Naturalizing Racial Differences Through Comedy: Asian, Black, and White Views on Racial Stereotypes in *Rush Hour 2*

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In this paper, we examine the ideological implications of racial stereotypes in comedy through a textual and audience analysis of Rush Hour 2. Although Asian, Black, and White focus group participants differentially engaged with racial stereotypes in the film, most participants, regardless of race, found the film's racial jokes inoffensive. Many Asian and Black participants found a positive source of pleasure in the negative portrayals of their own race and did not produce oppositional discourse. Our study suggests that the generic conventions and textual devices of comedy encourage the audience to naturalize racial differences rather than to challenge racial stereotypes.

Rush Hour 2 (2001), the sequel to *Rush Hour* (1998), achieved enormous commercial success, grossing over \$226 million in the United States and \$329 million worldwide.[1] As of March 2005, the film ranked 45th in the all-time U.S. box office.[2] The movie follows two police officers, one from Los Angeles (Chris Tucker as "Carter") and one from Hong Kong (Jackie Chan as "Lee"), as they pursue Asian gang members attempting to execute an elaborate counterfeiting plot. Although *Rush Hour* and *Rush Hour 2* can be classified as action-comedy "buddy movies," the films depart from convention by pairing an African American and an Asian in the lead roles. Although such a casting decision could have alienated White viewers, the film's incredible mainstream success suggests that it appealed to both minority and White audiences. Perhaps inspired by the success of the *Rush Hour* franchise, the current film landscape reveals a growing number of comedies that feature Asian and/or Black leading men, among them *I Spy* (2002), *Shanghai Knights* (2003), and *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle* (2004).

It is possible to argue that the growing number of comedies starring racial minorities has facilitated racial tolerance, as well as the acceptance of Asian men,

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in particular, who have been consistently marginalized from mainstream cultural representation in the United States. However, it is premature to claim that these films represent a substantial shift in the cultural representation of race. A critical investigation reveals that not only is the racial hierarchy a crucial part of these films' narratives but also the characters consistently conform to negative minority stereotypes that can be deemed racist. The relationship between explicitly stereotypical portrayals of race and commercial success seems highly problematic and contradictory. If blatant stereotypes are embodied in films, why do people enjoy them? *Rush Hour 2*'s enormous commercial success makes it an ideal example through which to explore the apparent paradox between potentially racist representations in comedy and its widespread popularity transcending racial boundaries.

Through *Rush Hour 2*, we examine the ideological implications of racial stereotypes in comedy and discuss how the genre of comedy privileges a reading of racial stereotypes as harmless, despite the potential negative consequences of such representations. Our textual analysis of *Rush Hour 2* identifies the kinds of stereotypes and the textual devices that attempt to diffuse viewers' critical interpretations. Through a cross-racial reception analysis, we investigate how Asian, Black, and White viewers react to racial jokes in *Rush Hour 2* and examine if they differentially engage with the film's racial stereotypes. Although the present study is specific to *Rush Hour 2*, the findings provide valuable insight into how racial stereotypes in comedy naturalize racial differences.

Racial stereotypes in comedy

Stereotyping serves multiple purposes, both cognitive and motivational, and it "emerges in various contexts to serve particular functions necessitated by those contexts" (Hilton & von Hippel, 1996, p. 238). A wide range of situations, such as cognitive overload, group conflict, power differences, or a desire to justify the status quo, can give rise to the formation and activation of stereotypes (Hilton & von Hippel). From a media industry perspective, stereotyping results from the need to quickly convey information about characters and to instill in audiences expectations about characters' actions (Casey, Casey, Calvert, French, & Lewis, 2002; Omi, 1989; Wilson, Gutiérrez, & Chao, 2003). Stereotypes are important in comedy because not only do they help to establish instantly recognizable character types but such character traits and stereotype-based jokes also constitute a source of humor (Bowes, 1990; King, 2002).

Critical attention has been paid to the ideological implications of the stereotypical treatment of racial minorities in comedy, whether stereotypes are "read as a symptom of existing social relations or as a more active component of the politics of representation" (King, 2002, p. 129). With regard to the disruptive potential of comedy, King notes that comic representations of race (i.e., exaggerated portrayals of racial traits) can be identified as a parody of the stereotype and a strategy of subversion, thereby opening up the possibility of critiquing the racial norm and rejecting

prejudice. Denzin (2002) suggests that the conventional narrative in the interracial buddy films, where two men of different races develop trust and friendship, can be read as an imaginary utopia in which racial differences do not matter. In fact, comedy often inverts stereotypes to generate humor. For instance, in the *Lethal Weapon* (1987) film series, the Black character is middle class, conservative, and family oriented, and the White character is unpredictable and dangerous (Malanowski, 2002). Jewish and Black comedians tell jokes about their own race to criticize social injustice and racial inequalities (Haggins, 1995; King).

