“An investigation into identity formation and adolescent identity in American teen film, with a focus on interstitiality, angst and alienation.”

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is their own and that appropriate credit has been given within the thesis where reference has been made to the work of others.

Abstract

Through its broad exploration of teen identity formation, interstitial angst, alienation and anxieties adolescent media is a unique polysemic element of Western culture that can be used to identify wider social discourses habituating within American society. For many years adolescent genres have been underappreciated and vilified as simple juvenile stories concerning teen angst. The aim of this thesis, therefore, is to explore the representations of the reciprocals of adolescent mental health issues and how these function in illuminating problems propagated by Neoliberalist values, Neotribalsim and Hypermasculinity, to name just a few. Chapter I of this thesis will explore the emergence of the teenager across the twentieth century through the filmography of actors such as James Dean and Marlon Brando. The chapter will then focus on the influential adolescent literature of the twentieth century such as *The Catcher in the Rye*; the novel's angst-fuelled protagonist will be examined in his relation to the social problems ingrained within American society such as Neoliberalism. Chapter II will then explore the concept of race within the teen genre and how the mental health issues of ethnic minorities can indicate how an adolescent's environment can have a monumental impact on their identity formation as well as social problems such as hypermasculinity, cultural trauma, tokenism and gentrification. Chapter III will discuss how concepts such as intersectionality as well as Tokenisms are linked to the mental health dispositions of the LGBT+ community within the teen genre. Chapter IV will then be used to examine case studies of the representation of mental health issues throughout the teen genre concerning their function in representing social problems such as social media consumption, political criticisms and censorship. Chapter V will then conclude with an investigation into how violence within the teen genre can indicate further social discourse surrounding school shootings, interstitial angst and cultural trauma with a particular focus on the film *Elephant* with its relationship to the Columbine massacre.

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Introduction

Across generations of varying youth cultures, everchanging political landscapes and an abundance of media representations, American adolescence has evolved to become one of the most polysemic cultural exports the United States has ever created. The outward perception and vacillating reputation of adolescent dramatizations has incurred the focus of the mass media's attention due to the age groups turbulent history and polarising representations. The attention youth-based media has garnered over the past century has led it to becoming one of the largest global outputs of the American film and media industries. These industries succeed in portraying the perpetually evolving experiences of American adolescents and what factors may contribute to the formation of adolescent identity and the psychological issues that manifest themselves as a result of interstitial angst.

Adolescent stories can produce a plethora of different analogies and perspectives concerning intersectionality and its influence on adolescent identity development. These narratives reflect how external factors existing within an adolescent's environment can have a monumental impact on their identity formation. For example, a film such as *Moonlight* (Jenkins, 2016) introduces crucial cultural discourse concerning intersectionality and the subsequent effect this can manifest within its lead protagonist's psychological wellbeing as manifested through the representation of his angst, alienation and anxiety. The film's protagonist, Chiron (Alex Hibbert, Trevante Rhodes, Ashton Sanders), battles with the intersectionality of both his LGBT+ and African American identity within 1980s Miami, a city inflicted with drug misuse and crime. *Moonlight* manifests important cultural discourse surrounding issues such as cultural trauma, racial and sexual inequality as well as the impact that hypermasculinity has on young boys' identity formation. Similarly, a film such as *Elephant* (Van Sant, 2003) depicts intense reactions to institutional alienation, a major

component of American adolescence. *Elephant* depicts a unique study through its depiction of interstitial angst perpetrated by its psychologically disturbed teens; this narrative raises vital discourses concerning American gun laws, media debates surrounding censorship as well as neoliberalism's impact on teen psychological issues, all depicted through *Elephant's* multi-perspective narrative depicting interstitial angst and alienation. The overarching topic explored throughout this thesis will evaluate the position of American adolescents within the teen genre in conjunction with the theoretical, political and cultural discourses through the depiction of angst, alienation and anxiety within adolescent narratives

As seen through the countless youth-orientated narratives produced throughout America's cinematic history the teen genre has become a globally recognised component of American culture through the recognisable iconography of its postmodernist texts. From the locker lined hallways of *The Breakfast Club* (Hughes, 1984), to the bleachers the T-Birds dance upon in *Grease* (Kleiser, 1978) the American teen genre is as American as apple pie. However, despite the cultural potency of the teen genre for many years it has long been 'a genre which has for years been important to Hollywood, but rarely, it seems, to genre critics, theorists and historians' (Cook & Bernink, 1999, p. 219). The pessimistic perceptions of the teen gerne influenced the conceptualisation of this thesis with specific focus on the genre's cultural potency concerning societal issues reflected through adolescent development, a subject with limited research within the film studies sector of academia.

The aim of this thesis is to explore the shared representations of adolescent angst, anxiety and alienation and how these factors depict the interstitiality of adolescence as well as how identity formation can occur as a result of an adolescent's environment across the many mediums, environments and demographics the teen genre propagates. Although the focus of this thesis relates to the exploration of adolescent narratives, the term 'adolescent' will be defined as the transitionary stage of development for young people rather than a specific age group. Adolescence within the context of this thesis can be identified as the liminal

stage of development that bridges the gap between childhood and adulthood; and in doing so depicts the interstitial angst associated with adolescent identity formation. Many interpretations of adolescence assume a person's teenage years defines their adolescence, however, throughout this thesis the parenthesis of adolescence will be widened further than just teenage years. The rationale behind this is that many older teenagers, and even those in their early twenties, could be defined as an adolescent in what I define as a "Kidult" due to their consumption of youth-based media such as anime, comic books and video games, coupled with a lack of independence from their parents and angst surrounding their interstitial development into adulthood. On the contrary an adolescent could even be defined as a preteen as many young people are being exposed to the adult world through social media in what is now defined as the tweenager.

In relation to the difficulties identifying what an adolescent is defined as within the teen genre the theorist Driscol comments upon the complexities of analysing teen representation stating 'It is actually as difficult to establish the boundaries of 'teen film' as it is to specify then 'adolescence begins or ends, and this difficultly is entirely appropriate' (Driscol, 2011, p.3) An example of these varying ends of the spectrum can be seen in a character such as Benjamin (Dustin Hoffman) in *The Graduate*. Benjamin who is fresh out of college and in his early twenties suffers from angst about his interstitial development into adulthood, the same angst someone half his age suffers from such as a character like the pre-teen Kayla in *Eighth Grade.* Both these characters harbour the same interstitial fear the liminality of adolescence despite their near decade apart.

The teen genre's construction and popularity among both adolescents and adults can be attributed to the postmodernist components associated with the genre. Many films incorporate postmodernist refences to the earlier eras such as the 1950s as seen in films such as *Grease* (Kleiser, 1978) *Back to the Future* (Zemeckis 1985) and *American Graffiti* (Lucas, 1973) inducing nostalgia within its older audience. The uses and gratification theory

can also be credited as one of the many factors of the genre's universal popularity among many different demographics. Through repeating and rejuvenating the existing stereotypes, tropes and conventions associated with the teen genre these components produce gratification for the audience in their recognition of the archetypal conventions the genre reciprocates.

The repetition of using the same actors across different films from the same genre such as John Wayne, Clint Eastwood and Randolph Scott staring across many different Western films helped solidify the Western as one of the most successful genres of all time. This trope is of course seen within the teen genre as well; through appearing in multiple films across the genre actors such as Mathew Broderick, Molly Ringwald and even *American Pie's* (Weitz, 2000) Jason Biggs all helped the teen genre's popularity skyrocket. The repetition of characters, narratives, locations and archetypes associated with the genre repeated generates gratification among its audience as 'research has supported the assumption that viewers experience the greatest level of enjoyment when the portrayed outcomes are perceived as just or correct' (Bartsch & Viehoff, 2010, p.248) hence the teen genre's constant recycling and rehashing of existing archetypes as seen through its use of bricolage.

Bricolage is a prominent and important fixture seen throughout the teen genre as the combination of, sometimes quite contrasting, genres such as horror as seen in *Carrie* (De Palma, 1976) assists in contributing to the intertextuality of the genre extenuating the genre's hybridity and popularity among an even larger demographic through the development of subgenres. Subgenres highlight the fluidity and adaptability of the teen gerne by widening its audience and narrative capability through the postmodernist concept of bricolage combining various tropes across multiple genres. Traditional genres such as comedies have a multitude of subgenres attached to them such as the rom-com, mockumentary, black comedy and etc.; The teen genre delves into a similar span of subgenres such as musicals like *Hairspray* (Shankman, 2007), horror productions such as

Carrie (DePalma, 1976) or even gross-out comedies such as *Superbad* (Mottola, 2008). Subgenres assist the teen genre in exploring issues not typically associated with adolescence; for instance, *Hairspray*'s subplot depicting African Americans protesting for equality within television assists in highlighting African American issues still prevalent to this day as seen in the many protests, social media campaigns and discourse surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement seen across 2020.

Across media and literature, the teen genre is used as a blank canvas for storytelling; through its various iterations and narratives, the genre can be interpreted to discuss many different social and political problems perpetuating within American society. These adolescent narratives successfully produce important social commentaries concerned with issues directly afflicting young people and how these are effective allegories for theoretical debate concerning Western culture. For example, through its manifestation of anxiety and angst within its young protagonist, Matthew Broderick's performance as David within *Wargames* (Badham, 1983) succeeds in illustrating the shared fears and anxieties young people harboured during the height of the Cold War. 'Director John Badham uses lighthearted humor to explore the deadly serious concept of mutual assured destruction as the teen tries to stop the United States from retaliating against a false threat' (Lindsay & Gach, 2020). *Wargames* succeeds in producing allegories for the child-like politics at the time as the film symbolically produces a political critique of the Reagan administration's nuclear and foreign policies; David's actions demonstrated how teenagers were more politically informed and socially aware of the dangers of cybersecurity than the adults who were in charge. The film itself prompted Reagan to revaluate the cybersecurity of the American military, uncovering startling evidence that the events depicted in the film could easily have taken place in real-life prompting a massive reshuffle into America's cybersecurity. Despite *Wargames* belonging to the teen genre, its important narrative could have prevented a nuclear war highlighting the incredible importance of the genre creating vital discourses.

In the past decade, perhaps due to the rise of social media platforms, across the world adolescents have become much more vocal concerning the political and social inequalities ingrained within society, akin to the counterculture movement of the 1960s. The recent outcry of the Black Lives Matter protests surrounding the death of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, as well as the countless rallies and protests concerning global warming, were disseminated, discussed and backed by a large proportion of younger people online. These political movements by young people are greatly represented within across social media and out in the streets, 'in the three weeks since Floyd's death, stories like this of young people taking it upon themselves to mobilise and make their voices heard, in many cases for the first time, have been replicated across the US in a wave of Gen Z-led protests' (Byrant, 2020). The reciprocals of the mass politicisation of young people again highlights the interstitial world that they are living in. Across the teen gerne more and more young people are dealing with mature themes and problems from school shootings to racism. These themes are now becoming a new means of social identity formation for young people representing the shifting adolescent experiences of modern-day adolescence. the parathesis of adolescence shrinking contributing to interstitial angst as a result of adult issues intersecting throughout adolescents lives and in the contemporary media that the consume

Films such as the coming-of-age comedy *Booksmart,* have helped subvert the typical gender norms associated with the male-dominated high school comedies, mirroring films such as *Superbad* and *American Pie* within a postmodernist narrative. The film's promotional material [Appendix I] shows clear inspiration from the 1970s classic teen comedy *Animal House* (Landis, 1978). The comparison between these films' posters highlights *Booksmart*'s postmodernist production, as although it borrows certain themes from *Animal House*, it reinvents the male-dominated genre through its inclusion of a female-led cast and contemporary perspectives on feminism. *Booksmart* manages to produce a more liberal and

socially aware narrative than many of its predecessors as the film represents anxieties about high school students prioritising their education above everything else rather than socialising and enjoying their adolescences; this analogy could arguably be seen as criticism on the neoliberalist values ingrained within the American education system. *Booksmart* also manages to produce a modern, more politically aware representation of minority groups such as the LGBT+ community in its depiction of an LGBT+ romance story, as well as Amy (Kaitlyn Dever) having a key role within the narrative instead of being used for LGBT+ Tokenism. *Booksmart* is a unique entry within the teen genre as it utilises the growing politicisation that younger people are now partaking in. *Booksmart*'s political awareness, the inclusion of LGBT+ characters, as well as referencing feminist icons such as Ruth Bader Ginsberg and Malala Yousafzai, encourages a more political style of filmmaking that is now becoming the new norm for the genre. Despite *Booksmart'*s comedic tone, the film effectively implements a politically charged commentary in contrast to the many comedy-based films within the genre that rarely use the platform to open up discourse regarding the social issues affecting American society.

Although these narratives are fictitious, they are crucial for encouraging social discourse regarding the many issues ingrained within American society and exploring the evolution of youth culture and its relation to interstitiality. These stories depict vulnerable teens coping with the emotional stress and turmoil generated from decades of discrimination, neoliberalism and inequalities ingrained within American society; these representations highlight the need for further cultural debate regarding these issues. The teen genre accentuates the parallel relationship between America's neoliberalist values and the mental wellbeing of young people in relation to identify formation. By identifying the social and psychological issues of the students represented within the teen genre, as well as their relation to identity formation, the social problems which are deeply ingrained within Western society can also be identified and discussed.

Just one of the major factors that may affect a young person's mental wellbeing can be identified as a reciprocal of the American capitalist system as well as the rise of Neoliberalism. The American education system creates a strenuous environment for mental illnesses to develop and fester within the minds of teenagers due to unhealthy competition between classmates as well as immense pressure to succeed. The rise of Neoliberalism can be associated with the Reagan presidency, as well as being magnified in the aftermath of the financial credit crunch in the late 2000s, contributed to a cultural shift in America's social and political landscape. The rise of Neoliberalism is reflected in many films across the teen genre highlighting the immense academic pressure young people face in outperforming their classmates and exceeding the high expectations their schools and parents instil. Films such as *Booksmart* (Wilde, 2019) and *Rushmore* (Anderson, 1998) highlight the pressures young people feel in succeeding academically above their mental wellbeing. In an already capitalist saturated society 'Neoliberalism sees competition as the defining characteristic of human relations. It redefines citizens as consumers, whose democratic choices are best exercised by buying and selling, a process that rewards merit and punishes inefficiency' (Monbiot, 2016).

Capitalism has, for many years, been a large factor in the decline of young people's mental health through encouraging unhealthy competition regarding jobs, scholarships and college places; due to the rise of Neoliberalism however, many new factors affecting young people's mental health have arisen throughout adolescence. The rise of Globalisation has resulted in fewer jobs for American workers which has forced teenagers to seek out competitive higher paid jobs as typical manual labour jobs in the primary sector such as factory and agricultural work have been outsourced to other countries to maximise profits 'the result is that workers, job-seekers and public services of every kind are subject to a pettifogging, stifling regime of assessment and monitoring, designed to identify the winners and punish the losers' (Monbio, 2016). As a result of the pressure Neoliberalism places upon students and staff, there is significantly more pressure to raise students' grades to receive larger funding and retain

their jobs despite the impact this has on their students' mental health. Films that represent the strain of Neoliberalism can be seen in many films across the genre such as *The Graduate, Booksmart* and *The Breakfast Club* with their focus on both academic and parental pressure to achieve unreachable goals at the sacrifice of student's mental health.

John Hughes' attempt at representing a cross-sectional slice of society within *The Breakfast Club* assists in reflecting how issues such as Intersectionality and Neoliberalism are ingrained within American culture, as well as their contribution to the interstitial angst the adolescents face. Within the film, one of the largest factors contributing to the group's interstitial angst is dictated by the Neoliberalist values Western society has demanded of them to succeed and conform to middle-class capitalist hegemony. The film also comments upon America's varying national identity and the conflict that can arise from different cultures coexisting within the high school relating to the theory of Intersectionality and therefore commenting upon how adolescent identity formation is manufactured. During one pivotal scene within the film, Brian admits he had contemplated suicide as a result of underperforming in the eyes of his parents; Andy then discloses he too is subjected to similar pressures stemming from his parents' high expectations of his sporting ability, demonstrating the mental health issues derived from Neoliberalist America. In contrast to Brian and Andy's predicaments, John's nonconformist attitude to the education system symbolises how students who do not conform to the Neoliberalist values American hegemony dictates can equally become as imbued with alienation and angst; this hypocrisy highlights the unjust balance of the Neoliberalist values within Western society.

Through its blend of both carefree entertainment and hard-hitting issues, the teen genre has evolved to represent the interstitial space between childhood and adulthood. Adolescence as an interstitial element of identify formation is heavily prominent in films such as *Eighth Grade.* Within the film, Kayla's adolescence collides with her angst about entering the adult world exposing the deeper issues ingrained within Western society such as the effects of

social media on young people as well as exploring the #MeToo movement. One of the earliest examples of the teen genre showcasing adolescent angst concerning interstitiality can be traced to Arnold's *High School Confidential* (1958). Within the film The introduction of adult themes, such as narcotics and crime, within the world of young people, alienated the students from their youth at an accelerated rate reflecting the moral panic many adults felt during this period due to their fear surrounding young people forming gangs and committing juvenile delinquency.

Academic pressure and strict conformity to follow American hegemony can often lead to acts of teenage rebellion. Generally, this rebellion can be seen as a rite of passage for many students, but as highlighted previously, these acts of rebellion can often be a guise for highlighting the many issues ingrained within American society as seen with the mass politicisation of young people during the 1960s in defiance of The Vietnam War and America's troublesome foreign policy. These acts of rebellion can be key indicators of young people's alienation towards American society as well as forming part of their social identify formation in crossing the interstitial gap into adolescence.

Within the teen genre adolescent narratives can be effectively allegorised as a microcosm of society depicting the same inequalities and societal pressures affecting individual adults across Western society; these allegories assist in providing a comprehensive exploration of the effects of American hegemony and Neoliberalism on youth identity formation. Within each generation of adolescents that passes through the American education system there is a piece of shared cultural knowledge and sociological capital that the students inherit from their time as adolescents. These common cultural factors young people experience contribute to the shared cultural capital that accommodates a young person's identity formation; The identity formation associated with adolescent institutions relates to what the functionalist theorist Durkheim suggests as to how schools and other institutions 'provide the "social glue". Durkheim's thinking is actually one of the fundamental things which convinced

governments the world over to spend billions of pounds on schools – in order to socialise the young and create a sense of solidarity' (Thompson, 2016). Durkheim's theory relates to the concept of adolescent identity formation within the teen genre as the institutions and media that habituate within Neoliberalist America propagate the use of stereotypes and conformity to the capitalist system of America. Adolescents become indoctrinated into following the traditional clichés and stereotypes attributed to the teen genre, therefore reciprocating the same tropes they see on screen within their own lives, further solidifying the postmodernist aspects of the teen genre.

The decision to explore adolescent identity formation within American cinema and its relation to wider cultural discourses stems from the ever-growing trend of mental health, angst and interstitiality being discussed retrospectively within modern-day context. The discussion surrounding identity formation and its polysemic qualities concerning social commentary is generally quite absent within the media discipline. This thesis aims to explore the importance of the teen gerne and its relation in representing adolescent identity formation and its exploration of themes such as interstitiality that conjures mental health problems in adolescents and the wider social discourses among American society.

Regarding the sources utilised across the course of this thesis there were limited options relating to the concepts of interstitiality and identity formation within the teen genre, hence the rationale to widen the knowledge of adolescent narratives within this thesis. Driscoll's *Teen film: a critical introduction* assisted in my initial research into the teen gerne in exploring the origins of adolescent narratives as well as their link to social identity structures concerning American adolescents. Driscoll's work is very practical in terms of its application to the foundations of to this body of work, however, its limitations stem from the lack of context concerning the psychological reciprocals of interstitiality among adolescents. In particular, Driscoll's section on rites of passage will prove effective in terms of identifying activities and tropes that identify adolescent interstitiality and how this relates to adolescent

identity such as examining ‘the transition from boy to man through an encounter with mortality’ (Driscoll, 2011 p.66) in films such as *Stand by Me* (Reiner, 1986) *and American Graffiti* (Lucas, 1973).

To further examine the effects of interstitial angst the aptly named *Movies and Mental Illness 3* (Wedding, 2010) was implemented to provide a method of critical readings concerning cinematic portrayals of adolescent mental health. Wedding evaluates both the positive and negative aspects of mental health illness representations rather than its cultural capacity relating to social discourse. Although the book dedicates a small portion of its content into teenage mental illnesses on screen, the majority of Wedding’s content explores the less common adult-centred mental illnesses that are often contrived on screen. The issues explored throughout Wedding’s *Movies and Mental Illnesses* tend to focus on illnesses such as Schizophrenia or War related PTSD, which are generally not as prevalent within the teen genre.

