

Contradictory Messages: A Content Analysis of Hollywood-Produced Romantic Comedy Feature Films

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This study analyzed the romantic content of a sample of 40 romantic comedy films using a basic grounded theory methodology. Analyses revealed that such films appear to depict romantic relationships as having qualities of both new and long-term relationships; that is, to be both novel and exciting, yet emotionally significant and meaningful. Furthermore, relationships were shown to have both highly idealistic and undesirable qualities but, for any problems or transgressions experienced to have no real negative long-term impact on relationship functioning. The potential for viewer interpretations is discussed and the need for future research highlighted.

Keywords: Adolescence; Content Analysis; Grounded Theory; Media; Romantic Relationships

With the media such a prominent part of today's society it is little wonder that it has become a resource on how the world works. Adolescents, particularly impressionable as they attempt to make sense of themselves and others around them, often look to the media (e.g., Bachen & Illouz, 1996; Brown, 2002; Signorielli, 1997) for issues increasing in importance such as those of romantic and sexual relationships (e.g., Arnett, 2000; Furnham & Simon, 1999). However, interpreting media representations of these issues as being an accurate reflection of reality may have serious implications for adolescents' perceptions of the world. Films and television programs typically rely on exaggerated and unrealistic portrayals of romantic and sexual relationships to

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appeal to their audiences (e.g., Committee on Public Education, 2001; Jowett & Linton, 1980; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999); and, although older and more experienced viewers can generally recognize this (Illouz, 1998), younger viewers with few of their own experiences to compare against may come to view these representations as cultural norms and form unrealistic relationship beliefs and expectations accordingly. If adolescents are indeed looking to the media's exaggerated and unrealistic portrayals to gain insight into what to expect in their own relationships, research must determine what specifically they are being exposed to. Research on romance media content thus far, however, is severely lacking. This study, therefore, sought to address this gap by analyzing the romantic content of a sample of romantic comedy feature films. Furthermore, a coding system of the romantic themes identified during analysis was created and interrater reliability established.

Theoretical Background

Research on media effects is generally carried out within the framework of one of two major theories, that of either cultivation theory (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994) or social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986, 1994). Social cognitive theory suggests individuals may actively observe media portrayals of behaviors in romantic relationships for insight into how they themselves could behave in their own relationships. According to Bandura (1986, 1994), individuals commit to memory behaviors they have observed to memory to be later used as models on which to base their own behavior. Observed behaviors are especially likely to be modelled if they are performed by individuals perceived as attractive and if outcomes are viewed as particularly appealing (Bandura, 1994)—that is, if an observed behavior results in a desired outcome, adolescents may engage in similar behavior believing that in doing so they too will gain the same benefits. However, with the media typically relying on unrealistic portrayals of relationships, it may be that adolescents modelling their own behavior on those seen in the media are unlikely to achieve the observed desired outcomes.

Where social cognitive theory suggests adolescents actively look to the media, cultivation theory suggests the effects of media messages may involve a more passive process. According to Gerbner et al. (1994), television has become the primary common source of socialization and everyday information for a heterogeneous population. Through its use of repeated themes and images it serves to influence viewer perceptions of reality—that is, viewers exposed over a prolonged period of time to portrayals of reality as defined by the media may come to develop perceptions that are consistent with these portrayals. Traditional cultivation theory posits that it is the overall exposure to general media content that influences real world perceptions. However, recent research has suggested that it is not overall media content but rather genre specific viewing that has a more potent influence on audiences (e.g., Holmes, 2007; Rössler & Brosius, 2001). Therefore, according to this revised theory, viewers exposed to a high level of romance media will come to cultivate beliefs and expectations of relationships consistent with those particular presentations over heavy viewers of media in general.

For example, a major criticism of romantic genre television and films is that they frequently portray intimate liaisons between physically beautiful characters (Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999) leading to relationships full of romance, physical intimacy, passion (Segrin & Nabi, 2002), and little conflict (Signorielli, 1991). Adolescents repeatedly exposed to these highly idealized images may therefore come to perceive them as normal, which, in turn, could have an adverse effect on their satisfaction with their own future relationships. When their own relationships do not compare to the exaggerated depictions in the media they may come to feel as though they are lacking a relationship that others are enjoying.

Previous Research

Studies have indeed found evidence to suggest a relationship between sexual media content and adolescents' beliefs and expectations. Viewing sexually oriented media has been associated with adolescents overestimating the sexual activity of peers (Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999), experiencing dissatisfaction in their own lack of sexual activity (Baran, 1976), and endorsing unhealthy beliefs of women as sex objects (Ward & Friedman, 2006) and men as sex-driven (Ward, 2002).

Lending support to social cognitive theory, studies suggest there may be an association between exposure to sexual content on television and initiation of sexual behavior. Brown and Newcomer (1991) found evidence to suggest a relationship between heavier viewing of sexual television programs and earlier initiation of sexual behavior. In addition, one year-long study found that adolescents who frequently viewed large amounts of sex-oriented television programs were more likely to initiate sexual behavior than those who watched comparatively less sexual content (Collins et al., 2004).