Scholars, however, concede that it is often difficult to distinguish social commentary and satire from the ideological reproduction of racial stereotypes in comedy. The most frequently debated question is whether viewers laugh *at* stereotyped minority figures or *with* them (Bowes, 1990; Hall, 1990). For critical scholars, the distinction is less important than the negative social consequences of seemingly harmless racial jokes. Critical views on race in comedy posit that racial stereotyping serves an ideological function, normalizing racially defined characteristics and legitimating the racial hierarchy (Bogle, 2001; Hall; King, 2002; Means Coleman, 2000; Omi, 1989; Wilson et al., 2003). Critical scholars claim that in a social environment in which racism is deeply rooted, racial jokes and stereotypes inevitably reinforce hierarchically structured racial differences (Hall; Omi). Omi argues that racial jokes told across the color lines "will, despite its 'purely' humorous intent, serve to reinforce stereotypes and rationalize the existing relations of racial inequality" (p. 121). Schulman (1992) questions the satirical use of racial humor as a tool for criticizing racism. She argues that an attempt to critique racism through comedy results in unintended consequences, namely, the reinforcement of the very stereotypes that the humor attempts to ridicule. Race-based comedy often juxtaposes racially characterized non whites against socially dominant Whites: "[racial humor] appears at the same time to have internalized something of the very despicable images that oppressors of the black community have harbored for centuries, however blatantly it parodies their absurdity and illogic" (Schulman, 1992, p. 6). Bogle claims that although comedy is perceived as having the potential to comment on the problematic nature of stereotyping, it rarely capitalizes on the opportunity. In the world of the film, minority characters rarely resist or reject the stereotypes that are forced upon them. In his discussion of *48 Hrs.* (1982), Bogle argues that the character Reggie Hammond (played by Eddie Murphy, a Black actor/comedian) never gets mad at Jack Cates (played by Nick Nolte, a White actor) for making racially insulting comments, thus "greatly neutralizes the inherent racism" (p. 282).

Scholars also highlight the harmful effects of minority actors embodying stereotypes associated with their own race. King (2002) points to the enactment of racist stereotypes, particularly that of the "coon," by Black comedians, such as Eddie Murphy, Martin Lawrence, and Chris Tucker, and notes that their performances are uncomfortably reminiscent of racist ideologies that have been used to justify racial discrimination in the past. Means Coleman (2000) also claims that Black actors appearing in what she terms "neominstrelsy" sitcoms, such as *Martin* (1992–1997),

The Fresh Prince of Bel Air (1990–1996), and *The Wayans Bros.* (1995–1999), are "taking part in their own racial ridicule by adopting Jim Crow, coon, and Sambo characterizations" (p. 130). She argues that Black sitcoms emphasize self-deprecating humor, physical comedy, provocative and flashy clothing, and "ghettocentric" characterizations, all of which contribute to a narrowly defined portrait of African American men and women.

Theories of genre suggest that the naturalization of racial difference through stereotyping is more likely to occur in a comedic format because generic conventions discourage viewers' critical engagement with the racial discourse. Feuer (1992) argues that "the genre positions the interpretive community in such a way as to naturalize the dominant ideologies expressed in the text" (p. 145). Genres structure viewers' expectations, which, in turn, limit the ways in which viewers can interpret the film (Altman, 1987; Feuer; Neale, 1980). Comedy as a genre essentially extends the alleged harmlessness of interpersonal jokes, which allows controversial content in mainstream films to be considered acceptable (King, 2002, p. 149). The nature of the genre and the comedic performance dictate that audiences should not take stereotypes seriously because they are intentionally humorous and that taking offense to stereotypic representations simply signals a misreading of the filmmakers' intent (Bowes, 1990; Casey et al., 2002; Malanowski, 2002). Bowes argues that comedy affirms the dominant ideological positions because it diffuses viewers' critical interpretations. Hall (1990) characterizes race-based comedy as "a licensed zone, disconnected from the serious" and argues that its generic convention "ultimately protects and defends viewers from acknowledging their incipient racism" (p. 17).

We contend that seemingly innocuous racial jokes and stereotypes in comedy need critical attention in the current social climate. Most people claim to be color blind and antiracist; however, race continues to serve as an important cognitive category with which people make sense of their social world (Myers & Williamson, 2001). Much of the existing scholarship expands the understanding of racism and racial differences in conjunction with racial stereotypes as representational devices or cognitive categories. Racial stereotypes play a significant role in maintaining the racial ideology in post–civil rights America where blatant declarations of racist views, bigotry, and violence have become uncommon and unacceptable (Essed, 1991; Myers & Williamson; van Dijk, 1984, 1987). Racial stereotypes ultimately reduce and naturalize racial differences and, thus, preclude alternative ways to think about the category of race (Hall, 1997). Once the beliefs of racial differences are naturalized as objectively existent and immutable, these differences provide insight into how people see their world. Given that racial stereotypes are most frequently used to represent people of color, the reified racial beliefs help maintain the racial hierarchy and White privileges. These beliefs also lead to social consequences, including the negative judgments of racial minorities and social injustice (see Schaufer, 2003). We argue that racial stereotypes in comedy should be taken seriously because of their potential to naturalize racial differences through humor. However, the potential of comedy to subvert racial stereotypes cannot be underestimated. The purpose of

the present study is to examine the ideological implications of racial stereotypes in comedy and to determine whether they humorously naturalize or possibly disrupt the beliefs of racial differences that constitute the ideological basis of the racial hierarchy.

Textual analysis

The textual analysis that follows has three parts. First, a descriptive synopsis of *Rush Hour 2* situates racially stereotypical moments in the specific situations where they occur in order to examine how race is configured through dialogue and how racial jokes are related to the film narrative. We identify the stereotype-based racial jokes in *Rush Hour 2* that are consistent with previous scholars' discussions of the dominant representations of Asians and Blacks in American mass media (see Bogle, 2001; Hamamoto, 1994; King, 2002; Lee, 1999; Shim, 1998). The descriptive narrative analysis of the film is followed by a critical analysis that attempts to decode the racial ideology embedded in the film. The ideological analysis of *Rush Hour 2* was conducted in conjunction with the two important theoretical categories, character and narrative, as suggested in the work of Fiske (1987) and White (1992). Fiske claims that character is a crucial category of textual analysis because characters are discursive constructs embodying ideological positions and values; they are not individuals existing independent of textual and broader social relations. Narrative serves as another significant category of textual analysis in that narrative orients viewers' understanding of stories and naturalizes meanings and events that are ideological (Fiske; White). Finally, we examine the ideological limitations and possibilities of several textual devices in the film narrative.