The content regarding PTSD within Wedding’s work concerns more with the depictions of soldiers coming back from horrific wars and the accuracy of the representation of PTSD within films such as *The Dry Land* (Williams, 2010) *Paths of Glory* (1957) and *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) rather the everyday trials and tribulations of angst-ridden teens. Wedding comments on the films in regard to their accuracy concerning real-life disorders rather than relating it to social discourse such as PTSD’s relation to criticising the political aspects of the War on Terror or an indication of national trauma such as the effect of Hauntology in the aftermath on the attack on the world trade centre. Wedding evaluates films such as *The Dry Land* with critical assumptions such stating that the film ‘offers students a compelling and realistic introduction to the symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)’ (Wedding, 2014, p.108). These subjective statements represent only one perspective on such a polysemic medium; Wedding’s book seems to rationalise film as a passive medium that is there to be evaluated in terms of its clinical accuracies. Within a

humanities perspective these signs, icons and allegories produce an abundance of metaphors and social commentary that relate to political and social discourse that influence these mental illnesses to develop. The book's focus on psychiatry rather than film also limits the gravity of the book's content in supporting the overall thesis of this debate, as the book is primarily aimed at junior therapists using films to identify the real-life diagnosis of their patients, making the book even less relevant in the field of arts and humanities.

Another study that tackles the subject of the representation of mental health is Birch's *Mediating Mental Health* (2014), which again, has limited scope into adolescent mental illnesses, instead, focusing its attention on the overall representation of mental health in the media, something not entirely relevant to this thesis. Another conflation commonly identified by the theorists Harper and Cross reflects some academics negligence in recognising distinctions between cultural forms of media. Many researchers compare representations of mental health between newspapers and film as though fiction and news are interlinked in both their tone and function. Within the discourse of film, many researchers also choose to compare representations of mental health with very contrasting genres such as comparing documentaries and horror as though fiction and factual content corroborate.

The methodology of this thesis will include narratological textual analysis in examining how narrative structures, such as *Elephant*'s disjointed narrative structure acts as an allegory for the many different perspectives on the Columbine massacre, as well as themes, iconography and gerne conventions of the teen genre can indicate social discourse regarding adolescent identity formation. The critical reception of these films will also be used to gauge the multitude of perspectives regarding the representation of mental health, angst and alienation relates to contextual analysis regarding identity formation and interstitiality. These methods of analysis are effective within this study as by examining different aspects of the genre a wider and more cohesive debate can therefore emerge regarding the teen genre's cultural potency concerning interstitial identity formation.

As psychological issues linked to interstitiality can be challenging to identify without clear exposition from a film's narrative, certain characters whose mental health dispositions are not always overtly obvious will be identified through their representations of angst, anxieties and rebellion. These juvenile tendencies are often interlinked with undiagnosed mental health issues linked to interstitial anxieties such as within a film like *Eighth Grade*. Throughout the film there is no indication that Kayla has been diagnosed with any kind of psychological issue, but there are clear signs of her discomfort and anxiety reflecting her mental disposition surrounding her transition into high school. Eighth Grade therefore produces a narrative that accurately reflects the interstitial crisis many young people face in the modern-day America. American society has specifically been chosen as the framework of this investigation due to the sheer number of films, television shows and literature it has produced revolving around teenage life, as well its allegories depicting the pressures social problems the American academic and Neoliberalist system manifests. By analysing the mise en scéne, cinematography and production aspects of the selected films many of the societal issues plaguing American society can be seen reflected through the interstitiality in young people.

Chapter I:

The Emergence of The Teenager

Debatably, without the momentous films, music and literature of the early twentieth century, the entire notion of the teenager may never have existed. Up until the latter half of the twentieth century, the concept of the teenager was all but a number between 12 and 20. Adolescents tended to be viewed as children up until they were able to start work, until that time, there was minimal defining characteristics that embodied the space between childhood and adulthood. Through sharing similar themes surrounding angst and alienation across 'a number of genres, traditions and production trends, some of them quite distinct, contributed to [the] initial development' (Cook & Bernink, 1999, p. 218) of the teen genre. These films, as well as adolescent based literature and music, aided in shaping and solidifying the teen genre as one of the most important cornerstones in cinematic history. The emergence of the teenager is also linked to the discussion concerning the development of adolescent identity formation as well as interstitial angst. Concepts such as interstitial angst and identity formation began to manifest themselves within the films of the 1950s such as *Rebel Without a Cause* (Ray, 1954), *The Wild One* (Benedek, 1953) and *Blackboard Jungle* (Brooks, 1955).

The teen genre is not only a source of entertainment for many, but it also provides an important platform for discussing the many social problems afflicting Western society. The youth-orientated social problem film was conceptualised by three main films within the teen genre: *Rebel Without a Cause*, *The Wild One* and *Blackboard Jungle*, 'each of them drawing on a tradition of films about juvenile delinquency, juvenile wildness and juvenile crime' (Cook & Bernink, 1999, p. 218) in reaction to the growing moral panic at the time of the increasing rebellious nature of teenagers. One of the earliest examples of the social problem film is seen in one of the most important films to emerge from the 1950s, *Blackboard Jungle*.

Blackboard Jungle explores an inner-city high school where racial tensions between the students and teachers are at an all-time high, ‘the film simmers with anxieties about race, America’s educational system, and postwar urban space’ (Stoever-Ackerman, 2011, p. 782). The film succeeded in being one of the earliest teen films to star an African American actor, Sidney Poitier, as one of its lead cast members highlighting the racial conflict and prejudice that ethnic minorities faced within the American high school. *Blackboard Jungle* will be further explored in chapter II in comparison to contemporary films such as *Moonlight* (Jenkins, 2016) and *The Blind Side* concerning Identity formation within race.

At the midpoint of the twentieth century, young people’s lives were forever changed, the seismic explosion of the counterculture movement emanating throughout the 1950s and 1960s helped teenagers preclude themselves from the social norm of America’s middle-class white hegemony. The inception of Rock ‘n’ Roll music was arguably one of the largest influences in producing youth-orientated counterculture ’for the teenage generation of the 1950s, which came of age in the next decade, rock 'n' roll was the catalyst of that rebellion’ (Altschuler, 2004 p. XI, Editors notes). Seen as both controversial and radical for the time, artists such as Elvis Presley, Little Richard and Bill Haley & his Comets*,* to name just a few, engrained themselves into their impressionable teenage fan’s consciousness, and thus, changed the landscape of both music and youth culture across the Western world. Films like *Blackboard Jungle* helped spread the popularity of Rock ‘n’ Roll through its use of “*Rock Around the Clock*” performed by Bill Hayley which was paramount in bringing together young people. The theorist Altschuler recounts the opening scene of *Blackboard Jungle* as the perfect embodiment of what it was like to be an adolescent during the eve of the counterculture movement in the 1950s.

> ‘As the opening credits of Blackboard Jungle rolled across the screen … For two minutes and ten seconds, "Rock Around the Clock" issued clarion call to students to break out of jail and have fun’ (Altschuler, 2004 p.32).

Rock ‘n’ Roll’s growth was one of the largest factors influencing youth culture and rebellion throughout the 1950s. Rock ‘n’ Roll’s origins were ‘initially apolitical, this cultural

phenomenon helped generate the civil rights and anti-war movements that gave that decade its distinctive ethos. The "shook up generation," according to Altschuler, "transformed an inchoate sense of disaffection and dissatisfaction into a political and cultural movement."' (Altschuler, 2004 p.11, Editors notes). For the first time in a generation, teenagers were now able to define themselves through their consumption of music, fashion and film which created an abundance of different youth subcultures such as Greasers, Bikers and Punks. These subcultures created social solidarity between teenagers, as well as alienating them from other teenage subcultures causing gang rivalries such as the feud between the Mods and Rockers during the 1960s. The spread of teenage gangs and delinquency created a moral panic among the older generation as 'fears of teen gangs and juvenile delinquency abounded, inspired by texts such as Frederic Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), a study that rather simplistically suggested a link between crime comics and youth misdemeanours' (Gair, 2007, p.32). Films such as *The Outsiders* (Coppola, 1985) and *West Side Story* (Wise, 1961) depicted teenage gangs fighting, committing crimes and causing chaos across their local town, demonstrating the fear of juvenile delinquency emanating from America's older generation.

As a result of the sharp rise and global dominance of social media platforms, the pressures associated with youth identity formation have been magnified extensively through issues perpetuated by social media's representations of unrealistic beauty standards, pressure to confirm to trends as well as exposing younger people to adult content. These sites, through pressure emanating from social media influencers and brands, encourage young people to alter their online persona through filters, photoshopping, following trends and even producing lewd content to gain more followers/likes. Adolescent's dissociation of genuine social interactions within the real world has produced intense feelings of isolation and alienation stemming from the oversaturation of social media within young people's lives. Concerning social media's impact on young people's mental health theorists MacKenzie, &

Wajcman's study on Social Shaping Theory highlights the detrimental aspects of both mental health and cultural values to certain groups:

> 'Technologies change, either because of scientific advance or following a logic of their own; and they then have effects on society … [and therefore] fuels an information and communication technology revolution that, numerous pundits tell, is changing and will change the way we live' (MacKenzie, & Wajcman, 1999, p.1)

The effects of Social Shaping Theory are manifested within films such as *Eighth Grade* through the guise of Kayla's low self-confidence and anxiety stemming from her obsession with social media. The negative effects of social media 'for good or ill, are woven inextricably into the fabric of our lives … all of our lives are intertwined with technologies, from simple tools to large technical systems' (MacKenzie, & Wajcman, 1999, p.1). Traditionally, The function social identity formation once fulfilled within adolescence has now migrated to a purely social media environment. Within the horror subgenre the growing concern concerning the dangers of social media regarding young people is a common theme depicted within teen horror films such as *Unfriended* (Gabriadze, 2014) and *Friend Request* (2016, Verhoeven) and even the subtle slasher movie *Die Influencers Die* (Orana, 2020). These films, though paranormal in their nature, act as an important allegory in showcasing the detrimental effects of social media platforms on adolescent identity formation as well as the interstitial angst associated with exposing adolescents to an unregulated online world.

Within the realms of social media, young people often feel immense pressure to follow fashion and beauty trends, as well fabricating a 'perfect' online persona. These factors contribute to the evolution of social identity formation within contemporary society as young people are exposed to an incredibly filtered and edited version of reality where other users only post the positive aspects of their lives as well as photoshopped images. The theorists Glazzard and Mitchell identify this concept within their study on social media:

> 'young people generally post positive messages and images of their lives on social media. These represent idealised lives, others then begin to make social comparisons between their own lives and the lives of their peers. If they begin to feel that their own life is full in comparison with that of their peers this can result in the development of mental disorders' (2018, p.32).

Young people often feel obliged to follow specific social norms and values to feel integrated within online communities as seen through 'research [that] suggests that young people who use social media heavily are more likely to report poor mental health, including psychological distress' (Glazzard & Mitchell, 2018, p.32).

The rise in popularity of both social media and communication technologies has resulted in the natural evolution of social identity formation within adolescents. The conception of these exclusive online subcultures has led to what is referred to as Neotribalsim. Neotribalsim was first conceptualised by the theorist Michel Maffesoli within his book *The Tribe of The Times*. *Neotribalsim* (1996) demonstrating how the rise of communication technologies has resulted in people from across the world forming unique subcultures, despite varying cultural and geographical differences as:

> 'the traditional tribe is bound by geography and kin-ship. It also has a historical tradition. However the neo-tribe is not bound by geography, and only exists for the duration of it's rituals. It does not rely on historical tradition, as it comes into being as the occasion arises' (Morling, 2009)

The global rise of social media platforms has influenced its young users to form new subcultures and communities exclusively online. The shift to online platforms as a central hub for subcultures to thrive has resulted in the decline of natural subcultures forming in the real world. Traditionally, subcultures formed as a result of young people living within close proximity of one another as well as sharing similar interests in music, films etc. Now, more so than ever, due to the current Covid-19 outbreak preventing face to face interactions, social media has become an essential platform for new subcultures to emerge made up of different people thousands of miles apart. Morling describes modern subcultures as liminal entities that evolve and change over time at a rapid rate, as well as how social media allows people to change their social group at the click of a button:

> 'In a subculture identity is unified and fixed. It is seen as static, as members permanently carry one mask. However nowadays people belong to many tribes, and move effortlessly between them. They switch masks, as they assume temporary roles and identities' (2009).

Neotribalism demonstrates the natural evolution of teenage culture migrating onto online platforms, creating online subcultures based around social media such as Sneakerheads, Hypebeasts, E-boys and E-girls, Seapunkers or even the alt-right; the list is endless and ever-growing. These internet Cyber-cultures are all community based and revolve around shared interests in music, media and films much like in the same way gangs and subcultures formed in the 1950s demonstrating the cultural shift in how adolescents form subcultures and their identity.

Within the film *Not Another Teen Movie* (Gallen, 2001) the pressures of identity formation are explored through the coercion many teens feel in conforming to the specific tropes propagated by the teen genre. These tropes reflect the pressures that Neoliberalism instils on adolescents to conform to the capitalist ideals through the occupation of working-class roles within society. Within 'an early scene of *Not Another Teen Movie* a student guide assures newcomers that everyone can be themselves at ‘John Hughes High’, and then promptly divides them into jocks, ‘slutty’ girls, and geeks' (Driscoll, p. 94, 2011). The scene highlights how both the media industry and society force pressure on young people to conform to certain classist attributes based on their cultural background. This cohesion of working-class people reflects how neoliberalism moulds members of society to conform to the capitalist hegemony across Western society through the self-fulfilling prophecy.

Two of the most pivotal cinematic performances that helped further envision the concept of the male teenager, as well as influencing the identity formation of millions of adolescents, can be seen through James Dean’s monumental performance as Jim Stark in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), as well as Marlon Brando’s role as the quick-talking rogue, Johnny, in Karzan’s influential film *The Wild One* (1951). Notably, the use of automobiles within these two films, as well as the many films made during or set in the 1950s, were paramount in solidifying the automobile as a staple of youth culture. The automobile helped adolescents escape from their suburban middle-class lives helping them carve their destiny in the world.

The importance of the automobile within American culture is one of the main concepts seen throughout the 1970s film *American Graffiti* (Lucas, 1973) which produces a retrospective take on the 1950s youth culture. The use of fashion and music in *American Graffiti* all pay homage to the 1950s; the cars the teenagers drive around the city streets blare out songs from Dion and the Belmonts, Chuck Berry and Frankie Ford, helping forge teenage independence from their parents, and develop the teenage subcultures associated with music of the era. The automobile helped teenagers craft their own independent lives away from the confines of their homes, though often leading to deviance, experimentation and rebellion, this trope was seen in many films emerging from the 1950s.

Throughout many contemporary teen films social media has come to represent the new automobile of the 21st century. Throughout the 1950s adolescent's newfound ability to traverse their local towns behind the wheel of an automobile granted them a new sense of independence from their parents. These days literally any adolescent with a phone can traverse the world in the palm of their hands, socialise with anyone around the world and access adult content without their parents' knowledge or consent. Adolescents using social media as a means of socialising contributes to the theory that the traditional means of identity formation, such as the social mobility associated with the automobile, have become outdated for many young people with social media platforms becoming the new norm. This impact that social media has had on adolescent identify formation is seen in many films across the teen genre, most notably within Eighth *Grade* through Kayla's reliance on the internet as her only means of socialising through the guise of her self-confidence vlogs.

Rebel Without a Cause played a crucial role in representing the trials and tribulations of America's middle-class youth. Before *Rebel's* release, 'disaffected teen delinquencies in films before *Rebel* were almost always from deprived backgrounds or just plain 'born bad'. *Rebel* significantly broke new ground by portraying middle-class alienated teens' (Cook & Bernink, 1999, p. 220) offering a new outlet for alternative middleclass adolescent identity

formation. Dean's portrayal of youth ensured young people did not have to originate from deprived backgrounds, or simply be born delinquent to revolt against their parents, their schools or the capitalist system itself. Juvenile delinquency was a common trope of the crime genre throughout the 1940s and 1950s. The damaging archetype can be found throughout films such as *Crime in the Streets* (Sigel, 1956), *Youth Runs Wild* (Robson, 1944) and *So Bad, So Young* (Vorhaus, 1950), where the young criminals' motives were simply being bored and naïve. The misguided representation was arguably a result of the growing moral panic about youth rebelling against the older generation. Films such as *Blackboard Jungle* intersected the trend of juvenile delinquency by implementing the notion of race as a stereotype of crime, providing an important social commentary on how young people were seen as criminals, more so than ever for young ethnic minorities as 'the advent of rock and roll, however, that generated the greatest hysteria about teenage culture in the mid-1950s. To a large degree, this was the predictable reaction of a white community already deeply suspicious of the integration of African American culture into the 'mainstream'' (Gair, 2007 p.32). Through newer, supplementary representations of teenage rebellion on-screen, middle-class teens did not need to have a tumultuous background to justify their feelings of alienation, strife and development of mental health issues.

The counterculture movement of the 1960s may have never transpired to the scale it amounted to, were it not for the performances of both James Dean and Marlon Brando in their respective films. Marlon Brando's performance as Johnny in *The Wild One* summarised the feelings of many teenagers across the world. When Johnny is asked about his rebellious attitude by Lisa asking, "What are you rebelling against, Johnny?" Johnny responds "Whaddaya got?", highlighting his rebellious nature forged from boredom. Both Dean and Brando's performances in *Rebel* and *The Wild One* were one of the first occurrences of teenagers justified in voicing out about issues such as inequality or injustice. Jim Stark's alienation towards the education system, police and many of the intuitions dictating his life, rather than his environment, became an inspiration for young people to vent their

frustrations, anxieties and problems to the world. Youth rebellion was paramount in influencing the counterculture movement, through the power of media, literature and music teenagers rebelled against their parents, society and expectations of their lives as Gair remarks:

> ‘the panics about the rise of the ‘juvenile delinquent’ were enacted in sociological and journalistic treatises as well as in movies such as *The Wild One* (1953) and *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) that (while often directly or indirectly linked to fears about race) regarded youth rebellion as representative of a general alienation from hegemonic culture rather than as the product of particular political desires’ (2007, p.32).

The contribution that music, film and fashion has had in influencing adolescent identity formation is paramount in what defines an American teenager. Through the development of unique subcultures across many different demographics ‘the availability of social interaction between teenagers saw a surge in the creation of slang terms covering everything from dating, music to general descriptions of those events themselves’ (Hendrickson, 2020). These, almost alien, concepts to the older generation created the ‘Generation Gap’ which is defined as ‘the chasm that separates the thoughts expressed by members of two different generations. More specifically, a generation gap can be used to describe the differences in actions, beliefs, and tastes exhibited by members of younger generations, versus older ones’ (Kenton, 2019). The Generational Gap alienated young people and adults from one another through their consumption of media, music as well as their differing politics; these factors all contributed to the further development of interstitial angst due to the widening gap between adulthood and adolescence now becoming a great chasm to cross.

The anxiety, nihilism and alienation teenagers evoke throughout popular culture help to define the age group’s rejection of modernity, conformity and structure through film, literature and music. Through its exploration of the liminal space between childhood and adulthood, films such as *Rebel Without a Cause* illustrate the interstitiality of adolescence ‘*Rebel* has been consistently popular with successive generations for its on-the-mark rendering of what it's like to grow up dazed and confused in America' (Doherty, 2002, p. 84). The importance

of *Rebel* to teenagers across America achieved 'what *Blackboard Jungle* did for rock 'n' roll, *Rebel Without a Cause* did for drag racing ... *Rebel* rams a touch stone for a generational strife in the 1950s' (Doherty, 2002, p. 83).

In *Rebel Without a Cause* interstitial angst is one of the largest factors in the deterioration of Jim's psychological wellbeing. Jim's turmoil at the hands of his naive parents is perfectly reflected within a scene during the aftermath of a car accident Jim was involved in. During an argument between Jim and his parents [Appendix II] on a flight of stairs, the stairs itself acts as symbolism for the warped hierarchy of the family and illuminates just one of the factors contributing to Jim's interstitial angst. Within the scene Jim's father is placed at the bottom of the stairs symbolically due to his lack of leadership and skills as a father all whilst his mother is placed at the top due to her dominance as the head of the family, all the while whilst Jim is stuck in-between the pair.

As the film was made in the 1950s, gender roles were very traditional at the time. The sociologist Parson's research into gender roles illustrates men typically helming the family through the instrumental role, whilst the women would typically provide an expressive role. "[The] more instrumental role in the subsystem is taken by the husband, the more expressive the wife … [the] husband has the primary adaptive responsibilities, relative to the outside situation … whereas the wife is primarily the giver of love" (Parsons and Bales, 1955, p.151 as cited in Crano, W., & Aronoff, 1987, p. 463). The convolution Jim endures caused by his parental conflict prompts him to adopt an adult role within their dispute. Jim's interstitial angst reaches new heights as a result of his traditional rebellious juvenile tendencies contrasting with his new mantle of responsibility concerning his parents' quarrels. Within a later scene, Jim's scrutinises his parents' conduct towards him as he exclaims whilst in a police station "You're tearing me apart!, You say one thing, he says another, and everybody changes back again". Jim's rant effectively expresses the source of his interstitial angst through the intergenerational conflict fought between him and his parents, a conflict

based upon Jim's identity formation and the contrasting differences between two generations. *Rebel Without a Cause* was one of the first instances of melodrama in youth-based cinema, with James Dean's performance perfectly encapsulating the trials and tribulations of being an angst-filled teenager in the 1950s.

