

The Effects of Romantic Comedies on Relationships

A Research Paper

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Author Note

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Abstract:

The purpose of this research essay is to look at the influence that Romantic Comedies can have on romantic relationships. Romantic Comedy centers on relationships and often presents the relationship in a way that is humorous and unrealistic. I plan to look at how these ideals can affect the way that people view their own relationships and specifically how that effect can be negative. I plan to also look at how this could be related to rising divorce rates in America. I will refer to research done by experts on media influences and relationship ideals, as well as how relationships (dating and marriage) have changed in the past years. I will explain ways that the viewer can become more aware of the influence romantic comedies can have on their own ideals and beliefs. I plan to use those suggestions to draw conclusions about how a person can enjoy Romantic Comedies without the movies having a negative influence on their romantic relationships.

My friend Anna was having doubts about her relationship with her boyfriend that stemmed from the belief that he should be able to know when she was having a rough day or if she had something pressing on her mind. Anna assumed he would know what she was feeling just through intuition. She believed that because he loved and cared for her, he should know when something was wrong and to ask what was bothering her. The problem is that Anna's favorite movie is *Sweet Home Alabama*. In this movie, Melanie reconnects with her old high school sweetheart, Jake, and falls back in love with him (plot twist: she originally went back to get a divorce from him so she could marry Andrew). In the end, it is established that Jake is the one for her and that, although Melanie loves Andrew, she is meant to be with Jake. One of the ways that this movie proves that Jake loves her and is better for her than Andrew is because he "knows her." Jake and Melanie grew up together in a very small town and therefore they knew everything about each other. Jake knew what she wanted and needed, often even when she did not, and that is chalked up to the fact that he loves her, understands her, and can basically read her mind to know what she wants.

The belief that loving someone means being able to intuitively understand what the other is thinking or feeling can be seen in the depictions of relationships in romantic comedies. Romantic comedies are widely produced and eagerly received by many viewers. These movies present relationships in a way that emphasizes finding love, facing hardships, and getting true love in the end, despite obstacles, and all in the matter of 90 minutes. The increased consumption of romantic comedies is not a problem in itself. However, the way that the information is processed could be creating relationship problems in the viewers' lives because they often fail to fully weigh the hard work of relationships. The relationships, despite being presented in a comedic light, could harm the way that a person understands romantic relationships. A study

conducted by Veronica Hefner and Barbara Wilson surveyed college students and found that there is a correlation between watching romantic comedies, believing the romantic ideals that they present, and ultimately pursuing those in their own relationships (Hefner & Wilson, 2013, pp. 155-160). Even marriages can be affected if the individuals have expectations that are unfair to their partner. Nearly half of American marriages end in divorce with the divorce rate at 0.32 percent and the marriage rate at 0.69 percent (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). I believe that one cause of high divorce rates is the influence of unrealistic depictions from movies, specifically romantic comedies. The relationships presented in romantic comedies are often unrealistic and set up false expectations which can compromise actual relationships. The key to fighting back against this issue is to have an increased awareness of how real relationships work. Although watching romantic comedies may be fun and seem harmless, like almost anything else, it should be done with caution and consideration.

Romantic comedies are created for entertainment purposes and present relationships in ways that are comedic while also giving insight into actual relationships. Many of the problems that the characters face are problems that people face in their own lives. In this way, the viewer may feel that they can relate to the characters, even though the characters often overcome massive obstacles in ways that are unlikely for the viewer to also achieve. Specific ideals have been found to commonly surface in romantic comedies; some ideals include “love at first sight,” the idea of love equaling the ability to understand each other through intuition, the belief that love can conquer any obstacle, the belief that everyone has a soulmate, and “happily ever after”. These ideals may not seem bad, but the problem that often occurs is that the viewer watches the movie and begins to shape expectations of their relationship based on what they saw in the movie. Real life is not scripted or pre-planned to have a happy ending, people are not perfect,

and relationships take work. Whatever the case, romantic comedies could have a negative impact on the way people feel about their own relationships, maybe even contribute to those high divorce rates.

