

## **The Effects of Romantic Comedies on Women and Female Adolescents**

Cassady Green  
Communication and Media Studies  
Georgetown College  
Four-Hundred East College Street  
Georgetown, KY 40324 USA

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Jacob Dickerson

### **Abstract**

For years women have planned “girls’ night” with the purpose of watching a film their significant other has no desire to see; in fact this genre of movies has been termed specifically for the audience it appeals to. “Chick Flicks” not only possess an entertainment factor but also serve as a bonding experience among women and female adolescents. The popularity of this particular movie genre has served as a spring board for the messages and values that they depict to the audience. As the audience views the portrayal of romantic relationships as Hollywood depicts, their understanding of what a relationships “should” look like is altered. Previous studies of romantic comedies based on Social Cognitive Theory suggest that the audience may actively observe the behavior within relationships depicted by the media in order to gain understanding in how they themselves could behave in their own relationships. Although the likelihood of achieving these desired outcomes depicted by the media within romantic comedy films is unlikely, this has not affected the popularity of the genre. This paper is guided by Social Cognitive Theory and presents a content analysis of how romantic comedy films alter the way the audience views certain aspects of relationships, including improbably high standards, traditional patriarchal ideals and support of post-feminism ideals. Using this study, I argue that romantic comedies can provide both contradictory messages and poor values pertaining to romance and relationships.

**Keywords: Gender, Mediated-Relationships, Post-Feminism**

### **1. Introduction**

For years women have planned “girls’ night” with the purpose of watching a film their significant other has no desire to see; in fact this genre of movies has been termed specifically for the audience it appeals to. “Chick Flicks” not only possess an entertainment factor but also serve as a bonding experience among women and female adolescents. The popularity of this particular movie genre has served as a spring board for the messages and values that they depict to the audience. As the audience views the portrayal of romantic relationships as Hollywood depicts, their understanding of what a relationships “should” look like is altered. Based on Social Cognitive Theory, past studies on the effects of media and the messages communicated to the audience through both movies and television, romantic comedies give an unrealistic view and immoral code associated with relationships and romance for both adolescents and women. My argument is based on how the romantic comedies studied can provide both contradictory messages and poor values pertaining to romance and relationships.

### **2. Social Cognitive Theory**

Based on the views of Bandura, Social Cognitive Theory suggests that “Individuals commit to memory behaviors they have observed to memory to be later used as models on which to base their own behavior”<sup>1</sup>Behaviors are more

likely to be modeled when they are accomplished by individuals who are seen as desirable and if outcomes are perceived as alluring to the audience<sup>2</sup>. When referring specifically to romantic comedies the theory suggests that the audience may actively observe the behavior within relationships depicted by the media in order to gain understanding in how they themselves could behave in their own relationships. Unsurprisingly, Johnson and Holmes found that “With the media typically relying on unrealistic portrayals of relationships, it may be that adolescents modeling their own behavior on those seen in the media are unlikely to achieve the observed desired outcomes”<sup>3</sup>. Although the likelihood of achieving these desired outcomes depicted by the media within romantic comedy films is unlikely, this has not affected the popularity of the genre. This paper provides an analysis of a small sample of romantic comedies and argues that content of such films alters the way the audience views certain aspects of relationships, including improbably high expectations, traditional patriarchal ideals and the support of post-feminism.

### 3. Reoccurring Themes

My analysis of romantic comedies found that generally speaking, the films had an unrealistic approach to romance and relationships. Hollywood’s goal is to entertain their target audience and make them love the story just as much as the characters. In order to entertain viewers, realistic plots and characters can be sacrificed. Unfortunately, this does not always affect the way that people look at the films. Viewers do not always realize the purpose of mainstream media, Foss, Foss & Trapp suggest that “A basic function of the media is the creation of representation or simulations –reproduced versions of reality”<sup>4</sup>. The audience often leaves the movie theatre yearning for a love similar to the one on the silver screen. This is problematic because women and adolescents begin to expect similar qualities in their own love life, many of which are improbable or even unobtainable in reality.