The teenager of the contemporary era, however, deals with a torrent of contemporary issues stemming from the oversaturation of social media, pressures of Neoliberalism and interstitial angst within their lives. A concept appropriate for defining the framework of adolescent interstitial angst can be seen within the notion of the tweenager. The term is the quintessential example of the liminal space between childhood and adulthood and the issues that arise from this liminal stage of identity development 'one of the first usages of the term tweens was in the late 1990s referring to children who are in the liminal space between childhood and adolescence. In other words, these children are in a state of "in between"' (Aguiló-Pérez, 2017). The emergence of the tweenager can be associated with many factors such as the ease of access children have to adult content through the social media, easier access to drugs and alcohol and the sexualisation of young people throughout social media 'the name captures the ambiguous reality: though chronologically midway between early childhood and adolescence, this group is leaning more and more toward teen styles, teen attitudes, and, sadly, teen behavior at its most troubling' (Kay S. Hymowitz, 1998).

Although the teenagers of the 1950s and 2020s are separated by decades of cultural and technological change, there is still a common connection between them as seen through the interstitial angst many adolescents suffer from. Interstitial angst as a reciprocal of identity formation is just as prominent within films such as *West Side Story* (Robbins, 1962) as they are within *Elephant.* The fact that *West Side Story* is an adaptation of a Shakespearian play demonstrates the universality of teen gerne through the representation of different demographics and cultures. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* can easily be categorised as a teenage coming of age drama, despite the fact it was written in the Sixteenth century by a

British man set in Renaissance Italy. *Romeo and Juliet* is within the same vein as many of the contemporary teen genre films that depict romantically doomed teenagers, albeit with less death and tragedy. The same could be said for many of Shakespeare's plays; *The Taming of the Shrew* being adapted into *10 Things I Hate About You* (Junger, 1999*)*, *She's the Man* (Fickman, 2006) loosely based upon *Twelfth Night;* as well as Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996). The similarities between stories, despite them being separated by centuries, demonstrates how the teen genre's focus on youthful angst and rebellion transcends time and social change, and will forever continue to.

It is not only within the world of cinema that the teenager has flourished, the realm of literature has also helped to elevate the genre into the public consciousness. Certain works of literature that emerge with a unique sense of originality can be defined as urtexts. Within the realm of teenage angst, several novels can be defined as the urtexts of the genre as the conventions they developed were wholly unique and remain relevant to this today. Some of the earliest and most important examples of interstitial angst and anxieties concerning identity formation among adolescents can be seen within J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in The Rye* (1951) as well as Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963). *The Catcher in the Rye* is one of the earliest works of fiction to focus its narrative on exploring adolescent interstitiality and alienation. The novel explores its young protagonist Holden Caulfield's alienation towards the institutions that control his life; through Caulfield's defiance of society's expectation towards him, the theme of teen angst and alienation towards the older generation is one of the major themes explored throughout the novel. The text has become a notable part of the American literary canon within schools, becoming a major component of the school curriculum, despite its widespread ban and controversy across the country shortly after its release. The book saw censorship across many states across America partly due to the aforementioned Generational Gap.

The Catcher in the Rye ‘spoke to the “antiestablishmentarian attitude of fifties intellectuals.” And it became the mouthpiece for the counterculture of the activist anti-Vietnam War generation of the 1960s’ (Reiff, 2008, p.80). Older generations seemed to be apprehensive about the book’s influence on youth rebellion and disorder due to the novel’s coarse language and even the belief that it encouraged communism leading to its eventual banning in certain states. *The Catcher in The Rye* excelled in portraying the interstitial angst that occurs as a result of adolescent alienation within society proving the novels longevity and cultural potency within the minds of young people ‘for the last 50 years Holden's story has become a celebratory anthem for legions of angst-ridden, alienated readers who, "if you really want to know the truth," found themselves mirrored in Holden's usually funny, sometimes angry, always iconoclastic smack-down of self-satisfied phonies’ (Wenke, 2010).

The number of young people in education during the post-war era soared parallelly with the economic boom of the 1950s; this also meant Neoliberalist competition had never been higher. Caufield’s alienation to the Neoliberalist world around him helped resonate his story with teenagers and adults alike ‘because they recognize themselves in the character of Holden Caulfield. Salinger is imagined to have given voice to what every adolescent, or, at least, every sensitive, intelligent, middle-class adolescent, thinks but is too inhibited to say’ (Menand, 2001). Although the novel’s discussion about mental health is generally seen as a subplot, ‘it is obvious that Caulfield is depressed (he says so throughout the book, and he exhibits symptoms of depression, such as an inability to concentrate and anhedonia, a lack of interest in just about anything), it may be less obvious that he appears to be both manic and psychotic’ (Jaffee, 2011) highlighting the effects of his alienation of the education system. As Menand expands on the importance of *The Catcher in The Rye*, the whole emotional burden of adolescence is that you don’t *know* why you feel unhappy, or angry, or out of it. The appeal of “The Catcher in the Rye,” what makes it addictive, is that it provides you with a reason. It gives a content to chemistry’ (2001). The fact that Salinger’s work still pertains relevancy, even in modern-day America’s curriculum, highlights the importance of

the text as well as its timeless narrative that perseveres modernity. Without the importance of adolescent literature, the world of cinema may never have had such iconic films such as *The Wild Ones* or the filmography of James Dean.

During the midpoint of the Twentieth century, a wave of social change swept across the Western world. Growing up in a period where the threat of an atomic war could manifest itself at any time anxiety was rife during the post-War period. The concept of nihilism, secularisation, and alienation towards authority was beginning to fester within the minds of America's youth. As a result of the controversial Vietnam War America's youth were being shipped off to fight oversees from as young as 18, with many more underage youths lying about their age to join the war. The Vietnam War was arguably a major factor in stripping America's youth from any remaining innocence they had; the conflict manifested a wave of interstitial angst as a result of manufacturing young teens into killing machines as nothing is more effective at bridging the gap between adolescent and adulthood like taking the life of another man. The interstitial angst felt by teens in the 20th century greatly affected the types of films being released during the latter half of the Twentieth century. These films often contained content that was a lot darker in their tone and thematic approach to storytelling than what Hollywood had ever released before. Genres such as noir, horror and many War films saw a major influx of releases across Hollywood's cinematic output in the years that followed.

The ease of access adolescents had in viewing adult content such as graphic violence, substance abuse as well as sexual content have all contributed to further development of interstitial angst. During the early period of cinema young people had easy access to unrated media due to the lack of any venerable rating system within America up until the MPAA's (Motion Picture Association of America) conception in 1968. The lack of a coherent rating system meant young people often had easy access to unfiltered media that should have been restricted to an adult viewership. Many Noir films such as *The Man with the*

Golden Arm (Preminger, 1955) with its themes of drug misuse, murder and violence were easily accessible to children of all ages. One of the most controversial and graphical films of the early Twentieth century, the religious epic *The Sign of the Cross* (DeMille, 1932), 'was one of the most extreme, even outrageous of Hollywood films made prior to the movie cleanup of 1934 … [*The Sign of the Cross had*] more sex than in *Baby Face*, more savagery than in *Scarface*' (Barrios, 2003, p. 83). The accessibility adolescents had during the early Twentieth century to view adult content could have arguably contributed to the development of interstitial angst among teenagers as young children were being exposed to more adult-themed content than ever before.

As a result of Hollywood capitalising on both nostalgia and the ever-growing youth market, the 1970s and 1980s were filled with films that both stared young people as well as being set in the 1950s. 'The 1970s and 1980s saw a number of films … that were set in the 1950s and which addressed both a youth audience and older viewers who had grown up in those decades' (Cook & Bernink, 1999, p. 220). Films such as *Stand by Me* (Reiner, 1986), *American Graffiti* (Lucas, 1973) and *Back to the Future* (Zemeckis, 1984) relied heavily on the notion of nostalgia as it appeals both to a younger and older demographic. Many of these directors were teenagers themselves during the 1950s, providing an important, personable reflection of the period that incorporates a postmodern perspective on youth culture and identity formation. The same can be said for many films and television shows being made in recent years being set in the 1980s and 1990s such as *Stanger Things* (Duffer Brothers, 2016) and *Mid90s* (Hill, 2018) both relying heavily on nostalgia to tell their stories demonstrating the postmodernism aspect of the teen genre.

The 1980s was a pinnacle moment for the teen genre, as a result of John Hughes' prowess. The teen genre is generally associated with the Brat Pack kids of the 1980s with films such as *The Breakfast Club* (1985, Hughes), *Pretty in Pink* (Deutch, 1986), *St Elmo's Fire* (Schumacher, 1985), *Sixteen Candles* (Hughes, 1984) and many more. The 1980s was one

of the first decades to truly cater films for younger people. With young people having greater leisure time as a result of staying in education longer more money was being spent on making films geared specifically towards the growing young adult market. It could be argued that the unbelievable success of *Star Wars* (Lucas,1977) led to film studios identifying the economic potential of both children and teenagers visiting the cinemas, as well as buying merchandise. 'Films like *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977) and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Spielberg, 1981) helped establish a teen-friendly trend toward big-budget action, adventure and fantasy films' (Cook & Bernink, 1999, p. 219). The 1980s was a golden era for the teen movie, where the majority of its archetypes originated from such as the cheerleader, jock, bully, nerd and so on.

One of the most notable changes to the film industry throughout the 1970s and 1980s was the utilisation of young people within the Horror genre introducing the bricolage aspect of the teen genre conflating the two genres together. Films such as *Friday the 13th* (Cunningham, 1980*), A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Craven, 1984), *Carrie* (De Palma, 1976) and *Halloween* (Carpenter, 1978) all used teenagers as either the perpetrators or more often than not, the victims of horrific crimes. Throughout many of these films, dozens of helpless teenagers are slain by supernatural entities, such as Jason, Freddy Kruger and Michael Myers all of whom could arguably be metaphorical for fear of youth rebellion and counterculture stemming from the older generation. These were the first steppingstones in producing the more despairing films within the teen genre entering the 1990s.

As the 1990s began, the teen genre saw a dramatic turn in its content as the narratives often focused on misusing narcotics, alcohol and adolescent violence. The independent film industry thrived in the 1990s as the cost to make films dramatically dropped due to cheaper technology and easier distribution. Films such as *Reservoir Dogs* (Tarantino, 1992), *Kids* (Clark, 1995), *Slacker* (Linklater, 1991) defined the decade with their low-budget style of cinematography, unique narrative style and experimental filmmaking. At the eve of the

1990s, Spike Lee emerged as one of the first African American directors to break into mainstream cinema with his debut film *Do the Right Thing* (1989) which showcased racial issues and the identity formation of young inner-city African American adolescents. Throughout the 1990s, Lee's unique style of socially aware filmmaking greatly influenced how young African American's were presented within the American media and helped shed light on issues directly affecting the African American population. The films of the 1990s generally became much more violent in their content, with more explicit scenes, narratives and violence. Films such as *Natural Born Killers* (Stone, 1994), *Reservoir Dogs*, *Seven*, (Fincher, 1995) and *Fight Club* (1999) all portrayed such violent and graphical content that the state of filmmaking has been forever desensitised to explicit material.

The 1990s ended in one of the most dramatic and despairing events to ever happen within the high school. In 1999 the Columbine Massacre, perpetrated by two very mentally unstable and deranged teenagers Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, cost the lives of 15 people. These awful events were dramatized and discussed in Gus van Sant's 2003 film, *Elephant,* which will be examined extensively within Chapter V with its relation to violence and interstitiality within the teen genre. The high school, as well as American society, was never the same after such a graphic and awful event destroying any innocence that was left within the minds of America's adolescents. The once nonchalant carefree films of the happier, more optimistic teen movies of the 1970s and 1980s now encompassed a much more contemplative perspective on the high school during the 2000s and 2010s. Films such as *The Perks of Being a Wallflower, Donnie Darko, Eighth Grade* and *Charlie Bartlett* (Poll, 2007) all began to represent issues such as suicide, anxiety and depression in a much more reflective manner than the majority of its precursors ever could achieve, highlighting the increase of interstitial angst afflicting young people throughout the Twenty-First century.

The teen genre has been defined by the momentous films releasing within each decade.

During the midpoint of the twentieth century films such as *Rebel Without a Cause* paved the way for youth-based cinema influencing millions of young people to rebel against the capitalist system and conformity. Additionally, as a result of the growing Neoliberalist system emerging across the latter half of the Twentieth Century *The Graduate* (Nichols, 1967) reflected the interstitial angst manifested from the high expectations perpetuated by parental and societal norms and values. The 1970s began to incorporate bricolage within the teen genre utilising the horror as a subgenre to represent the shifting experiences of adolescents and how they were represented within film; no longer were adolescents in need of protecting by adults, but now had become the victims of horrific crimes perpetrated by the older generation seen across many films across the subgenre. The 1980s was of course defined by the quirky films of John Hughes that explored the many factors of adolescence that contribute to the theory of identity formation as well as one of the first instances of postmodernism in the teen gerne. By the 1990s films were defined by their graphic and controversial content such as *The Basketball Diaries, Gummo* (Korine, 1997) and *Kids* (Clark, 1995). The 2000s encompassed a more comedic tone with films like *American Pie* and *Superbad*. And finally, the 2010s showcased a larger selection of more grounded, politically aware and representative films such as *Moonlight*, *Eighth Grade* and *Booksmart,* all bringing something unique to the ever-changing genre. These films all represent key moments in history, each showcasing young people's search for identity, meaning and hope, in an adult world, they struggle to integrate within.

Chapter II

Race

As a result of institutional racism, discrimination and prejudices built into the very foundations of the American society, adolescents from minority backgrounds may face unavoidable obstacles during development. These factors may manifest themselves through the representations of mental illnesses, interstitial angst and anxiety within the teen genre; these issues affecting African American youths may therefore reflect the greater societal issues afflicting American society. Identity formation for many ethnic minorities within American society differs drastically from the high concentration of White led narratives seen across the teen genre. For one, masculine ideals and heteronormative sexuality is a much more potent issue for many young African Americans to circumvent than it is for a White adolescent due to factors such as Hypermasculinity and stereotypes associated with Tokenisms which will be further explored within this chapter.

Films that excel in representing issues of race within the teen genre, such as the aforementioned *Blackboard Jungle*, are effective mediums of exploring issues of integration, poverty and interstitial angst from the perspectives of ethnic minorities. As early as the 1950s, a time when racial tensions were elevated, *Blackboard Jungle* went against the traditional Hollywood norms and values through representing a mixed group of students in an industry that rarely gave ethnic minorities the same limelight as their white co-stars, as well as using the medium of film to discuss the social issues affecting the student's lives. The premise of the film revolves around a school within an urban setting filled with an array of different students from various cultural backgrounds. The racial tensions presented within the film highlight the prejudices harboured by the schoolteacher Mr Dadier (Glenn Ford) and by extension, the education system and White hegemony as a whole towards ethnic minority students.

In one particular scene, Mr Dadier presumes, despite no clear evidence, that one of his students, an African American student named Gregory Miller (Sydney Poitier), is the ringleader of the delinquent boys due to Mr Dadier's own racial prejudices. Gregory's presence within the film 'confronts Dadier with his own unacknowledged racism' (Driscoll, pp. 35-36, 2011). Whilst Gregory and his friends are rehearsing a song in the school's auditorium Mr Dadier approaches the group to which Gregory pre-emptively tells Mr Dadier 'if you are wondering about this, we didn't break in, Mr Halloran loaned us the use of this hall', demonstrating Gregory's instinctive behaviour to defend himself despite not performing any kind of delinquency. These microaggressions aimed at the African American students highlights their own radically different experiences of adolescent identity formation as a result of having to adapt to the White hegemonic society they live in in order to survive. The African American students are assumed to be the perpetrators of juvenile delinquency despite no clear evidence; as a result of this many ethnic minority adolescents experience interstitial angst at an earlier age than their White counterparts due to dealing with racial microaggressions and accusations of criminal activity.

To add insult to injury, Mr Dadier is surprised to see how well Gregory performs the piano and remarks, "you can be so cooperative on a thing like this. but in my classroom...", demonstrating Mr Dadier's racial microaggressions, as well his overall opinion, of Gregory being incredibly low at this point in the film. Mr Dadier's submissive tone and conjecture towards Gregory's abilities paints Gregory as uneducated and he is surprised that a working-class African American has the talent to play the piano. During the climactic end of the film, the real culprit behind the delinquency turns out to be perpetrated by the White student named West, proving Dadier's assumptions were based on racial prejudices.

The teen genre is an essential tool for allowing audiences a glimpse into the important, and often shrouded, issues that ethnic minorities may face during their time in education and

beyond. Films such as *Moonlight* greatly succeed in highlighting how prominent hypermasculinity, homophobia and racism is within American society, especially for African Americans through its representation of its lead protagonist Chiron's (Alex Hibbert, Ashton Sanders and Trevante Rhodes) battle with interstitial angst as a reciprocal of his artificial identity formation enforced by his toxic environment. *Moonlight* 'focuses on Chiron, whose troubled life is split into three distinct sections, showing his struggle to define, disguise and ultimately accept his own sexuality in the deprived neighbourhoods of Miami' (Lee, 2016); each of these three stages of Chiron's life represents the interstitial angst Chiron has to contend with in traversing the liminal stages of his adolescence. By highlighting the social problems throughout Chiron's adolescence, *Moonlight* thrives in portraying a retrospective depiction of the struggles that many ethnic minorities and members of the LGBT+ community endured during the 1980s, and still do to this day.

Chiron is raised within an environment surrounded by drugs, gangs and prejudice towards the LGBT+ community living in Miami during the 1980s. Throughout Chiron's upbringing, he contends with one of the worst crack cocaine epidemics of all time, as well as being homosexual during the mass stigmatisation towards homosexuals as a result of the emergence of AIDS. Throughout many urban settings across America, many 'Black males suffered higher than average unemployment rates; they dwelled in desolate neighbourhoods ravaged by the scourges of crack cocaine and AIDS; and their lives were daily plagued by muggings, carjacks, and shootings' (Williams, 2015). These factors manifest themselves across the three chapters of Chiron's life rationalising his lack of free will in navigating his identity formation unlike many other White teen stories seen throughout the genre.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the city of Miami was in the midst of the crack cocaine epidemic; the city was a crucible for drugs and debauchery during the infamous Miami Drug War between the authorities and drug dealers. *Moonlight* provides an important social and critical commentary of both the victims of the drug epidemic and those directly involved in its

production and distribution and the effect this had on the ethnic minority adolescents were growing up within The Projects within Miami. Chiron's mother (Naomi Harris) is herself a drug addict and, as a result of her addiction abuses and neglects Chiron because of his sexuality severely affecting how he perceives his homosexual identity contributing to one of the many factors influencing his hypermasculinity and deposition of his identity formation. The African America theorist bell hooks, whose research revolves around race and its relationship with capitalism and gender, remarks in her book *We Real Cool* that 'most black men do not love themselves. How could they, how could they be expected to love surrounded by so much envy, desire, hate?' (2004, p.xi). hook's statement relates wholly to Chiron's persona as 'Black' as throughout his life he is constantly made to feel he is both smaller, and weaker than everyone else, hence his 'Little' nickname. In contrary to hooks' statement *Moonlight*'s director Barry Jenkins produces a film that "gives not just to American cinema, but to American culture, is that he depicts black boyhood as something worthy of rooting for to succeed' (Thrasher, 2016) rarely seen across American media. Jenkin's film depicts the dire reciprocals of concealing your true identity and how a warped perception of masculinity can contribute to the detrimentally of an adolescent's identity formation.

Chiron's father figure Juan (Mahershala Ali) is a drug dealer producing a clear binary between the conflicting parental figures in Chiron's life. These contrasting figures in Chiron's life arguably result in Chiron's difficulty with authority throughout his life leading to his expulsion from school and subsequent jail time. These diverging dogmas within his life contribute to the development of his split persona and interstitial angst concerning his identity formation as throughout the film Chiron exhibits both the hypermasculine 'Black' as well as the sensitive 'Little'. Throughout Chiron's adolescence the liminal experiences he endures forces him to mature, e.g., his first sexual experience, drug taking and his violent outburst leading him to juvenile prison. Chiron's story is paramount in reflecting the interstitial angst many ethnic minorities face throughout their adolescence as these liminal events bridge the gap between his adolescence and adulthood. The events *Moonlight*

depicts highlights the rites of passage many adolescents go through in order reach adulthood demonstrating both the uniqueness and hardships associated with African American identity formation compared to the typical White narrative commonly seen throughout the teen genre.

Despite the obvious negative connotations of Juan's criminal activity, Juan is a very positive influence for Chiron helping him escape from his abusive mother, being a father figure and helping Chiron be proud of his unique identity. *Moonlight* may be suggesting that society is too quick to judge a person solely based upon their life decisions and that the reasons some people may resort to crime can be a result of their environment and the press to protect themselves as well as their family. The act of judging a person based on their appearance and background is heavily prominent within the teen genre; *The Breakfast Club,* for example, utilises this concept as the conflict that arises throughout the film stems from the student's making assumptions of each other based upon the stereotypes of the groups they align themselves with. This principle can also be attributed to Chiron in his adulthood as although on the surface he exhibits a hard, hypermasculine exterior deep down he is a very sensitive person who has had to fabricate a hypermasculine identity to survive his adolescence, the same way Juan had to resort to crime to survive poverty.