Having established an association between exposure to media representations of sexual relationships and adolescent beliefs and behaviors, recent years have seen a progression into exploring other aspects of relationships presented in the media that may serve to have similar associations. A study carried out by Signorielli (1991) examined the possibility of a relationship between media and adolescents' feelings and expectations for marriage. A content analysis carried out within the study examined the portrayals of marriages on prime-time television programs and found a tendency to promote only positive images of marriages. Adolescents who regularly viewed such programs had greater aspirations to marry and start a family, suggesting a relationship between exposure to these biased representations and adolescents' marriage expectations.

Segrin and Nabi (2002) also found a relationship between consumption of romanticized television and high expectations of marriage. Consistent with the revised theory that the cultivation of viewer beliefs and expectations is the result of genre specific rather than general media content, individuals who frequently watched media that focused on relationships and marriage, such as romantic comedy films and soap operas, held idealistic expectations of marriage. Not only was romantic media found to be related to elevated expectations but, consistent with Signorielli's (1991) study, also to greater intentions to marry.

In addition to these overly optimistic beliefs are studies that have shown that individuals exposed to romantic television content also endorse dysfunctional relationship beliefs, potentially to the detriment of their current relationships. Haferkamp (1999), Holmes (2007), and Shapiro and Kroeger (1991) examined the relationship between romantic media, including sitcoms, romantic novels and movies, and dysfunctional relationship beliefs as established by Eidelson and Epstein's (1982) Relationship Belief Inventory. Individuals viewing high levels of romantic media content were found to more strongly endorse beliefs that men and women are different, that neither can change themselves or their relationship (Haferkamp, 1999), that sex must be perfect (Shapiro & Kroeger, 1991), and that a partner should intuitively understand their needs (Holmes, 2007).

In addition, Holmes (2007) found a relationship between romance media and the belief that partners can be romantically destined for one other, whereas Shapiro and Kroeger (1991) found a positive relationship between exposure to romantic media and intimate relationship dissatisfaction, potentially the result of viewers' relationships not comparing to media-endorsed ideals.

Rationale Behind Current Work

With studies providing evidence of an association between genre-specific television programs and films and viewer beliefs and behaviors, research has set out to determine what the specific messages are that audiences are frequently being exposed to. What particular messages are potentially cultivating dysfunctional beliefs and unrealistic relationship expectations? What scenarios do adolescents find so appealing as to use them as a model for their own behavior? Several content analyses have been carried out investigating the nature and frequency of sexual encounters (e.g., Kunkel et al., 1999; Sapolsky & Tabarlet, 1991; Ward, 1995); but, despite evidence of a relationship between depictions of romantic aspects of relationships and viewer beliefs and expectations, there have been but a few content analyses investigating this. Of the two content analyses found examining the romantic content of films (Pardun, 2002; Tanner, Haddock, Zimmerman, & Lund, 2003), neither looked at a romantic genre-specific sample, which is an important factor to consider from a cultivation theory perspective. With this in mind, the primary aim of this study was to identify what messages on romantic relationships adolescents are being exposed to by systematically documenting all relationship-oriented themes that feature in the popular genre of romantic comedy films, with a secondary aim to establish interrater reliability on the themes found.

Method

Film Sample

The film genre of "romantic comedy" was chosen due to its high romantic content and wide appeal. From a list of the U.S. top 200 grossing romantic comedies (see www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/?id=romanticcomedy.htm), a shorter list was

created according to the following four criteria. First, films were chosen if they were available on Region 2 DVD. As this study was carried out in the United Kingdom, it was not possible to view films available on Region 1 DVD only.

Second, it was proposed that adolescents may more strongly identify with the characters and situations of recent films; therefore, only films released in cinemas between 1995 and 2005 were included. Films made, but not set, within this time period were not included. For example, *Pride and Prejudice* (Bevan, Fellner, Webster, & Wright, 2005), was excluded due to being set during the 1800s. Films that did not specify were assumed to be set in the year they were released.

Third, only films rated by the British Board of Film Classification as U, PG, or 12 were included. Younger adolescents with fewer of their own experiences may be more susceptible to representations of relationships; therefore, it was decided that the sample should comprise films viewable by younger audiences.

Finally, only films produced by one of the “Big Six” major Hollywood studios (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Hollywood_movie_studios) were included. Films produced by major Hollywood studios typically have the widest distribution and, as a result, attract the largest viewing numbers. After excluding films that did not fit into the aforementioned criteria, the top 40 of the remaining highest grossing films were then selected to be analyzed, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Films Selected for Analysis

