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Multiracial youth are one of the fastest-growing demographics in the United States. What messages might these multiracial young people be receiving about multiraciality in college-related television series? Applying Critical Race Media Literacy and Critical Multiracial Theory (MultiCrit), this study examines representations of multiracial students in *Charmed*, *Dear White People*, *Ginny & Georgia*, *Grown-ish*, and *Black-ish.* We find that multiracial college student characters are routinely confronted with "box-checking" on demographic forms and wrestle with the limitations of racial categories to capture complexity and the potential resources/benefits associated with selecting specific boxes. Further, multiracial college student characters question their belonging within monoracial student organizations and interracial relationships. Implications for practice and pedagogy are outlined to better leverage television depictions of multiracial college students toward disrupting rather than reinforcing monoracism in higher education contexts.

Alongside the exponential growth of the multiracial population in the United States, particularly those under the age of 18 (Jones et al., 2021), there has been a rise in the representation of multiracial characters in American popular culture. This representation includes record-breaking viewership of series like *Ginny & Georgia* (Bean, 2021) and *Grown-ish* (Pedersen, 2018), which center on young multiracial characters and college-related themes. An expanding audience market and proven commercial success may incentivize the development of future film and television content featuring multiracial young people. Moreover, rising media representation may influence mixed race identity development and college-related expectations. Among extant literature focused on collegiate films (e.g., Conklin, 2008), some scholars consider representations of race in higher education (Donahoo, 2016; Donahoo &

Yakaboski, 2017). However, missing from much of the past inquiry has been an explicit focus on multiraciality in college media and the messages these media may send to college-bound audiences. For this study, we operationalize multiraciality as a noun relating to people who identify as multiracial and/or being more than one race.

From media to education, Osei-Kofi (2012) argued that discourses of multiraciality are often operationalized to represent "tropes of racial unity, colorblindness, and [cross-racial] bridge-building" (p. 246) that reinforce rather than deconstruct racial categories. Racial categorizations connect with how people "do race" (Moya & Markus, 2010). Moya and Markus (2010) outlined how race is "not a thing located inside people... race is a doing; a dynamic system of historically derived ideas and practices involving the whole of society and every individual in it" (p. 78), including through various representations of racialized groups. Grounded in Yosso's (2002) Critical Race Media Literacy (CRML) as a tool for analyzing and critiquing media images of People of Color, we apply a Critical Multiracial Theory (MultiCrit; Harris, 2016) lens to examine how college-related television series might perpetuate monoracism, a system of oppression rooted in "assumptions and beliefs in singular, discrete racial categories" (Johnston & Nadal, 2010, p. 125). As King (2017) pushed, CRML challenges us "to 'read' racism through media texts, images, and discourses that promote deficit renderings of non-White cultures and raise social consciousness" (p. 36). We posit that television series may serve as a critical tool to raise *multiracial consciousness*, which Malaney-Brown (2022) defined as "a heightened level of self-awareness where the student … has the ability to describe how monoracism affects daily life experiences and influences their decisions" (p. 132). Though this concept focuses on individuals' consciousness, we recognize the potential of media to heighten awareness of monoracism on a broader scale. Thus, our guiding research question was: In what ways is monoracism reinforced in college-related television series, and how might higher education leverage these media to raise multiracial consciousness?

Literature Review

To begin, we ground our study in literature on multiracial college students, college-related media, and media-fueled microaggressions.

Multiracial College Students

A growing body of research on multiracial college students centers their identity development and lived experiences (e.g., Renn, 2000, 2003, 2004). Scholars have explored how multiracial college students come to name their identities (Harper, 2016; Johnston-Guerrero & Chaudhari, 2016; Phinney & Alipuria, 1996) and how they negotiate their identities within university contexts (Chang, 2014; Kellogg & Liddell, 2012; Museus et al., 2016). Expanding Root's (1996) model of biracial identity development, Renn (2000, 2003) identified five identity patterns among mixed race college students: 1) multiple monoracial identities (e.g., distinct, parallel), 2) multiracial identity (e.g., overlapping, intersecting), 3) monoracial identity (e.g., singular, primary), 4) situational identity (e.g., fluid, context-responsive), and 5) extraracial identity (e.g., opting out of racial categorization). These identity patterns are impacted by monoracially organized university environments and activities (e.g., identity centers, orientation programs, on-campus housing communities), which Giebel (2023) argued *compromise* multiracial identity. Further, involvement in race-oriented clubs and organizations can affirm, challenge, and (de)legitimize multiracial college students' racial identity (Kellogg

& Liddell, 2012; Renn, 2000). Just as college environments impact multiracial identity development, adolescent socialization messages (e.g., popular media) also shape multiracial students' "attitudes, beliefs, and identity moving into higher education" (Lynch, 2022, p. 16).

