

FROM LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT TO SOUL MATE: ROMANTIC IDEALS IN POPULAR  
FILMS AND THEIR ASSOCIATION WITH YOUNG PEOPLE'S BELIEFS ABOUT  
RELATIONSHIPS

BY

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## ABSTRACT

Romantic comedy films have been popular since motion pictures first entered the media world. Scholars have speculated why these movies remain appealing to viewers and have argued for several reasons. These movies might foster hope about real-life romance (Galician, 2004), or demonstrate that there are no limits to how love may manifest itself (Harvey, 1998). Despite this speculation, few studies have systematically investigated the content of these movies or the effects they may have on viewers. The purpose of this dissertation was to investigate that potential. In particular, I conducted two studies that explored the nature of romantic ideals in romantic comedy films and their influence on viewer endorsement of romantic beliefs. The first study was a content analysis of the themes or romantic ideals embedded in romantic comedies. The second study was a survey designed to explore whether exposure to such films encourages the learning of romantic ideals among young people. The theories of uses and gratifications, social cognitive, and cultivation served to inform this project.

I first analyzed the content of over 50 top-grossing films from the romantic comedy genre. This process involved identifying the type, nature, and context of romantic ideal expressions that characters in these films make (i.e., idealization of other, soul mate/one & only, love at first sight, love conquers all), as well as the statements that contradict or challenge these ideal themes. In particular, I identified the nature of the source, the type of expression, the nature of the target, and how the expression was reinforced (e.g., rewarded, punished). In addition, the content analysis documented the overarching themes of the movies.

The results showed that romantic ideals and challenges are prevalent in romantic comedy films, both as overarching themes and as relational expressions. Whereas ideals are overwhelmingly more common as the takeaway message, challenges were featured twice as

often as ideals were at the expression level. The characters who expressed these ideals and challenges were predominantly White, adult, and heterosexual, and differed only by sex. In particular, male characters most often expressed ideals, whereas female characters most often expressed challenges. As for the context in which these ideals and challenges were expressed, ideals received mostly rewards in the plotline whereas challenges were most often punished.

To investigate the impact of this content, I conducted a survey in which I asked 335 undergraduate students to report on their romantic comedy movie viewing and their beliefs about love and romance. In particular, I asked them the degree to which they endorsed beliefs about romance (i.e., idealization of other, soul mate/one & only, love at first sight, love conquers all). I also asked them how often they watched romantic comedies by giving them a list of 20 films (a subsample from the larger list used in Study 1). For the exposure variable, I weighted the films by the number of ideal expressions found in each film, as documented by Study 1. I then controlled for overall movie viewing and demographic variables, before calculating the predictive power of romantic comedy viewing on endorsement of beliefs. Results demonstrated that romantic comedy exposure significantly predicted endorsement of one of the four ideals—idealization of other.

After testing for main effects, I also assessed the potential influence of a series of moderating variables: relational experience, perceived reality, watching in order to learn, perceived similarity, and sex of participant. The results of the analyses involving moderators revealed one significant association. In particular, individuals who watched these films in order to learn reported stronger endorsement of romantic ideal beliefs than did those who watched for other reasons. The implications of these results are discussed.

Dedicated to my graduate school girls:

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## CHAPTER 1:

### ROMANTIC COMEDIES AS SOCIALIZERS

Romantic comedy films have been a successful movie genre ever since the cinema became popular in the early 20th century. In the late 1930s, young adults were choosing to go see romance movies over most other genres of films (Edman, 1940). In fact, romance and comedy films made up nearly half of all produced movies during that period (Edman, 1940). More recently, romantic comedy films such as *Knocked Up* (2007) and *Sex and the City* (2008) continue to be popular, each among the top 10 highest-grossing romantic comedies of all time (Box Office Mojo, 2008). 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 (Nash, 2010). Furthermore, 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). Clearly, romantic comedies have been a thriving component of the movie industry throughout its history.

Romantic movies are often referred to by the colloquial phrase, “chick flicks,” in part because these films seem to target females. Indeed, statistics indicate that the movie-going audience for romantic comedies is made up primarily of females (Nielsen, 2008). Scholarly research also reveals that females report a significantly greater consumption of romantic media content than males do (e.g., Segrin & Nabi, 2002). Despite these tendencies, however, males do report watching romantic media but in smaller doses than do females (e.g., Eggermont, 2004). In fact, some men actually report liking romantic comedies, particularly because these movies often are viewed during dates (Harris et al., 2004).

The popularity of these movies has led some scholars to speculate about why such films are appealing. One common argument for why viewers are drawn to these romantic comedy movies is because they depict relationships as relatively easy and full of possibilities (Galician, 2004). Consequently, these movies can foster hope about real-life romance. 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. Similarly, Harvey (1998), author of a historical critique of romantic comedy films, asserts that these movies demonstrate that there are no limits to how love may manifest itself. In short, both of these authors argue that the appeal of the romantic genre is that it gives viewers a sense of optimism about love because it features examples of relationships that survive the difficulties.

Another reason individuals may be attracted to romantic media is because they provide lessons about love and intimacy. For instance, Wood, Senn, Desmarais, Park and Verberg (2002) posited that adolescents seek out romantic content in television and other media in order to better understand how romantic relationships work. Similarly, Winn (2007) chose to analyze the relational scripts (i.e., the events that occur in “most” relationships) in several romantic comedies because she believed that these scripts could influence relational expectations among viewers. In support of this idea, one study found that men, in particular, choose to watch reality dating programs because they are sources of information about dating and romance (Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006). It is quite possible that viewers seek out romantic comedies for a similar purpose.

Despite these arguments about the messages one could learn from romantic media, few systematic analyses of such content exist. Instead, most of the studies, especially those involving romantic films, involve interpretive analyses of particular movies. For example, Rios and Reyes

(2007) provided an in-depth analysis of a single film, *Maid in Manhattan*. Natharius (2007) analyzed two romantic films starring Helen Hunt, pointing out that both movies featured the stereotype that men do not understand women. Johnson (2007) examined 13 popular wedding films and identified a number of romantic myths in those movies, such as the idea of “love at first sight.”

Interpretive studies like these provide rich information about the themes embedded in certain films, but they do not allow us to generalize to the entire genre of romance movies. To date, 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, coding over 100 romantic behaviors enacted by various characters in these films. The study provides a starting point because it demonstrates that there are indeed consistent patterns in such films. The researchers also made claims about overall themes in the films, but the analysis itself focused closely on behaviors and did not systematically assess the broader, embedded messages. To their credit, Johnson and Holmes (2009) attempted to assess the presence of two romantic ideal themes—“love at first sight” and “one and only soul mate”—but had difficulty obtaining reliability on those variables. Although admittedly more challenging to code, these larger themes may be the important “take-away” message for viewers.

The purpose of the present dissertation is to further this line of research. In particular, I will conduct two studies that explore the nature of romantic movies and their potential impact on viewers’ perceptions. The first study will be a systematic content analysis of the themes or romantic ideals embedded in romantic comedies. The second study will consist of a survey to explore whether exposure to such films encourages the learning of romantic ideals in young people.

## 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; Furnham & Mak, 1999; Hurtz & Durkin, 2004). For example, children can learn about gender roles by watching television. Dozens of content analyses show that television portrays men and women in consistent and gender-stereotypical ways (e.g., Kaufman, 1999; Signorielli & Bacue, 1999; Signorielli & Kahlenberg, 2001). Moreover, a number of surveys and experiments have documented that exposure to sex-stereotyped television is associated with the endorsement of stereotypical attitudes (e.g., Fung & Ma, 2000; Lauzen, Dozier, & Horan, 2008; Signorielli & Lears, 1992; Ward & Friedman, 2006) and an increased likelihood of performing sex-typed behaviors (Ruble, Balaban, & Cooper, 1981). One experiment demonstrated that exposure to gender-stereotypical commercials led to women expressing educational and vocational interest in masculine-oriented domains like math and science (Davies, Spencer, Quinn, & Gerhardstein, 2002). These patterns hold up in survey research even after controlling for a variety of demographic variables such as age and parental education. Furthermore, a meta-analysis of 30 studies involving over 13,000 participants revealed a consistent and positive relationship between exposure to sex-role stereotypes on television and the possession of sexist attitudes (Herrett-Skjellum & Allen, 1996).

Young people also can learn about race and ethnicity from the media. A number of content analyses reveal that the portrayal of minority racial groups on television historically has been stereotypical and derogatory (Baptista-Fernandez & Greenberg, 1980; Mastro, 2000). It should be no surprise, then, that in survey research among college students, heavy television viewing has been linked to the possession of negative racial stereotypes (Lee, Bichard, Irely, Walt, & Carlson, 2009). In addition, experimental research has demonstrated that when Whites

are exposed to comedic, stereotypical portrayals of African Americans, they are more likely than those in a control group to rate Blacks as guilty of crimes (Ford, 1997). Beyond fictional portrayals, there is also evidence that watching television news can impact viewer perceptions of minorities. For example, Dixon (2008) found that exposure to network news was positively associated with racial prejudice, such as perceiving African Americans as poor and intimidating. This pattern held up even after controlling for demographics and for individuals' political ideology. Furthermore, in an experiment, Gilliam and Iyengar (2000) found that Caucasian residents in Los Angeles who were exposed to news reports about Black perpetrators reported more racist attitudes towards African Americans than did those exposed to White perpetrators. Thus, a variety of different types of television content can influence and activate viewers' social judgments about racial minorities.

In addition to learning about social groups, young people can find out about occupations from screen media. Signorielli and Kahlenberg (2001) content analyzed segments of prime-time television from 1990-1998 and reported that, when compared with U.S. labor statistics, managerial and service worker positions were under-portrayed, whereas law enforcement jobs were over-represented. Research suggests that such biased portrayals can impact young viewers. For example, Wright et al. (1995) interviewed elementary students and found that heavy viewers of television were more likely than lighter viewers to have job aspirations that matched the glamour and stereotypes of professions shown on television. Furthermore, these heavy viewers' schemata of police officers and nurses overlooked the real-life negative aspects associated with such occupations (Wright et al., 1995).

Media also can teach young people about the nature of families and family life. Greenberg, Hines, Buerkel-Rothfuss, and Atkin (1980) content analyzed 96 prime-time

television shows and found that the most common type of family interaction was positive and constructive (e.g., shows concern). Research has demonstrated that such portrayals can influence viewers. In one study, for example, children's exposure to family-oriented television was significantly associated with their belief that real-life families regularly exhibit affiliative behaviors such as support and compliance (Buerkel-Rothfuss, Greenberg, Atkin, & Neuendorf, 1982). This pattern held up even when controlling for demographic variables and total television viewing.

Taken together, each of these examples supports the argument that media portrayals can influence viewer perceptions about a variety of topics. From stereotypes about race and gender to beliefs about family and professions, the literature indicates there is a consistent link between media exposure and distorted perceptions of the social world. One topic that has not received much attention, however, is the media's potential impact on viewers' beliefs about romance and intimacy. Several theoretical perspectives that are relevant to this question will be discussed in the next section.

#### Can Viewers Learn from Romantic Comedies?

If viewers can learn about families and occupations from the media, it stands to reason that they can also learn about intimate relationships. This type of learning is most likely to occur if there are a plethora of messages in the media about love and romance. Clearly, romance is the topic of a great deal of media content. Popular magazines such as *Seventeen* often feature stories about relationships, giving readers information about how to balance their love life with the stresses of everyday events (Carpenter, 1998). For those who like to read, there is an entire genre devoted to love, called "romance novels." Television programming, and in particular soap operas, also features portrayals of romantic love. More recently, reality shows such as *The*

*Bachelor* (2009) and *The Pick-Up Artist* (2008) are devoted entirely to the quest of finding the right relational partner. Finally, movies have long featured romance and love, especially within the genre called the romantic comedy.

Because of the widespread availability of romance in media, it stands to reason that consumers may be affected by such content. One question we might ask is: what sorts of lessons are viewers taking away from the romantic comedies that continue to be so popular among young people? There are three major theoretical perspectives that can be used to illustrate how viewers might learn from such films: uses and gratifications, cultivation, and social cognitive theory.

### *Uses and Gratifications*

Uses and gratifications is a perspective that focuses on why individuals seek out particular types of media content (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). The idea is that people bring diverse characteristics to a media encounter and make different choices about what media to consume, therefore exercising control over their media consumption (Katz et al., 1974). Rubin (2002) summarized five assumptions on which this theoretical perspective is based: (1) The use of media is purposive and functional; (2) People choose content based on the ways in which they feel it will satisfy current desires or needs; (3) People bring certain predispositions to their interactions with mass media, which inevitably shape their expectations about the content; (4) Social and psychological conditions, such as interpersonal interactions, tend to help determine how effective media are in satisfying needs and desires; and (5) The reasons people choose media dictate the effects of that use. As a theoretical perspective, uses and gratifications emphasizes audience activity and choice, meaning that people exercise control over their interactions with media. Instead of looking at what media do *to* individuals, this perspective



focuses on what individuals do *with* media (Klapper, 1963).

There are a number of different motivations that scholars have identified as reasons why people use media. Some of those include: habit, arousal, escapism, learning, interpersonal activity, relaxation, entertainment, reality exploration of personal identity, and a way to pass time (Bryant & Thompson, 2002; Rubin, 2002). Although these gratifications are most often applied to general media consumption, there is evidence that some of these reasons also can explain romantic media use. For example, both men and women report watching romantic dating programs for entertainment purposes (Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006). In another survey, researchers found 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 (Nabi, Finnerty, Domschke, & Hull, 2006). In accordance with uses and gratifications, these individuals presumably were interested in watching that type of content because it offered a way for them to explore vicariously facets of their personal identity, in hopes of reducing their feelings of regret.

Further evidence of motivated use of romantic media comes from another, more recent study by Knobloch-Westerwick, Hastall, and Rossmann (2009). The researchers assessed selective exposure patterns among partnered and single individuals to determine what types of reading topics were most appealing for these two groups. Reading choices were tracked while the participants ostensibly browsed a new online magazine, with headlines such as “Relationship & Marriage,” “Health,” “Travel,” or “College & Job.” The researchers found that partnered individuals who were unhappy with their romantic relationships spent the least amount of time reading romantic content. The opposite was true for unhappy single respondents: they spent the most time reading about romance. Knobloch-Westerwick and her colleagues concluded that

individuals' consumption of romantic media was based on their need to deal with their current romantic situations--unhappy partnered individuals wanted escape, whereas unhappy single people wanted hope. In line with uses and gratifications, these findings reflect two of the primary motivations for media exposure: escape and exploration of personal identity (e.g., hope for their future relationships).

Another motivation for consuming romantic media may be the desire to learn. Young people generally do not have much experience in relationships, and they often have questions about what norms exist for courtship and romantic love. Thus, they may be especially eager to process romantic messages in the media. In support of this idea, one study found that adolescents often seek out magazine content to learn about romance and love issues (Steele, 1999). Similarly, a study of undergraduate students mentioned previously found that men more so than women, choose to watch reality dating programs because these shows provide information about dating and romance (Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006). It stands to reason, then, that young people may seek out romantic movies for the purpose of understanding more about relationships. Particularly for those who are motivated to learn, exposure to these types of films could play a significant role in shaping young people's beliefs about relational norms and practices. I turn next to the theoretical perspectives that focus on learning.

### *Social Cognitive Theory*

According to social cognitive theory (SCT), individuals can learn by watching others (Bandura, 1986). This social learning can occur in face-to-face interactions, but it can also happen within the context of the media. That is, individuals can learn new behaviors by watching models perform these actions on the screen.

Social cognitive theory has its roots in social learning theory, which was concerned primarily with the conditions under which children imitated others (Bandura, 1977). Criticisms of the early theory as being too behavioristic led Bandura (1986) to revise his approach so as to incorporate certain cognitive processes in social learning: attention, retention, production, and motivation. In order to learn a behavior, the observer needs to pay close attention to a model's activities. Attention is partly dependent on the observer's cognitive ability, but it is also influenced by characteristics of the model such as how salient the model is (Bandura, 2002). Retention refers to the process of recoding observed information into a way that the observer can successfully remember the modeled event. Retention is enhanced when the observer is able to remember the modeled event by restructuring the information into accessible memory codes (Bandura, 2002). As for production, Bandura (1986) argued that individuals must be able to transform the observed activity from a mental conception into a behavior. The final step of this process, motivation, refers to the idea that observers do not perform or imitate everything they learn. Certain features can increase or decrease motivation, such as self-reinforcements as well as the reinforcements that an observed model receives for performing the particular behavior (Bandura, 2002).

Over the years, research by Bandura and others has documented that there are certain factors that enhance social learning. For example, both children and adults are more likely to pay attention to and imitate models that are perceived as attractive (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963; Hicks, 1965). In addition, individuals are more likely to imitate models that are similar to the self (Bandura, 1986). In one experiment on the effectiveness of anti-alcohol magazine messages, researchers placed college students in groups and asked them to read stories that varied the protagonists' level of alcohol consumption (Andsager, Bemker, Choi, & Torwel,

2006). Andsager and colleagues (2006) found that identification with the protagonists in the stories, such as perceived similarity and same level of self-reported alcohol consumption, was positively associated with message effectiveness, or a reported desire not to drink.

Another factor that enhances learning is vicarious reinforcements (Bandura, 1986). Viewers are more likely to learn and subsequently be motivated to perform a behavior when that activity is positively reinforced or rewarded than when it is punished (Bandura, 1965). In fact, one of Bandura's well-known Bobo doll experiments documented that children would imitate a behavior on screen so long as it was not overtly punished (Bandura, 1965), suggesting that the absence of punishment can sometimes function as a tacit reward.

Although these features of SCT could help researchers understand the connection between media exposure and romantic beliefs, there is little research that investigates that potential link. One study, however, suggests that social cognitive theory has merit in this arena. Using in-depth interviews, Bachen and Illouz (1996) talked with young people ranging in age from 8 to 17 years of age to determine whether the media teach children and adolescents about love. The researchers showed participants various magazine photos of couples in dating settings and asked them to indicate which represented "typical" and "ideal" descriptions of romance (Bachen & Illouz, 1996). The participants were consistent in their descriptions, suggesting that there is a cultural model of romance in this country. Moreover, when asked to describe how they learned about love, 90% of the young people said they "often" or "sometimes" encountered love stories in movies. The researchers noted that, "for them, media and romance are packaged together" (p. 292, Bachen & Illouz, 1996), and concluded that a major way young people learn norms about romance is from the images and storylines found in media.

This dissertation is designed to further explore the link between media and romance by looking at the specific themes embedded within romantic comedies and by assessing whether young viewers can acquire beliefs similar to those themes. As a first step, the content analysis will assess various features in romantic films that should enhance viewer learning, according to social cognitive theory. For example, I will examine various attributes of the main characters in the films, such as demographic characteristics. Social cognitive theory predicts that characters with whom the audience can identify should increase viewer attention as well as motivation for learning.

Coders also will assess the extent to which expressions of romantic themes or ideas are reinforced in the plot. For example, a character could react to a romantic theme or behavior in a positive way, by laughing or expressing verbal affirmation, or in a negative way, by showing disgust or even challenging the romantic overture. According to social cognitive theory, a romantic theme that is positively rewarded is a more potent message for viewers (Bandura, 2002). In my study, coders will record character reactions and reinforcements to the expressions of relationship beliefs or themes. In turn, I expect that the survey will show that viewers are more apt to endorse beliefs that are consistently and positively reinforced in movies.

Social cognitive theory also points to what types of viewers may be most predisposed to learning, which has further implications for the survey. My prediction is that viewers who are demographically most similar to the majority of characters in these films should endorse beliefs that are consistent with the ones expressed in romantic comedies. For example, if most of the romantic themes are expressed by female characters, then I would predict stronger social learning for young women than for young men.

In short, positive or negative reactions to expressions of ideals, as well as observer similarity with characters, could encourage learning among romantic comedy viewers. However, the theoretical assumptions of SCT point to short-term effects only. According to the theory, a young viewer who sees a model express a particular ideal about love in a movie may learn a matching belief or related attitude. In other words, the theory is beneficial in establishing a connection between exposure to specific types of portrayals and the acquisition of corresponding beliefs. Yet SCT does not fully explain the effects of long-term, repeated viewing of homogeneous content such as that featured in romantic comedies. A theory that can help tease out the complexities associated with this type of long-term socialization is cultivation, which I turn to next.

### *Cultivation*

According to cultivation theory, heavy viewers of television are more likely than lighter viewers to see the “real world” as similar to the one depicted on television (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002). Over a long period of time, viewers with heavy exposure will form conceptions of the world that mirror television’s reality (Gerbner, 1969). Moreover, cultivation theory posits that individuals who have limited real-life experience are more susceptible to media influence than are those with greater real-world familiarity (Gerbner et al., 2002). For instance, some scholars have argued that the effects of television exposure on children’s perceptions of the world may be especially potent because their limited real-life experience does not equip them with counter examples to media portrayals (Van Evra, 2006).