Movie title	
<i>What Women Want</i>	<i>Bewitched</i>
<i>Hitch</i>	<i>The Wedding Planner</i>
<i>Runaway Bride</i>	<i>Clueless</i>
<i>Bringing Down the House</i>	<i>Just Married</i>
<i>Sweet Home Alabama</i>	<i>Never Been Kissed</i>
<i>My Best Friend's Wedding</i>	<i>Sabrina</i>
<i>Mr. Deeds</i>	<i>Forces Of Nature</i>
<i>Something's Gotta Give</i>	<i>Serendipity</i>
<i>50 First Dates</i>	<i>Kate and Leopold</i>
<i>You've Got Mail</i>	<i>One Fine Day</i>
<i>How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days</i>	<i>Must Love Dogs</i>
<i>Maid in Manhattan</i>	<i>About a Boy</i>
<i>America's Sweethearts</i>	<i>10 Things I Hate About You</i>
<i>Two Weeks Notice</i>	<i>Keeping the Faith</i>
<i>Along Came Polly</i>	<i>Return to Me</i>
<i>While You Were Sleeping</i>	<i>Just Friends</i>
<i>Six Days Seven Nights</i>	<i>The Wedding Date</i>
<i>Nine Months</i>	<i>Picture Perfect</i>
<i>Down to Earth</i>	<i>Fools Rush In</i>
<i>She's All That</i>	<i>The Prince and Me</i>

Analysis

The aim of this study was to document all relationship-oriented themes using a basic grounded theory methodology. This involved three stages of coding: open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The aim of open coding is to create initial categories by comparing data with data for similarities (Charmaz, 2003) and grouping them accordingly. These initial categories are simply a means of organising the data to progress into the next stage of coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The purpose of axial coding is to re-evaluate the categories created during the open coding stage. This stage involves a reorganization into more abstract categories through searching for and linking any traits each open coding category might share (Charmaz, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The final selective coding stage involves further reorganization of the categories established from axial coding. Categories at this stage are integrated into a core concept that summarizes the overall findings of the study (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Before the open coding analysis could be performed, raw data was collected, in this case, any relationship-oriented incidents (e.g., kissing, sexual acts, dates, etc.) observed in the 40 films included in the sample. Each film was divided into DVD chapters; each chapter was watched, and relationship-oriented observations were recorded as they occurred. Once each film in the sample had been viewed, they were viewed a second time in case any incidents may have been missed. Once completed, the process of open coding could be carried out.

Results and Discussion

Open Coding

A total of 3,470 relationship-oriented incidents were recorded during analysis. Each incident was written on individual papers and phrased clearly and unambiguously so its context could be understood independent of other incidents. Open coding was carried out by placing each incident into categories with other incidents that were similar in content or meaning and by creating new categories when new incidents could not be placed. After doing this for all 3,470 incidents, 103 open coding categories were created, listed in Table 2.

By far, the largest category created at this level was "kissing," which in itself comprised nearly 10% (326) of all incidents coded. When looking at the most common behaviors depicted in the film sample, many involved couples' physical demonstrations of affection for one another, such as "affectionate touching," (96) "hugging and cuddling," (91) and "holding hands" (83). Instances of nonsexual touching far outweighed incidents of sexual activity (46), which occurred in just over one half (21) of the 40 films. Although this may appear to be a considerable proportion of the total films, it leaves nearly one half of the films failing to include any reference to this important aspect of romantic relationships. This, of course, could be a reflection of

Table 2 Axial and Open Coding Categories

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Affection <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Affectionate touching ● Arms linking around each other ● Carrying ● Dancing ● Flirting ● Gazing and smiling ● Holding hands ● Hugging and cuddling ● Kissing ● Lost in the moment ● Physical closeness ● Sharing a private moment ● Sitting on partner's lap ■ Commitment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Committing to the relationship ● Engagement ● Weddings ● Marriage ● Proposals ■ Demonstrating caring <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Caring and concern for love interest ● Guilt ● Nursing ● Support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Good with children ● Match-making ● Relationship views from the outside ■ Gestures <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Chivalry ● Doing favors ● Gestures ● Gifts ● Serenading ■ Importance of partner <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Changing for or because of relationship ● Creating opportunities to meet ● Defending partner ● First person to contact ● Importance of looks ● Importance of partner's opinion ● Keeping mementos ● Partner on the mind ● Loyalty ● Missing partner ● Priorities ● Rescuing the relationship ● Risking safety for love ● Sacrificial action ● Taking an interest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Discussing past relationships ● Discussing current relationship ● Discussing relationships in general ● Love epiphanies ● Relationship advice ● Relationship confidence ■ Relationship issues <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Arguments ● Being single ● Cheating ● Counselling or therapy ● Deception ● Divorce or separation ● End of relationship ● Game playing ● Inappropriate behavior ● Inappropriate gifts ● Inappropriate talk ● Jealousy ● Neglect ● Violence ■ Relationship with ex <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Romantic speech <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Accepting love ● Compliments
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- Expression of emotions
 - Lost for words
 - Excited about a new relationship
 - Excited to see or hear from partner
 - Feeling comfortable
 - Happier because of partner
 - Overtly happy or laughing together
 - Pleased to see or hear from partner
 - Post-deception reaction
 - Post relationship behavior
 - Relationship nerves
 - Family and friend approval
 - Family and friend approval
 - Wanting partner to stay
 - One-of-a-kind relationship
 - Fate or soul mates
 - Special relationship
 - Open communication
 - Apologies or admitting being wrong
 - Confessions
 - Declarations of love
 - Open about feelings and intentions
 - Showing appreciation
 - Taking the initiative
 - Relationship discussion
 - Character wants
 - Discussing partner
 - Feeling lucky
 - Love at first sight
 - Remembering or reciting details
 - Sweet nothings
 - Terms of endearment
 - True understanding
 - Sexual activity
 - Sex
 - Post-sex behavior
 - Time together
 - Being playful together
 - Celebrating anniversary
 - Dates
 - Spending time together
 - Trust in partner
 - Confiding or opening up
 - Trust
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the certificate ratings of the films. Indeed, in all but two instances sexual activity between two characters was implied as opposed to actually depicted. However, as similarly suggested by Pardun (2002), movies in which there is an absence of reference to sexual behaviors may leave adolescents with an impression of a disconnect of such behaviors from romantic relationships.

