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From Love at First Sight to Soul Mate: The Influence of Romantic Ideals in Popular Films on Young People's Beliefs about Relationships

Veronica Hefner & Barbara J. Wilson

Despite their popularity, few studies have systematically investigated the content of romantic comedy movies or the effects they may have on viewers. We conducted two studies to address this gap. The first study was a content analysis of the romantic ideals embedded in the top 52 highest grossing romantic comedies from the last 10 years. Results demonstrated that romantic ideals and challenges are prevalent in these films. The second study was a large-scale survey of 335 undergraduate students, who were asked to report on their romantic comedy movie viewing and beliefs about romance. Results showed that individuals who watched these films in order to learn reported stronger endorsement of romantic ideal beliefs than those who did not watch to learn.

Keywords: Romantic Comedy; Love; Media; Movie; Film; Ideals; Beliefs; Romance; Content Analysis

Romantic comedy films have been a successful movie genre ever since the cinema became popular in the early twentieth century. In the late 1930s, young adults were choosing to go see romance movies over most other genres of films (Edman, 1940). More recently, romantic comedy films such as *Knocked Up* (Apatow, 2007) and *The Proposal* (Fletcher & Chiarelli, 2009) continue to be popular, each among the top 10 highest-grossing romantic comedies of all time (Gray, 2012). In one analysis, the romantic comedy genre was the sixth highest grossing category of films between 1995 and 2010, pulling in over \$10 billion in gross revenue during this 15-year period

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(Nash, 2010). A recent study about what types of media people selectively consume showed that the movies with the highest viewing average were romance-comedy films (Hall, 2005).

The popularity of these movies has led some scholars to speculate about why such films are appealing. For example, Galician (2004), author of a critical analysis of romantic media, argues that people seek romantic content in the media in order to see relationships that appear to work despite all obstacles. Further, previous work has documented that young people seek out romantic media content in order to learn about relationships. For instance, Wood, Senn, Desmarais, Park, and Verberg (2002) found that both male and female adolescents seek out romantic content in television and other media in order to get information about dating. Similarly, another study found undergraduate men and women report watching reality dating programs (RDP) in order to learn about dating and romance (Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006). This phenomenon may extend to romantic comedy viewing. That is, viewers may seek out those movies for a similar purpose: to learn.

Despite the popularity of the films and the argument that individuals seek out these movies in order to learn about romance, there is only one previous content analysis of these films. Additionally, no work has looked at the association between viewing romantic comedies and learning about these romantic, or idealistic, beliefs. The purpose of this study is to address those gaps.

Screen Media as a Socializing Agent

There is plenty of evidence that youth can learn about various aspects of their world from exposure to screen media (e.g., Dill & Thill, 2007; Hertz & Durkin, 2004). If viewers can learn about families and occupations from the media, they may also be able to learn about intimate relationships from exposure. Several scholars have tested whether romantic media can cultivate relationship beliefs among viewers. For example, Segrin and Nabi (2002) surveyed 285 unmarried undergraduates and found that heavy viewers of romance-oriented television, such as soap operas and reality-based programs about relationships, were more likely than light viewers to agree with statements such as “you should know each other’s inner feelings.” In another study, undergraduates were surveyed about their exposure to dating television shows and endorsement of dating attitudes (Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007). Results indicated that those with higher average viewing scores endorsed dating attitudes found within the programming (e.g., dating is a game) more so than lighter viewers. More recently, Rivadeneyra and Lebo (2008) surveyed high school students and found that heavy viewers of romantic television were more likely than light viewers to hold traditional dating role attitudes, such as the belief that men should be in charge on dates.

These surveys point to the ability of romantic media to cultivate idealistic or even unrealistic beliefs. Yet each study assessed different types of screen media content (i.e., soap operas, romantic reality programs), but did not assess the impact of romantic movies independently. There are several reasons why movies deserve close attention.

First, romantic comedies are widely consumed (Nash, 2010) and commonly cited by youth when they describe their ideas of relationships (Bachen & Illouz, 1996). For example, Bachen and Illouz (1996) interviewed young people ranging in age from eight to 17 years and found that 90% of the young people said they “often” or “sometimes” encountered love stories in movies. Second, much of the critical scholarship that has examined romantic ideals in media has focused on films (e.g., Johnson, 2007; Winn, 2007). For instance, Johnson (2007) qualitatively examined 13 popular wedding films and identified a number of romantic myths in those movies, such as the idea of “love at first sight.” Winn (2007) analyzed the relational scripts (i.e., the events that occur in “most” relationships) in several romantic comedies. However, a systematic, quantitative analysis is still needed. Third, unlike other forms of romantic media, movies offer stories that trace relationships from the beginning to the end in one packaged narrative. In contrast to the romantic relationships on television, which often take several seasons to fully develop the characters, movies are viewed in a single sitting. These presumably potent messages could boost the impact on attentive viewers.

Thus, romantic comedies deserve scholarly attention to determine how they may contribute to the development of idealistic beliefs. There are two predominant ways that researchers have approached the study of romantic ideals. According to one conceptualization, romantic ideals refer to traits unique to each partner and relationship (e.g., Markey & Markey, 2007). Researchers working within this realm typically ask participants to rate their ideal and current partner on a list of descriptive adjectives, and then look to see if discrepancies exist between these two ratings (Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). With no a priori group of adjectives that is always considered ideal by researchers or participants, the definition of a romantically ideal partner or relationship is unique to each individual, and pertains only to issues related to specific partners and relationships instead of to love, romance, and the relationship process more broadly.

The second conceptualization is a collection of expectations about relationships and love that extends beyond individual partners. Instead of using descriptors to characterize a partner, the romantic ideal in this sense is a set of beliefs about the power of love and the perfection of romance (Bell, 1975; Knox & Sporkowski, 1968; Sprecher & Metts, 1989). It is a set of expectations for how a model relationship should form, develop, function, and be maintained. This construct of the romantic ideal is generally comprised of the following four themes: Love can overlook flaws; love can seek out that one perfect mate; love can happen instantaneously; and love can overcome all obstacles (Bell, 1975; Knox & Sporkowski, 1968; Sprecher & Metts, 1989). This broader conceptualization of the construct is more pertinent here because it relates to shared beliefs that exist in a culture and that extend beyond individual preferences. Such beliefs develop and get reinforced by cultural institutions such as schools, churches, and media. For this project, we test the influence of romantic comedy exposure on endorsement of this set of ideals.

The Impact of Holding Romantic Ideals

The four themes that comprise the romantic ideal construct reflect an idealistic view of love. But, why might it matter if people endorse romantic ideals? One reason to pay attention to these beliefs is that despite such idealism, we have a tremendous number of relational failures in our society. According to the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), there is a 20% chance that a first marriage will end in divorce or separation within five years (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). Approximately 52% of women's and 56% of men's first marriages survive the 20-year mark, according to a *USA Today* expert analysis of the most recent NCHS report on marriage and divorce (Jayson, 2012).