Relationships within the romantic comedy films analyzed demonstrate specific ideals associated with loving and successful romances. Qualities include the notion that all men and women are systematically different and that neither can change their ways; this is demonstrated in the films *When Harry Met Sally* and *What Women Want*<sup>5 6</sup>. Conflicts arise when neither character refuses to let go of their gender stereotypes. Meg Ryan’s character (Sally Albright) yells at Billy Crystal (Harry Burns) for living a promiscuous life style that is not acceptable for women and Harry firmly believes that men and women can never be simply friends because one of them will always have some sort of romantic feelings for the other. Another quality associated romantic comedies is the abundance of non-sexual touching; almost all of the films analyzed involved kissing, affectionate touching and holding hands. Johnson and Holmes suggest that by adolescents viewing relationships in the media as being without sexual activity leads them to believe that their relationship should have an absence of sexual behavior<sup>7</sup>. While some might believe that romantic comedies would portray relationships to be predominately physical, after conducting a content analysis it was clear that is not the case. While the two main characters do almost always end up with each other the courting stage is not usually filled with sexual situations. *Runaway Bride* and *You’ve Got Mail* are two examples of films in which two people are supposedly destined for each other and yet have very little physical contact in the process of realizing their intense love<sup>8 9</sup>. This relates to another idea that is often portrayed within romantic comedy films which involves the two characters being “destined” and “meant” for each other. “Soul-mates” is a notion that can be particularly detrimental to real life relationships. Johnson and Holmes found that those who view a high level of romantic comedies ultimately believe that their significant other should “intuitively understand their needs”<sup>10</sup>. The film *The Holiday* reflects these unrealistic ideas when Amanda Woods (Cameron Diaz) realizes that leaving Graham (Jude Law) has caused her to cry for the first time since she was fifteen years old<sup>11</sup>. She realizes that the love she feels for him affects her more than anything has before. Viewers may start to believe that they should have a “one of kind” relationship that is something special and unlike anyone else’s’. The likelihood of this happening in real life is next to impossible and thus further explains the impact this genre of films can have on the viewer. Films within the content analysis focused primarily on relationships during the early stages and lead to the climatic event of the two characters realizing they were meant for each other. The early stages of the relationship depicted excitement over the possibility of a new relationship that is unlike any other. While it is realistic to be happy, excited and affectionate with a new partner the behaviors demonstrated by these characters were not always compatible with reasonable early stages of a relationship. The characters actions were ones that suggested deeper feelings and high levels of trust that are not usually associated until later stages of a relationship. According to Johnson and Holmes behaviors included, high levels of emotional support, expressing deep feelings of love, placing great importance on one’s partners and performing actions purely to promote their partners happiness<sup>12</sup>. It was also not uncommon to end the film with one character having a “love epiphany” where they realize they have found the person they want to spend

the rest of their life with. Hollywood gives the impression that it is not uncommon for someone to suddenly have incredibly strong feelings of love for another person. The information that romantic comedies are providing can lead to dissatisfaction of one's own love life due to the high expectations that viewers have for their relationship which are demonstrated in popular films.

An issue with romantic comedies is not simply due to the unrealistic portrayal they have on romance and relationships. The poor values and unethical behaviors that are depicted are often not seen as problematic or immoral. Instances that involved deception or lack of trust outweighed those that involved honesty or partners being open about their feelings and intentions. This is evident in many of the romantic comedies studied including *You've Got Mail*, *How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days*, *Sex and the City*, *Ten Things I Hate About You* and *The Wedding Planner*<sup>13 14 15 16</sup>. In *How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days* Andie Anderson (Kate Hudson) and Benjamin Barry (Matthew McConaughey) both make secret bets with their co-workers that are deceiving the other person<sup>17</sup>. They both take advantage of the other person's trust and feelings for their own personal gain and yet still forgive each other and ultimately are together and in love. In *You've Got Mail* both Kathleen Kelly (Meg Ryan) and Joe Fox (Tom Hanks) are in different relationships while they are connecting and forming a relationship via email<sup>18</sup>. Neither character gets reprimanded for their unfaithful actions and the movie ends with them blissfully in love. This is not an uncommon trend with romantic comedies and could lead audiences to believe that they should not only be weary of the sincerity of their partner but might also underestimate the consequences of their own behavior. Johnson and Holmes suggest<sup>19</sup> that not only does their appear to be no legitimate consequences for their actions but the films do not accurately depict realistic emotions that individuals would naturally feel in response to these acts of dishonesty<sup>20</sup>. Instead of having feelings such as hurt, anger, or resentment the unethical behaviors have no lasting effects on their relationships. Although it might seem that a character will not be forgiven for their transgressions in some cases, for example in *Ten Things I Hate about You*, despite the deceitful actions of Patrick Verona (Heath Ledger), Kat Strafford (Julia Stiles) eventually forgives him in the end because he buys her a guitar and apologizes<sup>21</sup>. Nabi and Clark suggest that "Depictions of liked characters experiencing either rewards or punishments for their actions will influence viewers to be either more or less likely to perform those behaviors themselves"<sup>22</sup>. In this case, viewers will be more likely to assume that their unethical actions will not have any negative effects on their relationship. When audiences believe they may be able to get away with such behavior they will be more likely to take part in it which could be detrimental to their relationship.