“Compliments” was the second-largest category, with 154 instances being coded, the vast majority (123) of which were expressed by male characters. This was not the only area where male characters were depicted as making the greater effort. Of the 107 gestures coded, male characters performed 90, they gave 35 of 37 gifts, performed 14 of 17 favors, and took more steps to initiate relationships (63 of 84). Such a proportion of effort could lead to the distinguishing of gender roles, identifying the man’s role to “take the lead” when it comes to relationships. A further implication could be female adolescent viewers’ forming of somewhat idealized relationship expectations. With films depicting male characters as frequently performing exaggeratedly romantic gestures (e.g., such as the scattered rose petals, bouquets of roses, and a phone message gesture in *Sweet Home Alabama* (Fottrell, Jashni, Mordaunt, & Tennant, 2002), “There’s a rose for every moment I thought of you last night”), female adolescents may be led to believe that such behaviors are the norm. Furthermore, by preferring to focus on behaviors between couples such as the aforementioned, it is possible that such films may make these gestures more salient to adolescents as an indication of the extent of partners’ feelings for them and the quality of the relationship itself over factors such as communication and trust.

Although there were 61 coded instances of “open about feelings and intentions,” there were only 4 incidents coded pertaining to trust, with 3 of these demonstrating a character’s lack of trust in their partner. For example, in *Nine Months* (Bradshaw, Lambert, & Columbus, 1995), a male character suspects that his girlfriend has intentionally fallen pregnant, despite knowing his lack of interest in having children. Further to this, in the one coded incident where a character spoke of their trust in their partner (*Forces of Nature*, Arnold, Bryce, Roth, & Hughes, 1999), their partner had, in fact, been unfaithful to them. The lack of depiction of trust becomes particularly notable when looking at the number of incidents of “deception” coded. There were 82 such incidents, occurring across all 40 films, ranging from white lies so as to spare partners’ feelings, to more serious acts of deception such as ulterior motives and direct lying for personal gains. These far outweighed characters confessing their lies and deceptive acts to their partners (9), with lies being discovered by partners typically by chance or indeed not at all. In addition, there were 33 incidents coded of characters cheating or having cheated on their partners, which, in combination with “deception” and “trust,” could have the potential to cultivate in viewers a sense of a need to be cautious of others’ sincerity and intentions.

The vast majority of films in the sample focused on newly developing relationships and as such included many depictions of behaviors and feelings that are typical to the early stages of a relationship. For example, there were 116 coded incidents of characters mutually gazing and smiling longingly at one another, suggesting early feelings of infatuation and adoration for a new or potential partner. Perhaps atypical

to new relationships, however, were the 75 coded incidents of “declarations of love,” with characters frequently declaring their love for one another very early in their relationship, such as in *Runaway Bride* (Lucchesi, Madden, Tannebaum, & Marshall, 1999), where both characters declare their love for one another after 1 week and arrange to marry a few days later.

In addition to these early feelings of adoration and infatuation, certain incidents coded seemed to suggest new relationships to be fragile and to break down quite easily. There were 73 coded incidents of arguing and 43 incidents of relationships ending. It was quite often the case that a couple’s relationship ended directly after a heated argument. With films often linking these two relationship aspects, it may be the case that adolescent viewers may form an association between the two, potentially leading to interpretations of arguments as destructive in relationships.

Another category to emerge at this stage of coding that may have the potential to influence viewer perceptions was “being single.” Although this was one of the smaller categories, each coded incident (15) was consistently negative. Individuals who were single were depicted as either lonely and miserable (such as in *While You Were Sleeping* (Barron, Sarkissian, & Turtelbaub, 1995), where a character dejectedly says she has no one to laugh with), frustrated (such as in *Hitch*, Mordant, Tadross, & Tennant, 2005; where a character expresses her frustration at not having had sex for 1 year), or made to feel insecure (such as in *Picture Perfect*, Maddon, Teitler, Caron, 1997; where a character attending a wedding on her own is made to feel inadequate). Two films (*Keeping The Faith*, Barber, Birnbaum, Glickman, & Norton, 2000; and *Picture Perfect*) even suggested that being single might interfere with career progression. Such a consistently negative representation of being single could, therefore, have the potential to negatively influence viewers’ feelings toward being single themselves.