College Representations in Media

Conklin (2008) argued that films about college "influence the way people perceive the undergraduate experience by both distorting it and accurately mirroring it" (p. 3). Scholars have examined the messages college films convey about women (Reynolds et al., 2018; Yakaboski & Donahoo, 2015), Black women (Donahoo, 2016), and racial diversity (Donahoo & Yakaboski, 2017) as well as the influence that films have on college expectations and perceptions among particular groups such as international students (Bourke, 2013) and community college students (Bourke et al., 2008; Hawk & Hill, 2016). While most research has focused on college representation in film, Tobolowsky (2006) examined television depictions of the first-year college experience and argued that understanding how television shapes incoming students' views of college life can support higher education professionals in proactively countering media-based expectations or concerns. However, Tobolowsky (2006) did not explore the messages television shows send about (mixed) race and college.

Renn (2003) positioned media and popular culture as "social and cultural forces pressed on students [that present] a variety of messages about what it [means] to have mixed racial and ethnic heritage" (p. 397). Similarly, Rockquemore et al. (2009) argued that increasing representation of multiracial people in media adds legitimacy to claiming multiracial identities. Though distal, these messages have important influence across the lifespan. For example, Moss and Davis (2008) noted that lack of representation in popular culture can cause multiracial girls to experience "identity distortion" (p. 221). Building on the analysis of multiraciality and educational discourses in Disney programming (Valdivia, 2008; Larson, 2016) and reality television (Patterson, 2016), we echo Johnston-Guerrero and Combs' (2023) call to examine the educational utility of multiracial portrayals in media.

Monoracism and Multiracial Microaggressions

Sue et al. (2007) described microaggressions as common interpersonal and environmental interactions that "communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group" (p. 273). Specific to mixed race communities, Johnston and Nadal (2010) developed a taxonomy of multiracial microaggressions including five categories: 1) exclusion or isolation, 2) exoticization or objectification, 3) assumption of monoracial or mistaken identity, 4) denial of multiracial reality, and 5) pathologizing of identity and experiences. Johnston and Nadal (2010) argued that multiracial microaggressions are fueled by monoracism, which is enacted across multiple axes: *vertically* (by White communities), *horizontally* (by People of Color), and *internalized* by multiracial individuals themselves (Guillermo-Wann & Johnston, 2012; Hamako, 2014; Harris et al., 2021; Johnston-Guerrero et al., 2020). Multiracial college students experience multiracial microaggressions. For example, Harris (2017) found that multiracial women college students felt their multiracial reality was denied via campus surveys and questioned whether they were "enough" to engage in race-based campus events (e.g., Black graduation). However, multiracial college students debate the extent to which monoracism mediates instances of multiracial

oppression (Johnston-Guerrero et al., 2020), which may stem from limited opportunities to develop their multiracial consciousness (Malaney-Brown, 2022).

Key to the current study is considering how monoracism might be reinforced through college-related television series. In their foundational work on anti-Black microaggressions, Pierce et al. (1977) positioned film and television among the "plethora of sources which spew out microaggressions" (p. 66). Yosso and Garcia (2010) underscored that microaggressions within films "carry a distinct element of intention, projected by commission and omission" (p. 86). Further, they characterized "cinematic microaggressions" as that which "reinforce Hollywood's tradition of exploiting race [and] upholding White privilege for mass audiences" (Yosso & García, 2010, p. 86). While popular media can "reinscribe or confine individuals to existing paradigms of race" (James et al., 2011, p. 355), they also offer "pedagogical possibilities" (p. 354) to disrupt such notions. Similarly, Kabba (2016) advocated for the use of popular culture in first-year college seminars to prime conversations about race/racism and Venegas et al. (2021) argued that critically examining popular films about college can "foster cultural competence among White students, particularly their recognition of microaggressions perpetuated against Students of Color both in film and on their campuses" (p. 47). However, socialization within a monoracial paradigm of race (Harris, 2016) may limit college students' abilities to identify multiracial oppression (Johnston-Guerrero et al., 2020). Thus, critical attention to monoracist messages in college-related media is warranted to describe and disrupt monoracism in higher education.

