

# Identity in TV Series 'Superstore'

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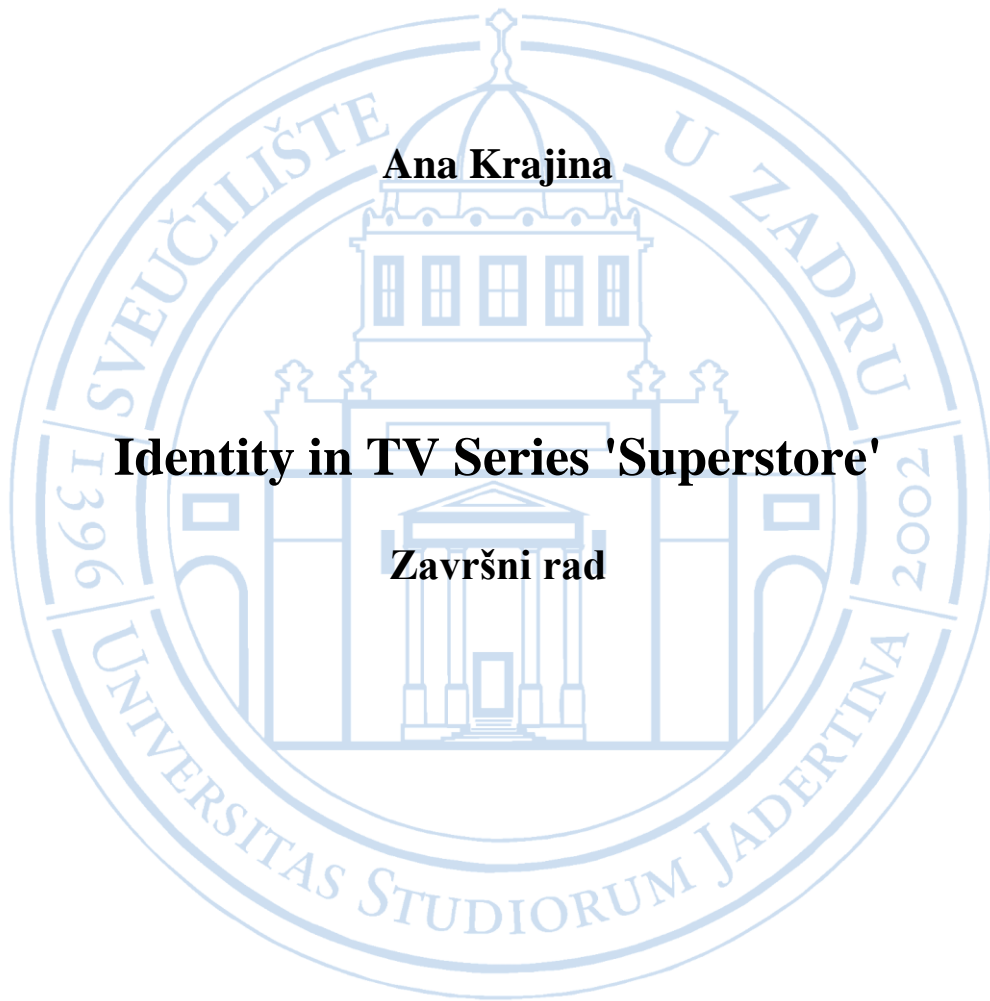
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DIGITALNI AKADEMSKI ARHIVI I REPOZITORIJI

Sveučilište u Zadru

Odjel za anglistiku  
Sveučilišni prijediplomski studij Anglistike



**Ana Krajina**

**Identity in TV Series 'Superstore'**

**Završni rad**

Zadar, 2023

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Odjel za anglistiku

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Identity in TV Series 'Superstore'

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the span of several decades, identity imposed itself as one of the main concepts of humanities as well as a crucial social question. One cannot offer a single simple answer to what identity is without firstly theorizing about it (in some of various ways). According to Lawler (7-8) 'identity' can be interpreted in many different ways – “My sense of myself, others' perceptions of me, my reactions to others' perceptions, the social categories that attach themselves to me and to which I attach myself”. The aim of this paper is to analyse the process of identity formation on the example of two of the main characters, Amy and Mateo, from the NBC's TV show 'Superstore'. Different identity theories (social, cultural, intersectional) will be used to attempt to explain certain interactions between multiracial individuals, racial stereotyping, and overall behaviour of individuals in a multicultural workplace. When analysing something as complex as identity certain methods and frameworks are necessary, one of them being intersectional approach. Paper will provide a clarification of intersectional approach, its key elements, and features and how this innovative framework “can fundamentally alter how social problems are experienced, identified and grasped to include the breadth of lived experiences” (Hankivsky 1). Focus will also be on how race, gender, ability, nationality, and other social categories are presented in contemporary sitcoms, in this case in 'Superstore', and in what way they construct identities.

There is a common belief that identity is a crucial aspect of who we are as individuals and there are many contributing factors, such as culture, environment, and personal experiences. Understanding and engaging with our and others' identities is a key part of meaningful interreligious and intercultural dialogue. Diverse theories offer explanations to if identity is fixed and unchanging, or fluid and malleable and why certain identities become more prominent while others take on a secondary role. Our identities incorporate qualities, beliefs, and expressions that make us who we are, and we express them in a different way depending on the situation, environment or even our mood. We assign identities not only to ourselves but also to the people around us and sometimes we reduce them to the identities we have chosen to give them which can often lead to misunderstanding and conflict. I consider this topic particularly relevant in the field of popular culture as dialogue helps us explore different layers and intersectionality of our identities. It helps us consider how our and others' identities affect our perception of reality and our worldview. Complexity of identity formation is often the narrative of TV contents and understanding the theory helps critically analyze them and conclude if the topic has (not) been adequately addressed.