Rush Hour 2 features the character James Carter (Chris Tucker), who is a detective in the Los Angeles Police Department, and his friend, Lee (Jackie Chan), who is chief inspector of the Hong Kong Police Department. The movie begins in Hong Kong, where Carter is visiting Lee on vacation. Amidst Carter's preoccupation with picking up women, Lee receives a call from his boss, who informs him that the Hong Kong Police suspect that Ricky Tan (played by John Lone), the cunning head of the Fu-Cang-Long Triads gang, is responsible for an explosion in the American embassy that killed two Americans. Carter's desire to enjoy a stress-free vacation leads him to warn Lee that, if Lee takes the case, "I'll slap you so hard that you'll end up in the Ming Dynasty." Throughout the movie, Carter is high pitched, childish, irresponsible, and hypersexual. When Carter sees a few Chinese women in the car next to theirs, he yells, "Let's get some sushi!" to the women, revealing his cultural ignorance.

Disguising his intentions to begin investigating the case, Lee brings Carter to a club where the Triad gang has gathered. When Lee tells Carter to act like a tourist, Carter replies, "I'm two feet taller than everybody in here." Carter impulsively decides to roust the bar and demands that people reveal Ricky Tan's whereabouts. Carter's irrational antics alert Ricky Tan's beautiful but deadly henchwoman, Hu Li

(played by Zhang Ziyi) and her fellow gangsters, resulting in a fight between Chan and the gang members.

After their first scuffle with the Triads, Lee takes Carter to an upscale massage parlor called "Heaven on Earth" to perform another undercover operation. Carter is shown a group of scantily clad Chinese women and the hostess assures Carter that he can pick any girl to perform his massage. When Lee tells Carter to speed up his selection process, Carter exclaims, "You don't jump in front of a black man in a buffet line!" Instead of choosing one girl, Carter greedily selects five. Later at the massage parlor when Lee and Carter find Ricky Tan, Carter starts another fight with the Asian gang members, despite Lee's attempt to verbally reason with Tan. During the fight, Carter exclaims to a gang member, "No wonder you're mad!" after the man's towel falls off and he is standing fully naked. Carter accidentally punches Lee instead of a gang member and explains, "You all look alike." Defeated, Lee and Tucker are kidnapped and later tossed out onto the highway.

Circumstances lead Carter to a yacht party hosted by Ricky. Carter meets and immediately begins flirting with a Latina woman named Isabella Molina (played by Roselyn Sanchez) who ignores his advances. Carter discovers that she is affiliated with Steven Reign, a wealthy White businessman from Los Angeles who claims that he is in Hong Kong to sightsee. When Carter meets Lee on the boat, he says, "No one understands the words coming out of your mouth" due to his accent. Carter shares with Lee his theory of investigation, which is, in sum, "follow the rich white man," stating that every major crime has a rich, White man behind it expecting to make large financial gains. After seeing Reign on the yacht, Carter becomes convinced that he is involved in the smuggling and that he is the key to solving the crime.

Lee and Carter follow Reign to Los Angeles where they run into Isabella Molina, who they learn is an undercover Secret Service agent. Molina tells them that Steven Reign and the Triads are involved in producing and shipping hundreds of millions of dollars in counterfeit "superbills." Isabella asks Lee and Carter to help find the plates used to counterfeit the money, and they agree. Carter boasts, "She chose me because I'm tall, dark and handsome, and you're third-world-ugly." Lee responds, "I'm not third-world-ugly. Women like me, they think I'm cute. Like Snoopy." Tucker then says, "Snoopy is six inches taller than you."

In pursuit of the plates, Lee and Carter are captured by Hu Li. Trapped and tied up inside a truck, Carter and Lee discover thousands of counterfeit bills and Carter takes some of the money, saying it is for "evidence." Lee and Carter start fighting. Carter exclaims, "I will slap the hell out of you right now!" Lee responses, "I'll bitch-slap you back to Africa!" They eventually work together to escape, only to find themselves in Las Vegas.

In Las Vegas, Carter and Lee see a casino called the "Red Dragon" (the same name as Ricky Tan's yacht) and realize that this is where the money is being laundered. When they enter the casino, Carter tells Lee to look for the plates and that he distracts the security guards. Carter uses some of the counterfeit money that he got from the truck and starts gambling at one of the craps tables in his usual

loud-mouthed fashion. He complains to the White dealer that he gets $500 chips instead of $1,000 chips because he is Black. Carter then brings up the issue of Black slavery, exclaiming, "You gave me $500 chips because I'm black? You think my people suffered 362 years of slavery so you could send us to cotton fields with $500 chips? Do I look like Chicken George to you?" During the film's climax, Lee and Carter once again face Hu Li and Ricky Tan. Both gang members die, and the counterfeiting plates are recovered.

Rush Hour 2 promotes numerous Black and Asian stereotypes through characters that personify and verbalize these racial myths. Lee is a respectful but culturally ignorant and asexual Asian man who excels at Kung Fu. Henchwoman Hu Li serves as the Asian "dragon lady" who is desirable but dangerous (Ogunnaike, 2003, p. E1). The Chinese women at the massage parlor embody the stereotype of obedient Oriental dolls readily fulfilling Americans' sexual desire and fantasies. These two images of Asian women may seem contradictory, but they reflect two major stereotypes of Asian women frequently found in the mass media. Omi (1989) suggests that although it is possible for racial minorities to be stereotyped in multiple ways within the same text, such contradictions do not challenge the one dimensionality of minority images. Carter is a loud, impulsive, hypersexual yet childish Black man who is often portrayed as ignorant and causing trouble. He constantly reinforces stereotypes associated with his own race. He tells a Chinese woman that he likes his chicken "dead and deep fried," as if it is natural that a Black man likes fried chicken. He also furthers the African American stereotype in his manner of speaking, such as "she's the bomb," "mack out," and "look fly."