Although some research suggests that having unrealistic beliefs can be detrimental to relationships (e.g., Fletcher et al., 1999; Knee, 1998), most research related to endorsement of these Western ideals indicates a positive impact (Montgomery, 2005; Sprecher & Metts, 1989, 1999). Endorsing ideals leads to relational durability (Franiuk, Cohen, & Pomerantz, 2002), satisfaction (Murray et al., 1996), and commitment (Sprecher & Metts, 1989, 1999) among undergraduate and older adult samples. More research is needed to discover the impact of romantic comedy films.

Study 1

This study is a content analysis of the themes featured in romantic comedies from the past 10 years. In particular, we coded for the existence of any expressions related to the four parts of the romantic ideal (i.e., love conquers all, idealization of partner, soul mate/one and only, love at first sight), whether these expressions were rewarded or punished, and the overarching themes of each film. Only one published study could be found that involved a systematic content analysis of a large number of films. Johnson and Holmes (2009) assessed 40 top-grossing romantic comedies, and used grounded theory methodology to identify relationship-oriented behaviors. They found that these films depict relationships as exciting, novel, and emotionally meaningful. They coded several behaviors that perpetuate two idealistic themes—"soul mates" and "love at first sight." Unfortunately, they were unable to reach acceptable intercoder reliability kappa scores on those variables: .59 and .56, respectively.

The Johnson and Holmes (2009) study provides a useful starting point because it demonstrates that there are consistent patterns in romantic movies. However, there are several ways in which our study improves upon their research. First, instead of focusing on behaviors, we chose to analyze broader themes that arguably are more relevant to the takeaway messages for viewers. Second, our study also assesses messages that challenge or contradict the romantic ideal themes. Finally, instead of first watching these films and then inductively developing a list of common romantic behaviors and themes, we developed our coding scheme in advance, based on theory and existing interpersonal research on what people commonly believe about romance (Sprecher & Metts, 1989).

RQ1: How prevalent are romantic ideals in popular romantic comedy films?

In addition to assessing the pervasiveness of romantic ideals, we also examined how often counter messages were conveyed. We conceptualized challenges as a more realistic, pragmatic expression about relationships, or a statement that contradicts a romantic ideal.

RQ2: How often are challenges to romantic ideals featured in romantic comedies?

Knowing which themes are most common is a useful starting point, but there are theoretical reasons for assessing *how* these messages are portrayed. According to social cognitive theory (SCT), observational learning is more likely to occur when certain contextual features are present to heighten viewer motivation (Bandura, 2002). That is, viewers are more likely to imitate a behavior when it is rewarded than when it is punished (Bandura, 1965).

RQ3: What are the consequences of romantic ideal and challenges expressions?

A final factor to consider is sex of character. In real life, one survey of young women indicates that they believe more strongly than young men that faithfulness, lifelong commitment, and love are important components of relationships (Meier, Hull, & Ortyl, 2009). However, other survey research indicates that men tend to endorse the ideals we investigate in our study (e.g., love conquers all) more strongly than women do (Sprecher & Metts, 1989). Thus, because the literature is mixed, we have proposed the following research question:

RQ4: What types of expressions are voiced by males and females in romantic comedies?

Method

Sample

The top 52 highest-grossing romantic comedy movies from the recent decade (1998–2008) were selected for this study (Gray, 2009). The list of movies included romantic comedies such as *The Wedding Planner* (Shankman, 2001) and *27 Dresses* (Fletcher & McKenna, 2008).

Units of Analysis

Expression level. The most basic unit of analysis for this project was each expression of an ideal or challenge. In order to avoid overcounting and to only capture the statements that were explicit and easy to detect by viewers, we decided to code only those messages that were clearly and explicitly expressed in words by the characters in the films. We made an exception for the love at first sight ideal, as it can sometimes be conveyed via nonverbal cues. Thus, we instructed coders to look at both verbal and nonverbal cues in order to identify love at first sight.

Film level. The macrolevel unit of analysis in this study was the entire film. Coders looked at content across the complete plot in order to capture the dominant, overarching theme.

Expression-level Variables

Type of expression. Expressions about love and romance were coded as either ideals or challenges. An ideal expression was defined as any statement that perpetuated love and romance as powerful and perfect. These expressions offered a conception of love as hopeful and idyllic.

A challenge was defined as any statement that contradicted an ideal or offered a more realistic conception of romance and relationships. Challenges typically conveyed a practical view of relationships. Coders originally were asked to classify those challenges into one of two categories: (1) realistic statement, or (2) antiideal statement. Whereas the coders could reliably identify a challenge expression, they were unable to agree which category was expressed. As a result, classifying challenges into discrete categories was eliminated from the coding scheme.

Once coders decided that an ideal (rather than a challenge) had occurred, they were asked to judge the type or nature of that ideal. Following Sprecher and Metts (1989), ideals were coded into one of four categories: (1) idealization of other, (2) love at first sight, (3) soul mate/one and only, or (4) love conquers all (see Table 1).

Consequences of expressions. Each relational expression was assessed in terms of positive and negative consequences. Positive consequence was defined as any type of reward or endorsement that occurred in response to the expression. Examples included praise from another character, agreement from another character, a positive display of emotion from another character, and/or the delivery of physical (e.g., hug) or verbal (e.g., "I love you") intimacy.

Negative consequence was defined as any type of punishment that was delivered in response to the expression. Examples of punishments included rejection of the source (e.g., turning away), disagreement ("No, that is incorrect."), physically leaving (e.g., storming out of the room), anger, sadness, and/or physical aggression toward the source.

To qualify as a consequence, these types of behavior and action (either positive or negative) had to be a direct response to the source's expression, typically occurring either during or immediately after the ideal or challenge was expressed. For each expression, coders chose one of four options: rewarded, punished, neutral (e.g., neither rewarded nor punished), or mixed (e.g., multiple characters present in scene who expressed conflicting consequences).