Most of the research that supports cultivation theory has focused on media violence (see Potter, 1993, for a review). In this context, heavy viewers of television have been found to perceive more violent crime in society (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999) and are more fearful of

being a victim of that crime (Shrum & Bischak, 2001) compared to light viewers. However, 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).

Despite the growing body of evidence in support of cultivation (e.g., Hetsroni, 2008; Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008; Roskos-Ewoldsen & Monahan, 2007), scholars have lodged criticisms of the theory. One concern is that the theory is too simplistic and does not explain *how* cultivation occurs (Hirsch, 1981). In response to this critique, several scholars have attempted to specify the psychological or cognitive processes involved in cultivation (e.g., Hawkins & Pingree, 1990). Most notably, Shrum (2001) has offered a heuristic processing model of cultivation effects. He posits that heavy viewers of television will develop and store cognitive exemplars related to television portrayals. The more they watch television, the more accessible these exemplars become. Consequently, heavy viewers routinely use these TV-based exemplars to interpret and make decisions about related issues in real life. According to this perspective, young people who watch a lot of romantic comedy films will be exposed to certain themes about romantic relationships. When these young people are faced with real-life romantic situations, they will access these movie relationship examples to help them process information and make decisions. Through this pattern of heuristic processing, heavy viewers should cultivate perceptions of love and relationships that are correlated with how romantic relationships are portrayed in movies.

Another criticism of cultivation theory concerns Gerbner's (1969) assumption that perceptions of reality are cultivated by watching heavy amounts of television, regardless of the content. Yet research indicates that television content is not so formulaic and indeed differs

greatly by channel (Lampman et al., 2002) and program (Eyal, Metzger, Lingsweiler, Mahood, & Yao, 2006). For example, certain television genres such as situation comedies almost always contain some type of sexual talk or behavior, whereas other genres such as children's cartoons rarely contain sexual content (Fisher, Hill, Grube, & Gruber, 2004). In line with these content differences, research indicates that exposure to particular types of programming, such as television news, results in stronger cultivation effects than does overall television viewing (for a review, see Huesmann & Taylor, 2006). For example, Romer, Jamieson, and Aday (2003) analyzed secondary data from two recent large-scale surveys about perceived risk. They found that, even after controlling for local crime rates, heavy viewing of television news in particular was linked to a greater fear and concern about the risk of crime than was overall television consumption. This work has helped scholars refine cultivation to include the effects of specific content rather than television as a whole (e.g., Perse, Ferguson, & McLeod, 1994; Segrin & Nabi, 2002).

Consistent with the idea that content matters, several scholars have tested whether romantic media in particular can cultivate certain types of social beliefs among viewers (e.g., Perse, 1986; Woo & Dominick, 2001). For example, Alexander (1985) found that male adolescents who viewed soap operas were more likely than nonviewers to believe in the delicate nature of relationships and the importance of talk when handling relational issues. In another study, researchers found that heavy exposure to talk shows was associated with a tendency to overestimate the percentage of Americans who participate in certain relational behaviors, such as premarital sex and infidelity (Woo & Dominick, 2001). More recently, Rivadeneyra and Lebo (2008) surveyed high school students and found that heavy viewers of romantic reality television were more likely than light viewers to hold traditional dating role attitudes, such as the belief that



men should be in charge and women should follow their lead while on dates.

Clearly, there is evidence that screen media can contribute to people's normative beliefs about relationships. Several studies also indicate that the media may cultivate *idealistic* beliefs about relationships and love, often termed "romantic ideals." In one survey, researchers found that heavy exposure to romantic media, such as novels and films, was associated with unrealistic beliefs about intimate relationships, such as the idea that "mindreading is expected" and that "disagreement is destructive" (Shapiro & Kroeger, 1991). Similarly, Segrin and Nabi (2002) surveyed 285 unmarried undergraduates and found that heavy viewers of relationship genre media were more likely than light viewers to agree with statements such as "you should know each other's inner feelings" and partners "should be able to talk open and freely about everything." This pattern held even when controlling for age and sex. More recently, Holmes (2007) surveyed undergraduates and reported that a preference for romance-oriented media was linked to an idealistic belief in the existence of predestined soul mates.

All three of these surveys point to the ability of romantic media to cultivate idealistic or even unrealistic beliefs. Yet each study combined a number of different types of screen media content (i.e., soap operas, romantic reality programs, talk shows) into a single variable, and did not assess the impact of romantic movies independently. There are several reasons why movies in particular deserve close attention. First, as mentioned previously, romantic comedies are widely consumed (Hall, 2005) and commonly cited by youth when they describe their ideas of relationships (Bachen & Illouz, 1996). Second, much of the critical scholarship that has examined romantic ideals in media has focused on romantic films (e.g., Winn, 2007; Johnson, 2007). Yet there has been no systematic empirical assessment of the content of these films, despite the fact that some scholars suggest that idealistic messages are rampant in romantic

movies (Harris et al., 2004). Third, unlike other forms of romantic media, romantic movies offer stories that trace relationships from the beginning to the end in one packaged narrative. That is, characters in romantic comedy films initiate, experience, and formalize their relationships within a two-hour time period. In addition, these condensed and presumably potent messages typically are viewed in a single sitting, which could boost the impact of their content on attentive viewers. In stark contrast, soap operas and reality programs on television often prolong the relationship arc; romantic relationships typically take several episodes, or even seasons, to develop fully. Moreover, romance is often couched in other subplots in such programming, as opposed to being the primary storyline, which could detract from the romantic themes. According to the tenets of cultivation theory, we should expect the strongest effects with media messages that are highly formulaic and have consistent themes about love and romance.

Nevertheless, I located only one empirical study—an unpublished dissertation—that looked specifically and exclusively at the influence of romantic comedy movies. Edison (2006) asked 140 undergraduates about their romantic comedy exposure as well as their perceptions of romantic relationships. She found that compared to light viewers, heavy viewers of these films were less likely to believe they would ever get divorced and more likely to believe they would find love and be happily married. However, this pattern held true *only* if these heavy consumers of romantic comedies also viewed a segment of a romantic comedy film immediately prior to answering this battery of questions about normative beliefs. In other words, the cultivation effect was only present among heavy viewers who had been primed or activated by exposure to a romantic film. In addition to assessing normative beliefs, Edison included items in her study that measured idealistic expectations, such as “My partner would do anything to win my heart.” However, she found no evidence of a relationship between movie exposure and these idealistic

beliefs about relationships.

Edison's (2006) study certainly suggests that romantic comedies deserve closer attention. However, there are several limitations with the study that could account for the modest effects observed. One limitation concerns Edison's (2006) exposure measure. Participants were asked to indicate how often they watched 15 different movie genres each month, of which romantic comedies was one genre. In other words, exposure to romance films was assessed with a single item. The problem with this method is that it forces people to try to summarize information about multiple instances of movie viewing. It also relies on memory of media behaviors over an extended period of time. Hence, Edison's measure of romantic comedy exposure may not be the most valid way to identify heavy viewers of such films. A better approach would be to present participants with a list of particular romantic films and ask how often they have seen each one. This approach, which has been used in other studies about the effects of movie viewing on beliefs and behaviors (e.g., Sargent, Wills, Stoolmiller, Gibson, & Gibbons, 2006; Song, Ling, Neilands, & Glantz, 2007), would also permit an assessment of repeated viewing of individual movies. A more sensitive measure of exposure to such films presumably would increase the variance in the exposure measure, and would more accurately capture true levels of exposure and attraction to these films.

A second limitation is that Edison (2006) did not take into account that even among heavy viewers, individuals may respond differently to these types of movies. The uses and gratifications perspective, for example, suggests that people bring diverse characteristics to a media encounter and have different motives for watching (Katz et al., 1974). For instance, viewers who watch movies for entertainment show different effects from exposure than do viewers who watch in order to learn (Rubin, 2002). In addition, cultivation theory predicts that

the strongest effects should occur among those individuals who have limited real-life experience with a particular topic. It stands to reason that individuals who have never been in a romantic relationship will be more affected by exposure to romantic comedies. In other words, the inclusion of such modifying variables would permit a more sensitive assessment of the cultivation power of these films.

A third limitation concerns Edison's (2006) measure of romantic beliefs. Most of her items referred to normative beliefs, which are not the focus of this study. However, she did include five items that she labeled "idealistic expectations." Examples included: "My ideal partner would do anything to please me," and "My ideal partner would be very romantic." She found no relationship between exposure and this measure. However, these items are fairly narrow in that they refer only to one's ideal partner and they were devised by Edison herself. In fact, Edison (2006) acknowledged that her limited findings could have been due to the fact that the ideals embedded in romantic movies may not match those that she measured in her scale. Clearly, more attention needs to be paid to how media researchers should assess idealistic beliefs about romance.

As it turns out, there are scholars outside the media realm who have paid considerable attention to people's idealistic beliefs about love. Indeed, there is a body of research that has defined and measured such conceptions of romance, often collectively termed "the romantic ideal construct" (Montgomery, 2005; Sprecher & Metts, 1989; Sprecher & Metts, 1999). This construct may be a useful foundation on which to orient this project. In the next section, I will describe the romantic ideal construct more fully.

## CHAPTER 2: THE ROMANTIC IDEAL

The ideal of romantic love has existed for centuries within the realm of Western culture. In fact, the word romance dates back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century when stories about love were disseminated by troubadours in France (Stone, 1988). The word *romans* is French for “stories” and is the foundation for the word romance because it was first coupled with literature about courtly love (Stone, 1988). Today, the pairing of romance with stories continues to be a popular part of entertainment culture. For example, there is an entire genre of films that focuses exclusively on stories of romance—namely, romantic comedies.

Some have argued that the one consistent feature of romantic stories in both literature and film is this presence of a romantic ideal (e.g., Galician, 2004). Indeed, the very term “romance” is often defined in idealist terms in today’s lexicon. For example, the Oxford English Dictionary (1989) defines *romance* with descriptions such as, “that class of literature which consists of love stories” and “idealistic character or quality in a love affair.” This definition suggests that the very essence of romance necessarily includes an element of fantastical invention or unrealistic love. The implication is that the term “romantic ideal” is redundant, as all romance can be defined as ideal in some form.

Nevertheless, scholars have grappled with how to define this construct. There are two predominant ways that researchers have approached the study of the romantic ideal. According to one conceptualization, romantic ideals refer to the types of traits that exemplify what constitutes the perfect partner and relationship (e.g., Markey & Markey, 2007). Researchers working within this realm typically ask participants to use a Likert scale and rate their ideal partner as well as their current partner on a list of descriptive adjectives, and then look to see if

discrepancies exist between these two ratings (Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, 2001; Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). These discrepancies are often compared with certain outcome variables such as relational satisfaction or longevity. According to this approach, there is no *a priori* group of adjectives that is always considered ideal by researchers or participants. Rather, the definition of a romantically ideal partner or relationship is unique to each individual. In this sense, it is a definition of the romantic ideal construct with loose boundaries. Furthermore, this conceptualization pertains only to issues related to specific partners and relationships instead of to love, romance, and the relationship process more broadly. Thus, this first conceptualization is somewhat limited in scope.

The second way in which scholars have defined romantic ideals is a more comprehensive conceptualization, as it is a collection of expectations about relationships and love that extends beyond individual partners. Here, the romantic ideal refers to a set of beliefs about what constitutes a perfect relationship (Bell, 1975; Knox & Sporkowski, 1968; Lantz, Schmitt, Britton, & Snyder, 1968; Sprecher & Metts, 1989; Walster, 1976). 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. More specifically, it is a set of expectations for how a model relationship should form, develop, function, and be maintained. Examples of such beliefs include the following: 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; Lantz et al., 1968; Sprecher & Metts, 1989). This broader conceptualization of the construct is more pertinent to the present study because it pertains to shared beliefs that exist in a culture and that extend beyond individual preferences. Such shared beliefs develop and get

reinforced by cultural institutions such as schools, churches, and of course, the media.

### *Romantic Ideals in Western Culture*

Most would agree that romantic ideals are contextually situated. For example, the ideals for how a relationship should form and unfold depend heavily upon the culture. In Western countries, the ideals we hold are very much rooted in choice, passion, and destiny. In contrast, in Eastern societies, relational beliefs and norms are very different, often based on tradition and familial ties. An illustration of this contrast can be found in the highest-grossing romantic comedy of all time, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002). In this movie, a traditional Greek woman and an American man wish to get married. The film revolves around the obstacles they face in uniting their two cultures because each of their families has different conceptions of love and marriage. Ultimately, the two marry for love and Western cultural ideals win out over Eastern tradition.

My dissertation project focuses on the romantic ideal construct as it exists in Western culture. Past research has identified four main themes that comprise the romantic ideal in western societies: Idealization of partner, soul mate/one and only, love at first sight, and love conquers all (Bell, 1975; Knox & Sporkowski, 1968; Lantz et al., 1968; Sprecher & Metts, 1989). The following subsections define each of these themes in greater detail.

*Idealization of partner.* When a person believes that his/her romantic partner is perfect, this individual is said to have idealized his/her romantic interest (Bell, 1975). Idealizing a partner means that an individual typically chooses to focus only on the good qualities, often exaggerating those characteristics, and ignores the parts that make a partner human (Bell, 1975). An individual who embraces this ideal typically feels adoration, fondness, liking, tenderness, and intense sentimentality toward a partner (Aron & Aron, 1986). Consequently, this person believes

the partner is flawless.

Romantic movies often feature this ideal. An early example can be found in the 1953 movie, *How to Marry a Millionaire*. In one scene, a female character tells another person about a man she likes: “Oh, and he’s a doll. A perfect doll.” In this case, the character believes her love interest is perfect, a clear example of the idealization of partner. More recently, in *(500) Days of Summer* (2009), the main character describes his girlfriend in the following way:

“I love her smile. I love her hair. I love her knees. I love how one eye is higher up on her face than the other eye. I love the scar on her neck from this operation she had as a kid. I love how she looks in my Clash T-shirt. I love how she looks when she’s sleeping. I love the sound of her laugh. I love how she makes me feel. Like anything’s possible. Like, I don’t know...like life is worth it.”

This example demonstrates the emphatic feelings a character can express when idealizing a partner.

*Soul mate/one and only*. This theme of the romantic ideal refers to the notion that there is only one perfect love for each individual (Franiuk, Cohen, & Pomerantz, 2002). It is the idea that real love comes only once, can only be experienced with one person, and that fate and destiny work in tandem to connect true lovers (Bell, 1975; Peplau & Gordon, 1985; Sprecher & Metts, 1989). It is a reassuring belief for those feeling “in love” because it rules out other potential possibilities and reinforces the thought that nobody else could make them as happy as their soul mate (Bell, 1975).

There are several good examples of this ideal in popular romance films. In *Jerry Maguire* (1996), the main male character says to the female character at a pivotal moment when he is trying to win her back: “You complete me.” The suggestion is that no one else could be capable of being the appropriately perfect fit for her. Another film, *Return to Me* (2000), features a man whose beloved wife dies in an automobile crash at the beginning of the film.



Throughout the course of the plot, he falls in love with another woman who coincidentally is alive only because she received a heart transplant from his deceased wife. The film reinforces the idea that there is only one “heart” or person for this man, and he is destined to love the woman who provides the bodily home for that heart. Each of these examples demonstrates how movies can perpetuate the ideal that there is just one perfect partner that each person is supposed to love.

*Love at first sight.* The third major theme of the romantic ideal construct is a belief that a romantic relationship can blossom after a one-time meeting (Bell, 1975). According to this theme, it can take just a mere glance or a short conversation for individuals to fall into love. Consequently, this type of love is characterized by flamboyant passion and fast-paced relational movement (Sprecher & Metts, 1989). People who believe in this ideal think that it is perfectly acceptable for physical intimacy and long-term commitment to happen sooner than what might be considered socially normative or appropriate.

Movies often feature the love-at-first-sight romantic ideal. In fact, a recent content analysis revealed that nearly 80% the romantic relationships portrayed in animated Disney films have love-at-first-sight beginnings and are depicted as easily maintained (Tanner, Haddock, Zimmerman, & Lund, 2003). This theme also can be found in romantic comedies. In *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), the two main characters are strangers until they finally meet at the end of the film, at which point they look at each other once and instantly fall in love before ever speaking a word. In another film, *Imagine Me & You* (2005), a lesbian and a straight woman are portrayed as immediately and unexpectedly connected to one another by sharing intimate glances and emotional undertones at their initial meeting and during subsequent conversations. One character muses about love: “I think you know immediately. As soon as your eyes [meet]...then everything that happens from then on just proves that you have been right in that first moment.”

This ideal is reinforced at the conclusion of the film when one character reassures her parents that she has known the other woman long enough to feel true love, saying, “I knew after three seconds.” Each of these examples illustrates the ways in which the ideal of love at first sight can be featured in films.

*Love conquers all.* The fourth theme of the romantic ideal is that love will overcome everything. According to this ideal, different values and interests are not pertinent, and financial, social, and geographical concerns are irrelevant. Indeed, conflict in the relationship does not matter for this ideal, because it is the belief that love will somehow find a way (Bell, 1975; Peplau & Gordon, 1985). The key to this theme, however, is the way in which partners believe conflicts are resolved. Instead of working through the issues and developing real solutions, the belief is that a couple ultimately can ignore problems and instead resort only to love as the mechanism for overcoming obstacles.

This theme is the foundation of many of the storylines in many romance novels (e.g., Lee, 2008). For example, one content analysis of these books revealed that most of the stories trivialize the importance of safe sex to the point that the characters often explicitly tell each other that true love means never having to be careful (Diekman, McDonald, & Gardner, 2000). In other words, their love alone is expected to overcome the issues and concerns that arise from practicing unsafe sex. There are examples of this theme in romantic comedies as well. In the film *Before Sunrise* (1995), the two main characters live in different countries—the man is from the United States and the woman is from France. The couple meets on a train and spends one night together. Yet the film concludes with the lovers believing that their passion will win out over the fact that they live in opposite hemispheres. In *Pretty Woman* (1990), the main character is a wealthy businessman who is too busy for relationships. He meets a Los Angeles prostitute

and hires her to be his companion for a week. Despite their obvious differences in background, the movie ends with the partners ignoring their social status issues and choosing to love one another as they forge ahead with their relationship. *Notting Hill* (1999) features a famous American actress who accidentally ends up in the home of a British bookshop owner after he spills orange juice on her. As they struggle to figure out their challenging relationship, she says in one scene, “I’m just a girl, standing in front of a boy, asking him to love her.” In her mind, none of the social status or location issues matter; instead, she believes their love will overcome all concerns and conflicts. Romantic comedies often use this insurmountable-odds motif in order to heighten the entertainment aspect and prolong the romantic adventure.

#### *The Impact of Holding Romantic Ideals*

The four themes that comprise the romantic ideal construct reflect an idealistic view of love. For the past 20 years, researchers typically have used a standardized scale developed by Sprecher and Metts (1989) to assess people’s endorsement of such beliefs. The Romantic Beliefs Scale (RBS) has been assessed for reliability and validity (Sprecher & Metts, 1989; Weaver & Ganong, 2004) and used in a number of studies (e.g., Sprecher & Metts, 1999; Montgomery, 2005). In this section, I will review the research that has explored the belief in romantic ideals, including which ideals are most commonly endorsed, what types of people are most likely to hold these beliefs, and what impact these beliefs have on individuals who endorse them.

Research indicates that certain themes that comprise the romantic ideal construct tend to be endorsed more strongly than others are. When participants indicate the degree to which they agree with each belief, the theme with the highest reported mean on a 7-point scale is love conquers all ( $M = 4.96$ ), and the theme with the lowest level of endorsement is love at first sight

( $M = 3.19$ ; Sprecher & Metts, 1989). This pattern has been replicated over time (Sprecher & Metts, 1999).

Research also reveals individual differences in the endorsement of such beliefs. For example, studies consistently show that males hold significantly stronger romantic ideals than do females (Sharp & Ganong, 2000; Sprecher & Metts, 1999; Weaver & Ganong, 2004). In particular, men are more likely to idealize their partner and relationship, and to believe that love can overcome obstacles and can happen at first sight (Sprecher & Metts, 1989). At first glance, these sex differences appear to be at odds with the popular notion that females are more interested in romance than males are. Yet there is evidence that men are also more likely to behave in accord with such ideals. When compared to women, for example, men are more likely to end a relationship that appears ill fated (Rubin, Peplau, & Hill, 1981) and more likely to sacrifice a career in order to have a romantic relationship (Mosher & Danoff-Burg, 2007).