#### 4. Regressive Fantasies

Another underlying issue within the romantic comedies studied is the films support of traditional patriarchal view of romance through their unrealistic portrayal of relationships. Although some believe that the film *Pretty Woman* is about feminism and a woman being independent it can actually be considered a "Regressive Fantasy"<sup>23</sup>. The main character, Vivian (Julia Roberts) is hired as an escort to live with Edward (Richard Gere) in his expensive hotel room for a week and live his lavish lifestyle<sup>24</sup>. Despite the argument that she can take of herself, ultimately, the two fall in love and are assumed to live happily ever after. Scala argues that *Pretty Woman* is a "Medieval Romance" and "Substitutes one kind of imprisoning tower for another in its "modern" rescue of the heroine, even a heroine who "rescues him right back"<sup>25</sup> Although the movie tries to make it seem as though it is about Vivian finding happiness, at its core it is actually about Edward and his concerns. Scala believes that "Most medieval romances are overwhelmingly concerned with male values, male pursuits and "What goes on inside the man's head"<sup>26</sup>. *Pretty Woman* is not the only example of Hollywood reflecting traditional values of romance however, many of the romantic comedies studied show the male character in a customary role. In almost all of the films analyzed the male character is depicted as putting forth more effort than the female lead<sup>27</sup>. They were more likely to compliment their partner or make a grand gesture of love and affection in order to win the heroine. In *When Harry Met Sally* Harry Burns (Billy Crystal) states a list of qualities that he loves about Sally Albright (Meg Ryan) which have lead him to realize he wants to spend the rest of his life with her<sup>28</sup>. This is after he has sprinted through New York City on New Year's Eve to get to her. This scene has become famous because it has lead women to want their significant other to also overwhelm them with compliments and make them feel as though they are the missing piece to their man's life. In *How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days* Benjamin Barry (Matthew McConaughey) speeds through traffic on his motorcycle to stop Andi Anderson (Kate Hudson) from leaving and to tell her he wants to be together<sup>29</sup>. In reality, it is farfetched to expect such treatment and behaviors in one's relationship. The likelihood of a man risking his life to tell a woman he loves her is pretty unlikely and further supports the notion that not only does Hollywood depict traditional patriarchal views of romance, but unrealistic and improbable ones at that. Johnson and Holmes suggest

that women and female adolescents will be led to believe that behaviors similar to this are the norm and should thus be reflected in a man's actions<sup>30</sup>. The man's role in romantic comedies is described as "taking the lead," the man is usually the one that "rescues" the female, that ultimately "fights" for her and suggests that they get married. Even if this is not what was what the character wanted in the beginning he almost always realizes it by the end which is demonstrated in the culminating point where the two main characters either get married or decide they want to be together forever. The romantic comedies studied might look like modern stories of love; in actuality they are "regressive fantasies" that only lead the audience to feel their relationships should reflect traditional values.