Love Conquers All

One major ideal found in romantic comedies is love having the ability to conquer all. This ideal is present in a majority of romantic comedies, where in order for love to be real and right, it must be able to defy all the odds and overcome any obstacle that stands in the way of a happy ending. Some of the obstacles may include other lovers, different socioeconomic status, different values and beliefs, stereotypes, and family. For a relationship to be successful, according to romantic comedies, the two individuals must be able to move past the problems that they face and see that only the love they feel for each other is truly important. In *The Wedding Planner*, Mary and Steve overcome engagements to other lovers, family disapproval, and many other obstacles to be together. However, this is not a realistic take on relationships. If the two individuals in a relationship have differences, depending on exactly what those differences are, they may be unable to overcome them. A relationship may not have the ability to withstand such strong differences, which is honestly okay. What is not okay is when people change aspects of themselves to fit what their partner expects or desires. A viewer of romantic comedies may wrongly be led to believe that a relationship must overcome insurmountable odds to be proven as a good relationship. It is true that relationships are going to go through rough times, mainly because the two individuals are bound to have hard days or go through particular issues that the other will have to help them surpass. However, a belief is not an aspect of life that someone should just give up and count as an obstacle that must be overcome. Aspects of the individuals

that are crucial to who they are should not be considered merely obstacles that can be overcome if the relationship is strong enough.

The characters of a romantic comedy are vital to the movie and specifically to the ideal(s) that they are presenting to the viewer. Often, the female role is portrayed as missing something; she may be very successful, have a glamorous job, a great family, and many positive aspects in her life, but she is seen as incomplete or “empty” until she finds love (Mortimer, 2010, pp. 21-24). In *Runaway Bride*, the main character Maggie has supposedly been in love multiple times, but never feels fully complete until she meets Ike who (although, it seems very unlikely) completes her. Likewise, the leading male role is often portrayed as being immature, rude, or treated unfairly by the world. Yet somehow the two complete each other despite their various issues. The movie often presents the idea that the man is needing the influence of a specific woman to change him into the man that he is destined to be (Mortimer, 2010, p. 46). This is also seen in *Runaway Bride* because Ike is transformed from a reporter who sets out to humiliate Maggie, to someone who is completely devoted to her. This sets up the idea that if the viewer feels that they are missing something in their life then it is a void that they need someone to fill, leading to lack of control and helplessness (Gannon, 2012). This could be one reason why many relationships fail, because the individual is expecting their significant other to fill a sort of void in their life. Also, the man is often shown going to extreme lengths to win the love of the woman, which can be problematic for the viewer. In *50 First Dates*, Henry tries to make his girlfriend Lucy fall in love with him every day. She has a severe form of amnesia which makes her forget the previous day, so Henry devotes his life to regaining her love each day. This sets up the idea that if the man, or woman even, is not doing absolutely everything in their power to win love (even trying to reverse amnesia) then they are not trying hard enough and are not “the one”

(Surrey, 2016). These portrayals of successful relationships reinforce the idea that men and women must act in specific ways to have a happy, lasting relationship.

Another ideal, “happily ever after,” can present some real problems for the viewers. After the entire movie has happened, the couple has met and overcome obstacles and is now back together, the movie ends without showing what happens next. Romantic comedies often end with a wedding or a baby or some other depiction of life progressing in a fairytale manner. The problem is that this ending leads viewers to believe that the worst has already occurred and the relationship will be relatively easy after the credits are over. After a wedding, the couple has to learn to handle a marriage, but they have not had much instruction from romantic comedies on how this is supposed to look. In real life, there is no actual ending to the drama; life happens each day and bad things will happen throughout a relationship. The “happily ever after” leaves the viewer wondering what to do next. The movie offers no formula for sustaining the relationship. Most viewers enjoy the happy ending of a romantic comedy because it is cheerful, possibly hopeful for them, but it is often somewhat misleading. In *Sweet Home Alabama* Melanie and Jake are seen having their “happily ever after” moment, but it could leave the viewer wondering what happens to them after the wedding, what happens to Andrew, or even what will happen for their own unlikely relationship. If the viewer has been led to believe that he or she is like the character of the romantic comedy and must behave in like manner, and then receives no instruction on how a relationship will continue, they may be led to leave their relationship up to fate. The lack of understanding in regards to sustaining a relationship could cause a reliance on the ability of love to conquer all instead of the two individuals working together to face challenges in the relationship.