Axial Coding

Once all the open coding categories were created, axial coding could be carried out. All 103 open coding categories were examined and, from these, 16 axial coding categories were created, listed in Table 2.

The first category, “affection,” was created from open coding categories that were viewed to represent couples demonstrating physical affection for one another, as listed in Table 2. Three open coding categories, “gazing and smiling,” “lost in the moment,” and “sharing a private moment,” although not physical, were also categorized here, as it was reasoned these were still suggestive of the feelings of affection that characters held for one another.

This was the largest category, comprising 25% of the total incidents coded. Affection between couples was often expressed freely, irrespective of where the couple was or if other characters were present. For example, in *Must Love Dogs* (Hall, Smith, & Goldberg, 2005), a couple in a supermarket are speaking with a counter assistant when both suddenly kiss one another passionately on the lips. Examples such as this

occurred frequently, potentially suggesting to viewers that couples who are happy and in love should want to engage in such behaviors regardless of who can see them. Further, it may encourage an impression that public displays of affection are a measure of a couple's love for one another, imparting a feeling almost of "couples are as in love as others see them to be." This is not to say that couples were affectionate with each other only when there were others around to see it, but the prevalence of publicly affectionate behaviors was high and as such may be viewed as being an important behavioral feature of relationships.

It should be further noted that of the incidents of affection coded, a vast minority occurred between married couples. Married couples were typically portrayed as either unhappy with their spouse (such as in *50 First Dates*, Ewing, Lupi, Roach, & Segal, 2004; where a husband is repeatedly shown to speak poorly of his wife), or were implied as happy but did little to reflect this (such as in *Two Weeks Notice*, Berman, McLaglan, & Lawrence, 2002; where a character's married parents show no affection toward each other throughout the film but appear content in their marriage). Of the depictions of affection between married couples that were coded, many were interspersed with episodes of arguing (such as in *Return to Me*, Erickson, Green, & Hunt, 2000; where a married couple argue about getting their children to sleep but then kiss before going to bed themselves), and most were limited to gestures such as brief kisses or standing with an arm around one other. Such a representation of marriage may leave adolescent viewers to see marriage and romance as disparate entities and with affection between married couples as an exception instead of the norm.

A second major category created in the axial coding stage was "relationship issues." This category emerged from finding that many open coding categories, listed in Table 2, appeared to represent negative aspects of relationships that could be either seen to be detrimental to a relationship's functioning, such as "cheating," or to represent relationship-related issues that could adversely affect individuals' well-being, such as "being single." The nature of negative behaviors in this category ranged from serious acts (e.g., acts of violence, such as in *Just Married*, Rosen, Donner, Trench, & Levy, 2003; where a wife throws a glass ashtray at her husband), to less serious acts (e.g., game-playing behaviors, such as in *Clueless*, Lawrence, Rudin, & Heckerling, 1995; where a character sends herself flowers and chocolates to gain the attention of a male classmate). What is interesting to note about the behaviors comprising this category, however, is that, irrespective of seriousness, there appeared to be no real consequences for characters' transgressions in their relationships. For example, in *You've Got Mail* (Brown, Durk, Ephron, & Ephron, 1998) a character in a long-term relationship is having an emotional affair with a man she speaks with through e-mail. Her partner never finds out about this; when the relationship eventually ends, the affair is not revealed and the separation is amicable. In *She's All That* (Weinstein, Weinstein, Yacoub, & Iscove, 1999), a relationship occurs because of a bet the male character makes with a friend. Upon finding out, the female character's initial distress is soon forgotten and both are happy together again. Similarly in *Never Been Kissed* (Barrimore & Gosnell, 1999), when a character is revealed to have been deceitful about who she is, initially it appears that the man she has fallen for may not forgive

her. However, after writing an apology in the newspaper she works for, the relationship continues as though no transgression has occurred. Such depictions do not accurately reflect the actual emotions individuals typically experience in response to acts of deception and betrayal in their relationships, which can involve feelings of hurt, anger, resentment, and relational devaluation (Fitness, 2001). As a result, with characters' negative behaviors either going undiscovered or having no long-lasting impact on their relationships, adolescent viewers may underestimate the consequences their behaviors can have on their own relationships.

The next category, "relationship discussion," was created by combining the open coding categories listed in Table 2. "Love epiphanies" was included here, as characters typically disclosed their realization that they were in love with a partner to another character. What is interesting to note is how the nature of the conversation differed depending on the relationship being discussed. Characters spoke positively of their partners, such as in *Something's Gotta Give* (Block, McNeill Fairwell, & Meyers, 2003), where a character describes a new partner to her mother as "fun, smart, and fascinating." This was not only the case in new relationships; characters also spoke fondly of more long-term partners, such as in *Nine Months* (Bradshaw et al., 1995), where a character speaks of his love for his partner to a friend. However, the nature of the discussion appeared to change when it was a married character speaking of their spouse, such as in *Forces of Nature* (Arnold et al., 1999), where a character tells his grandson that he was never attracted to his wife, that he only stayed with her through fear, and that marriage "is a prison." The few coded incidents of married characters shown to be discussing either their spouse or their marriage more positively were typically followed by statements or behaviors that seemed to go against what was being said. For example, in *Two Weeks Notice* (Berman et al., 2002), a character tells a friend she had to fight to be with her husband, but it was "the best thing I ever did." Upon her husband then speaking from their apartment window, she yells angrily at him. With the few discussions of marriage that were positive, but then followed by contradictory behaviors, and the vast majority of discussions negative, this may further add to the non-romantic impressions of marriage discussed earlier that adolescent viewers might form.