Theoretical Framework

Our study is grounded in two frames: Critical Race Media Literacy (CRML) and Critical Multiracial Theory (MultiCrit). CRML serves as a tool to apply Critical Race Theory in education "as a theoretical, conceptual, and methodological strategy to examine how People of Color are racialized throughout various media platforms" (King, 2017, p. 36). Yosso (2002) developed CRML to historicize deficit depictions of Chican@s within media, particularly films that portrayed inner-city schools while bringing in Freirean understandings of critical literacy processes as an active "reading" of racist influences toward liberation. Yosso (2020) later provided this succinct push for our work: "Once we 'see' that the racialized imagery on film has been systematically constructed, then we again ask what purpose do these images serve, and specifically, what do these images aim to teach?" (p. 8).

Given our focus on mixed race portrayals, we apply elements of MultiCrit, an extension of Critical Race Theory that accounts for the racialized experiences of multiracial students in higher education (Harris, 2016). The following eight tenets inform MultiCrit: 1) challenging ahistoricism, 2) interest convergence, 3) experiential knowledge, 4) challenge to dominant ideology, 5) racism, monoracism, and colorism, 6) a monoracial paradigm of race, 7) differential micro-racialization, and 8) intersections of multiple racial identities (Harris, 2016). For this paper, we use three tenets to guide our analysis: 1) racism, monoracism, and colorism, 2) a monoracial paradigm of race, and 3) differential micro-racialization. Racism, monoracism, and colorism are three distinct systems of oppression that operate simultaneously based on race, multiraciality, and skin color to influence multiracial individuals' lives. A monoracial paradigm of race challenges fixed monoracial categories that fail to consider a multiracial reality. Moreover, differential micro-racialization calls attention to how multiracial individuals are

racialized differently based on context, time, environment, and racial makeup (Harris, 2016). Pairing CRML with MultiCrit, we spark engagement toward Critical *Mixed* Race Media Literacy.

Methods

Though CRML informed our analysis, we are cautious about applying the framework to a population for which it was not designed, especially a contested one like multiracial students (Johnston-Guerrero & Wijeyesinghe, 2021). Our study's focus on a particular set of media also differs from a broader CRML analysis that pulls in a wide range of media over a longer time span. Therefore, we outline more specifically our study methods here, making connections to the frameworks when they methodologically guided our study.

Media Sources

We selected media sources based on the following inclusion criteria: recent television series (airing in the last five years) featuring at least one mixed race character whose race was explicitly discussed in relation to a college-related context or narrative. The "recent" criterion was included to capture what current college/college-bound students might be engaging with. Based on these criteria, our five media sources included the CW's *Charmed*, Netflix's *Ginny & Georgia* and *Dear White People*, Freeform's *Grown-ish*, and ABC's *Black-ish*.

Ginny & Georgia follows high school student Ginny, whose multiracial Black/White identity is a prominent theme throughout the series. One of Ginny's love interests, Hunter, is also multiracial (Asian/White). Though *Ginny & Georgia* is based in high school, we included it in our analysis because several key plotlines center the characters discussing college admissions.

Based off an earlier film of the same name (see Donahoo & Yakaboski, 2017), *Dear White People* takes place at predominantly White Winchester University and follows Sam White as she navigates race, racism, and her mixed Black/White identity through student activism and relationships. There are other mixed race characters that have identity-based dilemmas in the series including Gabe, Sam's White love interest, who is portrayed as having a distant Native American ancestor, and Al, a mixed Black and Mexican student.

Charmed focuses on three Latina sisters who discover they are powerful witches after the death of their mother. Maggie, a college student at Hilltowne College, considers a Puerto Rican man to be her father, but discovers that her biological father is Black. One of Maggie's sisters, Macy, is portrayed as Afro-Latina. Herrera et al. (2022) drew connections to student affairs within *Charmed,* including a focus on anti-Blackness in Maggie's identity development.

