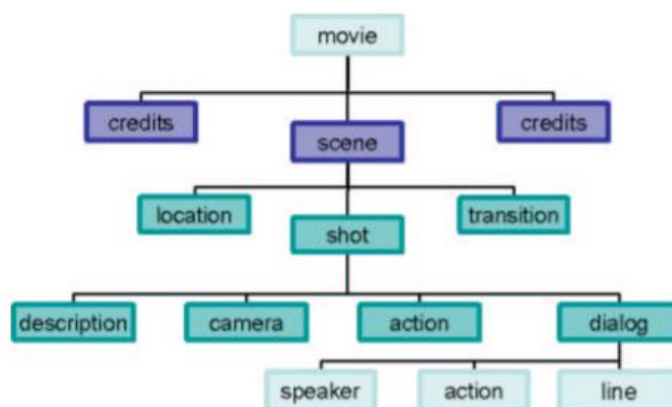
Figure 1. The hierarchical structure of a movie (Ronfard & Tran-Thuong, 2003).

3.2.   Operationalization

Based on the theories discussed in the previous chapter regarding sexuality and the social construction of sexuality, the idea of sexuality can be operationalized for this paper as a concept involving the expression and interaction of the sexual self. Following this line of thought, Asian sexuality would be understood as the expression and interaction of the sexual self of a person of Asian descent. This operationalization means that there are two elements to sexuality: the interpersonal and the intrapersonal.

The interpersonal. This element involves the way that people experience sex when interacting with different sexual selves. Irvine (2003) considers sexuality as something that is born out of the communicative transaction between people. Sexuality is a part of the performance that the sexual self puts up in the presence of others. This performance can

be sexual interactions (including flirting, courtship, performing sexual acts) or sexual relationships (with other characters).

The intrapersonal. While, as Reiss (1984) asserts, sexuality does not exist in isolation, sexuality does involve the individual. Hence, sexuality is not just about the experience of sex but also the expression of the sexual self. This expression can be observed in the physical appearances of the characters (clothes, hair, make-up, accessories), the personality (that might indicate the character as a desirable or undesirable sexual partner) and the different emotions that the character might go through (liking someone, lusting after someone or loving someone).

To determine the construction of sexuality in the movies, I looked at these interpersonal and intrapersonal elements of sexuality during the analysis. These elements can manifest in the form of courtship, courteous behaviors, romantic relationships, physical acts, or love and marriage (Shimizu, 2012). While there exists many different types of sexuality, the focus of this thesis was on heterosexuality. The rationale for this was due to the narrative convention of romantic comedy, which almost always features a union between men and women (Mortimer, 2010). Even though homosexual romances have started to appear in Hollywood productions starting from the 90s (Ng, 2020), Hollywood is still reluctant to portray sexual and romantic relationships beyond the confides of heterosexuality (Modelmog, 2009). Especially in movies featuring Asian characters, homosexuality is a rare occurrence, with only one out of the twenty-five movies analyzed by Besana *et al.* (2019) that does not portray Asians as heterosexual. Additionally, in the interest of filling a gap in research on sexuality that has often focused on queer identity (see Chapter 1), I have chosen to analyze heterosexuality and have examined both male and female sexuality.

3.3. Methods of Analysis

To study the discourse surrounding the construction of East Asian sexuality on screen, it is necessary to understand the importance of language and visual elements in communicating discourse.

3.3.1. Language

Under the lens of the French philosopher Foucault, the role of language transcends beyond the simplicity of talking – language operates as a mean to regulate fields of knowledge and

practice (Tonkiss, 2012). Language helps to naturalize certain norms which are then rarely questioned as anything other than common sense (Machin & Mayr, 2012). In a way, this mirrors the idea of the *Sapir-Whorf hypothesis*, which considers language to be closely related to how a person conceives his or her social world, to the point that language is thought to influence or even control how we think about our social realities (Kay & Kempton, 1984). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) operates under the same assumption that language is interlaced with the social norms and practices that dictate the functioning of our society (Machin & Mayr, 2012), therefor making it very suitable to study the use of language in shaping discourses about East Asian sexuality in movies. CDA exists within the realm of social and cultural research focusing on how meaning is constructed through the practice of texts and talk (Tonkis, 2012). The researcher using this method investigates the multitude of ways that discourse, power, dominance, and social inequality relate to one another (van Dijk, 1993). CDA functions as a mean to unearth supposedly neutral communicative strategies used to conceal ideologies that strive to dictate how certain events or people are portrayed (Machin & Mayr, 2012). The tradition of critical discourse analysis considers language as integral in the reproduction, legitimization, and exercise of power in society (Tonkiss, 2012). CDA intends to denaturalize "the language to reveal the kinds of ideas, absences and taken-for-granted assumptions in the texts" (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 5), thus exposing the inherent power interests in the text.

To this end, the process of analysis used CDA follows Machin and Mayr's (2012) proposal of how to carry out lexical analysis. This included examining *word connotations*, *overlexicalization*, *suppression*, *structural opposition,* and *lexical choices*. Lexical analysis is one of the most principal types of linguistic analysis under the wider umbrella of critical discourse analysis that focuses on word choices and connotations (Machin & Mayr, 2012). This was useful when examining the script of the movies to expose underlying meanings and ideologies about East Asian sexual identities. In general, I analyzed dialogues either involving the characters above, or that were about those characters.

Word connotations. This step is performed by the researcher under the assumption that word selection for the text is a deliberate process fueled by the goals of the producer (Machin & Mayr, 2012). During my analysis, I marked any words or phrases which are related to the sexual expressions or experiences of the characters. These could include conversations about their sexual experience, their dating history, or their physical

attractiveness. Additionally, considering that sexuality is socially constructed and rooted in cultural discourses (e.g. Epstein, 1994; Foucault, 1980; Reiss, 1986), I also paid attention to dialogues revolving around the cultural and racial identities of the characters, and examined how these might influence the construction of the characters' sexuality.

Overlexicalization. In this step, the researcher identifies the repetition of particular words and their synonyms, which might be an indication of overly persuasive content (Machin & Mayr, 2012). The repetitions that I analyzed in the scripts were those of words (and their synonyms) related to cultural identity, to the desirability of the characters (in terms of physicality, personality, socio-economic status, etc.), and to sexuality. For *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), I also highlighted words which might point to a fairy tale motif, given that the movie is considered a modern retelling of the classic Cinderella story (Cohen, 2018).

Suppression. The construction of discourse can also occur in the absence of specific words or phrases that the audience might assume would be present in the text (Machin & Mayr, 2012). When analyzing the scripts, I paid attention to where the dialogues focused on the sexuality of the characters (for example, when discussing their sexual feelings) that might be missing important information, such as an explanation for what the characters said. These absences could reveal implicit assumptions and understanding about Asian sexuality.

Structural opposition. The researcher analyzes the opposing concepts which are implied in the text (Machin & Mayr, 2012). For this thesis, I looked for opposing concepts in the existence of conflicts, which are a central element of the narrative of romantic comedy (Grindon, 2011). This genre commonly narrates stories surrounding three types of conflict: family conflict between members of the family, gender conflict between the men and the women in the movies, and personal conflict between individual development and self-sacrifice, or between personal values and societal expectations (Grindon, 2011). In addition to the examination of conflicts was the analysis of cultural opposition, where I looked at how the different cultures (and their values) of the characters might be set up to be the antithesis of each other. The main opposition that I highlighted was the opposition between Asian and American cultures.

Lexical choices. It often happens that writers deliberately utilize certain phrases or terms to establish authority over the audience, thereby influencing the audience's meaning

making process (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Given that movies generally do not address the audience directly, I considered it unlikely that the writers and directors would attempt to claim power over their audience, and did not expect that any meaningful data would be derived from this. To test this assumption, this step was included in the pilot phase, where I looked for ways that the movies might use lexical choices to influence the audience's understanding of Asian sexuality. Among the two types of lexical choices discussed by Machin and Mayr (2012), I focused on the use of scientific jargons and official terms related to sexuality.

3.3.2. Visual

Equally as important as language is the use of visual communication to construct discourse. In conjunction with CDA, Visual Discourse Analysis (VDA) was also carried out, focusing specifically on the visual side of the movies. Machin and Mayr (2012) argue that the communication of meaning is done through a mixture of language and other semiotic modes, among which is visual feature. Like language, visual communication "both shapes and is shaped by society" (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p.10). The idea of combining critical discourse analysis with visual analysis stems from the concept of multimodality. O'Halloran (2011) regards multimodal discourse analysis as an emerging paradigm where language is no longer studied as a separate entity but one that exists in concurrence with other semiotic elements such as body language, sound, movements, or images. By denaturalizing visual communication, the researcher can reveal the type of visual elements at work together with languages to push for certain ideologies (Machin & Mayr, 2012). A movie is, by nature, a combination of text (what is being said) and visual (what is being shown). The narratives and ideologies in a movie are delivered to the audience not only through the lines spoken by the characters, but also through visual elements that serve to enhance the communicative capability of motion pictures. Thus, a combination of CDA and VDA is required to truly understand the nuanced nature of the data set at hand.

VDA was carried out in this thesis using the framework developed by Machin and Mayr (2012). The first step in this framework was to identify the two levels of meaning of an image: the *denotative* level (looking at what is being described) and the *connotative* level (looking at the abstract ideas being communicated). A careful description of what is being denoted in the image is necessary to understand not just the connotation of the

image, but also how this connotation is communicated (Machin & Mayr, 2012). During my analysis, my attention was on the physical depictions of the characters in terms of their clothes, their hair styles, or their accessories, as well as their sexual interactions such as embracing each other, touching someone, or exchanging kisses. As the denotation and connotation of the image have been determined, the next step was to list out all of the *objects* present in the image and figure out the meanings attached to those objects based on the placement, the type of objects or the color. Attention should also be given to the *settings* of the image as backgrounds also play a role in connoting discourses and ideologies (Machin & Mayr, 2012). I paid attention to the physical space (such as the setting of a bedroom, a restaurant, or the inside of a car), the lighting (where the light focused on, how dark or bright it was), and the public (people in the background). The last step focuses on how certain elements of the image were highlighted to attract the attention of the audience and the type of symbolic values which were implied. To analyze *salience* in an image, I looked at the several ways that salience can occur: the use of potent cultural symbols, the size of the object (large objects tend to be regarded as more important), the color (rich, conspicuous colors are often used to attract attention), the tone of the object, the focus of the image, the foregrounding of certain objects (placing some parts in front of others) and the overlapping of objects (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

3.4.   Data analysis
3.4.1.   Pilot phase
The pilot phase, or pilot study, is a term used to refer either to a small-scale version of the actual study, or the pre-testing step to determine the suitability of a research instrument (Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). For this thesis, the pilot phase functioned as both the trial run version and the pre-testing of a research instrument. Conducting a pilot study was a logical choice to address my concern about the *lexical choices* step in the CDA framework proposed by Machin and Mayr (2012). Additionally, it also provided me insights into specific visual elements that I should pay more attention to when performing VDA.

The pilot study was carried out on small sections of both the scripts and the screenshots following the steps for VDA and CDA described above. The first four pages of all three scripts were tested for CDA, except for Crazy Rich Asians (2018), where pilot analysis is conducted from page 5 to 9 of the script as Rachel Chu and Nick Young do not

appear before that. The screenshots from the first two scenes of the three movies were tested for VDA. That totaled to 7 screenshots from *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), 14 screenshots from *Always be my Maybe* (2019), and 7 from *To All The Boys I've Loved Before* (2018). Based on the pilot study, it was concluded that *lexical choices* could be excluded from the actual analysis of the movie scripts given the lack of applicable data. There was no instance where the screenplay writers attempted to, in any manner, establish authority over the audience regarding the subject of Asian sexuality. Insights gained from the pilot analysis also suggested that for VDA, more attention should be paid to the use of colors, motifs, and symbols in relation to the portrayal of Asian characters. The reasoning for this was because it became somewhat apparent that the movie makers utilized motifs, symbols, and especially colors to indicate certain aspects about the sexuality of the Asian characters chosen for analysis. For example, flowers and vines decorations were used as depiction of femininity or red became an indication of romance and sexual appeal.

3.4.2. Analysis

The actual analysis was carried out through four phases. In the first phase, analyses of the scripts and the screenshots were performed separately following Machin and Mayr's (2012) CDA and VDA frameworks, with *lexical choices* excluded for CDA. CDA was done using *Atlas.ti,* which allowed me to note down my interpretations of every element that I highlighted in the script. For VDA, I used Microsoft OneNote to keep track of my analysis of the screenshots, which were divided by movies and scenes. Following the first phase, I compiled all my interpretations of the textual and visual elements of the movies and arranged them according to three categories: *across genders*, *Asian females*, and *Asian males*. The next phase consisted of grouping my analyses under each category to develop suitable frames that would provide the answer to my research question. For *across genders*, two relevant frames emerged from the analyses, which were *normalization of Asian sexuality* and *portrayal of distinct Asian-ness*. The second category, *Asian females*, consisted of the *attractive frame*, the *strong, independent, and in control frame*, and the *problematic frame*. The category of *Asian males* contained three frames: *attractive, masculine, and sexy*, *Prince Charming*, and *plural masculinity*. In the final phase of my analysis, I focused on identifying patterns existing within each frame and assigned codes to the patterns. An overview of the categories, frames, and codes can be found in Appendix C.

3.5.   Credibility of Research

An important point of consideration for any thesis is the credibility of the research. Central to the issue of research credibility is the notions of reliability (the degree to which the results are replicable) and validity (the extent to which the study correctly measures what it claims to measures) (Noble & Smith, 2015). For textual analysis, the reliability of the analysis relies on the degree of standardization of the categories used to examine the data (Silverman, 2011). As I used two frameworks for CDA and VDA proposed by Machin and Mayr (2012) and described the steps I took to adopt these frameworks to my study in detail, the reliability of my thesis is guaranteed. Additionally, the use of *Atlas.ti* and Microsoft OneNote allowed me to keep meticulous notes during my analysis, which is recommended to increase the reliability of qualitative research (Noble & Smith, 2015; Silverman, 2011). Parts of these notes are included in Appendix D and E to ensure the transparency of my work.

While the combination of CDA and VDA provided a measure of reliability for the thesis, the two methods also carried with them their limitations, chief among which is their dependent on the subjectivity of the researcher (Machin & Mayr, 2012). A way in which I addressed this was to clearly state the school of thought that I ascribed to in my theoretical framework, which is adopting social constructionism when analyzing human sexuality. Additionally, it is also necessary for me to consider my reflexivity and positionality, and how this might affect the outcomes of my research (Noble & Smith, 2015). I had watched all three movies prior to my thesis proposal, not as a researcher, but as an audience. I genuinely enjoyed the movies, especially with how Asian characters are portrayed. This might potentially influence the results of my analysis, as texts reflecting the personal opinions of the researcher pose a challenge for CDA (Machin & Mayr, 2012). As an Asian woman, I have my own opinions and expectations regarding how Asians are represented in the media. This could mean that compared to a non-Asian researcher, I might be more sensitive to certain parts of the scripts or the visuals of the movies, and thus, might perceive them to be more significant than they were. By acknowledging my own bias in my thesis and actively reflecting on this during the process of analysis, I can increase the validity of my research.