Nature of source. Each source or character that expressed an ideal was coded for demographic qualities. In particular, sex, race, age, and sexuality of character were

Table 1 Categories of Expressions with Definitions and Examples from Movies

Categories	Definition	Examples from movies in sample
Ideal: Soul mate/one and only (38%)	Any expression that suggested there was only one perfect love for a character.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “People search their whole life trying to find [the one].” ~ <i>Hitch</i> (2005) • “I know in my heart, you’re the only one for me.” ~ <i>Runaway Bride</i> (1999) • “At what point do you say to yourself, ‘I’m counting on you to be the one, and I have no fall back plan?’” ~ <i>Fever Pitch</i> (2005)
Ideal: Idealization of other (30%)	Any expression that indicated a character was perfect, flawless, and wonderful in a romantic sense.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I’m bragging about how good you are, and how I’m the luckiest man alive.” ~ <i>Runaway Bride</i> (1999) • “You are the perfect guy.” ~ <i>Made of Honor</i> (2008) • “I didn’t come here to tell you that I can’t live without you. I can live without you. I just don’t want to.” ~ <i>Rumor Has It</i> (2005)
Ideal: Love conquers all (25%)	Any expression that conveyed that love was the only thing needed to deal with obstacles in a relationship.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I will have poetry in my life. And adventure. And love. Love above all . . . love that . . . over-throws life. Unbiddable, ungovernable—like a riot in the heart, and nothing to be done, come ruin or rapture. Love—like there has never been in a play.” ~ <i>Shakespeare in Love</i> (1998) • “None of that other stuff matters you know . . . After all . . . I’m just a girl, standing in front of a boy, asking him to love her.” ~ <i>Notting Hill</i> (1999)
Ideal: Love at first sight (7%)	Any expression that suggested that love happens immediately after meeting.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The second that I saw you, I knew that we could be great together.” ~ <i>27 Dresses</i> (2008)
Challenge	Any expression that conveyed a practical view of relationships or contradicted an ideal.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Let’s be smart about this. You’re not going to move out here and become my co-pilot. And I’m not going to go to New York and be your receptionist, so . . . where’s that leave us? Let’s not complicate things.” ~ <i>Six Days Seven Nights</i> (1998) • “Long distance relationships can work, you know.” “Really? I can’t make one work when I live in the same house with someone.” ~ <i>The Holiday</i> (2006) • “I had the perfect relationship which was ruined by marriage.” ~ <i>Just Married</i> (2003)

Note. Expressions were coded first as either ideal or challenge. Ideals were then further classified; challenges were not. Thus, the percentages for the first four expressions add to 100%.

coded. Coders made their judgments based on the characters’ visual appearance, mannerisms, names, clothing, and/or dialogue. The majority of characters who expressed romantic ideals and challenges were White (95%), adult (94%), and heterosexual (99%).

Film-level Variable

At the film level, coders were asked to judge the overall relational message of the movie. Coders were instructed to take into account all scenes and contextual clues to make the determination, including verbiage, plotline details, and emotional portrayals. Coders considered all of the romantic couples when deciding about the overall message, while giving the main couple dyad the most weight. Films were coded into one of six overall categories: idealization of other, soul mate/one and only, love at first sight, love conquers all, challenge, or none.

Training and Reliability

Six undergraduate students (four females, two males) served as coders for this project. They met with the first author twice a week for 22 weeks to learn protocol for analyzing the films, to familiarize themselves with the codebook, and to practice coding romantic comedy films not included in the final sample. Training of coders continued until they reached 80% agreement on judgments of practice movies for two consecutive weeks on most of the variables.

During the coding process, coders independently watched each film twice on DVD in a quiet room on a computer. On average, it took coders approximately 4–5 hours to complete the coding for one film. Coding took place over a 10-week period. On average, coders coded two movies per week. We randomly selected 12 movies to be used for testing reliability. Reliability was assessed at two levels. First, coders needed to establish reliability on the identification of units. Following a unitizing procedure similar to the one outlined by Cissna, Garvin, and Kennedy (1990), coders recorded the precise minute in the film that marked the beginning utterance of each expression they identified. Reliability for this unitizing was assessed by calculating percent agreement for identification of expressions, which was 75% across all 12 films. Once the coders agreed on the unitizing, their consistency in choosing the same values for each variable was calculated. To assess agreement among coders, we calculated intercoder reliability using Fleiss' Kappa, which is an extension of Cohen's Kappa that allows for more than two coders and corrects for agreements based on chance (Fleiss, 1971; Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2005). Across the 12 films, the reliability coefficient for expression type was .90. and for consequence was .80. Reliability at the film level was also assessed using Fleiss' kappa. The reliability coefficient across 12 tests for the takeaway message variable was .72.

Results

Prevalence of Portrayals of Romantic Ideals and Challenges

Research question 1. The first research question asked how prevalent romantic ideals are featured in popular romantic comedy films. Nearly all (98%) of the movies contained at least one romantic ideal expression. In terms of density, across 52 films, or over 93 hours of programming, coders identified a total of 375 ideal expressions,

or roughly one romantic ideal expression every 14 minutes. On average, there were 7.21 ideal expressions ($SD = 4.43$, range = 0–19) per film. A total of 39 of the 52 films, or 75% of the sample, were judged as perpetuating an overarching romantic ideal message.

In terms of specific ideal expressions, nearly 40% were related to soul mate/one and only. About one third of the expressions fell into the idealization of other category, and one quarter of the expressions were coded as love conquers all. In contrast, less than 10% of the expressions were categorized as love at first sight. A goodness-of-fit chi square analysis indicated that there was a significant difference among the four categories, $\chi^2(3, N=375) = 79.52, p < .001$. Post hoc analyses revealed that the love at first sight expression ($n = 25, 7\%_a$) occurred significantly less often than would be expected by chance, whereas idealization of other ($n = 111, 30\%_b$) and soul mate/one and only ($n = 143, 38\%_b$) occurred significantly more often. The love conquers all expression ($n = 96, 25\%_{ab}$) in these films did not differ from what would be expected by chance.

At the film level, a slightly different pattern emerged. Of the 39 films that featured an ideal theme as the overarching message, 32 (82%) were classified as love conquers all and seven (18%) featured the soul mate/one and only ideal as the overall theme. None of the movies portrayed love at first sight or idealization of other as the overarching relational message.

Research question 2. The second research question asked how often challenges to romantic ideals are featured in popular romantic comedies. In terms of prevalence, results revealed that 98% of movies featured a romantic challenge expression. In terms of density, coders identified 739 challenge expressions, or one challenge every eight minutes. There was an average of 14.21 ($SD = 7.35$, range = 0–32) challenges per film. At the film level, a total of 12 out of the 52 films, or 23% of the sample, featured a challenge as the movie's overall theme.

When compared across units of analysis, an interesting pattern emerged. Challenges were more common at the expression level, $\chi^2(1, N=1114) = 118.94, p < .001$, whereas ideals were more common as the overall message at the film level, $\chi^2(1, N=51) = 14.29, p < .001$.

Context of Portrayals of Romantic Ideals and Challenges

Research question 3. The third research question asked about the consequences that ideals and challenges received in the plot. For ideals, a chi-square goodness of fit test revealed a significant difference for type of consequence, $\chi^2(3, N=375) = 2.03, p < .001$. Post hoc analyses indicated that ideals were significantly more likely to be rewarded ($n = 211, 56\%_b$) than would be expected by chance. Conversely, punishments ($n = 75, 20\%_a$), neutral reactions ($n = 51, 14\%_a$), and mixed reactions ($n = 38, 10\%_a$) were less likely to be consequences (see Figure 1).