Grown-ish, a spin-off of the popular series *Black-ish,* focuses on Zoey as she navigates college life at California University (Cal U). Zoey's father is Black, and her mother identifies as mixed (Black/White), and her affluent upbringing shapes her racialized experiences. Two episodes from *Black-ish* that transition Zoey into the *Grown-ish* series were included in our analysis. Williams and Martin (2019) highlighted implications for student affairs practitioners within *Grown-ish*, but their analysis did not examine portrayals of multiraciality in the series.

Data Analysis

As part of a larger project documenting multiracial portrayals across various media, we individually viewed these selected television series to identify key scenes/dialogue (those that explicitly name or engage multiraciality) and gain an understanding of multiracial characters' larger story arcs. We independently took notes and then created a shared list of specific episodes to revisit. For this analysis, we each rewatched focal episodes, taking notes regarding connections to MultiCrit and Johnston and Nadal's (2010) taxonomy of multiracial microaggressions. Given the depth of dialogue and our interest in the larger production of messages, the study could be considered a combination of textual analysis and discursive analysis of identity (Butler, 2011), particularly as we made connections across series. Our analysis was iterative and cyclical. Sharing individual memos and discussing our emerging analyses, we reached a consensus on how the various portrayals of mixed race characters in college-related media reflected monoracist tropes and reinforced monoracism within higher education.

Positionalities

Because our analysis is informed by who we are and how we see the world, we acknowledge our positionalities as related to the study. Together, all four authors identify as multiracial, though we have different heritage combinations. We approached this study with an appreciation for seeing multiracial characters represented in college-related series, yet also desired more critical and complex portrayals. Jacob identifies as a mixed Chinese, Filipino, and White cisgender man, and he is a PhD student in higher education and student affairs. Lisa identifies as a multiracial Filipina/White cisgender Woman of Color, and she was a PhD candidate in higher education and student affairs at the time of this writing. Marc identifies as a multiracial Filipino/White queer man, and he is an associate dean in a college of education. Rebecca identifies as Mexipina, both Mexican and Filipina, and a bisexual cisgender woman. She is an assistant professor in an educational leadership department. It is crucial to note that the multiracial experience is not a monolithic one, and we acknowledge that our lived experiences and analytic lenses cannot capture all possibilities and findings, particularly those related to portrayals of Blackness and Indigeneity within the series analyzed.

Findings

Our analysis resulted in two thematic findings. First, "box-checking" is a common situation multiracial characters navigate in college-related television shows. Second, questions of belonging and enoughness, particularly within student organizations and interracial relationships, were prominent among multiracial characters. We frame our findings through the lens of multiracial microaggressions, which are a symptom of monoracism. Specifically, we focus on how multiracial characters experience these microaggressions on screen and how these depictions often lack adequate nuance and shape dominant, monoracist narratives.

Which Box(es) Do I Check? Navigating (Mono)Racial Categories

A common trope and multiracial microaggression found across these focal series were the "what are you?" questions that came in multiple forms. From the initial episode of *Dear White People*, Sam must contend with questions about her mixed race background, but specific dialogue and situations around "checking boxes" appear at various points in the four-season series. In season two, episode eight, Sam is arguing

with her main love interest, Gabe (who is characterized as monoracial White until season three). In response to Gabe's critique of Sam having "White guilt" and overcompensating for her whiteness, she asks, "Do you think I get to go out into the world half the time as a White girl and the other half as a Black girl?" and "I have and continue to feel a lot of things over being something other than what fits into a fucking Census box" (Simien & Moore, 2018). The dilemma of having to choose one specific box over another stems from the monoracist belief in discrete racial categories. Similarly, in season one, episode eight of *Ginny & Georgia*, Ginny recites a powerful poem as part of a national essay competition that she hopes to win in an effort to strengthen her college applications. Ginny's poem includes lines like "Boxes. Check one. Check other." and "The box is empty and glaring and daring me to choose one" (Young et al., 2021). She ends with, "I belong in the spaces between. Check all that apply" (Young et al., 2021). Both Sam and Ginny underscore how boxes cannot capture the complexity of their lived experiences and identities, which is different from how *Dear White People* tackles "box-checking" in season three and how *Charmed* and *Black-ish* present the topic without much critique.