## 2. IDENTITY THEORIES

The tensions and conflicts that the identity problem encompasses are what make it essential and unavoidable. Theoretical work radiates from different directions such as cultural studies, feminism, Marxism, colonial and post-colonial identity studies, psychoanalysis and more. All those diverse models resulted in identity-related problems that seem structurally similar. Wittgenstein (as cited in Lawler 9) calls this 'family resemblance' – family members are not identical but still resemble one another to some extent. With this analogy, different interpretations of the concept and theoretical frameworks regarding identity are all related, there is relationship between them, but are not identical.

According to Culler (117) the process of forming one's identity highlights some differences while ignoring others as well as distinguishing between people or groups by presenting an internal distinction or division. Moreover, he claims how the topic of identity has frequently been presented as a dispute over "essentialism": between the idea that identity is something that is predetermined and has an origin and that it is something fluid, always in process, that develops via situational coalitions and challenges (the oppressed obtain identity by opposing the oppressor). Bauman (17) also advocates fluidity of identity claiming how this is more discernible now due to globalization and other social changes. Goffman (as cited in Lawler 8) presents three forms of identity. Personal identity refers to a person's distinctive qualities, both inner and in regard to their relationships with other people. Social or categorical identity is the identity that a person has as a result of belonging to a particular social category. The last one, ego identity, refers to a personal perception of "who we are" or "who we think we are", how individuals view themselves. Lawler (2) defines identity as "a social and collective process and not, as Western traditions would have it, a unique and individual possession". She talks about achieving identity, producing it via social relations, and avoids reducing it to single categories (gender, nation, race, sexuality, etc.). She does not deny the importance of these categories, but she finds it problematic as "identities cross categories", that is it is not possible to belong to only one, and "publicly available categories of identity may not easily map on to how people live, experience and understand themselves within those categories" (7). Considering the scope of this paper it is not possible to thoroughly analyze all theories regarding identity so Stuart Hall's work on identity and Crenshaw's intersectional framework will be taken as primary sources.

## 2.1. Identity and Stuart Hall

According to Hall identities are “the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves in, the narratives of the past” (Hall, *Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation* 70). He illustrates how feminism, Marxism, Freud’s psychoanalysis, and other 20<sup>th</sup> century developments have all contributed to popularizing the issue of identity. Hall argues that “... identities can function as points of identification and attachment only *because* of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render ‘outside’... Every identity has at its ‘margin’ an excess, something more. The unity, the internal homogeneity, which the term identity treats as foundational [,] is not a natural, but a constructed form of closure, every identity naming as its necessary, even if silenced and unspoken other, that which it ‘lacks’...” (Hall, Introduction: Who Needs ‘Identity’ 5). This concept is called the ‘constitutive outside’ of identity shows how no identity is whole, it is what it is not, it is both about sameness and otherness. “All identities are relational in this sense: all rely on *not* being something else” (Lawler 12). With this in regard, in the character of Amy (played by America Ferrera), we can see this clash or tension between her identities as a ‘mother’ and as a ‘worker’, as she, as a mother of two, struggles working on her corporate career.

When talking about racial identity systems of inequality, Hall considers ‘black’ as a narrative, something constructed. He gives an example of Jamaican society “who lived for three or four hundred years without ever being able to speak of themselves as ‘black’. Black is an identity which had to be learned and could only be learned in a certain moment. In Jamaica that moment is the 1970s” (Hall, *Spectacle of the Other* 45, as cited in Lawler 14).

## 2.2. Identification and the Subject

What this self is, the ‘I’, and what makes it what it is has been a topic of research for years. Culler, presented two basic questions that should be regarded – “first, is the ‘self’ something given or something made and, second, should it be conceived in individual or in social terms?” (Culler 108). Using these we can produce four basic strands of modern thinking: the given and individual, which views the self as an inner, unique entity; the combined given and social, which emphasizes the self’s origins and social characteristics (gender, race and others); the individual and the made, which emphasizes the self’s fluctuating nature through specific actions; and the social and made, which emphasizes the self’s position in society as crucial for identification (being wealthy versus being poor, being an employer versus employee) (108).



Finding herself/himself is often the narrative in written literature or on TV screens as characters develop and change as the plot progresses. It is possible to notice a selection of implicit models of identity formation in these works. Culler (110) offers an example of a narrative “where identity is essentially determined by birth: the son of a king raised by shepherds is still fundamentally a king and rightfully becomes king when his identity is discovered”. This structure where characters ‘discover’ who they are by act in such a way that after happens to be their ‘nature’, caused a lot of theorizing and discussion about race, sexuality, and gender in the literary field. Lastly, he concludes how literature provides readers with experiences how it feels to be in a particular situation and act accordingly and identify with the characters by presenting the world from their perspective - “we become who we are by identifying with figures we read about” (Culler 113).

### 3. IDENTITY AND POPULAR CULTURE

“Popular culture is an amorphous concept which encompasses an enormous range of cultural texts, and practices, from cinema films to newspaper articles, from designing computer games to playing music” and the term ‘popular culture’ today is mostly considered as media culture (Milestone, Mayer 1). Pop culture, as explained by Martin and Nakayama, is “produced by culture industries ... is different from folk culture ... is everywhere ... [and] fills a social function” (202-203). These authors explain the quantitative aspect of popular culture because ‘popular’ implies that it is watched/read/practiced by a significant amount of people. “And indeed, many aspects of culture which we commonly class as popular culture are widely appreciated and consumed, such as pop music or television” (Milestone, Mayer 3). According to Nadine Dolby (as cited in Martin & Nakayama 210), pop culture is significant in shaping our identity as she describes how “popular culture, at the end of the 20th century, is a key site for the formation of identities, for the ways in which we make sense of the world and locate ourselves within it”.