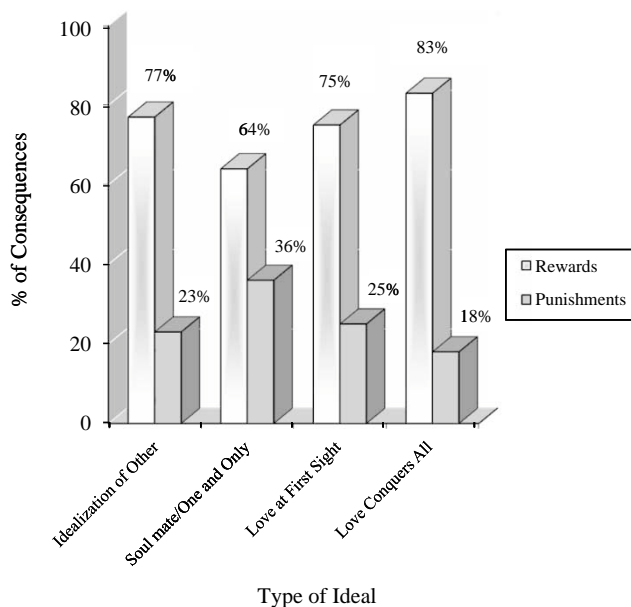


Figure 1 Frequencies of consequences to ideal expressions.

For challenges, a chi-square goodness-of-fit test revealed that this pattern was statistically significant, $\chi^2(3, N=739) = 2.68, p < .001$. Post hoc analyses revealed that punishments ($n=361, 49\%$) were more likely to be the consequences for challenge expressions than what would be expected by chance, whereas neutral reactions ($n=103, 14\%$), and mixed reactions ($n=77, 10\%$) were less likely. Consequences of rewards ($n=198, 27\%$) did not differ from chance for challenge expressions.

After analyzing challenge and ideal expressions separately, we ran an additional chi-square test to compare type of expression with type of consequence (rewards vs. punishments). This chi-square test of independence revealed a significant pattern, $\chi^2(1, N=1114) = 1.12, p < .001, V^* = 0.36$. Whereas results indicated that rewards were evenly distributed across consequences for ideals and challenges, punishments were overwhelmingly more likely to be a consequence of a challenge than an ideal (see Figure 2). Additionally, ideals were more often rewarded, whereas challenges were more often punished (see Figure 3).

Research question 4. The fourth research question asked about sex differences with regards to which characters made each expression. Roughly half were expressed by males ($n=569$) and half by females ($n=545$). A series of chi-square tests of homogeneity were conducted comparing ideals and challenges by sex of character, $\chi^2(1, N=1114) = 45.98, p < .001, V^* = 0.20$. Ideals were significantly more likely to be expressed by male ($n=245$) than by female characters ($n=130$). The ratio was

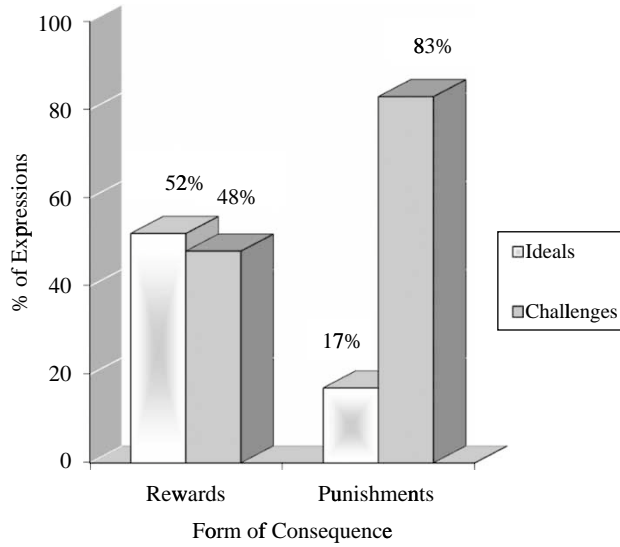


Figure 2 Form of consequence as a function of type of expression.

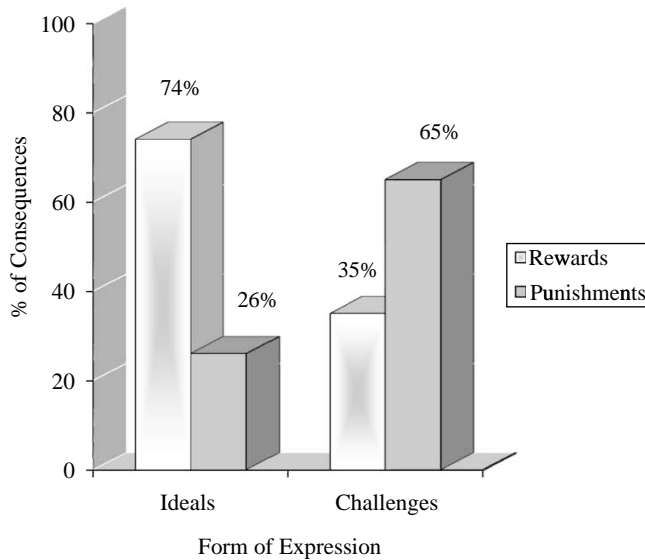


Figure 3 Form of expression as a function of type of consequence.

almost 2:1 for such expressions. In contrast, challenges were slightly more likely to be expressed by female characters ($n = 415$) than by males ($n = 324$).

Discussion

The findings of Study 1 indicate that romantic ideal expressions are quite prevalent in romantic comedy films. These films also feature a large number of expressions that

directly challenge or contradict such ideals. In fact, in most of the films, challenges are more common than ideals. Yet in spite of the prevalence of such countermessages throughout the plot, most of these movies celebrate romantic ideals as the overarching theme. Moreover, the contextualization of the expressions reinforces idealistic conceptions of intimate relationships.

In terms of specific findings, our first research question concerns how often romantic ideals are featured in romantic comedy films. Our study indicated that three fourths of the films in the sample featured an overarching romantic ideal message. However, only two ideals were featured as the overarching theme in these movies: love conquers all (65%) and soul mate/one and only (15%). One movie that featured the theme of love conquers all was *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (Brooks & Zwick, 2002), in which the main couple faces numerous cultural and familial challenges, but they persist throughout and marry happily at the end. In terms of soul mate/one and only, one example was *Serendipity* (Fields, Klein, & Chelsom, 2001), in which a couple randomly meet in New York City for one night and say goodbye, only to spend the next three years trying to find one another. Right before marrying other people, fate brings the two together. One reason that love at first sight or idealization of other are not featured as a film's overriding theme could be because such themes generally mark the beginning of courtship when couples first get to know each other, and are not necessarily sustainable across an entire plotline. At the expression level, all four types of ideals were expressed, albeit in different levels of frequencies. The overall pervasiveness of romantic expressions and overarching ideal themes across the sample indicates that one can nearly always find ideals in such movies.