In season three, episode six of *Dear White People*, a friend encourages Gabe (who says his great-great-grandmother was half Native American) to use his DNA ancestry test to claim not being White. They also mention Elizabeth Warren, acknowledging critiques of this sort of "gaming" of the system of Affirmative Action. In a later scene, Gabe is shown completing a grant application – he clicks and unclicks Native American, and then clicks and unclicks White, leaving viewers unsure of what he ultimately decides. The amount of time spent here highlights the common experience of mixed heritage people having to choose which box(es) to check and suggests that selecting both boxes was not allowed. Later in season three, episode nine, we learn that Gabe won the grant he applied for, and the announcement highlighted that all awardees were People of Color. Gabe acknowledges to Sam that he checked the Native American box, and Sam calls him "Chief Lies about Lineage" (Brown et al., 2019), depicting the complications of racial identity claims. Gabe's claim of a newly learned racial identity generated skepticism and questions about his racial authenticity and his right to claim Native American ancestry.

A scene in *Charmed* illustrates a similar encounter with "box-checking" for a scholarship application. In season one, episode 18, Maggie must find a way to pay for college after the passing of her Latina mother. When applying for scholarships on her institution's Financial Aid page, she pauses at the race/ethnicity question (which includes "check all that apply"). After recently learning her biological father is Black, she is shown choosing both "Hispanic/Latino" and "Black/African American." She is directed to a site entitled Black Student Union Scholarships and types "What determines Blackness?" into a web search engine. Later, Maggie expresses how learning about her multiracial identity has raised internal questions about her racial authenticity. She states:

> I did not even realize there was another culture I belong to. For 18 years, I have always checked the same box on every form. And now, I am eligible for all these scholarships for Black students. Is it messed up for me to apply? (Beeman et al., 2019)

This scene illustrates the dissonance between self-understanding and the meaning (and potential resources) attached to available racial categories on a scholarship application.

In season three, episode three of *Black-ish*, Zoey's mother (Bow) is concerned that Zoey isn't taking her college admissions essay seriously. Meanwhile, Bow calls her husband (Dre) "disgusting" for pushing their son to use "White guilt" to win votes in the election for class president. Dre responds, "Oh? As disgusting as claiming to be Samoan? Huh? To steal Samoan scholarship money from *real* Samoans?" (Whittingham & Nickerson, 2016) in an apparent reference to Bow's college application. She strongly replies, "Prove that I am not Samoan. Prove it!" (Whittingham & Nickerson, 2016). Similar to Maggie (*Charmed*) and Gabe (*Dear White People*) questioning which box(es) to check on scholarship applications, this exchange suggests an inherent advantage in checking the Samoan box for Bow's chances to receive a financial benefit, but it is unclear if she selected Samoan instead of or in addition to the Black and White boxes. While Gabe criticizes Sam's "White guilt" in *Dear White People*, Zoey explicitly leverages "White guilt" in her college essay by drawing on stereotypes of Blackness, to which Bow proudly exclaims, "Well, someone's getting into college!" (Whittingham & Nickerson, 2016). As a final punch line of the episode, Bow adds, "By the way, we're part Samoan!" (Whittingham & Nickerson, 2016). Here, multiraciality is a (comedic) tool to amplify potential admissions advantages of activating (monoracial) Black stereotypes. Simultaneously, this example upholds a microaggressive assumption that multiracial people are stealing or hoarding resources from monoracial Communities of Color. This thinking encourages the pitting of Communities of Color (inclusive of multiracial members) against each other over access to resources, which stems from White supremacy and a scarcity mindset. When monoracial communities critique multiracial communities for choosing multiple boxes on a scholarship application, they exhibit monoracist thinking and behaviors.

"Which Part of Me Belongs Today?" Finding (Mono)Racial Relationships and Belonging

As described earlier, Ginny's poem for the essay competition includes the phrasing, "which part of me belongs today?" This question aligns with the second major finding around multiracial characters questioning belonging and enoughness with peers, specifically in student organizations and interracial relationships.

Engaging with Monoracial Student Organizations

Context impacts the extent to which Zoey claims multiracial identity. In season three, episode 23 of *Black-ish*, Zoey attends her Cal U orientation and bonds with another incoming student, Miriam, over their shared goal of avoiding group introductions. Zoey is later stopped by current student Aaron, who asks if she is interested in joining the BSU (Black Student Union). Miriam, who is White, asks what BSU stands for and Zoey awkwardly struggles to respond. After some prompting from Aaron, Zoey deciphers the acronym and asserts "I'm *very* Black" (Griffiths et al., 2017). The insignificance of identity in Zoey's interactions with Miriam is in sharp contrast with a perceived pressure to prove her Black identity with Aaron. This pressure to identify with a single racial category is an example of internalized monoracism. This dynamic is heightened when Zoey explicitly distances herself from mixedness. In trying to resolve an issue with her on-campus housing assignment, Zoey inadvertently bolsters the Cal U

president's aim to "end segregation" by closing the predominantly Black housing community. Zoey explains the series of miscommunications to Aaron, who responds:

