

Breaking Stereotypes: Representation and Identity in *Booksmart*

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Introduction

The teen comedy genre has long been a staple of American cinema, originating in the 1950s with films that centered on juvenile delinquency. Over the decades, the genre evolved into lighthearted portrayals of teenage life, solidifying tropes such as “the nerd” and “the jock”, and prioritizing stories centered on privileged white, heterosexual males. Female characters and LGBTQ+ identities were often sidelined to supporting roles or reduced to stereotypes. Despite this history, shifts in societal attitudes towards gender, sexuality, and diversity, particularly among Millennials and Gen Z in the 2010s, have pushed the genre to adopt more inclusive narratives.

Booksmart (2019), directed by Olivia Wilde, represents a turning point in the teen comedy genre, offering a refreshing take that challenges traditional and stereotypical film narratives. The coming-of-age comedy follows two high-achieving high school seniors, Amy and Molly, as they attempt to condense four years of missed high school experiences into one night of wild adventures. Unlike their peers, Amy and Molly had devoted themselves entirely to academics throughout four years of high school, only to realize that their classmates, who partied and had fun, still secured spots at prestigious colleges. Determined to experience one carefree night before graduation, they embark on a journey that disrupts their rigid self-perceptions and broadens their understanding of identity and social dynamics. By centering on strong female leads, normalizing LGBTQ+ representation, and presenting nuanced explorations of intersectionality, *Booksmart* speaks directly to a generation that values inclusivity and representation and accurately presents positive representations of intersectional identities.

Booksmart redefines the teen comedy genre by subverting traditional tropes and offering a nuanced portrayal of teenage identity. Through its depiction of multidimensional characters and their interactions, the film challenges stereotypes, emphasizes the fluidity of identity, and reflects broader societal shifts toward inclusion. Before diving into these theoretical frameworks, it is essential to understand the historical and cultural context of the teen comedy genre. By examining its evolution, we can better appreciate how *Booksmart* both draws from and challenges traditional conventions. To explore this argument, I will analyze the film using three key theoretical frameworks: social identity theory, intersectionality, and identity performance. Social identity theory examines how individuals categorize themselves and others into in-groups and out-groups, often reinforcing positive self-perceptions relative to others. Intersectionality acknowledges the compounded consequences of overlapping identities, such as gender, race, and sexuality, and how these identities intersect with systems of oppression. Lastly, identity performance explores how individuals enact and adapt their claimed identities in different social contexts, highlighting the multifaceted nature of identity.

This analysis employs a textual analysis methodology, focusing on key scenes, character interactions, and narrative elements to reveal how *Booksmart* exemplifies these theories. By unpacking the film's approach to identity and representation, this paper aims to demonstrate how *Booksmart* not only transforms the teen comedy genre but also reflects contemporary cultural values.

Literature Review

To fully understand how *Booksmart* transforms the teen comedy genre, it is essential to examine the historical context and evolution of the genre itself. A review of its origins and

dominant narratives highlights the exclusionary patterns that *Booksmart* disrupts, setting the stage for its innovations.

The teenage comedy genre has evolved greatly since it was first introduced in the 1950s. At the time, teen films were called ‘social problem films’, which often featured stories about juvenile delinquency. Examples include *The Wild One* (1953), *Rebel Without a Cause*, and *Blackboard Jungle* (both 1955) (O’Neill, 2016). As the genre forged itself further throughout the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, typical characteristics and stereotypes about the genre became clearer. Typical teen comedy films in the 1980s carried common character archetypes such as “the nerd” and “the jock” (O’Neill, 2016). Furthermore, traditional teen comedies were almost always centered around men. Amanda McGoldrick states that the “key storylines of the majority of these films concentrate on the charades of upper middle class white teens”. These films also often focus on male sexuality, especially the “accomplishment” of losing virginity, and “the girl as the tool through which this task is accomplished—a strategy that dehumanizes and de-individuates her” (McGoldrick, 2011). This emphasis on male-centric narratives highlights the need for films like *Booksmart*, which shifts the focus to female leads and rejects the dehumanizing portrayal of women as tools for male validation.

The dominance of white, middle-class, male characters shapes the genre of teen comedy’s themes and social commentary. These films largely exclude other kinds of identities, especially by stereotyping or marginalizing non-white characters and women. The protagonists of teen comedies are often portrayed as privileged white males whose hedonistic actions, like sexual conquests or destructive behavior, are depicted as rites of passage and entitlement, linked to a

sense of middle-class freedom and societal tolerance for their misconduct. In addition, the genre rarely addresses the social implications of this privilege, focusing instead on individual quests and ignoring broader consequences. This absence of social consciousness reinforces the privilege these white male characters enjoy, as they are seldom held accountable (Speed, 2010).