Several scholars have proposed an evolutionary perspective for these sex differences (Ellis, 1995). They argue that men endorse ideals more strongly than women do because men historically have not had to worry about practical matters in relationships, whereas women traditionally have relied on men to provide food and shelter (Sharp & Ganong, 2000). As a result, women have had to base relationship decisions on logistical concerns rather than on ideals about love.

In addition to sex, age seems to make a difference. One study found that middle school adolescents tend to endorse the ideals more strongly than do older high school students, even after controlling for ethnicity (Montgomery, 2005). Research investigating older participants has not reported any significant differences with respect to age; however, nearly all of the research has used college-age samples (e.g., Sprecher & Metts, 1989; Weaver & Ganong, 2004). To date,

no one has explored how romantic ideal beliefs might change over the life course for adults.

In terms of race, one study reported that Blacks and Whites tend to believe in the overall construct of the romantic ideal with similar levels of strength (Weaver & Ganong, 2004). Moreover, factor analyses produced the same four beliefs across both groups. However, individual items loaded differently on these four ideals. For example, among Whites, the statement, “The person I love will make a perfect romantic partner; for example, he/she will be completely accepting, loving, and understanding” loaded on the factor of “idealization of other.” Conversely, among Blacks, this belief loaded with the “love conquers all” subscale. In summary, although both Whites and Blacks endorsed romantic beliefs generally, they differed in how they perceived those beliefs in terms of themes or patterns. Thus, the belief in the romantic ideal construct appears to fluctuate slightly by race and to differ greatly by sex and age.

So why does 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, there is a 20% chance that a first marriage will end in divorce or separation within 5 years (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). The same report also indicated that 33% of marriages lasting more than 10 years will result in separation or divorce (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). Overall, close to one out of every two marriages in the U.S. will end in divorce, according to a *New York Times* expert analysis of the National Center of Health Statistics on marriage and divorce (Hurley, 2005). Obviously, love does not *always* conquer all.

Moreover, the cost of these relational break-ups is extensive. Divorce in the United States is an industry that generates \$28 billion annually, with the average marital breakup costing \$20,000 in legal fees (McDonald, 2009). One report showed that some divorces can cost up to

\$100,000 in legal bills (Dorning, 2007).

There are substantial psychological costs related to relational breakdowns as well. One study estimated that adults spend a total of almost \$30,000 in counseling and therapy as the result of a single divorce (Schramm, 2006). Another study compared married individuals with divorced persons and found that divorce was related to increased depression and anxiety as well as a greater propensity to engage in alcohol abuse (Richards, Hardy, & Wadsworth, 1997). This pattern held up even after controlling for education, parental divorce, childhood neuroticism and aggression, age at marriage, current financial hardships, and level of social contact with friends and family (Richards et al., 1997). In addition, children often suffer as a result of relational failures. Children of divorce are more likely to experience depression, increased anxiety, and antisocial behavior than are children from intact homes, even when controlling for a number of variables such as child age and gender, as well as parental education and income (Strohschein, 2005). Other work indicates that children of divorce are also at higher risk for poorer academic performance and physical health, and disruptive behavior problems (Taylor & Andrews, 2009).

The cost of divorce, alone, on our society stretches from emotional to financial. Because these relational failures are costly to our society, any solution that may serve to reduce the number of failures would be a welcome find. For example, it may be useful to explore how holding idealistic beliefs about romance may serve to hinder or help keep relationships intact.

As it turns out, research suggests that the beliefs people hold about relationships do have some connection to relational development and maintenance (Montgomery, 2005; Sprecher & Metts, 1989; Sprecher & Metts, 1999). Although the results are mixed, most research indicates a positive impact. For example, one study found that single adolescents who believed strongly in the romantic ideal construct also reported a greater openness to the idea of developing closeness

and intimacy in their future romantic relationships (Montgomery, 2005). Thus, romantic ideals may help teens prepare and plan for relational life. Young adults also seem positively influenced by these beliefs. In a longitudinal study of 100 dating couples, researchers found that endorsement of beliefs were associated with several positive outcome variables. For example, at Time 1, beliefs consistent with the romantic ideal construct were positively correlated with feelings of satisfaction, love, and commitment in the relationship (Sprecher & Metts, 1999). With this type of correlational data, causality is impossible to determine. However, this same study also tracked these couples over time, and the results were similar. For instance, a strong endorsement of romanticism at Time 1 predicted a high commitment to the relationship at Time 2, even when controlling for commitment at Time 1 (Sprecher & Metts, 1999). However, this pattern held true only for men and not for women. This finding is consistent with the evolutionary perspective that suggests men put a greater emphasis on romantic qualities than do women, who tend to be more realistic and pragmatic than men are. Thus, romanticism often precedes feelings of commitment for men. Furthermore, the dating relationship was not likely to terminate when the woman believed in the soul mate/one and only theme, even when controlling for the man's strength of belief in this theme and the length of their relationship (Sprecher & Metts, 1999). Finally, for older individuals, this positive influence has also been demonstrated. For example, Murray et al. (1996) surveyed married and partnered people, and found that positive idealization in romantic relationships was associated with higher levels of relational satisfaction, in part because individuals often projected their idealistic beliefs onto their current relationships.

Although most research suggests that these ideals are indicators of positive relational functioning, not every study supports this assertion. That is, there is some evidence that

romantic beliefs can lead to negative outcomes. For example, discrepancy between a person's ideals and his/her actual partner can pose problems. In one study of couples, larger discrepancies are associated with lower relationship satisfaction (Fletcher et al., 1999; Ruvolo & Veroff, 1997; Sternberg & Barnes, 1985). In terms of the belief in soul mates, one longitudinal study found that a belief in growth, or the idea that relationships take work to be maintained, tended to be a precursor to a long-term and more committed approach to relationships than did a belief in destiny, or the idea that certain people are made for each other (Knee, 1998). In other words, it was a belief in the more realistic features of a relationship that tended to predict commitment over the long term. Another study found an even more nuanced result. Franiuk and colleagues (2002) asked college students currently in romantic relationships whether they believed in soul mates or in the idea that partners have to put in effort to make a relationship succeed. Belief in the existence of soul mates was positively associated with relational durability and satisfaction, but only when participants viewed their partners as their matching soul mates. All of this somewhat conflicting research means that there is an impact of believing in the romantic ideal construct, but the precise effects and parameters of those effects have not been consistently demonstrated with previous work.

In fact, there could be other outcomes associated with believing in the romantic ideal. It could be that holding these beliefs leads some people to stay too long in unsafe and unsatisfying relationships because they use romanticism to overlook dangerous flaws in their partner, such as verbal or physical abuse (e.g., Kulkarni, 2007; Lloyd, 1991). Or, it could be that the influence of these beliefs changes over the life course of a relationship. For example, one four-year longitudinal study of newly married individuals indicated that positive thoughts about the partner and relationship were associated with higher levels of satisfaction in the short term, but tended to



predict more severe problems over the long term because they masked the real nature of the relationship (McNulty, O'Mara, & Karney, 2008). Clearly, more research is needed.

Taken together, much of the research indicates that people's belief in romantic ideals is linked with positive indicators of relationship functioning (e.g., Montgomery, 2005; Murray et al., 1996; Sprecher & Metts, 1999). However, some studies find that under certain circumstances, such as when there is a discrepancy between ideals and actual partners, there may be negative implications (e.g., Fletcher et al., 1999; Knee, 1998). It could be that believing in the existence of ideals can help people think positively about their partner and relationship (e.g., Murray et al., 1996), or it could help individuals believe that they will marry just once, until death parts (e.g., Segrin & Nabi, 2002). Despite these conflicting findings, one overarching conclusion can be drawn—many people believe in romantic ideals and these beliefs do seem to predict facets of real-life relationships. Hence, it seems important to ascertain from where such beliefs might come.

Although some scholars have suggested that romantic movies are a significant source for acquiring these beliefs (e.g., Sharp & Ganong, 2000), there is little previous work that has linked these films with an effects study. Are expressions of these romantic ideal themes present in these movies? Does viewing these films lead one to form romantic ideal beliefs? This dissertation seeks to answer these questions with two studies, and the following two chapters explain those studies in more detail.

## CHAPTER 3:

### STUDY 1: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF ROMANTIC IDEALS IN POPULAR FILMS

Study 1 of my dissertation is a content analysis of the themes featured in romantic comedies from the past 10 years. Previous analyses of romantic comedies have been mostly interpretive in methodology and limited in the content that was assessed (Johnson, 2007; Johnson & Holmes, 2009; Natharius, 2007; Nowlan, 2006; Rios & Reyes, 2007; Winn, 2007). Interpretive studies can provide rich information about the themes embedded in particular romantic comedy films, but they do not allow us to make generalizations about the entire romantic film genre. Thus, there remains a need for a systematic, quantitative analysis that specifically investigates the presence of the romantic ideal construct in movies.

As noted previously, 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. Grounded theory is an inductive methodology by which researchers analyze content and develop conceptual categories, which in turn lead to the development of theoretical explanation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In their study, Johnson and Holmes (2009) systematically analyzed the 40 films, then developed 16 categories of discrete behaviors, and finally determined that these movies do feature consistent patterns of romance. In particular, they found that romantic comedies depict relationships as exciting, novel, and emotionally meaningful. In their analysis, Johnson and Holmes (2009) coded several behaviors that they argued perpetuate two idealistic themes – “soul mates” and “love at first sight.” However, 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 my study improves upon their research. First, my content analysis includes data about the presence of overarching romantic ideal themes in films. Instead of focusing on particular behaviors, I chose to analyze broader themes that arguably are more relevant to the takeaway messages for viewers. Second, my study also assesses messages that challenge or contradict the romantic ideal themes. The inclusion of these counter messages provides a comparison point, or frame of reference, that more fully captures the diverse messages pertaining to romantic ideal themes expressed in these films. Third, my content analysis includes variables that measure the context in which these romantic ideals are expressed. It could be, for example, that romantic ideal themes are very common in romantic comedies, but that they are routinely condemned in the plot (i.e., punished). It could also be the case that romantic ideals are expressed primarily by female characters or even by secondary characters in the plotline. All of these contextual features in the story can influence viewer's social learning from such films. Finally, instead of first watching these films and then inductively developing a list of common romantic behaviors and themes, I developed my coding scheme in advance, based on existing interpersonal research on what people commonly believe about romance (Sprecher & Metts, 1989). I also utilized major theoretical perspectives pertaining to media effects—cultivation and social cognitive theory--to develop my coding scheme.

Cultivation theory posits that media content often contains themes or formulaic messages that can influence people's perceptions of reality (Gerbner et al., 2002). In particular, heavy viewers of such content are expected to possess beliefs that mirror the content featured in the media, which is often at odds with real life. According to this theory, exposure to romantic

comedy films may influence viewers to develop beliefs consistent with the themes portrayed in such movies. Hence, the first step in my content analysis is to ascertain what messages are predominant in the media content. Thus, the following research question was proposed:

RQ1: How often are romantic ideals featured in popular romantic comedy films?

To assess pervasiveness, I examined romantic ideals at two levels of analysis. First, characters' individual expressions of ideal themes were coded each time they occurred throughout the film. This level of analysis provided an exhaustive assessment of every ideal conveyed in a film, no matter how subtle or brief. Second, the dominant or overall romantic theme portrayed in the film was assessed. This level of analysis required the coder to take into account the entire film rather than momentary expressions in individual scenes. Collectively, these two levels allowed me to assess which themes are expressed at the micro level as well as at the macro level.

In addition to assessing the pervasiveness of romantic ideals, I also examined how often counter messages were conveyed. It is possible, for example, that these films feature realistic or anti-ideal messages more prevalently than they do romantic ideals. Therefore, I measured how often challenges to ideals are expressed. A similar approach was used in the National Television Violence Study to ascertain whether alternative messages about violence were portrayed in entertainment television (Wilson et al., 2002). In that study, the researchers found that a high proportion of television programs contained violence (60%) but that very few of these shows (less than 4%) featured an anti-violence theme.

To assess counter-messages about romance, I conceptualized challenges as any message that portrays romantic relationships as contradictory to a romantic ideal. For example, the statement, "There are plenty of fish in the sea for you to love" is a direct challenge to the "one

and only” ideal. At the film level, a storyline that depicts a couple choosing to separate instead of relying on love to conquer their problems is an alternative message to the ideal of love conquering all. In short, a challenge consists of a more realistic, pragmatic expression about relationships, or a statement that directly contradicts a romantic ideal theme. To capture this type of phenomenon, the following research question was advanced:

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

Given that the romantic ideal construct is comprised of four distinct types of beliefs in Western culture (Sprecher & Metts, 1999), my analysis also coded the specific types of ideals portrayed in movies. It may be that romantic comedies feature one of the ideals over others, or it may be that all four of the themes show up with relatively equal frequency. The latter pattern would help to substantiate the idea that romantic films are an important contributor in popular culture to the romantic ideal construct as a whole. In order to explore this issue, the following research question was proposed:

RQ3: Which romantic ideal themes are most commonly portrayed in these films?

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, observational learning is more likely to occur when certain contextual features are present to heighten viewer attention and retention (Bandura, 2002). For example, viewers are more likely to imitate a model that is attractive in nature (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). In addition, research indicates that social learning is heightened when the model is similar in nature to the viewer (Andsager et al., 2006). As such, I assessed the demographics of every character (i.e., sex, age, race) that expressed any type of ideal or challenge in each film. If, for example,

younger characters are more likely to express ideals in such films than older characters are, we would expect that younger viewers would be more susceptible to learning romantic ideals. Thus, the following research question was posed:

RQ4: What types of characters express statements about relationships in these movies?

Viewers also may form expectations from such films based on who the targets of such statements are. If the recipients of ideal expressions are typically female, for example, then women who are heavy viewers of such films may come to expect their romantic partners to express such ideals as a normal part of the relationship. Thus, I proposed the following research question:

RQ5: What types of characters are the targets for statements about relationships in these movies?

In addition to demographics, I also assessed the prominence of the characters that expressed and received the statements about relationships. The primary characters in romantic comedies are the main couple in the plot. These characters have main billing in the movie and are used to attract viewers to the film. Hence, they typically are well-known movie stars who are highly attractive. In contrast, secondary characters are less famous and their physical attributes often are downplayed. For example, Zach Galifianakis is a comedian who plays a supporting role to Ashton Kutcher in *What Happens in Vegas* (2008). A portly man with a full beard, Galifianakis is meant to be the antithesis of Kutcher's clean-cut leading man character. Galifianakis' primary role is to be comedic and not romantic. In fact, he periodically makes comments about his desire to pursue Cameron Diaz' leading lady character, but his statements clearly are meant to be humorous, in part because his physical features presumably preclude him from being attractive to Diaz. Because of these differences in popularity and physical

attractiveness, viewers are likely to pay more attention to primary characters than to secondary characters in the plotline, which has implications for social learning. Thus, the following research questions were advanced:

RQ6: Are statements about relationships expressed more often by primary or by secondary characters in the storyline?

RQ7: Are statements about relationships targeted more often to primary or to secondary characters in the storyline?

Social cognitive theory also suggests that viewers are more likely to learn or imitate a behavior when it is rewarded than when it is punished (Bandura, 1965). For example, a character may tell his love interest, “You are my soul mate,” and she may respond by kissing him. This positive reinforcement to the ideal expression can be construed as a reward and is likely to encourage viewers to learn the ideal. On the other hand, if a character says, “We can make this relationship work, no matter what,” and her partner responds with a negative or punishing comment such as, “Don’t be ridiculous,” a viewer might be discouraged from believing that love can conquer all obstacles. Thus, the degree to which expressions of romantic ideal themes are rewarded or punished was assessed. Accordingly, I proposed the following research question:

RQ8: How often are romantic ideals rewarded or punished in romantic comedy films?

Similarly, I assessed positive and negative reinforcements associated with challenges.

Accordingly, the final research question was proposed:

RQ9: How often are romantic challenges rewarded or punished in romantic comedy films?

## Method

This project is a systematic content analysis of popular romantic comedy films. The following sections outline the sampling procedure, units of analyses, variables, coder selection and training, and measures of reliability.

### *Sample*

The top 52 highest-grossing romantic comedy movies from the recent decade (1998-2008) were selected for this study (Box Office Mojo, 2008). The use of top-grossing movies is a common approach among other researchers who have analyzed films, because it ensures that the sample is comprised of movies most watched by the American public (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008; Johnson & Holmes, 2009; Monk-Turner et al., 2004). I selected movies from the recent decade because Study 2 of this project involved surveying undergraduates, who presumably have not seen many romantic comedy films produced over 10 years ago. Using these criteria, the initial sample included 50 films; however, I added an extra week of reliability tests during the coding period, which resulted in an additional two films in the final sample. The list of movies included romantic comedies such as *What Women Want* (2000), *Hitch* (2005), and *What Happens in Vegas* (2008). For a complete list of films, see Table 1.

### *Units of Analysis*

Expressions of ideals and challenges were coded at two levels of analysis: the SET and the film. In devising my approach, I relied heavily on methodology developed for the National Television Violence Study (NTVS; Wilson et al., 1997).

*SET level.* The most basic unit of analysis for this project was each expression of an ideal or challenge. The unit was labeled SET, referring to the source (S) or character who conveyed the message, the expression (E) about love/relationships, and the target (T) to whom the source



directs the expression. My approach is similar to that used in the NTVS, whereby violence was unitized according to the PAT: perpetrator (P), aggressive act (A), and target (T). Similar to the PAT approach, in this study a new SET or unit was identified every time one of the SET components changed. For example, if a character tells a friend that he fell in love with his partner at first sight, coders would identify this expression as a SET. The source is the character, the expression is the ideal of love at first sight, and the target is the friend. If the same character then expresses the soul mate ideal, a new SET would be coded because the type of expression has changed.

I decided to focus this study on expressions that were explicit and easy to detect by viewers. Hence, coders were instructed to focus on verbal statements about relationships. It is certainly possible to convey messages about relationships through nonverbal cues. For example, a partner could spend most of the movie gazing adoringly into her lover's eyes, which could convey a message of idealization of the partner. Yet this type of subtle message may go unnoticed by a young viewer or could be misinterpreted. Also, including more subtle messages runs the risk of "overcounting" expressions of ideals. Thus, I decided to code only those messages that were clearly and explicitly expressed in words by the characters in the films. However, I did make one exception to this for one of the ideals. In particular, the love at first sight ideal is often expressed via nonverbal cues in romantic films. For example, characters may enter the room, spot each other from afar, and engage in long glances toward one another, often with romantic or dramatic music in the background to underscore their strong and immediate attraction. In such instances, no words may be exchanged at all. Because this convention is quite common in romantic movies, I made an exception for this one ideal and instructed coders to look at both verbal and nonverbal cues in order to identify the expression of love at first sight.

*Film level.* The macro-level unit of analysis in this study was the entire film. At this level, coders took into account content across the complete plot. Collecting information at this level approximates the overall message that viewers are likely to take away from the entire film. It is possible that the overall message differs from expressions conveyed in individual scenes in a film. For example, a movie may feature numerous challenge expressions about relationships at different points in the plot, but the film could still emphasize a love conquering all ideal because the two partners make a commitment to one another in the end. By collecting information at the film level, in which the coders make decisions about the entire plotline, my study is designed to tap the dominant, overarching themes in these movies.

#### *SET-Level Variables*

*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 coded. For race, coders selected from the following categories: Caucasian, African-American, Asian, Hispanic, Mixed, or other. For age, coders identified each character as one of the following: child (0-12 years), teen (13-17 years), adult (18-64 years), elderly (65 years or older), or “can’t tell.” For sexual orientation, characters were assigned one of the following: heterosexual, gay, or other (e.g., bisexual). Coders made their judgments for demographic variables based on the characters’ visual appearance, mannerisms, names, clothing, and/or dialogue.

The prominence of the source also was assessed. Each romantic comedy film features a main or primary couple around which the plotline is centered. Characters that expressed ideals/challenges were coded as primary if they were part of that main couple or secondary if they were not. For example, Hugh Grant and Julia Roberts make up the main romantic dyad, or primary characters, in *Notting Hill* (1999). All of their friends and business acquaintances make

up the secondary characters. In some cases, a film may have more than one romantic couple featured in the plot. In those rare instances, coders were instructed to choose the couple with the most on-screen time as the primary characters. As an example, there are four romantic couples featured in the film, *Sex and the City* (2008), but Carrie and Big (i.e., Sarah Jessica Parker and Chris Noth) would qualify as the primary couple based on my criteria.

*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 and romance as hopeful and idyllic, even in the face of adversity.

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 more practical or pragmatic view of relationships that is grounded in the realities of everyday life. For instance, a challenge would be identified if a character said, “There are plenty of fish in the sea,” because this statement constitutes a direct contradiction to the ideal that there are soul mates. Challenges also could involve statements indicating that relationships are difficult or require hard work. For example, a character might state, “Marriage isn’t easy,” or “If a guy doesn’t call you, it’s because he’s not that into you.”