Results and Discussion

In this chapter, the results from the analysis of the three movies will be presented. The quotations used in the chapter will be identified by the movies they are taken from, with *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) referred to as CRA, *Always be my Maybe* (2019) as ABMM, and *To All The Boys I've Loved Before* (2018) as TATBTLB. The chapter starts with a discussion of findings that occur in the portrayal of both Asian males and females, centring around two themes: *the normalization of Asian sexuality* and *the distinct Asian-ness portrayed in the movies*. The following subsection focuses on how Asian female sexuality is depicted. The three movies developed Asian female characters as sexually attractive and strong, independent partners, but still retains problematic aspects. Finally, the chapter ends with an analysis of how the portrayals of Nick Young and Marcus Kim challenge the stereotype of the asexual and emasculated Asian males by depicting these two characters as attractive, masculine, and sexy.

4.1. Across Genders

4.1.1. Normalization of Asian Sexuality

The analysis of the three movies reveals a clear attempt to normalize the sexuality of Asian characters by showing that above all, they are Americans engaging in sexual relationships. The conflicts surrounding their sexuality are conflicts common to any romcoms and not restricted to a specific racial background. The movies also situate the characters in familiar settings so that the audience, regardless of race and culture, can relate to.

Each of the characters analysed in the three movies carry their own cultural and racial background. Rachel Chu is Chinese American, Nick Young is Chinese Singaporean (who has spent considerable time in England and the U.S.), Sasha Tran is Vietnamese American, Marcus Kim is Korean American, Lara Jean Covey and Margot Covey are half-Korean, half-White American. None of these characters are depicted in these movies as the perpetual foreigners, a stereotype traditionally seen in Hollywood movies in which Asian characters are routinely portrayed as speaking in broken English and engaging in heavily accented dialogues (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004; Chin *et al.,* 2017; Yuen, 2004). Here, the characters speak in clear and easy-to-understand English. The attempt to emphasize that Asian Americans are Americans first is transparent in *Crazy Rich Asians,* where the opposition of Nick's family towards Rachel is not because of her Chinese. Their rejection of

her is because she is American at heart. Near the start of the story, when discussing the different between Chinese American and Chinese Singaporean, Rachel's mother says:

> Your face is Chinese. You speak Chinese. But here [point to Rachel's head and mouth] and here, you're different (CRA).

The idea of Rachel as someone who, while carrying the looks and speaks the language of the Chinese, is essentially American is further compounded by the comment from her friend Peik Lin, who refers to Rachel as a *banana*. According to Tu (2011), the term *banana*, like *twinkie* or *coconut*, is a racial euphemism referring to Asian Americans who do not behave in a typical Asian manner, as they are considered to have fully integrated into the mainstream White American culture. For Rachel to be called a *banana* onscreen is a reminder that she has overcome her racial barriers to be seen as similar to White Euro-Americans (Tu, 2011).

The word "American" is reiterated throughout the entire movie as a constant reminder of Rachel's identity. After introducing Rachel to his mother for the first time, Nick says: "I thought you might be excited that the first girl that I bring home is a Chinese professor" (CRA), to which his mother replies: "Chinese-American" (CRA), with an emphasis on the latter word. This is not the only time that she seems to be fixated on Rachel's American identity, as when Rachel confronts Eleanor about her disapproval, Eleanor explains: "You're a foreigner. *American*. And all Americans think about is their own happiness" (CRA). This effectively brands Rachel as an outsider from a faraway land, someone who, in Eleanor's own words, is not "our own kind of people" (CRA). Thus, while Rachel might be shown onscreen to be speaking fluent Mandarin or eating quintessential Chinese dishes such as dumplings, she is painted as American first and Chinese second. Her struggle could be the struggle of any Americans going to a foreign country and engaging with the family of their partner who is of a completely different culture.

These movies further situate their characters firmly in mainstream culture by placing the expression and experience of these characters as sexual beings in conflicts which are common for any romcom, not just limited to stories of certain racial backgrounds. For example, while the story of *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) is about a Chinese American professor going to Singapore to meet the family of her Chinese Singaporean

boyfriend, many of the issues that she faces are not limited to Chinese people. One of the main conflicts in the movie is the generational conflict between the parents and the children, along with their loves (Grindon, 2011). This is identified as one among the three most common conflicts in romantic comedies, focusing on the clash between the older generation, who represent traditions and order, and the younger generation, who represent passion and independence (Grindon, 2011). In the movie, this conflict manifests in the character of Nick's mother – Eleanor – who carries with her the tradition, the power, and the familial bonds. Her mindset is such that above all else, what is important for a person is their duty towards their family, no matter how traditional that might seem in contemporary times. This ancient struggle has been depicted throughout the history of the Western theatre. One of the most prominent examples of this is *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by Shakespeare, where, much like Eleanor Young, Egeus also attempts to control his daughter's choice of marriage partner (Grindon, 2011).

Another common conflict that is observed in *Always be my Maybe* (2019) is the tension between the man and the woman in understanding and accepting each other's gender differences (Grindon, 2011). One topic that has frequently surfaced in modern movies is the shift in the social and domestic role of women (Grindon, 2011), which is represented in the movie through Marcus coming to terms with the fact that his position as Sasha's supporter will not threaten his masculinity. This will be discussed in more details in the last sub-section of this chapter.

Finally, the possibility of alienating White audience (Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Weaver, 2001) is negated by the directors' choice to portray the Asian characters' sexual experience as embedded in contexts which are familiar and relatable to many people. *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) is a modern twist on the classic story of *Cinderella*, a narrative trope which has frequently been utilized in various romantic comedies – most notably *Pretty Woman* (1990). Fairy tale functions on a symbolic level, containing instantly recognizable codes which grant it immense accessibility and relatability (Baubeta, 1997). Furthermore, fairy tales are so firmly situated in a shared cultural heritage that any use of the fairy tale storyline can create a feeling of belonging and fellowship (Baubeta, 1997) between the audience and the Asian characters onscreen. This familiarity is even more apparent in the lives of Lara Jean Covey and Margot Covey in *To All The Boys I've loved Before* (2018). The setting of the movie is a typical onscreen middle-class suburban

neighbourhood featuring green lawns, detached houses, and winding lanes (Muzzio &
Halper, 2002). Like many of its predecessors, *To All The Boys I've Loved Before* (2018)
portrays a stereotypical image of the suburb. It is nonetheless relatable because the movie
plays on the pre-existing mental construction that the audience has of the suburb, one that
does not necessarily have to fit the actual image (Muzzio & Halper, 2002). Within this
setting, the story revolves around the typical high school experience that has frequently
been featured in movies, such as attending prom, going on excursions, being invited to a
party, or sitting with friends at lunch. Combined together, these snippets of familiarity
create a cinematic experience where the Asian character is less of a foreign body but more
of a fellow country(wo)man who also goes through what the audience goes through.

4.1.2.   Distinctly Asian

For a genre that has a history of problematic racial and cultural representation
(Moddelmog, 2009), the three romantic comedies analysed have achieved a certain
balance in portraying both the mainstream American identity and the unique cultural
identities of the character. These cultural elements are shown to be deeply intertwined not
just with development of the characters as a whole, but also with their sexuality and their
relationships with their partners. One of the ways this is done is through the various
depictions of food specific to each culture. Food is one of the cornerstones of Asians'
histories, cultures, and communities, and Asian Americans are no exception to this (Ku,
Manalansan & Manur, 2013). In *To All The Boys I've Loved Before* (2018), the inclusion of
Korean food is more than just a casual mention to remind the audience of Lara Jean's
background. *Yakult* – a Korean yogurt drink – acts as an expression of Peter Kavinsky's
feeling for Lara Jean. He declares: "So if I went all the way across town to get you
something you like, then that means…" (TATBILB). The last part is left unsaid, but its
meaning is clear. The relationship between cultural food and the sexuality of the characters
is further explored in *Always be my Maybe* (2019), where nearing the end of the movie,
Sasha brings Marcus to her new restaurant – a homey Korean restaurant featuring dishes
that have been taught to her by Marcus' late mother as a child. She tells him:

It's all her recipes. This is what I want to do, Marcus. The kind of food that
makes people feel at home. The way your mom always made me feel
(ABMM).

This is a gesture that deeply touches Marcus, as the scene shows his face clouding over
with emotions, looking like he is about to cry as he leans into Sasha's embrace. It feels
appropriate that their reconciliation is sealed not with a declaration of love on the red
carpet amidst a cheering crowd of supporters, but here in the privacy of a restaurant built
upon the memory of Marcus' mother. The scene is a respectful nod to the importance of
food in Asian American culture as a reminder of family and a device of love.

One of the most prominent scenes in *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) is Rachel learning
how to make dumplings with Nick's family at his grandmother's manor. This is a traditional
activity passed down from mothers to children, from grandmother to grandchildren.
Amidst aesthetic shots of dumpling wrappers and bamboo baskets, the clash between
family expectations and individual pursuits unfold, spurred by the very dumplings that
Rachel appreciates for bringing a big family together – something that she never got to
experience growing up under the care of a single mother. Nick's mother says:

It's nice you appreciate this house and us being here together wrapping
dumplings. But all this doesn't just happen. It's because we know to put
family first, instead of chasing one's passion (CRA).

Eleanor's words imply that dumpling making, like any other tradition, is built upon years of
hard work, preservation, and, ultimately, self-sacrifice. Thus, by weaving this signature
Chinese food into the storyline, the movie showcases how Rachel gains insight into the
tight bond of her partner's family and the duties that would be expected of her if she
marries Nick.

The development of the characters' cultural backgrounds extends beyond
portrayals of food, with the exception of *To All The Boys I've Loved Before* (2018). Aside
from occasional mentions of *yakult,* the Korean half of Lara Jean is mostly relegated to the
background, only briefly appearing in the form of an unidentified Korean dish made by her
White father or the Korean face masks that Lara Jean shares with her friend Lucas. These

instances represent elements of Korean culture which have already become mainstream in the U.S. in recent times (Yin, 2018). They are largely irrelevant to Lara Jean's sexuality, demonstrating that her cultural identity plays little to no role in shaping or influencing her sexual journey. While this works well in avoiding turning *To All The Boys I've Loved Before* (2018) into an Asian-themed movie that might potentially drive away White audience (Chin *et al.,* 2017), it also negates Lara Jean's dual identities and the implications that might have as she strives to navigate her sexual journey growing up in the suburb of Portland, Oregon. This is a city that has frequently been referred to as "the whitest, and arguably, one of the most racists cities in America" (Harden-Moore, 2017, para. 1), a place that is as hostile to Asian Americans as it is to other minority groups and seem to bear no resemblance to the utopic raceless suburb that Lara Jean lives in (Yin, 2018). This careless treatment of Lara Jean's Korean half suggests a failure on the part of the movie-makers to understand how tightly intertwined sexuality is with race and power (Shimizu, 2006), and the intimate relationship that it shares with the surrounding societal context (Chou, 2012).

In contrast, *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) brings to the forefront Nick's Chinese identity through repeated mentions of "Chinese" by other characters. When speculating about Nick's evasiveness about his family, Rachel's mother says: "Maybe his parents are poor and he has to send them money. That's what all good Chinese children do" (CRA). In a later scene, following a conversation about Nick's various family members, Rachel remarks:

> So, if you have all this family there, why are we staying in a hotel? Aren't
> good Chinese sons supposed to stay with their parents? (CRA)

Later on, as Rachel confides in Peik Lin the tight relationship Nick shares with his mother, Peik Lin says: "Yeah, Chinese sons think their moms fart Chanel No.5" (CRA). While spoken under different circumstances, what these comments have in common is that they are not just offhand remarks to make clear the Chinese elements of the movies and of the characters. They carry with them expectations and assumptions about the character of Nick – who he is (a Chinese man), what he thinks (his mother is highly-regarded and respected by him), what he is supposed to do (stay with his parents when visiting, help his family financially). These clues allow Rachel to have a glimpse of a side of Nick that she previously

has not been privy to, a side that has not surfaced during his time in New York, which might affect how Rachel views their relationship and her future commitment with Nick.

References to the cultural identities and wider Asian identities of Sasha and Marcus in *Always be my Maybe* (2019) are subtler in comparison. For Tang (2019), Asian identity is not the central drive of the narrative but rather exists in the background to create a realistic setting of a diverse San Francisco that is a stark difference from portrayals of the city in mainstream romantic comedies. While this is true to a certain extent, it can be argued that the Asian-ness of Sasha and Marcus in this movie play a bigger role than just background set-up. For example, the movie delves into the issue of Asian American income inequality by portraying Sasha and Marcus as representing the two faces of *the model minority* stereotype. In the case of Sasha, her achievement exemplifies the myth of Asian Americans as economically successful (Palumbo-Liu, 1999), whose media income is above the national average by 25 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). However, because stereotyping is reductionistic and essentialist, it does not allow room for other traits that would not fit into the archetypes (Hall, 1997). This means that as the idea of *the model minority* continues to be perpetuated, the struggle and very existence of the Asians who are not economically successful are disregarded. For a group facing the most unequal distribution of wealth out of every major racial group in the country (Kochhar & Cilluffo, 2018), this is especially dangerous. *Always be my Maybe* (2019) acknowledges the Asians who do not live in the top 10 percent through the portrayal of Marcus, someone who has never made it to college and who earns his living by working as a repairman with his father. The socioeconomic divide between Sasha and Marcus is not just a tool to represent the diversity within the Asian community, but also a plot point. One of the issues in their relationship is Sasha's deletion of her Asian roots, as implied by Marcus' accusation of her willingness to exoticize Asian cuisine to suit the taste of White diners. This deletion stems from her economic success, which brings her closer to whiteness and alienates her from the community she grew up in (Clark, 2019). For their relationship to work, Sasha needs to reclaim her Asian identity, as she eventually does by opening her New York restaurant that sells the traditional Korean dishes she grew up eating.

4.2. The Asian Woman

4.2.1. She is Attractive

Analysing the three movies reveals that the Asian female characters are depicted to be physically attractive and desirable. The only exception to this is Margot Covey in *To All The Boys I've Loved Before* (2018), whose lack of screen time makes it difficult to assess the extent to which she is portrayed as an attractive woman. The diversity of their appeal can be categorized into two groups: *the romantic and feminine looking Asian women* and *the bold, modern, and powerful looking Asian women*.