Akin to Juan, a similar character within the film *New Jack City* (Peebles, 1991), a drug dealer named Nino Brown (Wesley Snipes), demonstrates how in some films ethnic minorities can be stereotyped as one-dimensional delinquent criminals with no redeeming qualities as through Nino's criminal behaviour there is a clear lack of remorse or any redeeming qualities. 'While the film's heroes are Scotty (Ice-T) and Nick (Judd Nelson), a pair of tough, streetwise cops, the main focus is their target, drug lord Nino Brown (Wesley Snipes). A criminal businessman with no room for pity or emotion' (Blaise, 2020). Juan's story is presented in a much more personal and considerate manner relating to bell hook's discussion of how African American men in areas of poverty may resort to a life of crime due

to the lack of genuine legal opportunities to support themselves and their families 'It is no wonder that many black youths see drug dealing and crime as apparently easier alternatives to the frustration of subscribing to a work ethic which fails to reward as promised' (Chan,1998, p. 37). hooks identifies how drug dealing flourished in areas of unemployment and poverty as 'the developing of a vibrant yet deadly drug economy surfaced in black life and was accepted precisely because it was and is an outlaw job arena where money—big money—can be made' (2004, p.19) relating to Juan's way of life through criminal enterprise.

Chiron's decision, or there lack off, in hiding his sexuality from the world can be an indicator for the societal pressure the LGBT+ community, as well as African American males, faced in forming barricades to protect themselves from the poverty-stricken streets of Miami. The environmental factors affecting Chiron's mental health influenced his transition into the hypermasculine shell he morphs into by the end of the film as 'in the film, Chiron regulates his behaviour to prevent people from knowing he's gay, but the bullies at school and his cruel mother are aware of his sexuality and persecute him as a result' (Lee, 2016). Chiron's metamorphization also demonstrates the anxiety the LGBT+ community endured surrounding the AIDS epidemic through Chiron's fear of expressing his true identity and sexuality as a result of the stigmatism surrounding the disease and perception of the LGBT+ community. *Moonlight* uncovers the truth as to what difficulties a young, homosexual African American boy is subjected to within American society, as both an ethnic minority and a member of the LGBT+ community.

In Chiron's world, and by extension the vast majority of American society, African American boys are expected to embody a traditional masculine, heterosexual life as 'in the U.S., there is a dominant traditional masculinity ideology rooted in a subjective and dated image of what men should and should not be' (Sanchez, 2009). The heteronormative conventions inflicting many African Americans 'is generally understood within queer theory as a theoretical concept in which patriarchy and heterosexuality are centered as the social norm and all

other genders, sexualities, and sexual expressions are cast as deviant' (Battle, & Ashley, 2008, p.1). This attributed deviancy further enforces African American men to adhere to hypermasculine façades in order to conform to existing stereotypes propagated from unhealthy media representations. Chiron and many other LGBT+ teens suffer from alienation as a result conforming to heteronormative conventions as Battle and Ashley remark how heteronormative values are 'more than the processes of patriarchy, heterosexism, and compulsory heterosexuality; it also contains elements of racial and class "othering."' (2008, p.5).

Western media's perception of "othering" is a frequented throughout many outlets framing of African Americans. In Williams' research about African American gangsta rappers, whom Chiron as "Black" shares a similar appearance and demeanour with, found that many of these rappers felt they had to protect their masculinity as 'the social order was dead set against them, they said, on emasculating them' (2015, p.150) contributing to their hypermasculinity and hypersexuality within their lyrics and personas. This mindset is shared by many African American males such as Chiron who resorts to hypermasculinity as, what he assumes, is a means of producing 'an authentic expression of black manhood' (Williams, 2015, p.150). Many African Americans 'felt they had to put up a fight against the system for the sake of their manhood' (Williams, 2015, p.150) highlighting Chiron's warped perception of what African American identity formation should entail.

In recent years however, perhaps even due to *Moonlight's* influence, there has been a large influx of openly gay rappers performing and releasing music all whilst embracing their LGBT+ sexuality. African American Rappers such as Tyler, the Creator, Steve Lacy and most notably Frank Ocean, have all embraced their homosexuality within their rapper personas and lyrics. The changes in societal perceptions towards African American LGBT+ rappers highlight the progression both the music and media industries have embraced. As recently as 10 years ago these same rappers would have been met with abuse and

discrimination due to the stigma of homosexual African American male rappers going against the stereotypical hypermasculine attributes of a typical rapper. These rappers have challenged the longstanding toxic stereotypes, hypersexualisation and heteronormative conventions that African American performers seemingly have to abide to in order to be deemed profitable to by many studios.

Last year one of the most successful pop artists of the past decade, Lil Nas X came out as homosexual during the height of his fame; similarly, to Chiron's story, Lil Nas X embraced his LGBT+ identity after concealing it for the vast majority of his life within his hypermasculine and heteronormative persona. Rappers challenging the stereotypical conventions of heteronormative, hypermasculine doctrines can help advocate being a homosexual African American man. Roy Kinsey, a librarian and rapper commented upon how "Lil Nas X re-imagined an image of the Wrangler-wearing, horseback-riding man's man into a young black representative of youth culture, got the attention of two traditionally macho cultures and then came out on the last day of Pride," (as cited in Kennedy, 2019). After the recent release of Lil Nas X's song *Industry* (2021), which was accompanied by a music video depicting explicit homosexual themes, Lil Nas X received backlash from both fans and critics alike due to the homosexual lyrics and sexualised video despite its similarity to other rappers' music and videos who produced heteronormative explicit content. In response to the criticism Lil Nas X tweeted "You seem to only respect gay artists when the gay part is tucked away. you don't like me because i embrace my sexuality instead of hiding it and never speaking on it for your comfort." (Lil Nas X, 2021). Lil Nas X's comment highlights the hypocrisy as many of heteronormative and hypermasculine rappers within the music industry that produce the same sexualised content receiving praise and admiration from fans and critics alike all due to their content being heterosexual rather than homosexual. Throughout Western media these hypermasculine and heteronormative hegemonies that many young people are exposed to within the music and media industries contribute to the defilement of African American identity formation.

Moonlight provides an essential exploration of society's perception of homosexual African American males 'at a time when gay culture is overwhelmingly white, Barry Jenkins explores the experience of queer black men' (Thrasher, 2016). *Moonlight* showcases the insurmountable pressure Chiron faces as a result of the intersectionality of both his ethnicity and sexuality. Due to Chiron's ethnicity, he faces pressure to conform to the heteronormative conventions that are expected of African American males due to African Americans being hypersexualised by the media's offensive African American stereotype 'Black Brutes' 'a common on-screen representation of a violent, vengeful, highly sexual black male' (Kocić, 2017). This stereotype can be attributed first and foremost to D.W Griffith's controversial film *Birth of a Nation* (1915), with its representations of African Americans as derogative antagonists. The film enforces the negative stereotype of the 'Black Brute' with its emphasis on violence, rape and debauchery as 'the black brute was a barbaric black out to raise havoc. Audiences Could assume that his physical violence served as an outlet for a man who was sexually repressed' (Bogle, 2002, p.13). Chiron as 'Black' evolves to become this stereotypical caricature a result of adapting to survive his strenuous environment inflicting his sexual repression.

One of the pinnacle events that Chiron endures in becoming 'Black' is seen through the scene were Chiron takes his revenge on the bully that instigated the hazing ritual forcing Kevin to beat Chiron up shortly after they were intimate together. This scene is paramount in exploring one of the most pivotal rites of passage Chiron faces; the act of violence births Chiron's interstitial angst as he loses his final shred of childhood adolescence. This evolution influences his identity formation into "black" 'as a result of rage, self-hate and jail time, Chiron bulks up, grows new layers of muscle and becomes unrecognisable in his last evolutionary stage of development: reinventing himself as Black' (Bradshaw, 2017). During Chiron's arrest, he is placed into a cop car by a female officer which may be symbolic of how his once feminine side, and childhood innocence, is now being metaphorically locked away inside of him, to which he then emerges out of prison as the hypermasculine "Brute"

stereotype. Chiron's entrapment of his persona relates to bell hooks statement that 'whether in an actual prison or not, practically every black male in the United States has been forced at some point in his life to hold back the self he wants to express, to repress and contain for fear of being attacked, slaughtered, destroyed.' (2010 p. ix-x). The dire reciprocals of adolescent African Americans internalising their sexuality because of the hypermasculine ideals inflicting western society is skilfully represented through Chiron's internal conflict. Through Jenkins' depiction of 'black kids beat[ing] each other up in *Moonlight* is not a call to abandon black masculinity as insufficient to cope with black homosexuality, but to wrestle with the reality of black gay men in its totality' (Thrasher, 2016).

The origins of Chiron's name itself could lead to further analysis of his character's identity formation. The name Chiron originates from a character within Greek mythology who was a wise centaur. Chiron the centaur was a teacher with a youth nurturing nature, as a well as being half horse and half man. This comparison relates to Chiron's dual identity of being the soft, innocent "Little" contrasting with his hypermasculine "Black" persona. Chiron the centaur as a teacher for youth also relates to Chiron's story within *Moonlight* as Chiron's hardship in embracing his identity advocates LGBT+ and inspires the young African American boys watching the film to be proud of their sexuality rather than conceal it due to hypermasculine ideals.

Chiron's eventual bout as 'Black' relates to *Birth of a Nation*'s depiction of the "Black Brute" who 'are the nameless characters setting out on a rampage full of black rage' (Bogle, 2002, p.13). Arguably Chiron is nameless throughout the film in the search for his identity as his name changes from 'Little' to 'Chiron' and finally 'Black' indicating how Chiron feels like his race and physical appearance is his only medium in which he can express his persona due to the suppression of his true identity hidden beneath insecurities from his environment. Jenkin's choice to present Chiron's insecurities of being homosexual and feeble highlights the importance of the teen genre in its representations of important analogies for African

American men's fears of emasculation and how warped identity formation, interstitial angst, hypermasculinity and alienation can become factors in influencing adolescents to become criminals.

Within Fields, Morgan, and Sanders' journal regarding the Sociocultural Factors and Health-Related Behaviour of LGBT+ community their research assists in rationalising Chiron's hypermasculine fabricated persona:

> 'Some have suggested that stereotypical male gender roles of hyper-masculinity (i.e., exaggeration of traditional masculine roles through behaviors such as sexual prowess, physical dominance, aggression, competition, and anti-femininity) seen in some Black men may be a way for Black men disempowered by a social context of limited access to socioeconomic power, racism, and discrimination by a predominantly White male society to demonstrate power and authority and to approximate the American masculine ideal' (Fields, Morgan, & Sanders, 2016)

African American men have long been the victims of hyper-sexualisation from White people through the media's portrayal of African American males as sexual deviants and fantasies of White people. The theorist Fanon remarks how 'in relation to the Negro, everything takes place on the genital level' (2008, p. 121). The stereotype of African American men having an exaggerated large penis and being highly sexual beings is plastered across Western media in both comedic representations and in that of exoticism. Fanon's statement is visualised through Chiron's metamorphosis into following the heteronormative conventions he is abided to follow as a result of the media's representation of African Americans as exotic sexual deviants affecting Chiron's identity formation in becoming "Black". Within *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon expands that White society's perception of African American men revolves around how 'in that of the Negro, one thinks of sex (2008, p.123). The Netflix series *Luke Cage* (Coker, 2016) relates wholly to Fanon's statement as 'Luke Cage's character purely focuses on his physicality rather than his mentality, which continues the revamping of the exoticism and hyper-sexualization of Black male bodies that has occurred since slavery' (Hemphill, 2017, p.6). *Luke Cage* is certainly not a unique example of African American representations within the media as 'many media portrayals of Black males' romantic relationships have been stereotyped as hypersexual, unfaithful, and prone to violence'

(Hemphill, 2017, p.13). Chiron suffers from this misconception of African American identity, which in turn, severely affects his identify formation by influencing his hypermasculinity as an adult.

As a result of African American exoticism plastered across Western media many African American men are indoctrinated into believing they need to be highly sexual and have a large penis to be desirable, or even as a defining characteristic of African American identity. Fanon further explores within his book *Black Skin, White Masks*: 'for the majority of white men the Negro represents the sexual instinct (in its raw state). The Negro is the incarnation of a genital potency beyond all moralities and prohibitions.' (p.136). Chiron succumbs to this pressure to conform to heteronormative conventions by internalising his emotions as seen through Chiron's outcry to Kevin (André Holland, Jharrel Jerome and Jaden Piner) of how he has not been intimate with anyone since their sexual encounter many years prior. The theorist hooks remarks on how the pressures of sexuality influence African American men to alter their behaviour: 'Undoubtedly, sexuality has been the site of many a black male's fall from grace. Irrespective of class, status, income, or level of education, for many black men sexuality remains the place where dysfunctional behavior first rears its ugly head' (2004, p. 63).

Chiron's metamorphosis can be attributed to hooks' statement regarding African American pressure to conform to the dominant white culture across America, leading to low self-worth and an identity crisis. 'Black males in the culture of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy are feared but they are not loved. Of course part of the brain washing that takes place in a culture of domination is the confusion of the two.' (Hooks, 2004, p. ix). One of the major causes of Chiron's interstitial angst throughout *Moonlight* stems from this African American identity crisis. *Moonlight* utilises the teen genre, a genre so deeply aligned with the topic of identity crisis, to comment upon how minorities such as LGBT+ African Americans struggle with finding their identity and the angst and mental health issues associated with

their search for identity. During the film's production, Jenkin's purposely prevented the three actors playing Chiron from seeing each other's performances to make the three stages of Chiron's life seem even more disjointed. Concerning this production decision, Jenkins within an interview with PBS News stated: 'I wanted to cast different people to play the same person, and I wanted them to be different' (PBSNews, 2016). The three distinctive, yet vastly different performances of Chiron provide an important analogy for how African American adolscents may battle with finding their true identity.

Chiron as "Black" embodies hypermasculinity to protect himself so no one can call him 'Little', a homophobic slur, or abuse him 'the protagonist comes to be named Black: macho, gym-built, with gold teeth; a man of few words' (Bradshaw, 2017). Jenkins himself in an interview with the Guardian discuses societies presumptions on the hypermasculine African American men Chiron was based: "To me it's groundbreaking that people are responding to a character like this. You walk past someone like him all the time. You see the grills and assume all these things. Fifteen years ago, that kid loved ballet but the world has beaten it out of him" (Lee, 2016). As a result of stereotypes from the past, African American males associate themselves, as well as their male peers, as effeminate and lesser than themselves when they do not adhere to stereotypical conventions of masculinity, such as being muscular and heterosexual, which may lead to interstitial angst, alienation and mental health issues as seen in *Moonlight.*

Within *Moonlight* the use of water is highly prevalent as a metaphor for Chiron's everchanging fluid identity 'water is a recurring and potent symbol of rebirth, transformation, and release' (Gilbert, 2016) throughout the film. Through examining the cinematography of the scene in which Juan teaches Chiron how to swim, the water can be viewed in a biblical sense as it represents a plethora of different meanings such as new beginnings, a baptism of a sort, and the fluidity of Chiron's character changing throughout the course of the film. During scenes with water, Chiron's character experiences a wave of changes, from receiving

his first sexual experience by the sea to being taught how to swim by his Juan; water represents the fluidity of both Chiron's identity formation and sexuality. In another scene, Chiron uses the warmth of a hot bath to escape the abuse at home and substitute the warmth he does not receive from his mother. After Chiron is beaten up by Kevin, his closest friend and someone whom he has shared immense feelings for, he 'goes home and immerses his wounded face in a sink filled with ice water. Then he stares directly into the mirror, with blood pouring down his nose, as if willing himself to change states' (Gilbert, 2016). Water is a constant motif throughout the film that symbolises a change in Chiron's identity; Chiron feels the need to constantly change and adapt to an environment he never feels a part of or feels he can control. Water can be shaped and remoulded just like Chiron's identity formation.

In the closing sequence of *Moonlight* Chiron as 'Black' breaks down to Kevin that he has been unable to be intimate with anyone since they last met at teenagers. Kevin says to Chiron 'Who is you, Chiron?' leaving Chiron perplexed as to what his actual identity is and finally having an epiphany of the lies he has told himself since being 'Little'. The motif of water is used again as a boiling pan throughout the diegetic foreground implies Chiron has finally reached his boiling point as well as the purification process of water being boiled relating to Chiron now being pure and understanding his identity. Chiron visually breaks down all the barriers he has put up his entire life, visibly struggling to contain his emotions as his last ounce of hypermasculinity attempts to hold back the tears. Chiron's hypermasculinity finally subsides as he is cradled within Kevin's arms to which the scene then transitions to Chiron as 'Little' alone on a moonlight-soaked beach representing Chiron's regression back to his true identity. 'Although Kevin and Chiron have reconnected, the film's ending is ambiguous—much like real life for generations of kids growing up in neighbourhoods where traditional families are rare, parents are young adults themselves, and the social structure is amorphous and tenuous' (Staley, 2017).

Without his façade as a shadow of his former self, Chiron would live a tortured life, or not even lived at all, at the hands of homophobia and masculine expectations. *Moonlight* wholly reflects the internal struggle many young African Americans are burdened with to become a hypermasculinised version of themselves as Sanchez remarks:

> 'for men, traditional masculine ideals seem to play a significant role in their psychological well-being. In particular, many men experience negative consequences when these ideals are threatened by feelings of insecurity, inadequacy, and inferiority. For instance, men who experience greater conflict with traditional masculine ideals report more symptoms of psychological distress' (2009).

Without the remarkable representations of both sexuality and ethnicity as seen throughout *Moonlight,* the momentous stories of such a unique and marginalised section of society would never be known. By producing these essential stories, the mental wellbeing of millions of young boys who feel their stories are not worth telling would be lost. It is incredibly important to have a larger catalogue of films in the same guise of *Moonlight* released in the current political climate, as for too long Hollywood has only shown a heterosexual, White perspective across many of their genres.

A similar film to *Moonlight's* young African American coming of age story is the 1991 classic *Boyz n the Hood* (Singleton)*.* Although the premise of the film revolves around exploring Los Angeles' gang culture in the 1980s and 1990s, education and its importance for escaping poverty and violence is a key message within the film's narrative as well as the exploration of African American identity formation. The film's title itself produces a clear binary of young "Boyz" living within the dangerous adult environment of "The Hood" demonstrating the liminal environment the hood has become for the boys' lives as crime and adult themes surround them thus influencing their identity formation and producing interstitial angst from their exposure to an adult environment. The film showcases the many external factors that can affect African American students' education and identity formation such as analysing the effects of poverty and violence during young African American's time within education exposing gang culture, Gentrification and how hypermasculinity can lead to the death of

young African Americans. The film ends with two of the main characters, Tre (Cuba Gooding Jr.) and Brandi (Nia Long), escaping the violence and poverty of their hometown by leaving to attended college to further their education, in the hope of creating better lives for themselves. ‘In many ways it’s the basic American teenage coming-of-age story that we know well from movies like “Risky Business” and “The Breakfast Club.” Can our heroes navigate the last year of high school and make it to college?’ (Touré, 2019). *Boyz n the Hood* is a typical coming of age teen film as ‘a large part of “Boyz” is about the efforts of the main character, Cuba Gooding Jr.’s Tre Styles, to lose his virginity, and the efforts of his best friend, Morris Chestnut’s Ricky Baker, to do well on the SAT and get into the University of Southern California’ (Touré, 2019). African American teenagers experience similar anxieties and rites of passage that White student’s face in their coming-of-age stories. Though what separates the youths from *Boyz n the Hood* from the White students of John Hughes’ filmography is that they ‘must do this while also surviving one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in the country — South Central Los Angeles, which the film depicts as a place where violence is ubiquitous’ (Touré, 2019).

Tre’s father, Furious Styles (Lawrence Fishbourne) plays a monumentally important role within the film as both Tre’s father figure, as well as assisting the audience in providing an important social commentary on the social problems many African Americans face in areas of poverty. The importance of a father figure in *Boyz n the Hood*, and African American culture, is shown through Tre’s choice in absolving from a life of crime and violence his friends partake in, all due to his father’s involvement and guidance throughout his life. ‘The main thing that separates Tre from other boys around him is that he has a father in the home and they don’t, so he’s able to learn how to be a man, while the other guys get sucked into the brotherhood that drives gang culture’ (Touré, 2019). The concept of father figures as an instrumental part of a young African American boy’s development, as well as the effects of losing a father figure, is seen throughout *Moonlight*. As Chiron gains the father figure of Juan during the first act of film his life drastically improves, then when he loses him his life spirals

out of control. Juan steps in to care for Chiron and during one of the most memorable scenes within the film, Juan teaches Chiron how to swim in the ocean. Although teaching a child to swim may not seem as drastic as feeding and clothing them, it helps to abolish the negative stereotype of African Americans being unable to swim due to not having a parental figure to teach them.

Similarly, with within *Boyz n the Hood* Styles constantly gives his son lessons on African American culture and how their community is being oppressed through Gentrification. The film provides an important commentary on Gentrification as within African American communities 'Gentrification displaces and separates. It segregates the social strata of a city along the social-spatial axis of wealth. As a result, the peripheries of many city centers are now gentrified—they have become home to the new middle and upper classes' (Helbrecht, 2018, p.3). Within Tre's community, Styles explains African Americans are punished more for drug dealing compared to White people, as there are gun and alcohol shops on every corner, promoting violence and substance abuse. These lessons assist Tre in abstaining from a life of crime and substance abuse that many others within his community partake.