> Wow. You know, when you showed up with this White chick . . . and didn't know what the BSU was, I could kinda tell you weren't down. You know, I get it, but I did not think that you were against us. (Griffiths et al., 2017)

Aaron adds, "you're just some mixed chick from, like, Encino," to which Zoey responds, "Only my mom is mixed, and I'm from Sherman Oaks" (Griffiths et al., 2017). Aaron's "us or them" framing is an example of horizontal monoracism, forcing Zoey to prove her (monoracial) loyalty by not claiming mixedness.

Like Zoey *(Grown-ish),* Maggie *(Charmed)* seems uncomfortable within a Black Student Union meeting. Maggie attends this meeting as part of a group interview for the Black student scholarships. A Black student shares, "I could have chosen to go to an HBCU, but I want to thrive at a predominantly White campus because my existence is resistance" (Beeman et al., 2019). When it is her turn, Maggie shares, "I just found out that my dad is Black, and I am at somewhat of a crossroads" (Beeman et al., 2019). Later, Maggie speaks to her older sister, Macy, and lets her know she won't be applying for any of the Black student scholarships because it does not feel right. Instead, she insists she is going to learn more about BSU and wants "to figure out this new part of myself" (Beeman et al., 2019). This decision exemplifies Maggie's movement toward her multiracial consciousness and internal definition of her relationship to multiraciality, Blackness, and Latinidad.

Dear White People also features a mixed Black and Latino character, Al, who attends a Latinx Student Association meeting. In season four, Al explicitly discusses his multiracial identity, stating, "I don't talk about the Mexican side of my family 'cause it's easier being Black, but now I don't feel Black or brown enough" (Bailey & Kung, 2021), "I realized being biracial cut both ways. I couldn't relate to the new experiences of my Latinx friends like I'd hoped" (Simien & Momplaisir, 2021), and "being multiracial comes with a lot of t-shirts" (Simien & Temesgen, 2021). Al's comments underscoring the pressure to choose between multiple identities one holds and barriers to belonging in monoracial spaces like the Latinx Student Association typify internalized monoracism.

Being in Interracial Relationships

In season one, episode eight of *Ginny & Georgia*, Ginny and her boyfriend Hunter get into an argument about who deserves to win the essay contest. This scene captures some of the nuances of mixedness and what Harris (2016) described as differential micro-racialization, particularly that being mixed with Black/White (Ginny) and mixed with Taiwanese/White (Hunter) have distinct challenges. Further, this scene shows two multiracial characters weaponizing multiracial microaggressions against one another. From food preferences (Hunter: "I've never seen you pound back jerk chicken… how Black are you then?") to language proficiency (Ginny: "I speak more Mandarin than you. You're barely even Asian"), they debate their proximity to Whiteness (Hunter: "Together, we make a whole White person") (Young et al., 2021). Hunter wins the essay contest by "keeping his head down" and "following the rules" (Young et al., 2021) which aligns with stereotypes about Asian Americans rooted in the model minority myth (Poon et al., 2016). Conversely, Ginny's poem about her multiracial identity is deemed "unconventional."

Grown-ish and *Dear White People* explore intersections of colorism and monoracism within the college dating experience. In season one, episode one of *Dear White People*, Sam defends her choice to date a White man, "You know I'm biracial, so technically..." but is interrupted by her monoracial Black friend Joelle who says, "You're not Rashida Jones, biracial, you're Tracee Ellis Ross biracial. People think of you as Black" (Simien et al, 2017). Invoking different skin tones of multiracial actresses, Joelle denies Sam's multiracial reality (a multiracial microaggression) and criticizes her decision not to date "darker" Black men. In season one, episode 10 of *Grown-ish*, Zoey references multiracial actor Jesse Williams to describe her generation's "open door policy" around dating, stating, "We've mixed things up so much that in 40 years we're gonna have this planet looking like a bunch of Jesse Williams" (Cunningham et al., 2018). Frustrated that Black men on campus seem more likely to date White women, Jazz and Sky (twin sisters who are Black) drive a group conversation, noting there is a dating hierarchy with White girls at the top followed by "your exotic chicks – those are the girls who constantly get, 'Girl, what are you mixed with?'" (Cunningham et al., 2018). The exoticization and objectification of mixedness is a multiracial microaggression. Later, Aaron worries that he is "colorstruck," realizing his previous girlfriends "have mixed parents and their hair is long and curly" (Cunningham et al., 2018). These series suggest that while colorism may enhance dating opportunities for some multiracial women, monoracism may fuel criticisms about interracial dating choices from their monoracial peers.