In romantic comedies, finding “The One” is a matter of fate, where immediately the person knows that they are more complete for having met this specific person; they feel more complete because they have now met their soulmate who they believe is perfect for them in every way (Gepford, 2016). In *27 Dresses*, Jane meets George through the planning of her sister’s wedding. The two are quite different, but they help each other in many ways. Although he hurts her several times throughout the movie and pushes her in ways that she had never been pushed before, she still claims that she knew from the beginning that he was special. She claims to have known that they had a connection and that he would be an important person in her life, even if she was unaware of exactly what purpose he was going to serve. This could be problematic for the viewer because they may actively search for this specific person who is supposed to be perfect for them in every way. Love is based on a connection between two people, and that may happen between multiple partners or in multiple ways. There is no blueprint of what the perfect one for a specific person is like, and looking for a partner that is “perfect” and fits the mold of “The One” is unlikely to be successful (Meyers, 2012).

Love conquering all plays out in various ways in romantic comedies; love may be “conquering” finances, family, stereotypes, or other lovers. However, when this ideal meets the off-screen reality it can be very different than that of the movies. Many people will do anything for the person they love and will go to any length to make their relationship work. This is quite different from the idea that love is the force behind these actions. In many romantic comedies, people find the person they love and aspects of their world change because of the influence of that person; although some portions of a person’s life may change with the introduction of a significant other, relationships will take active work on both sides or it will not work out the way

each wants. A person is not meant to fill the void in another's life and it definitely will not happen if there is not participation from both people in the relationship.

Relationships and Hard Work

An ideal that can be harmful to the viewer is that mind reading equals love. If the viewers are led to believe that the right person for them will be able to know what they want and need, then they may believe they are in a poor relationship if this is not the case. They may feel that the relationship is not right for them if they are unable to completely understand their significant other or if their partner is unable to fully understand everything about them. Believing that love is equal to the ability to read minds leaves a gap in communication. Communication is vital to a healthy, successful relationship. However, this ideal leads people to believe that the need for communication is a negative sign in their relationship. In *Sweet Home Alabama*, Jake followed Melanie to New York, but never told her. He decided he would try to change aspects of himself and then he would convince her to stay with him. However, all Melanie wanted was to know that Jake cared, and she waited for him to come to New York to find her. If the two had communicated what they wanted to the other, they might never have lost touch or had nearly as many issues. The same is true for the viewers' relationship. If one of the individuals in the relationship is feeling a certain way then they need to make sure they communicate those feelings with their partner so they can work together to amend those problems or concerns that may arise.

Love at first sight, a staple of romantic comedies, suggests that love is mystical and without effort. A movie often begins by showing the individuals separately and then progresses by showing the scene where the two see each other for the first time. It seems that when the two see each other everything begins to fall into place. They know that they are meant to be and even

when it seems that they may have been mistaken in believing they were perfect for each other, they work it out and end up together in spite of the odds (Johnson, 2007, pp. 362-363).

Relationships do not normally work this way in the real world. Relationships take work and may be very difficult at times. One failure of this idea is that it does not lead to an importance of commitment. When love is found solely based on seeing someone, it promotes a love based on attraction. The two characters fall in love before they know much, often anything, about the other, but they know that they are perfect for each other. A relationship takes commitment to making the relationship last, which is not promoted when the relationship begins, not on shared values and similarities, but on the attraction felt between the two. When the romantic comedy portrays “true love” as a relationship that is right from the very beginning and will survive anything, even when the individuals want to or do give up, it suggests that a relationship that does not work that way is not a good relationship. However, not all relationships are going to be that simple; on the contrary, most relationships will go through difficult times whether they are lasting or not. The portrayal of relationships in romantic comedies “is an oversimplification of how relationships work in real life” (Surrey, 2016). This could cause the viewer to believe that if the relationship is hard or has problems then it is not the right relationship. Having problems in a relationship is to be expected because two people cannot be together without some form of disagreement. This is why communication (an aspect of relationships that is often missing from romantic comedies) is important for a relationship of any kind to be successful.