A controversial film in terms of both its accuracy in portraying African American adolescent identity as well as its use of the White Saviour complex comes from 2009's *The Blind Side* (Netter). The film attempts to create a hopeful message of how meritocracy and obedience can help a young African American overcome poverty and inequality; however, the message is arguably detracted due to *The Blind Side's* overbearing White Saviour Complex. *The Blind Side*'s portrayal of the Tuohy's family as charitable and caring individuals is problematic due to the film's choice of 'portraying the Henderson family in contrast to the Tuohy family fulfil[ling] an important component of the White Savior film by positioning Tuohy as the only person willing and capable of helping him' (Ash, 2015, p.92). *The Blind Side* is based on a true story 'in which a down-and-out black teenager is adopted by a straight-shooting southern mom (Sandra Bullock)' (Freeman, 2009). The teenager in question, Big Mike, has

no permanent residence and comes from a poverty-stricken environment; through his incredible sporting ability, Big Mike achieves his dreams of going to college from receiving a sports scholarship after performing well playing football. Despite *The Blind Side*'s fanciful view on the real-life story of Michael Oher, the film provides an important social discourse regarding how 'for a number of Black youths, there is a decline in the hope of mainstream life choices and life chances. (Wycliffe W. Simiyu, 2012, p.42). Big Mike's entire identity formation within the film is a fabricated narrative created by Hollywood which creates a damaging representation of African American adolescence and how a White Saviour is the only means to escape poverty.

Big Mike's presence within the film 'is also portrayed in the film as a docile, meek, and in need of "toughening up … This characterisation is an important component of the White Saviour film, in which the African American character must be portrayed as a non-threatening to reduce fear and superficially challenge racist stereotypes to create an illusion of interracial concord (Hughey, 2009; Appiah 1993)' (Ash, 2015, p. 93); very similar to how Chiron believes he must abide to within his identity formation. Contrary to this depiction, the real-life Big Mike was very dissimilar to on-screen portrayal demonstrating Hollywood's habit of adapting their narratives to suit a White audience and subsequently produce racist undertones and microaggressions. *The Blind Side*'s choice to present Big Mike as an unintelligent and docile character contributes to reinforcing negative stereotypes of African Americans as 'the devaluing of the Black mind and intellectualism in general have led to a construct and racial identity of despair and hopelessness among the African American community' (Wycliffe W. Simiyu, 2012, p.42).

The circumstances of Big Mike gaining his scholarship is where the damaging representation arises as *The Blind Side* is 'a film that reflects ideologies of White Moral virtue and Black deficiencies' (Ash, 2015, p.86). The film suggests that one of the only means to escape poverty is to have great ability in sport, as well as receiving charitable

support and guidance from White people. *The Blind Side* fabricates the real-life story to make it appear that the White Tuohy family taught Big Mike how to play football as the theorist Ash comments how 'the most striking modification of Oher's story, and one that manifests as a main story line of the film, is that Oher needed to be taught how to play football by the Tuohys. Oher, in fact, did know how to play football' (2015, p. 93). *The Blind Side*'s negligence towards producing an honest retelling of Oher's story insinuates that ethnic minorities require the assistance of a 'Fairy Godmother' type character in their lives to escape poverty as well as gain key skills to better their lives that only White people seem to obtain.

Traditionally many films within the teen genre represent jocks as stereotypically unintelligent, in the real-world Wycliffe W. Simiyu identifies how:

> 'athletes who devote a disproportionately high percentage of their time on athletic pursuits at the expense of academic priorities fair poorly in terms of their class attendance and other academically oriented assignments and thereby compromise their progression towards graduation. This failure to graduate by a number of college athletes enhances the dumb jocks stereotype and the perception that Black athletes are intellectually deficient' (Wycliffe W. Simiyu, 2012, p.53)

The racist undertones of the film can be seen through the presentation of Big Mike's demeanour and dependency on a White saviour to help him, rather than his ability, as Big Mike is 'nothing but a silent, compliant cipher, there to prove the good-heartedness of Bullock's character. And how does he justify his presence among the white middle classes? By following that glorious tradition of racial rapprochement in America – becoming an athlete' (Freeman, 2009). The family hire a private tutor for Mike to help him increase his GPA, highlighting the unequal opportunities White, upper-class Americans have over other groups through being able to afford luxuries, such as private tuition. The message the film seems to emit suggests that White people are more intelligent than African Americans and that they need to be treated as charity cases. 'A long-standing, widely held, racist, and ill-informed presumption of innate, race-linked Black athletic superiority and intellectual

deficiency. This stereotype projects a Black person as athletic, skilful, fast yet intellectually deficient' (2012, p.48).

The added burden due to the financial demands needed to afford college tuition produces an immense wave of anxiety and adversity for students hailing from working-class backgrounds. Parents, as well as students, would end up saving up their entire lives just to attend college. 'Families reached into their savings, postponed purchases, and went into debt so that their children could go to college' (Lazerson, 1998, p.65). The narrative of scholarships as a means of academic progression is both a very capitalist idea as well as contributing to the neoliberalist system inflicted within American society. Through meritocracy, students are expected to achieve the American dream through hard work although despite how the American dream is much more complicated than simply working hard to achieve success; the American Dream is a disproportionate philosophy as those from minority and poorer backgrounds have a much smaller chance of succeeding within American society than those who have the financial and cultural resources inherited to them from birth. The pressure to achieve academic scholarship is a very prevalent archetype throughout the high school genre, highlighting the mental health issues that arise from overworking, high expectations and financial strain. Films such as *Booksmart, Rushmore* (Anderson, 1998) and even more slapstick films such as *The Waterboy* (Coraci, 1998) all embellish a similar motive of the importance and pressure academic scholarship has for the working-class student.

The Blind Side's dependency to make its White characters look superior, charitable and in need of caring for African Americans highlights 'the contrast between Black and White responses to Oher's situation is an example of what Toni Morrison (1992) describes as "the strategic use of Black characters to define the goals and enhance the qualities of White characters" (p.52-53)' (Ash, 2015, p.92). *Precious* (Daniels, 2009) a film released the same year 'succeeds by rejecting the usual path for an abused teenage mother and finds a

more realistic way out than through a fairy godmother: education. *The Blind Side* might be "based on a true story", but it's *Precious* that takes its subject matter seriously' (Freeman, 2009). Instead of waiting for her White saviour, Precious throws herself into her education to better her and her children's lives, all whilst *The Blind Side* produces a narrative that suggests that only a White person can help them escape poverty.

The theory of tokenism has become a highly relevant concept in recent years due to the outcry of Black Lives Matter for better representation of African American across the media and film industries. The theory of 'tokenism is a sophisticated way of making institutions look progressive, while gender, race, and a host of other factors are the underlying hierarchy determining entrance and advancement in an institution' (Lee, 2020). The growing trend of tokenism, as well as its discourse, has become an incredibly prevalent concept in contemporary society. The teen genre, which generally lacks the larger budgets most Hollywood films have, theoretically could, and should, take larger risks with the diversity of their casting. More often than not, ethnic minorities tend to only star in lead roles in teen films when the narrative revolves around poverty, inequality and social issues in films such as *Moonlight*, *Precious* and *Boyz n the Hood* (Singleton, 1991) painting a negative portray of African American identity formation. Though these films are incredibly important, African American identity formation needs to become more diverse across the teen genre, and not just films about African American poverty.

Throughout the teen genre itself, there is a severe absence of ethnic minority characters taking lead roles throughout many of the subgenres such as chick flicks, teen comedies, and coming of age films. Ethnic minorities tend to occupy roles as secondary characters to support, usually, in a comedic fashion, the White protagonist as seen within the film *She's All That* (Iscove, 1999) where 'Gabrielle Union and Lil' Kim play members of the popular girl's court. Lil' Kim barely has any lines and Union is more mammy than heroine. Their role in the narrative is to support the storyline of the main character, Laney Boggs, a white,

conventionally attractive, if endearingly eccentric, art student played by Rachael Leigh Cook' (Willoughby, 2015). This representation can be severely damaging for ethnic minorities as through a White perspective their role within the teen genre is seemingly to be subservient and inferior to White people. In a *Vice* article Vanessa Willoughby voices her opinion on the view of tokenism and its effect on her perception of the representation of African American characters within the teen genre:

> 'As a teen, watching whitewashed movies was like peering into an alternate reality, a world that I could inhabit if I only tried hard enough. Maybe that's why I kept watching them—for the off-chance that once, just once, the black characters could also live in the full spectrum of human vulnerability and messiness and first love, instead of being subjected to the role of background player, a role I knew too well from the everyday truths of my own life' (Willoughby, 2015)

These tokenisms within the teen genre are generally based upon offensive stereotypes placed by Hollywood producers in an attempt to supplement the white-centred narratives for comedic reasons or to entice ethnic minorities into watching the film. A great parody of the token character within the high school genre can be seen within the film *Not Another Teen Movie* (Gallen, 2001), which in itself scrutinises and lampoons a lot of archetypes within the genre and can be one of the best places to identify offensive stereotypes the genre produces. *Not Another Teen Movie* is set within a typical American high school, which is humorously named "John Hughes high school" which could arguably be a jibe at the director's filmography where the majority of the high school stereotypes originate from. There is a scene within the high school where an African American character, satirically named "Malik Token", responds to being asked to hold some books for his White friend replying: "Sure why not? I am the token Black guy, I'm just supposed to smile and stay out of the conversation and say things like damn, shit and that is whack", showcasing the token character's subservient role within a white narrative and racial stereotypes of the African American male in the teen genre. Another archetype of the token character throughout the film is demonstrated when Malik's hair changes drastically from shaved to an afro style and back and forth, all whilst his white friends do not notice or comment upon. This demonstrates how the token African American character's actions are rarely noticed or deemed important

enough for the White narrative. In a later scene during a song named Prom Tonight!, Malik has a very small part where his only line within the song is, “I’m only in the song because I’m a Black guy”, all whilst being dressed in what appears to be an African American stereotype from the 1950s bearing similarities to Chuck Berry or Little Richard, further extenuating his ‘otherness’ compared to the white students in their typical modern prom night tuxedos.

During a satirical scene at a house party in *Not Another Teen Movie,* Malik confronts a fellow African American about how there is only allowed to be one “Black guy” at a high school party, poking fun at the genre’s stereotypes. When Malik confronts the other African American, he suggests that “I’m supposed to be the only black guy at this party”, to which the other African American teen expresses gratitude for pointing out his obvious mistake, demonstrating the warped perspective of the teen genre for its obvious tokenism and lack of genuine African American representation.

A similar character, aptly named Token Black, is seen in the satirical cartoon series *South Park* (Parker & Stone, 1997,) and is the only African American child in the school. The creator’s Matt Stone and Trey Parker named him Token Black to parody the many films and television series using African American’s as token characters to appeal to the African American demographic, as seen with characters such as Carl Carlson in *The Simpsons* (Groening, 1989) or Cleveland Brown in *Family Guy* (MacFarlane, 1999) who are both troublesomely voiced by White actors.

Without the influence of the teen genre, many of these invisible struggles that many young African American students face throughout their adolescence would never come to fruition, taking away the voices of a section of society rarely heard in Western media. With Hollywood’s biased towards White actors, and White narratives, the importance of African American narratives is paramount to providing better representations, as well as highlighting often ignored but essential identity formation of African American adolescents. Momentous

African American centric films such as *Moonlight*, *Boyz N The Hood* and *Blackboard Jungle* all present real-life themes of race, sexuality and class within their thematic approach to storytelling. The teen genre emanates a crucible of various backgrounds, cultures and beliefs mixed into the world of adolescence and angst. Although there are still plenty of problems surrounding the education system, it is only through better representations of these issues across American media that the racial diversity and equality across the education system will improve, and in turn, help prevent the development of interstitial angst and mental health issues within young people from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Chapter III

Sexual identity formation within the teen genre

Within the Hollywood studio system, the representation of LGBT+ characters have, for many years, created polarising depictions of the LGBT+ community severely affecting adolescents identity formation. The traditional representations of the LGBT+ community

> 'within historical Hollywood cinema was largely formed on issues of denial, absence and 'othering', evident in the archetypes of the 'sissy' (the overly feminized gay man) and the 'dyke' (the overly masculinized lesbian), or the murderous queer character or the pathological victim, as commoditized spectres of disavowal' (Pullen, 2014, pp. 4-5)

These representations reflect the varying perceptions towards the LGBT+ community as well as the greater societal issues affecting the LGBT+ community within America. Films such as *Dallas Buyers Club* (Vallée, 2013) and *Philadelphia* (Demme, 1994) showcase the mass stigmatisation of the LGBT+ community during the AIDS epidemic whilst other films such as Stonewall (Finch, 1995) or *"The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson"* (French, 2017) tackle one of the most important events of LGBT+ history with the Stonewall Riots.

The teen genre is paramount in representing the trials and tribulations that young LGBT+ adolescents endure as a result of the toxic heteronormative environment inflicting Western society and the influence this has on their identity formation; these representations create vital discourses surrounding the greater social problems afflicting the LGBT+ community. The immense statistics regarding the suicide rates of the LGBT+ community highlights the mental health epidemic affecting young people 'The Trevor Project, an organization with the goal of preventing queer youth suicide, reports that gay, lesbian and bisexual youth are four times more likely than straight youth to attempt suicide, and that nearly 50% of transgender youth seriously consider suicide, with 25% actually attempting it' (Wuest in Pullen, 2014, pp. 19).

Hollywood's representation of LGBT+ characters has had a varied and turbulent relationship throughout cinematic history. Just one example of negative representations of LGBT+ issues within the teen genre can be seen in the 1980s film *Teen Wolf* (Daniel, 1985), where a conversation between Scotty and friend Stiles ends with Stiles worrying that Scotty was coming out as homosexual rather than a werewolf. Stiles asks "Are you gonna tell me you're a f*g? Because if you're gonna tell me you're a f*g, I just don't think I could handle it...". Scotty replies "I'm not a f*g… I'm a werewolf." 'Within moments, Stiles is relieved and happy about this because, in this film, being gay is worse than being a literal lycanthrope' (Aexandra, 2017).

Within the teen genre, many of the LGBT+ stories that have emerged depicting adolescent struggles of coming out stories, concealing their sexuality, and internal conflict with their identity from pressures stemming from bullying, parental constraint or even religious doctrines. Through exploring the identity formation of the LGBT+ adolescents within the teen genre 'the concept of queer youth potentially offers deeper resonance in assessing the transgressive nature of the teenager' (Pullen, 2014, p.8) which in turn can provide important discourse surrounding the position of the LGBT+ community within Western society. The greater increase of LGBT+ teenagers within mainstream media helps provide important discourse for issues directly affecting the LGBT+ community as in the past, 'for many years, the only place you could find images of gay teenagers was in illegal porn' (Gideonse, 2000, p.56).

Across the teen genre, many of these representations depict the identity crisis many young people find themselves in their quest for sexual identity and acceptance among their peers and family. These films showcase how environmental factors can have an immense effect on young people and their journey in accepting their sexual identity. As a result of many teens within the LGBT+ community 'most likely born to straight parents, begin to understand themselves as queer, they have no built-in support or education structure and may not have

other visible queer people in their lives to act as examples or models' (Wuest in Pullen, p.20-21). Without a support network in place, many LGBT+ youth can struggle to cope in their journey of discovering their sexual identity.

These barricades facing the LGBT+ community are a very prevalent fixture throughout the teen genre. Films such as *But I'm a Cheerleader* (Babbit, 1999) depicts the pressures many LGBT+ teens may face in terms of discovering their sexual identity as well as coping with how their families and peers react to said choice. The film's depiction of a gay conversion camp helps showcase the brutality of the real-life camps as well as providing a glimpse as to how the LGBT+ community were viewed as a curable disease at the time, and sadly still to this day in some cases; there is even a germophobic woman in the film that represents the fear of AIDS many people harboured during the peak of the epidemic. In an interview the film's Director Jamie Babbit, she describes said character, Mary Brown, as the representation of cultural ignorance and discrimination concerning AIDS victims and the how LGBT+ community are seen as unnatural: 'She's germophobic, so everything is plastic, and she's all about AIDS-paranoia and all that stuff. And it's everything that's against nature: so she doesn't have real flowers, she has plastic flowers. She doesn't want anything organic, because it's scary' (Fuchs, 2000).

The film's use of colour within its mise en scéne also helps convey societal pressures to conform to both gender and heteronormative norms through the bright pink set design throughout many of the scenes [Appendices III] as well as clothing both the men and women in gender-specific clothing such as pink dresses and blue work overalls in an attempt to subdue their homosexual tendencies. The choice in using the mise en scéne as a means of expressing gender identity assists in commenting upon the gender conformity Western society propagates and how the identity formation for the LGBT+ community can be artificially enforced to conform to heteronormative standards. Typical gender roles such as the expressionist role, which is mostly attributed to women, is forced upon the girls at the

camp as reflected through lessons on baby raising, cleaning the house as well as the men forced to play sports and fix cars in to conform to the stereotypical roles of gender. The film succeeds in reflecting the immense pressure Western society produces in enforcing gender and heteronormative norms as Megan (Natasha Lyonne) suffers throughout the film in an attempt to hide her sexuality.

As discussed in the previous chapter *Moonlight* successfully embodies the trials and tribulations of life as an African American homosexual youth in the late 20th century. Within *Moonlight,* Chiron grapples with his environment's dominant heterosexual hegemony as many of the social expectations for men are 'dictated by four main rules: men should not be feminine; men must be respected and admired; men should never show fear; and men should seek out risk and adventure' (Sanchez, 2009). Men who do not adhere to these doctrines can instantly become alienated from society contributing to the development of Chiron's hypermasculinity and interstitial angst whilst dealing with mature themes within his environment. The film highlights the many societal issues afflicting the LGBT+ community as well as producing a greater representation of African American LGBT+ stories as traditionally 'the common characteristic among most televisual representations of gay men is that they are usually white' (Alfred, 2011, p.63) and thus relating to important discourses surrounding Intersectionality.

Intersectionality is a highly relevant concept within *Moonlight* as it portrays a teenager struggling to balance his hybrid identity as both an African American and homosexual. Within Battle, & Ashley's research into Intersectionality their findings correlate with Chiron's alienation as in their view 'intersectionality has been articulated to understand the mutual ways in which the discursive and structural elements of race, gender, class, and sexuality intersect to create unique experiences based on social location and complex relationships of power and oppression' (2008, p. 3). The duality of Chiron's character corroborates his internal conflict surrounding his divergent identities; The fact of the matter is if Chiron was

heterosexual, he would receive significantly less abuse than the combination of being both African American and homosexual and vice versa as a White homosexual. As Battle & Ashley conclude in their work on intersectionality 'these individual desires and the enduring and diverse family structures that emerge from them should not be punished for their divergence but rather applauded for their creative and constructive potential to further highlight the mosaic that is the black experience in the United States' (Battle & Ashley, 2008, p.21).

Intersectionality can be attributed as the cause of alienation for many adolescents across the teen genre, and very much interlinked with the identity crisis many teens face. Intersectionality, as the term implies, can occur within any demographic as evident in a character such as Jim Stark's alienation within *Rebel Without a Cause* for example. Jim's turmoil stems from his middle-class background intersecting with his rebellious nature and working-class culture he emanates at the dismay of his parents and contributing to Jim's alienation, angst and further rebellion. Intersectionality can occur as a combination of many things. a person who is upper class, White and LGBT+ can also face similar issues to Chiron through alienation from their parents and peers. As the teen genre is a melting pot of different cultures, intersectionality is rife throughout the genre. A film such as *The Breakfast Club* is again a signifier of the conflict that intersectionality brings upon adolescents from the pressure of socialising with a different group than their typical peers as well as straying from their groups own stereotypical conventions; Intersectionality affects many teenagers in their search for identity and contributes to the psychological distress many of them experience throughout their time within their adolescence.

Throughout the teen genre, there are two very prominent tropes of homosexual male characters; the first is seen in narratives where the homosexual character goes through emotional and physical turmoil due to their sexuality. These representations can be seen through characters such as Chiron in *Moonlight*, as well as Alike in *Pariah* (Rees, 2011)

who, as the film title suggests, is a lesbian teenager who struggles to integrate with her environment and find her identity. The other common trope commonly found within the teen genre is seen through the “gay best friend” stereotype seen frequently within Chick Flicks such as the character Damien in *Mean Girls* (Waters, 2004), or Brandon in *Easy A* (Gluck, 2010). The “gay best friend” character is generally in a film to serve as comic relief, similar to that of African American tokenism in the high school genre as mentioned previously. An interesting and self-aware take on the stereotype is seen within the film *G.B.F* (Gay Best Friend) (Stein, 2013), ‘it makes a commentary of the gay best friend trend (especially for cis, straight women) and tackles the idea of stereotyping gay men’ (Crittenton, 2019). *G.B.F* intelligently uses the stereotype to show how being a homosexual male has become a tokenism for LGBT+ representation within the teen genre, as when the homosexual character ‘Tanner (Michael J. Willett) becomes the GBF of a popular clique, the girls are disappointed he doesn’t fit into their limited idea of the gay men they’ve seen on TV, so they give him a makeover’ (Crittenton, 2019). The film does an effective job in demonstrating how Hollywood may tokenise the LGBT+ community in order to appear to be more liberal as well as exploiting the stereotype for comedic purposes which in turn affects LGBT+ identity formation.