The second research question concerns how often challenges to romantic ideals are featured in these films. Counter to the popular assumption that romantic movies are purely idealistic, these films routinely feature direct contradictions to romantic ideals. For example, *Knocked Up* (Apatow, 2007) features the story of a mismatched couple who, after enjoying a one-night stand, realize they have created a pregnancy. Multiple fights and tough discussions ensue, thus accounting for the large number of challenge expressions in this film.

The presence of both romantic ideals and challenges in these films is consistent with previous research and critical theory. Like Johnson and Holmes (2009), we found that expressions about relationships in such films featured both ideal and challenge statements. However, a typical viewer confronts many more "realistic" appraisals of romance because challenge messages occurred more often than ideal expressions, at a ratio of two to one. Why, then, are romantic comedies conceptualized as being idealistic? Critical cultural scholars have argued that it is the happy ending (i.e., ideal takeaway theme) common in these films that leads people to assume that such movies promulgate idealistic messages (Allen, 1999; Neale & Krutnik, 1995). The idea is that the juxtaposition of challenges with ideals is a literary device designed to set up tension and advance a plot that is typically resolved with an ideal conclusion.

The third question concerns what consequences ideals and challenges received in the plotline. Our study revealed that ideal expressions received positive consequences in the story most of the time. For example, in *Sex and The City* (Chupack & King,

2008), a male character tenderly declares to a woman, “You’re the one.” She responds by smiling, hugging, and kissing him. Conversely, challenge expressions were more likely punished. For example, in *The Wedding Planner* (Shankman, 2001), Matthew McConaughey’s character breaks up with someone, and says: “The reasons we were together in college don’t hold up anymore. We’re different people now.” The woman reacts by staring at him angrily, and then crying. Whereas challenge expressions were punished about half of the time, they were rewarded about one quarter of the time. The overall message is that ideals are treated well, and challenges are treated poorly in these films.

The results of our final research question demonstrate that both male and female characters, in roughly equal proportions, talked about relationships in these films. This pattern contradicts the common assumption that females are more interested in relationship issues than men are. In fact, research demonstrates that young girls focus more on friendship issues than do young boys (Youniss & Haynie, 1992), and, as they grow older, women generally rate romantic relationships as more important than do men (e.g., Johnston, Bachman, & O’Malley, 2007). However, research also demonstrates that women generally wish that men would talk more about relational issues during courtship and in marriages (Riessman, 1990; Tannen, 1999). It may be that because the romantic comedy genre attracts a large female audience (Fischhoff, Antonio, & Lewis, 1997), filmmakers are intentionally featuring the types of relationships that women want most—those in which both partners discuss the relationship.

Although both men and women talked about relationships, there was a difference in what they said. Female characters more often expressed challenges, whereas male characters more often expressed ideals. Research indicates that young women rate faithfulness, love, and lifelong commitment as more important than do young men (e.g., Meier et al., 2009). However, women may believe that maintaining these relational components does not magically happen, which represents a challenge-like view. Conversely, other research demonstrates that men tend to be more romantically idealistic than women in their belief structures (Sprecher & Metts, 1989, 1999). Therefore, our results—women express challenges, men express ideals—suggest that character expressions in these films may mirror sex differences observed in the real world.

Some limitations exist. First, we did not code the “adult” category with greater specificity. This group comprised individuals ranging from age 18 to 64. It could be that most of the characters in these films are in the “young adult” category and older adults are largely ignored. Future research should look at more specific age ranges to see which groups are being represented. Second, the film-level variable had marginal interrater reliability (.72), which could bring into question some of the findings associated with that variable. Finally, future research should unpack the reactions to ideal and challenge expressions, by measuring the different ways characters can be rewarded, such as through physical touch, material rewards, or verbal affirmation; or punished, such as with retaliatory behavior or angry words.

Study 2

Study 1 documented the prevalence of ideals in romantic comedy films. The next step is to determine whether there is a meaningful connection between the content of these movies and the beliefs that certain viewers endorse. For this study, we surveyed undergraduates and asked them to report on their exposure to romantic comedy films as well as their beliefs about romance.

Two theoretical perspectives support the idea that young adults will be affected by these films. According to cultivation theory, viewers who are repeatedly exposed to romantic content in media should, over time, adopt beliefs about the real world that are similar to the themes featured in the storylines (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002). The original conception of Gerbner's theory was the assumption that perceptions of reality are cultivated by watching heavy amounts of television, regardless of the content (Gerbner, 1969). However, most of the research that supports cultivation theory has focused on media violence (see Potter, 1993, for a review). More recently, though, research suggests that the media can cultivate young people's beliefs about topics other than violence, such as sexual beliefs and attitudes (Ward & Friedman, 2006) as well as beliefs about body image and size (Gentles & Harrison, 2006). In line with these results, Morgan and Shanahan (2010) have argued that the influence of genre-specific programming should only be considered within the larger context of overall viewing. Previous research within the relationship genre of media has found evidence in support of a cultivation effect. For example, Segrin and Nabi (2002) demonstrated a connection between romance-oriented television viewing and endorsement of relational beliefs such as "you should be able to talk openly about everything," whereas Ferris et al. (2007) identified a link between viewing dating reality shows and endorsement of beliefs such as "men are sex-driven."

Social cognitive theory posits that learning from media is most likely to occur when the models are rewarded, rather than punished, for their behavior (Bandura, 1965). Because Study 1 documented that ideal expressions were more often rewarded than punished, there is further reason to expect that the ideals in these films are likely to be learned by viewers. Previous research also supports this prediction (Bachen & Illouz, 1996). For example, Ferris and colleagues (2007) found that the attitudinal themes that were most often rewarded on screen were also the ones that viewers were most likely to endorse.

Study 1 documented that romantic ideals are prevalent and rewarded in these films, but also that certain types of ideals are featured more often than others. In particular, we found that the soul mate/one and only ideal was the most common expression in these movies among the four ideals coded, followed closely by idealization of other and love conquers all. According to cultivation theory (Gerbner, et al., 2002), the ideals that are most pervasive should also be the ones that are endorsed most strongly by heavy viewers. We proposed the following hypothesis:

H1: Heavy viewers of romantic comedies will report stronger endorsement of romantic beliefs than will light viewers.

The first hypothesis predicts generalized effects for all those who regularly view romantic films. However, all viewers may not be affected in similar ways. The uses and gratifications perspective posits that there are a variety of reasons why people watch television and films (Palmgreen, 1984; Rubin, 1994). For example, Nabi, Finnerty, Domschke, and Hull (2006) demonstrated that individuals who cheated on their romantic partners and felt regret for doing so were more likely than those who had no regret to express interest in viewing television programs that feature cheating storylines, perhaps in order to learn about others who were facing a similar situation. Consuming media with this intention of learning could produce an enhanced effect. For example, Rubin (1984) found that viewers who watched television with the intent to learn reported a more involving experience (i.e., purposive, goal-directed, and selective) than did those who were merely watching to pass the time. In support of this idea, we proposed the following hypothesis:

H2: The association between viewing and beliefs will be strongest among those who report watching romantic comedies in order to learn.