How to Use Romantic Comedies

Although these ideals are present in most romantic comedies and they can cause issues for the viewers’ relationships, this is not to say that romantic comedies cannot be beneficial. Depending on how the viewer perceives the information in the movie and how they use that to

inform decisions in their own life, a romantic comedy could be just for entertainment. One romantic comedy that stands out among many of its counterparts is *Don Jon*, a movie that actually highlights how romantic comedies, and other forms of media, can have a negative impact on the viewers. This is a very unique way to approach the topic – using a romantic comedy to show the negative impact of romantic comedies. In the movie, the main character Jon suffers from the negative effects of watching porn, while his girlfriend Barbara suffers from the negative effects of watching romantic comedies. She has expectations of how she should act, how he should act, how they should both feel, etc. He, because of what he watches, believes that a relationship is supposed to be all fun and no work. Both of the characters are dissatisfied with their relationship because it does not fit the specific molds that the romantic comedies and porn have created for them (Nicholson, 2013). They both are forced to come to the realization that movies and other media are not accurate in their portrayal of relationships and are unreliable sources for modeling a relationship. This movie also brings to light the influence of these forms of media on their own relationships by showing the way that the characters in the movie are having issues. *Don Jon* draws a correlation between romantic comedies and porn, suggesting that both create unrealistic expectations and have harmful effects on relationships. Melissa Gepford explains that porn is problematic because it creates a barrier in the relationship by being simplistic and objectifying the individuals portrayed. She states that although she does not believe the impact of romantic comedies to be equal to porn, she does think that they do similar things to a relationship and should be taken in very small amounts with caution (Gepford, 2016). This specific movie further proves that having a better awareness of the effects of romantic comedies can allow the viewer to watch the movie without it damaging their own relationship.

The correlation between the relationship ideals in romantic comedies and the occurrence of relationship issues related to the ideals in real life is not confined to only affect those that are in dating relationships, however. Romantic comedies often focus on married couples in a negative light, praising relationships before marriage showing marriage as the downfall of the fun relationship. K. Johnson explained that “unrealistic expectations of... marriage [increases] the likelihood of divorce” (Johnson, 2007, p. 356). Mary Vinnedge, in her article *Pass the Popcorn, Save a Marriage: Divorces Decline when Spouses Observe and Discuss Film Couples' Behavior*, discussed a study performed by the University of Rochester which concluded that married couples who watched and then discussed the ideals that were found in romantic comedies benefited greatly. The study also showed that married couples found it easier to communicate problems in their own relationship when they were able to see the problems in action in the romantic comedies (Vinnedge, 2014, p. 17). Another study suggested watching romantic comedies to help aspects of a marriage, and specifically focused on how awareness can affect relationship satisfaction over time. The end result was an increased satisfaction in couples who watched and discussed romantic comedies. The reason behind this finding is that the couples who not only watch the movie together but discuss the ideals they saw in the on-screen relationship had an increased awareness of their own problems and could then more easily work toward fixing those issues (Gulli, 2014, p. 70). These studies highlight the difference that awareness can make on the possible impact romantic comedies can have on any relationship, even a marriage.

I believe that the effect romantic comedies have on the viewer has less to do with the movie and more to do with how the viewer perceives the information. Romantic comedies present the ideals that I mentioned, and many more, but those are not altogether bad ideals. The

movies portray love in ways that are often unrealistic, but if viewers are aware of the way that the movies could impact their own beliefs then a change could occur. The viewer needs to be aware of the difference between the love portrayed in romantic comedies and the expectations they can create in the viewer's life (Surrey, 2016). Awareness is the key to turning this problem into a possible way to improve relationships. Along with awareness, reducing the amount of these movies that we take in as viewers could be helpful. Melissa Gepford explained that romantic comedies are not inherently bad, but can have harmful effects. She suggested that viewers limit watching romantic comedies because they have the ability to harm our relationships. She does not mean that no one should ever watch another romantic comedy, but she compared it to the way that "junk food never nourishes the body" (Gepford, 2016).

For my friend Anna there is a better way to approach the issue of relationships and their representation in romantic comedies. Anna's best option may be to have a better awareness of the ideals that she is being presented in romantic comedies. Even in *Sweet Home Alabama*, a movie that just seems to tell the story of a sweet southern girl finding her true love in a man that she knew her entire life, there could be danger in watching the movie without full consideration of what it is demonstrating. Anna needs to begin watching the romantic comedies to have a better outlook on her relationship without using them to shape how her relationship should look. If she understands that the ideals demonstrated in romantic comedies are often unrealistic and potentially harmful, then she will be less likely to have unfair expectations of her boyfriend. If Anna can begin to watch romantic comedies while understanding how integrate the ideals into her relationship in a positive way, or even just watch the movies for the sole purpose of entertainment, then she can better her relationship. Her relationship will be filled with more

understanding, more communication, and less disappointment over inconsequential issues, her outlook on present and future relationships will be more positive.

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