Though LGBT+ characters have a larger presence on screen than ever before, their screen time is severely limited within Hollywood films. There can be a multitude of different reasons for the omission, but one of the most damaging factors stems from the fact that Hollywood films purposely make it easier to remove LGBT+ characters from scenes and entire narratives to suit the beliefs of different territories, such as the attitudes shared by countries such as The United Arab Emirates, Russian Federation and The People’s Republic of China who are infamous for their discrimination and persecution towards the LGBT+ community. The Queen biopic, *Bohemian Rhapsody,* had its homosexual sex scenes censored for its release in China; ‘at least a minute will be cut from the film to secure permission for it to be screened in Chinese cinemas, including scenes where Mercury (played by Rami Malek)

kisses other male characters' (Pulver, 2019). *Bohemian Rhapsody* was a commercial success around the world, being one of the highest-grossing films of 2018. 'Although a major commercial success all over the globe, Bohemian Rhapsody is likely to secure only a small-scale release in China – unlike Oscar-winners *Moonlight* and *Call Me by Your Name*, which failed to be released there at all' (Pulver, 2019). Through Hollywood's decision to allow its films to be altered and suited to different territories, anti-LGBT+ hegemonies mean that independent films, such as *Moonlight* could never see the light of day, resulting in a large proportion of teenagers missing out on viewing a relatable and poignant story.

At the turn of the millennium the rise of social media platforms sites such as YouTube, Tumblr and Facebook have all assisted in contributing to opening up important discourse surrounding the LGBT+ community. Wuest comments upon this trend concerning the LGBT+ community within *Queer Youth and Media Cultures*. Social media sites and vlogs greatly assist in exploring LGBT+ identity formation from actual members of the LGBT+ community within the 'online repository of videos mainly produced by Coming Out Videos on YouTube queer adults shares stories of bullying, homophobia and survival in high school while framing queer identity affirmation as the ability to overcome oppression' (Wuest, 2017, p.19-20). James Charles, one of the platforms largest channels with 24.4 million subscribers (as of December 2020), is an LGBT+ content creator whose videos receive millions of views every day. Charles' videos include many LGBT+ centred content such as discussing LGBT+ issues online like bullying, discrimination as well as discussing his own experience in coming out. Wuest again remarks how these online representations of LGBT+ community are far more empowering and reflective on genuine LGBT+ issues rather than televised and cinematic portrayals of both tokenised and stereotypes of LGBT+ characters 'through this online forum, with users from across the globe, queer youth were able to find people and stories that reflected their own specific situation more accurately than, for example, the characters of Will & Grace, Queer as Folk or The L Word' (Wuest, 2017, p.23).

The representation of the LGBT+ community throughout the teen genre has seen a positive increase in terms of its scope and relevance to societal issues affecting the LGBT+ community such as tokenism, intersectionality as well as hypermasculinity. The mental health dispositions of young LGBT+ students as represented within the teen genre can illuminate poignant issues surrounding the position and social problems affecting the LGBT+ community worldwide as well as the identity crisis many young people suffer from in concealing their sexuality from the world. In years to come, the stereotypical caricatures of homosexual characters within Western media will hopefully cease to include the negative connotations of being a GBF, victim of bullying or even a sexual deviant. Films such as *Booksmart, Moonlight* and *Love, Simon* already lead this movement with their LGBT+ characters producing a narratives void of any stereotypical tropes of the many negative LBGT+ characters emanating from Hollywood's tokenised narratives.

Chapter IV: case study of the representations of angst, alienation and mental health.

Many filmmakers within the teen genre incorporate metaphors and symbolism within their cinematography to create subjectivity and double-entendres within their narratives, especially surrounding the mental health of the adolescents within their films; these metaphors function to reflect societal issues afflicting American society through the guise of teen angst. Traditional coming of age narratives such as *Pretty in Pink* or *Sixteen Candles* (Hughes, 1984) generally constrain their representations of mental health issues, often through stylistic conventions such as non-diegetic music, metaphors and cinematography to portray feelings of angst, anxiety and alienation. Contrastingly, contemporary adolescent films that directly reference mental health illnesses such as *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* or *Eighth Grade* are becoming more common throughout the teen genre in recent years. These films overtly reference genuine mental health disorder such as PTSD and anxiety to produce important analogies of social problems such as social media consumption, body dysmorphia, teen anxiety and even the #MeToo movement. The constant flow of contemporary teen genre films being released year on year succeeds in representing the reciprocals that identity crisis, interstitial angst and mental health dispositions can incur within adolescents, as Hall suggests,

> ‘the enduring power of the young to disconcert owes something to the ambiguity of youth as an intermediary and transitional phase. Young people are betwixt and between. No longer children and not yet adults, they do not quite fit or fully belong; and this makes the youth a rolling movement of social tension and unease’ (2003, p. 117).

As a result of young people occupying the liminal space between adulthood and childhood the issues affecting their lives are both visually and metaphorically represented onscreen within the teen genre. The teen genre is an excellent platform in representing teen angst,

alienation and anxiety and their troublesome relationship with greater societal discourse across American society.

The use of metaphors within coming-of-age narratives can be directly compared to the use of idioms in everyday vocabulary in characterising feelings of angst, alienation and anxiety. Conventional idioms used to describe feelings of depression could be statements such as “down in the dumps”, or “feeling blue”; these subjective idioms are comparable to the metaphorical depictions of mental health within coming-of-age narratives due to their reliance on toning down mental health depictions to reduce any sombreness for its young viewership. Idioms can represent feelings of sadness and melancholy without overtly stating a person if suffering from depression. The use of these idioms as metaphoric retort can be used to downplay the severity of a person’s mental health issues; in the context of the teen genre, these factors relate to how many coming-of-age films omit significant evidence of mental health illnesses, instead, relying on non-diegetic music, or a darker colour palate to disclose a character’s depression rather than the possible causes of said depression.

The teen genre implements many metaphorical images and stylistic conventions within its teen angst narratives. These narratives mediate important discourse surrounding the external factors that may incur adolescent mental health dispositions such as social media consumption and division of wealth, class and race. Many filmmakers within the teen genre use the representations of adolescents’ mental health issues as a vessel for analogical debate, however others have been accused of detracting from the importance of the illnesses itself in film such as within *Donnie Darko* with the film conflating Donnie’s mental illness as paranormal. The theorist Fenimore identifies how ‘the media consistently offers derogatory and dehumanizing images of mental illness, the public has no other frame of reference’ (2012, p.157); these representations may therefore lead to the further stigmatism of mental health issues afflicting young people. Examples of this can be seen through a film’s use of colour to represent a character’s change in mood, or as simple as the choice of

music within a scene to indicate a character's emotion rather than stating the obvious and disclosing a character's diagnosis.

Within certain coming of age stories, genuine mental illness symptoms can often be misrepresented as simple teen angst, as identified by Wedding within *Movies and Mental illnesses* 'depression is often mistaken for the normal mood liability of teenagers' (2010, P. 156). The process of identifying an adolescent's mental health issues can be problematic, as alienation and teen angst can simply be attributed to factors of adolescence as Wedding continues:

> 'psychiatric problems of children are not as easily diagnosed as those of adults, and the symptoms of mental illness in children are often difficult to distinguish from those changes associated with normal growth and development' (2010, P. 156).

Adding to Wedding's perspective, a metaphorical representation may not always be most effective means of representing a character's inner turmoil as angst and anxiety can easily be construed as normal functions of teenage life and not representative of the external factors of social discourse.

Across the teen genre the depiction of young people's mental illnesses can assist in highlighting the concept of social identity formation. Many young people within the teen genre exhibit social identity formation through their shared anxieties about the liminality of entering the adult world which manifests through the representation of angst, anxiety and interstitial angst. These factors can be seen in a film such as *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (Hughes, 1985) in which the film highlights the intersectionality of youth and adulthood through the depiction of Ferris and his friend's exploration of their shifting adolescent experiences. For a teen film 'Ferris's adventures are not typical youthful thrill-seeking but explore the border between adolescence and adulthood' (Driscol, 2011, p.53) both Ferris and his friends drive a Ferrari, sunbathe by the pool and even hang out at art galleries, all activities not typically associated with youth culture. Throughout the film Ferris, and especially Cameron both share anxieties about leaving their youth behind and entering the

adult world as both ‘Ferris and his friends directly confront the question of what will happen after the immanent end of high school’ (Driscol, 2011, p.53) showcasing the interstitial fears of leaving their carefree adolescence and entering adulthood that they now know to be a lie. Cameron goes through and existential crisis in the realisation of his loss of youth and the façade of adulthood ‘while Cameron believes that ‘School, parents, future. Ferris can do anything,’ Ferris confesses to the audience that he doesn’t know what the future holds’ (Driscol, 2011, p.53) highlighting the duality of the two characters in relation to their fears of the interstitiality of adolescence.

Cameron struggles throughout the film to deal with the pressure his overbearing father subjects him in conforming to the neoliberalist structure of America. During a pivotal scene within the film, Cameron accidentally destroys his father’s Ferrari during a spit of rage and subsequently goes into emotional shutdown. The film comments upon parental pressure to conform to their, often unreachable, expectations concerning the effects of Neoliberalism through metaphorical symbolism. During his breakdown, Cameron dives to the bottom of a swimming pool [Appendix IV] where he remains motionless until Ferris dives in to rescue him before he drowns. In reality, Cameron’s escapade can be contrived as a suicide attempt, but in the rose-tinted world of John Hughes, it is merely brushed off as nothing more than juvenile behaviour. The metaphorical aspect of this scene comes from Cameron being framed at the bottom of the pool surrounded by the cold, blueness of the water; the sombre mise en scéne is contrasted with Ferris and Sloane above him in the warm, sunny Chicago summer, heightening Cameron’s feeling of feeling drowned under the pressure his father has placed on him and in no control of his own identity. As previously discussed within the last chapter, the use of ‘water is a recurring and potent symbol of rebirth, transformation, and release’ (Gilbert, 2016), and a highly common motif for representing emotional strain as there are very similar scenes across the coming-of-age genre which demonstrate this, such as *The Graduate.*

Akin to Cameron's plunge into the pool, Benjamin, the angst-ridden protagonist of *The Graduate*, who is in a very similar situation to Cameron in terms of neoliberalist pressure, suffers from the extreme pressure his parents are placing upon him. Within a scene in the film, after Benjamin returns home from college, he is reluctantly dressed in some scuba gear and is then made to entertain his father's party guests at the expense of his dignity. There is then a sequence filmed through Benjamin's point of view in which his parents and fellow adults at the party inaudibly laugh at him through his claustrophobic suit, representing Benjamin's perspective of feeling suffocated and ignored by the adults around him and pressure to succeed within Neoliberalist America. He then dives into the swimming pool where he later attempts to get out, but his parents push him back into the pool where he floats motionlessly in sombre thought [Appendix V], representing his parents, and by extension Neoliberalism's control over his life, depriving him of his free will and own identity formation. The subsequent affair Benjamin has with the much older Mrs Robinson may be the result of Benjamin seeking someone who treats him like an adult, as he is still in a liminal space between adolescent and adult and desperate to leave.

Throughout *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* the film successfully utilises both metaphorical content as well using overtly pragmatical content such as Charlie attending therapy sessions, prescribed medicine and diagnosed with having PTSD. Charlie's main ailment within the film stems from the emotional trauma he has endured due to both the sexual abuse he has suffered at the hands of his Aunt and the death of his best friend. An example of the metaphorical storytelling within the film is seen during a scene where Charlie is sat on his bed, alone, in the darkness whilst he listens to *Asleep* by *The Smiths* (1982), a sombre song depicting suicide and loss. The song could easily be in reference to the death of his best friend and perhaps implying how the part of Charlie that got molested by his aunt has been "put to sleep" within his subconsciousness wanting to retain his childhood innocence. The abuse Charlies suffers from by his Auntie conjures the interstitial angst within his psychosis though exposing a child to very mature adult themes destroying his childhood

innocence. Throughout the film, before Charlie meets his group of friends, the mise en scéne presents the audience with clues on the disposition of Charlie's mental health. Charlie is consistently framed on his own, and even whilst with his family he is the only one framed within the camera. It is only when he makes more friends and begins to open up and become happier that he begins to share the camera frame with other characters with wider, less claustrophobic, shots. The colour pallet of the scenes later on in the film also reflect Charlie's progression through the use of warmer colours emulating his improvement.

Symbolism is deeply rooted within *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* as many factors about Charlie's behaviour remains a mystery throughout the film until the audience understands the larger picture. During Charlie's first intimate moment with Sam, his PTSD reawakens within him conjuring the memories of his Aunt sexually abusing him. As revealed in the film Charlie's Aunt was also molested by an older person when she was younger contributing to her repeating the cycle of abuse on Charlie. Charlie's method of talking about his feelings stems from writing letters to an unknown recipient, this process is similar to how young people use vlogs in contemporary society to discuss their feelings and help others. The film's combination of metaphorical symbolism and diagnosed illnesses assists in portraying the scale of the mental health pandemic affecting young people across the Western world.

An earlier example of a film from the teen genre that utilises both metaphorical storytelling and diagnosed mental illnesses can be seen within the mind-bending *Donnie Darko* (Kelly, 2002); the film incorporates an incredible amount of metaphorical and symbolic analogies for greater social discourses as seen through the guise of its representation of teen mental health. The film created a polarising reception upon its release leading to 'unimpressed critics often accused it of being 'adolescent' and, according to Kelly, disliked it for representing 1980s adolescence very differently than John Hughes had done' (Driscoll, 2011, p. 104). The opposing narrative Donnie Darko critics loathed is exactly what makes the film a perfect alternative to the rose tinted perspective of the many nostalgia driven films

of the John Hughes Era, providing an important retrospective view of the period and its relation to mental health and social discourses.

Donnie Darko stands out within the teen genre as a wholly unique narrative that incorporates intersectionality through its use of both postmodernism and bricolage in the of splicing two genres, sci fi and the teen genre. The film is an early example of a teen film depicting its protagonist attending therapy sessions, being diagnosed with schizophrenia, and being prescribed medicine to combat his hallucinations. The film does, however, arguably trivialises schizophrenia with its depictions of Frank, the humanoid rabbit, as a metaphor for Donnie's mental ailment; this arguably conflates Donnie's mental illness with that of the paranormal, which may, in turn, lead to Donnie's schizophrenia being perceived as a figment of his imagination rather than a mental illness.

Frank, the metaphorical embodiment of Donnie's schizophrenia, may represent a plethora of metaphors seen through Donnie's subsequent erratic and rebellious behaviour throughout the film. Donnie's rebellious actions aid in exposing the adverse behaviour of the institutions and adults around him; Donnie's school itself is a parochial institution ran by teachers who believe deeply in religious doctrines such as Kitty Farmer (Beth Grant) forcing their beliefs via a carefully controlled curriculum. Donnie's inquisition in a discussion between his science teacher Mr Monitoff regarding time travel and the basis of free will concerning a higher deity in control is quickly shut down by his teacher as he realises the conversation would be deemed sacrilegious towards the school's values. 'At this point in the discussion, Monitoff breaks off, fearing the loss of his job if he goes any further in this potentially blasphemous discourse' (Powell, A, 2007. p.158). The film's other scientist, Roberta Sparrow, had previously been a Nun until she became a scientist. Roberta eventual role as a scientist could be Kelly's way of suggesting how to understand the world you need to stray from religious doctrines preventing creativity and knowledge. The film may be suggesting the American high school as an institution, and by extension American society, needs to be

more secular in its values and place all subjects equally, as well as encouraging free speech within the classroom ‘the film stresses the educational establishment’s muzzling of speculative thought and stylistic innovation in both arts and sciences’ (Powell, 2007, p.159). A similar narrative that comments upon religions’, specifically Catholicism, control over school curriculums, censorship and freedom of speech (or freedom of dance so to say) can be seen within the film *Footloose* (Ross, 1984) whose youth are controlled by a religiously strict town that stops young people from expressing themselves through dancing, leading to an eventual rebellion by the young people of the town. These themes lend themselves to the growing debate of identity formation and how many institutions within Western society may inhibit the natural progression of adolescent identity formation though religious censorship and pressure to conform to societal norms and values.

When Donnie’s English teacher, Karen Pomeroy (Drew Barrymore), implements the book *The Destructors* (Greene, 1954) into the school’s English curriculum she is met with intense hostility by both the school and parents due to the belief that the novel incited the vandalism within the school, leading to her eventual dismissal. The censorship of *The Destructors* highlights the education system’s choice in restricting certain materials from its student’s curriculum due to the book’s expression of free will and mindless teenage rebellion similar to *Rebel Without a Cause’*s narrative; the censorship of *The Destructors* is similar to what happened during *The Catcher in The* Rye’s publication and its heavy censorship across American schools. Kelly could be commenting upon how the education system and religion suppresses young people’s free will and identity formation; one of the key themes seen throughout the film. Donnie comments upon the book during class stating how “destruction is a form of creation” which in of itself is a highly relevant the teen genre. The entire concept of teenager is based upon destruction of archetypes, systems and sometimes themselves, Donnie’s own metal health is represented through the embodiment of ‘Frank’ which can be ‘associated with Donnie’s alienation from adolescent adjustment and with his increasingly destructive attacks on authority (Driscoll, 2011, p.105). Frank as a metaphor for Donnie’s

alienation relates to other characters within the teen gerne such as Jim Stark within *Rebel Without a Cause* or Johnny in *The Wild One* as their rebellion is a form of creation through the destruction of Western hegemony as well as social norms and values.

Donnie's family also produce metaphorical insights and commentary into American politics at the time of the film's production through referencing the 1988 presidential election. 'A little eruption takes place at the dinner table of the Darko family when his bright elder sister announces she's going to vote for Mike Dukakis. This shocks her Republican parents more than the term 'f*ckhead' being used in front of their nine-year-old younger daughter' (French, 2002). As George Bush Senior won the election in 1988 when the film is set and at the time of the film's production in 2000 George W. Bush became President the film highlights the parallels from the past in conjunction with the then present; this parallelism could be Kelly's warning of another Bush presidency causing the end of the world through ravenous Republican politics. As Donnie receives 'an announcement from Frank, a 6ft rabbit with a head like a satanic emissary, that the world is going to end in 28 days, six hours and 42 minutes. That's around Halloween and before the election' (French, 2002). Donnie's schizophrenic visions act as a metaphor for the impending Republican win by Bush Sr in the past and warning the audience to Bush Jr's win within the present. *Donnie Darko* succeeds in creating a philosophical debate about the state of free will in society, the education system's relationship with religion and the political hemisphere of two periods of time all through the guise of a teenager's angst; As Driscol concludes 'Donnie Darko may be a story about time travel, or about mental illness, but it is certainly a story about the disempowerment of youth' (Driscoll, 2011, p.106).

Bo Burnham's decade-defining film, *Eighth Grade* (2018), has been one of the largest influences for this thesis; its contemporary setting and modern-day issues explored through the perspective of a 13-year-old girl greatly encompass what Generation Z contends within a social media-saturated world. *Eighth Grade* effectively presents the identity crisis of the

modern say teenager through its conscious decision to represent the often-overshadowed adolescence anxieties many modern teenagers are suffering from such as angst, body dysmorphia, and insecurities. The story of *Eighth Grade* explores its teen protagonist's battle through her adolescence, Kayla 'is 'crushingly voted "most quiet" in class, Kayla struggles to connect with her peers in person, passing in silence through the corridors of her school' (Kermode, 2019) terrified of making the transition to high school. *Eighth Grade* arguably represents a truer to modern life coming of age story compared to many of Hollywood's attempts at representing the modern-day teenager. As the critic Kermode identifies, '*Eighth Grade* has prompted much soul-searching discussion about the plight of "generation Z" – the post-millennials whom Burnham astutely identifies as having been "forced by a culture they did not create to be conscious of themselves at every moment"' (2019).

Throughout *Eighth Grade,* metaphorical symbolism and analogies surrounding contemporary youth culture are rife throughout the film's exploration of adolescent anxieties. Kayla (Elsie Fisher), the lead character of *Eighth Grade* bears the typical awkwardness and social anxiety many teenagers experience at the start of their teen years; what makes *Eighth Grade* standout, however, is its effectiveness as a social commentary on young people's cohabitation with social media as well as the interstitial angst Kayla bears in making the next step into high school. Kayla battles with 'a complicated social world that seems to exclude her, and that shifts seamlessly between her real life and her social media feeds' (Miner, 2018) her anxiety exposes the effects social media consumption has on teen identity formation. The anxiety Kayla harbours within the film highlights the impact of social media and technology has had on young people's mental health as 'rates of teen depression and suicide have skyrocketed since 2011. It's not an exaggeration to describe iGen as being on the brink of the worst mental-health crisis in decades. Much of this deterioration can be traced to their phones' (Twenge, 2017).