Once coders decided that an ideal (rather than a challenge) had occurred, they were asked to judge the type or nature of that ideal. Ideals were coded into one of four categories: a) idealization of other, b) love at first sight, c) soul mate/one and only, or d) love conquers all. The development of these categories was based largely on the work of Sprecher and Metts (1989), who compiled relevant literature on the romantic ideal construct and developed a scale to measure the extent to which individuals believe in these ideals.

The first category, idealization of other, was defined as any expression that indicated that a mate or partner was perfect, flawless, and wonderful in the romantic sense. If a character idealized another, he or she typically focused only on the good qualities of the partner or love object, often exaggerating those characteristics. Statements about idolizing another character, describing a love interest as ideal, or dismissing any negative qualities were classified as idealization of other. Other examples included: “He is the most wonderful man I have ever met,” and “Our relationship is perfect!”

The second category, soul mate/one and only, was defined as any expression that suggested there was only one perfect love for a particular character. Coders looked for statements consistent with the idea that real love comes only once, that love can only be experienced with one person, or that fate and destiny work in tandem to connect true lovers. Examples included: “You are the only person who could make me happy,” “Things like this don’t just happen,” or “We are meant to be together.”

The third ideal category, love at first sight, was defined as any expression that suggested that love happens immediately after meeting and develops quickly. For example, a character might state: “I knew I loved you the moment our eyes met,” or “I’ve loved you since that first day you walked into my office.” For this one category, coders were instructed to consider not only verbal statements but also nonverbal expressions. In some romantic comedies, love at first sight is signaled by intense music and long and dramatic glances of attraction between two characters when they first meet. Yet words are never expressed. Thus, coders paid attention to both verbal and nonverbal clues when identifying this category of ideals.

The last category, love conquers all, was defined as any expression that conveyed that love was the only thing needed to deal with obstacles in a relationship. According to this ideal,

different values and interests are not pertinent, and financial, social, and geographical concerns are irrelevant. Instead of working through the issues and developing real solutions, a couple can ignore problems and instead resort to love as the mechanism for overcoming obstacles. As an example of this type of ideal, a character might state: “None of that matters, I love you and that’s the only thing we need to know right now,” or “If we love each other, then that other stuff will just work itself out.”

If a challenge rather than an ideal was expressed in a given SET, coders originally were asked to classify those challenges into one of two categories: 1) realistic statement, or 2) anti-ideal statement. A realistic statement was defined as a pragmatic expression about the practicalities of relationships. An anti-ideal was defined as any expression that directly contradicted an ideal. However, the coders had difficulty during training distinguishing realistic statements from anti-ideal statements. Whereas the coders could reliably identify that a challenge expression had occurred, they were unable to agree on which specific category of challenge was expressed. As a result, classifying challenges into discrete types or categories was eliminated from the coding scheme.

*Nature of target.* Each target or character to which a relationship expression was directed was assessed for demographic qualities. Coders coded the same demographic variables for the target as they did for the source (i.e., sex, race, age, sexuality, and prominence). In some cases, the source expressed an ideal or challenge to multiple characters at one time. Coders were instructed to select the target that most clearly responded to the expression. In rare cases, a source was alone when he or she expressed an ideal or challenge, so coders were instructed to choose “no target” for these SETs.

*Reinforcements of expressions.* Each relational expression was assessed in terms of positive and negative reinforcements. Positive reinforcement 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, such as happiness or excitement, and/or the delivery of physical (e.g., hug) or verbal intimacy (e.g., “I love you) in response to the expression.

Negative reinforcement 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 reinforcement, these types of behaviors and actions (either positive or negative) had to be a direct response to the source’s expression. In other words, the reinforcement needed to be in close proximity to the expression, typically occurring either during or immediately after the ideal or challenge was expressed. Reactions to an ideal or a challenge that occurred later in the plot were not coded as reinforcements.

One important distinction needs to be made here. Simple agreements and disagreements by other characters generally were coded as reinforcements unless they were elaborated to the point that they became a new relational expression or SET. For example, if a character declared to his girlfriend that “you are my soul mate” and the girlfriend yelled “no, I’m not,” the response is a simple disagreement and would qualify as a negative reinforcement (i.e., punishment). If, on the other hand, the girlfriend said, “I don’t believe in soul mates,” this statement would be coded as a new SET, a challenge statement, rather than a simple disagreement. In general, the degree of elaboration helped coders distinguish between reinforcements involving

agreement/disagreement and expressions of new SETs. A nod, shaking of the head, or simple statement of agreement or disagreement was classified as a reinforcement, whereas the advancement of an alternative ideal or challenge was coded as a new SET.

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 reinforcements).

### *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 in a film when making a decision about the overall message, while keeping in mind that the primary characters (i.e., main couple dyad) should hold the most weight when deciding about the general theme.

Films were coded into one of five overall categories: idealization of other theme, soul mate/one and only theme, love at first sight theme, love conquers all theme, challenge theme, or none. In cases where more than one ideal was repeated throughout the film, coders were instructed to focus on which theme was the most prominent or focal message throughout the entire movie.

### *Training and Reliability*

Six undergraduate students (four females, two males) served as coders for this project. The coders met 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. Coders worked approximately 9 hours per week during the training

process. Throughout this time, the codebook was adapted and edited as needed. Training of coders continued until they reached 80% agreement on judgments of practice movies for two consecutive weeks on the majority of variables. The choice to set the threshold of agreement at 80% is consistent with established practices in content analysis research (e.g., Neuendorf, 2002; Popping, 1988; Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999).

During the coding process, coders independently watched each film on DVD in a quiet room on a computer. Every DVD is broken into time chunks that generally reflect natural segments of the film's storyline, and these segments are called chapters. To identify SETs, coders were instructed to watch each chapter twice before moving to the next chapter. This process ensured that coders paid close attention to all statements made during short segments of the plot so as not to miss any SETs. After watching the entire movie, essentially twice, coders made a judgment about the film-level variable. On average, it took coders approximately 5 hours to complete the coding for one film. All coders used the same computer software (i.e., VLC, *VideoLAN Client*) to view the DVD movies so that the time stamps for identification of SETs would be uniform.

Coding took place over a 10-week period. On average, coders coded two movies per week. Initially, I randomly selected 10 movies, or 20% of the sample, to be used for reliability testing. Unexpectedly, the first week of reliability coding did not produce acceptable kappa levels for a single but critical variable – the film variable— so I made the decision to add another week of reliability tests. As a result, I added two more films to the overall sample and redid the random selection of films to be used in the reliability pool. The final reliability kappa coefficient scores are based on tests from 12 movies (i.e., the 2 films from the first week of reliability tests plus the 10 films that were randomly selected from the final sample).



Reliability was assessed at two levels. First, coders needed to establish reliability on the identification of units or SETs. Following a unitizing procedure similar to the one outlined by Cissna and Garvin (1990), coders recorded the precise minute in the film that marked the beginning utterance of each SET they identified. Reliability for this unitizing was assessed by calculating percent agreement. Each time a unit was identified by a coder, it counted toward the number of possible units on which the coders could agree. In order to create the percent agreement, the total number of times coders actually agreed was divided by the total number of possible times they could have agreed. For example, if five coders agreed that a SET occurred at minute 47 and six coders agreed that another SET occurred at minute 53 of a film, the total number of times they could have agreed was 12 (i.e., six coders multiplied by two SETs) and the actual number of times they did agree was 11. By dividing 11 by 12, the percent agreement in this example is 92%. For this study, the percent agreement for identification of SETs was 75% across all 12 films. See Table 2.

Once the coders agreed on the unitizing, their consistency in choosing the same values for each variable was calculated. To assess agreement among coders, I calculated inter-coder 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 coefficients were as follows: source sex (.94), source race (1.0), source age (.98), source sexuality (1.0), source prominence (.95), expression type (.90), target sex (.88), target race (.97), target age (.94), target sexuality (.99), target prominence (.84), and reinforcement (.80).

Reliability at the film level was also assessed using Fleiss' Kappa. The reliability coefficient across 12 tests for the take-away message variable was .72.

See Tables 3-5 for a complete list of reliability kappa coefficients across each film and every variable. In accordance with scientific conventions (e.g., Neuendorf, 2002; Popping, 1988; Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999), all but one of the mean reliability coefficients across films were above .80.

## Results

### *Analysis Plan*

The results of this chapter are organized by research questions. The first set of questions pertains to the prevalence of ideals and challenges in romantic comedy films. The second set concerns the specific nature of the ideals and challenges. The third set deals with the context surrounding the portrayals of these ideals and challenges in romantic comedy films.

Most of the analyses involved frequency comparisons on the amount and nature of romantic expressions across films. When appropriate, I used chi-square goodness of fit tests to ascertain if there were differences among categories within a single variable. Then, when looking at differences across variables, I used Pearson chi-square tests ( $p < .05$ ) of independence. Post-hoc pairwise comparisons of proportions were executed using the chi-square analog to the Scheffé procedure (Marascuilo & Busk, 1987). Throughout the results, percentages having no subscripts in common are significantly different ( $p < .05$ ).

Most of the variables were measured at the SET level (i.e., source, expression, target), but the overall theme or message variable was assessed at the film level. As a result, the  $n$ 's change depending on which unit of analysis (SET or film) is being described.

### *Prevalence of Portrayals of Romantic Ideals and Challenges*

*Research question 1.* The first research question asked how often romantic ideals are featured in popular romantic comedy films. This question can be addressed by looking at the

prevalence of romantic ideal themes across romantic comedy films as well as the rate or concentration of such ideals within films.

To assess prevalence, I calculated the percentage of films that featured a romantic ideal expression at the SET level. Results revealed that nearly all (98%) of the movies contained at least one romantic ideal. In other words, it is highly likely that a viewer will be exposed to at least one ideal expression when viewing a romantic comedy. The only movie that featured no ideals at all was *No Reservations* (2007). Although billed as a romantic comedy, this film is centered largely on the story of an emotionally distant woman who must rethink her life when her recently orphaned niece comes to live with her. The romantic element is actually a subplot and, along with most aspects of this film, is portrayed in a very realistic way.

Next, I calculated the rate or density of ideal portrayals within the movies. Across 52 films, or over 93 hours of programming, coders identified a total of 375 ideal expressions. On average, there were 7.21 ideal expressions ( $SD = 4.43$ , range = 0-19) per film. That translates to roughly 1 romantic ideal expression every 14 minutes.

Because my sample ranges over a 10-year period, I also looked at the rates of ideal expressions over time. Figure 1 displays the average rate of romantic ideals in these films every two years, beginning in 1998 and ending in 2008. As can be seen, the rate of ideal portrayals has stayed very consistent over the 10-year period, indicating that this pattern of density is a persistent quality in these films.

At the film level, coders were asked to determine the overarching theme of each movie. I then calculated the percentage of movies that contained an overall message consistent with a romantic ideal theme. A total of 39 of the 52 films, or 75% of the sample, were judged as perpetuating an overarching romantic ideal message.

*Research question 2.* The second research question asked how often challenges to romantic ideals are featured in popular romantic comedies. To assess amount, I examined the overall prevalence of challenges across the films as well as the rate at which these challenges were expressed within romantic comedy films.

To assess prevalence, I calculated the percentage of films that featured a challenge expression at the SET level. Results revealed that a total of 98% of movies featured a romantic challenge. In other words, it is highly likely that a viewer will encounter at least one challenge expression when viewing a romantic comedy. Only one of the films (i.e., *Bringing Down the House*, 2003) contained no challenge expressions at all. This movie is an unusual example of a romantic comedy because it centers on the comedic aspects of two people who have just met, rather than focuses on the romantic components of a blossoming relationship.

Next, I calculated the rate or density of challenge portrayals within the movies. Across the 52 films, coders identified a total of 739 challenge expressions. In terms of rate, there was an average of 14.21 ( $SD = 7.35$ , range = 0-32) challenges per film. That translates to roughly one challenge expression every 8 minutes.

Again, I assessed the portrayal of challenges over time in these films. As seen in Figure 2, the rate of challenge portrayals has stayed fairly consistent over the 10-year period, which indicates this pattern is a persistent quality in romantic comedy films.

The attentive reader will notice from the rate data that challenges actually occur more often than romantic ideals in these films, which is somewhat surprising. However, in an upcoming section we will take a closer look at the context of these portrayals, which will shed light on how to interpret these findings.

At the film level, I assessed how many movies contained an overall message consistent with a challenge theme. A total of 12 out of the 52 films, or 23% of the sample, featured a challenge theme.

When ideals and challenges were compared across units of analysis, an interesting pattern emerged. Challenges were more common at the SET level,  $\chi^2(1, N = 1,114) = 118.94, p < .001$ , whereas ideals were more commonly featured as the overall relational message at the film level,  $\chi^2(1, N = 51) = 14.29, p < .001$ .

### *Nature of Portrayals of Romantic Ideals*

*Research question 3.* The third research question assessed how often each particular ideal theme was expressed in the movies. In order to address this question, I calculated the frequencies of each of the four ideal themes at both the SET and film levels.

At the SET level, nearly 40% of the ideal expressions consisted of 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 (7%<sub>a</sub>) occurred significantly less often in these films than would be expected by chance, whereas idealization of other (30%<sub>b</sub>) and soul mate/one and only (38%<sub>b</sub>) occurred significantly more often. The frequency of the love conquers all expression (25%<sub>ab</sub>) did not differ from what would be expected by chance. See Figure 3.

At the film level, a slightly different pattern emerged. Of the 39 films that featured an ideal theme as the overarching message, the most predominant theme was love conquers all

(82%). The only other ideal theme featured as the overall message of these films was soul mate/one and only (18%). None of the movies portrayed love at first sight or idealization of other as the overarching relational message.

Looking at all types of expressions featured at the film level (i.e., ideals as well as challenges), a goodness-of-fit chi square analysis indicated that there was a significant difference in type of message,  $\chi^2(2, N = 51) = 20.59, p < .001$ . Post hoc analyses revealed that love conquers all was featured significantly more often as the overall relational message (63%<sub>b</sub>) than would be expected by chance. The soul mate/one and only ideal (14%<sub>a</sub>) and challenge overall themes (23%<sub>a</sub>) occurred significantly less often than what would be expected by chance. See Figure 4.

#### *Context of Portrayals of Romantic Ideals and Challenges*

*Research question 4.* The fourth research question concerned the types of characters that make statements about relationships in these films. Several demographic variables related to the source of each SET were assessed. In this section, I first present frequencies pertaining to the sources of all 1,114 SETs, regardless of type of expression. Then, I make comparisons between ideal versus challenge SETs in terms of the source characteristics.

For sex, roughly half of the SETs were expressed by males and half by females. See Figure 5. Obviously, there was no statistical difference in terms of the sex of the source of relational expressions.

The second demographic variable coded was race. Across the more than 1,000 SETs in these films, the vast majority of sources were White. A small number of the sources were African American and Hispanic, both accounting for less than 5%. None of the sources of relational expressions were Asian. See Figure 6. Reflecting these dramatic differences, the chi-

square goodness of fit test was highly significant for race of the source,  $\chi^2(4, N = 1,114) = 3,823.55, p < .001$ .

I also compared the source statistics in these films to national population data in terms of race. In 2009, 65% of the population was Caucasian, 16% was Hispanic, 13% was Black, 5% was Asian, and the rest identified as American Indian, multi-racial, or other (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). A chi-square test comparing the race data for the films with real-world statistics on race was significant,  $\chi^2(4, N = 1,114) = 416.48, p < .001$ . That is, the proportion of source characters that were Caucasian in these films was significantly higher than the proportion of Caucasians in the U.S. population. Conversely, the proportion of source characters that were Black or Hispanic was significantly lower than the proportion of Blacks and Hispanics in the U.S. population.

In terms of age of the source, over 90% all the characters who made statements about relationships in these films were adults. Child, teen, and elderly characters combined for a total of just 6% of all sources. See Figure 7. The chi-square goodness-of-fit test was significant,  $\chi^2(3, N = 1,114) = 2,902.51, p < .001$ .

The final demographic variable was sexual orientation. Across all SETs, the sources of these expressions were overwhelmingly heterosexual. In fact, less than 1% of all sources fell into the other sexual orientation categories (i.e., homosexual, other). See Figure 8. As a result, the chi-square test for sexual orientation of source was highly significant,  $\chi^2(2, N = 1,114) = 2,180.26, p < .001$ .

The next set of analyses compares ideals and challenges directly in terms of the source of such expressions. A series of chi-square tests of homogeneity were conducted comparing ideals and challenges by each demographic variable. The only significant finding pertained to sex of

source,  $\chi^2(1, N = 1,114) = 45.98, p < .001, V^* = .20$ . As seen in Figure 9, ideals were significantly more likely to be expressed by male characters than by female characters. In fact, the ratio was almost 2:1 for such expressions. In contrast, challenges were slightly more likely to be expressed by female characters than by males.

None of the other demographic variables significantly differed between ideals and challenges, or differed by ideal type. See Table 6 for the demographic frequencies of source variables broken down by expression type (i.e., ideals versus challenges).

*Research question 5.* The fifth research question concerned the types of characters that were the targets of relational expressions in these movies. There were 40 SETs that did not have targets, so the  $N(1,074)$  for this section is slightly different from the  $N(1,114)$  in the results associated with source demographics. For this section, I first present frequencies pertaining to the targets of all 1,074 SETs, regardless of type. Then, I make comparisons between ideal versus challenge SETs in terms of the targets of these different types of expressions.

For sex, expressions about relationships were more likely to be targeted toward males than females. In fact, the ratio was roughly 3:2 for males versus females in terms of target of expressions. See Figure 10. A chi-square test revealed that this difference was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(1, N = 1,074) = 32.91, p < .001$ .

For race, the pattern for targets mirrored closely the pattern observed for the sources of such expressions. That is, across the more than 1,000 SETs in these films, over 90% of targets were White. A very small number of targets were African American (4%), and the rest of the targets combined to make up another 4% of all the targets. See Figure 11. These differences were statistically significant, according to a goodness-of-fit chi-square test,  $\chi^2(5, N = 1,074) = 4.43, p < .001$ .



I also compared the target statistics in these films to national population data in terms of race. In 2009, 65% of the population was Caucasian, 16% was Hispanic, 13% was Black, 5% was Asian, and the rest identified as American Indian, multi-racial, or other (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). A chi-square test comparing the race data for the films with real-world statistics on race was significant,  $\chi^2(4, N = 1,114) = 407.83, p < .001$ . That is, the proportion of target characters that were Caucasian in these films was significantly higher than the proportion of Caucasians in the U.S. population. Conversely, the proportion of target characters that were Black or Hispanic was significantly lower than the proportion of Blacks and Hispanics in the U.S. population.

In terms of age, roughly three fourths of all targets of such expressions were adults. The next most common age group was children (15%), with the remaining age groups of teens, elderly, and other making up fewer than 10% of all targets of relational expressions. See Figure 12. A chi-square test revealed that these differences were statistically significant,  $\chi^2(4, N = 1,074) = 2.15, p < .001$ .

The final demographic variable concerning target characters was sexual orientation. Across all SETs, roughly three fourths of the targets of relational expressions were heterosexual. About one quarter of relational expressions were targeted towards the “other” category (e.g., bisexual, unknown sexual orientation). Less than 1% of all targets were classified as gay. A chi-square test revealed that these differences were statistically significant,  $\chi^2(2, N = 1,074) = 1.68, p < .001$ . Post-hoc analyses showed that targets were significantly more likely to be heterosexual (77%<sub>b</sub>) and less likely to be gay (.5%<sub>a</sub>) than what would be expected by chance. However, other characters (i.e., bisexual, unidentifiable) did not significantly differ from what would be expected by chance (23%<sub>ab</sub>). See Figure 13.

The next set of analyses compares ideals and challenges directly in terms of the target of such expressions. A series of chi-square tests of homogeneity were conducted comparing ideals and challenges by each demographic variable. The only significant pattern pertained to sex of source,  $\chi^2(1, N = 1,074) = 34.156, p < .001, V^* = .18$ . As seen in Figure 14, challenges were more often targeted toward male characters than toward female characters. In fact, the ratio was almost 2:1 for such expressions. In contrast, ideals were slightly more likely to be targeted toward female characters than toward males.

None of the other demographic variables significantly differed between ideals and challenges, or differed by ideal type. See Table 7 for the demographic frequencies of target variables broken down by expression type (i.e., ideals versus challenges).

*Research question 6.* The sixth research question asked about the prominence of the characters that express ideals and challenges in romantic comedy films. For all SETs combined, roughly two thirds of the sources of relational expressions were primary characters, whereas just under one third was made up of secondary characters. See Figure 15. A chi-square goodness of fit test revealed that this difference was significant,  $\chi^2(1, N = 1,114) = 124.22, p < .001$ .