A critical reading of *Rush Hour 2* indicates that racial ideology is coded both in the characters and in the narrative. First, Jackie Chan and Chris Tucker both portray likeable characters that do not problematize or transgress mainstream racial images and boundaries. Their characters are buffoons or "symbolically castrated men" that do not challenge White masculinity (Lo, 2001, p. 474). In contrast to Chan's Hong Kong–made action movies, where his characters are not only affable but also masculine and tough (Teo, 1997), Chan's Hollywood films, such as *Shanghai Noon* (2000) and *Shanghai Knights* (2003), cast him in the role of the funny, desexualized, and unthreatening Oriental male. Lo argues that Chan's masculinity has been toned down in Hollywood in order to ensure that his characters conform to racial conventions. Tucker as Carter is an infantile Black man who, despite his masculine physical presence, is incapable of protecting himself without Chan's help. King (2002) indicates that the Black comedian's high-pitched voice and childish tone are unthreatening to the racial status quo because they help "reduce any threat created by the spectacle of a seemingly dominating Black character" (p. 149). Most of the racial jokes in *Rush Hour 2* are directed toward minorities, which strengthens Whites' positive self-image and their dominant position in the racial order.

Second, the narrative's binary opposition of powerful Whites and subordinate minorities contains the symbolic threats to the racial hierarchy. The contrast between the powerful and the powerless becomes a "metaphor for power relationships in

society and thus a material practice through which the dominant ideology works" (Fiske, 1987, p. 9) because a binary opposition in narrative naturalizes and universalizes the hierarchy implied by the opposition. Although White characters only have small roles in *Rush Hour 2*, they still occupy key "overseeing" positions in the storyline, regardless of whether they are good or evil. Steven Reign, the billionaire hotel owner, funds gang leader Ricky Tan's operation and provides his casino as a means of money laundering, and agent Sterling of the U.S. Secret Service supervises the criminal investigation into Tan's and Reign's activities. The main villains of the film are Asian. Ricky Tan, Hu Li, and the team of Chinese gangsters all threaten American interests by blowing up the American embassy in Hong Kong and by circulating counterfeit U.S. currency. Although Lee and Carter play a crucial role in avenging the Chinese villains and maintaining justice, they act in service of White America by defeating those who challenge White patriarchal power. Ultimately, the violence of and against Asian gangsters does not constitute a threat to White masculinity and domination but helps maintain the racial status quo.

In addition to generic conventions that communicate the innocuousness of racial stereotypes, several textual devices in *Rush Hour 2* diffuse viewers' potential claims of racism and promote the acceptability of racial stereotypes. First, the minority status of two main characters signals that their racial jokes are acceptable and not racist. Because people of color are usually portrayed as victims rather than perpetrators of racism, they are not perceived as having power over the others (as opposed to a White character having power over a minority character).

Second, racial jokes in the film cross color lines, creating an impression that all races are subject to stereotypes. Although there are only a couple of instances in the film that could potentially be interpreted as promoting White stereotypes, the inclusion of these few quips creates the impression that all racial groups are targeted by the film's racial humor. Marchetti (1991) argues that "Hollywood films often play various positions one against the other, so that a text can appear to espouse rather liberal attitudes toward race" (p. 279).

Third, the film's stereotypes are coded as realistic and natural and based on the characters' personality differences and the execution of the plot. For instance, Carter's impulsive behavior is used to propel the plot and causes Lee to engage in fights with the Triad gang members. Carter is also always the funny distraction when Lee is responsibly investigating the crime. The relevance of stereotypes to the plot and characterization makes the racially stereotyped content acceptable and realistic.

Fourth, the two leading men are portrayed as good friends. Because neither Carter nor Lee is hurt by the racial remarks, the film encourages viewers to interpret the humor as acceptable. They are seen singing together in the car, and they often help each other out of difficult situations. At the end of the movie, Lee gives Carter his father's badge as a symbol of friendship. This also implies that despite all of Carter's racial jokes and comments, Lee was still a true friend and there were indeed no hard feelings between them.

Although a critical analysis suggests that these textual devices serve an ideological function by promoting the acceptability and believability of racial stereotypes, such devices can simultaneously be read as strategies to subvert or disrupt the racial status quo. For instance, the friendship between Carter and Lee can signify two conflicting meanings to the audience. Although it communicates the acceptability of negative racial jokes by suggesting that "in this world of racial integration, ugly racial slurs are reserved only for the bad buys" (Denzin, 2002, p. 101), it may also change viewers' racial attitudes by cultivating favorable views on Blacks or Asians. Lee can be read as subservient to the (White) authority, but he can also be considered respectful and responsible. Kenny, Carter's African American informant, who owns a Chinese restaurant, wears traditional Chinese clothing, and is married to an Asian woman, may, through juxtaposition, make Carter appear to be the "normal" Black man. Kenny's unusual traits may also challenge viewers' preconceived images of African Americans. There are many other aspects of the film that can be read as potentially subversive: People from two different cultures developing friendship and trust, two good guys learning about each other in life and death situations and overcoming cultural misunderstandings, and so forth.

A discussion of the ideological limitations and possibilities of racial stereotypes in comedy cannot be complete without exploring audiences' interpretation of the text. We now turn our attention to the viewers. We examine how viewers of different races make sense of the racial stereotypes in relation to the genre of comedy and the textual devices that we discussed above. How do audiences interpret *Rush Hour 2*'s racial stereotypes? Are White, Black, or Asian audiences offended by any content in the film? Do White, Black, and Asian American audiences differ in their sensitivity to the portrayal of race in this film?