The romantic and feminine looking Asian women. This type is mostly found in the portrayals of Rachel Chu in *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) and Lara Jean Covey in *To All The Boys I've Loved Before* (2018). In both movies, bright colours are utilized to depict Rachel and Lara Jean's sense of romance and femininity. Rachel is frequently shown to be wearing clothes in various colours, such as pastel purple, pink, sky blue, cream or powder blue. Outside of these colours, she is also consistently shown in red and associated with red objects (for example, pillows, blankets, seatbelts, or cars). The movie-makers' use of red alludes to the meaning of sex and romance often attached to this colour (Elliot *et al.*, 2010). Red has been found to have a positive influence on the perception of men about the level of attractiveness of women (Elliot & Niesta, 2008). As Rachel is in her early thirties and therefore considered to be young, this effect is further increased (Schwarz & Singer, 2013). For Lara Jean, her clothing often includes items in various shades of pink, especially pastel pink, as well as other bright colours such as pastel blue, yellow, light grey, white, and cream. Pink is a highly gendered colour that has come to be associated with girls and femininity (LoBue & DeLoache, 2011). As Lara Jean's defining colour, it is found on her clothes in eleven different scenes and appears on various furniture and decorations in her bedroom (see Figure 2). The portrayal of Lara Jean in close relation with this colour serves to emphasize her feminine aesthetic.

Figure 2. Screenshot taken by the author from TATBILB.

Additionally, Rachel and Lara Jean's romantic and feminine portrayal is also done using the flower motif. Many of Rachel's outfits, especially her dresses, feature flower patterns, from branches of blooming pink cherry blossoms to tiny red, white, and yellow daisies. For the wedding scene, Rachel is dressed in a white and powder blue gown with flowers in the same colour attached to the plunging neckline and the waist. In her hair is a long silver hair clip that is made to resemble a thin branch with tiny flowers on it. Rather than looking like a costume, the dress enhances her innate beauty, as evident by how enamoured Nick is when he could only mouth "Wow!" as he sees her for the first time at the wedding. This motif is also apparent with Lara Jean, whose bedroom decoration features blue wallpaper with flower drawings (see Figure 2), evoking a sense of romance and femininity that is also mirrored in her clothing. In a scene where Lara Jean contemplates Peter's proposal of a fake relationship and her feelings towards Josh, she wears a pink hoodie with a red rose embroidered on her left chest. The appearance of the red rose, especially over where her heart is supposed to be, is not coincidental, as the red rose symbolizes love, passion, and romance, thus acting as a nod towards the romantic and feminine theme of her character.

The bold, modern, and powerful looking Asian woman. The portrayal of Sasha exemplifies this aesthetic. Unlike Rachel and Lara Jean, Sasha favours a darker and more neutral palette for her everyday clothes, and bold shades for her red-carpet appearances. In both cases, she veers towards sleek and modern forms that accentuates her figures and asserts her position as a successful celebrity chef and restaurateur. She is unafraid to make bold fashion statements, as evident by her formal gowns that she wears when attending big events in the movie. The colours of her gowns – bright red, gold, shimmering silver, and

pure white – as well as the style – figure hugging, plunging necklines, billowing skirts – depict Sasha as an adventurous dresser. Her gowns are often accompanied by statement jewelleries, mostly in the form of necklaces. At one scene where she is dressed in a golden dress, she wears a gold choker with long rays that extend all the way down to her chest. Together, the dress and the necklace create a powerful look where Sasha resembles a goddess walking among mortals. She is attractive in the confidence, self-assertiveness, and power that she exudes from her appearance.

Overall, the Asian female characters analysed are not shown onscreen in sexy attire or partial nudity, which is in line with the trend reported by Smith *et al.* (2018). The only exception to this is one scene in Always be my Maybe (2019), where Sasha is implied to be naked after engaging in sexual intercourse with Marcus. She is shown to be lying in bed with him, with her arms and shoulders bare and the rest of her body covered by a blanket. However, even in this instance, her body is not hypersexualized and objectified to satisfy the male gaze (see Shimizu, 2006), as the focus of the scene is on the intimate conversation shared between her and Marcus. Contrary to Smith *et al.*'s (2018) finding that Asian American females were least likely to be referred to as attractive, the Asian female characters examined in this thesis receive compliments for their physical attractiveness on several occasions. Peik Lin's father, Wye Mun, refers to Rachel as a beautiful and smart woman when talking to his daughter and son, while Nick says to Rachel at the wedding reception: "You look spectacular, you know that? […] It's not the clothes, it's just you" (CRA). In *Always be my Maybe* (2019), Sasha is often complimented by the reporters and photographers at the various events that she attends, as well as by one of her boyfriends, Brandon.

However, as diverse as the portrayal of their attractiveness is, their physical features remain rather monolithic. Rachel, Sasha, and Lara Jean are all physically petite Asian females, ranging between 1.50 and 1.60 meters tall, continuing the trend of portraying Asian women as short and small in statues (Besana *et al.,* 2019). Their petiteness is further enhanced by the fact that they are always paired up with taller and bigger males than themselves, who are all over 1.75 meters tall. The only exception to this is Margot, who is of similar height as her female counterparts but has a curvaceous body. Similar to Rose Tico from *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017), she displays a different type of body shape for Asian women, thus allowing an often underrepresented group to gain some much

needed media exposure (Besana *et al.,* 2019). However, due to Margot's limited screen time and the mixed-race heritage of the actress, the extent to which her portrayal can add diversity to the representation of Asian female body types is questionable.

4.2.2. She is Strong, Independent and In Control

Historically hypersexualized and exoticized, the Asian women have often had their sexual agency taken away from them as they are objectified under narratives that only focus on the gaze of (White) men (see Benshoff & Griffin, 2004; Ono, 2017; Shimizu, 2006). Representation in movies are often dependent on the current political and social contexts, and as those change with the times, so does onscreen representation (Salcudean & Negrea, 2015). Movies like *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), *Always be my Maybe* (2019), and *To all The Boys I've Loved Before* (2018) represent a shift in portrayals of female Asians and Asian Americans from sexualized objects to strong and independent women who take charge of their own sexuality. All four female characters analysed are shown multiple times in the movies to be initiating displays of affection, especially kisses. These characters establish clear boundaries regarding sexual relations with male characters. After having sex with Marcus for the first time, Sasha does not hesitate to shrug off Marcus as he tries to put his arm around her shoulders in a gesture that makes her uncomfortable. A rare instance shows Lara Jean firmly telling Peter that she does not want him to kiss her anymore as they agree to have a fake relationship together. She says:

> You may be the James Dean of this stuff but I've never had a boyfriend […] It matters because I don't want all my firsts to be fake. If I'm making out with someone, I'm gonna do it for real (TATBILB).

Her words might be considered as hypocritical given that she previously kissed Peter without his consent and not once has she apologized for it. However, it remains that while for the most part Lara Jean's character might be set up as a timid and submissive girl – especially concerning Peter (see next sub-section), this scene at least demonstrates that she is capable of communicating what she wants. It also implies that she fully expects Peter to honour her wish out of respect that she deserves.

The sexual agency of Asian women is most apparent in the portrayal of Sasha Tran in *Always be my Maybe* (2019). As the heroine of the story, she is shown to engage in three onscreen relationships with Brandon, Keanu, and Marcus, as well as two scenes featuring implied sexual intercourse with Marcus. However, unlike previous Hollywood production, the movie does not treat her character as promiscuous or having an immoral inclination towards sex (Shimizu, 2007). The figure of the Dragon Lady who utilizes her sexuality to manipulate men and attain success (Ono, 2017; Wang, 2012) is also conspicuously missing. Rather, Sasha is portrayed as a normal woman who has had her share of relationships and who is comfortable with her sexuality – a position which is often assigned to male characters in romantic comedies rather than females (Bowler, 2013). As she breaks the news to Marcus about her new boyfriends, she unabashedly recounts:

> We had the most insane, freaky-ass sex. My toes are curled up right now just thinking about it. And look, look! I have a hickey, like a teenager (ABMM).

Rather than feeling shy, Sasha openly acknowledges her sexual adventure and wholeheartedly embraces the pleasure that she derives from engaging in intercourse. This portrayal reflects not only society's changing perspective regarding the meaning of sexuality (Salcudean & Negrea, 2015) but also the erosion of the hypersexualized Asian female discourse that frames the Asian woman who partakes in sexual activities as immoral and exotic (Shimizu, 2006). Sasha represents a new generation of Asian women in movies whose sexuality is normalized and whose enjoyment of sex and ability to feel pleasure are accepted by society at large.

In addition to the hypersexualized and exotic discourse, the image of the submissive Asian woman is also countered through the portrayals of the female characters in the movies as being unafraid to make difficult decisions in their relationships. Before leaving for university in Scotland, Margot breaks up with her boyfriend of two years despite still having feelings for him. Her reasoning, as she relays to her sister, is that: "Before Mom died, she said I should never go to college with a boyfriend" (TATBILB). More than just respecting the wish of her late mother, Margot's decision implies that she is willing to go to great length, no matter how hard it might be, to act in a manner that would be in her best interest. She foresees the obstacles that she and Josh might face trying to sustain a long-

distance relationship and chooses to end it because she wants to give herself the best start possible as she embarks on a new journey. Initially, this decision might be viewed by the audience as cold and selfish, reinforcing the robotic and unfeeling stereotype about Asians in mainstream media in the U.S. (Kim, 2013). However, as the story progresses, the audience gains more understanding of Margot's character, especially as Josh admits: "The longer she was gone, the more I understood why she ended it" (TATBILB). Thus, this demonstrates that Margot is independent not just for the sake of being independent; her strength of character benefits not just herself but also the people that she loves – namely Josh.

However, there continues to be remnants of the submissive Asian woman stereotype, mostly observed in the character of Lara Jean Covey, which is discussed in-depth in the following sub-section. The objectification of Asian women, although few and far in between, can be detected in the treatment of the character P.T. towards Rachel in *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018). P.T. is the timid and reclusive older brother of Peik Lin who takes an instant interest in Rachel after his father jokingly encourages him to chase after her during their first meeting. P.T. rarely talks to Rachel and does not make any attempts to get to know her as a person. Instead, his interaction with Rachel is limited to him mouthing "I love you" to her or making the heart symbol with his hands or taking photos of her without her consent. This turns Rachel from a person with her own agency and feelings into the stereotypical acquiescent China doll – a mere object to be looked at by men (Wang, 2012). Rather than feeling embarrassed about his own behaviour, P.T. is often shown to be proud of himself for treating Rachel as an object to be looked at. During the emotional climax of the movie, after being caught eavesdropping on Rachel's private conversation with her mother and once again secretly taking photos of her, P.T. unabashedly says: "I'll email the photo later" (CRA). Instead of being alarmed by his behaviour, both Rachel and her mother laugh, showing that they think P.T. is harmless and his action is humorous rather than problematic. This is consistent with Rachel's character throughout the entire movie, as she is never shown to be addressing P.T.'s treatment towards her, no matter how invasive it is. Thus, this creates the impression that so long as it is for comedic purpose, objectifying women, regardless of their race and ethnicity, is acceptable.

4.2.3. She is Also Problematic Lara Jean Covey

Out of all the female characters analysed, Lara Jean Covey of *To All The Boys I've Loved Before* (2018) proves to be the most problematic in terms of perpetuating stereotypes about Asian female sexuality. On the one hand, she is the submissive doll who is devoted to the (White) men that she loves (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004; Wang, 2012). Lara Jean's embodiment of this stereotype is demonstrated through her portrayal as a character who is sexually and romantically innocent, who allows Peter Kavinsky – the romantic interest – to force her into doing things she is not comfortable with, and whose only suitable love interests are White males. On the other hand, she carries traces of the Dragon Lady figure – the Asian woman who is cunning, treacherous, and tricks (White) men (Ono, 2017; Wang, 2012).

The submissive doll. Lara Jean is portrayed as a high school junior who has outdated and unrealistic views about sex and love due to reading too many romance novels and watching too many romantic comedies from the last century. Her lack of experience regarding her sexuality is revealed as the movie progress. At one point, she says to Peter: "You may be the James Dean of this kind of stuff but I've never had a boyfriend" (TATBILB). In reply to his, Peter comments: "You have the references of an 80-year-old woman" (TATBILB), referring to her outdated romantic view, a kind of view that teenagers normally would not have. This is further confirmed by Lara Jean suggesting what Peter can do instead of kissing her to make their fake relationship look convincing to other people, drawing from her favourite movie *Sixteen Candles* (which was produced in 1984):

How about this? You can put your hand in my back pocket […] Sixteen
Candles? It's the opening image. It's a couples thing (TATBILB).

Her lack of experience is compounded by the ending scene, where after starting an official relationship with Peter, she asks:

How do we do this? […] What do you put into a contract for a real
relationship? (TATBILB)

She is clearly confused and unsure about the prospect of having a real boyfriend for the first time. Faced with the unknown, Lara Jean tries to anchor herself by coming up with guidelines that she could abide by, not knowing that there is no contract that can be set for a real relationship.

While clearly meant to ground Lara Jean as a normal high school student whose overly romanced ideas about sex and love are not unusual for teenagers starting to explore the world of dating, this portrayal depicts Lara Jean as passive. Her lack of knowledge only changes, slightly through the course of her interaction with Peter, who acts as her guide into the world of dating. When discussing how to proceed with their fake relationship, Lara Jean needs to be taught by Peter on what to do and how to act. He says:

> You crazy? Who's gonna believe we're in a relationship if I'm not allowed to kiss you? […] We need to figure out something because people are gonna get suspicious if I'm not allowed to touch you (TATBILB)

This demonstration of Lara Jean's ignorance about appropriate behaviours in a relationship shows the White male as the one who helps the Asian female to realize her own sexuality. This is especially evident in Scene 28 (see Appendix A), where Lara Jean and Peter reconcile in a hot tub during their ski trip with their class. Throughout the entire movie, this is the only time where Lara Jean is dressed in a remotely revealing outfit – her nude-coloured nightgown with spaghetti straps and a plunging neckline that shows the beginning of her cleavage. This is in stark contrast to her normal image of a young schoolgirl in button down shirts, pleated skirts, and sweaters (see Figure 3). There is an overtly sexual quality to the scene in the way that the nightgown clings to her body as she enters the water and how later on this scene is referred to as a sex tape as it is released on Instagram. Lara Jean's transition implies that under the guidance of a White male, the demure, innocent Asian girl can transit into a sexy, confident woman (Besana *et al.*, 2019).
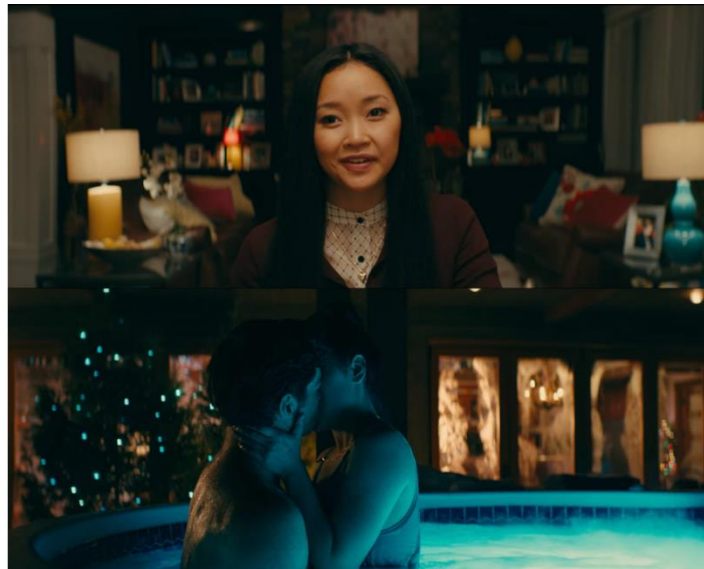
Figure 3. Screenshots taken by the author from TATBILB.