Stuart Hall’s (‘Encoding/Decoding’ in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies*) concept of active audience and encoding/decoding processes is also important when considering the relationship between individuals and media (in this case a TV show). Hall explains different interpretations of consumed content among viewers. The media has the power to encode a certain message through their content and Hall’s ‘active audience’ is actively working on decoding the meaning of those messages. Hence, illustrating the ‘power’ that various popular culture forms but mostly media, have on influencing viewers however they please. This is especially relevant when talking about a TV show which discusses racial and other social issues, such as ‘Superstore’, as the everyday dialogue between the characters about these issues offers, to some extent, a learning experience for viewers as well as a realistic look at how these sorts of issues may occur in real life. Stafford (8) raises questions about the political role of representation, if different audience will truly interpret the content in different ways, “who is in control of the representations in the program – whose values and ideas are ‘spoken’?”, to extent to which TV representation resembles the ‘real world’ and so on. This all goes to state how complex the analysis of representation is.

### 3.1. Identity in TV sitcoms

Workplace comedies are one of the most common narrative situations on television today. Critics claim that *'The Office'* and *'Brooklyn Nine-Nine'* are responsible for popularizing it in recent years. Gender represents one of the fundamental factors in characterization in most sitcoms and “comedies rely heavily on ‘social typing’ – characters based on traits related to social class, age, gender, and ethnicity” (Stafford 6). This is why NBC’s *'Superstore'* was chosen for this topic as it differs from the other workplace comedies with its diverse cast including Black, Asian, Latina, elderly, queer, and disabled characters. In addition, it is an up-to-date show, it provides examples of intersecting identities, and it deals with ongoing social issues regarding race and gender, immigration, labor rights.

According to Hall, in his chapter “The Work of Representation”, representation is a term for the production of meaning of the concepts that are already in our mind by using language. “It is the link between concepts and language which enable us to refer to either the “real” world of objects, people or events, or indeed to imaginary world of fictional objects, people and events” (17). With Hall’s theory of representation and Encoding/Decoding concept, the show is responsible for the way of how appropriated Hawaiian culture for example is illustrated to the viewers, and how they (producers and creators) chose to address that issues may have a significant impact on the audience if they choose to adopt the presented stance.

### 3.2. Gender and class in the media

Studies show how popular culture, in this case the media, is significantly influential in forming identities and producing subject positions, in correlation with other social factors including social class. Milestone and Mayer, in their book *'Gender and popular culture'* (2012) talk about proliferation of media since the 1940s and how today’s modern culture can be seen as media culture; media can have central role when it comes to forming self-identity as popular culture and gender are deeply interconnected. They analyze certain ways how consumers (viewers) “retain a certain passive edge by being conceptualized as respondents who react to the media” but also actively use the media to structure gender identities (164). They answer the question about the effect of the media in the formation of gender identity by stating that many media products are gendered. This means, firstly, that magazines, films, television shows and so on are in most cases addressed to either men or women and, secondly, deal with concerns which are traditionally know a male (sports, money, cars) or female (romance, emotions, family).

Consuming these contents can result in producing and reinforcing either feminine or masculine identity (Milestone, Mayer “*Gender and popular culture*”). Sitcoms are not as gendered, but they certainly provide content where gender norms appear in regard to power relations, social status and gender inequality. An example of Amy successfully balancing both ‘the mother role’ and ‘the businesswoman’ role will be analyzed in more detail later in the paper.

Bratslavsky describes how important are the narratives, frameworks and even the physical bodies that the media construct to represent social class and how they limited those representations often is. Hall explained how media create and construct “images, descriptions, explanations and frames for understanding how the world is and why it works as it is said and shown to work” (Hall 82 as cited in Bratslavsky 210). This issue was also addressed in the ‘Superstore’ as America Ferrera (playing Amy) explained to the press: “We’re representing working-class people in a setting that is the intersection of American consumerism and every race, religion and background. It’s so ripe to have any conversation you want without it feeling forced” (Ryan 2016 as cited in Bratslavsky 210).

### **3.3. Judith Butler – performing gender**

Butler (*Gender Trouble*), like some other researchers (Goffman, Bronwyn Davies), offers a framework where gender is represented as something that is performed, that is done, and not something that an individual is. She explains these performances as unconscious and habitual, simply following ‘the script’. Davies (‘Becoming male or female’ *Gender: A Sociological Reader*) explains that gender and sex are made up of individual practices, hence cannot exist beyond the individual. Social structures are often constraining (Milestone, Mayer “*Gender and popular culture*”) and this is quite transparent in the example of gender as both femininity and masculinity ‘dictate’ what women and men can and cannot do, what are socially (un)acceptable practices for one and for the other. Gender provides knowledge about ‘typical’ patterns of behavior, character traits and attitudes regarding femininity and masculinity, hence enabling individuals to position themselves by performing these elements (Davies, ‘Becoming male or female’, in *Gender: A Sociological Reader*). Butler (*Gender Trouble*) also agrees that these performances are unconscious and habitual, simply following this ‘gender script’.

According to Hall, (“*The Work of Representation*” 23) it is not possible for meaning to be finally fixed, since individuals do not have control over language and images which carry (positive or negative) connotations, in addition to other meanings being created and allocated.

*Superstore* tried to also tackle this issue of traditional femininity and masculinity discourse by blurring the strict lines of feminine and masculine behavior ('the norm'). Jonah's or Marcus' characters could be seen as 'the norm' as they embody normative gender behavior of a white heterosexual male but that does not put them in power position in regard for example Mateo who is homosexual and therefore has different behavior patterns. The same goes with the female characters where Amy represents a loving mom and a caring friend in contrast to Dina whose certain characteristics could be seen as more masculine (aggressive, authoritative, physically strong, often rude).