Burnham succeeded in creating a film that reflected the genuine portrayals of contemporary youth angst, alienation and anxiety as well as their causes through extensively researching self-help vlogs made by young people and incorporating that into his narrative. In an interview with Burnham he discloses his methodology in crafting his youth-centric narrative:

> 'the really incredible thing is that if you want to find out what [contemporary eight graders] are like, they post their entire lives online. I don't have to go to a middle school and creep around. The internet has made research much, much easier' (Mulcahey, 2018).

A similar trope is also seen in *Easy A* as protagonist Olive uses the platform to talk about her problems involving being stigmatised for being mislabelled as promiscuous. Burnham's methodology in his preproduction of the film highlights the duality of social media's function within society. For one, in the film, Kayla uses social media to discuss her feelings, anxieties and advice to her audience which she probably would struggle to communicate in the real world. However, social media is also one of the main reasons she struggles to be happy 'while Kayla wants to connect with others, she seems to use technology as a substitute for actual human contact or a distraction from her loneliness. Her experience reflects that of millions of kids who turn to technology as a way to connect socially — only to find that it makes them feel more isolated' (Miner, 2018). *Eighth Grade* speaks volumes about the real-life social problems affecting young people through its representation of Kayla's mental health as symbolism for social media's impact on young people's lives. As evidence suggests 'Eighth-graders who spend 10 or more hours a week on social media are 56 percent more likely to say they're unhappy than those who devote less time to social media' (Twenge, 2017). At one point in the film, Kayla cuts her thumb on her cracked phone screen which could easily be a metaphor for the damaging effect that social media has on her and many other teens across the world.

As with the very nature of the mise en scéne, the use of camera shots, dialogue, score and nearly all aspects of film production can be interpreted by an audience through many different perspectives. Film auteurs use semiotics to produce various subjective meanings

throughout their compositions, allowing for a polysemic style of filmmaking that results in scenes having many layers of meaning for the audience to interpret. *Eighth Grade* successfully uses its non-diegetic score to further imply the negative attributes of social media and technology with a score that utilises pure electronic sounds, void of acoustic instruments. In an interview with Burnham regarding the production of *Eighth Grade* he stated how: 'I really wanted an electronic score. I didn't want the score to be plucking strings and a glockenspiel. I didn't want the score to make it cute' (Mulcahey, 2018). The use of a digital-centric score metaphorically represents how ingrained technology is in these young people's lives as it both constantly in the background of the film as well as the lives of the teenagers. The cinematography of the film also succeeds in representing this motif as the film is shot in with very sharp and realistic cinematography through being filmed digitally rather than through celluloid. Burnham comments upon this choice within his interview 'we didn't want to try to make the movie look like we shot on celluloid. We wanted to lean into the fact that this is a digital film, because this is a digital story' (Mulcahey, 2018). The effect of this incredibly sharp and digital void of stylistic filters and colour grading exposes the teenagers for who they are with acne, greasy skin and imperfections not seen on the filter obsessed social media sites.

During the closing credits the camera pans from an extreme closeup of a single pixel, slowly panning away to reveal a larger picture made up of thousands more pixels. This may be Burnham's method of suggesting how society needs to take a step back and examine the effects of digital technology to see the literal larger picture of how it affects everyone rather than just an individual like Kayla. Burnham also uses non-diegetic music as a means of expressing how social media has become something of a spiritual experience for young people through his use of the song *Orinoco Flow* within a scene of Kayla getting lost in the social media world on her phone 'Burnham decided the tune, with its repetitive hook ("sail away, sail away, sail away"), would make the sequence "feel religious, which was what I

wanted it to feel like," adding, "browsing the internet for [Kayla] is, like, spiritual."' (Blickley, 2018).

The rise of social media sites' total dominance over young people's mindsets has led to a whole barrage of different issues abruptly emerging at the turn of the millennium. Social media has generated a need for young people to follow trends, articulate a perfect online persona, as well as conform to an unrealistic set of beauty standards manifested by photoshopped images of social media influencers. The pressure to have a perfect online profile has generated two identities for teenagers: their real-world identity and their social media persona. The pressure of balancing both these personas has led to a whole host of different mental illnesses festering such as issues with self-confidence, body dysmorphia and depression. These seemingly impossible goals to reach ideal beauty standards are fuelled by the fact that 'in many schools the most important factors influencing a teenager's status are largely inherited: athletic ability for men and good looks for women' (Milner, 2004, p.40), the online world only propagates this to a higher degree. *Eighth Grade* is very successful in presenting these issues through the perspective of young people with its portrayal of a young adolescent within a media-saturated society.

Although technology has long been stigmatised as one of the key causes of present-day mental health issues, social media has provided young people with an effective outlet to produce their own self-help content. Through using mediums such as podcasts and vlogs, young people can directly discuss their mental health issues to help those who may be struggling themselves as, 'web-based video sharing sites are providing an opportunity for cultural change' (Ellis, 2012, p.185). There are thousands of vloggers across the world that share their vital stories to young people, helping them to feel part of a community where they can share their own stories and seek help and guidance; 'unlike typical diaries or journals, blogs are characterised by community and encourage dialogue via the contribution of comments' (Ellis, 2012, p.186). *Eighth Grade* gives self-help vlogs a wider platform for

younger people to seek out, and even make their own as ‘illness blogs are an important function of this new form of communication because they allow people experiencing illness to share their day-by-day, hour-by-hour feelings while gaining and sharing information and emotional support’ (Ellis, 2012, p.186). Through using video diaries, as opposed to narration, the audience is placed into the mindset of the characters but remain in the world of a film, making it seem that much more potent and realistic, which is crucial to the representation of mental health, ‘as an extension of blogging, video-sharing sites such as YouTube provide an important opportunity to address social discrimination particularly in relation to stereotypes of mental illness’ (Ellis, 2012, p.186). Although social media is blamed for a lot of the issues young people have today, it has allowed young people, such as the character of Kayla who struggles with anxiety and is voted the quietest in her whole class, to have a voice in the real world to express themselves more confidently.

Eighth Grade also depicts issues of sexual consent in the wake of the #MeToo movement. Often within the teen genre scenes of sexual assault are presented as light-hearted juvenile behaviour, as seen within *Back to the Future* (Zemeckis,1984) where Biff attempts to sexually assault Marty’s mother, Lorraine, which is presented as, primarily, an opportunity for Marty to save the day. *Eighth Grade’s* depiction of sexual consent however is shown through an uncomfortable, yet realistic manner since she is with someone she already knows and assumes is safe. During the scene Kayla is driven home by an older boy who puts pressure on her to perform a sexual act upon him, despite her young age and obvious discomfort; Kayla even apologises to the older boy for not preforming a sex act on him, to which the boy lets her feel even worse about her anxieties. The pressure to perform a sexual act upon him further develops Kayla’s interstitial angst through being thrust into an adult situation whilst still being so young. The scene is crucial for younger female viewers as it shows sexual assault can happen at any age and with people you believe are safe; *Eighth Grade* highlights the systematic abuse many young girls are subjected to at such early ages. The film respectfully represents issues of consent in the wake of the #MeToo movement,

providing such an important representation for women of all ages to relate to. *Eighth Grade* raises an important discussion about consent, that would rarely be taught at school or even by parents, despite evidence from ‘a 2017 survey by the girl guiding Girlguiding movement confirmed the committee’s grim conclusions – 64% of girls and women aged 13 to 21 had experienced sexual harassment at school in the previous year’ (Weale, 2019).

Through incorporating symbolism within their narratives, metaphorical content as represented through the mental health of adolescents assists in portraying issues that can avoid censorship, as well as discussing adult themes making them more palatable for younger audiences to view such as *Eighth Grade*. Although many metaphorical representations have been criticised for their inaccuracies in representing mental health, for some young people mental health can be impossible to identity, especially within themselves, as well as discussing openly. Metaphorical representations of certain feelings and mental health issues can be a necessity in representing young people’s emotions and, in turn, what these emotions may represent in a wider cultural discourse surrounding mental health. Many young people would keep these poignant issues to themselves, highlighting the greater need for metaphorical content within the teen gerne in discussing mental health.

Chapter V - The Elephant in the room.

Violence, Alienation and Anti-establishment within the teen genre

Out of all of the issues explored throughout the body of this thesis, none have been more volatile than the subject matter of *Elephant* (Van Sant, 2003). Van Sant released *Elephant* in reaction to the Columbine massacre responding to the vast media discourses that followed; the film utilises a unique narrative in its presentation of different perspectives of a fictional school shooting. The theorist Lester discusses *Elephant*'s cultural potency concerning America's youth within post-Columbine America, the event manifested 'the cultural abandonment of American youth to a culture that refuses to invest in public institutions and spaces that promote and educate our youth to develop agency in social relationships is eerily reflected in Gus Van Sant's post Columbine film Elephant' (Lester, 2006, p. 143). Lester's statement perfectly encapsulates how the disenfranchised youth of America could resort to the drastic and cataclysmic choices portrayed within the film *Elephant*.

The film is a clear reactional piece of work designed to ignite discussion and debate surrounding the 1999 school shooting at Columbine High School, Colorado. *Elephant* presents its audience with a variety of different perspectives of the film's narrative through the eyes of multiple students. The multinarrative perspective highlights the mass debate surrounding the Columbine shooting with many different sides, arguments and perspectives perpetuated by the media. *Elephant*'s nonlinear narrative reflects the many factors suggested as the cause of the Columbine Massacre as theorised by the media. The theorist Bassett remarks on *Elephant*'s multi-narrative technique: 'indeed, while many possible triggers or motivations are presented in the film, none of them is presented as commensurate with the events they might have provoked, and none of them is presented as likely to be determining' (2007, p. 165).

The film's polarising reception and various controversies led it to become one of the most debated films of the early 2000s; upon its release '*Elephant* was well received in some circles, winning the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. But other critics derided the movie, saying it seemed to be exploiting the Columbine tragedy' (Condon, 2005). The film succeeds in providing an important social commentary on the state of the American education system in relation to the treatment of its students' mental health. Elephant's unhinged content as well as attempting to rationalising the psychopathic motives of the real-life shooters provides important discourse surrounding adolescent mental health.

In identifying Van Sant's choice for the multiple viewpoints within the film an old fable, as well as the title itself, *Elephant*, conjures relevant metaphor in understanding the multinarrative production:

> 'Van Sant reputedly understood the naming of the original film to refer to an old tale in which a group of blind men meet an elephant, each man connecting with one part of the beast, feeling its ears, its trunk, its legs, or its tusks. The result of this partial contact is that each of them comprehends the elephant in their own way' (Basset, 2007, p. 180).

Elephant's relation to this fable can be overtly compared to the media's extreme reaction during the aftermath of the Columbine shootings; nearly every factor of the boys' (Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold) lives were scrutinised as an element to them committing the atrocities, from their consumption of media, video games and films, to their peculiar fashion choices. American newspapers, such as the Washington Post, framed the boys as 'members of a small clique of outcasts who always wore black trench coats and spent their entire adolescence deep inside the morose subculture of Gothic fantasy' (Brockell, 2009). Another news outlet, The Denver Post, described the boys as 'interested in the occult, mutilation, shock-rocker Marilyn Manson and Adolf Hitler' (Brockell, 2009). All of these external factors, except for the boys' mental health, were scrutinised and debated by the media as the motive for their atrocities, despite further insights into the background of Klebold which highlighted

his battle with mental health issues as a possible cause of his alienation. In an interview with Peter Langman, a child psychologist suggested that '"the biggest eye-opener was the extent to which Dylan Klebold really was mentally disturbed. That was not in the literature, not in the media accounts. To realize that, you had to see his journal"' (The Denver Post, 2009).

The name of the film *Elephant* is also in reference to the common parable of "the elephant in the room" which suggests how certain subjects that are deemed uncomfortable and sensitive, such as a school shooting, are often ignored and consciously hidden by an individual or society; in reality, it is near impossible to hide something as sizeable and macabre as a mass shooting. Within the film, there is a scene within Eric's room where a poster of an elephant is seen plastered on his wall. The combination of both the iconography of this scene, as well as the film's title, could be interpreted as the sensitivity surrounding the debate becoming the elephant in the room itself. The poster could also be seen as a metaphor for how the massacre is a constant fixture in the background for many Americans in what can be seen as a cultural trauma still haunting the American high school to this day.

The Columbine Massacre is as prevalent within American cultural trauma as 9/11, the slave trade and even the assassination of JFK; *Elephant* exists as the cinematic embodiment of Columbine's potency as one of the largest cultural traumas within American culture. Across the teen genre, television shows such as *13 Reasons Why's* storyline of a potential school shooting, as well as the biopic film of the real-life columbine victim, Rachel Scott, in *I'm Not Ashamed* (Baugh, 2016) provide a postmodernist reflection on the 1999 massacre through their unique presentation of school shootings where the focus is not on the tragedy, but the students themselves. The television show *Glee* (Murphey, 2009) also incorporates a school shooting episode where an accidental gunshot creates mass paranoia around the school highlighting the immense fear and anxiety many American teens still have whilst at school.. American culture has never fully recovered from Columbine, ever since the tragedy 'the United States has seen more than 230 school shootings, not including ones at colleges or

universities, according to data from the Washington Post' (Zegers, 2019) highlighting the minimal progress the country has made to prevent further shootings other than bulletproof backpacks.

In terms of the *Elephant*'s actual content, the multinarrative perspective is vital in exploring the Columbine tragedy, a topic many studios would not have dared replicate at the time. *Elephant* begins with a serene, almost mundane, drive to school with John, the bright blonde-haired teen, and his father. It is only as the car begins to swerve and has a near collision with a cyclist does *Elephant's* dark undertones begin to emerge. The juxtaposition of the calm, almost inaudible, commute with the near-miss of a collision with a cyclist may act as the perfect foreshowing of how a calm, and almost perfect, suburban neighbourhood can suddenly be the setting for death. The juxtaposition reflects how a school, which is supposed to be a place of safety and growth, can become an epicentre of death.

Within *Elephant*, the teenagers are purposely separated from the adults, as 'the film seems to hint that adults have left teenagers to mostly fend for themselves in a harsh world' (Condon, 2005) both physically when the teenagers are left to fend for themselves, and emotionally due to their incompetency in how they treat their students' mental wellbeing. The abandonment of the youths relates wholly to the interstitial angst the teens face as they are placed within in an environment that is more commonly seen in a warzone, not a place of learning. As John arrives late at school, due to his drunk father, he is harshly punished by the principal when in reality it should be his father being reprimanded. John is unfairly 'admonished and detained by the school principal, who passes judgement on this student's aberrant behaviour without inquiring into reasons or offering any assistance' (Lester, 2006, P. 144). Van Sant may be alluding to the discussion that it is not solely the fault of the students for the school shootings, but in fact, adults and greater society are equally as guilty in how they make it so easy to obtain guns, ignore clear red flags, and let children develop psychological disorders through abuse and neglect.

Within *Elephant*'s opening scene John 'drives the car to school and seizes the car keys from his irresponsible father. Emphasising the reversal of roles' (Lester, 2006, P. 143) and further extenuating the interstitial angst John contends with in having to adopt the adult role from his father similar to James Dean's strife within the staircase scene within *Rebel Without A Cause*. The role reversal produces an important metaphor on how the adults in the world are behaving like children as well as the children performing adult activities such as shooting and driving producing an analogy for how the real-world adults treat school shootings. Van Sant's choice in framing the adults in the film as incompetent helps rationalise how students in real life are being neglected by the education system and society and how this alienation can lead to the actions of the school shooters. Across the entire narrative, 'few adults appear in the film, and when they do, they seem for type most part to blunder or abdicate their role as elders whose responsibility is to convey meaning and purpose to the next generation' (Lester, 2006, P. 143).

At this point in the film, it is not clear who the shooters are, and from John's almost Aryan appearance, with his bright blonde hair and blue eyes, interstitial angst and problematic family life the audience could easily assume John is the shooter based on school shooter stereotypes perpetuated by the media. This motif occurs many times throughout the film as many of the teenagers within the school resemble typical nonconformist angst-ridden stereotypes the media has demonised, from breakdancing students wearing hoodies to conceal their face, to goths sporting leather and piercings. Throughout the film, there are many red herrings used to conceal the identity of the shooters, the function of which, prompts the audience to make their own assumptions as to who the perpetrators will be comparable to how the media makes these assumptions on a person's background or demographic.

Within a scene before the shooting, a group of students are caught up in a debate about how to identify someone who is homosexual. The camera slowly pans in a circular motion as the group discusses how to identify a homosexual person based on their looks and demeanour, which of course is nonsense and based upon offensive stereotypes. The scene also relates to previously discussed debate of how an environment such as the high school can have an enormous impact on identity formation for the LGBT+ community though concealing their identity as well as being ridiculed for it. This particular scene stands out within the film as it is similar to the discussion of identifying school shooters by their appearances. The media stereotyped Harris and Klebold on their unique dress sense and behaviour, when in reality there was no correlation between this fabricated stereotype and the mental health of the shooters. As a result of stereotypes relating to school shooters those on the autistic spectrum can often be alienated by their peers as a result of their difficulty fitting in with mainstream society as many media outlets will often vilify those on the autistic spectrum despite the fact that ‘there is no established connection between autism and murder, some eagerly leapt to causality and scapegoating’ (Solomon, 2015). Figures prove that there is no link between suffering from mental illnesses and partaking in violent crime as ‘fewer than 5 percent of gun crimes are committed by people with mental illness; fewer than 5 percent of people with mental illnesses commit violent crimes’ (Solomon, 2015). The real cause of shootings could well be attributed to the treatment that those suffering from mental illnesses are subjected to by their peers. From factors such as bullying to isolation, those who struggle with mental illnesses have their symptoms magnified from the treatment they receive within the high school, something which is wholly reflected within *Elephant*. The media itself can be seen as a major culprit in encouraging further shootings, as in the aftermath of the shooting Roger Edger identified within his review of the film: ‘the message is clear to other disturbed kids around the country: If I shoot up my school, I can be famous. The TV will talk about nothing else but me. Experts will try to figure out what I was thinking’ (Edger, 2003).

During a long single take, the jock-type character, Nathan, is filmed casually strolling through the school gradually building dramatic tension as to when the shooting will commence. There is then a short sequence in which members of what appears to be a group of stereotypical jocks partake in a game of American Football, becoming increasingly violent and aggressive with one another. The action of the Jocks represents how normalised violence and competition between students has become within the education system producing analogies of the effects of Neoliberalism as a possible cause of the shootings. Physical violence and athletic dominance are all but encouraged throughout the high school by both teachers and parents representing the Neoliberalist values embedded within the high school. Unhealthy competition between students is constantly encouraged throughout the high school which creates clear divisions between winners and losers. Within the film Eric and Alex are the losers, they have failed to adapt to the Neoliberalist values within the school resulting in their alienation and motive for the shooting.

As Nathan proceeds to walk around the school, he is accompanied by a nondiegetic composure of Beethoven's classic *Moonlight Sonata* which effectively foreshadows the demise of himself and his fellow students. The composition of *Moonlight Sonata* is likened to that of a funeral procession by the poet Heinrich Rellstab, in which he states that the composition has 'a misleading approach to a movement with almost the character of a funeral march' (The Oxford Dictionary of Music, 2013). The sombre music tone foreshadows the massacre perfectly and provides a calm before the storm motif. The score of *Elephant* sets the film apart from the majority of high school films filled with pop-punk anthems of angst-filled lyrics.

The calmness and normality of the school in *Elephant* suggests how this is just a normal school; there is no class on Nazism or a gun range practice at recess as the media would like its viewers to assume. It's a regular school and normal things are happening; 'it is interesting to note the title outside the building reads simply "High School", letting this

particular school represent every high school' (Wedding, 2010, P. 159). Even though Van Sant's uses incredibly graphic and senseless violence within the film, it does not follow any typical conventions of the action genre, having no heroes or saviours to protect the children from evil. Within the film there is a scene, which due to the monotonous repetition of the action genre, the audience expects Benny, a student, to save the day and stop the shooters, however, as Benny approaches Eric as he is about to execute one of his teachers, he is immediately killed in a futile act of valour. Even in the event of a death, the action genre uses a character's sacrifice as a tool to forward the narrative of another character's quest, such as Obi-wan Kenobi sacrificing himself to help Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars.* Within *Elephant*, Benny dies a worthless death with his only victory reducing the amount of bullets Eric has at his disposal. This failed sacrifice challenges the typical conventions of the action genre, placing *Elephant* in an entirely different calibre of cinema that humanises the story rather than producing a spectacle that the action genre produces. The film critic Ebert further explores this typical scene:

> 'All of our experience as filmgoers leads us to believe this action will have definitive consequences; the kid embodies all those movie heroes who walk into hostage situations and talk the bad guy out of his gun. But it doesn't happen like that, and Van Sant sidesteps all the conventional modes of movie behavior and simply shows us sad, sudden death without purpose' (Ebert, 2003).

This scene sets *Elephant* apart from similar violent films as the film does not follow the typical narrative conventions that Hollywood produces. There is no happy ending or clear conclusion to the narrative akin to the real-life events.