Her submissiveness is also evident in her allowance of Peter to convince her into doing things that she might not be comfortable with, except for one instance discussed in the previous sub-section. In one scene, she is forced by Peter to let her hair down as he takes away her hair tie. When she protests and demands that he returns her hair tie, he replies: "I'm keeping it. I like your hair down. You look pretty" (TATBILB) and Lara Jean relents. This scene suggests that Peter has power over her appearance – power given to him by Lara Jean herself – which allows him to change the way that she looks to fit his preference. Additionally, when Lara Jean does not behave according to what Peter wants, he ignores her. This is shown on the day that they leave for their ski trip, when instead of sitting with Peter, Lara Jean chooses to sit with her friend. He says:

> I'm supposed to be sweet to you after you don't sit with me on the bus ride
> up here? […] I wanted to sit next to you, Lara Jean. I even packed the snacks.
> I asked Kitty where to find those yogurt drinks you like so much (TATBILB).

The insinuation is clear: Peter would readily withhold his affection towards Lara Jean if she does not comply with his wishes, no matter how uncomfortable she is about it. Yet, Lara Jean perceives this as a romantic gesture and apologizes to Peter. His repeated assertion over Lara Jean can be seen as a continuation of the historical Western attitude towards

Asia, which is considered as weak and submissive compared to the strong and dominating West (Wang, 2012).

There is also the suggestion that the only suitable love interest for an Asian girl is a White male, reflecting the colonial construction of sexuality discussed by Ono (2017) as well as the devotion of the Orient woman towards her White lover outlined by Benshoff and Griffin (2004). Lara Jean's two love interests – Peter and Josh – are both White, while another person whom she likes is a queer Black male, which eliminates him as a competition for the White males (Gateward, 2005). Like many other before him, the character of Lucas plays the gay Black guy who is both the comedic relief and the friend who assists the leading character in achieving her heterosexual coupling (Ng, 2020). Onscreen, the actor that Lara Jean likes is Jake Ryan in *Sixteen Candles* (1984) – a racially problematic movie. The two-half Korean girls – Lara Jean and her sister – excuse and even ignore the racist implications of the movie, which manifests in the character of Long Duk Dong (Ono & Pham, 2009; Shek, 2006) in light of their admiration for the handsome White man.

The cunning Asian girl. At the same time as the submissive stereotype, there is also the idea of the manipulative seductress who traps and tricks (White) men (Ono, 2017; Wang, 2012). While this is not as overt as the previously discussed stereotype, it is worth examining the ways that the character of Lara Jean continues to maintain this stereotype. In order to confuse Josh about her feelings for him, Lara Jean forcefully kisses Peter without his consent. She never apologizes for essentially sexually assault him and only explains blithely:

So here's the thing, I don't actually like you. I just have to make it look like I liked you so someone else wouldn't think I like them (TATBILB).

Lara Jean's action suggests that for her own gain, she would manipulate Peter sexually. However, the most significant manifestation of the cunning Asian girl stereotype is the contract for the fake relationship between Lara Jean and Peter. She only agrees to the final clause in the contract – going on the ski trip with Peter – because she is confident that given the temporary nature of their relationship, she would not actually have to go on the trip. This line of thinking implies that Lara Jean has no intention of honouring a contract

that both Peter and her sign on. In a later scene, Lara Jean continues to falsely agree to go by telling Peter she would only go if her friend Chris goes, knowing full well that Chris despises school functions and therefore would not go. Lara Jean's repeated manipulativeness invokes the image of the immoral *yellow peril* that threatens White Americans – Peter and Chris (Kawai, 2005).

4.3.   The Asian Man

4.3.1.   He is Attractive, Masculine and Sexy

The portrayals of Nick Young – *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) – and Marcus Kim – *Always be my Maybe* (2019) – subvert mediated stereotypes that depict the Asian man as asexual and emasculated, as someone whose only role is playing sidekick to the White male or providing comedic relief for the story (Chin et al., 2017; Nakayama, 1994; Ono & Pham, 2009). Instead, Nick Young and Marcus Kim represent a new generation of Asian men onscreen – men who are the centre of the narrative and who are the romantic heroes – by portraying them as the sexually desirable man, and the man who has engaged in multiple romantic relationships.

Director Gene Cajayon's assertion that "mainstream America, for the most part, gets uncomfortable with seeing an Asian man portrayed in a sexual light" (Shimizu, 2016, p.46) no longer holds true as both Nick and Marcus are presented as sexually desirable men. Several scenes in *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) and *Always be my Maybe* (2019) show the two characters in various state of undress, marking a transformation from movies produced before 2017, where Asian men were rarely shown in sexy attire or partial nudity (Smith *et al.*, 2018). In the first movie, Nick appears shirtless three times, each time serves to highlight his attractiveness and sex appeal. The first time that this happens, it is at the hotel in the morning after he wakes up with Rachel. As Rachel looks at him, the audience is invited to join her in appreciating the sight of Nick standing next to the bed, wearing only a pair of pants. By the second time, the audience no longer needs to rely on Rachel's gaze as the focus of the camera is directly on Nick's torso, highlighted by the white of the clothes surrounding him (see Figure 4). The patch of light hits just the right place – his torso and chest – illuminating it, drawing the audience's attention straight to it. However, this overt sexualization of Nick can also be read as objectification, as his head is excluded from the light, thus relegating him to nothing more than a body to be gazed at.

Figure 4. Screenshot taken by author from CRA.

In *Always be my Maybe* (2019), there are two sequences where Marcus is implied to have had sexual intercourse with Sasha. Both sequences only show the two characters before and after intercourse, which is common for movies of this genre (Johnson & Holmes, 2009). Developing from the fumbling awkwardness of two teenagers engaging in sexual intercourse for the first time in the back of an old Corolla, the second scene features a full minute of Marcus and Sasha passionately making out against walls, undressing, and seemingly unable to keep their hands off each other. Hollywood's reluctance with portraying Asian men in a sexual manner (Shimizu, 2012) means that it is rare to see an Asian man caught up in the throes of passion onscreen. Additionally, there is no trace of the stereotype of the *subordinated Asian male* (Chou, 2012) in this scene, as Marcus exudes confidence as he kisses Sasha, pushes her against the walls, and hoists her up around his waist to carry her to bed. Later on, as Sasha compliments him for his performance, Marcus replies that he has had some practice. This exchange not only highlights Marcus's ability as a sexual partner but also implies that he has engaged in sexual intercourse at least a few times since his teenage years, thus establishing Marcus as a sexually experienced man.

Against the stereotypical depiction of Asian and Asian American men as lacking the sexual desirability to be considered worthy partners of Asian and Asian American women (Ono, 2017), both Nick and Marcus are portrayed as having engaged in multiple romantic relationships. Nick is directly referenced by his mother as having many girlfriends, to the point that she struggles to keep track of his dating life. Aside from Sasha, Marcus is shown to have another onscreen girlfriend, Jenny, who is so enamoured by Marcus that she fell in

love with him at first sight and proclaims to Sasha: "We're married spiritually and sexually" (ABMM). Her words and action imply suggest an inherent desirability in Marcus, a desirability that is not hampered by the mediated misconception that Asian men are asexual and inferior sexual partners (Shimizu, 2012; Ono, 2017).

However, despite the way that the portrayals of Nick and Marcus challenge stereotypes about Asian male sexuality, there remain certain issues. The casting of Henry Golding as Nick Young in *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) raises some questions about the elevated status of mixed-race Asian males, specifically of half-White, half-Asian males (otherwise referred to as Eurasian), in terms of their physical attributes. The character of Nick Young is described in the novel as an ethnic Chinese man whose looks resemble Takeshi Kaneshiro in his youth (Kwan, 2013). However, in the movie, he is played by Henry Golding, who is half Iban Malaysian and half White ("Henry Golding", n.d.). The casting of Golding has prompted criticism of whitewashing a character who is supposed to be ethnic Chinese in an era where Hollywood continues to desexualize Asian men (Chen, 2018). While there is no measurement of how Asian a person has to be in order to be considered Asian enough, it is necessary to note that the onscreen stereotyping against Asians and Asian Americans pertains not only to their behaviours but also to their looks, especially for Asian men who are typically stereotyped as being less attractive than males from other groups (Mok, 1999). For example, the slanted eyes many Asians carry have often been used as a signifier for Asians' inherent cunning and dishonourable nature (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004), thus immediately positions them as the threatening *yellow peril* (Lee, 1999). In the novel, Nick's resemblance to Takeshi Kaneshiro (see Appendix F) suggests that he possesses a similar slanted eye shape – something that, given Hollywood's struggle with portraying the Asian man in a sexual light (Besana *et al.,* 2019; Nakayama, 1994; Ono, 2017), might harm Nick's onscreen appeal across different groups of audience. Meanwhile, Golding possesses racially ambiguous features - notably with big, double-lid eyes – which panders to a physical aesthetic favoring Caucasian features as well as holding universal allure (Lui, 2017). Given that compared to every other group, males from mixed-race background are most likely to be depicted as sexually attractive in movies (Smith *et al*., 2018), the appraisal of Nick Young as a new Asian sex symbol (Besana *et al*., 2019) becomes problematic. It raises the question of whether the portrayal of Nick signifies a shift in Hollywood's attitude

towards the sexual appeal of Asian men, or a continuation of its historic desexualization of this group in the form of favoring romantic heroes with more Caucasian features.

4.3.2. He is the Asian Prince

As discussed in the first section, *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) is considered a modern retelling of *Cinderella* (Cohen, 2018), making use of the familiar fairy tale trope that has graced the screen since the birth of the cinema, from Disney animated features to big-budget Hollywood production (Crowley & Pennington, 2010). Cinderella has appeared in notable romantic comedies in the form of various characters, from the Hollywood prostitute Vivian Ward in *Pretty Woman* (1990), or the ambitious Wall Street secretary Tess McGill in *Working Girl* (1988), to Latina hotel maid Marisa Ventura in *Maid in Manhattan* (2002). By 2018, Cinderella has been reborn again in Rachel Chu, an Asian American economic professor at NYU who is visiting the family of her boyfriend in Singapore, only to find out that he hails from one of the richest families in the world ("Crazy Rich Asians", n.d.). The movie contains various fairy tale references, such as Rachel's makeover before attending the wedding of Nick's friend. Here, she tries on dozen of dresses and goes through a series of procedures that include "eyebrow triage, root crimps, maybe some eyelid tape" (Goh Peik Lin, CRA), as well as "a Korean snail face mask" (Oliver T'Sien, CRA) to address her dehydrated skin. The characters Peik Lin and Oliver take up the mantle as Rachel's self-appointed fairy godmothers. As Rachel arrives at the wedding, she steps out from her own version of a pumpkin carriage – a gold Bentley – dressed in a wispy, regal chiffon creation in powder blue, the colour of Cinderella's original dress at the ball.

Having established Rachel as the modern Cinderella, the role of Prince Charming is undoubtedly relegated to her boyfriend – Nick Young. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines Prince Charming as "a suitor who fulfils the dream of his beloved; a man of often specious charm towards women" ("Prince Charming", n.d.). In popular media, Prince Charming acts as a metaphor of an idealistic masculinity in which men are viewed as attractive and highly desirable (Temmerman, van de Voorde, & Coesemans, 2018). In *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), Nick is established as the Prince Charming through his position as the heir to an empire, the smart and accomplished man, and someone who is not only physically attractive but also has a charming personality.

An integral element of the Prince Charming ideal is his economic power (Barnes, 2009), originally represented in the fairy tale as being the prince of a country. Modern romantic comedy adaptations of this ideal often put the Prince Charming in positions of immense wealth, privilege, and success that do not necessarily have to be related to the monarchy. Examples of this include affluent senatorial candidate Christopher Marshall in *Maid in Manhattan* (2002), or business tycoon Edward Lewis in *Pretty Woman* (1990). Nick's position as the scion of a family of vast fortune and influence mirrors those of his romantic hero counterparts. His best friend, Colin, emphasizes this by saying in one scene:

> Ever since primary school, you were always going to be the next chairman of the Young corporation, your family's shining heir […] You're Nicholas Young, you're untouchable. You always have been (CRA).

Colin's acknowledgement of Nick's wealth and power solidifies his standing as the Prince Charming of the story. More than just implications, there are literal references to the fairy tale inspiration of his character scattered throughout the entire movie. In one scene, his cousin Oliver says to Rachel: "You nabbed the Crown Prince" (CRA), while in another, Peik Lin remarks: "The Youngs are like royalty" (CRA). Within this echelon of wealth and privilege, Nick is introduced to the audience as also a smart and accomplished man. He works as a history professor at NYU, which is indicative of his academic intelligence and achievement. Additionally, he is also expected to manage his family corporation in the future – an economic empire that spans across Asia and beyond. According to Peik Lin's father, the Young Corporation is "just the biggest developers in all of Singapore. And Malaysia, Thailand, Brunei, New Mexico" (CRA). To be worthy enough to manage his family's vast business and not destroy the legacy of his forefather implies that Nick is not just academically talented but also possesses a strong business sense and an aptitude for management. His portrayal as a wealthy and accomplished man once again invokes *the model minority* stereotype, made even more jarring by his status as a Chinese Singaporean immigrant in the U.S.

In his role as Prince Charming, Nick dresses the part. As previously established, Nick is portrayed as an attractive and masculine Asian man. His physical appearance is depicted in a way that not only enhances his desirability as a romantic partner, but also affirms his

role as the prince of the story. At Rachel's first arrival at Nick's grandmother's palatial manor, which according to Peik Lin is "two hundred mil worth of real estate" (CRA), Nick walks out of the door in a pure white tuxedo. The colour of his costume stands out in stark contrast to the other black-clad party guests, thus placing him at the centre of attention as the prince of the castle (see Figure 5). In his white tuxedo, Nick mirrors the image of a knight in shining amor, or a prince riding on his white stallion to see his princess.

Figure 5. Screenshot taken by the author from CRA.

Additionally, Nick is also portrayed as having a charming personality, as evident in his loyalty and devotion to his girlfriend, and his kind and caring behaviour. The strongest example of Nick's devotion towards Rachel is seen when Nick proposes to her for the first time, saying:

Marry me. Marry me and we'll start our life together in New York, just you
and me. I'll leave all of this behind (CRA).