Discussion

This paper adds to a growing body of literature focused on both multiraciality in higher education (e.g., Harris, 2016; Johnston-Guerrero & Wijeyesinghe, 2021) and higher education representations in popular culture (e.g., Reynolds, 2014; Tobolowsky & Reynolds, 2017). Specifically, it aimed to help fill the gap where these two areas of inquiry intersect. This gap is especially troubling given the ways that mixed people tend to be used as props in public discourse around racial claims (Johnston-Guerrero & Chaudhari, 2016), including arguments during the 2013 U.S. Supreme Court affirmative action case, *Fisher v. University of Texas*, where Justices Roberts and Scalia used mixed race students to question the very foundation of racial diversity – the self-identification choices of college students. Against the backdrop of recent rollbacks to race-conscious admissions practices by the U.S. Supreme Court, the continued focus on "box-checking" found in our study must be further contextualized by nuance between one's right to self-identification (Root, 1996) and the potential implications of those decisions in university contexts. In this section, we further discuss the thematic findings in relation to previous research and theory before outlining implications for practice and pedagogy.

Characters across the focal series mirrored the five identity patterns Renn (2003) described among multiracial college students. Zoey exemplifies the *monoracial* pattern, emphasizing her Black identity by distancing herself from her multiracial mother. With an established Latina identity and a newfound relationship with Blackness, Maggie negotiates the pattern of *multiple monoracial identities*. As Hunter and Ginny's "Oppression Olympics" debate underscores, they each experience distinct *multiracial* identity patterns at the intersection of their multiple racial backgrounds. Similar to the *extraracial* pattern, both Sam and Ginny question the utility of racial categories to

accurately capture their lived experiences. Finally, the *situational* identity pattern was present in each of the series analyzed. For example, the Black Student Union was a common context that increased the salience of Blackness (e.g., Sam and Zoey), and scholarship applications heightened questions of racial authenticity (e.g., Maggie and Gabe). In addition to a range of multiracial identity patterns, these series also illustrate multiracial microaggressions in college environments (Harris, 2017; Johnston-Guerrero et al., 2020). For example, multiple mixed race characters navigated feelings of racial inauthenticity as a result of demographic "box-checking" or participation in monoracial student groups. These examples align with categories of multiracial microaggressions within Johnston and Nadal's (2010) original typology.

It is striking that multiple shows across these media have explicit scenes where multiracial individuals struggle with the tensions of checking a box on demographic forms or applications. These boxes are a symptom of monoracism (Johnston & Nadal, 2010), and the prevalence of "box-checking" in the television series analyzed reflects the rigid reality of race/ethnicity data collection within higher education that may conflict with the racial meanings students attach to such disclosure (Johnston et al., 2014) and prime insecurities around racial authenticity and feeling racially enough (Ashlee & Quaye, 2020). Tied to these portrayals are misconceptions about college admissions and affirmative action (Poon et al., 2019) and minority scholarship worthiness (Sanchez & Bonam, 2009). Taken on the surface, they perpetuate harmful myths that multiracial people identify situationally (see Renn, 2000) just to "game the system" as a kind of race hustle (DeVega, 2011). To be clear, we understand the material consequences at play with how people identify racially and ethnically, including the U.S. Census and resource allocation. However, the literature and theory undergirding this study highlight how multiracial students struggle with wanting to show up authentically as their whole selves rather than identifying for material gains. Though these media portrayals of multiracial characters may pave a path toward more nuanced representations of multiracial identity, the ways higher education is depicted enshrines a monoracial-only paradigm of race.