#### 4. INTERSECTIONALITY

Intersectional approach has been gaining status in the past decade as scholars concerned with tackling complex social issues, see it as a way of promoting social justice and challenging inequities. An American race scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw coined the term in 1989 but the main concepts regarding intersectionality can be traced long before then and far outside the United States' borders (Hankivsky 2). The idea originated from attempts to define how racial and gender dynamics affected social and political life (ibid). Researchers were well aware of the complexity of human lives. Crenshaw (as cited in Hankivsky 4) tried to visually represent intersectionality as “the rich, complex and historically shaped topography of the Grand Canyon”.

Intersectionality is constructed on several key principles (Hankivsky 3):

- Human lives are complex multi-dimensional and therefore cannot be reduced to single categories (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, nationality)
- When dealing with a certain social issue, precise investigation will be what illustrates the significance of any category or structure.
- “Relationships and power dynamics between social locations and processes (e.g., racism, classism, heterosexism, ableism, ageism, sexism) are linked”, subject to change over time and geographically dependent.
- Privilege and oppression can be experienced at the same time, all depending on the context.
- Multi-level analyses are essential to understanding power relations.
- Scholars and researchers should be reflexive and consider their own social position hence setting directions in their intersectionality related papers.
- Main goals of intersectional approach are attaining social justice and creating harmony among diverse groups.

Black feminists in the United States developed the intersectional concept as a way to construct theories about their social position and lived experiences, but scholars highlight that it has potential to shed light on other national contexts as well. The burgeoning number of scholars producing work about intersectional perspective and the complexity of the concept itself have resulted in various definitions and explanations and applications of the concept. Generally, however, it can be said that the main focus is on how “inequities are never the result

of single, distinct factors. Rather, they are the outcome of intersections of different social locations, power relations and experiences” (Hankivsky 2). It illustrates the crucial aspect of societal complexity that is the interface of social systems of oppression including gender, race, class, and others. Hill Collins also marks the notion of power, suggesting that race and gender intersect in order to create a “matrix of domination” where every cell defines a status in the race and gender hierarchy (194). She originally applied this “matrix of domination” or “matrix of oppression” model to African American women, but it can be easily applied to every other marginalized group that faces oppression (ibid).

Weldon (194) states how “black feminists argued that their problems and experiences could not be described as the problems of black men *plus* the problems of white women. Black women face many problems *as black women*, and their unique perspectives, identities, and experiences, cannot be derived from examination of the experiences and position of either black men or white women”. Elisabeth Spelman (as cited in Weldon 194) has famously claimed that “identity is not like pop-beads: people cannot discern the ‘woman part’ from the ‘African American part’ or from the ‘middle-class part’”. So, what this means is that instead of “... examining gender, race, nation and class, as separate systems of oppression, intersectionality explores how these systems mutually construct one another” (Collins 63).

Among numerous scholars who continued developing the concept of intersectionality after Crenshaw was also an American author and theorist Gloria Jean Watkins, better known as bell hooks. Her book *‘Ain’t I a Woman’* (2015) illustrates the intersectionality of race, capitalism, and gender where hooks describes black women’s experience as veiled due to policies and theoretical discourses that often detach blacks and women and see them as separate groups. She goes on explaining the importance of analyzing their experiences in the study of gender as it greatly differs from the white women’s experience.

As “all aspects of identity are interrelated” (Mead as cited in Lawler 6) it is vital to use intersectional approach. Superstore’s characters are in no shortage of those aspects as individuals but that also expands as they spend their days in multicultural surrounding mutually sharing and/or adopting each other’s opinions, behavioral patterns and customs. This paper will aim to analyze characters of Amy and Mateo through intersectional lens meaning try to explain their views and actions (how and why they differ from others’) and in what ways they have experienced discrimination or any kind of obstacle due to their overlapping social categories (gender, class, race, sexual orientation and so on).

## 5. TV SERIES ‘SUPERSTORE’ ANALYSIS

‘*Superstore*’ is an American sitcom television series in a 22-minute format. It is distinguished by the absence of laugh track and hilarious and often disgusting customer interstitials. The show aired from November 30, 2015, to March 25, 2021, on NBC and it had six seasons in total, the last one covering the topic of COVID-19 pandemic. The critic reviews started as average but from the second season on, show got more confident, and critics acknowledged it. A lot of parallels have been drawn between this show and ‘*The Office*’ (U. S. version) as *Superstore*’s creator Justin Spitzer worked as a writer on ‘*The Office*’ for years. Because it is one of the few television programs attempting to discuss America as it is right now, fans contend that it should receive more recognition from industry awards. In addition, it is not too self-important, making it a great ‘comfort food’ – to watch something recognizable and humorous.

We follow the lives of a group of employees who work at Cloud 9, a fictional big-box chain store in St. Louis, Missouri. Viewers have an insight in a workplace with an unusual and eccentric boss Glenn (played by Mark McKinney), suspenseful romance between Amy (America Ferrera) and Jonah (Ben Feldman), and an abundance of workers who seem to hate their job and would prefer to do anything else but nonetheless are content with their minimum-wage jobs at the store. At the end the store closes due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper will highlight the examples of cultural appropriation and how the show portrayed working men and women (organizing unions and strikes, maternity leave, health care, minimum wages, work during global pandemic, etc.).

‘*Superstore*’ is a typical American store selling typical items along with guns, liquor, and pharmaceutical products which resulted in certain controversial debates among show’s characters regarding gun policy, abortion, and other provocative topics. Many TV companies make content featuring social issues to promote themselves, but by doing that they are also exposing themselves to the risk of receiving a vastly negative response that can damage their reputation and reduce their sales due to boycotts for a certain period. ‘*Superstore*’ took the same risk but according to critics they successfully addressed diverse global issues and controversial topics, offered some interesting theories and possible solutions for some of them. “The best social comment sitcoms will undermine stereotypes and explore ‘real’ social situations and the dynamics of social interaction” (Stafford 7).