Nick's willingness to sacrifice all of his wealth and privilege in order to marry Rachel is no small gesture, seeing as he is giving up his rightful inheritance to one of the greatest fortunes in the world and all the power that implies. Furthermore, abandoning his position as heir to the Young Corporation also equals becoming estranged with his family, which Nick has admitted that: "Ever since I can remember, my family has been my whole life" (CRA). His love for Rachel proves stronger than his adoration for his family and his proposal demonstrates the extent to which Nick is willing to go to be together with the woman he loves. As a romantic partner, Nick is also kind and caring. Knowing how devastated Rachel is upon finding out about her true parentage, Nick attempts multiple time to call Rachel

and meet her. When that does not work out, he flies her mother over from the U.S. with the understanding the person that she needs the most right now is not him – whose family has invaded Rachel's privacy in the most basic way and has insulted her in every way possible. His action suggests that Nick is attuned to the needs of his partner and he is willingly to help her feel better at any cost.

The portrayal of Cinderella and her intimate partner, Prince Charming, is typically criticized as upholding patriarchal expectations about gender roles. *Cinderella*, along with *Sleeping Beauty, Snow White*, and *Rapunzel*, is a fairy tale that features its main character as the innocent heroine who is unfairly persecuted by evil forces (Bacchilega, 1993). Within this context, Prince Charming acts as the hero who would rescue the powerless woman from economic and social ruin, thus reinforcing patriarchal assumptions about the submissiveness and dependency of females, as well as the dominance and power of males (Barnes, 2009). The Prince Charming of *Pretty Woman* (1990), Edward Lewis, exemplifies this criticism. In the movie, he acts as Vivian's saviour, using his wealth and power to assist in her upward socioeconomic mobility so that she could escape the prostitution life that she is stuck in (Zhao, 1996). In this way, the portrayal of Nick Young is a rejection of the traditional and stereotypical portrayal of Prince Charming. Like his cinematic counterparts, he might possess vast fortune and influence; however*, Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) strays away from positioning Nick as Rachel's saviour by having her overcoming her most important conflict in the story – that between her and Nick's mother – through her own wits and resourcefulness. Thus, while the character of Nick demonstrates that the Asian male is capable of being the type of romantic hero that the audience traditionally fantasizes about, the Prince Charming coming out from a fairy tale, he also shows the evolution of the Prince Charming archetype. In doing so, Nick's portrayal affirms the desirability of Asian men – a desirability that is as charming as it is modern.

4.3.3. He is the Asian Pauper

In stark contrast to Nick Young's image of the traditional Prince Charming, Marcus Kim represents a more modern and progressive discourse of Asian male sexuality, one that is lauded by Shimizu (2012, 2016). The portrayal of Marcus redefines Asian manhood as one of plural masculinity that embraces multitudinous sexual expression, among which is vulnerability, weakness, or even effeminacy (Shimizu, 2012).

In the movie, Marcus is pitted against Keanu Reeves, his biggest romantic rival. As a character, Keanu represents the idea of hegemonic masculinity, one where manhood is understood as a show of power used for domination (Shimizu, 2012). Watson and Shaw (2011) identify the emphasis of hegemonic masculinity as physical force, occupational achievement, patriarchy, and heterosexuality. Keanu embraces these qualities in his portrayal as a man obsessed with violence, unafraid to flaunt his career success and economic superiority, and dominating in his heterosexuality. Over the fourteen-minute that Keanu is featured, he needlessly smashes a vase on his head at one point in response to Marcus' joking challenge, and then says, as blood drips down his face: "You see how easy that was? I never cower in the face of danger" (ABMM). His willingness to hurt himself is a way to prove his fearlessness under a threat, which he sees as an essential quality for a man. Furthermore, Keanu considers violence as the only way to solve problems. Sensing Marcus' growing hostility towards him, Keanu urges Marcus to hit him then says: "Feeling better? Want another go?" (ABMM). His competitiveness, aggressiveness, and risk-taking nature are all parts of traditional masculinity (Eschholz, Bufkin, & Long, 2002).

In terms of occupational achievement, Keanu continuously flaunts his success, stardom, and wealth. He takes it upon himself to pay for the meal of the entire group, using the opportunity to remind them of how he makes his fortune. This continues as he invites the group to his luxurious penthouse suite at a top hotel, where he casually mentions his meetings with world leaders like Xi Jinping and his success with his recent movie, *John Wick*. Overall, Keanu is shown to assert his superiority over Marcus not just in terms of money, but also in terms of influence, connection, and success.

Figure 6. Screenshot taken by the author from ABMM.

The movie also depicts Keanu as a highly desirable heterosexual male through Sasha's initial obsession with him and Marcus' girlfriend, Jenny, fawning over him (as discussed in sub-section 4.3.1.). Keanu is shown to be sexually expressive and self-assured as he confidently kisses and touches Sasha multiple times in a smooth and suave manner. In stark contrast to this is Marcus, who fails to compete with Keanu when he awkwardly attempts to be affectionate with his unresponsive girlfriend. Keanu's domination over Marcus as a sexual being is most evident when Marcus is shown to have pink lipstick painted on his face due to the game they are playing (see Figure 6 above). The colour pink itself is a feminine colour commonly associated with girls (LoBue & DeLoache, 2011). For a man, wearing pink lipstick can typically be considered the height of emasculation, especially as flamboyantly dressed males are often accused of not being masculine enough (Bruzzi, 1997).

Beyond Marcus' relationships with Keanu is the fact that as a character, Marcus is full of his own vulnerability and weaknesses, many of which might be considered feminine. He is an underachiever, never making past high school and is now working with his father as a repairman. His lack of wealth is also emphasized by his ownership of a barely functioning Corolla that he has had since his teenage years and his still living in his childhood bedroom with his father. Unlike Nick of *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) or Keanu, Marcus is not a fashionable man who dresses in clothes that highlight his masculinity and appeal to women. The time he dresses up in a tux (which is normally considered to be attractive in a romantic comedy), he is woefully out of place and uncomfortable. As a person, he is indecisive and reluctant in the face of change, prompted by the death of his mother. He is also depicted to be emotional, an attribute associated with traditional femininity that is commonly not acceptable for men onscreen (Eschholz, Bufkin, & Long, 2002). Several times Marcus is shown to be having emotional outbursts, such as when, reeling from the death of his mother, Marcus lashes out at Sasha, accusing her of being a freeloader at his house who would not understand his feelings.

In a traditional Hollywood production, Marcus' failing to assert his position as a masculine man would render him undesirable and emasculated. Compared to Keanu, or even to Nick, Marcus lacks the qualities that would make him a real man as defined by race: sexually or financially (Shimizu, 2016). Measured against the criteria of culturally normative manhood, Marcus' lacking might be seen as shameful and undignified (Shimizu,

2012). However, rather than trying to invoke pride in his inability to measure up to the system of hegemonic masculinity, the movie tackles his failings head on, and in doing so, redefines the meaning of Asian manhood.

Always be my Maybe (2019) challenges the idea of a man having to be financially successful not just by portraying Marcus as economically unsuccessful, but also by demonstrating his achievements in different areas that have little to do with money. He is a Korean American who learns to speak Cantonese fluently just to be able to converse with the servers at his favourite dim sum restaurant. He writes original songs and performs in a band that people like, and eventually gets some recognition for it. In this way, the movie even subverts *the model minority* stereotype that often depicts Asian Americans as being economically successful (Kawai, 2005; Palumbo-Liu, 1999; Wu, 2015).

Traditionally, the lack of a White phallus might have crippled Marcus when trying to measure up against the sexual dominance of Keanu (Nakayama, 1994). However, much as Keanu is set up as the ultimate masculine (in the hegemonic sense of the word) type, he does not end up with the girl – Marcus does. Sasha's decision of choosing Marcus over Keanu sends a clear message, one that asserts the beauty and appeal of a man who exists beyond normative notions about manhood (Shimizu, 2016). To her, Keanu's success, wealth, and sexuality pale in comparison to Marcus' honesty, stability, and understanding.

Yet, the story does not end when Marcus and Sasha find their way back to each other. It goes on to confront the next manifestation of Marcus' perceived lack of masculinity, which is the dynamic of his relationship with Sasha. Of the two, Sasha is the wealthy one, while Marcus depends on her financially; Sasha is the successful one, while Marcus plays the role of the supporter, the arm-candy going with Sasha to big parties. Most importantly, Sasha is extraordinary in her position as a celebrity chef, while Marcus is "just a regular guy" – to quote him in ABMM. This dynamic is a source of insecurity and frustration for Marcus, who feels eclipsed by Sasha's success and angered by her insistence that his band could be something more, interpreting it as her disdain towards his lifestyle.

This ultimate conflict in Marcus' relationship with Sasha demonstrates Shimizu's (2016) argument that "in the face of racism that not only hates the racial others but encourages hate on the self as a racial other" (p. 59), what is important is learning to love oneself and others. Marcus reconciles with Sasha not by a grand romantic gesture, or by

becoming successful overnight, but by learning to better understand the person that he is and striving to improve himself. He says:

> I wanna be where you are. I don't care where it is [...] I want to have a family with you. I want to spend my life with you. Even if it scares me, even if I'm as scared everyday as I am right now. So my question is this: Sasha Tran, can I hold your purse for you? (ABMM)

Marcus' final question, asking whether he can hold Sasha's purse, shows that beyond accepting himself, he has learned to respect Sasha's achievement and lifestyle without feeling like his masculinity is compromised. In this way, he has relinquished and broken down the patriarchal structure of hegemonic masculinity that threatens the sexuality of Asian men, demanding them to be dominant and shaming them when they fail to measure up (Shimizu, 2012). Like the many characters of James Shigeta (Shimizu, 2016), Marcus portrays a type of manhood that makes people feel with him. Unlike Nick Young, Marcus' sexuality is not defined by his wealth or staggering good looks, but is a sexuality that is full of vulnerability, femininity, and care. The portrayal of Marcus proves that for Asian men, sexuality exists as limitless expression and experience of the sexual selves, free from the constraints of hegemonic masculinity.

Conclusion

5.1.   Major findings

The purpose of this thesis has been to answer the research question: How is the sexuality of Asians constructed through the portrayals of Asian characters in Hollywood romantic comedies released in 2018 and 2019? By analysing three movies – *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), *Always by my Maybe* (2019), and *To All The Boys I've Loved Before* (2018) – using Critical Discourse Analysis and Visual Discourse Analysis, I conclude that the construction of Asian sexuality in these movies is done through a combination of maintaining existing stereotypes and developing new narratives about Asian men and women as sexual beings.

It is noteworthy that the portrayals of the Asian female characters are more stereotypical than those of their male counterparts. A possible explanation of this is that Asian men are historically forced into subordinated roles with emasculated images (Besana *et al.,* 2019; Nakayama, 1994; Ono, 2017), which are generally not traits of the romantic heroes. Hence, as they are now afforded the opportunities to play the leading male characters, this serves to help make their portrayals less stereotypical. Additionally, this thesis adopts Shimizu's (2012) view that Asian manhood should be embraced not by adopting standards of the restrictive hegemonic masculinity, but by accepting the existence of a plural masculinity that celebrates asexuality, effeminacy, queerness, and other sexual expressions. This enables the analysis of Asian male characters – particularly Marcus Kim – to be performed using a more progressive lens, thus revealing the ways that their portrayals challenge stereotypes about Asian male sexuality and hegemonic masculinity.

Given that recent movies are more likely to feature Asian characters who resist stereotypes (Besana *et al.*, 2019), it is unsurprising that the movies examined are more committed to building new narratives than sustaining stereotypes about Asian sexuality. However, this does not occur equally between the three movies, as compared to the other two, *To All The Boys I've Loved Before* (2018) utilizes more stereotypes about Asian sexuality, most evident in the portrayal of its female lead, Lara Jean Covey. This possibly stems from the differences in the racial backgrounds of the directors and writers of these movies, as stories not created by Asian American themselves have higher odds of containing stereotypes and misrepresentation (Besana *et al.*, 2019; Ono & Pham, 2009). While *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) and *Always be my Maybe* (2019) have several Asian

64

Americans working as directors and writers, *To All The Boys I've Loved Before* (2018) has none (see Appendix B).

Maintaining stereotypes. For Asian female characters, the most common sexuality stereotypes used in these movies for their portrayals are the submissive Asian women, the petite Asian females, and the manipulative Dragon Lady. Lara Jean Covey in *To All The Boys I've Loved Before* (2018) exhibits all three stereotypes, demonstrating her character as the most problematic. In characterizing Lara Jean with traces of the Dragon Lady, the movie unwittingly invokes traces of *the yellow peril* stereotype that marks Asians as the threatening bodies towards Whites (Kawai, 2005). The submissive frame gives way to the objectification of Asian females, as demonstrated by P.T.'s behaviour to Rachel Chu in *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) – an element of the movie meant to add humour to the storyline but nonetheless problematic. It further adds to the historical perspective that relegates Asian women to mere objects to be gazed at by men (Wang, 2012), while also normalizing the objectification of women, regardless of race and ethnicity. This creates the impression that these movies are lagging behind compared to other romantic comedies, which have long adopted the more emancipated and egalitarian narrative for their female characters (Salcudean & Negrea, 2015). However, this narrative is seen as a mere illusion created for the purpose of comedy, as the power in the relationship continues to be depicted as belonging to men (Salcudean & Negrea, 2015).

Representation of the body type of the Asian female characters is found to lack diversity, as all characters are depicted as small and short in statues, which is in line with the portrayal of Asian women in movies since 1998 (Besana *et al.,* 2019). The only exception to this is Margot Covey in *To All The Boys I've Loved Before* (2018), whose curvaceous body adds variety to mainstream images of the body types of Asian women, but whose limited screen time and mixed-race heritage might render this meaningless. Mixed-race background becomes a much more prominent issue in the depictions of Asian male characters, where Henry Golding's – a Eurasian male – casting as Nick puts into question the extent to which Asian males have been accepted as sexual beings. Golding's racially ambiguous features (Lui, 2017) complexify the assessment that the portrayal of Nick marks a change in Hollywood's attitude towards the sexual appeal of Asian men. It can be said that Golding's casting is in no way radical or transformative, as Hollywood movies

regularly position mixed-race males as more attractive than any other group (Smith *et al.,* 2018).

Building new narratives. In rejecting the commodification of Asian sexuality perpetuated by the exotic and hypersexualized women and the asexualized and emasculated men stereotypes, the Asian characters in the three movies are situated within a normalization frame. This frame positions them as normal individuals going through their sexual journeys by creating a sense of fellowship with the audience, using common denominators such as the fairy tale trope (Baubeta, 1997) or the suburban setting (Muzzio & Halper, 2002). In their quest to normalize the characters, the movie makers did not attempt to erase their cultural identities, which play a significant role in developing and maintaining the sexuality of a person (Chou, 2012). The only exception is Lara Jean and Margot's characters, where the lack of acknowledgement for their Korean heritages might give the false impression that the fight for proper representation of Asian sexuality has been won and it is no longer necessary to include cultural identities when constructing Asian sexuality. This has the consequence of ignoring the reality where Asians continue to be discriminated against as sexual beings.