Beyond the teen comedy genre, traditional teen films have also reinforced patriarchal ideals, especially by promoting passive and dependent female characters, revolving around male characters and conventional romance plots (Santiago, 2013). The genre has historically been focused on men, with strong stereotypes and few films that have deviated from the traditional. The film industry in general has also been male-dominated overall. In a study conducted by the San Diego State University Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, the average percentage of films with female protagonists from 2002 to 2023 was 25.75% (Lauzen, 2024). Representation of women and gender diversity is clearly lacking, not only in teen comedy films specifically but in the broader film industry in general.

In terms of the diverse representation of sexualities, “homosexuality was rarely acknowledged in early American cinema” (Benshoff & Griffin, 2009). This statement is true for all early films, but especially in the teen comedy genre, which consistently included storylines centered around cisgender, heterosexual men, and stereotypical high school themes. However, as themes in the film industry shifted, societal attitudes towards diversity also changed.

Public opinion in the United States has become more accepting and open to same-sex relations over the past fifty years (Benshoff & Griffin, 2009). Between the 1970s and 2010s, attitudes in the U.S. toward gender roles in work and family became more egalitarian, as both high school students and adults increasingly supported mothers working and fathers choosing

flexible work arrangements. Data show that these shifts were largely influenced by time period (Donnelly et al., 2015). This reflects the changing attitudes of the 2010s, where American people generally became more open and accepting of same-sex relations, women in equal positions to men, and racial diversity. Additionally, a study found that younger generations, particularly Millennials and Gen Z, are generally more open to and aware of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) principles. They tend to have higher DEI levels, which include a stronger familiarity with DEI issues, a commitment to equity, and greater confidence in creating inclusive environments. In contrast, older generations like Baby Boomers and Gen X show lower DEI engagement, potentially due to fewer DEI-focused experiences and less exposure to inclusive practices in earlier stages of their lives (Muralidharan et al., 2024). This shows that not only are attitudes shifting with time passing, but also with the birthing of new generations. These generational shifts influenced films like *Booksmart*, which reflects a society increasingly open to diverse identities and narratives.

Unlike earlier films that centered on male characters and limited female roles, *Booksmart* showcases strong female leads whose growth is independent of male validation. This shift signals a genre evolution, aligning with today's values of diversity and inclusivity. *Booksmart* challenges traditional and stereotypical narratives, including new ideas like strong female leads and LGBTQ+ themes. The film aligns itself with the cultural shifts of the late 2010s, particularly regarding gender, sexuality, and diversity.

Kaitlen Johnson makes many great arguments about *Booksmart* changing the narratives of this genre. First, she acknowledges how the film starts like many others in the genre with certain familiar stereotypes and character archetypes. But, it quickly takes a turn from these

traditional narratives. For example, *Booksmart* frames the “delinquent” as academically driven. She argues that this “forces audiences to challenge preconceived ideas and depicts the characters as multidimensional” (Johnson 2023). Another aspect of teen film that *Booksmart* improves on is the act of sex and sexuality. Historically, teen films have shown narratives that created unrealistic expectations and representations of sex. *Booksmart*, however, includes protagonists of young women embracing their sexuality, consent, and awkwardness, in a realistic way.

In terms of sexuality, Johnson also discusses how *Booksmart* normalizes LGBTQ+ characters and representation, as one of the main characters, Amy, her sexuality is portrayed in a way without making it central to her identity. This normalized representation challenges the stereotypical portrayal of queer youth as sidelined or caricatured. Additionally, Johnson explores how this film emphasizes female friendship and growth over romantic narratives, distinguishing it from other films of this genre where female characters often find validation through male approval. Instead, Molly and Amy’s journey is about self-discovery and independence, which adds depth to female representation (Johnson 2023). Emma Morehouse argues that *Booksmart* is an example of ‘popular feminism’, which can be defined as the way feminism has become mainstream in culture but does not produce any meaningful change or action. Morehouse argues that the protagonists of the film, their “feminist attitudes are specific to the 2010s” and are an example of popular feminism (Morehouse 2022).

To understand how *Booksmart* subverts traditional genre tropes and provides a more inclusive portrayal of identity, it is essential to understand how it relates to social identity theory, intersectionality, and identity performance. These concepts offer valuable tools for exploring the

film's approach to identity and its critique of social categorizations and stereotypes historically embedded in the teen comedy genre.

Booksmart applies social identity theory to its characters and narrative in a variety of ways. By exploring specific scenes, the film's nuanced depiction of group dynamics and identity categories becomes clear. Social identity theory is defined as the “processes we use to categorize one another. [social identity theory] refers to the human tendency to label self and others based on individual and group identity (Allen, 2023). First, social identity theory acknowledges that identities are multidimensional and multifaceted. Amy's queer identity, which is depicted as a natural part of her character's identity rather than a separate “category”, aligns with social identity theory's recognition of multifaceted identities. This shows how one's social identity can consist of multiple identities.