Researching the audience

Method
The focus group interviews were conducted with White, Black, and Asian participants. Several studies have demonstrated the strengths of focus groups in identifying audiences' response to the media portrayal of race beyond their surface attitudes and in mapping out a subtle picture of audience reaction (see Bird, 1996, 2003; Bobo, 1989, 1995; Jhally & Lewis, 1992). Blacks, Asians, and White viewers were placed in separate focus groups with a moderator of their racial group. We felt this approach created an atmosphere where participants would feel comfortable discussing potentially sensitive topics, such as racism. It also facilitated comparisons between racial groups.

There were eight focus groups with three to eight people per group: two groups of White Americans, three groups of Black Americans, and three groups of Asian Americans. Of the 40 volunteers who participated in the groups,[3] race and gender were as follows: 11 White (7 males, 4 females), 18 Asian (7 males, 11 females), and 11 Black (6 males, 5 females). Age ranges were as follows: White participants,

18–21 years (mean 19.7 years); Black participants, 18–28 years (mean 21.2 years); and Asian participants, 18–31 years (mean 21.6 years). The majority of the participants were recruited from the undergraduate population of a large East Coast university through e-mail, in classrooms, and by word-of-mouth. One Asian participant had a graduate degree; two Asian participants and one Black participant were graduate students.

For each focus group, the participants were brought together either in someone's home or in a classroom. They watched *Rush Hour 2* together, and then, the moderator facilitated a discussion about their views on the movie, including questions about their opinions on the characters, what they thought about the stereotypes in the movie and whether they were offended. The moderator also asked participants to comment on issues of racial stereotypes in general in order to explore how they made sense of the film's stereotypes in relation to their own actual beliefs on race. The semistructured discussions were relaxed and informal so that much of the information shared emerged from the natural flow of conversation. The moderators asked questions to keep the discussion on track and to probe participants to explain their comments in more detail. Discussions, which lasted about 30–60 minutes, were tape recorded and transcribed at a later date. Pseudonyms are used to protect participants' anonymity.

In analyzing the focus group data, we looked at two overarching areas: offensiveness and perceptions of stereotypes. With regard to offensiveness, we assessed whether or not the participants were offended by *Rush Hour 2* and why. With regard to stereotypes, we explored which stereotypes the participants noticed in the movie and which, if any, they perceived as true. Instead of simply reiterating how participants of different races responded to racial stereotypes in the movie, we provide accounts of why they responded in the ways that they did. Radway (1986) notes that researchers' critical accounts of informants' own interpretation of a text is a crucial task because audiences "live ideology … they are produced by it to accept a particular limited view of their situation. *Their self-understanding, when seen from some other perspective, then, might be constructed as 'false'*" (pp. 106–107, emphasis added).

Offensiveness

Irrespective of race, the majority of the focus group participants laughed throughout their viewing of *Rush Hour 2*. They stated explicitly that they enjoyed *Rush Hour 2*, and that the film's racial humor did not offend them. Although participants gave numerous reasons for why they were not offended, several common themes emerged. First, Black, White, and Asian participants mentioned that *Rush Hour 2*'s status as a comedy dictated that the film should not be taken seriously. Many participants stated that they would have taken offense at racial jokes and stereotypes if they had been conveyed in different generic forms, such as drama.

> Jeff (White male, 19): It's not as offensive when you know it's supposed to be funny, as opposed to just coming out of nowhere, and you're like, "what?"

Justin (Asian male, 18): I think since it's in a comedy movie, people can let it go.

Aaron (Black male, 20): The context of putting the whole interaction with the comedy so people aren't necessarily offended when Lee says, I'm gonna bitch-slap you back to Africa or something. Like, that was funny because of the context but if he said it anywhere else, it wouldn't.

Most participants in all three racial groups acknowledged, however, that even within the context of a comedy, racial humor could potentially be racist. Several participants said that the race of the person telling a joke can dictate whether or not the joke is racist. In comedy, it is often considered acceptable for racial minorities to tell racial jokes, whereas the same jokes told by Whites would be considered racist. Most participants agreed that if a White character told the same jokes as Carter and Lee, audiences would probably be offended.

Vanessa (Black female, 20): Well, I guess culturally people would be less inclined to take offense, in my opinion, [because of] the fact that Chris Tucker is black and Jackie Chan is Chinese … . They're both minorities … . Whereas I feel that if one of the characters had been White, there's a historical stigma of White oppressor that could maybe just not let people think his intentions don't have any racial prejudice or racial hatred or patronizing feelings in any way.

Ryan (Asian male, 19): I think it's more acceptable I think. There's one line when Jackie Chan was in a truck, he's like "I'll slap you back to Africa." There's no way that a White character would ever say that in the movie because … . You can't say that.

Ethan (White male, 20): The movie works because it's two minorities. They can rag on each other. It wouldn't be acceptable if one of them was White because … . It just wouldn't work out. People would be offended and stuff.

The White participants' discussion of racial stereotypes revealed that they were keenly aware of Whites' stigmatized position as perpetrators of racism. One White participant explained that the main characters' minority status allowed White people to enjoy the jokes without feeling guilty.

Amy (White female, 20): Maybe the jokes are more politically correct because … you're making fun of your race against someone who can also make fun of their race and White people don't have to stand back and be, like, "Oh, shit, sorry." Like, I'm sorry I'm an oppressor, or something.

Second, several of the Black, Asian, and White participants stated that the movie was not offensive because the jokes were targeted at Blacks, Asians, and Whites—and not at one group in particular.

Stacey (White female, 20): I think a lot of it has to do with that they ragged on every race in this movie. I think if it was just focused in on one race, and they

only made fun of that one race, it would start to get a little racist … . If it was just only Black jokes or only Asian jokes, or only White jokes …

Even when Lee told Carter that he would "bitch-slap him back to Africa," some Black participants stated that there was no need to be offended by the comment because earlier in the film Carter had said he would slap Lee back to the Ming Dynasty. One Black participant suggested that making jokes about every race was a deliberate move by the filmmakers. Our textual analysis, however, shows that Whites were portrayed differently than Blacks and Asians in *Rush Hour 2*. The film successfully creates the *impression* among the viewers that all races are objects of mockery, distortion, and exaggeration.