Implications

Given the increased attention and access to film and television multiracial portrayals, recommendations for media-based pedagogical practices are increasingly critical in college student environments. Venegas et al. (2021) suggested that "analyzing popular media through critical media literacy can help address tensions within the campus racial climate" (p. 47). For example, critically examining media representations of college and race within the classroom can create space for Students of Color to share experiences with racial microaggressions on and off campus while also enhancing White students' ability to recognize and critique stereotypical images of Students of Color (Venegas et al., 2021). We propose that if educators include critical analysis of television series centering mixed race students in higher education curriculum, this may similarly support multiracial college students in naming experiences with multiracial microaggressions while fostering all students' ability to counter monoracism in and beyond the university context. These pedagogical strategies may extend beyond multiracial consciousness (Malaney-Brown, 2022) and foster broader awareness of monoracism for students who do not identify as multiracial. A compelling component of our findings is that "box-checking" on demographic forms is a prevalent

experience in multiracial media portrayals. We encourage higher education educators to utilize other examples of monoracism in order to generate various understandings and notions of this explicit system of power. For example, Hamako (2014) names affirmative action, anti-discrimination policies, and the lack of legal recognition of multiraciality as examples of monoracism that move beyond the interpersonal level and focus on its systemic implications. These explicit examples should also be utilized alongside media portrayals as pedagogical tools to better understand monoracism as a system of power. Future research is needed to determine if media representations of college life broadly, and mixedness in college specifically, are supportive in developing students' capacity to recognize monoracism on their campuses.

Tobolowsky (2006) noted that college adjustment challenges may stem, in part, from unrealistic expectations of college life as depicted on television. Similarly, Bourke (2013) argued that understanding how higher education is portrayed in film can support educators in "[helping] students *adjust* (emphasis added) to the reality on campus rather than the reality on screen" (p. 468). However, previous literature has overlooked how media representations might shape perceptions about multiraciality and college adjustment. The current study surfaced key challenges multiracial students may see on television and *expect* to encounter as they enter college life. First, multiracial students may question how disclosing their mixedness could impact admission to college. Second, multiracial students may question their eligibility for monoracially-framed resources. Third, multiracial students may question their sense of belonging on campus, especially in race-oriented groups or spaces. Understanding the salient messages multiracial students may receive about college via television could enhance the ability of higher education professionals to alleviate adjustment challenges mixed-identifying students may be navigating on campus. From admissions and financial aid to housing and student clubs/organizations, the media analyzed in the current study may be particularly useful in priming critical conversations among current higher education professionals around barriers faced by multiracial students.

The portrayals analyzed also bring into question current practices that depend solely on how students racially identify themselves on college applications, particularly during a time when there are increases in the percentage of "racially unknown" students who opt out from identification altogether. For example, Maggie (from *Charmed*) experiences dissonance when selecting her racial demographics on an institutional webpage. We propose that higher education administrators trouble the notion of solely relying on applications to discern how multiracial students identify and what support services they qualify for. In alignment with Renn's (2003) patterns of multiracial identity development, students may change how they racially identify throughout their collegiate experience. Thus, administrators should provide ongoing opportunities for students to update their racial designations in campus data systems. The student organization portrayals also provide an opportunity to glean explicit recommendations for practice about the rigidity of support structures of multiracial college students. Multiple characters struggled when engaging with monoracial student groups on campus, further emphasizing the need for expansive options such as *both* supporting multiracial student organizations *and* fostering a sense of multiracial inclusion in monoracial groups. Higher education administrators and educators should keep this in mind when advising race-based student organizations. Finally, we recommend the curricular inclusion of

multiracial-focused media analysis in courses for emerging higher education professionals (e.g., student development theory, critical race theory, multicultural counseling) to engage future leaders in the work to identify and disrupt monoracism in higher education.

Conclusion

Rather than problematize the monoracist systems and structures of higher education, these television series focus on individual representations of multiraciality. We contend that the scripted depictions of multiracial microaggressions found within these media are a manifestation of monoracism within the industry and institutions in which they were produced. Television representations of multiracial characters in educational contexts essentialize the monoracialized realities of mixed race college students and have the potential to perpetuate harmful stereotypes that pathologize multiraciality. While increased visibility of multiracial college students on screen is progress toward more representative media, the presence of multiracial microaggressions in the television series analyzed in this study maintains rather than disrupts monoracism. Thus, Critical *Mixed* Race Media Literacy is a pedagogical imperative in the work toward raising multiracial consciousness and dismantling monoracism within higher education.

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