Method

Participants and Procedure

A total of 335 communication students at a large Midwestern university were recruited to participate in this study. Of these participants, 29% were male ($n = 96$) and 71% were female ($n = 239$). They ranged in age from 18 to 26 years ($M = 19.90$, $SD = 1.21$). Roughly two thirds of the participants were Caucasian (69%). The rest were Black (14%), Asian (12%), or Latino (5%).

Students were invited during regularly scheduled class time in Spring 2010 to participate in an online questionnaire in exchange for extra credit. Interested students received a recruitment email with the consent form and questionnaire. The questionnaire contained three sections (romantic and relational perceptions, media exposure, and demographics and control variables). There were six versions of this questionnaire. In every version, the first, second, and third sections were presented in a single and chronological order; however, within each section, the ordering of measures/scales was counterbalanced across different versions.

Measures

Romantic beliefs. To assess students' beliefs about intimate relationships, we used Sprecher and Metts' (1989) Romantic Beliefs Scale (RBS). The RBS is designed to assess four types of beliefs that are part of the romantic ideal construct: love conquers all, soul mate/one and only, idealization of partner, and love at first sight. Sample items include: "I believe if another person and I love each other we can overcome any differences and problems that may arise" (love conquers all), "There will be only one real love for me" (soul mate/one and only), "The person I love will make a perfect romantic partner; for example, he/she will be completely accepting, loving, and understanding" (idealization of other), and "I am likely to fall in love almost

immediately if I meet the right person” (love at first sight). Before testing our hypotheses, we first determined whether those dimensions were evident in this sample by submitting the 15 items to a principal components analysis with Varimax rotation. Eigenvalues and interpretability indicated that the best solution was four factors: love conquers all (five items, $M = 5.01$, $SD = 1.26$, $\alpha = .82$), idealization of partner (four items, $M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.23$, $\alpha = .74$), soul mate/one and only (three items, $M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.39$, $\alpha = .69$), and love at first sight (three items, $M = 2.73$, $SD = 1.28$, $\alpha = .48$). The eigenvalues for the four factors were 4.26, 1.76, 1.37, and 1.03, respectively. However, because the alpha level for love at first sight was very low (and expressions associated with this ideal were the least common as reported in Study 1), we chose not to analyze the association between viewing and endorsement of the subscale of love at first sight. Mean scores for the composite 15-item seven-point Likert scale (1 = “strongly disagree,” 7 = “strongly agree”) ranged from 1.36 to 6.71 ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 0.90$, $\alpha = .80$).

Exposure to romantic comedy movies. Media exposure has been assessed in a number of ways in prior research (e.g., Dixon, 2008; Edison, 2006; Segrin & Nabi, 2002), but no single approach has been adopted as the standard. We opted to ask respondents to indicate how many times they had seen a series of popular films, and we summed their responses. We included a list of the 20 top-grossing romantic comedy movies from the last five years of the sample (2003–2008) included in the analysis described in Study 1. To help disguise the true nature of the study, we also included the 10 top-grossing action and 10 top-grossing nonaction drama films during the same period (Gray, 2009; *Movie Times*, 2009). Participants indicated how many times they had seen each film. The options were “never” (0), “once” (1), “a few times” (2), and “more than a few times” (3). Summed scores for all 20 films ranged from 3 to 55 ($M = 20.30$, $SD = 9.46$).¹

Overall movie viewing. Using an adaptation of an already-established scale (Shrum, Wyer, & O’Guinn, 1998), participants were asked to specify the number of movies watched per week in four categories: movies at the theater, movies airing on television, movies on DVD/VHS/On Demand, and movies watched on iPod or phone. The scores for the four types were summed to create an overall movie exposure variable ($M = 8.42$, $SD = 3.06$, range: 3–21).

Watching movies to learn. We adapted a measure to assess motives based on Rubin’s (1983) original scale. Participants were asked to think about three reasons for watching romantic comedy movies (“I watch romantic comedies because they help me learn about myself and others,” “I watch romantic comedies so I can learn about what could happen to me,” and “I watch romantic comedies so I can learn how to do things I haven’t done before”), and indicate the degree to which they agreed with each

reason on a scale ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7). Mean scores ranged from 1.00 to 7.00 ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 1.59$; $\alpha = .85$).

Demographics and control variables. Participants were also asked to report on their relational status, parents’ marital status, and their own sexual orientation. For relational status, about half of the participants were single ($n = 175$), and half were in partnered relationships ($n = 160$). For parents’ marital status, the responses were: still married (70%), never married (13%), divorced (13%), and widowed/deceased (3%). The vast majority of the sample participants (97%) identified their sexual orientation as heterosexual. A very small percentage reported that they were bisexual (2%), gay men (1%), or questioning ($> 1\%$).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

According to a power analysis based on Cohen (1988), there was sufficient power (.99) to find both medium ($f^2 = .15$) and large effects ($f^2 = .35$) at $\alpha = .05$ with $N = 340$ for a main effect, controlling for five variables. However, the power for small effects ($f^2 = .02$) was not as strong (.43). We had sufficient power to find medium or large effects, and only moderate power to detect small effects in this study.

Main Effects of Viewing on Romantic Beliefs

To test the relationship between romantic comedy exposure and endorsement of beliefs, we conducted a series of hierarchical multiple regression analyses, with belief endorsement as the outcome variable. Control variables were entered first: sex, age, race (White, non-White), relational status (single, partnered), parents’ relationship status (not married, married), and overall movie viewing. In the second block, we entered romantic comedy exposure.

Hypothesis 1. The first hypothesis posited that heavy viewers of romantic comedies would report stronger endorsement of romantic beliefs than would lighter viewers. To test this hypothesis, we ran four separate hierarchical linear regression analyses, one for each of the three subscales and one for the entire Romantic Beliefs Scale.