"Romantic speech" was created after combining the open coding categories listed in Table 2. "True understanding," "love at first sight," and "feeling lucky" were categorized here, as these were all verbally expressed to partners. The significance of this category becomes clearer when compared to another category created at this level. "Open communication" consisted of open coding categories that seemed to involve characters openly communicating and admitting their feelings and wants to their partner. This category was comparatively smaller than "romantic speech," which contained the more romantic verbal gestures. The greater frequency of romantic verbal gestures such as compliments and sweet nothings may lead adolescents to place more importance on them in relationships than on open communication between partners.

"Expression of emotions" was created when several open coding categories were noticed to depict characters expressing their feelings about their relationships (as listed in Table 2). Characters were shown to be visibly happier when in a relationship

or excited at the prospect of a new relationship forming. For example, in *The Wedding Planner* (Borman, Sadowsky, Sievernich, Sinclair, & Shankman, 2001), a character arrives at work the day after a date and colleagues comment on her appearing noticeably happier, more carefree, and that she “can’t stop smiling.” This contrasts from the depictions of single characters that were typically shown to be unhappy or frustrated, potentially further influencing the negative attitudes toward being single discussed earlier.

Several open coding categories, upon closer examination, appeared to represent the importance individuals placed on their partners. These were grouped together under the axial category, “importance of partner.” Characters were quickly loyal to their partners, defending them to others (such as in *10 Things I Hate About You*, Chernov, Jaret, & Junger, 1999; where a character defends the girl he is interested in when a friend speaks derogatively of her). Partners preoccupied characters’ thoughts (such as in *Keeping the Faith*, Barber et al., 2000; where a character appears distracted at work while waiting for her partner to meet her), and their opinions became important (such as in *Clueless*, Lawrence et al., 1995; where two characters change their appearance in response to comments each has made of the other). Characters also prioritized their relationships and partners over other areas in their lives. For example, in *Mr. Deeds* (Caracciolo, Sandler, & Brill, 2002), a character gives up her career and moves to be with the man she loves. Such instances outnumbered those depicting characters prioritising careers over partners, such as in *Picture Perfect* (Maddon et al., 1997), where a character ends her relationship due to “bad timing.” However, even in such cases, work is only initially prioritized over a relationship, as by the end of the film the relationship is ultimately chosen over all else.

The next axial category, “demonstrating caring” was created after it was noticed that “concern for partner,” “nursing,” “guilt,” and “support” all appeared to represent or suggest characters showing caring for a partner. The majority of this category consisted of depictions of characters providing emotional support, typically from male characters to their female partners in the form of reassurance or comfort when upset. As with “taking the initiative” and “gestures,” this may similarly have the potential to suggest certain gender roles in relationships.

One of the smaller categories to be created at this stage was that of “commitment.” It should be noted that in films where the central characters married one another, the wedding was shown to be the culminating point of the film with life after the wedding left to the viewers’ imagination. This gap may lead adolescents to view the act of getting married itself as the peak of a relationship, with the earlier discussed depictions of already married couples as unaffectionate with each other, speaking negatively of each other, and arguing with each other potentially reinforcing this.

The axial category, “family and friend approval,” was created from adding “good with children,” “matchmaking,” and “relationship views from the outside” to the open coding category of the same name. “Good with children” was categorized here, as it was found that in each case it was the partner’s child who the character had a good relationship with and as such represented a form of approval. For the

most part, characters' friends and family approved of their partners. In some instances this was the case despite very little being known about them. For example, in *The Wedding Planner* (Borman et al., 2001), a father, told by a man he has never met before that he wants to marry his daughter, excitedly approves. All incidents coded were not this extreme, however; in *The Wedding Date* (Niemeyer, Reeve, Robbins, Waitt, & Kilner, 2005), a character's friends all approve of her date by enthusiastically commenting on his looks. It should be noted that in only six films did family and friends not approve of partners, and in three of these (*50 First Dates*; Ewing et al., 2004; *The Prince and Me*, Winikoff & Coolidge, 2004; *Just Married*, Rosen et al., 2003) the families were eventually won over by partners and gave their approval. As adolescence is a time where approval by others increases in importance, the majority of depictions of family and friends approving of partners may serve to reinforce the importance of viewers' own family and friends' opinions of their own partners.

"Sex" and "post-sex behavior" were combined to create the broader category, "sexual activity." After sex, couples cuddled and talked (such as in *Keeping the Faith*, Barber et al., 2000), connected emotionally (as in *Something's Gotta Give*, Block et al., 2003; where both characters cry) and, in one case, woke up before the other and left (as in *Maid in Manhattan*, Medina, Newirth, & Wang, 2002). However, with only very few incidents coded pertaining to post-sex behavior, viewers may be left still unsure as to what is appropriate in such circumstances.