Third, in assessing the offensiveness of the film's racial humor, Asian, Black, and White participants considered the movie's internal context of two close friends making fun of each other's race. Participants felt this type of racial humor was acceptable because neither Carter nor Lee seemed offended by any of the comments. Their banter was interpreted as harmless "inside jokes."

> Nathan (Black male, 18): I think a lot of the joking about the stereotypes in the movie was kind of softened by the fact that Jackie and Tucker are friends …and they're cool.

An interesting aspect of the discussions within the Black and Asian focus groups is the fact that although most participants denied being offended by *Rush Hour 2*, many were still able to label the film as offensive on an intellectual level. We propose that this happened in part because of the nature of the focus group experience; participants were forced to think about the film and its implications. However, even after they acknowledged the movie's potential offensiveness, most were still accepting of the film and insisted that they were not offended.

Stereotypes

Although not offended by *Rush Hour 2*, White participants made reference to the implicit stereotypes expressed in the film, including the Asian man skilled in martial arts who cannot speak proper English, Asian women as seductresses, and the Black cop with "street credibility." White participants also commented on the stereotypes verbalized by the main characters, including the idea that a rich White man is behind most crimes, Asian men are short, and Black people like fried chicken. Most White participants felt that both the implicit and the explicit stereotypes were not only blatant and contrived but also very funny.

White viewers' interpretations of the film characters were structured around racial stereotypes. Jackie Chan's character was read along the line of typical Asian male stereotypes. White participants found Lee entertaining but did not consider him attractive. Chris Tucker's character was also perceived of in terms of particular Black stereotypes (i.e., loud and childish) but to a lesser extent than Chan's. Many

of the White participants felt that Chris Tucker's acting was intentionally over the top, and they assessed his performance not only in terms of Black stereotypes but also in terms of his previous roles and general acting style. Overall, White participants' reading of *Rush Hour 2* was straightforward in that their understanding of Black and Asian characters did not go beyond their stereotypical depictions. For White participants, Lee and Carter were no more than typical Asian and Black men in their imagination. We did not see any alternative or creative engagement with the movie among White participants. We proposed that this is because White viewers were comfortably aligned with the dominant racial ideology that promotes White invisibility and minority stereotypes (see Dyer, 1997) and thus readily adopted the reading strategy privileged by the film. We argue that the White participants felt no need to contest or negotiate with the film's representation of race since their relation to the racial ideology is much less resistive. The racial imagery in the film did not challenge prevailing notions of race and did not provoke feelings of discomfort or anxiety in White viewers. The absence of a major White character did not alienate White viewers because the inclusion of a White character verbalizing racial stereotypes could have implicated White people as perpetrators of racism and thus would have made White viewers uncomfortable and resistant.

As the most stereotyped and joked about group in *Rush Hour 2*, Asian participants were quick to point out the Asian and Black stereotypes in the film, including culturally ignorant Asian men, submissive Asian women, and impulsive Black men. The recognition of negative and objectionable Asian stereotypes, however, did not prevent participants from enjoying the film. We argue that Asian participants were uncritical of the film because of the unique way Asian characters were interpreted. For Asians, who have long been under- and misrepresented in the American media,[4] *Rush Hour 2* could be perceived as a sign of progress. Unlike previous Hollywood films where Asian men play subservient or villainous roles, *Rush Hour 2* presents a self-confident, successful, and heroic Asian man. Thus, while the film promotes numerous Asian stereotypes that are potentially racist, it nonetheless offers a positive image of an Asian man in a leading role that Asian viewers can be proud to cheer for and support.

> Sandra (Asian female, 22): I think you always cheer for the Asian guy. I am not saying that "Oh, I relate with Jackie Chan." But when he does something good, I'm like "Yes! Fight for the Asians!"

Bobo's (1989, 1995) study of Black female viewers' positive engagement with *The Color Purple* suggests that non white audiences are not necessarily critical of a racially controversial film because they quickly sift through contentious parts of the film and identify positive elements that resonate with their own experiences. We found such evidence in our Asian and Black focus groups. Asian and Black viewers overlooked the negative stereotypes of their races and instead focused on positive aspects of minority representations. In *Rush Hour 2*, minority characters

are not just sidekicks but good guys who end up winning. Asian and Black participants also recognized that two men of color were positioned in a nonhierarchical relationship. For Asian and Black participants, the sense of cross-racial equality and friendship expressed in the film outweighed the negative minority stereotypes.

> Justin (Asian male, 18): Chris Tucker and Jackie Chan complement each other. Obviously Jackie Chan is better in fighting and stuff. But Chris Tucker is better at talking and everything. So they kind of cancel each other out. They are a good combo. But I think with a White person and an Asian person, it always feels like the White person is better than the Asian person.

We observed that Asian participants' positive interpretations of Chan's character extended to their view of the portrayal of Asian women. Despite the film's stereotypical representation of Asian women as submissive and seductive and as ruthless "dragon ladies," none of the Asian participants raised the issue of racialized sexism. In contrast, several of the female participants stated that they were empowered by Zhang Ziyi's character in the film.