## 5.1. Position of working men and women

'*Superstore*' won praise for showing numerous problems faced by retail workers some of them being low wages, racial and gender discrimination, poor benefits, automation, short staffing, and even the challenges of serving as essential workers during the global COVID-19 pandemic, which was the topic of the last season of the show. This is a story about working people trying to 'meet the ends', corporate versus the little men, and all that in a workplace ironically named 'Cloud 9'. The corporation of the store is based in Chicago, Illinois, and wanting to be in control of everything that is happening in all their stores, they monitor everything (temperature in the stores and music, locks and lights, etc.) from their offices. They do not offer health insurance to their employees, paid maternity leave, or paid overtime and it is written in their policy that employees may have one bathroom break per shift and only a 15-minute lunch break. There are numerous critiques about the policies and employees' attempts to organize a union or a strike throughout all six seasons, and their biggest act of rebellion against the corporate - the employee walkout after the store manager Glenn was fired (S01E11). Bratslavsky described the show as a "satire about consumerism and working conditions is connected to activist rhetoric about the failures of multibillion-dollar corporations to pay living wages" (209).

In the final episode (S06E15 "*All Sales Final*") Garrett, played by Colton Dunn, employed for over twenty years, ends the episode saying that "most jobs suck 99 percent of the time," and that "If you're lucky maybe you even get to be friends with a coworker or two along the way. Not sure what else you could want in a job" (00:20:49-00:21:30). As lovely and sentimental as this ending is, "the show consistently showed the many other things that workers could want: parental leave, good health insurance, opportunities for advancement, a fair wage, job security, a workplace free of discrimination, and ethical management" (Wanzo 89). Black Friday is considered a holiday so the workers cannot reach them for any potential questions during the busiest day in the year for retailers. Could 9 corporate can also be accused of nepotism as we follow district manager Laurie trying to hire her clearly incompetent son instead of highly more qualified Amy. When workers addressed it, Laurie denied saying - "Not that it's any of your business, but yes, Blaine is my son, but that has nothing to do with why he got hired here" (S04E14 "*Minor Crimes*" 00:10:50).

### 5.1.1. Organizing unions and strikes

A common setup for US television is a workplace, which is the case with the show 'Superstore', and what is not so common is the topic of unions and their attempts to fight corporate. District manager Jeff claims that the corporate calls them 'a problem child store' because of, among

other reasons, multiple attempts of unionizing. Wanzo (89) claims it is one of the rare shows in the US dealing with this topic in their plot. Even though it was not their intention, according to the creator Justin Spitzer, a show portraying the lives of low-wage workers inevitably becomes political. Cheyenne's (played by Nichole Sakura O'Connor) maternity leave (S01E11 "Labor") triggered the first discussion about unions and when Amy and Jonah called the corporate to try to resolve this issue and mentioned the word 'union', it instantly caused attention from management (00:05:34 – 00:07:20). The call resulted in them sending "a labor relations consultant" to the store explaining how Cloud 9 is not anti-union but rather that there is no need for unions when their company listens to their workers' troubles (00:07:55-00:08:17).

## 5.2. Racial stereotyping

Stereotyping is the process which simplifies people and their characteristics to only a couple of simple crucial traits. As Hall (*Spectacle of the Other* 258) states stereotypes reduce people "to few 'simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized' characteristics about a person, *reduce* everything about the person to those traits, *exaggerate* and *simplify* them, and *fix* them without change or development to eternity." Being a complex process, stereotyping involves a few aspects. First representing the construction of 'otherness' as this process categorizes people whether they 'fit' a certain norm, something that is considered as normal by the majority), or not, and everything considered as 'different' is excluded as 'the other'. Secondly, it possesses this symbolical power to illustrate any concept in any way, in any 'regime of representation'. "Comedy changes over time as stereotypes change... (stereotypes) have become powerful ways of defining social groups often by the dominant groups as a way of labelling the 'others' in society" (Stafford 6). The most well-known example of this is Said's theory of how Europe, thanks to its hegemony over the Orient, has constructed a stereotypical image of it. Another aspect of stereotyping is fantasy as all stereotypes have a deeper meaning besides the one that is recognized as real. This deeper meaning is not stated but rather fantasized (Hall, *Spectacle of the Other* 223-290). It is clear that stereotypes constantly appear in sitcoms as they are used for familiarity and certain sitcom characters are unimaginable without them (Butsch 112).

Racial differences and racial stereotyping are a common source of conflict for decades. Even though "stereotypes originally developed as aids to market research" (Stafford 6) commercials companies would air adverts filled with depicted stereotyped behaviours, subdued racial prejudice and ignorance. Scholars mostly claim that "race as a category is now generally

agreed to have no credible biological basis” and is seen as a social construct developing over time (Lawler 14). The show *Superstore* is a good example for racial analysis as it has a diverse cast and “multiracial individuals are more likely to have a heightened awareness of race as a social construct” (Shih et al. 125). Educating about what race is and how to deal with it is a way of minimizing negative racial stereotypes and prejudice. Although racism and ignorance are widespread, calling it out is also gaining notion, especially with the younger generations who are keen in promoting equality and freedom among all nations and races by expressing their criticism on social media, that is platforms for creating and sharing content - Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter.

Critical commentary is present through all the seasons but the fifth and the sixth season of the show offered some of the most prominent debates about current issues with many discussions regarding race issues relevant to the ones we see within the United States today. More specifically, in the episode “*Hair Care Products*,” (S05E05) the cast was given a task to identify racial issues in their environment after the store lifted their policy of needing to lock up Black beauty products. There is also talk about microaggressions and white privilege.