"Fate or soul mate" and "special relationship" were combined to create "one-of-a-kind relationship." Although there were 17 coded references to either fate or to finding one's soul mate (almost one half of which were coded in a single film, *Serendipity*, Goldstein, Osher, Slotnick, & Chelsom, 2001), the majority of this axial category consisted of characters' claims or behaviors that suggested there was something special or different about their relationship. For example, in *How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days* (Evans, Forsyth-Peters, Obst, Vane, & Petrie, 2003), a male character brings his partner home to meet his family, at which point it is revealed he has never done this with a partner before; later his partner writes in the magazine she works for that the last 10 days with her partner were the best in her life.

"Trust in partner," consisting of "trust" and "confiding or opening up," was one of the smallest categories, comprising only 0.7% of the total incidents coded. Characters were shown to open up to their partners about personal memories, insecurities, and feelings. Although partners were shown to listen and offer emotional support if needed in return, the far greater number of incidents of deception coded may still give adolescent viewers the feeling of a need to demonstrate caution in relationships.

The two final categories to be created at this stage were "time together" (consisting of open coding categories "dates," "being playful together," "celebrating anniversary," and "spending time together") and "gestures" (consisting of "chivalry," "gifts," "gestures," "doing favors," and "serenading"), leaving one open coding category, "relationship with ex," which could not be grouped with others and was, therefore, left as it was.

Interrater Reliability for Axial Codes

As content analyses are subjective in nature, establishing interrater reliability (i.e., the extent to which 2 or more coders evaluate data and reach the same conclusions; Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002) is important for the results of a study to be considered valid.

In this study, a coding manual was constructed from the categories created at the axial coding level of analysis to establish interrater reliability. Using a random number generator, 7 films (containing 174 chapters in total) from the original 40 were randomly selected for reliability coding. A female psychology undergraduate acted as a second coder. Training comprised familiarising the second coder with each of the open coding categories, their properties, and axial coding categories, using films not in the final reliability sample.

Coding judgments consisted of coding observed axial coding categories as being present or absent within each chapter. This approach was chosen because the focus of this study was to identify relationship behaviors and actions. By focusing coding judgments on the presence and absence and therefore on recognition, a high interrater reliability rating suggests that others can recognize and interpret these behaviors and actions in the same way.

Reliability was calculated using Cohen's kappa. Scores between .41 and .60 are considered moderate interrater reliability, .61 and .80 as substantial, and .81 and above as almost perfect (Landis & Koch, 1977). The results of this analysis are listed in Table 3. Thirteen of 16 codes reached the substantial threshold, with the remaining four having moderate values.

Selective Coding

After examining the data, one finding that emerged was that depictions of relationships seemed contradictory and, therefore, potentially confusing to adolescent viewers. With the purpose of this study to identify how relationships are depicted in romantic comedy films and what these might suggest to adolescent viewers, "contradictory messages" was named as the core concept.

Relationships were shown to be at once highly desirable and highly undesirable. Characters in relationships placed importance on and prioritized partners, often made great efforts with romantic gestures, and were understanding and supportive when partners confided in them. Characters were also shown, however, to neglect their relationships, deceive their partners, fight and argue, and in some cases be unfaithful. Although it could be argued that such contradictory behaviors are actually common in reality and that these films may, therefore, be offering a realistic representation in this respect, the previously discussed underplay of the consequences of negative and undesirable behaviors does not accurately reflect those typical in reality (e.g., Fitness, 2001); therefore, it would seem that these representations of arguably realistic features of relationships are still depicted in an unrealistic way.

Table 3 Axial Level Category Kappa Scores

Axial level category	Kappa scores ^a
Affection	0.69 ^b
Commitment	0.68 ^b
Demonstrating caring	0.64 ^b
Expression of emotions	0.61 ^b
Family and friend approval	0.67 ^b
Gestures	0.51
Importance of partner	0.62 ^b
One-of-a-kind relationship	0.59
Open communication	0.74 ^b
Relationship discussion	0.64 ^b
Relationship issues	0.66 ^b
Relationship with ex	0.89 ^b
Romantic speech	0.56
Sexual activity	0.67 ^b
Time together	0.72 ^b
Trust in partner	1.00 ^b

^aFigures shown are correct to two decimal places.

^bScores reaching a substantial rating and above.

In addition to the aforementioned desirable–undesirable representations were the contradictions that could be found in the undesirable behaviors themselves. An example of this can be found in *The Wedding Planner* (Borman et al., 2001). A female character confides in a male character about a painful past experience of her ex-fiancée being unfaithful to her. However, these two characters are themselves having an emotional affair and, yet, this itself is not negatively depicted. With the character's described experience of infidelity painted in a negative light and the present behavior as simply two people falling in love, there is potential for confusion in viewers as to what is acceptable and what is not.