When ideals and challenges were compared directly, there was no statistical difference in terms of prominence of the source of these expressions. See Table 8. In other words, the vast majority of characters who expressed statements about relationships—regardless of whether these expressions were ideals or challenges—were primary rather than secondary characters.

*Research question 7.* The seventh research question asked about the prominence of the characters that were the targets of relational expressions in romantic comedy films. For all SETs combined, targets were more likely to be primary characters than secondary characters in the plotline. In fact, over two thirds of the targets were primary in nature, whereas less than one

third of the targets were secondary. See Figure 16. A chi-square test revealed that this difference was significant,  $\chi^2(1, N = 1,074) = 153.48, p < .001$ .

When ideals and challenges were compared directly, there was no statistical difference for prominence of the target by expression type. See Table 8. In other words, the vast majority of the recipients of these expressions were primary characters in the plot.

*Research question 8.* The eighth research question asked how often ideal themes were reinforced in the plot. Of the 375 ideal expressions, over half of these were positively reinforced or rewarded. About one fifth of the ideal expressions were punished, and the remaining one fourth of expressions received mixed or no reinforcements. See Figure 17. A chi-square goodness of fit test revealed a significant difference for type of reinforcement,  $\chi^2(3, N = 375) = 2.03, p < .001$ . Post-hoc analyses indicated that ideals were significantly more likely to be rewarded (56%<sub>b</sub>) in the plot than would be expected by chance. However punishments (20%<sub>a</sub>), neutral reactions (14%<sub>a</sub>) and mixed reactions (10%<sub>a</sub>) were less likely to be reinforcements than what would be expected by chance.

Theoretically, the explicit delivery of rewards versus punishments should have the strongest consequences for social learning. Accordingly, I isolated only those two categories of reinforcements to see if they were differently applied to the four types of ideals. The 2 x 4 chi square analysis was significant,  $\chi^2(3, N = 286) = 8.89, p < .05, V^* = .18$ . In general, ideal expressions were more likely to be rewarded than punished, regardless of ideal type. More specifically, soul mate/one and only expressions were rewarded more often than punished at a rate of 2:1. Idealization of partner and love at first sight expressions were rewarded more often than punished at a rate of 3:1. Finally, love conquers all expressions received rewarding reinforcements about four times as often as they received punishment reactions. See Figure 18.

*Research question 9.* The ninth research question was concerned with how challenges of the romantic ideal were reinforced. Results indicated that about half of the nearly 750 challenge expressions were reinforced negatively or punished. About one-quarter of the challenge expressions were rewarded, whereas the remaining 25% of expressions received mixed and neutral reinforcements. See Figure 19. A chi-square goodness-of-fit test revealed that this pattern was statistically significant for challenge expressions,  $\chi^2(3, N = 739) = 2.68, p < .001$ . Post-hoc analyses revealed that punishments (49% <sub>c</sub>) were more likely to be the reinforcements for challenge expressions than what would be expected by chance, whereas neutral reactions (14% <sub>a</sub>), and mixed reactions (10% <sub>a</sub>) were less likely than what would be expected by chance. Reinforcements of rewards (27% <sub>b</sub>) did not differ from chance for challenge expressions.

When the reinforcements of punishments and rewards only were compared for challenge expressions, results indicated that challenges were more likely to be punished (65%) than rewarded (35%). According to a chi-square test, this difference was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(1, N = 559) = 47.53, p < .001$ .

After analyzing challenge and ideal expressions separately, I ran an additional chi-square test to compare type of expression with type of reinforcement (rewards versus punishments). This chi-square test of independence revealed a significant pattern,  $\chi^2(1, N = 1,114) = 1.12, p < .001, V^* = .36$ . Whereas results indicated that rewards were evenly distributed across reinforcements for ideals and challenges, punishments were overwhelmingly more likely to reinforce challenge expressions as opposed to ideal expressions. See Figure 20.

## Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that romantic ideal expressions are quite prevalent in romantic comedy films. At the same time, however, these films also feature a large number of

expressions that directly challenge or contradict such ideals. In fact, in the majority of romantic comedies in this large sample, challenges are more common than ideals. Yet in spite of the prevalence of such counter messages throughout the plot, on the whole most of these movies celebrate romantic ideals as the overarching theme. Moreover, the different ways in which ideals and challenges are contextualized also serve to reinforce idealistic conceptions of intimate relationships.

In terms of specific findings, my first research question concerns how often romantic ideals are featured in popular romantic comedy films. The results revealed that nearly every film (98%) in my large sample of 52 movies contained at least one expression of a romantic ideal. The only anomaly was a film entitled *No Reservations* (2007). Unlike the typical romantic comedy, this film's plotline centered on the relationship between the primary female and her recently orphaned niece. Additionally, the romantic relationship between the two primary characters was portrayed fairly realistically, potentially explaining why no ideal expressions are present.

The overall pervasiveness of romantic expressions across the sample indicates that one can nearly always find ideals in such movies. Yet in terms of amount, it is arguably more meaningful to examine the rate of ideals within individual films. Here, I found that on average there were roughly 7 ideal expressions per film, or 1 ideal every 14 minutes. Thus, a viewer of a typical romantic comedy is likely to encounter a fairly steady dose of ideal expressions in a single film. At the high end, two films featured 19 expressions each: *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) and *Love Actually* (2003). The former film is the story of how William Shakespeare fell in love, thus providing the script ample opportunities for the Shakespeare character to exercise his romantic eloquence when conversing about his lover. The latter movie features multiple

romantic couples and their storylines, again offering a substantial number of opportunities for ideal expressions. At the low end, *Six Days, Seven Nights* (1998) and *The Break-up* (2006) were the only two films with just one ideal expression each. The first film featured a tumultuous and unlikely romance between a seemingly mismatched pair, whereas the second film depicted the story of a couple's inevitable break-up, thus potentially explaining the paucity of ideal expressions.

I also examined the density or rate of expressions over time. My sample covers a 10-year period and 52 films. The presence and amount of ideal expressions stayed fairly consistent over the 10-year span of my sample. In other words, ideals about romance are a staple in the conversations that ensue in romantic comedies and they have been so for the last decade.

Clearly ideals are common at the expression level but how prevalent are these notions as a thematic focus of the entire film? My study revealed that three fourths of the films in the sample featured an overarching romantic ideal message at the film level. As an example, *Maid in Manhattan* (2004) tells the story of a New York hotel cleaning lady who falls in love with a famous senator. The couple ultimately gets married after finding a way to overcome a series of major obstacles, including being dishonest with one another, coming from radically different social classes, identifying with different ethnicities, and dealing with significant issues at their respective places of employment. Another example, *Forces of Nature* (1999), features the story of how two people – played by Sandra Bullock and Ben Affleck – form a bond after a chance encounter obliges them to take a road trip together. Affleck is on his way to Georgia, where he is planning to marry his fiancée, but after a series of unusual events, he ultimately decides that fate has other ideas for his romantic destiny. In the end, he and Bullock forge ahead with a new romantic relationship.

Collectively, the results demonstrate that ideals about relationships are widely featured in romantic comedy films. From a theoretical standpoint, the dense prevalence of these ideals at the expression and film levels have implications for the impact that such films may have on the belief structures of regular viewers. According to cultivation theory, heavy viewers of romantic comedies should develop conceptions of the world that mirror the reality perpetuated by such content (Gerbner et al., 2002). In other words, individuals who watch a lot of romantic comedies should be more likely to believe that ideals about love and romance are a normal component in real-life relationships than would nonviewers or light viewers of this genre.

The second research question concerns how often challenges to romantic ideals are featured in these movies. Similar to the presence of ideals, I found that 98% of my sample contained at least one expression of a challenge. Counter to the popular assumption that romantic movies are purely idealistic, then, these films routinely feature direct contradictions to the romantic ideal. Only one movie in the sample was void of challenges. *Bringing Down the House* (2003) contained no challenge expressions at all, in part because the movie focuses primarily on the development of a friendship instead of the elements of a blossoming romantic relationship.

Turning to density or rate, I found that there was an average of 14 challenges per film, or 1 challenge expression every 8 minutes. The range of challenges was fairly sizable, however, at 32. At the extreme end, *Knocked Up* (2007) contained a total of 32 challenges, or 1 every 4 minutes. This film features the story of a mismatched couple who, after enjoying a one-night stand, realizes they have created a pregnancy. Multiple fights and tough discussions ensue, thus accounting for the large number of challenge expressions in this film. At the low end, *Maid of Honor* (2008) had just three challenge expressions in the entire movie.

Much like the rate of ideals, the density of challenge expressions remained fairly consistent throughout the 10-year period. Both over-time patterns indicate a great deal of stability in the content of romantic comedies over the last decade.

The presence of both romantic ideals and challenges in these films is consistent with previous research. Johnson and Holmes (2009) found through their grounded theory analysis of romantic comedy movies (i.e., they did not develop a theoretical-based code book prior to analyses) that the relationships depicted in these films often have both idealistic and undesirable qualities attached to them. In their study, for example, the two most common categories of relational incidents were “affection” and “relationship issues.” The former was characterized as romantic behaviors that demonstrated physical and verbal affection between partners, whereas the latter referred to problems that couples encounter during the development of romantic relationships. The findings of my study tend to follow a similar pattern in that expressions about relationships in such films were fairly frequent and featured ideal as well as challenge statements.

Yet a closer look at my results indicates that challenge messages actually occurred more often than ideal messages did. In fact, the ratio was two to one. Thus, a typical viewer confronts many more “realistic” appraisals of romance in these films than idealistic messages. How, then, can romantic comedies have such a popularized conception 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 (Neale & Krutnik, 1995; Shumway, 1991). To be sure, this happy ending typically is contingent upon the couple overcoming some obstacle or challenge along the way (Allen, 1999; Neale & Krutnik, 1995). Allen (1999), a cultural scholar who studies narrative theory as it applies to the romantic



comedy genre, put it this way: “After all, if the lovers get together right away, then there isn't much of a narrative” (p. 77). The idea, then, is that the juxtaposition of challenges with ideals is a literary device designed to set up tension and advance an interesting plot – a plot that typically resolves itself with an ideal conclusion.

Looking at both SET and film level data, my findings support this idea. Whereas challenges were more common at the SET level, ideal messages were more common at the film level. In fact, less than one fourth of the movies (23%) featured a challenge theme as the overall relational message. In other words, the takeaway message was far more likely to be idealistic than realistic, at a ratio of about three to one.

As an example of this tension between challenge expressions and overarching ideal conclusions, the film *Six Days Seven Nights* (1998) features a couple that has a discussion in one scene about whether the newly formed relationship has a chance at survival. He lives in Hawaii, whereas she lives in New York. The male character, played by Harrison Ford, says to the female character, played by Anne Heche:

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.

She agrees, and it seems that this challenge expression marks the end of their romance.

However, by the film's conclusion, he chases after her to the airport and says: “I've decided my life is too simple. I want to complicate the hell out of it.” They kiss and the credits roll. This love conquers all conclusion is made all the more salient by the previous challenge expression.

The idea that obstacles are necessary for the development of storylines is an intriguing creative formula. Yet an important question remains: how do viewers interpret this juxtaposition

of conflicting messages? Narrative theorists such as Graesser, Olde, and Klettke (2002) have grappled with this issue and describe the conundrum in the following way:

How does the point of a story systematically emerge from the configuration of important goals, actions, obstacles, conflicts, and resolutions expressed in the plot? The relationship between these two levels appears to be as mysterious and complicated as the relationship between word meanings and sentence meanings (p. 235).

In short, the tension between the obstacles of a narrative and the overall theme or point of the story presents perplexing implications for how stories are comprehended and remembered.

There is some empirical evidence that the overall message takes precedent when individuals try to recall a story (Graesser et al., 2002; Zwaan & Singer, 2003). One possible reason for the dominance of the overall message is that people seem to recognize that obstacles and minor conflicts are simply necessary details for telling the story (Graesser, et al., 2002). In fact, Zwaan and Singer (2003) use an assortment of empirical research studies to demonstrate that the purpose of details within a narrative is to substantiate an overall message, and that individuals often comprehend the overall message or moral to the story more completely than they do plotline details. In short, despite the fact that viewers will encounter expressions that challenge romantic ideals more frequently than they will see ideal expressions in this genre of film, empirical evidence and narrative theory both suggest that it is the takeaway message that is likely to be most salient for viewers.

Although rare, it should be noted that roughly one in four movies in my sample actually did feature a more realistic conception of romance as the overarching theme. As an example, *The Break-Up* (2006) follows the story of a long-term couple and their emotionally volatile and

verbally abusive romantic separation. By the conclusion of the film, the couple decides to split permanently. In other words, this film featured numerous challenges at the scene level as well as an overarching realistic theme of romance. Other examples of this sort included *No Reservations* (2007), *Fool's Gold* (2008), and *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* (2008). In each of these films, the focus of the movie narrative was on the realistic or unpleasant qualities of a romantic relationship instead of the more ideal or fantastical elements so common in this genre. These films defy the formulaic narrative of most films in my sample.

Research Question 3 concerns the specific types of ideals that are expressed in these movies. At the SET or scene level, I found that just under half of all expressions focused on the soul mate/one and only ideal. As an illustration, one scene in the movie *Hitch* (2005) features the protagonist who is trying to console her friend who has just broken up with her boyfriend. The protagonist states, “You’re gonna meet a great guy, with a great smile, and you’ll travel the world together... He just hasn’t found you yet.” The same soul mate theme is expressed later in the film when Will Smith tells the protagonist, “People search their whole life trying to find [the one].” As another illustration, at the end of the movie *Runaway Bride* (1999), Julia Roberts says to Richard Gere, “I guarantee that if I don’t ask you to be mine, I’ll regret it for the rest of my life...because I know in my heart, you’re the only one for me.” He accepts the proposal, and the film ends with a wedding ceremony.

Arguably, the soul mate/one and only ideal is the most extreme of the romantic conceptions about relationships. It emphasizes that there is literally only one person who is destined to be the perfect mate for an individual. In a film, the plot can twist and turn while a character struggles to realize who the soul mate is. Once that soul mate is found, the relationship is on track for goodness and stability.

Although the soul mate notion may seem somewhat fantastic, research indicates that believing in this ideal may be a factor in healthy relational functioning. For example, Franiuk et al. (2002) found that a general belief in the existence of soul mates was positively associated with relational durability and satisfaction, but *only* when individuals considered their partners to be their matching soul mates. According to my content analysis, the soul mate ideal is perpetrated in a great number of films. If these films contribute to people's views of relationships, romantic comedies could be construed as a positive socializing force in that they model relational functioning and provide hope for individuals who believe they are in relationships with their soul mates.

The next most common ideal at the expression level was idealization of other. Roughly one in three ideals expressed in these films fell into this category. As an example, one scene in the movie *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) features the male protagonist's passionate soliloquy: "What light is light if Sylvia be not seen? What joy is joy if Sylvia be not by? Unless it is to think that she is by, and to feed upon the shadow of perfection." As another example, in one scene of the *Runaway Bride* (1999), a supporting character says to his fiancée, played by Julia Roberts, "I'm bragging about how good you are, and how I'm the luckiest man alive." Similarly, in *Made of Honor* (2008), the primary female character says to her fiancée: "You are the perfect guy." Each of these expressions demonstrates one character idealizing another, or focusing on the good, perfect, or wonderful qualities of his/her romantic interest.

Research suggests that idealizing a partner may have a positive effect on relational functioning. In one study, Murray et al. (1996) surveyed 360 married and partnered people and found that idealization in romantic relationships was associated with higher levels of relational satisfaction. As a way of explaining this connection, the researchers found evidence that

individuals often projected their idealistic beliefs onto their current relationships. It may be, then, that repeated viewing of romantic comedies that promote the idealization of a love could encourage viewers to think of their own relational partners as wonderful and perfect.

Alternatively, such films could remind people of the shortcomings of their own relationships, particularly in those cases in which the partner is already perceived as less than ideal. Future studies should explore the impact of watching movies that idealize partners on viewers in different types of relationships.

The third most common category of ideals was love conquers all; roughly one quarter of all expressions featured this ideal. As an example, in one scene of *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), Gwyneth Paltrow speaks about her wishes in life to her nurse:

I will have poetry in my life. And adventure. And love. Love above all. No... not the artful postures of love, not playful and poetical games of love for the amusement of an evening, but 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.

As she makes these statements, her voice and facial expressions indicate a powerful yearning to experience this intensity of love that overcomes all, that is all-consuming, and that is intoxicating. Another example can be seen in the film *Just Like Heaven* (2005). In one scene, a friend is trying to convince the protagonist to forget about a woman because the obstacles they face are too overbearing. The friend asks the protagonist, "Do you know what you're risking for this woman?"

The male protagonist replies, "Yes."

The friend then asks, "Why?"

The protagonist responds in a voice that suggests he is helpless to the power of his feelings: “Because I love her. I love her. I do.”

To him, it makes no difference that he has to make substantial sacrifices to be with this woman. He loves her, and to him that is all that matters. Similarly, in *Fool’s Gold* (2008), the primary character believes that his love is enough to make the primary female character ignore the past and choose to marry him when he says: “I love you. I’ve learned a lot from my mistakes. Marry me?”

Research indicates that of all the ideals, the notion that love conquers all is the most widely endorsed among adults (Sprecher & Metts, 1989, 1999). In general, a belief in this ideal is associated with long-term positive relational functioning, such as increased satisfaction and higher levels of partner commitment (Sprecher & Metts, 1989, 1999). Nevertheless, in some cases embracing this ideal can have negative consequences. Research indicates that people can stay too long in unsafe and unsatisfying relationships because they use romanticism to mask negative aspects of the relationship (McNulty, et al., 2008). Endorsing this ideal might lead people to overlook dangerous flaws in their partners, such as verbal or physical abuse (e.g., Kulkarni, 2007; Lloyd, 1991). Future research is needed to determine how exposure to such messages in romantic films might impact the beliefs of viewers and how those beliefs, in turn, might impact relational functioning.

The fourth and final category of ideals, love at first sight, was rarely expressed in the large sample of romantic comedies I analyzed. In fact, fewer than 10% of the expressions in these films featured a love at first sight theme. Though rare, the movies *Hitch* (2005) and *27 Dresses* (2008) provide several good examples of this category. In *Hitch* (2005), a male character says to his business acquaintance: “Have you ever met someone and you knew right

away she was going to be important to you? Not just because of her looks, but, you know, that x factor?” Contradicting the notion that it takes time to get to know a person, this ideal suggests that a meaningful connection can be made within moments of an encounter. In fact, in *27 Dresses* (2008), just the mere sight of the other person signaled to one protagonist that he and the main female character had a bright romantic future: “The second that I saw you, I knew that we could be great together.”

Just as this type of expression was rarely found in romantic comedies, it is also an ideal that is not widely accepted among adults. In several studies of college students, love at first sight was consistently the least commonly endorsed romantic ideal, presumably because it is only associated with the early stages of a relationship and consequently is not considered as overarching and important (Sprecher & Metts, 1989, 1999). Nonetheless, some people do in fact believe in this ideal. One study suggests that endorsement of this type of ideal is associated with mixed qualities in a relationship. Barelds and Barelds-Dijkstra (2007) asked 137 cohabiting or married couples about how they met and about the nature of their relationship. The researchers found that partners who fell in love at first sight were more dissimilar in their personalities and became intimately involved (i.e., had sexual intercourse) more quickly than did partners who were friends first or who developed their relationship at a rate slower than “love at first sight.” However, there was no significant difference in reported quality of the relationship as a function of how quickly the relationship started. The researchers suggested that falling in love at first sight may be a viable way to enter into a relationship, particularly if the romantic passion the couple shares can buffer any personality dissimilarities (Barelds & Barelds-Dijkstra, 2007).

At the SET or scene level, then, all four types of ideals were expressed, albeit in different levels of frequencies. However, at the film level, a slightly different pattern emerged. Here,

only two ideals were featured as the overarching theme in these movies: love conquers all and soul mate/one and only. Love conquers all was far more common at the film level; nearly 65% of the movies featured this theme whereas less than 15% featured the soul mate/one and only theme. One movie that featured the theme of love conquers all was *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), in which the main couple faces numerous cultural and familial challenges, but they persist throughout and marry happily at the end. Another example is *Just Like Heaven* (2005), in which a lonely man falls in love with the spirit of the woman who used to live in his apartment. In terms of soul mate/one and only, one example was *Forces of Nature* (1999), in which the couple meets and falls in love after a series of happenstance events force them to spend several days together. Another example was the film *Serendipity* (2001), in which a couple randomly meets in New York City for one night and says goodbye, only to spend the next three years trying to find one another. On the day when they are each scheduled to wed other people, fate finally brings the two together and they live happily ever after.