### **5.3. Cultural appropriation**

Cultural appropriation represents a complex and controversial subject within the media as well as society and is receiving increased interest over the last twenty years. Cultural appropriation is a term describing usage or taking of tangible or intangible items including ideas from one culture by another without giving proper recognition or respect to that culture (Young 6). To this standard definition, scholars include process of commodification of culture and a reference to the inequality in power between the two cultures (Arya 4). When power dynamics are involved (when the dominant culture appropriates from minority cultures), the ‘weaker side’ is facing the risk of being misunderstood and misrepresented, which then causes hurtful stereotypes. Culture is often instantly related to skin color but that is not always the condition. Cultural appropriation takes many forms (3), and people can be accused of appropriating a culture for braiding their hair, dressing in a certain way, wearing hoop earrings, using African American Vernacular English (AAVE), the style of dancing, just to name some.

It is also the case that sometimes people whose culture is being appropriated do not consider it as a problem and the concept of cultural appropriation itself is not that relevant for them. They explain how they enjoy when foreigners wear and genuinely like the style or history of their

traditional clothes and love to share their food, music, and art with others. That makes them view their culture as a source of inspiration for others and not as something being appropriated. Young (1) claims how “artists from many cultures are constantly engaging in cultural appropriation” naming various painters, musicians, poets, and filmmakers take, what he calls ‘artistic elements’ such as musical themes, motifs, plots, styles, and genres. This ‘borrowing of ideas’ for Young is not considered problematic but rather seen as cultural exchange. Borrowing from each other, from other cultures, is a rich part of human experience and can be very beneficial. For example, Anime has the style, themes, and forms unique to Japanese culture but anime as a whole could not have developed independently from 50s Disney (Raffaeli 127, Pisha 4). Humans will often imitate or absorb what we like and feel a connection to, so I think cultural appropriation is good when it is done in appreciation, understanding and love of the culture and not in a degrading, mocking and humiliating way. We need examples of respectful cultural exchange, ways to relate to other culture in ways that honor that culture, to appreciate without appropriating.

## 6. CHARACTERS IN ‘SUPERSTORE’

In this time when TV commercials, shows, films, etc. feature actors of different races are ever more present, Hall’s question: “Do these images appropriate 'difference' into a spectacle in order to sell a product?” gains greater significance (Hall, *Spectacle of the Other* 273). It can be argued that commercials’ intention is to promote and sell, and businesses aim to make a profit, but situation regarding this issue today is rather complex. Many saw the show’s diverse casting choices and the show itself as enlightened with the stereotypes they perpetuated. This ensemble of diverse co-workers appears rather quirky and the only thing that binds them together seems to be their workplace. The show first started with a central cast of seven regulars, but as the peripheral characters continued to amaze with their one or two lines per episode, burgeoning number of actors entered this semi-central crew at Cloud 9, gaining more and more screen time. This paper will further examine the characters of Amy and Mateo as they are appropriate for applying identity theory and intersectional approach. Using these two examples I will analyze identity aspects such as gender, race and sexuality and support the claims with examples from the show.

Amelia ‘Amy’ Sosa is one of the main *Superstore* characters and is played by America Ferrera, who was also an executive producer of the show. Amy right away catches the attention of the audience as ‘different’ or ‘smarter than the others’ as she changes her name tag every day explaining – “I just don’t like random strangers using my name like we’re buddies” (S01E01 “Pilot” 00:06:01). She is a woman balancing her career and motherhood, her divorce, and a new romance, being a Latina in America. Having so many roles at a time, her character will serve for the intersectional analysis. Another rather complex character is her colleague Mateo Fernando Aquino Liwanag, played by Nico Santos, who is a Cloud 9 associate. His character started off very simple – slightly arrogant and a highly competitive worker, but as the show progresses, viewers get to see a lot of layers to him that explain his temper and hyper competitiveness. He serves as a great example of intersectionality (Filipino x queer x undocumented immigrant x working-class) and the show illustrates how that ‘clash of identities’ reflects on his work and personal relationships.

### 6.1. Amy Sosa

Amy is a Honduran American employee who, in the beginning of the show was hired as an associate and it was supposed to be her summer job. She later stayed long enough and was

competent enough that Glenn promoted her to a floor supervisor, and after filling in the position of an assistant manager. She is stuck in her home-job routine and calls herself realistic as believing that is all that life is. As a worker she represents ‘the normal one’ as (almost) always being the reasonable and responsible one; not making immature jokes or pranks and fixing other workers’ mistakes making sure store runs properly. In season 4 she reaches the top of her Cloud 9 career and becomes a store manager. After that last promotion, her significant raise created a significant class divide between her and her colleagues and friends. In the last season, Amy was offered a corporate position at Cloud 9 and therefore leaves the show but returns for the final three episodes.

We find out Amy got married and pregnant quite young and throughout the show, displays certain evidence of regret (but still undoubtedly loving her child). Tania Modleski (*Loving with a vengeance: mass-produced fantasies for women*) introduced ‘the ideal mother’ as the prime subject position in TV shows that female viewers can identify with. That character does not have personal needs but is always prioritizing others’ requests (predominately her children’s and husband’s), mediates various conflicts, shows considerable common sense and sympathy. Amy’s daughter Ema, and later her son Parker, significantly influence her decisions and lifestyle in general. From the first episodes she has been presented as a mother – worried, responsible, and taking care of her younger colleagues. Parenthood has, over the history, often been described as motherhood in the sense that raising children is a women’s job. “As a consequence, motherhood is important to women’s identities in a way that fatherhood is not for men. Women who have children are very much defined by this; they are first and foremost mothers” (Lawler 2000 as cited in Milestone, Mayer 105). Superstore fights this as Amy’s motherhood does not define her and she is capable to achieve and develop other aspects of hers throughout the show.