Elephant's final sequence ends on a cliff-hanger where Alex is situated between the natural frames of two doorways as he is about to kill two students [Appendix VI]. The cinematography of this scene could be producing a double-entendre of how the media has framed the real-life shootings through many different perspectives, as well as the isolation Alex would have felt in the weeks leading to the massacre. Framing characters within natural frames is a concept seen throughout the Western genre with characters such as John

Wayne in *The Searchers* (Ford, 1956) demonstrating the postmodernist aspect of the film recontextualising the Western within a high school setting. At the end of his violent and chaotic gunslinging journey, Wayne's character, Ethan, returns home after the events of the film have transpired and during the final scene, he is situated within the natural frame of a doorway [Appendix VII], similar to Alex in *Elephant*. The symbolism of the framing may represent how Ethan has become an outcast due to the toll of his journey, he stands in the doorway refusing to go inside. Ethan's hesitancy suggests he has no home, he does not know how to live a normal life now as a result of the violence he has endured. Within *Elephant* the symbolism of the similar gunslinging Alex trapped within a doorway could allude to how America's violent past is preventing it from healing and reconciling with its gun violence epidemic. The ambiguous ending could also be suggesting how the violence Alex has committed has instilled a permanent sense of interstitiality within his psyche, preventing him from ever having his adolescence back, and by extension this represents the entire youth of America. The final scene ends on a cliff-hanger cutting to the credits where all that can be seen is a cloudy sky which may be Van Sant's choice to suggest how the real-life events are hazy and clouded and that there is not any clear answer or conclusion to the tragedy.

In 2005, *Elephant* was at the centre of controversy after a school shooting in Red Lake, Minnesota. The perpetrator, Jeff Weise, had viewed the film only 17 days prior to the shooting and, as a result, *Elephant* was blamed for being one of the many influences that led him to carry out the atrocity. Various 'media accounts reported that Jeff listed this film on a website profile as one of his favourites and watched the video a couple of weeks before the shootings, skipping to the end, according to a friend, to focus on the rampage' (Lester, 2006, P. 143). Generally, Hollywood has a habit of making villains look attractive and desirable, such as the many James Bond villains sporting rich, lavish lifestyles, or the charming Hannibal Lecter whose polite demeanour and superior intelligence detracts from his heinous crimes as a murderous cannibal. The repercussions that may have manifested if Van Sant's

Elephant glorified the shooting could have elevated the profile of the real killers to that of cult status and be blamed for influencing more shootings of this nature, the very thing Van Sant went out to criticise in the first place. If *Elephant* was made by a larger film studio, they could have made the violence a spectacle, rather than displaying the important anti-violence message as 'there is no pumped-up style, no lingering, no release, no climax. Just implacable, poker-faced, flat, uninflected death … Van Sant has made an anti-violence film by draining violence of energy, purpose, glamor, reward and social context' (Ebert, 2003).

A film with a similar scene concerning school shooting, though tonally completely different, is seen within *The Basketball Diaries*. Within the film, there is a dream sequence in which Jim (Leonardo DiCaprio) massacres his teacher and fellow students in an action-packed succession of smoke, guns and slow-motion sequences. The film is a perfect example of how Hollywood presents serious issues through the guise of a fantasy style of filmmaking. During the shooting scene, the set is lit in a dark, sombre tone to make the sequence seem more atmospheric and dreamlike, as well as Jim being dressed in a fashionable leather outfit [Appendix VIII], all whilst nondiegetic rock music plays in the background making Jim look heroic. By comparing this scene directly with *Elephant*'s, the contrast between Hollywood and Van Sant's text is obvious. In *Elephant* the boys wear casual clothing they have worn for practical reasons, rather than Jim's fashionable attire. The boys always flinch when they shoot, holding the weapons awkwardly when they fire, whereas Jim holds and fires a shotgun onehandedly for dramatic effect when realistically this is highly impractical. The lighting and set of the school in *Elephant* are lit as though a real school would be, as well as the cinematography and minimal editing creating less of a spectacle on violence and grounding the setting as a documentative piece rather than fiction.

The production and stylistic aspects of *Elephant* are very similar to certain aspects of cinema verité through the film's use of simple camera shots, characters, lighting and casting of local, unknown actors. The effect of utilising certain elements attributed to cinema verité in many

of *Elephant's* narrative and production arguably produces a more ordinary style of filmmaking allowing the subject matter to appear more grounded in a documentary-style of filmmaking rather than a work of fiction. Throughout the film, Van Sant 'uses long-tracking shots, low lighting, non-linear, non-narrative structure, and multiple perspectives to create a pseudo-documentary or cinema Verité presentation of what appears to be an ordinary day in the life of an ordinary middle-class high school' (Lester, 2006, p. 143). The violence portrayed in the film is shocking, to say the least, but the film presents violence in a mundane way, as opposed to Hollywood's fantastical view of violence. The verité style of filmmaking is paramount to *Elephant's* principles; the film offers no closure to the killings and instead leaves the viewers with a sense of ambiguity as to what the film represents as seen in the film's credits. Van Sant purposely leaves a lot of unanswered questions throughout the film, which is more in line with the real Columbine, leaving the ambiguity up to the interpretation of the viewer. Even films based upon real-life events such as *Titanic* (Cameron, 1997), *The Impossible* (Singer, 2018) or a biopic such as *Rocketman* (Fletcher, 2019) rely heavily on elements of fantasy, CGI and sensationalism to make their stories more palatable for a wider audience. Despite *Elephant* being a unique narrative, it feels truer to life than most Hollywood productions of "true life" stories through its cinema verité style of cinematography, and unfiltered narrative.

Alan Clarke and Danny Boyle's coproduction of *Elephant* (1989) provided an important influence on Van Sant's *Elephant*, 'the film that provided the title—not to mention the formal and emotional strategy—for Gus Van Sant's ethereal meditation on Columbine' (Lim, 2004), explores a similar narrative, cinematography and thematic approach to presenting violence to that of Van Sant's *Elephant*. In Clarke and Boyle's *Elephant*, the film explores the violence seen across Northern Ireland during the period of ethno-nationalist conflict, known as The Troubles. The 1989 film 'depicts a series of sectarian killings in Northern Ireland with a provocative combination of suspense and affectlessness' (Lim, 2004). The use of minimal dialogue, no character exposition, cinema verité style of cinematography and reconstructing

real-life crimes of The Troubles is a clear influence on Van Sant's *Elephant*. Clarke and Boyle's '*Elephant* is detached and diagrammatic to the point of abstraction—it pares a cycle of senseless violence down to cruel, anonymous geometry' (Lim, 2004). The violence in both *Elephant* films demonstrates how violence does not manifest itself from the actions of an individual, but as a factor of the environment, these characters inhabit, whether that be a divided Ireland or a dysfunctional education system.

Each component and character of Van Sant's film is consciously used to provide a critique of one of the many different perspectives of the real-life shootings, it is no accident that the character Elias is a photographer. Elias could easily be seen as a metaphor for the media's many perspectives on Columbine, with the many scenes where Elias is seen taking pictures of various students, as well as the killers themselves. Elias is seen many times to frame his subjects through the lens of his camera, choosing exactly how he wants his subjects to be presented, which is akin to the many different perspectives of the shooting the media generated. The fact Elias uses a film camera instead of digital, despite relatively easy and cheap access to digital cameras, even in 2003, could be a plot device used to comment on the media's outdated view of the Columbine tragedy and its understanding of mental health. To further illustrate *Elephant*'s criticism on the media aftermath, Elias enters a dark room to develop his film away from the violence and is literally 'in the dark' of the events happening right outside the door, which could be Van Sant's further criticism of the media's understanding of the school shooters' mental health.

In the wake of the tragedy, the media produced countless debates calling for the censorship of violent video games, such as *Mortal Kombat* (Boon, 1992), or *Doom* (Hall, 1993), or censoring films and musicians such as Marilyn Manson due to his violent lyrics. Manson discusses the Columbine incident in the 2002 Michael Moore documentary *Bowling for Columbine* (2002). Manson himself in an interview said: 'I wouldn't say a single word to them. I would listen to what they have to say and that's what no one did' (Manson, 2002).

Manson's comments illustrate how empathy and understanding teens feelings are the key to prevent these tragic events and how young people being ignored is one of the major factors for the shooting. There are many signs within the film that the boys are planning something untoward; throughout the film, many superficial distractions are preventing the characters from noticing the warning signs, from a playful dog to gossiping at lunch. Van Sant may be portraying the message that if society took more notice and listened to the boys then the tragedy could have been avoided as throughout the film 'there are hints of the anger they feel. One of the boys is bullied by a student who throws spitballs at him. The other plays a violent video game. But the director's touch is light: Van Sant isn't blaming their massacre on either bullying or violent video games. Instead, he offers issues to think about' (Doland, 2003).

Elephant's legacy has offered varying perspectives on school shootings and what constitutes to a person's psyche to make them possibly want to carry out an atrocity of that magnitude; 'it offers no explanation for the tragedy, no insights into the psyches of the killers, no theories about teenagers or society or guns or psychopathic behavior. It simply looks at the day as it unfolds' (Egbert, 2003). As for the multiple perspectives on the causing of the shooting, 'the point is that we don't know and are given no clue. The killings happen, and so an ordinary day turns into an extraordinary one, apparently randomly or "just because"' (Bassett, 2007, p. 165). Van Sant may be suggesting that there is no overriding reason for the shootings to have taken place and that a person's mental health can be affected by many different aspects that cannot be generalised as simple angst or depression.

Violence within the teen genre is not a unique conception to *Elephant*; one of the earlier representations of violence in the high school is seen within *Blackboard Jungle* during the climactic showdown between the student, West, and Mr Dadier, demonstrating the extreme reaction to alienation some students may experience. Fast-forward to today, and violence has become almost entirely normalised within the teen genre, as well as being more explicit

than ever before. A similar reflective film concerning school shootings can be seen within the psychological thriller *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (Ramsey, 2011). The film opens up discourse surrounding the nature vs nurture argument concerning violence within the high school through a mother's retrospective view of her son who has orchestrated a massacre at his school. *We Need to Talk About Kevin* provides a more macro view on the factors influencing the massacre through the film's mother/son relationship exploring how dysfunctional family life could have constituted Kevin's actions. Within the film Kevin's father is absent for the vast majority of his life, as well as his mother, who struggles throughout Kevin's life to bond with him, as well as physically assaulting him at an early age. The film suggests that the many small factors that instilled interstitial angst within Kevin's' childhood could have constituted to his psychopathic tendencies to commit a school shooting. Within *Elephant,* as previously discussed*,* John clearly has parental issues at home as Van Sant alludes to through his father's drinking problems, as well as the role reversal of children looking after parents. Within *Elephant,* the purpose of the film is to raise the many issues that could constitute a student's decision to partake in a school shooting. *Elephant* combines both the nature vs nurture debate within its narrative, though producing no clear delineation between the two leaving it up to the interpretation of the audience to create their own conclusion.

Due to the high frequency of school shootings and violence across America since Columbine, many American citizens and their media outlet have become so accustomed to school shootings that it has seemingly become a normal aspect of American life. Within *Eighth Grade* there is a scene where the students practice a school shooting drill by hiding under the desks, though their reaction to the drill is to simply go on their phones and nonchalantly chat with one another. Burnham may be suggesting how school shootings have desensitised American society becoming as normal as a fire drill were nobody seems to treat it as anything out of the ordinary. A similar storyline is portrayed throughout an entire season of the satirical cartoon series *South Park*. Throughout the season, the school life of

the children is constantly disrupted by shootings happening nearly every day. Humorously, due to desensitisation, the town has become oblivious to the shooting due to the sheer number happening across America. The townsfolk's attitudes towards school shootings become nonchalant and when Stan's mother raises concerns for the shootings and is met with ridicule by the townsfolk as they see the shootings as an almost daily occurrence. The show effectively satirises the real-life attitudes of many Americans and criticises how their culture still has failed to reconcile from past shootings as gun control is still barely restricted.

The motive for this representation can be traced back to the creators, Trey Parker and Matt Stone, living in the area close to the Columbine high school during the 1980/90s. In an interview for the documentary *Bowling for Columbine,* Trey Parker describes their hometown, Littleton, as "Painfully horribly average" validating how the area was no military training camp or favela; Columbine was situated within middle-class suburbs. Trey then comments on how the education system enforces neoliberalist factors within the students' lives, frightening them to succeed and making the cost of failure seem catastrophic: "The teachers and counsellors and principals don't help things, they scare you into doing, and conforming, and doing good in school by saying if you're a loser now you're gonna be a loser forever". These factors may have contributed to Harris and Klebold's actions as neoliberalism creates a massive strain on student's mental health.

It is only through the daring and experimental work of auteurs such as Van Sant, that these debates can continue to permeate throughout the media. The innovation of *Elephant*'s multi-narrative and cinema Verité helps provide important analogies and the fact that there is not any clear conclusion in the real world. Neoliberalism, interstitial angst, bullying and alienation are only a small proportion of the reasons suggested as the causes of Columbine, there is no clear answer as to why it happened, but it is only through further research, discussions and debates orchestrated by filmmakers such as Van Sant that society can get closer to rationalising the events on that fateful day in Columbine and subsequent atrocities.

Conclusion

The America teen genre has quickly become an exemplary microcosm for representing the many societal issues American society is imbued with. Tragic teens across various decades have all managed to represent the greater societal fears and social issues America is affiliated with. The teen genre allows a deeper exploration of the anxiety, angst and rebellion that overbearing parents, racist institutions, homophobia, Neoliberalism and extreme violence manifest within American teenagers. The medium of film and literature has provided a detailed and honest glimpse into the lives and mental health of young people snared within a toxic education system that produces countless societal issues. Fiction can be an effective means of shedding light onto the social injustices seen across American society; novels such as *The Catcher in The Rye* and *The Bell Jar*, to films such as *The Perks of Being A Wallflower* and *Eighth Grade,* all share similar stories of adolescents suffering from the same anxieties and trepidations, despite being produced in different decades, and their characters stemming from all walks of life.

These common denominators seen between characters that, on the surface, may seem to be complete binaries in terms of their social standing and personality, are shown to share intense similarities in terms of their experiences throughout the high school. Although a character like Chiron within *Moonlight* may seem on the opposite end of the spectrum compared to a character such as Kayla in *Eighth Grade,* their experiences growing up within American society, as well as how they are artificially forced to form their identity as a result of their environment share incredible similarities. Despite *Moonlight* being set in the 1980s/1990s, as well its focus on LGBT+ and African American issues, Chiron's story transcends both genres and cultural exclusivity, compared to Kayla's story of a white, middle class, heterosexual social media obsessed teenager's angst in a contemporary setting; on paper, these characters have nothing in common. Despite the obvious differences, both

these characters share the same feelings of interstitial angst and their stories demonstrate how the environment they exist in greatly influences their identity formation.

The same could be said for nearly all characters within the teen genre, from James Dean's role as Jim Stark in *Rebel Without a Cause,* to Troy Bolton and his internal dilemma of pursuing basketball or singing within *High School Musical*. These films, and conflicted teens, demonstrate how every student goes through the same rites of passage during their journey into adulthood. Even in 2021, media industries are still producing an abundance of content aimed for a teen market, and those of us who once remember being teens. Shows like *Sex Education* (Nunn, 2019) the fourth season of *Thirteen Reasons Why* (Yorkey, 2017), and romantic films such as *To All the Boys: P.S. I Still Love You* (Fimognari, 2020) continue to dominate the viewership of streaming sites such as Netflix, highlighting the genre's constant reign of popularity among adolescents, and those of us who still remember being young.

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All Quiet on the Western Front (1930) Directed by Lewis Milestone. United States, Universal Studios.

Almost Famous (2001) Directed by Cameron Crowe. United States, Columbia Pictures.

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American Pie (1999) Directed by Paul Weitz. United States, Summit Entertainment.

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Bowling for Columbine (2002) Directed by Michael Moore. United States, United Artists.

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Mid90s (2018) Directed by Jonah Hill. United States, A24.

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Precious (2010) Directed by Lee Daniels. United States, Lee Daniels Entertainment.

Pretty in Pink (1986) Directed by Howard Deutch. United States, Paramount Pictures.

Rebel Without a Cause (1954) Directed by Nicholas Ray. United States. Warner Bros.

Reservoir Dogs (1992) Directed by Quentin Tarantino. United States, Miramax Films.

Revenge of The Nerds (1984) Directed by Jeff Kanew. United States, 20th Century Fox.

Riverdale (2017) Directed by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa. United States, Berlanti Productions.

Rocketman (2019) Directed by Dexter Fletcher. United States, New Republic Pictures.

Romeo + Juliet (1995) Directed by Baz Lurhmann. United States, 20th Century Fox.

Rushmore (1998) Directed by Wes Anderson. United States, Touchstone Pictures.

Seven (1995) Directed by David Fincher. United States, Cecchi Gori Pictures.

Sex Education (2019) Directed by Laurie Nunn. Netflix, United Kingdom.

She's the Man (2006) Directed by Andy Fickman. United States, DreamWorks Pictures.

Sixteen Candles (1984) Directed by John Hughes. United States, Universal Pictures.

Slacker (1991) Directed by Richard Linklater. United States, Orion Classics.

So Bad, So Young (1950) Directed by Bernard Vorhaus., United States, Danziger Productions.

South Park (1997) Directed by Matt Stone & Trey Parker. United States, South Park Studios.

Split (2016) Directed by M. Knight Shyamalan. United States, Blumhouse Productions.

St Elmo's Fire (1985) Directed by Joel Schumacher. United States, Colombia Pictures.

Star Wars (1977) Directed by George Lucas. United States, Lucasfilm.

Stranger Things (2016) Directed by The Duffer Brothers. United States, Netflix.

Superbad (2007) Directed by Greg Mottola. United States, Sony Pictures.

Stonewall (1995) Directed by Nigel Finch. United Kingdom, BBC.

Taxi Driver (1976) Directed by Martin Scorsese. United States, Bill/Phillips Production.

Teen Wolf (1985) Directed by Rob Daniel. United States, Atlantic Releasing.

The Basketball Diaries (1995) Directed by Scott Kalvet. United States, Island Pictures.

The Blind Side (2010) Directed by John Lee Hancock. United States, Alcon Entertainment.

The Breakfast Club (1984) Directed by John Hughes. United States, A&M Films.

"The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson" (2017) Directed by David France. United States, Netflix.

The Dry Land (2010) Directed by Ryan Williams. United States, Maya Entertainment.

The Graduate (1967) Directed by Mike Nichols. United States, Mike Nichols/Lawerence Turman Productions.

The Hunger Games (2012) Directed by Gary Ross. United States, Lionsgate Films.

The Impossible (2018) Directed by J. A. Bayona. United States, Apaches Entertainment.

The Man with the Golden Arm (1955) Directed by Otto Preminger. United States, United Artists.

The Outsiders (1985) Directed by Francis Ford Coppola. United States, Zoetrope Studios.

The Perks of Being a Wallflower (2013) Directed by Stephan Chbosky. United States, Summit Entertainment.

The Searchers (1956) Directed by John Ford. United States, C.V. Whitney Pictures.

The Sign of the Cross (1932) Directed by Cecil B DeMille. United States, Paramount Pictures.

The Simpsons (1989) Directed by Matt Groening. United States, Gracie Films.

The Waterboy (1998) Directed by Frank Coraci. United States, Buena Vista Pictures.

The Wild One (1953) Directed by László Benedek. United States, Stanley Kramer Pictures Corp.

Thirteen (2003) Directed by Catherine Hardwicke. United States, Working Title Films.

Titanic (1997) Directed by James Cameron. United States, Paramount Pictures.

To All the Boys: P.S. I Still Love You (2020) Directed by Michael Fimognari. United States, Netflix.

Unfriended (2014) Directed by Gabriadze. Universal Picture, United States.

Wargames (1983) Directed by John Badham. United States, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

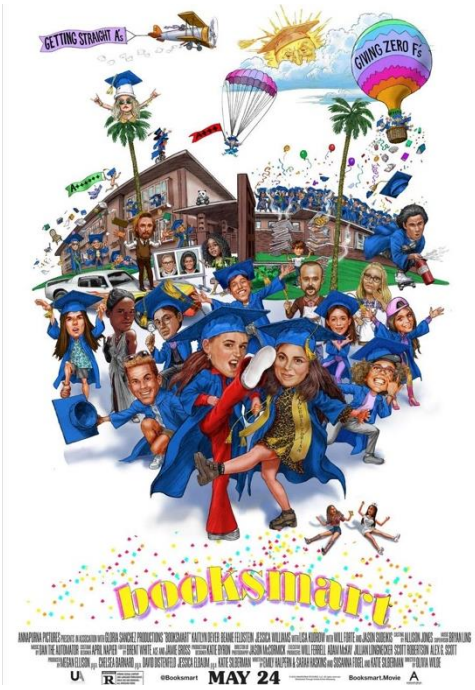
West Side Story (1961) Directed by Robert Wise. United States, Mirisch Pictures.

We Need to Talk About Kevin (2011) Directed by Lynne Ramsey. United States, BBC Films.

Youths Run Wild (1944) Directed by Mark Robson. United States, RKO Radio Pictures.

Appendices

Appendix I



Appendix II

Appendix III

Appendix IV

Appendix V

Appendix VI

Appendix VII

Appendix VIII