In general, the Asian participants accepted and found humor in the potentially racist comments directed toward Lee and other Asian characters in *Rush Hour 2*. We suspect that this occurred because the participants perceived important differences between themselves and Lee with regard to national identity. The Asian participants felt that they could laugh at Lee, a Chinese man, because the stereotypes associated with him, such as poor English-language skills and cultural ignorance, did not apply to them as Asian Americans. Overall, Asian participants read the Asian characters in *Rush Hour 2* as Chinese more so than Asian American. As a result, although Asian participants were glad that Asians had prominent roles in the film, they simultaneously distanced themselves from Lee and other "Chinese" characters and felt comfortable laughing at the jokes directed toward Asians; Asian participants depersonalized the Asian stereotypes. It should be noted that although Asian participants were keenly aware of the Asian characters' national origins, White and Black participants read the characters much more broadly, that is, as generically Asian.

Black participants recognized many racial stereotypes in the film and characterized them as exaggerated racial traits, which they found to be funny and entertaining. They acknowledged Chris Tucker as representing the loud Black man who is always after women and is essentially placed in the film to elicit laughter from the audience. The participants saw Jackie Chan as a stereotypical Asian man who knows martial arts, is not fluent in English, and is calm and respectful. The participants also recognized Carter's statement that a rich White man is behind most crimes. Although Black participants did not feel empowered by Tucker's character, a few of them identified with him and suggested that they would have reacted the same way he did in several of the film's scenes. Although *Rush Hour 2* presents numerous Black stereotypes that can be deemed offensive, Black participants did not seem critical of

nor did they take them seriously. We propose that this is because Black participants were inclined to see the positive aspects of the film's representations of African Americans instead of being upset by unpleasant portrayals. For instance, Black participants concentrated on the fact that the ideas perpetuated are ones that most people do not get upset over or that are usually considered humorous (e.g., Black people like fried chicken, all Asians know karate). They contrasted these ideas with joking about serious stereotypes, such as poverty and drug use, claiming that had the movie made light of these issues, it likely would have offended them. In addition, several participants remarked that in contrast to films that position Black characters as criminals, Tucker's character does not commit a crime but solves one. Some participants also considered Tucker's character as more important than Chan's in the narrative. We also argue that Black participants were often accepting of Carter's comments about Black people because they are accustomed to Black entertainers capitalizing on their own racial stereotypes (Means Coleman, 2000). Having recognized the importance of Tucker's role, several Black participants commented that White viewers would have enjoyed *Rush Hour 2* the least because there is no positive portrayal of Whites and White viewers are not entitled to laugh at Black stereotypes like Black viewers. They also felt sorry for Asian viewers because Asians were the most joked about in the film.

Regardless of race, the majority of focus group participants did not take *Rush Hour 2*'s portrayal of race seriously, stating it was only a comedy and thus not intended to offend viewers. Throughout the discussions, participants frequently commented that it would be unusual to discuss a *fictional* comedy like *Rush Hour 2* at length and that the moderators were reading too much into it. Although participants made light of the racial stereotypes in *Rush Hour 2*, they perceived and accepted many of its racial portrayals as *real*. Participants in all three racial groups felt that the racial stereotypes in the film were humorous and acceptable because they were based on a "kernel of truth" that had been exaggerated.

> Moderator: What are some of the stereotypes in the movie?
> Stacey (White female, 20): Tucker kicks Jackie Chan in the face and says all Asians look alike.
> [People laugh]
> Josh (White male, 21): Or that all Asians are short.
> Emily (White female, 20): [Quoting movie]: "I'm two feet taller than everyone else in the room."
> [People laugh]
> Moderator: And why is that funny? I can see everyone sort of giggling when they remember it.
> Anthony (White male, 18): It's just so true.
> [People laugh]
> Moderator: So you think there's truth in it. Is there truth in the stereotypes?
> Stacey (White female, 20): Yeah.

Moderator: Do you remember "Carter's theory of criminal investigation"?
Richard (Asian male, 23): Follow a [rich] White guy. [There's always a rich White guy behind every crime].
Sandra (Asian female, 22): When I heard that, [I thought] "Oh my God. It's kind of funny" because I guess …
Steve (Asian male, 22): Because it's true.
Ken (Asian male, 19): Stereotypes are based on some types of truth.

Mark (Black male, 21): I think most stereotypes Tucker brings out are true. They are things that you don't usually think about or just say. But they are kind of true … . In general, of course you can't stereotype every single Black person, but I think Carter is supposed to be that average Black person from the ghetto.

Despite participants' emphasis on the fictional nature of *Rush Hour 2*, they perceived a sense of realism in its racial representations; few participants stated that racial stereotypes in the film were unreal or incorrect. Although many participants claimed that they could distinguish between fiction and reality, we observed strong continuity between the film's representations of race and participants' general opinions about racial traits. As participants' comments suggest, many revealed (likely without realizing it) that they thought many of the stereotypes expressed in the film were based on truth.

Throughout the focus group discussions, many participants displayed a blurring of the distinction between the fictional characters and the actors who play them, using Lee and Chan, or Carter and Tucker interchangeably. One White participant implied that Black stereotypes in *Rush Hour 2* are likely to be true because Chris Tucker (as an actor) plays off of stereotypes and he makes jokes about his own race. As Jhally and Lewis (1992) note, fictional media are simultaneously real and unreal and therefore have a significant impact on how we perceive the social world. Fiske (1987) argues that realism in the media encourages viewers to incorporate on-screen attitudes and beliefs into the real world. Although it is beyond the scope of our study to determine whether participants of our study transformed *Rush Hour 2*'s racial characterizations into their everyday common sense, we found evidence that the movie influenced how participants made sense of racial differences. We observed several incidents in which participants used *Rush Hour 2* as a reference to validate their own actual racial beliefs.

Amy (White female, 20): It was funny, because in the outtakes, Jackie Chan got his lines wrong, and Chris Tucker's phone goes off, and he's like, "No, brother, get off the phone. Get off the phone." The outtakes almost played into the stereotypes and it's the actual people, not their characters. I don't know if that was a very politically correct thing for me to say.