None of the movies in my sample featured love at first sight or idealization of other as the overarching relational message. One reason that these two ideals presumably are not featured as a film's overriding theme is that such themes generally mark the beginning of courtship when couples first meet or first get to know each other. As such, these ideals are not necessarily sustainable across an entire plotline.

The four ideals I analyzed in my study were chosen because they are well-documented romantic beliefs that people hold in Western societies (Bell, 1975; Knox & Sporkowski, 1968; Lantz et al., 1968; Sprecher & Metts, 1989; Walster, 1976). My findings indicate that the romantic comedy film genre does indeed feature these four ideals prominently and consistently over time. In other words, such movies are one form of popular culture that reinforces the



romantic ideal. Future research should examine the presence of these four ideals in other popular media, such as television, music, and even other genres of film.

Additionally, there may be other romantic ideals that should be explored in future studies of media content. For example, many people endorse the idea that time heals all wounds and that marriage is the only way to demonstrate true love and commitment (Deleyto, 2003; Johnson, 2007; McClanahan, 2007). There are also a number of ideals associated with weddings in Western culture, because the wedding is often considered the necessary culmination of a “normal courtship” (Otnes & Pleck, 2003; Shumway, 1991). Do these types of ideals also figure prominently in popular romantic media content? At a minimum, future research should systematically analyze romantic comedy films for the presence of ideals alternative to the ones explored in my study.

The remaining research questions deal with the contextual features associated with romantic ideals and challenges in these films. The fourth research question asks about the types of characters that make relational statements in these films. Results revealed that the vast majority of sources of such expressions were White (94%), adult (94%), and heterosexual (99%). In general, there was little variation in the types of characters that expressed relational ideals and challenges.

Although this representation of characters may not seem to correspond with real-world demographics, this bias in media depiction is not unique to romantic comedy films. In fact, other types of fictional screen media tend to reveal a similar pattern. For example, Harwood and Anderson (2002) content analyzed prime-time comedies and dramas on television and found that children and elderly characters were underrepresented, whereas Whites and adults were overrepresented. In short, the findings of my romantic comedy content analysis seem to

reinforce the demographic representation bias found in other types of screen media portrayals.

This uneven representation of race, age, and sexuality could have implications for how viewers respond to these messages. From a cultivation perspective, these films could signal that idealistic relationships and even conversations about ideal romances are reserved only for Caucasian, heterosexual adults. Young viewers of such films may come to believe that White, heterosexual couples are full of romance and can manage any challenge, whereas other types of relationships are not so ideal or lucky. These viewers may come to think that romance cannot happen after the age of 35. Heavy viewers may also overestimate the amount of time that white heterosexual people in the real world spend talking about intimate relationships.

From the perspective of social cognitive theory, we know that viewers attend the most to the characters that are similar to the self (Bandura, 2002). The source character findings in my study indicate that young adults who are Caucasian and heterosexual will pay most attention to the messages in these movies (Bandura, 2002). The ramification of this is that for specific subgroups of viewers, romantic comedy viewing could be very discouraging. Indeed, a young person who is just discovering his or her homosexuality will not see very many characters in the romantic comedy genre that are similar to the self. Similarly, a young African American couple that wants to go see a romantic comedy will find that most of the depictions and conversations are among White characters. Even the elderly, a growing segment in the United States' population, will not see very many examples of older characters talking about romance or falling in love in these films.

Despite the fact that the majority of characters are White, adult, and straight, there are some notable exceptions worth addressing. In terms of race, a few films in my sample feature primary characters that are not White. In each of the movies *Down To Earth* (2001), *Bringing*

*Down the House* (2003), *Hitch* (2005), and *Norbit* (2007), one of the primary characters is African-American. In *Maid in Manhattan* (2002), the primary female character, played by Jennifer Lopez, is described as Latina.

In terms of age, the movie *Something's Gotta Give* (2003) features a love story between Jack Nicholson and Diane Keaton, both of whom are well into their 60s. The plot follows their courtship in a mostly realistic way, detailing the issues and concerns that an older couple might face when beginning a new relationship. Another example of an underrepresented age group in these films is adolescents. In the movie *Because I Said So* (2007), a subplot of the film focuses on the relationship between the teenage daughter and her boyfriend. Despite these exceptions, age groups other than adults are not well represented or targeted in romantic comedy films. One limitation of my study is that I did not code the "adult" category with greater specificity. This group comprised individuals ranging from age 18 to 64. My sense from watching many of these films is that most of the characters are in the "young adult" category and that older, middle-aged adults are also largely ignored in these movies. Future research should look at more specific age ranges to see which groups are being represented and which are rarely featured.

Although there was little demographic variation among the sources, the one exception pertained to the sex of these characters. Roughly half of the SETs were expressed by males and half by females. In other words, both male and female characters, in roughly equal proportions, talked about relationships in these films. This pattern seems to contradict 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, in the romantic

comedy genre, both sexes discuss relationships and make statements about romance in about equal proportions. Interestingly, research also demonstrates that women generally wish that men would talk more about relational issues during courtship and in marriages (Riessman, 1993; 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 are discussing the nature of the relationship.

Although both male and female characters talked about relationships equally in these films, there was a difference in what they said. That is, female characters more often expressed challenges, whereas male characters more often expressed ideals. Again, this pattern seems somewhat counterintuitive given that women seem to value relationships so much in the real world. Indeed, research indicates that women rate faithfulness, love, and lifelong commitment as more important than do men (e.g., Meier, Hull, & Ortyl, 2009). However, it may take hard work to achieve these levels of relational functioning. That is, women may believe faithfulness to be important, but also realize that maintaining faithfulness in a relationship takes a great deal of effort and does not magically happen. Men may disagree. In fact, research indicates that in general men tend to be more romantically idealistic than women in their belief structures (e.g., Sprecher & Metts, 1989). Likewise, movies are representing men as the characters who express the most ideals. Taken together, these results—women express challenges, men express ideals—suggest that character expressions in these films may mirror sex differences observed in the real world.

Research Question 5 concerns the types of characters that are the targets of expressions about relationships in these films. The findings are similar to that of sources in that the majority

of all target characters were White (92%), adult (76%), and heterosexual (77%). However, this pattern was not as extreme. For age, 15% of the targets were children, often because the main characters discuss their relationship woes and triumphs with a younger sibling, daughter, or son. For example, in *Maid in Manhattan* (2002), the female protagonist has a young son with whom both she and the male protagonist have discussions about love and romance. In terms of sexuality, the less extreme pattern here is a result of many target characters playing such minor roles that their sexuality was not able to be determined (i.e., comprising the category of “other”).

Similar to sources, though, there was variability in terms of sex of the target. Roughly half of the expressions were targeted toward males and half toward females. This finding once again challenges the common assumption that women are the ones who focus on relationship issues. In romantic comedies, it is not just female characters talking to other females about love and romance. Male characters were just as likely to be the targets of these relational expressions.

The *types* of messages that were targeted to males and females differ, however. Male characters more often received challenges, whereas female characters were more often the targets of ideals. When combined with the findings related to source characters, these results show an interesting pattern: male characters express ideals, but are the targets of challenges, whereas female characters express challenges but are the targets of ideals. From a cultivation perspective (Gerbner et al., 2002), this formula could have ramifications for how male and female viewers conceptualize normal interactions within romantic relationships. That is, women who view these movies on a regular basis might develop expectations that their male partner should be the torchbearer for idealistic sentiments. For example, in *The Holiday* (2006), the male character who lives in England tells his paramour who lives in Los Angeles: “Long distance relationships can work.” Conversely, male viewers might develop expectations that

women will be the more realistic in relationships or that they frequently will downplay any type of idealistic overture. In fact, in the example cited above, the woman responded to the idea of making a long distance relationship work (i.e., a love conquers ideal) with the following challenge expression: “I can’t make a relationship in the same house work.” Whereas a woman might anticipate that a man will express idealistic statements about love and romance when he interacts with her, a man might expect a woman to be the pragmatist who thinks about the harsh realities of a romantic relationship.

Furthermore, from a social cognitive perspective (Bandura, 1986), individuals are more likely to identify with those characters to which they feel similar. Thus, men may be more likely than women to develop idealistic beliefs after viewing, simply because men are more likely to express these ideal statements in romantic comedies. More research is needed to properly tease out any potential links between viewing and effects.

The sixth and seventh research questions concern the prominence of the characters involved in ideal and challenge expressions in romantic comedy films. For both sources and targets, roughly two thirds of the characters were primary and about one third were secondary. According to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), viewers are likely to pay most attention to the main characters in these films, in part because they are typically highly attractive movie stars and they spend a great deal of time on screen. As such, these primary characters are likely to be role models—especially among young people—which suggests that these relational expressions are probably noticed and learned by viewers.

The last two research questions concern whether ideals and challenges are reinforced in the plotline. My study revealed that ideal expressions received positive reinforcements in the story most of the time. For example, in the film *Sex and The City* (2008), the primary male

character, Mr. Big, tenderly declares to Carrie, the primary female character, “Carrie, you’re the one.” She responds by smiling, hugging, and kissing him. This is an example of a soul mate/one and only ideal being reinforced with a reward. Whereas ideal expressions were rewarded over half of the time, they were punished about one fifth of the time. Roughly one quarter of ideal expressions received either a neutral (no reaction) or mixed response. The overall message here is that ideals are mostly treated well in these films.

On the other hand, challenge expressions were more likely punished. For example, the film *The Wedding Planner* (2001) includes an example of a negative reinforcement. During a scene in which primary character Matthew McConaughey is attempting to break up with a secondary character, he 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 she begins crying. This is an example of a challenge expression being reinforced by a punishment. Whereas challenge expressions were punished about half of the time, they were rewarded about one quarter of the time. Roughly one quarter of challenge expressions received either a neutral or mixed response. The overall message here is that challenges are mostly treated poorly in these films.

Although rewards and punishments were the most common type of reinforcements for ideals and challenges, these relational expressions received a neutral reinforcement (neither rewarded nor punished) about 15% of the time. For example, in *The Break-Up* (2006), the primary male character, played by Vince Vaughn, yells this expression to the primary female character: “All you do is nag me. ‘The bathroom’s a mess.’ ‘Your belt doesn’t match.’ ‘Hey, Gary, you should probably go work out.’ Nothing I ever do is ever good enough. I just want to be left the hell alone!” The primary female, played by Jennifer Aniston, reacts with stunned

silence. This is an example of a challenge expression receiving a neutral reinforcement.

In general, then, romantic comedies feature a great number of ideals, most of which are rewarded in the plot, and an even greater number of challenges, most of which are punished in the storyline. Despite the pervasive number of challenges in these films, the overall narrative celebrates idealism. Social cognitive theory posits that viewers are more likely to learn when a modeled behavior is positively reinforced or rewarded than when it is punished (Bandura, 1965). According to this theory, the straightforward interpretation of my findings is that viewers of these films will be more likely to learn idealistic conceptions—not realistic ones—about love and romance.

However, Bandura's (1965) research also demonstrated that many viewers would imitate a behavior modeled on screen if it was not overtly punished. Whereas roughly one half of all challenges were punished, only one fifth of all ideal expressions were punished. This suggests an even stronger indication that viewers will learn to endorse idealistic beliefs about romance simply because of the lack of overt punishments to ideal statements.

Future research should take a closer look at how these expressions are reinforced. For example, my study did not measure the different ways characters can be rewarded, such as through physical touch, material rewards, or verbal affirmation. Unpacking these types of positive reinforcements would be helpful, particularly those associated with physical or sexual intimacy. Research suggests that physiological arousal is an important factor in people's responses to media content (Harris & Barlett, 2009; Hoffner & Levine, 2005; Peter & Valkenburg, 2008; Zillmann, 1991). Increased arousal causes people to pay more attention to media content (de Jong, 2009; Lang & Dhillon, 1995; Ye & Zhou, 2007). It also can enhance people's emotional responses to media content (Kang & Cappella, 2008), and it can even



enhance behavioral responses such as aggression and helping behavior (Bushman & Huesmann, 2006). In the case of romantic comedies, if ideal expressions are constantly coupled or reinforced by physical intimacy, viewers should be more likely to notice these statements and to react emotionally to them. A physical reward may contribute to arousal among viewers, therefore making those expressions more likely to be remembered and endorsed. More specificity in the content analysis portion of a study would help set up ways to test these effects in subsequent projects.

Similarly, future research should unpack what constitutes a challenge expression in these films. I had difficulty obtaining coder reliability when I tried to further divide these statements into two categories—realistic expressions and anti-ideal expressions—in part, because the antithesis of an ideal is not always substantively different than a realistic expression. Future research should establish a scheme that includes a number of different realistic themes, such as “it takes hard work to make a relationship last” or “we may love each other, but that is not enough.” This added level of specificity could better record the content of these films and subsequently inform future research associated with the effects of viewing these messages.

Another suggestion for future research includes recording how much time is devoted to expressions of ideals as opposed to expressions of challenges. The length of the expression might signal to viewers that the expression is an important issue, and consequently may be an issue that viewers pay attention to more so than another topic with shorter length. For instance, it could be that ideal statements are short expressions that are stated quickly and simply, (i.e., “Love at first sight is wonderful.”), whereas challenge expressions may be more often associated with lengthier statements about complex relationship issues. Future studies should record how long each expression lasted, because the length of time devoted to the statement might make a

difference for how viewers are influenced.

Another path for future research is to focus on the use of humor in these films. Humor often contextualizes violence in movies and television shows (Wilson et al., 2002), and this coupling can serve to trivialize aggression in the eyes of viewers (Potter & Warren, 1998). Humor is an inherent component of this genre of film, but how is it used? Are ideals treated more seriously and challenges routinely made fun of in the plot? If challenges are used primarily as moments of comic relief, and therefore not taken seriously, this could have implications for how viewers respond to such expressions.

In summary, the findings of this study indicate that romantic ideal expressions are quite prevalent in romantic comedy films. However, these films also feature a large number of expressions that challenge these ideals. Despite the fact that challenge expressions appear twice as many times as ideals, the ways in which these expressions are contextualized should have implications for viewer influence. In general, romantic comedies feature a great number of ideals, most of which are rewarded in the plot, and an even greater number of challenges, most of which are punished in the storyline. This pattern celebrates idealism. According to social cognitive theory, viewers of these films should be more likely to learn idealistic conceptions—not realistic ones—about love and romance, because the ideal expressions are the ones that are most often rewarded.

Moreover, there were notable differences in what male and female characters expressed in these films. Although both male and female characters talked about relationships equally in these films, there was a difference in what they said. That is, male characters expressed ideals, but were the targets of challenges, whereas female characters expressed challenges but were the targets of ideals. From a cultivation perspective, the potential viewing implication is that a

woman might anticipate that a man will express idealistic statements about love and romance when he interacts with her, a man might expect a woman to be the pragmatist who thinks about the harsh realities of a romantic relationship. Furthermore, from a social cognitive perspective (Bandura, 1986), men may be more likely than women to develop idealistic beliefs after viewing, simply because men are more likely to express these ideal statements in romantic comedies.

However, we cannot make substantive claims about the effects exposure to these romantic films may have on viewers without testing that relationship. The next step is to determine whether viewing these types of films is positively associated with endorsement of ideal beliefs. In particular, research must be done to see if there is a meaningful connection between the content of these movies and the beliefs that particular viewers subsequently endorse.

CHAPTER 4:  
STUDY 2: A SURVEY INVESTIGATING YOUNG PEOPLE'S BELIEFS ABOUT  
RELATIONSHIPS

Study 1 revealed that romantic comedies contain numerous romantic expressions, many of which focus on ideals about love and relationships. In addition, many of these idealistic statements are rewarded in the plotline. Moreover, when these idealistic statements are challenged directly, those challenges are frequently punished. Finally, Study 1 substantiated that most films portray an overarching message of idealism as the main theme.

The next question concerns what impact such films have on viewers. Does frequent exposure to this type of idealistic content change how viewers perceive romantic relationships? As indicated in Chapter 1, previous studies have examined the relationship between exposure to romantic media and people's relational perceptions, expectations, attitudes, and behaviors (Alexander, 1985; Eggermont, 2004; Fallis, Fitzpatrick, & Friestad, 1985; Punyanunt-Carter, 2006; Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008; Segrin & Nabi, 2002). Yet all of these studies measured television exposure as the independent variable. We know very little about the effects of romantic films in particular on beliefs, outside of the dissertation by Edison (2006) discussed in Chapter 1. Thus, Study 2 was designed to address this gap in the field.

In Study 2, I conducted a survey of undergraduates and asked them to report on their exposure to romantic comedy films as well as their beliefs about romance. I chose an undergraduate sample as my target age group for several reasons. First, this age group is likely to watch a great number of romantic comedies. Young adults between the ages of 16 and 24 represent the largest portion of frequent moviegoers (i.e., a person who sees at least one movie in a theater per month) in the United States (Motion Picture Association of America, 2009).<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, a nationwide survey of individuals between the ages of 15 and 83 found that the youngest group (13-25) was the most likely to report romantic comedy as their favorite movie genre (Fischhoff, Antonio, & Lewis, 1997). Second, young adults are likely to identify with the characters in these films. Romantic films are known for featuring highly attractive, young movie stars as the lead characters. For example, Katherine Heigl and James Marsden are the leads in *27 Dresses* (2008), and Kate Hudson is the lead in *Fool's Gold* (2008). In addition, I found in Study 1 that nearly all of the characters who talk about relationships in these films are adults. I did not have coders assess the precise age of those adults, but across the 52 films in my sample, the vast majority of primary characters were in the “young adult” age range (i.e., 18-35). In general, then, these films seem to be targeting a young adult audience.

Third, young adults are in the precise period of development that would make this type of movie content most salient. Most people experience their first serious romantic relationship during the early adult years (Regan, Durvasula, Howell, Ureño, & Rea, 2004), so this age group should be drawn to romantic stories in media. Yet young adults’ experience with relationships is still in its infancy so they are less likely to be cynical or jaded by a failed romance. Compared to older adults, then, college aged viewers may be less likely to discount romantic films as unrealistic.

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 et al., 2002). Moreover, the films should have the greatest impact on people with little direct experience in this arena—in this case, young college students. Social cognitive theory posits that learning from media is most likely to occur when the model is

attractive and when a viewer strongly identifies with characters on screen (Bandura, 1984). Given that most of the characters featured in these romance stories are young, attractive movie stars, young adults are likely to pay attention to the models because they are both attractive and similar in age to the viewers. Social cognitive theory also maintains that models who are rewarded are more influential than are those who are punished. 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 adopted or learned by viewers. In line with the tenets of these theories and the findings from my first study, I predicted the following:

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

The results of Study 1 not only documented that romantic ideals are prevalent in these films, but also that certain types of ideals are featured more often than others. In particular, I 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. However, love conquers all was the most common ideal at the film level, and soul mate/one and only was the only other ideal to be classified as an overarching theme. According to cultivation theory (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986), the ideals that are most pervasive should also be the ones that are endorsed most strongly by heavy viewers. In accordance with that logic, I proposed the following hypothesis:

H2: The ideals most commonly portrayed in romantic comedy films will be the ones most strongly endorsed by heavy viewers.

The first two hypotheses predict generalized effects for all those who regularly view romantic films. However, it stands to reason that not all viewers will be affected in similar ways.

There are a number of factors that may moderate or alter the effect of such content. As noted above, real-life experience can sometimes diminish the effects of media exposure because individuals may discount the depictions as unrealistic (Gerbner et al., 2002). Overall, college students should have less relational experience than older adults do, but there still are likely to be differences within this select age group. For example, some young adults have had numerous partners during high school and even in college, whereas others have yet to have a serious relationship. To date, research on the impact of romantic media exposure on romantic beliefs has focused exclusively on individuals who are not in romantic relationships (Edison, 2006; Segrin & Nabi, 2002). However, it is likely that real-life romantic experience influences how romantic comedies are interpreted. In other words, relational experience may moderate the association between movie viewing and romantic beliefs. Therefore, I proposed the following hypothesis.

H3: The relationship between exposure and beliefs will be stronger among those with less relational experience.

Another factor that may alter the impact of the viewing experience is perceived realism of the media (Potter, 1986; Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). Very young children believe what they see on the screen is an accurate reflection of real life (Low & Durkin, 2001; Potter, 1988). As they develop, children become increasingly skeptical about how accurate or realistic media are (Greenberg & Reeves, 1976; Wright, Huston, Reitz, & Piemyat, 1994). Nevertheless, there are still reliable differences even among adults in perceived reality of media (Hall, 2003; Potter, 1988). Moreover, these differences play a role in media effects. For example, Taylor (2005) found that perceived realism moderated the association between exposure to sexual content on television and related sexual beliefs. In particular, the relationship between viewing and the

perception that sexual activity was prevalent among peers was greater among those participants who reported high perceived realism of television content. Using this research as a framework, I proposed the following hypothesis:

H4: The association between viewing and beliefs will be stronger for those who perceive movies to be most realistic.