Despite the presence of the submissive Asian women stereotype, the Asian female characters are also found to be portrayed as strong, independent, and in control of their own sexuality. At first glance, this empowered discourse might seem like it is at odds with the wider environment of romantic comedy, who has a tense and often problematic relationship with feminism and feminist sexual politics (Bowler, 2013). However, a closer look might suggest that this discourse is not exclusive to portrayals of Asian women, as it reflects the postfeminist narrative of the autonomous and independent females that has frequently been utilized in popular romantic comedies since late 1990s (Holmlund, 2005). What is noteworthy about the three movies analysed for this thesis is perhaps that this narrative has often been reserved for White women in the past, with the occasional exceptions minority actresses such as Jennifer Lopez in *Maid in Manhattan* (2002) (Holmlund, 2005).

Meanwhile, the Asian male characters are depicted as anything but emasculated, asexual, and subordinated, as has often been done in Hollywood movies (e.g. Nakayama, 1994; Ono, 2017). The sexual appeal of Asian men and women are constructed as diverse, ranging from romantic and feminine to bold and modern for the Asian females, and from

dreamy and charming to sensitive and masculine for the Asian males. This lack of homogeneity reflects the inherent diversity of the Asian community and, to a certain extent, breaks down the essentialism that has often stripped Asians of their freedom and forced their sexuality into narrowly defined categories. It should be noted that this diversity in portrayals of Asian sexuality still suffers from generalization, as seen in the homogenous depiction of the Asian female bodies or the continued use of stereotypes to construct Asian sexuality.

5.2. Limitations

No matter how comprehensive and systematic a scientific work is, it is never without its limitations. In addition to the issue of my own positionality (see chapter 3), another limitation to consider is my decision to focus the analysis only on the two leading characters from each movie (with the exception of *To All The Boys I've Loved Before* (2018), where Margot Covey is a supporting character). While this did not affect the richness and depth of the data, it still means that I missed out on the chance to examine the possible differences in the construction of Asian sexuality between characters who are in leading roles and those who are in supporting roles.

Conducting a pilot study before the actual analysis carries its own limitations. As I included the results garnered from the pilot phased in my actual findings, this poses the challenge of data contamination. When the research instrument needs to be modified following the pilot study, this implies that pilot results might be flawed (Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). However, given that the frameworks of Machin and Mayr (2012) are established tools for CDA and VDA, this could address any potential issues that pilot results might have (Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001).

5.3. Socio-theoretical Implications

This thesis has analysed the portrayals of Asians characters in what are arguably the three most notable movies featuring Asians in leading roles in recent years. Adopting a content-centric perspective has allowed me to unearth the stereotypes about Asian sexuality which continue to be perpetuated in mainstream media, as well as contemporary narratives which enable Asians to be represented in a more progressive and accepting light. In this way, this thesis has proven itself to be a valuable first step in understanding current

cinematic discourses surrounding Asian sexuality. It highlights the importance of further studies into this topic by expanding the analysis across different movie genres and countries. However, media production is never a one-way street. As important as the messages being encoded into the movies are, it is also necessary to take into consideration the decoding process performed by the audience. Thus, research surrounding the topics of representation of Asian sexuality can delve into the issue of audience reception using in-depth interviews, focus groups, or qualitative surveys.

Hollywood movies often act as a reflection of the current social context and the state of racial movements at the time (Smith, 2013). Results gathered from the analysis shows that to a certain extent, mainstream American society's attitude towards Asians and their sexuality may be changing. Asian American men and women are becoming more accepted in popular discourses on love and sex, where they are neither fetishized nor disregarded. However, it is erroneous to state that with the production of *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), *Always be my Maybe* (2019), or *To All The Boys I've Loved Before* (2018), the drive for proper Asian sexual representation, or any type of representation, has been successful. Sexual stereotypes, many of which are extremely enduring, continue to mar the portrayals of Asian characters onscreen, often in much subtler ways.

This realization carries both theoretical and social implications. Theoretically, it shows that while classic models of stereotyping regarding Asian sexuality provide a useful and necessary foundation to understand stereotypes, it is no longer suitable to apply them without considering current societal contexts. Asian sexuality does not exist in isolation from wider sexuality representation – on the contrary, it evolves and regresses alongside the gains and losses of other movements fighting for better sexual representation. Thus, future research can look into the extent to which construction of Asian sexuality mirrors or goes against portrayals of the sexuality of other racial groups in movies, or how the evolution in Asian sexuality portrayals in Hollywood romantic comedies reflects the changing perception regarding gender roles or femininity and masculinity at large. Societally, this thesis serves as a reminder that stereotype is an enemy that transforms with the time. The fight against misrepresentation is one that requires perseverance and flexibility to make Hollywood, and society at large, a more inclusive and accepting place.

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Appendices

APPENDIX A: Information about the movies

Title	Crazy Rich Asians (CRA)	Always be my Maybe (ABMM)	To All The Boys I've Loved Before (TATBILB)
Release date	August 15, 2018	May 29, 2019	August 17, 2018
Director	John M. Chu	Nahnachtka Khan	Susan Johnson
Screenplay writer	Peter Chiarelli & Adele Lim	Ali Wong, Randall Park & Michael Golamco	Sofia Alvarez
Studio	Warner Bros. Pictures	Netflix	Netflix
Duration	121 minutes	102 minutes	99 minutes
Synopsis	Rachel Chu, an American-born Chinese NYU professor, travels with her boyfriend, Nick to his hometown of Singapore for his best friend's wedding. Before long, his secret is out: Nick's family is wealthy, and he's considered the most eligible bachelor in Asia. Rachel has to navigate family expectations, cultural difference, and the disapproving mother of her boyfriend who thinks she is not good enough to be Nick's wife.	Childhood friend Sasha Tran and Marcus Kim have not been in touch since a brief teenage fling ended badly. When Sasha returns to San Francisco to open a restaurant and romantic chemistry from their teenager years remains, Marcus's fears and Sasha's fame and demanding career challenge their potential new relationship.	Lara Jean Covey writes letters to all of her past loves, the letters are meant for her eyes only. Until one day when all the love letters are sent out to her previous loves. Her life is soon thrown into chaos when her foregoing loves confront her one by one. To mislead her crush Josh - who is the ex-boyfriend of her older sister - Lara Jean agrees to have a fake relationship with Peter Kavinsky, but soon discovers that her feelings for Peter is nothing but fake.

Note: Information was collected from the *IMBd* and *Wikipedia pages* of the movies.

APPENDIX B: Time stamps, descriptions and screenshots taken from scenes in the three movies

Movie 1: Crazy Rich Asians (2018)

Time Stamps	Scene	Description	No. Screenshots
1:56:57 - 1:55:41	1	Rachel gives a lecture on Game Theory at NYU. Nick walks in, gazing at his girlfriend adoringly.	3
1:55:40 - 1:50:44	2	At a cafe, Nick invites Rachel to go to Singapore. This is overheard by Celine Lim, who delivers the news to everyone. Eleanor calls Nick to ask and Nick discusses the arrangements for when they are in Singapore.	4
1:50:43 - 1:49:17	3	Rachel goes dress shopping with her mother, where it is pointed out how different Rachel is	2
1:49:16 - 1:43:00	4	Nick and Rachel fly to Singapore, where Nick tells Rachel about his family members	6
1:42:59 - 1:37:44	5	Nick and Rachel meet Nick's friends, Colin and Araminta. They go to have a meal at a hawker center.	4
1:35:02 - 1:33:59	6	Nick and Rachel wake up in the morning at the hotel	4
1:33:58 - 1:27:50	7	Rachel has lunch with Peik Lin at their house. She is made known about Nick's family and is prepped for dinner at Ah Ma.	3
1:27:49 - 1:09:18	8	Rachel is introduced to Nick's entire family. This is her first entry into Nick's rich and luxurious world and also the first time that she has to face Eleanor. She struggles to fit in and behaves appropriately.	4
1:09:14 - 1:06:59	9	At the Changi Private Jet terminal, Nick and Rachel prepare to go on separate parties with the bride and groom	3
1:06:58 - 1:04:36	10	Colin's bachelor party. Nick and Colin don't enjoy themselves and plot to leave	1
1:04:35 - 1:03:03	11	At Araminta's party, the girl goes on a shopping spree. Rachel tries on a dress and is helped by Amanda to pick out a necklace.	2
1:03:02 - 00:57:57	12	Colin and Nick escape to Rawa Island, where Nick reveals that he plans to propose to Rachel. Colin points out the difficulties that Rachel would face. Meanwhile, Amanda reveals to Rachel that Eleanor wants Amanda to be his wife. Rachel runs away and bumps into Astrid. They go back to Rachel's room, where there is a dead fish on her bed and the words "Catch this, you gold-digging bitch" written on the wall.	1
00:57:56 - 00:55:52	13	Rachel talks with Astrid and Astrid reveals that she has problems in her own marriage, too.	1
00:55:51 - 00:53:26	14	Rachel confronts Nick about why he doesn't tell her about his family and his world.	3
00:53:25 - 00:46:11	15	Rachel makes dumplings with Nick's family. Eleanor confronts Rachel and lets her know what she thinks about Rachel. Nick tells Rachel about how Eleanor makes sure he is his Ah Ma's favorite.	3
00:46:10 - 00:43:55	16	Rachel talks with Peik Lin and receives advice on how to deal with Eleanor	1
00:43:54 - 00:41:35	17	Rachel tries on various dresses and preps for the wedding	5
00:41:34 - 00:40:37	18	Rachel arrives at the wedding and tells Amanda off	1

Time Stamps	Scene	Description	No. Screenshots
00:38:27 - 00:31:47	19	The wedding ceremony. Nick and Rachel look at each other, caught up in the emotion of the ceremony and mouth "I love you". Meanwhile, Eleanor is worried.	2
00:31:46 - 00:25:52	20	Nick and Rachel enjoy the wedding reception. Then, it is revealed that Rachel is an illegitimate daughter and is rejected by Nick's family. Rachel runs away to Peik Lin's house, heartbroken.	3
00:25:51 - 00:20:45	21	Rachel lies sadly at Peik Lin's house. Nick tries to call Rachel but couldn't. Her mother flies over to Singapore and reveals the true story of her past.	5
00:20:44 - 00:19:35	22	Rachel meets up with Nick, who proposes to her and says that he is willing to leave his family behind to be with her.	2
00:19:34 - 00:13:49	23	Rachel confronts Eleanor at a mahjong place. She reveals that she has turned down Nick's proposal because she doesn't want him to be estranged from his family, but reminds Eleanor of the important role she plays	2
00:12:40 - 00:08:18	24	Rachel prepares to go back to New York with her mother. Eleanor comes to see Nick and gives him her engagement ring - a show of approval. Nick chases after Rachel and proposes to her on the airplane. She accepts	6
00:08:17 - 00:06:55	25	Nick leads Rachel to their engagement party, where they are cheered on by everyone. Rachel exchanges an understanding look with Eleanor.	3
		Total	74

Movie 2: Always be my Maybe (2019)

Time Stamps	Scene	Description	No. Screenshots
1:41:37 - 1:31:08	1	Snapshots of Marcus and Sasha growing up together in San Francisco, including their childhood, the death of Marcus' mom, their first time having sex together and their fall out	11
1:31:07 - 1:28:45	2	Sasha at her restaurant in Los Angeles, before attending an event with Brandon, her boyfriend	3
1:28:44 - 1:28:17	3	Sasha and Brandon sitting in their car after the event, barely talking	1
1:28:16 - 1:27:04	4	Introducing grown-up Marcus living at home with his father	1
1:27:03 - 1:26:05	5	Brandon convincing Sasha to postpone the wedding	1
1:26:04 - 1:24:38	6	Sasha telling Veronica about the decision. She is torn up about it, but tries to hide it	2
1:24:37 - 1:21:33	7	Marcus goes to a house for a repair job. It turns out it's the house Sasha is renting in San Francisco. They meet again.	3
1:21:32 - 1:20:14	8	Sasha talks to Veronica, who apparently purposefully hires Marcus so the two can meet again	1
1:20:13 - 1:17:24	9	Marcus works at Sasha house, where he criticizes her for being fake on the phone. Later on, Marcus' dad invites Sasha to come to one of Marcus' gig with his band.	2
1:17:23 - 1:16:40	10	At night, Marcus and Sasha both check each other out on the Internet. Marcus pulls out old relics from his childhood with Sasha and smiles.	2

1:16:39 - 1:14:26	11	Sasha is overseeing the construction of her new restaurant in San Francisco, when her parents stop by. She relays to them her plan of going to New York after finishing opening this restaurant.	2
1:14:25 - 1:13:41	12	Sasha eats dinner at home and finds the poster of Marcus' gig.	0
1:13:40 - 1:07:50	13	Marcus and his band play at a small bar, where Sasha attends with Veronica. Afterward, Sasha meets Marcus' girlfriend, Jenny, and decides to have dinner with them.	4
1:07:49 - 1:05:46	14	Sasha has dinner with Marcus and Jenny at Jenny's place	1
1:05:45 - 1:02:52	15	Marcus drives Sasha home in his beat-up Corolla that he has had since he was a teenager.	0
1:02:51 - 1:02:14	16	Sasha receives an invitation to cater a wrap party for Netflix on Sunday.	1
1:02:13 - 1:00:21	17	Sasha checks out Brandon on Facebook and finds out he's dating another person. She and Marcus texts back and forth as Marcus talks to Tony in his room.	3
1:00:20 - 00:57:11	18	Sasha attends the birthday party of her cousin's on, Liam. Marcus is also invited. Brandon calls Sasha in the middle of the party and she breaks up with him.	2
00:57:10 - 00:52:57	19	Marcus and Sasha go to eat at a dim sum restaurant, where Marcus reveals he has learned Cantonese to talk to the servers.	1
00:52:56 - 00:51:47	20	Marcus is at a poetry night organized by Jenny, but finds himself missing Sasha. Sasha is at her wrap party and was about to text Marcus when she meets a mysterious stranger.	3
00:51:46 - 00:50:38	21	Marcus is at a sauna with his father, where his father urges him to face his feelings for Sasha and lets her know how he feels.	1
00:50:37 - 00:48:57	22	Marcus meets up with Sasha, intending to tell her how he feels. However, Sasha reveals she has found a new boyfriend and Marcus ends up agreeing to go to dinner with them.	2
00:48:56 - 00:41:01	23	They have dinner at a fancy restaurant, where it is revealed that Sasha is dating Keanu Reeves. Marcus suffers throughout dinner and concludes that Keanu is a douche. Jenny fawns over Keanu.	5
00:41:00 - 00:34:45	24	Marcus and Jenny go to Keanu's hotel and they play a game of Truth and Dare. Marcus fight with Keanu at Keanu's urging. Sasha realizes Keanu is not right for her and she leaves with Marcus, while Jenny stays.	1
00:34:44 - 00:32:50	25	Marcus and Sasha argue on the Uber ride home (which is shared with another person). Then end up making out in the car.	2
00:32:49 - 00:30:50	26	Marcus and Sasha go to Sasha's home, where they have sex.	10
00:30:49 - 00:29:30	27	Marcus and Sasha start dating.	5
00:29:29 - 00:28:56	28	Marcus and Sasha have dinner together at night, talking about their feelings.	3
00:28:55 - 00:28:05	29	They visit Veronica in the hospital, who has just given birth to her baby. Sasha reveals she still plans to go to New York, which upsets Marcus.	2
00:28:04 - 00:25:56	30	They attend an event, where Marcus feels out of place and is unhappy with his role as Sasha's arm-candy. He's especially upset when Sasha tells the reporter he's just a regular guy.	4
00:25:55 - 00:22:13	31	They prepare for the opening of Sasha' restaurant. They end up fighting about their relationship and Marcus refuses to go to New York with Sasha.	4