This exploration of multifaceted identities through social identity theory naturally connects to the concept of intersectionality. As *Booksmart* highlights overlapping social categories such as gender, sexuality, and class, it showcases how these intersections shape individual experiences and relationships. The theme of intersectional identities is woven throughout this film. Intersectionality, in terms of identity, as defined by Brenda Allen, is “a concept that acknowledges complex, compounded consequences of belonging to more than one nondominant group” (Allen, 2023). First, as mentioned before, *Booksmart* is a film that not only features two main female characters and has a storyline and themes that deviate from the traditional teen comedy film genre, but also includes diverse representations of sexuality and race. Amy's identity as a queer woman intersects with her role as a high-achieving student, reflecting how overlapping identities shape individual experiences. The film's acknowledgment

of diverse identities, through characters' race, sexuality, and gender, positions it as a groundbreaking contribution to the genre.

While social identity theory and intersectionality examine the ways characters navigate societal labels and intersections of privilege and oppression, identity performance offers insight into how they actively shape and redefine their self-presentation in various social contexts.

Booksmart portrays this fluidity through Molly and Amy's evolving interactions with their peers. Identity performance is the notion that one consciously/unconsciously enacts her/his claimed/assigned identities in everyday interactions with others. Throughout *Booksmart*, the main protagonists actively perform their academic identity, presenting themselves as "serious students" who prioritize academic success. This identity, however, is challenged when they realize their peers who balanced academics with social life have also achieved their goals. This contrast pushes Molly and Amy to rethink their self-assigned identity as "nerdy overachievers" and explore other aspects of themselves on their final night before graduation. This shift in identity performance shows that these two protagonists in *Booksmart* break away from the "nerd" stereotype and explore and expand beyond a single, narrowly defined identity. Additionally, throughout the film, the two protagonists engage with various different kinds of people, each requiring different identity performances. For example, in interactions with their peers at parties, they tone down their academic identities, revealing the fluidity of identity in different contexts.

The evolution of the teen comedy genre reveals a historical pattern of exclusion and stereotyping, particularly of women and marginalized identities. Traditional teen comedies from the 1950s onward often centered around white, male protagonists, reinforcing patriarchal ideals

and limiting representations of gender and sexuality. These films depicted male hedonistic actions as rites of passage while sidelining female characters and LGBTQ+ identities, contributing to a narrow and exclusionary narrative framework.

However, as societal attitudes have shifted towards greater acceptance of diversity and inclusivity, especially among younger generations, the genre has begun to transform. *Booksmart* emerges as a significant departure from traditional teen comedies, showcasing strong female leads whose personal growth is independent of male validation. By normalizing LGBTQ+ representation and embracing intersectionality, the film reflects contemporary cultural values and challenges traditional genre conventions.

The application of social identity theory, intersectionality, and identity performance provides valuable frameworks for understanding how *Booksmart* constructs its characters and narratives. These theories highlight the film's exploration of multifaceted identities and the fluidity of self-perception in social contexts. These historical trends and societal shifts set the stage for *Booksmart*, a film that actively challenges these conventions. The following section applies theoretical frameworks to explore how the film achieves this transformation. By examining specific scenes and character dynamics, the primary research will explore how the film not only redefines the teen comedy genre but also offers a nuanced portrayal of teenage identity that resonates with modern audiences.

Discussion of Primary Research

Building upon the theoretical frameworks and historical context established in the literature review, the following analysis delves into a detailed examination of *Booksmart*. This section employs a textual analysis methodology to explore how the film embodies social identity

theory, intersectionality, and identity performance through its characters, narrative arcs, and key scenes. By scrutinizing specific interactions and moments within the film, the analysis aims to demonstrate how *Booksmart* not only challenges traditional teen comedy conventions but also provides a nuanced portrayal of teenage identity that resonates with contemporary audiences.

Social identity theory emphasizes how individuals categorize themselves and others into groups, often creating in-group and out-group distinctions. This concept is central to the character development of Amy and Molly. At the start of the film, Amy and Molly perceive themselves as part of an academic “in-group” contrasting their identity with peers they view as socially focused and academically indifferent. For example, in the early scene in the school bathroom, Molly overhears classmates mocking her seriousness. Their insults reveal Molly’s misjudgment of the social hierarchy: she assumes that her academic dedication places her at a higher social status. This moment forces her to question her self-perception and the value she places on academic achievement as the sole marker of success over social status. As the night and film unfold, Molly and Amy interact with various social groups, challenging their rigid identity as “nerdy overachievers”.