In addition to past experiences and perceived reality, another factor that is likely to make some individuals more susceptible to these films concerns the motives for viewing. The uses and gratifications perspective posits that there are a variety of reasons why people watch television and films (Palmgreen, 1984; Rubin, 1994). Moreover, these reasons are crucial in terms of media effects (Perse & Rubin, 1988; Ruggiero, 2000). In support of this idea, 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. Other studies have also found stronger effects on people who report using media in order to learn as opposed to other motivations (Diddi & LaRose, 2006; Namsu, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009). Accordingly, I proposed the following:

H5: The association between viewing and beliefs will be stronger among those who report watching romantic comedies in order to learn.

In addition to motives, an individual's reactions to the characters in these films may be pivotal. According to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2002), viewers who feel similar to the characters onscreen will pay more attention to the content and learn more from these models than will those who feel no such similarity. In support of this idea, Hoffner and Buchanan (2005) found that perceived similarity with television characters was positively associated with children's desire to be like those fictional role models. Focusing on adults, a number of studies



have found that identification with characters can enhance the effects of exposure to screen media (Cohen, 2001; Tian & Hoffner, 2010). For example, Harrison (1997) found that liking of and feeling similar to thin TV characters was positively associated with symptoms of disordered eating among female college students. Based on this research and on the tenets of social cognitive theory, I proposed the following hypothesis.

H6: The association between viewing and beliefs will be stronger among those who perceive themselves to be similar to romantic comedy characters.

A final factor to consider is sex of the viewer. In the case of romantic comedies, there are several reasons for expecting that males and females will be influenced in different ways by these films. On one hand, women like and watch all types of romantic screen media more often than men do (Harris et al., 2004; Segrin & Nabi, 2002). In a nationwide survey of people's (ages 15-83) favorite types of movies, 31% of women reported romantic comedy films as their top choice compared to only 4% of men (Fischhoff et al., 1997). Women also believe more strongly than men that faithfulness, lifelong commitment, and love are important components of relationships (Meier et al., 2009; Rose & Frieze, 1993). Thus, the messages in romantic comedy films may be more salient for female viewers. In support of this idea, Eggermont (2004) found that exposure to romantic themes on television predicted girls' romantic beliefs more strongly than boys' beliefs. In short, women may pay more attention to and be more involved with these films.

On the other hand, data from Study 1 demonstrated that male characters in these films were more likely to express idealistic statements than female characters were. Given this pattern, it may be that young men will be more strongly impacted than young women by the romantic messages in these films. After all, young men are the most likely to identify with the male

characters that are the most consistently romantic and unrealistic in the plotlines.

Clearly, sex of the participant is likely to be a factor in how these movies are interpreted. Yet given the mixed findings, it is difficult to ascertain whether females or males will be influenced more, so I posed the following research question.

RQ1: Does sex of participant moderate the association between viewing and endorsement of romantic beliefs?

### Method

This survey was designed to assess the relationship between undergraduate students' exposure to romantic comedy movies and their beliefs about intimate relationships. The following sections describe the sample, procedure, and measures.

#### *Participants*

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 African American (14%), Asian (12%) or Latino (5%). Only two students (1%) did not report any demographic information and they were eliminated from analyses.

#### *Procedure*

Recruitment occurred during regularly scheduled class time. I visited communication courses in the spring of 2010 and invited interested undergraduate students to participate in this study in exchange for extra credit. I briefly introduced the purpose of the study by explaining that it focused on young people's beliefs and opinions about relationships, love, and romance, and about what people their age choose to do with their leisure time. I then circulated sign-up

sheets upon which interested students recorded their names and email addresses. Later that day, I contacted all interested students via email. The email described the purpose of the study again, reminded students that their participation was completely voluntary, and provided students with a link to an online consent form. By using this process, voluntary participation was ensured at two levels. First, students had a choice as to whether or not they offered their contact information on the circulated sign-up sheet; and second, students had a choice as to whether or not they participated in the survey when they received the subsequent email.

In the recruitment email, I provided students with a link to the consent form and questionnaire (see Appendix A), hosted by SurveyMonkey. SurveyMonkey is an online website widely used by social scientists to collect data in a secure fashion. All of the participants received a customized link that corresponded with their email addresses. The email addresses were used to track who completed the questionnaire (to record who should receive extra credit), but no names were directly linked with any of the questionnaire responses. This procedure ensured confidentiality and it guaranteed that no participant completed the questionnaire more than once.

The first webpage of SurveyMonkey contained the consent form. This page reiterated the purpose of the study, assured students that their participation was completely voluntary, and explained the potential risks and benefits of their participation. Students were informed that the project presented no risks outside of what might normally be encountered in everyday life, but that the benefits included furthering societal understanding of young adults' perceptions of love and relationships. Consent was explained as follows: "By clicking the 'Next' button below, you will certify that you have decided to participate, having read and understood the information presented, and that you are 18 years of age or older. This is your way of granting consent. If

you do not want to grant consent, please do not click ‘Next’ or continue on with this survey.”

This process ensured informed consent within the virtual parameters of an online questionnaire.

Once participants indicated their consent by clicking “Next,” the webpage advanced to the questionnaire. The questionnaire was composed of three sections. The first section consisted of various measures related to romantic and relational perceptions. The second section included measures associated with media exposure and, in particular, romantic comedy viewing. Section two also contained questions about leisure activities (Adolescent Leisure Time Activity Scale; Yin, Katims, & Zapata, 1999) that were used as filler items to help mask the true nature of the study and help prevent demand characteristics. The final section was comprised of demographic questions measures associated with the 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 particular measures/scales was counterbalanced across different versions.

After completing the survey, students were directed to a page thanking them for their participation. All students received extra credit for one of their communication courses in exchange for participating. The questionnaires were stored in a secure SurveyMonkey account database online and only authorized researchers had access to the data.

### *Relational Beliefs and Experiences*

The measures in this part of the questionnaire assessed romantic beliefs and relational experience.

*Romantic beliefs.* To assess students’ beliefs about intimate relationships, I used Sprecher and Metts’ (1989) Romantic Beliefs Scale (RBS). The RBS has been used in a number of studies to gauge participants’ endorsement of beliefs associated with the ideology of romance

(Anderson, 2005; Montgomery, 2005; Sprecher & Metts, 1999). This measure has been shown to have concurrent validity with other similar love and romance scales (Sprecher & Metts, 1989), such as Hendrick and Hendrick's (1986) Love Attitudes Scale. It has also demonstrated very good reliability (e.g.,  $\alpha = .88$ ) in past research (Sprecher & Metts, 1999).

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 for love conquers all include: "I believe if another person and I love each other we can overcome any differences and problems that may arise" and "If I love someone, I will find a way for us to be together regardless of the opposition of the relationship, physical distance between us or any other barrier." Sample items for soul mate/one and only include: "There will be only one real love for me" and "Once I experience 'true love,' I could never experience it again, to the same degree, with another person." Sample items for idealization of partner include: "The person I love will make a perfect romantic partner; for example, he/she will be completely accepting, loving, and understanding" and "I'm sure that every new thing I learn about the person I choose for a long-term commitment will please me." Sample items for love at first sight include: "I am likely to fall in love almost immediately if I meet the right person," and "When I find my 'true love' I will probably know it soon after we meet." Participants were asked to indicate on a 7-point Likert scale the degree to which they agreed with each of the items. Scores for this measure were based on the overall mean across the 15 items, and ranged from 1.36 to 6.71 ( $M = 4.16$ ,  $SD = .90$ ). The measure showed good internal reliability:  $\alpha = .80$ .

*Relational experience.* Relational experience was assessed because it might moderate the relationship between film exposure and romantic beliefs. I modeled my approach to be

consistent with previous studies that have assessed relationship experience as a key variable (Costigan, 2006; Segrin & Nabi, 2002). In particular, relational experience was assessed in three ways: current relational status, total number of previous relationships, and length of longest romantic relationship. First, participants were asked whether or not they were currently in a romantic relationship. For relational status, about half of the participants were single ( $n = 177$ ), and half were in partnered relationships ( $n = 160$ ). Second, participants were asked to report how many previous romantic relationships (lasting at least one month) they have had. For number of previous relationships, reports ranged from 0 to 12 relationships ( $M = 2.40$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ). Finally, participants reported the length (in months) of their longest romantic relationship. For relational length, reports ranged from 0 to 72 months ( $M = 23.88$ ,  $SD = 13.95$ ).

#### *Media Measures*

The second part of the questionnaire included the following measures: exposure to romantic comedy movies, overall movie exposure, movie genre preferences, exposure to romantic media, perceived television reality, motives for viewing, and perceived similarity.

*Exposure to romantic comedy movies.* To assess participants' exposure to romantic comedies, I asked them to indicate how many times they had seen a series of popular films. This procedure has been used in other studies of individuals' exposure to particular genres of screen media (Harrison, 2001; Wilson, Martins, & Marske, 2005). The listing of popular television shows or movies serves to accurately identify the genre of interest for participants and assists them in recalling previous exposure. Previous research that asked respondents to estimate how often they viewed romantic comedies in the past month, without any examples, found very little variation across participants (Edison, 2006).

For my study, I included a list of the 20 top-grossing romantic comedy movies from the last five years, all of which were analyzed in Study 1. To help disguise the true nature of the study, I also included the 10 top-grossing action and 10 top-grossing non-action drama films from the last five years (Box Office Mojo, 2008; The Movie Times, 2009) as filler items. Participants indicated how many times, if any, they had seen each film. The options were “never” (0), “once” (1), “a few times” (2), and “more than a few times” (3). Responses pertaining to the 20 romantic comedies were summed to create a composite score of overall romantic comedy viewing. Scores ranged from 3 to 55 ( $M = 20.30$ ,  $SD = 9.46$ ).

*Overall movie viewing.* I assessed overall movie viewing to control for the possibility that heavy exposure to romantic comedies might reflect a tendency to watch lots of movies (i.e., film buffs) rather than this particular genre. 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 each of the four types of movie viewing were summed to create an overall movie exposure variable. Participants watched an average of 8.42 movies per week ( $SD = 3.06$ ), with scores ranging from 3 to 21 films per week.

*Movie genre preferences.* In addition to assessing exposure, I measured participants’ preferences for different movie genres. The idea here was to ascertain how attractive romantic comedies were to people, relative to other movie genres. This measure seemed particularly important for this sample as college students may not have time to view lots of movies but they might choose to watch romantic comedies if they could.

For this measure, participants were told to imagine they had two hours of free time to watch a movie and were asked to rank order a list of eight genres by how likely they would choose that type of movie. The eight genres included: action, animation, documentary, foreign, horror, non-action drama, romantic comedy, and science fiction. Participants ranked each genre from “most likely to choose” (1) to “least likely to choose” (8). After reverse coding the responses, the average ranking for the romantic comedy genre was 6.32 ( $SD = 2.17$ ), with rankings ranging from 1 to 8.

*Exposure to romantic media.* Past research has focused on the overall diet of romantic media consumption (Aloni & Bernieri, 2004; Osborn, 2007). Although I was particularly interested in romantic comedies, I wanted to ensure that I assessed general interest in other types of romantic media. To gauge participants’ romantic media diet, I adapted a measure based on two previous studies of the relationship between media use and relationship beliefs (Aloni & Bernieri, 2004; Segrin & Nabi, 2002). Participants were asked to indicate on a 7-point scale how much they enjoyed spending time with six different types of romantic media: romance novels, relationship/self-help books, romantic movies (Aloni & Bernieri, 2004), as well as TV situation comedies, afternoon soap operas, and reality-based TV shows about relationships (Segrin & Nabi, 2002). The response options ranged from “strongly dislike” (1) to “strongly like” (7).

In order to prevent demand characteristics, several filler items also were included that asked participants to indicate how much they liked other types of media, such as horror movies and mystery novels. Total scores were calculated by summing the scores for each of the six romantic media items, with final scores ranging from 6 to 41 ( $M = 23.28$ ,  $SD = 6.16$ ).

*Perceived reality of movies.* Perceived reality may enhance the impact of viewing screen media so I included it as a moderator variable. To assess perceptions of how realistic the media



are, I used a modified version of Rubin's (1981) Perceived Realism Scale (PRS). This scale has been found to have high internal reliability in previous studies testing the perceived realism of romantic television, with Cronbach's alphas as high as .93 (Punyanunt-Carter, 2006; Rubin & Perse, 1987). The measure contains five items. In the present study, each item was altered so that the statements began with "movies" instead of "television." Participants were told to "Please think about the movies you watch, and indicate on the scale below how much you agree with the following statements." Sample items included: "Movies shows life as it really is" and "Movies let me really see how other people live." Respondents rated each item on a scale from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7). One item did not correlate with the other items ("If I see something in a movie, I can't be sure it really is that way"), so it was deleted from the overall scale. The final measure consisted of four items. Mean scores ranged from 1 to 7 ( $M = 3.33$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ). The scale showed reasonable reliability:  $\alpha = .73$ .

*Motives for movie viewing.* Motives for viewing romantic comedies may have an influence on how young people respond to the content. I adapted a measure to assess motives based on Rubin's (1983) original scale, which ascertained the different reasons why people watch television. This scale has been used in past research investigating reasons why young adults watch romantic television (Rubin, 1985), and has been shown to have reliability alphas as high as .84 (Haridakis & Rubin, 2003). In the present study, participants were told, "Please think about your reasons for watching romantic comedy movies (e.g., *Made of Honor* or *Knocked Up*). Using the scale below, indicate how much you agree with each reason for watching films." The scale ranged from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7). Participants were then presented with a list of nine statements that pertained to three potential reasons (i.e., escape, entertainment, and learning) for viewing romantic comedy movies. Sample items included: "I

watch romantic comedies so I can get away from what I'm doing," "I watch romantic comedies because they entertain me," and "I watch romantic comedies because they help me learn about myself and others." This same procedure was repeated for horror and for action movies, included as fillers to disguise the genre of interest.

For the purposes of this study, I was concerned primarily with the motivation of learning, which was assessed by 3 items: "I watch romantic comedies because they help me learn about myself and others," "I watch romantic comedies so I can learn how to do things I haven't done before," and "I watch romantic comedies so I can learn about what could happen to me." Mean scores for learning ranged from 1.00 to 7.00 ( $M = 3.57$ ,  $SD = 1.59$ ). The scale showed good reliability for this sample:  $\alpha = .85$ . Learning was only moderately correlated with the subscales of escape ( $r = .40$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and entertainment ( $r = .20$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

*Perceived similarity to characters.* The degree to which individuals may feel similar to romantic comedy characters may increase viewer attention and help to enhance the effects of viewing these movies. To assess perceived similarity, I used the Perceived Homophily Measure (McCroskey, Richmond & Daly, 1975), which has been used in other media studies investigating perceived similarity between respondents and media characters (e.g., Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). Internal reliability estimates for this scale have been shown to be very high ( $\alpha = .95$ ; Nowak, Hamilton, & Hammond, 2009).

In my study, I asked participants to think about their favorite romantic comedy movie and then rate how similar they thought they were to the main same-sex character from that favorite film. For example, if the respondent was a woman and she reported her favorite romantic comedy movie as *What Happens in Vegas* (2008), then she was instructed to compare herself with the Cameron Diaz character. This measure includes 26 items, all of which are semantic

differential phrases reflecting different characteristics a person might share with another. Examples include: “Doesn’t behave like me/Behaves like me” and “Morals unlike mine/Morals like mine.” Participants rated similarities between themselves and the movie character on a seven-point scale, with higher scores reflecting stronger perceived similarity. Each participant’s score on this measure was based on the mean of their responses to all 26 items. Those mean scores ranged from 1.69 to 6.54 ( $M = 4.03$ ,  $SD = .79$ ). The measure showed high internal reliability:  $\alpha = .86$ .

### *Demographics and Control Variables*

In terms of demographics, participants reported on their sex, age, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation. For sexual orientation, participants could choose from the following categories: Heterosexual/straight, gay male, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, questioning, and queer. 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%).

The questionnaire included four additional control variables. In particular, I measured parents’ marital status, churchgoing, life satisfaction, and depression.

*Parents’ marital status.* I measured parents’ marital status because research suggests that divorce in the family can affect young adults’ beliefs about romance and love, when compared to young adults who come from non-divorced/intact families (Hayashi & Strickland, 1998; Ming & Fincham, 2010). For parents’ marital status, participants responded to this item: “Please indicate your parents’ marital status.” Response options included: still married (70%), never married (13%), divorced (13%), and widowed/deceased (3%).

*Churchgoing.* Church attendance was measured because there is evidence that religious involvement is related to beliefs about romantic relationships among college students (Reiter, Richmond, Stirlen, & Kompel, 2009). This type of single-item measure (Kay & Francis, 2006) has been used successfully in previous research investigating the link between churchgoing and romance (Burdette, Ellison, Hill, & Glenn, 2009). Participants were asked: “How often do you go to church or other place of worship?” Response options included: “never,” “once or twice a year,” “sometimes,” “at least once a month,” and “nearly every week.” Scores ranged from 0 to 4 ( $M = 1.96$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ). Church attendance was fairly evenly distributed in this study. Participants reported going to church “never” (18%), “once or twice a year” (25%), “sometimes” (21%), “at least once a month” (15%), and “nearly every week” (20%).

*Satisfaction with life scale.* The Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS) was designed to measure cognitive satisfaction associated with life functioning (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985). This scale was included as a control variable because research has demonstrated links between life satisfaction and both media use (Knobloch-Westerwick, Hastall, & Rossmann, 2009) and romantic beliefs (Petrowski et al., 2010). The SWLS has been shown to have good reliability ( $\alpha = .78, .86$ ) in past research (Kuppens, Realo, & Diener, 2008; Schimmack, Diener, & Oishi, 2002). The measure consists of five statements that reflect people’s overall contentment with life. Sample items include: “In most ways, my life is close to my ideal,” “The conditions of my life are excellent,” and “I am satisfied with life.” Participants were asked to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with each of the statements, with response options ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7). Mean scores across the five items ranged from 1.80 to 7.00 ( $M = 4.93$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ). The internal consistency for this measure was high:  $\alpha = .85$ .

*Depression.* I assessed depression because it has been shown to predict certain behaviors and cognitions in romantic relationships, such as fearful avoidance (Carnelley, Pietromonaco, & Jaffe, 1994). In the present study, I used the 20-item Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) to assess levels of depression (Radloff, 1977). This measure has demonstrated reliability scores as high as  $\alpha = .75$  in previous studies investigating the role of depression in romantic relational functioning (DeMaris, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2010; Harris, Lee, & DeLeone, 2010). The measure asks people to think about the past week and indicate how often they have experienced certain behaviors and symptoms. Examples include: “I felt lonely,” “My sleep was restless,” and “I did not feel like eating; my appetite was poor.” Response options include the following: “rarely or none of the time” (0), “some or a little of the time” (1), “occasionally or a moderate amount of time” (2), or “most or all of the time” (3). Scores ranged from .00 to 2.30 ( $M = .58$ ,  $SD = .41$ ). The internal reliability of this measure for this sample was moderate:  $\alpha = .80$ .

## Results

### *Overview*

The following results section is organized into three parts. First, I describe the three preliminary analyses that I conducted to test power, to assess whether there were separate factors in the measure of romantic beliefs, and to create the romantic comedy exposure variable. Second, I report the main effect findings for the six hypotheses. Finally, I include the results for the final research question. It should be noted that a small number of participants chose to skip occasional questions, so the  $n$ 's change slightly for some of the analyses. See Table 9 for a complete list of scale variables and their respective descriptive statistics.

### *Preliminary Analyses*

*Power.* 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  $N = 340$ . However, the power for small effects ( $f^2 = .02$ ) was not as strong (.43). Thus, I had sufficient power to find medium or large effects, and only moderate power to detect small effects in this study.

*Romantic beliefs factor analysis.* Sprecher and Metts (1989) designed the Romantic Beliefs Scale (RBS) to have four subscales associated with the four romantic ideals described in Chapter 2 of this dissertation. To determine whether those dimensions were evident in this sample, I submitted the 15 items to a principal components analysis with varimax rotation. I stipulated that the eigenvalues had to be above 1.00 and each item had to have a factor loading of .60 or higher in order for a factor to be considered meaningful. In addition, factors could have no items with secondary loadings of .40 or higher. These criteria are commonly used in factor analyses for social scientific research (Caughlin, Scott, Miller, & Hefner, 2009; Johnston, 1995; McCroskey et al., 1975). Two items were dropped because of the 60/40 rule. Those items were: “If I were in love with someone, I would commit myself to him or her even if my parents and friends disapproved of the relationship” and “When I find my ‘true love’ I will probably know it soon after we meet.” The final 13-item model accounted for 65% of the variance. See Table 10. Eigenvalues and interpretability indicated that the best solution was four factors: love conquers all ( $M = 5.01$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ,  $\alpha = .82$ ), idealization of partner ( $M = 3.93$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ,  $\alpha = .74$ ), soul mate/one and only ( $M = 3.67$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ,  $\alpha = .69$ ), and love at first sight ( $M = 2.73$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ,  $\alpha = .48$ ). The eigenvalues for the four factors were 4.26, 1.76, 1.37, and 1.03, respectively. These four factors were used as the basis for calculating scores on the four subscales of romantic

beliefs.