Amy is not afraid to voice her opinions especially if she, or any of her colleagues, are being offended. She faced sexism and double standards after the sex tape episode (S04E01 “*Back to School*”) which resulted in one of many employee harassment meetings. Manager Glenn explained how any sort of sex incident is “less embarrassing” (00:07:08) for a male. As well as admitting that he is lost in everything that is happening, mentioning MeToo movement and Time’s Up. Amy was furious because she knew everyone saw the tape of her a Jonah, but no one mentioned anything to her – “... it’s a double standard. So, for men, sex is, like, an accomplishment. And for women, it’s that I got taken advantage of?” (00:08:17). On the other hand, male Cloud 9 employees had no problems talking about it with Jonah, proudly naming

him “J-Bone” and “Shredder” (00:04:48 - 00:05:26). Her co-workers also brought attention to her authority and if she as a supervisor coerced Jonah into having intercourse. Amy ends the discussion stating that it was consensual, both parties enjoyed and therefore there should not be any shame talking about it. Popular culture often represents women as mainly concerned with love and romance. “Whilst women are increasingly acknowledged to possess an active sexuality and wanting to experience sexual pleasure, often a dichotomy continues to be maintained in which men’s goal is life is sex and women’s ’aims are relationships and commitment” (Milestone, Mayer 87).

The show also covers the topic of typical Latina tropes on TV through Amy’s character. Latinos present maybe the largest minority in the United States but even so, Hollywood keeps depicting them quite narrowly and stereotypically. Female characters are very sexy (dressed sensually, hair and makeup always done, long hair, big mouth and eyes, voluptuous), very loud with a heavy accent and a lot of mispronunciations, fiery temperament and often originating from a very poor and dangerous village in Colombia (Hispanic countries represented as unsafe). “Women in popular culture have always been closely associated with and scrutinized in terms of their physical appearance, for example the size and shape of their bodies...” (Milestone, Mayer 93). Interestingly, very early on (S01E03 “*Shots and Salsa*”) Amy has been accused of not being ‘Latina enough’ as she did not engage in these stereotypical behaviors. Dina advised her “to add some ‘indigenous-ness’... put a little Vergara on it” (00:14:30). Amy showed her willingness to fight Latina stereotypes. She came to her colleague selling salsa sauce with a heavy Mexican accent as “people love it” (00:05:10) and said, “some people might find it offensive... Latino people who would think that that you’re exploiting your heritage and demeaning yourself” (00:05:24 – 00:05:36). This resulted in Glenn playing them a 60-minute-long video about racism - yet another miserable attempt from corporate to assess such a complex issue.

In the “*Costume Competition*” episode (S04E04), Amy started the topic of cultural appropriation and how disrespectful her colleagues were being (just to get them disqualified as she wanted to win). As first example she took Cheyenne’s hula girl costume and asked a Native-Hawaiian colleague Sandra if she finds “reducing (her) heritage to some cartoony stereotype” (00:07:47) disrespectful. Secondly, if half-Jamaican Janet was okay with Marcus’ Rasta cap, then how Sayid feels about Chris’ Aladin costume and so on. If it were not for Amy ‘hinting them’, most of them would not see these costumes as offensive but rather as just costumes for

the costume contest and no harm were meant by it but even though “cultural appropriation is often committed unintentionally or inadvertently ... it does not mitigate the damage” (Arya 2).

According to (Milestone, Mayer 170) “...women find it difficult to obtain high-powered positions at work because of gender discrimination” which then demotivates women to even try. Alongside gender, in her TED Talk, America Ferrera claims she kept receiving the same message from directors, producers, managers, etc. – “That my (Latina) identity was an obstacle I had to overcome” (“America Ferrera: My Identity Is a Superpower -- Not an Obstacle” 00:04:10). She states that Hollywood has to stop resisting what the world actually looks like and calls for far more authentic representation of diverse cultures in media - and a modification in how our stories are told (ibid). Show addressed these issues suggesting that the situation has improved as we follow Amy and Cheyenne (S04E10 “*Cloud 9 Academy*” 00:1:19-00:2:15) on a manager training program where both females and males are equally represented, as well as people of different races and ethnicities. Amy is very motivated to work on her career and believes she deserves it considering all of her experience.

## **6.2. Mateo Liwanag**

In this story that “gleefully finds the absurdity in the daily mundanity at a large retail store - employee Mateo is drawn as a funny, energetic young person” (Borum Chattoo 39). Quite early in the show we discover that he was living in the United States as an undocumented immigrant. Even though his colleagues helped him to try to keep that a secret, at the end of season 4 he was arrested by ICE (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement) at the end of season four. Later he was hired as an assistant manager as his colleagues wanted him back but were unable to hire him over corporate, so this job was the only one keeping the corporate not involved. In the beginning of the show, he was in a romantic relationship with the district manager Jeff, and later, towards the end of the show with Amy's brother Eric, with whom he got engaged in season 6.

Mateo’s realization of him being undocumented immigrant “established an ongoing episodic storyline that would prove rich with opportunities to build awareness and empathy about the lives of undocumented immigrants in the United States, particularly the experience of DREAM-ers, named for the DREAM Act that would allow many such young people to remain in the country” (National Immigration Law Center, 2017 as cited in Borum Chattoo 39-40). Mateo’s character is significant since undocumented immigrants are not very often featured



in the US entertainment industry and even when they are they are not fully embodied central characters but defamed and dehumanized in news coverage and supporting politics (Farris & Mohamed 2018 as cited in Borum Chattoo 40). In season 2, episode 18 (“*Mateo’s Last Day*”) “spotlights the complexities of undocumented life in a hilariously accessible way, humanizing Mateo’s plight and demonstrating the care and solidarity of his workplace friends” (Borum Chattoo 40). Pollard (76) emphasizes how Mateos’s intersecting identities as a working class and as an undocumented immigrant place him as a target to ICE’s and Cloud 9’s organizational violence. She states that “violence is encouraged through policies that are powered by the mercurial hand of whiteness and heteronormativity”. She also lists Dan on the list with ICE and Cloud 9 as he abuses his power over Mateo and because of a comment he made (S05E05 “*Self-Care*”) about him being a white savior (displaying complete lack of knowledge about the complex itself)– “he (Dan) also feels that he is a benevolent white man saving a helpless brown person from certain destruction” (69).