Time Stamps	Scene	Description	No. Screenshots
00:22:12 - 00:21:30	32	Sasha leaves for New York, despite Veronica's urging to talk to Marcus.	1
00:21:29 - 00:19:37	33	Marcus finds out his father has a girlfriend. He talks to his father, who makes him realize that he is letting life past him by.	1
00:19:36 - 00:17:59	34	Torn up about Sasha, Marcus messes up their band's audition and has a fight with Tony.	0
00:17:58 - 00:16:49	35	Marcus tries to contact Sasha, telling her about moving out of the house, getting another chance for the audition and the merchandise sale of his band going up. Sasha doesn't pick up the phone.	4
00:16:48 - 00:15:24	36	Sasha's parents visit Sasha in New York, wanting to support their daughter. They reconcile by showing that they went to Sasha's restaurant and paid full price.	2
00:15:23 - 00:13:37	37	Marcus goes to Sasha's restaurant in San Francisco to see if she's still there. He discovers that she has been ordering his band's merchandise in bulk, thus realizing her feelings for him and how she has been supporting him.	1
00:13:36 - 00:12:33	38	Marcus goes shopping for a tux.	0
00:12:32 - 00:07:42	39	Marcus reconciles with Sasha at her award show. Later on, she shows him her restaurant in New York - a homey Korean restaurant using Marcus' mom's recipes.	5
00:07:41 - 00:05:54	40	The opening of Sasha's New York restaurant.	3
		Total	100

Movie 3: To All The Boys I've Loved Before (2018)

Time Stamps	Scene	Description	No. Screenshots
1:39:49 - 1:39:19	1	Lara Jean fantasizing about meeting with Josh in a book she was reading	3
1:39:18 - 1:36:54	2	Lara Jean and Margot eat dinner with their family and Josh, where Josh reveals that he has booked a ticket to Scottland to see Margot	4
1:36:53 - 1:33:13	3	Lara Jean relaying the story of Margot and Josh dating, as well as her own feelings for Josh and her habit of writing secret love letters to guys she likes. Margot reveals to Lara Jean that she has broken up with Josh and why.	4
1:33:12 - 1:30:45	4	Lara Jean and family see Margot off at the airport	3
1:30:44 - 1:29:43	5	Lara Jean cleans up and prepares for her junior year	2
1:29:42 - 1:23:36	6	Lara Jean runs into Gen on her first day of junior year and talks to Josh. There's a general sense of displacement as she doesn't know where to sit during lunch, missing the company of her older sister.	2
1:23:35 - 1:21:16	7	Lara Jean spends the evening at home watching a movie with Kitty. Later on, Kitty sneaks upstairs to send Lara Jean's letters.	1
1:21:15 - 1:18:51	8	During gym at school, Lara Jean is confronted by Peter who receives the letter. Later on, when Josh approaches with the letter, Lara Jean kisses Peter and runs away	2

1:18:50 - 1:16:49	9	Lara Jean talks with Lucas - another boy she likes who has read a letter.	3
1:16:48 - 1:14:25	10	Lara Jean contemplates the consequence of her letters being sent and sneaks out of the house when Josh comes over wanting to talk	2
1:14:24 - 1:11:31	11	Lara Jean goes to Corner Cafe, where she runs into Peter and they talk	1
1:11:30 - 1:09:29	12	Peter proposes having a fake relationship	1
1:09:28 - 1:08:59	13	Lara Jean realizing how the fake relationship can help her with Josh	2
1:08:58 - 1:08:18	14	Lara Jean finds Peter to say she agrees to the proposal and Peter kisses her	2
1:08:17 - 1:04:43	15	Lara Jean and Peter write the contract for their fake relationship	0
1:04:42 - 1:02:21	16	Lara Jean and Peter start fake dating, to the shock of everyone	4
1:02:20 - 1:01:01	17	Lara Jean talking to Margot but still avoiding the issue of her dating Peter	2
1:01:00 - 00:59:33	18	Lara Jean is convinced to go the a party with Peter	0
00:59:32 - 00:55:20	19	At the party, Lara Jean interacts with Gen and later talks with Lucas. Peter is cornered by Gen in the bathroom	3
00:55:19 - 00:49:48	20	Lara Jean and Peter goes to the Corner Cafe after the party, where they talk about his relationship with Gen, their family situation and Lara Jean's fear of commitment. There is a sign that Lara Jean's feelings towards Peter is changing	0
00:49:47 - 00:49:11	21	Lara Jean interacts with Peter's friends	1
00:49:10 - 00:47:19	22	Lara Jean talks with Josh, but it goes nowhere	1
00:47:18 - 00:46:37	23	Peter watches Sixteen Candles with Lara Jean and Kitty. Lara Jean is afraid their families would get too attached.	1
00:46:36 - 00:43:10	24	Lara Jean has dinner with Peter's family and learns more about his history	2
00:43:09 - 00:40:26	25	Lara Jean and Chris overhear Gen talking with Peter. Later, Lara Jean has an argument with Peter and is reluctant to go on the ski trip because she starts to have real feelings for him	2
00:40:25 - 00:38:49	26	Chris convinces Lara Jean to go on the ski trip	1
00:38:48 - 00:37:11	27	The bus ride to the ski resort, where Lara Jean doesn't sit with Peter	1
00:37:10 - 00:30:52	28	At the ski resort, where Lara Jean gets the cold shoulder from Peter. Later, she goes talk to him at the hot tub and they kiss after Peter confesses his feelings	2
00:30:51 - 00:28:20	29	Lara Jean and Peter sit together on the bus, prompting Gen to later gives Lara Jean information that makes Lara Jean angry with Peter, thinking she has been played.	2
00:28:19 - 00:24:43	30	Lara Jean goes home to find Margot has returned. Peter comes by to talk to Lara Jean and gets into an argument with Josh. Peter accidentally reveals that Lara Jean likes Josh, which Margot overhears.	2
00:24:42 - 00:20:46	31	Lara Jean finds out about the video of her kissing Peter is leaked on Instagram as a sex tape. She makes up with Margot. Kitty reveals she was the one who sent the letter.	3

00:20:45 - 00:17:12	32	Margot helps take down the video. Lara Jean talks with her father about her mother.	4
00:17:11 - 00:14:25	33	Peter tells everyone that nothing happens in the video. Lara Jean confronts Gen.	1
00:14:24 - 00:10:26	34	Lara Jean talks with Josh, who helps her realize what she needs to do	1
00:10:25 - 00:04:56	35	Lara Jean talks to Peter and they kiss, starting their real relationship	3
		Total	68

APPENDIX C: Overview of categories, frames, and codes developed from the analysis

Categories	Frames	Codes
Across genders	Normalization of Asian sexuality	American identity
		Common conflicts in romcom
		Relatable social settings
	Distinct Asian-ness	Cultural food
		References to cultural identities
Asian females	Attractive	Romantic and feminine looking
		Bold, modern, and powerful
		References of attractiveness
		Petite Asian females
	Strong, independent, and in control	Sexual agency
		Decision-making in relationships
		Objectification
	Problematic Lara Jean	Submissive
		Dragon Lady
Asian males	Attractive, masculine, and sexy	Sexually desirable
		Romantic history
		Elevated status of Eurasian
	Prince Charming	Wealth and accomplishment
		Dressing
		Charming personality
		Rejection of tradition
	Plural masculinity	Against hegemonic masculinity
		Weaknesses
		Redefine Asian manhood

APPENDIX D: Examples of Visual Discourse Analysis

Figure 1. Screenshot taken by author from the movie Crazy Rich Asians (2018).

| Detonations & Connotations	Objects	Settings	Salience
Black, shoulder-length hair in a half up, half down style -> feminine, but not too much, fresh, young looking, simple looking that suggest she is not trying too hard Red choker around her neck: • The colour red: reappears a lot in the movie later • Red: lucky colour, typically associated with the Chinese • Choker: fashionable, young Silver earrings A white tank-top, low cut, revealing her arms, chest and neck -> modern, fun-looking, showing that Rachel as a person is not rigid but young, a bit daring and playful (this is also demonstrated by the scene as she plays poker against her T.A and later jokingly suggests he gets a haircut or commenting about how he is cheap) Makeup: • Light make-up • Dark red lipstick -> Asian women in general appears a lot on screen in colour red, especially lipstick Overall: Rachel appears as a fashionable and attractive Chinese American woman	A pair of earrings A red choker A white low-cut tank-top	Completely black • Centring Rachel -> she is the protagonist, the main focus of the movie	Elements highlighted: • Rachel as a whole • There is a certain attention towards her red choker, which stands out above everything else in an eye-catching colour -> alluding not only to the fact that Rachel is fashionable and well-dressed, but also that she is Chinese • There is something about the scene that make the audience thinks she's in a club or a casino, especially given the way she is dressed
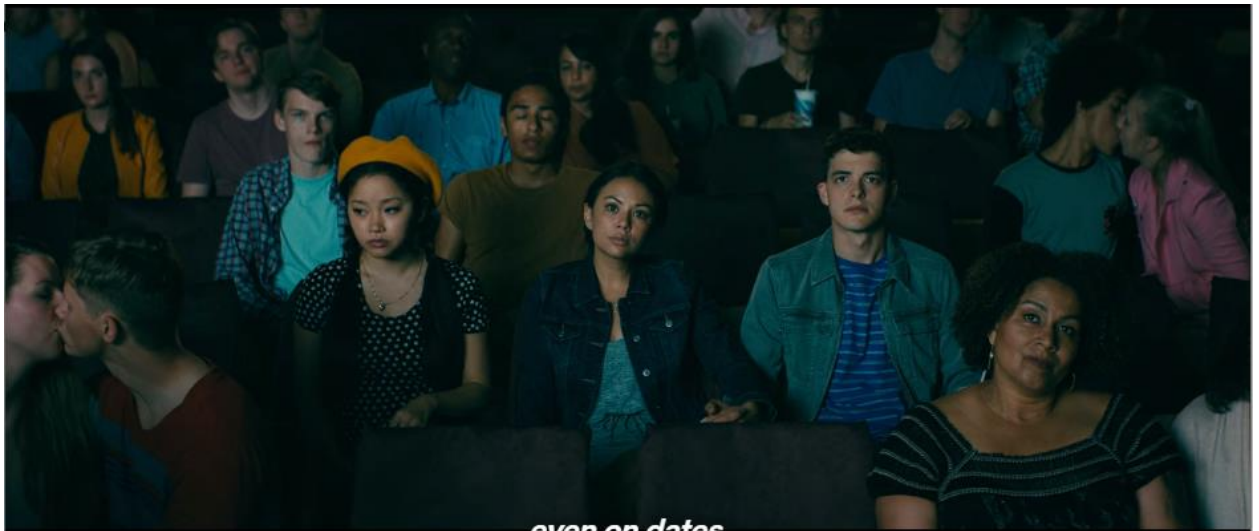
Figure 2. Screenshots taken by the author from the movie To All The Boys I've Loved Before (2018)

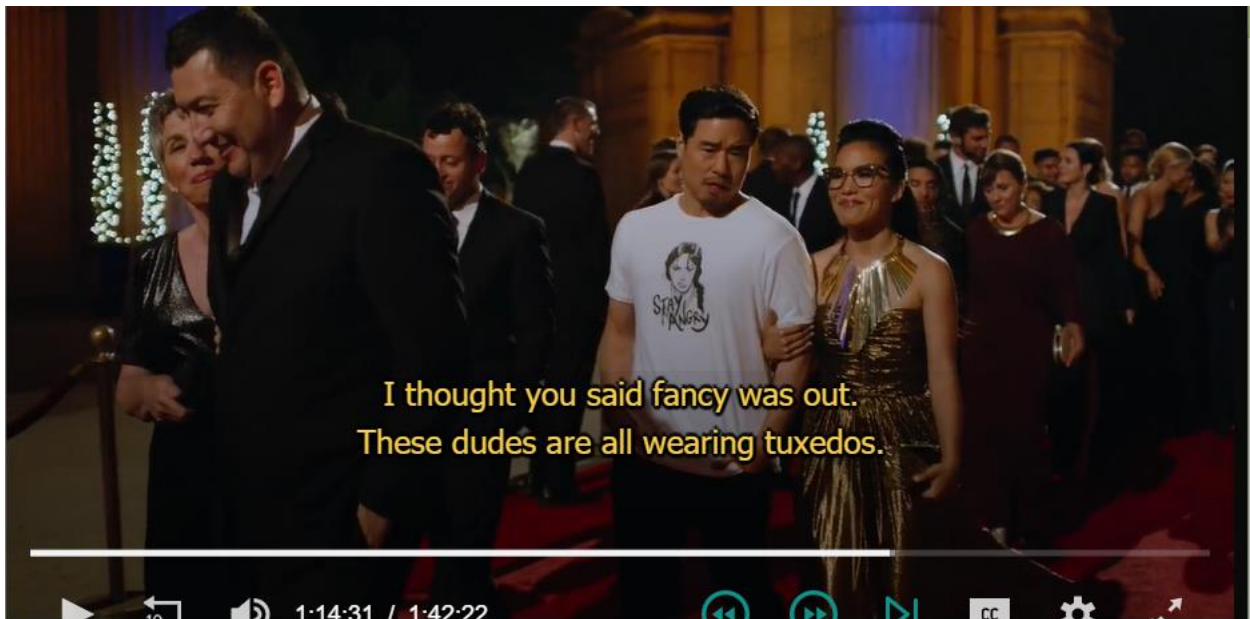| Detonations & Connotations	Objects	Settings	Salience
Margot: • Holding hands with Josh: her arm is situated above his -> in control, knows what she wants • Serious face watching the movie • Denim jacket, blue shirt, hair pulled back Everything about Margot suggests maturity, independence, and a clear sense of who she is and what she wants. As a romantic partner, she's always in control and not very sentimental (especially when she said how her mom said she shouldn't go to college with a boyfriend) -> she's almost **robotic** in her behaviour and thoughts -> stereotype: Asians are stiff and robotic Lara Jean: • Yellow beret • Hair in twin braids • Polka dot shirts • Bored, annoyed, so-done-with-this expression Again: childlike	The clothing of the two characters The cinema seats -> subtly separating Lara Jean from her sister and Josh. While the gap of the seats between Margot and Josh is obscured, it's visible between Margot and Lara Jean.	Dark movie theatre with people surrounding them: two are couples kissing each other	Contrast between the behaviour of Margot and Josh compared to the other couples: they are not kissing, they are just holding hands and completely focused on the movie • Emphasize how they are considerate of Lara Jean • Also: they are different from normal teenage couple - they don't need to be kissing each other every second. They are mature and considerate, but also there seems to be a lack of passion between the two Contrast between the two sisters Contrast between Lara Jean and everyone else: she stands out with her clothing, but also with how she looks at the couple