For the first analysis, which tested endorsement of the overall RBS, overall movie viewing and relational status were positively associated with stronger endorsement of romantic beliefs. The second step of the analysis, however, was not significant, $R^2 = .06$, $\Delta R^2 = .00$, $F(1, 320) = 1.08$, $p = .300$ (see Table 2). The next test indicated that romantic comedy exposure did significantly predict one of the three subscales: idealization of other, $R^2 = .08$, $\Delta R^2 = .01$, $F(1, 320) = 4.16$, $p = .042$. That is, participants with higher exposure to romantic comedies also reported stronger belief in this ideal, even after controlling for overall movie viewing. Romantic comedy

Table 2 Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Romantic Comedy Exposure Predicting Endorsement of Romantic Beliefs, Idealization of Other, Love Conquers All, and Soul mate/One and Only

Predictor	Romantic beliefs		Idealization of other		Love conquers all		Soul mate/one and only	
	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β
Step 1	.06**		.07**		.08***		.02	
Sex		.05		.04		.03		.10
Age		-.09		-.07		-.11*		-.04
Race		-.06		-.05		-.11*		.03
Parents' relational status		-.04		-.05		.06		-.07
Relational status		.12*		.07		.21***		.00
Overall movie viewing		.16**		.23***		.10		.06
Step 2	.00		.01*		.00		.00	
Romantic comedy films		.06		.14*		.04		.03
Total R^2	.06		.08		.08		.04	
N	321		321		321		321	

Note. All coefficients are from the blocks in which they were entered. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Sex is coded as male/female (1/2). Race is coded as White/non-White (1/0). Relational status and parents' relational status is coded as single/partnered and married/not married, respectively (0/1). Age and overall movie viewing are continuous variables.

viewing did not significantly predict endorsement of love conquers all, $R^2 = .08$, $\Delta R^2 = .00$, $F(1, 320) = 0.47$, $p = .494$, or soul mate/one and only, $R^2 = .02$, $\Delta R^2 = .00$, $F(1, 320) = 0.37$, $p = .546$. Study 1 demonstrated that idealization of other ideal expressions made up the second most common category of relational expressions, or roughly one third of all ideal expressions. We concluded that Hypothesis 1 was partially supported (see Table 2).

Hypothesis 2. The second hypothesis predicted that the association between viewing and beliefs would be strongest among those who reported watching romantic comedies with the motivation to learn. For this analysis, we entered controls simultaneously in the first block, romantic comedy exposure and the watching to learn in the second block, and the cross-product of the moderator and exposure variable (i.e., the interaction) in the third block. To reduce problems with multicollinearity, we mean centered the variables (i.e., transformed them into z-scores) prior to computing the interaction variable. We tested this hypothesis with four iterations of the outcome variable: overall beliefs, and the three subscales of love conquers all, idealization of other, and soul mate/one and only.

The results of the four hierarchical regression analyses are summarized in Table 3. Learning was significantly associated with romantic beliefs in two of the tests: overall endorsement of romantic beliefs and endorsement of idealization of other. The positive beta indicates that those who reported a higher motivation to learn from

Table 3 Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Two-way Interaction between Romantic Comedy Exposure and Viewing with Motivation to Learn in Predicting Endorsement of Romantic Beliefs, Idealization of Other, Love Conquers All, and Soul mate/One and Only

Predictor	Romantic beliefs		Idealization of other		Love conquers all		Soul mate/ one and only	
	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β
Step 1	.06**		.06**		.07**		.03	
Sex		.05		.04		.03		.11
Age		-.09		-.07		-.11*		-.04
Race		-.06		-.05		-.11*		.03
Parents' relational status		-.04		-.04		.06		-.05
Relational status		.12*		.06		.21**		.00
Overall movie viewing		.16**		.20**		.09		.08
Step 2	.02		.04**		.00		.00	
Watching with motive to learn Romantic comedy films		.16*		.17**		.04		.04
		.07		.14*		.05		.03
Step 3	.00		.00		.00		.00	
Learning \times Romantic comedy exposure		.02		-.04		-.02		-.02
Total R^2	.07		.10		.08		.03	
N	318		318		318		318	

Note. All coefficients are from the blocks in which they were entered. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. Sex is coded as male/female (1/2). Race is coded as White/non-White (1/0). Relational status and parents' relational status is coded as single/partnered and married/not married, respectively (0/1). Age and overall movie viewing are continuous variables.

these films also were more likely to endorse romantic beliefs in general, and idealization of other specifically. However, watching romantic comedy films in order to learn did not significantly interact with exposure to predict endorsement of beliefs. Instead, motivation to learn was an independent and significant predictor of the endorsement of ideals, irrespective of degree of exposure.

The results of the hierarchical regression analysis for love conquers all and soul mate/one and only are also summarized in Table 3. Here, learning was not significantly associated with romantic beliefs, and the interaction terms were not significant. Because viewing to learn was associated with stronger endorsement of all romantic beliefs and the belief in idealization of other, and because *some* viewing is implicated in this learning process (even if the interaction was not statistically significant), we concluded that Hypothesis 2 was partially supported.

Other potential moderators. Because overall movie viewing and relational status significantly predicted endorsement in our regression tests of main effects, we also ran two additional tests to determine whether these variables interacted with viewing to produce an effect. Neither the results for relational status, $R^2 = .06$, $\Delta R^2 = .00$,

$F(1, 321) = 0.40, p = .529$, or overall movie viewing, $R^2 = .07, \Delta R^2 = .00, F(1, 319) = 0.75, p = .389$, were significant.²

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that exposure to romantic comedies is related to young people's endorsement of romantic beliefs, but the relationship is not as robust or straightforward as predicted. In general, repeated viewing was positively related to only one of the four beliefs that comprise the romantic ideal: idealization of one's partner. Furthermore, individuals who reported watching romantic comedies in order to learn were more likely to endorse romantic beliefs than were those who watch for other reasons, independent of actual viewing. In particular, they were most likely to endorse the belief in the idealization of one's partner.

In terms of specific findings, the lack of an overall relationship between viewing and perceptions for Hypothesis 1 is inconsistent with previous work. Segrin and Nabi (2002) found that viewing romantic-oriented television was associated with endorsing marriage-related ideals. Ferris et al. (2007) also reported that viewing reality dating shows predicted stronger endorsement of attitudes expressed in the programs. Although our study is the first to look at romantic comedy exposure, our results are still inconsistent with previous research and cultivation theory. That is, viewers who are repeatedly exposed to formulaic media content should, over time, adopt beliefs about the real world that are similar to the themes featured in these repetitive storylines (Gerbner, 1998)—in this case, the consistent ideals documented in Study 1. We did not find support for this.

One possibility for this null finding is that the measure of exposure may have been flawed. Participants were given a list of 20 highest grossing romantic comedy movies from 2003 to 2008 and asked to indicate how many times they had seen each film. Perhaps we should have included more recent films in the list. It is also possible that students watch a variety of films rather than repeat their viewing of the same movies. Lastly, we did not ask participants for actual hours per week spent watching romantic comedies, in part because we expected the variance to be limited and we wanted to prevent demand characteristics. Future research should develop more creative ways to measure exposure.

Another possible explanation for the null finding is that romantic ideals may be so pervasive in Western culture that such films alone have little impact on beliefs. In fact, the romantic ideals measured in this study can be traced far back in history, long before the advent of romantic comedies. For example, the ideal of soul mate can be found in the early writings of Aristotle: "Love is composed of a single soul inhabiting two bodies" (Barnes, 1971). More recently, ideals about love conquering all can be found in popular romance novels (Lee, 2008). It may be, then, that romantic ideals are so ingrained into Western societies that romantic comedies have little influence above and beyond what already exists in popular culture.