The sense of realism participants perceived in *Rush Hour 2* has ideological effects because it authenticates the racial stereotypes in the film and grants them an objective status. We claim that a comedy like *Rush Hour 2* can contribute to viewer's sense

of the real and foster the believability of different racial characteristics. Although not all participants stated explicitly that the film's stereotypes are based on truth, most of them hesitated to claim that they were false, confessing that their first-hand experience of different races is limited. We argue that the humorous portrayal of racial traits and the sense of realism in *Rush Hour 2* encouraged participants to see or seek "true" components in racial stereotypes rather than to challenge or argue against the exaggerated and totalizing nature of stereotypes. Most participants in all three racial focus groups agreed that there are certain characteristics about different racial groups that are more common than others and that the film simply exaggerated these traits to make them funny and entertaining. In addition, the participants of all three racial groups rarely talked about White stereotypes while preoccupied with minority stereotypes. Although participants identified several jokes about White people in the film, they did not see a strong association between Whiteness and stereotypes. In the general discussion of racial stereotypes, participants of all races infrequently mentioned stereotypes associated with Whites. Our study suggests that *Rush Hour 2* successfully promotes a sense of normality of Whiteness among viewers while encouraging them to see non whites as racially marked and different.

Conclusion

The fact that almost none of our focus group participants were offended by *Rush Hour 2*'s explicit racial jokes is revealing but potentially misleading. Viewers' claims that racial stereotyping in comedy is funny, inoffensive, and therefore acceptable do not automatically establish that it is harmless. Racial stereotypes in comedy are problematic precisely because they help validate racial differences through humor, thus rendering them natural and unchallengeable. Inoffensiveness in comedy is a necessary condition for the naturalization of racial differences because if overly antagonistic racist remarks or assumptions were presented in ways that were offensive, they would likely trigger an oppositional reading, resulting in a straightforward rejection and critical evaluation of the cultural construction of racial differences. Because racial stereotypes in comedy rarely offend the audiences and are presented in an enjoyable way, audiences are able to naturalize specific knowledge about racial minorities without resistance. The generic conventions and textual devices of comedy ensure that viewers actively consume and derive pleasure from racial jokes and stereotypes without critical and interrogative engagement with them. Comedy ultimately controls and limits audiences' critical reflection of potentially racist characterizations, thereby making viewers susceptible to the beliefs of racial difference. Our study suggests that not only do different racial audiences enjoy racial jokes and humor in comedy but they are also much more inclined to see truth in racial stereotypes than to cast doubt on them.

We also gathered evidence that audiences of different races do not engage with racial stereotypes in comedy in uniform ways. In comparison to White viewers who

interpreted minority characters strictly within the confines of stereotypes, Black and Asian participants found a positive source of pleasure in the seemingly offensive portrayals of their own race. However, we claim that it is inaccurate to take this as an indication of comedy's potential to disrupt the racial status quo. Viewers' creative and positive engagement with racial stereotypes does not necessarily indicate that the text's subversive potential is realized by audiences, for their negotiation with racial stereotypes does not always work to disrupt the racial ideology. Communication scholars note that the selective and creative activity of the audience may not constitute critical viewing (Condit, 1989; Morley, 2005; Schudson, 1998). Morley suggests that the notion of interpretative freedom often leads us to underestimate the power of the media to shape our social reality, arguing that "the power of viewers to reinterpret meanings is hardly equivalent to the discursive power of the centralized media institutions to construct the texts which the viewer then interprets, and to imagine otherwise is simply foolish" (p. 175). Condit claims that audience pleasure is not sufficient "to certify a positive role for mass media in the process of social change" (p. 103). We are skeptical of the disruptive potential of race-based comedy because in our study, minority participants' pleasure did not transcend but occurred *within* the discursive confines of the racial ideology. Although participants of different racial groups employed different hermeneutic strategies to negotiate their readings, such negotiated readings involved rearticulating the genesis of each racial stereotype (e.g., kernel of truth). In other words, participants' active viewing and pleasure were based on the self-validation of racial characteristics rather than on the subversion of stereotypes. Bird (2003) would describe this as "constrained cultural activity" (p. 167) in that although the audiences do many unexpected things with the images provided by the media, their meaning making is constrained by the boundaries set by the media. Audiences' pleasure in viewing racial humor tends to require the acceptance of the beliefs of racial differences because there would be little pleasure if viewers perceived racial stereotypes in comedy as unreal or false. We claim that viewers' validation of racial stereotypes is the ideological effect of comedy that encourages them to perceive racial differences as essential and natural, not culturally constructed. Although creative, none of our focus group participants produced any oppositional discourse with regard to the problematic aspects of racial characterizations in *Rush Hour 2.* The absence of a critical discourse and the validation of racial stereotypes among the viewers suggest that racial stereotypes in comedy successfully enable viewers of all races to naturalize the beliefs of racial differences while allowing them to enjoy the humor.

Notes

1 Box Office Prophets. (n.d.). *Rush hour 2*. Retrieved March 3, 2005, from http://www.boxofficeprophets.com/tickermaster/listing.cfm?TMID = 169
2 Internet Movie Database. (n.d.). *All-time USA box office*. Retrieved March 3, 2005, from http://www.imdb.com/Charts/usatopmovies

3   Except for one Black participant who was born abroad and migrated to the United States at an early age, all the White and Black participants were American born. "Asian Americans" refers to Americans of East Asian decent. All Asian participants were of Chinese, Korean, or Japanese descent and used English as their first language. Among the 18 Asian participants, 14 were American born and 4 were foreign born. Two foreign-born Asian participants were adopted and raised by White families, and the other two foreign-born participants immigrated to American at their early age.
4   For discussions of the representations of Asian Americans in American film and television, see Hamamoto (1994), Shim (1998), and Wong (1978).

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