Figure 3. Screenshot taken by the author from the movie Always be my Maybe (2019)

Detonations & Connotations	Objects	Settings	Salience
Sasha: • Golden billowing dress and dramatic statement necklace with gold rays fanning out like the sun • Creating a sense of glamour: Sasha resembles a Etruscan or Greek carpet descending on the Earth, enhanced by the presence of Greek-motif pillars • She looks powerful and bold, but at the same time modern as the image of goddesses normally are not reserved for Asian women Marcus: • White t-shirt with a drawing and phrase: "Stay angry" • Casual black pants • Compared to everyone else, Marcus is dressed extremely casual and he is aware of it. He looks like he's attending a different event and is removed from Sasha, who is dressed very formally.	The red carpet -> a formal event Small trees wrapped in fairy lights Sasha's sun ray statement necklace -> dramatic, showing that she does not shy away from bold fashion statements that might seem like too much.	The red carpet at a party that Sasha is invited to: • Everyone else is dressed in fancy party clothes. • The men are all wearing tuxedoes. • The Greek-motif pillars in the background enhance the sense of formality of the event, as well as making the whole scene looking far removed from the normal daily • The lighting of the background is quite dark, mostly muted yellow and black shades	The focus of the scene is on Marcus: in his white shirt, he stands out from everyone else not just due to the style, but also because of the colour. Even next to Sasha, he stands out as the gold of Sasha dress seems to fade in with the yellow in the background. This foregrounds the upcoming conflict between the couple: They have different life styles and essentially live in different worlds of different economic status: Sasha is upper-class (fancy dress) versus Marcus is middle/lower-class (casual T-shirt). Emphasize Marcus' sense of not belonging: • This is the second time he dresses wrong: in a formal tuxedo or a casual t-shirt, he doesn't seem to be able to match up to Sasha's world • He is not a rich person or a celebrity and thus is unable to anticipate the social codes in Sasha's world. He is aware of this, too, and is at this moment feeling very awkward and uncomfortable.

APPENDIX E: Examples of Critical Discourse Analysis

Directory

   	Word connotation
   	Overlexicalization
   	Suppression
   	Structural Opposition

Movie 1. Crazy Rich Asians (2018)

Script text	Analysis
[Rachel] I think my masseuse just got me pregnant.	
[Amanda] I can see why Nick put off coming back to Singapore.	
[Rachel] What do you mean?	
[Amanda] You know. He was supposed to come back last year, take over the family business. His parents freaked out when he didn't. But, now that he's back, I'm sure all is forgiven.	Reference to Nick's position as heir to the empire Why? Implying Nick's responsibility to his family
[Rachel] But he's not back for good. I mean, we're just here for a wedding.	Implying conflict between Nick and his family
Scene cuts to Colin and Nick.	
[Colin] Wow!	
[Nick] But?	
[Colin] No, I'm really happy for you.	
[Nick] Colin, I've known you since you were in nappies. I know when there's something on your mind.	The attentive man who understands the people he loves well.
[Colin] Well, it wasn't that long ago that you were sure you were moving back home. And I mean, Rachel loves her job in New York.	Conflict between Nick and Rachel: seems like they want different things in life -> affect relationship.
[Nick] Yeah, we're gonna figure that out.	
[Colin] Yeah, you're going to figure it out. Right.	Sarcasm: points to difficulty trying to address this conflict.
Scene cuts back to Amanda and Rachel.	
[Amanda] Rachel, I get it. It's hard knowing where you stand with someone like Nicholas Young. He has all that pressure from his family. Not just in business, but in who he's dating. It's like, you just never know what's quite going on in that gorgeous head of his---	Elevates Nick's position. Family conflict + personal conflict: individualism versus family expectations Repeat of 'family': important for Nick and Rachel's relationship Compliment for Nick + Amanda's desire for him

Rachel stares at Amanda, who realizes she's overstepped.

[Amanda] Nick told you that we were together, right? It's ancient history now. Although our families, particularly his mother, always wanted us to get married. I guess we weren't ready then.

Nick's romantic history

Threat to Rachel's relationship with Nick + rival for Rachel, who doesn't have Eleanor's approval

As Rachel reacts at this revelation, scene changes to Colin and Nick.

[Colin] Dude, ever since primary school, you were always going to be the next chairman of the Young corporation, your family's shining heir. You really think your family's going to accept anything less than that? I mean, unless you…no. Are you thinking of walking out? Leaving everything to bloody Alistair and Eddie?

Nick as the heir to the empire

Family conflict -> the complexity of having Nick as a partner

[Nick] I'm not walking out on anything. I met a girl, I fell in love and I want to marry her. And it can't just be one thing or the other.

Profession of Nick's feeling for Rachel.
Nick's naivety + implying: it eventually has to be one thing or the other, because of family.

[Colin] Uh, no, no, no, no. It's…it's not that simple. You know that.

Alluding to the expectations that come with Nick's position.

Scene cuts back to Rachel and Amanda at the resort.

[Amanda] I really admire you. Takes guts, coming all the way over here, facing Nick's family. Especially when Eleanor isn't exactly in your corner.

Suggesting that Rachel is actually not worthy as Nick's partner and potential wife: she doesn't have his family's approval and it seems like she's an outsider barging in.

Scene cuts to Colin and Nick.

[Colin] Okay. Your family aside, have you ever thought about what your relationship with Rachel will be like if you got married? I mean, okay, you're, you're Nicholas Young, you're untouchable. You always have been. But Rachel's not. And if…

Nick's position: he has wealth and that wealth comes with immense power at his disposal versus Rachel, who is of a different class.

[Colin]…she becomes Mrs. Nicholas Young, every day for her is going to be a struggle.

Difference between Rachel and Nick, how Rachel doesn't belong and wouldn't be able to adjust.

Movie 2. Always be my Maybe (2019)

Script text	Analysis
[Sasha] God, I can't believe we're opening Saintly Fare tonight. Phew, I'm nervous. You thought the last event was crazy? Wait till you see what it's like opening night of a restaurant.	Referring to the opening of Sasha's new restaurant -> she is successful + her lifestyle consists of attending fancy parties and events like this.
[Marcus] Hmm. I'm just glad this is the last thing for a while.	Showing how Marcus is not used to it and is happy that he doesn't have to attend more.
[Sasha] Well...Not really. Remember, I'm off to New York next week. You're still coming, right?	Sasha's jet-setting lifestyle -> she can afford to because she is upper-class.
[Marcus] Oh, um... Well, I'm not sure I can, I got my dad and that Southie's audition, so...	Implying how he's uncomfortable: he's making up excuses for it
[Sasha] So, come after the audition.	
[Marcus] Well, maybe. We'll see. So, when are you planning on coming back?	He doesn't like it but is pretending He's expecting her to return
[Sasha] I wasn't. I'm... moving on to the next thing. You know?	Sasha's flighty tendency: she doesn't want to return -> difference between the two
[Marcus] Oh, right. Right. It's because you're a celebrity chef. Who came up with that term anyway? It's so pretentious.	Marcus taking issue with Sasha's line of work, but it's to hide his discomfort with her lifestyle and her world.
[Sasha] Great, well, it wasn't me, okay?	
[Marcus] You know what other term I hate? "Elevated Asian cuisine." Asian food isn't supposed to be "elevated." It's supposed to be authentic. That's what you used to make with my mom. I don't know why you're doing this kinda stuff now.	Clash between Asian and American culture in food + between Marcus and Sasha: she's leaning more towards White culture
[Sasha] Oh, so now you're saying my food isn't authentic.	Alluding to how Sasha's straying away from her cultural roots: in a sense, she's straying from the world Marcus is comfortable with.
[Marcus] It's not authentic. Asian food shouldn't be served in a shot glass. It should be served in a big ass bowl. You're just catering to rich white people.	Conflict between Asian and American culture
[Sasha] Well, if you think I'm such a sellout, then	

why are you dating me?

[Marcus] If you think I'm just a regular guy, then why are you dating me? Oh, I know, it's because you need someone to carry your purse.

Marcus doesn't belong to Sasha's world
His pride is hurt because of her remark: he sees this as her looking down on him -> vulnerability.

[Sasha] I called you "a regular guy" as a compliment. You aren't caught up in all the bullshit.

For Sasha, this is something that drawn her to him: she appreciates him for his vulnerability and groundedness.

[Marcus] The way you are?

Talking about how different she is.

[Sasha] Oh, right. Instead, you smoke weed every night 'cause that's so much more noble.

Marcus: underachiever -> no more model minority.

[Marcus] God forbid someone relax in Sasha Tran's presence.

Implying that she is rigid and too serious.

[Sasha] Don't shame me for going after things, Marcus! You're so scared to do anything new.

Talking about Marcus' tendency to stay in his safe zone where he is comfortable.

[Marcus] I'm not scared. Okay? I just don't want to be some dude on your arm so you don't have to show up to places alone.

Showing his insecurity: he feels like he's less than Sasha in their relationship.
Also: conflicting values between the two.

[Sasha] Why not? What's wrong with that? What's wrong with you supporting me? No one would question it if it was the other way around.

Challenging popular gender roles: the other way around would be the woman as the arm-candy and the man as successful.

[Marcus] You don't support me. You hate the band. You hate Ragga.

Implying that their relationship is one-sided. Again, Marcus' insecurity.

[Sasha] I don't hate the band! I think the band is great. Too great to be stuck playing in that shithole!

Sasha's belief in Marcus' potential, but also her disapproval: she thinks he's wasting away.

[Marcus] Well, I love that shithole! Sorry if it isn't "elevated" enough for you.

Conflicting values: for Marcus, it's a place that he enjoys, but for Sasha, it's not.

[Sasha] You know what, Marcus? Don't come tonight.

[Marcus] Sasha! Sasha, look, I didn't mean to...

[Sasha] I love you, Marcus. I've loved you since we were kids. And I don't need you to live my life, but I need you to understand that this is my

Sasha's feeling for Marcus.
Sasha making clear what she wants from Marcus: support and understanding.

Script text	Analysis
life. I want to be with you. I want to come home to you, even when you're being an asshole. After the opening, I'm gonna go to New York, and if you don't want to come with me, then just say it.	Again, Sasha's feeling for Marcus. Also alluding to marriage (come home to you). Showing she loves him for his weaknesses, too.
[Marcus] I don't want to go to New York with you.	He's scared of changing, even for Sasha.
[Sasha] You are such a fucking coward.	Disappointment in Marcus

Movie 3. To All The Boys I've Loved Before (2018)

Script text	Analysis
[Peter] You did so good tonight, Gen was pissed.	Goal of the fake relationship.
[Lara Jean] Yeah, I just hope she doesn't put glass in my smoothie on Monday.	
[Peter] I love how you're not afraid of her.	Complimenting Lara Jean.
[Lara Jean] No, no. I'm terrified of her.	Lara Jean's personality: non-confrontational, demure.
[Peter] But you don't let her steamroll over you. Like that day she was being a bitch about your shoes.	
[Lara Jean] You remember that?	
[Peter] Yeah, of course. I mean, I couldn't say anything because we were together and everything but those shoes weren't just cool, I thought they were kinda hot. Gen's gorgeous, but you have way better style.	Implying he would stay silent if his girlfriend was bullying someone. Complimenting Lara Jean for her sense of style: she's dressed distinctly.
[Lara Jean] Thank you.	
[Waitress] You need anything else?	
[Lara Jean] Um, no. I think we're good.	
[Waitress] Okay.	
[Peter] She just makes me so angry sometimes.	
[Lara Jean] We're still talking about her?	

[Peter] Like tonight, she barely talks to me, when we're at the party, then we leave, and I have a thousand texts from her.

[Lara Jean] Okay, have you been responding?

[Peter] No, I'm... I'll just call her when I get home or something.

[Lara Jean] You guys still talk on the phone then?

[Peter] I mean, not as much as we used to, but yeah, sometimes. - What?

[Lara Jean] Hmm?

[Peter] You do this thing, you have this whole judgy face scenario going on.

[Lara Jean] I guess I just think it's really weird you still talk to your ex-girlfriend on the phone. It's not healthy.

She has some awareness about relationships, not completely naïve.

[Peter] Sorry, you're the expert? You've never even had a boyfriend.

Implying that Lara Jean doesn't know anything so she shouldn't say anything.

[Lara Jean] You've only had one girlfriend, and you're completely obsessed with her. That doesn't necessarily make you The Bachelor.

Challenging Peter.

[Peter] Okay, one, I am not... obsessed with her.

[Lara Jean] Okay. So then, prove it. Don't call her tonight.

[Peter] For someone who's quiet all the time, you sure have a lot of opinions.

Imply: her opinions might not be welcomed.

[Lara Jean] I think that's just because no one's been honest with you before.

[Peter] Okay, fine. Be honest with me, then. Why haven't you ever had a boyfriend?

Interrogating her.

[Lara Jean] I don't know. I guess no one's ever liked me like that.

How she sees it.

[Peter] Lies. I know that those are lies, because I know for a fact Carlos Myers asked you to Spring Formal last year and you said no.

Contradicting her, making it seems her opinion is invalid because of what he knows. Lara Jean's appeal towards boys.

[Lara Jean] Are you keeping tabs on me?

[Peter] Come on, Covey, talk to me. What happened to no secrets? Fight Club. Remember?

[Lara Jean] Okay. Um... So love and dating? I love to read about it, and it's fun to write about and to think about in my head, but... when it's real...

Showing her personality: dreamy and romantic, but she's only comfortable with it in her head -> shy + inexperience with love.

[Peter] What, it's scary?

[Lara Jean] Yeah.

[Peter] Why? Why is that scary?

[Lara Jean] 'Cause the more people that you let into your life, the more that can just walk right out.

Fear regarding relationships.

APPENDIX F: Picture of young Takeshi Kaneshiro