His hard work and ambition got him where he is today so when rumors of firing people started to occur Mateo tried his best to keep his job. He started to form various alliances to protect himself from lay-offs (S02E22 “*Tornado*”). He began with an Asian alliance with Brett and Sandra, then a gay alliance, Dave Matthews Ban fans alliance and a catholic alliance. Mateo used this shared sense of belonging to a group (characterized by race, religion, sexuality...), a concept known as collective identity or group identity. Critics define several problems regarding it. In his work regarding literary theory, Culler (112) mentions that “when novels are concerned with group identities – what it is to be a woman, or child of the bourgeoisie – they frequently explore how the demands of group identity restrict individual possibilities”. Moreover, critical studies invalidate the idea that all members of a group characterized by race, gender, nationality, sexuality, religion, or language share an essential identity and show how inappropriate it is to view traits like sexuality, gender, or visible physical features as fundamentally defining characteristics of group identity (ibid).

Mateo is quick to judge, self-centered and quite blunt, which sometimes can seem aggressive. He is also easily offended but when it comes to the others, he is not that sensitive. Cheyenne’s hula costume, as previously mentioned, encouraged conversation about cultural appropriation where Mateo saw nothing wrong with it - “OMG. How cute is Cheyenne’s hula outfit?” (00:07:58). He also ‘demonstarted’ Hawaiian sacred dance hula as “Laki-maki laki-maki laki-maki. It’s adorable. Oh, you guys (Hawaiians), you’re just such a cute, funny little

people.” (00:08:02 – 00:08:15). He, according to Hall, reduced the whole of the Hawaiian community to this dance that he finds ‘cute’. Another example regarding his unawareness rather than bad intentions, I would say, is when he was selling salsa with a Mexican accent, was not able to stop himself even when Amy explicitly told him claiming he is appropriating her culture. I would also add that the customers were also shown in ‘a bad light’ as they would only buy salsa if the seller had the accent (S01E03 “*Shots and Salsa*”).

He is sometimes portrayed as being a good worker by blindly following the rules. That may seem as accurate representation as he does enjoy receiving compliments from his supervisors but that does not imply that he is not aware of their poor working conditions. He was the one noticing how the company has been holding them under 40 hours a week, so they do not have to give them benefits (S01E11 “*Labor*” 00:12:40) and was standing with his colleagues during several attempts to better the situation. He was not fighting eagerly as Amy and Jonah but still he never denied the existence of the issue.

## 7. CONCLUSION

There is not one universal definition of identity. It is a complex and broad term describing multiple aspect that the person's identity is composed of. Ethnicity, gender, class, race, sexual orientation, and other social categories as well as values and hobbies, all have a significant role in shaping individuals. There are theoretical works explaining if identity is fixed and inner or fluid and malleable during life, or a mix of both. This paper aimed to explain complexity and 'layeredness' of identity through intersectional analyses of Amy and Mateo – two characters from the TV show '*Superstore*'. Intersectional approach makes it possible to analyze human lives as composite and multi-dimensional as they truly are, and these multi-level analyses are crucial to understanding power relations. The chosen show also offers insight into daily struggles of retail workers, listing various issues corporate policies cause, resulting in employees' tensions, and continuous critical commentary regarding different inequalities and racial issues that keep emerging without anyone tackling them professionally. Employees are left on their own and they try their best, though sometimes having poor ideas and plans, to find a solution, learn from their mistakes and do better in the future.

Issues regarding racial stereotyping and cultural appropriation are, in my opinion, handled quite well and can even serve as a learning ground for the audience. I feel that the rise in social awareness and sensibility for questions of racism and other kinds of oppressions in recent years are what made it possible for '*Superstore*' to successfully address certain controversial topics and familiarize their audience with numerous concepts regarding race and gender issues. It is important to analyze topics like this one as it helps us develop critical thinking, understand how to fight racial stereotypes and prejudice and how to view person as a whole rather than placing them in various 'social boxes'. In recognizing one another's identities, we can appreciate each other's diversity and experience the richness it offers us.

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**IDENTITY IN TV SERIES ‘SUPERSTORE’: Summary and key words**

This thesis deals with the analysis of the construction of identity of two selected characters of the American sitcom ‘*Superstore*’. The aim is to analyze the factors that contribute to identity formation in a multi-cultural workplace. The theoretical part provides previous research done on the topic of identity with an emphasis on the intersectional approach which is used to analyze crossing of racial, gender, and class aspects of identity. The practical part refers to the examples from the show that provide support for the theoretical claims about formation of identity as well as examples of retail workers’ struggles and the instances of cultural appropriation and racial stereotyping among multi-cultural characters.

Key words: identity, intersectionality, racial stereotypes, gender, TV shows

**IDENTITET U TV SERIJI ‘SUPERSTORE’: Sažetak i ključne riječi**

Ovaj završni rad bavi se analizom formiranja identiteta na primjeru dvoje odabranih likova iz Američke komedije situacije ‘*Superstore*’. Cilj ovog rada jest analizirati faktore koji doprinose formiranju identiteta na multikulturalnom random mjestu. Teorijski dio sadrži pregled prijašnjih istraživanja na temu identiteta s naglaskom na intersekcionalni pristup koji je korišten pri analizi preklapajućih rasnih, rodnih i klasnih aspekata identiteta. Praktični dio odnosi se na primjere iz serije koji podupiru teorijske tvrdnje o formiranju identiteta, poteškoće s kojima se susreću trgovački radnici te primjeri kulturološke aproprijacije među multikulturalnim likovima.

Ključne riječi: identitet, intersekcionalnost, rasni stereotipi, rod, serije