One finding in our study supports this idea. Time spent watching all movies (regardless of genre) *did* significantly predict romantic belief endorsement. This

pattern held up even after controlling for a variety of demographic variables and including romantic comedy exposure in the model. In fact, overall movie viewing and romantic comedy viewing were statistically correlated, $r = .26$, $p = .01$. It could be that movie viewing is a proxy for romantic comedy viewing, and it may be that these ideals are present in all types of movies and are not unique to romantic comedies. For instance, the highest grossing movie of all time, *Avatar* (Cameron, 2009), features an adventure story with an embedded love story in the plot. Furthermore, one recent content analysis documented that roughly 80% of romantic relationships portrayed in Disney films have love-at-first-sight beginnings (Tanner, Haddock, Zimmerman, & Lund, 2003). Romantic dramas, such as *Twilight* (Hardwicke, Mooradian, Morgan, & Morgan, 2008) or *The Notebook* (Cassavetes, Johnson, & Harris, 2004), may also contribute to the development of these ideals, especially because comedy is not used to discredit the ideal statements.

It is tempting to conclude that romantic comedies have little influence above all the other movies that feature romantic ideals. However, our data challenge this supposition. First, we found a relationship between viewing romantic comedies and endorsement of one of the ideals. Second, we found that motives for viewing romantic comedies predicted endorsement, even if overall viewing did not.

The results of Hypothesis 2, which predicted watching to learn would enhance the influence of these movies, revealed that viewing these films to learn did not significantly moderate the association between exposure and endorsement of beliefs. However, those participants who reported watching with the motivation to learn did more strongly endorse the ideals, regardless of degree of exposure. In other words, motives for viewing mattered more than sheer viewing did. Because exposure to these films is implicit in the way that learning was measured (e.g., "I watch romantic comedies because they help me learn about myself and others."), we concluded that Hypothesis 2 was partially supported. This is consistent with other research, in that the motivation to consume content for learning purposes is more influential on outcomes than mere media exposure (e.g., Guo, Tan, & Cheung, 2010). For example, Tiggemann (2005) found that viewing television with a motivation of social learning was a stronger predictor of reported body image concern among adolescents than was sheer amount of television exposure. Future research should consider learning motives less as a moderator and more as a predictor when analyzing the effects of media consumption.

There are several practical implications for these findings. Some scholars have suggested that romantic movies are a significant source for acquiring unrealistic beliefs about relationships (e.g., Fletcher et al., 1999; Galician, 2004; Sharp & Ganong, 2000). At the very least, our results indicate that romantic comedies are influential only in certain contexts. Instead, it may be that romantic comedies are actually a positive social factor in young people's lives. Prior research suggests that idealizing one's partner can be beneficial for a romantic relationship (e.g., Sprecher & Metts, 1999). Murray et al. (1996) found that idealization in romantic relationships was associated with higher levels of relational satisfaction in a sample of married and partnered people. Our study suggests that repeated viewing of romantic comedies could encourage viewers to think of their own relational partners as wonderful and

perfect. The findings also suggest that the greatest impact will be on those people who watch romantic comedies to learn.

Conclusion

The first study was a systematic content analysis of the themes or ideals embedded in romantic comedies from the past 10 years. The second study was a large-scale survey of undergraduate students that assessed the association between viewing romantic comedy films and beliefs about love, relationships, and romance. According to the results of these two studies, we have developed four general conclusions. First, romantic ideals and challenges are prevalent in romantic comedy films. Second, ideals are more often rewarded than punished, whereas the opposite was true of challenges. Third, there is an association between romantic comedy viewing and endorsement of beliefs; particularly the endorsement of the idealization of other belief. Fourth, viewing romantic comedies with a motivation to learn is positively associated with endorsement of all romantic beliefs.

The findings of this project reveal a few implications for theory. Viewing romantic comedies was associated with a greater endorsement of the idealization of other belief, whereas overall movie viewing was related to stronger endorsement of all romantic beliefs. Both of these findings provide support for Gerbner's (1998) hypothesis. In terms of uses and gratifications, our study demonstrated that there was a positive relationship between watching romantic comedies with the motivation to learn and endorsing romantic beliefs. This supports previous work that found that people often seek out romantic content in order to learn about relationships (Steele, 1999; Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006), and that consuming media in order to learn may be more influential than total amount of exposure (Tiggemann, 2005).

Much of the previous work related to romantic media and effects has looked only at the impact of television (Ferris et al., 2007; Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008; Segrin & Nabi, 2002) and has not investigated the influence of exposure to movies. Although our study is the first to investigate the association between movie exposure and romantic beliefs, the relationship was not as straightforward as the one seen in previous work related to television. Our work is a significant first step, but more investigation is certainly needed.

Future research should work to better understand content features, direction of causality, and individual viewer differences. Researchers who specialize in interpersonal interactions should also continue to investigate the influence of holding beliefs on relationship functioning. For a genre often criticized for being unrealistic, an enhanced understanding of romantic comedy content and its association with effects may help highlight the value of these formulaic plotlines.

Notes

- [1] We created four other viewing variables and tested those, but none of these measures altered the findings in any substantial way. In the first of these alternative approaches, we combined

the overall exposure measure with a ranking measure of how likely each participant was to select a romantic comedy movie over other genres, if free time were available. We computed this composite variable by summing the participants' overall viewing with their ranking score (range = 6–60; $M = 26.69$, $SD = 10.23$). For the second approach, we weighted each of the 20 films in the list by the number of ideals in the content, as reported in Study 1. We then multiplied each participant's viewing score by that weight. The resulting weighting score reflected the pervasiveness of idealistic content, with higher scores signifying exposure to a higher prevalence of ideals. To create the composite exposure variable, we summed together the weighted scores for all 20 films. Scores for this variable fit a normal distribution curve well (range = –454 to –4; $M = -195.03$, $SD = 90.64$). In the third approach, we weighted each film by the number of ideals in the content minus the number of challenges, as reported in Study 1. For the final approach, we summed together the weighted scores for all 20 films and added that to the participant's ranking of romantic comedy genre. Scores for this weighted variable also fit a normal distribution curve extremely well (range = 9–343; $M = 118.65$, $SD = 61.94$). As might be expected, the exposure variables were highly correlated, according to Pearson correlation tests. Preliminary regression analyses testing the predictive relationship between each of these four exposure measures and endorsement of romantic beliefs revealed no meaningful differences.

- [2] After testing for main effects, we also assessed the potential influence of a series of moderating variables: relational experience, perceived reality, perceived similarity, and sex of participant. None of these variables revealed any statistically significant associations.

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