Films in the sample typically focused on relationships in their early stages, a time of excitement at the prospect of the new relationship, a strong desire for physical closeness and contact (Berscheid, 1985), and passion (Sternberg, 1986). This was certainly demonstrated in the films analyzed here: Characters spent much of their free time together, appeared visibly happier and excited, and were physically close and affectionate with one another.

However, there were also behaviors demonstrated by couples that seemed incongruous with these early-stage representations—behaviors suggestive of deeper feelings that ordinarily develop over time and, as such, are usually absent early on. Characters performed actions purely to promote partners' well-being, placed great importance on partners, expressed deep feelings of love, and provided emotional support—features more typically associated with later stages (Reedy, Birren, & Schaie, 1981; Sternberg, 1986). Although films depicting new relationships with

characteristics of longer term relationships can be assumed to be for the purpose of creating a narrative that is both engaging (through the depiction of exciting early relationship encounters) and satisfying (through the suggestion of a deeper, more meaningful relationship experience) to appeal to audiences, this could have potentially significant consequences for adolescent viewers' relationship perceptions. By coming to believe that characteristics of relationships that ordinarily take time to develop should be present early on, adolescents may misjudge the quality of their own relationships and find them lacking. In addition, adolescents might come to expect that the excited feelings present early on in a relationship should remain as the relationship progresses. However, as these early feelings come to be replaced by, not develop in conjunction with, the feelings of closeness, connectedness, and bondedness of later-stage relationships (Sternberg, 1986), there is potential for adolescents to misinterpret this progression as reflecting negatively on the quality of their own developing relationships.

Conclusion

With the media viewed as a major source of information for adolescents on issues they know little about (e.g., Bachen & Illouz, 1996), it is important to identify what information such media might be providing. From a social-cognitive theory perspective (Bandura, 1986, 1994), adolescents using films of this nature as a means to obtain information on what behaviors are successful in initiating and maintaining a relationship may find information on the former, but little on the latter. Films appeared to depict relationships as progressing quickly into something emotionally meaningful and significant, but there was little shown to explain how or why this was the case. Adolescents using these films as a model on which to base their own behaviors, expecting that in doing so their relationships will progress in kind, are likely to be left disappointed. Likewise, from a cultivation theory perspective (Gerbner et al., 1994), adolescents coming to view these representations as norms are likely to be left with an inaccurate impression. However, the effect of romance media on individuals is an area that has been greatly under-explored and, as such, we have limited understanding on what specific influences such media might have on viewers. With the findings highlighted here suggesting that what adolescents might "learn" from romance media may lead to a number of interpretations that could interfere with future relationship functioning, it is important that future research expand on our current understanding and explore in greater detail such effects. For example, research on the effects of romance media thus far has yet to establish a direction of causality. Experimental work, therefore, needs to be carried out to determine whether exposure to films of this nature does indeed have a causal influence. If this is the case, what specific effects on viewers such exposure has and how individual differences may serve to moderate needs to be explored.

It is interesting to note that findings from previous research, which suggest a relationship between romance media consumption and idealistic expectations of marriage (e.g., Segrin & Nabi, 2002), seem to conflict with the finding from this study

of marriage being consistently depicted in a non-romantic and less than appealing manner. Perhaps the relationships at the forefront of these films, building up to an imagined “happy ever after” marriage, are more salient to viewers on which to form their expectations than the negatively depicted marriages in the background. Future research will need to ascertain whether this is the case. This study might also provide some insight into the findings of previous research that individuals who frequently watch romance media endorse dysfunctional relationship beliefs. For example, Haferkamp’s (1999) and Holmes’s (2007) finding that individuals believed a partner should intuitively understand their needs could be explained by the observation that characters appeared happy in their relationships, despite seldom openly communicating their feelings, intentions, and wants to each other.

Further worthy of note in this analysis is the narrow spectrum of character representations offered by these films. Characters were predominantly White, middle class, and heterosexual. On this latter characteristic, in particular, only one film included a portrayal of a homosexual relationship (*Must Love Dogs*, Hall et al., 2005), although a stark contrast between this couple’s interactions and those of their heterosexual counterparts was apparent. Whereas heterosexual couples were open in physically demonstrating their affection for one another, this was not evident in the homosexual couple, with the only indication of romantic feelings between the two being shown through a reference made to an early experience they had shared. With generally very limited variation in character portrayals, one could question the impact these depictions might have on a heterogeneous viewing audience. Whereas viewers with similar ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds to those depicted on screen may see the portrayals as relevant models on which to base their own behaviors and expectations, viewers with differing backgrounds may identify less with these portrayals and, therefore, take little from them. Furthermore, research has shown female viewers to demonstrate greater preference for romance media than male viewers (e.g., Holmes, 2007); on this basis, one would expect different effects to emerge across gender. Future research will need to examine the effects of exposure to romance media taking these factors into consideration.

This study focused on a sample of only 40 films; although informative, further content analyses examining the nature of romantic relationship depictions across different genres of television programming and films are needed to identify romance messages in a wider media context. However, there was still much highlighted here that may serve to broaden our understanding of the potential of romance media to influence adolescents’ relationship beliefs, expectations, and resultant relationship experiences.

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