## 5. Post-Feminism

The idea that Hollywood is supporting traditional values within romantic comedies relates to the way that women are oppressed through the depiction of female heroines. Popular media, specifically romantic comedies, can be characterized by a set back from the progress and achievements of the feminist movement through its support of patriarchal values. We believe that women have been liberated and therefore ignore the evidence suggesting otherwise, this ultimately reinforces hegemonic structures. McRobbie refers to this idea as "Post-Feminism" and argues that feminism has already passed and that it includes "double-entanglement" which is the combination of conservative based gender values and the idea of women being liberated and owning their own sexuality<sup>31</sup>. McRobbie believes "Post-Feminism" "permits the close examination of a number of intersecting but also conflicting currents"<sup>32</sup>. Romantic comedies portray female characters as leading an independent, equal and free lifestyle. These independent women, however like in *Sex and the City*, are not abiding according to McRobbie to the principles of feminism and they do not associate themselves with the movement of its goals, therefore not contributing to its political power<sup>33</sup>. Some of these women use their freedom to choose to adopt female behavioral patterns which feminism strived to abolish. The women of *Sex and the City* for instance all four have their own apartments, social lives and good jobs, yet a large majority of their time and effort is centered around finding a man to marry that will fulfill their life. All of these women are successful and yet still believe they need a man to make them happy. Carrie Bradshaw (Sara Jessica Parker) becomes depressed and lost when her engagement is broken off<sup>34</sup>. Despite the fact that she is a well know and successful author she still barely knows how to move on from the event. This portion of the story is contradictory to feminist values and subtly reinforces patriarchal oppression by insisting that Carrie, representing all women, can only find happiness in a relationship with a man rather than within her personal and professional achievements. Romantic comedies also support post-feministic values in their discouragement of being single. The idea of a female character not belonging to a partner in Hollywood does not make them independent or capable; instead they are portrayed as being lonely and frustrated. This is apparent in many romantic comedies including *Hitch* where Sara Melas' (Eva Mendes) boss even tells her she needs to get a boyfriend and not be so concerned with her job<sup>35</sup>. In *Bridget Jones' Diary*, Bridget's (Renee Zellweger) family is constantly reminding her that she needs to settle down with a man and attempts to set her up every Christmas<sup>36</sup>. Bridget's character is another example a single woman who constantly worries about her future love life and believes that if she doesn't take advantage of an opportunity she will let a man slip away and be eternally alone<sup>37</sup>. Hersey argues that in romantic comedies "True love is proposed as the fulfilling choice of an independent heroine"<sup>38</sup>. In recent years romantic comedies have included a final speech by the heroine which could be an attempt to balance both "Romantic desirability and professional success"<sup>39</sup>. While it is still debated whether these films empower or oppress women, one thing is for certain, overall the content of this analysis shows that each incident of a female being single was consistently negative. Johnson and Holmes believe that this representation could possibly lead to the audience's understanding of being single is one that is negative and above all else undesirable<sup>40</sup>. Hollywood sets parameters for women within romantic comedies that they must follow in order to be happy and fulfilled. These limitations are not only regressive to the feminist movement but are detrimental to the way women place extreme importance on another person.

## 6. Conclusion

While more extended research and analysis is required in order to find a direct correlation between the messages depicted in romantic comedy films and the way women and female adolescents view relationships and romance, the popularity of this genre of films among the target audience should be noted. The narrow spectrum of character types and messages throughout the analysis suggests that women and young adolescents are more likely to be receptive to such ideas due to Social Cognitive Theory. Problems arise when the values communicated are unethical, qualities of

the relationship are unrealistic and messages depicted are detrimental and regressive to the feminist movement. Romantic Comedies do have the potential to affect the expectations, beliefs and overall relationship experiences for both women and female adolescents.

## 7. Endnotes

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3. *Ibid.*, 353.
4. Sonja K. Foss, Karen A. Foss and Robert Trapp, "Contemporary: perspective on rhetoric" (Prospect Heights: Waveland Press Inc., 2002), 3.
5. *When Harry Met Sally.*, DVD, directed by Rob Reiner (United States: MGM, 1989).
6. *What Women Want.*, DVD, directed by Nancy Meyers (United States: Paramount Pictures, 2000).
7. Johnson and Holmes, *Contradictory Messages*, 352.
8. *You've Got Mail*, DVD, directed by Nora Ephron (United States: Warner Brothers Pictures, 1998).
9. *Runaway Bride*, DVD, directed by Garry Marshall (United States and Canada, Paramount Pictures, 1999).
10. *Ibid.*, 352.
11. *The Holiday.*, DVD directed by Nancy Meyers (United States: Columbia Pictures, 2006).
12. Johnson and Holmes, *Contradictory Messages*, 353.
13. *You've Got Mail*, DVD, Ephron, (1998).
14. *How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days*, DVD, directed by Donald Petrie (United States: Paramount Pictures, 2003).
15. *Sex and the City*, DVD, directed by Michael Patrick King (United States: New Line Cinema, 2001).
16. *Ten Things I Hate About You*, DVD, directed by Gil Junger (United States: Touchstone Pictures, 1999).
17. *The Wedding Planner*, DVD, directed by Adam Shankman (United States: Columbia Pictures, 2001).
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37. *Ibid.*
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