A pivotal moment occurs during Amy and Molly’s conversation with Jared, a wealthy but socially ostracized classmate. Jared is initially portrayed as a caricature of the wealthy outcast, flaunting his family’s wealth in misguided attempts to gain social acceptance, such as renting a yacht to host a party no one attends. Molly and Amy, firmly set in their academic “in-group,” view Jared through a lens of condescension, perceiving him as a shallow figure defined solely by his privilege. Their perception of him begins to shift when Jared reveals his vulnerability during a heartfelt conversation where he opens up about his insecurities and his longing for genuine

connection, explaining how his over-the-top gestures stem from a desire to be liked. This moment forces Molly and Amy to reconsider their preconceived notions about him. For Molly, in particular, this interaction serves as a catalyst for self-reflection. She begins to question her own rigid self-perception and how her academic identity has similarly been a barrier to connecting with others on a deeper level. This interaction exemplifies the in-group and out-group dynamics central to social identity theory, where individuals categorize themselves and others into distinct social groups, often reinforcing a sense of superiority over perceived outsiders.

Intersectionality examines how overlapping identities, such as gender, sexuality, and class, shape individual experiences. *Booksmart* integrates intersectionality through its diverse characters and storytelling. Amy's sexuality is portrayed naturally, without reducing her character to a stereotype. Her romantic storyline with Ryan demonstrates this balance. The scene at the pool party, where Amy awkwardly attempts to connect with Ryan, highlights her intersectional identity as a queer teenager navigating social pressures. While her queerness is part of her identity, it is not her defining feature; instead, her character is presented as multidimensional, reflecting an inclusive narrative approach. The film also critiques privilege through the lens of intersectionality. Molly's realization about her classmates' achievements, particularly those who balanced academics with social lives, reveals how structural advantages (such as wealth or social capital) often go unnoticed. This critique is evident in her interaction with Annabelle (Triple A), who reclaims her identity from the derogatory nickname imposed by male peers. Annabelle's monologue challenges stereotypes and underscores how gendered labels intersect with broader social expectations.

Identity performance focuses on how individuals enact their claimed identities in different social contexts. *Booksmart* explores this concept through Molly and Amy's attempts to expand beyond their self-imposed academic personas. Throughout the film, Molly and Amy shift their behavior depending on the situation. For example, at the pool party, Molly attempts to embrace a more relaxed and social persona, shedding her typically controlled demeanor. However, her discomfort is evident, showcasing the tension between her desire to fit in and her ingrained identity as a high achiever. The final party scene demonstrates the fluidity of identity as Molly and Amy connect with their peers on a more equal footing. Especially Molly's interactions with Nick, who represents a figure Molly has categorized as the quintessential "cool kid". Throughout the film, Molly's perception of Nick is filtered through her academic identity; she assumes that his popularity and relaxed attitude are signs of superficiality. This assumption begins to unravel during the party scene. As Molly lets her guard down and interacts more openly with Nick, she discovers a depth and sincerity that contradicts her earlier judgments. Nick is not just a party host or a popular figure, he is a multifaceted individual who, like Molly, is navigating the uncertainties of adolescence.

In this scene, Molly's identity performance shifts as she attempts to reconcile her attraction to Nick with her own deeply ingrained sense of self as an overachiever. Her initial hesitation and awkwardness are apparent as she tries to present herself as more socially adept than she feels. However, Nick's relaxed demeanor and willingness to engage with her on an equal footing push Molly to loosen her identity boundaries. This interaction exemplifies how identity performance is influenced by context and the dynamics of social interactions, showing Molly's capacity for self-expansion. This interaction highlights her ability to integrate aspects of

her academic identity while embracing spontaneity. This growth reflects the dynamic nature of identity performance, showing how individuals adjust their roles based on social expectations and self-discovery.

Conclusion

Booksmart stands as a pivotal moment in the evolution of the teen comedy genre, redefining its conventions while reflecting the cultural values of the late 2010s. By centering on multidimensional female protagonists and normalizing LGBTQ+ representation, the film breaks away from the exclusionary narratives that have historically defined the genre, like centering on white, male protagonists. Its focus on inclusivity, diversity, and personal growth aligns with shifting societal attitudes that demand more authentic and equitable representations in media. Through social identity theory, intersectionality, and identity performance, the film critiques rigid societal categorizations, normalizes LGBTQ+ experiences, and portrays the fluidity of self-expression. These theoretical frameworks highlight how *Booksmart* reflects broader societal shifts towards inclusivity while challenging the exclusionary conventions of its predecessors.

More than a film, *Booksmart* serves as a cultural milestone, demonstrating the power of media to foster meaningful conversations about identity and representation. As the teen comedy genre continues to evolve, the film offers a blueprint for embracing diversity and authenticity while maintaining the humor and heart that define the genre. Its legacy lies not only in its ability to entertain but in its capacity to inspire more inclusive storytelling for generations to come.

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