*Romantic comedy exposure variable.* Media exposure has been assessed in a number of ways in prior research (e.g., Dixon, 2008; Edison, 2006; Harrison, 2001; Segrin & Nabi, 2002) and no single approach has been adopted as the standard. Based on the array of measures in my study, I devised four different approaches to assess romantic comedy exposure. The first approach involved simply looking at participants' overall exposure to particular romantic comedy movies in the list of films provided. Respondents reported their exposure to the 20 films on this list (embedded with other films) and a composite exposure measure was created by summing the ratings (range = 3 to 55;  $M = 20.37$ ,  $SD = 9.44$ ).

The second approach involved combining this overall exposure measure with the ranking measure of how likely each participant was to select a romantic comedy movie over other genres, if free time were available. In a sense, this second measure compensated for the fact that college students may be too busy to view many movies at this point in their lives and yet some might selectively choose to watch romantic comedies if they had more time. I computed this composite variable by summing the participants' overall viewing with their ranking score (range = 6 to 60;  $M = 26.69$ ,  $SD = 10.23$ ).

The third approach involved a variable similar to the second one, except that each film was first weighted by the number of ideals it contains. This weighted composite measure was adapted from a procedure used by Harrison (2001). In her study of the influence of thin-ideal television on body image perceptions, she weighted her exposure measure by the degree of thinness of the main characters in each program. Likewise, in the present study I weighted each of the 20 films in my list by the number of ideals in the content, as reported in Study 1. The weighting scores are summarized in Table 11. Then I 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. For example, if a participant reported that she had viewed *27 Dresses* (2008) “a few times,” her viewing score for that film would be 2. As Table 11 indicates, the weighting value for *27 Dresses* was 11. These values were multiplied together to create a weighted exposure value of 22 for that movie. To create the composite exposure variable, I 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 fit a normal distribution curve extremely well (range = 9 to 343;  $M = 118.65$ ,  $SD = 61.94$ ).

In the final approach, I summed together scores from all of the romantic media variables. These variables included overall romantic comedy viewing (unweighted), ranking of romantic comedy genre, and ratings of enjoyment of other various romantic media, including romantic movies, romance novels, relationship/self-help books, TV situation comedies, afternoon soap operas, and reality-based TV shows about relationships. Scores for this variable also fit a normal distribution curve fairly well (range = 12 to 85;  $M = 50.21$ ,  $SD = 13.55$ ).

As might be expected, the four composite exposure variables were highly correlated, according to Pearson correlation tests (see Table 12). Preliminary regression analyses testing the predictive relationship between each of these four exposure measures and endorsement of romantic beliefs revealed no meaningful differences. Because the results did not differ substantially based on the way in which exposure was assessed, I selected the third approach, the weighted composite variable, for all subsequent analyses. I chose this approach for three reasons. First, this composite variable includes both viewing *and* ranking of the romantic comedy genre. Thus, it takes into account that college students may not have much free time at



this point in their lives to watch many romantic comedy films, but they may still be attracted to such content. The ranking captures selective exposure preferences for what may be a relatively low viewing group. Second, this weighted variable is a richer, more meaningful measure of exposure than viewing alone (second approach) because it takes into account the actual content or amount of ideal messages people are being exposed to, as documented by Study 1. Third, this variable is the most sensitive measure of exposure to romantic comedies—my primary concern in this dissertation—because it does not include other romance-related media content (fourth approach). For the remaining analyses, this weighted composite variable is referred to as romantic comedy exposure.

#### *Main Effects of Viewing on Romantic Beliefs*

To test the relationship between romantic comedy exposure and endorsement of beliefs, I conducted a series of stepwise hierarchical multiple regression analyses with endorsement of romantic beliefs as the outcome variable. In each analysis, I entered control variables in the first block and romantic comedy exposure as the main predictor variable in the second block. Age, race (white, nonwhite), parents' relationship status (not married, married), frequency of churchgoing, depression, life satisfaction, and overall movie viewing served as controls. All statistical tests were conducted at the  $p < .05$  significance level.

*Hypothesis 1.* The first hypothesis posited that heavy viewers of romantic comedies would report stronger endorsement of romantic beliefs than would lighter viewers. The results of the final model of the hierarchical regression are summarized in Table 13. In the first step, the positive betas revealed that churchgoing, higher life satisfaction, and heavy viewing of movies in general were all positively associated with stronger endorsement of romantic beliefs.

The second step of the analysis, which tested the hypothesis, was not significant,  $R^2 = .07$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .00$ ,  $F(1, 321) = .89$ , *ns*. In other words, after controlling for a variety of other variables, exposure to romantic comedies did not predict romantic beliefs. Hypothesis 1 was not supported. This same pattern of nonsignificant results for romantic comedy exposure occurred no matter which of the four approaches was used to assess exposure.

*Hypothesis 2.* The second hypothesis predicted that the ideals most commonly portrayed in the romantic comedy films would be the ones most strongly endorsed by heavy viewers. To test this hypothesis, I ran four separate hierarchical linear regression analyses, one for each of the four subscales of the Romantic Belief Scale (idealization of other, soul mate/one and only, love at first sight, love conquers all). See Table 14 for the correlations among subscales. As in the previous analysis, I first entered the control variables in step 1 and then entered romantic comedy exposure as the predictor variable in step 2.

Results of the regression tests indicated that romantic comedy exposure significantly predicted one of the four subscales: idealization of other,  $R^2 = .10$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .01$ ,  $F(1, 321) = 3.93$ ,  $p < .05$ . That is, participants with higher exposure to romantic comedies also reported stronger belief in this ideal, even after controlling for overall movie viewing and an assortment of other variables. In the final model, life satisfaction and overall movie viewing positively correlated with endorsement of this ideal as well (see Table 15).

Romantic comedy viewing was not significantly associated with the other three beliefs. In particular, viewing did not significantly predict endorsement of love conquers all,  $R^2 = .06$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .00$ ,  $F(1, 321) = .26$ . Life satisfaction was the only control variable that was related to this ideal (see Table 16). That is, those that reported higher life satisfaction were more likely to endorse the idea that love conquers all. However, the beta for overall movie viewing did

approach statistical significance, indicating a marginal effect. In general, those participants who reported watching more movies overall were also more likely to endorse beliefs.

Romantic comedy viewing also did not predict beliefs related to love at first sight,  $R^2 = .02$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .00$ ,  $F(1, 321) = .01$ . In this case, none of the variables significantly predicted endorsement of beliefs associated with love at first sight. See Table 17.

For the final subscale, soul mate/one and only, results of the regression analysis again revealed no significant association between viewing and endorsement of those beliefs,  $R^2 = .06$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .00$ ,  $F(1, 321) = 1.38$ . However, frequency of churchgoing and higher levels of reported depression were positively associated with belief in the soul mate/one and only ideal. See Table 18. In addition, overall movie viewing approached statistical significance as a predictor variable. In particular, participants who reported heavy viewing of movies tended to also endorse romantic beliefs more strongly.

To summarize, based on the four regression tests, exposure to romantic comedies was predictive of only one of the four beliefs that comprise the Romantic Belief Scale: idealization of other. Study 1 demonstrated that statements related to the idealization of other ideal made up the second most common category of relational expressions, or roughly one third of all ideal expressions. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was partially supported.

### *The Influence of Moderating Variables*

When testing for moderating effects, I conducted stepwise hierarchical multiple regression analyses with three blocks. I used the same control variables that were used for the tests of main effects: age, race, parents' relationship status, churchgoing, depression, life satisfaction, and overall movie viewing. I entered controls simultaneously in the first block, romantic comedy exposure and the relevant moderating variable 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, I mean centered the variables (i.e., transformed them into  $z$ -scores) prior to computing the interaction variable. This approach is consistent with standard procedures used to combat multicollinearity in regression tests (Belsey, Kuh, & Welsch, 2004). All statistical tests were conducted at the  $p < .05$  significance level.

*Hypothesis 3.* The third hypothesis posited that the relationship between romantic comedy exposure and romantic beliefs would be stronger among those with less relational experience. The relational experience variable was created by summing the number of previous relationships and the length of the longest relationship (in months) for each participant. Higher scores indicated more experience in romantic relationships. Scores for this composite variable ranged from 0 to 75 ( $M = 21.03$ ,  $SD = 15.09$ ).

Results for this regression analysis are reported in Table 19. In the first step, churchgoing, life satisfaction, and overall movie viewing were significantly associated with beliefs. In general, greater frequency of churchgoing, higher life satisfaction, and greater movie viewing were related to stronger endorsement of romantic beliefs.

In the second step, neither relational experience nor romantic comedy exposure significantly predicted endorsement of romantic beliefs. In the final step, relational experience did not significantly interact with romantic comedy viewing to predict endorsement of beliefs,  $R^2 = .07$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .00$ ,  $F(1, 311) = .09$ .

As an alternative, I also used current relational status as an indicator of relational experience. Using the same stepwise approach, I conducted a separate regression analysis testing whether current relational status interacted with viewing romantic comedies in predicting endorsement of romantic beliefs. Results of this regression are summarized in Table 20. In the

first step, more frequent churchgoing, higher life satisfaction, and heavier overall movie viewing were significantly associated with stronger endorsement of romantic beliefs. In the second step, current relational status significantly predicted endorsement of beliefs, independent of viewing. That is, those who were in a current relationship were more likely to endorse beliefs than were those who reported being single. However, exposure to romantic comedy films was not significantly associated with endorsement of romantic beliefs.

In the final step, the test of the interaction also revealed no significant association. In other words, current relational status did not interact with viewing to predict endorsement of romantic beliefs,  $R^2 = .09$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .00$ ,  $F(1, 319) = .99$ . Based on these tests, I concluded that Hypothesis 3 was not supported; relational experience did not moderate the relationship between watching romantic comedies and endorsing romantic beliefs.

*Hypothesis 4.* The fourth hypothesis predicted that the association between viewing and beliefs would be strongest among those who perceived movies to be highly realistic. To assess perceived reality, I calculated the mean scores of 4 items that assessed the degree to which participants considered movies to be realistic. The same stepwise hierarchical approach was used to test this moderator. The results of the regression analysis are summarized in Table 21. In the first step, churchgoing, life satisfaction, and overall movie viewing were significantly associated with beliefs. In general, higher scores on each of these three variables were predictive of greater endorsement of romantic beliefs. In the second step, neither romantic comedy exposure nor perceived reality of movies predicted endorsement of beliefs. In the third and final step, the interaction term was not significant,  $R^2 = .08$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .00$ ,  $F(1, 319) = 1.47$ . That is, perceived realism of films did not significantly interact with viewing of romantic comedies to predict endorsement of beliefs. Thus, Hypothesis 4 was not supported.

*Hypothesis 5.* The fifth hypothesis predicted that the association between viewing and beliefs would be strongest among those who reported watching romantic comedies with the motivation to learn. The results of the hierarchical regression analysis are summarized in Table 22. In the first step, results revealed that churchgoing, life satisfaction, and overall movie viewing were significantly associated with beliefs. Once again, higher scores on each of these three variables were predictive of greater endorsement of romantic beliefs.

In the second step, romantic comedy exposure did not predict endorsement of beliefs. However, learning was significantly associated with romantic beliefs. The positive beta indicates that those who reported a higher motivation to learn from these films also were more likely to endorse romantic beliefs. In the third and final step, the interaction term was not significant,  $R^2 = .09$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .01$ ,  $F(1, 316) = 1.76$ . That is, watching romantic comedy films in order to learn did not significantly interact with exposure to predict endorsement of beliefs. Thus, being motivated to learn from these films did not moderate the effects of exposure on romantic beliefs. Instead, motivation to learn was an independent and significant predictor of the endorsement of ideals, irrespective of degree of exposure. Because *some* viewing of romantic films is implicated in this learning process, I concluded that Hypothesis 5 was partially supported.

*Hypothesis 6.* The sixth hypothesis posited that the association between viewing and beliefs would be stronger among those who perceived themselves to be similar to romantic comedy characters. To assess perceived similarity, I asked participants to rate how similar they felt to the same-sex characters of their favorite romantic comedy films, using 26 semantic differential phrases. The results of the hierarchical regression analysis are summarized in Table 23. In the first step, results revealed that churchgoing, life satisfaction, and overall movie

viewing were significantly associated with beliefs. Again, higher scores on each of these three variables were correlated with greater endorsement of romantic beliefs. In the second step, neither romantic comedy exposure nor perceived similarity with romantic comedy characters predicted endorsement of beliefs. In the third and final step, the interaction term was not significant,  $R^2 = .07$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .00$ ,  $F(1, 318) = .98$ . Thus, perceived similarity of romantic comedy characters did not moderate the relationship between viewing romantic comedies and endorsing romantic beliefs. Hypothesis 6 was not supported.

*Research Question 1.* The research question concerned whether the sex of the participant moderated the association between viewing and endorsement of romantic beliefs. The results of the hierarchical regression analysis are summarized in Table 24. In the first step, once again, churchgoing, life satisfaction, and overall movie viewing were significantly associated with beliefs. In general, higher scores on each of these three variables were associated with greater endorsement of romantic beliefs. In the second step, neither romantic comedy exposure nor sex of participant significantly predicted endorsement of romantic beliefs. In the third and final step, the interaction term was not significant,  $R^2 = .08$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .00$ ,  $F(1, 317) = .41$ , indicating that sex of the participant did not moderate the relationship between exposure and endorsement of beliefs.

Although there was not a significant interaction between sex and viewing in predicting endorsement of beliefs, there were some notable sex differences. In particular, women in this study reported watching significantly more romantic comedies than did men,  $t(335) = -6.97$ ,  $p < .001$ . Women also tended to endorse idealistic beliefs more strongly than did men,  $t(335) = -1.69$ ,  $p = .07$ , and reported watching romantic comedies for learning more so than men did,  $t(332) = -1.74$ ,  $p = .06$ , although these two latter patterns only approached significance.

## 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, motives for viewing these films appear to be more critical than sheer exposure to the content. That is, 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 terms of specific findings, the first hypothesis posited that heavy viewers of romantic comedies would report stronger endorsement of romantic beliefs than would lighter viewers. To test this idea, I created four different measures of exposure to test this prediction: one based on viewing of 20 romantic comedies, one based on viewing these films in addition to a ranked preference for the romantic comedy genre, one based on viewing plus ranking when the viewing was weighted by the number of ideals in the film, and one based on exposure to various types of romantic media. No matter which measure of exposure I used, I found no relationship between viewing romantic content and overall endorsement of romantic beliefs. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was not supported.

The lack of an overall relationship between viewing and perceptions is inconsistent with cultivation theory. According to cultivation, 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, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980). Study 1 clearly documents that romantic ideals are commonly featured in romantic comedies. Therefore, according to cultivation, heavy viewers of these films should more strongly endorse romantic



ideals. Yet the findings of Study 2 do not support that idea.

There are several possible explanations for this null finding. One possibility is that the measure of exposure may have been flawed. Participants were given a list of 20 highest grossing romantic comedy movies and asked to indicate how many times they had seen each film.

Although the list was based on films released between 2003 and 2008, it is conceivable that it was too constrained. Given that the survey was conducted in 2010, perhaps I should have included more recently released movies in my list. It is also possible that students who like this genre are more likely to watch a variety of such films rather than repeat their viewing of particular films. Although I did observe some variance in frequency, very few of the students watched any particular movie more than three times. Future research should explore which is a more valid measure of exposure: presenting a longer list of movies and asking respondents to simply check the ones they have seen, or presenting a shorter list and asking respondents to rate how often each film has been viewed. Another improvement would be to include a visual advertisement from each movie so as to help prompt respondents' memory. Lastly, I did not ask participants to report how many hours a week they spend watching romantic comedies, in part because I expected the variance to be limited and I wanted to prevent demand characteristics. Future research should develop more creative ways to assess romantic comedy exposure without revealing the purpose of the study.

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, romantic ideals such as the ones measured in this study (i.e., idealization of other, love at first sight, soul mate/one and only, love conquers all) 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). In addition, the love at first sight ideal can be found in early work by Shakespeare. In his play (1597) *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo speaks of how he fell passionately in love with Juliet after a single glance. 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 my study supports this idea. Unexpectedly, 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 other words, it may be that romantic ideals are present in all types of movies and are not unique to romantic comedies. Several examples illustrate this point. In the science fiction genre, the highest grossing movie of all time is *Avatar* (2009), an adventure story with an embedded love story in the plot. The primary storyline is about a soldier in a wheelchair who visits another planet called Pandora, gets connected to an artificial body called an avatar so he can walk again, and manages to save the planet from an evil business corporation that tries to take over the planet. In the midst of this story, the soldier falls in love with a native of the planet, and they spend much of the second half of the movie conquering obstacles to their unusual pairing (i.e., love conquers all). In a very different genre, action movies often contain idealistic love stories within the plot. For example, in the recent disaster film *Unstoppable* (2010), Chris Pine plays a conductor on a runaway train containing hazardous material. Throughout the movie, viewers see him talking to his wife about their impending divorce proceedings. By the end of the film, which covers the timeframe of just one day, he saves the world by stopping this moving bomb and reconciling with his estranged wife. Even Disney

movies appear to contain romantic ideals. One recent content analysis documented that roughly 80% of romantic relationships portrayed in Disney films have love-at-first-sight beginnings (Tanner et al., 2003). For example, in *Snow White* (1937), the handsome prince falls instantly in love with Snow White after he awakens her from a magical sleep. Thus, young people may be exposed to romantic ideals from a variety of movies, even those watched at an early age.

Following this line of reasoning, it is tempting to conclude that romantic comedies have little influence above all the other movies that feature romantic ideals. Indeed, one could argue that other genres may be even *more* influential because they are void of the types of challenges documented in Study 1. Because the romantic storylines are often secondary plots in such films, they seldom contain the repeated tests and challenges that are central to the storyline in romantic comedies. In a sense, other films that contain ideals may offer a more potent, undiluted message about romance.

However, my data challenge this supposition in two ways. First, I found a relationship between viewing romantic comedies and endorsement of one of the ideals I measured. And second, I found that motives for viewing romantic comedies actually predicted endorsement, even if overall viewing did not. Both of these patterns, to be discussed further below, indicate that romantic comedies may have an influence on romantic beliefs even if the relationship is not as straightforward as cultivation theory would predict. Still, the findings related to overall movie viewing are consistent with Gerbner's (1969) contention that certain formulas may be so pervasive that overall viewing is more crucial than the specific types of content viewed. In line with this reasoning, Morgan and Shanahan (2010) have argued that the influence of genre-specific programming should only be considered within the larger context of overall viewing. For instance, although viewers might learn from watching the ideals in romantic comedies, these

ideals are not limited to only this genre of film, just as viewers who watch romantic comedies also watch other genres of movie. In this regard, my finding that romantic comedy exposure in particular as well as overall movie viewing are both related to the endorsement of certain romantic beliefs is consistent with the broader, systemic suppositions of cultivation theory.

In addition to overall movie exposure, two other control variables significantly predicted endorsement of romantic beliefs. In particular, churchgoing and life satisfaction were linked to stronger endorsement of romantic ideals. Research has documented that religion and churchgoing often play a role in romantic relationships, often resulting in decisions to delay sexual intimacy (Burdette et al., 2009) and to seek interfaith partners (Reiter & Gee, 2008; Reiter et al., 2009). The finding that more frequent churchgoing is predictive of stronger romantic belief endorsement could be attributed to a tendency for people with strong religious ties to ascribe to a higher power or deity. That is, believing in an all-powerful God may predispose people to believe that love too is governed by a higher power—hence, love can conquer all and fate can connect true lovers. In fact, religious scholars have been writing for over a century about the presence of ideals in churches (Foote, 1872; Goodier, 1933). Therefore, the same individuals who regularly attend church and believe in a higher power may also endorse romantic idealism.

Life satisfaction also predicted romantic belief endorsement. Other research has demonstrated that individuals who are satisfied in their relationships also tend to be satisfied with their lives more generally (Petrowski et al., 2010). This type of halo effect may work across many arenas in a person's life. That is, individuals who are happy with their lives also may be optimistic about the power of love and the nature of romance. Future research should unpack more precisely the role of religion as well as life satisfaction in people's views about romance. Hypothesis 2 predicted that the ideals most commonly portrayed in romantic comedy movies would be the ones most strongly endorsed by heavy viewers. This prediction was partially

supported in that viewing romantic comedy films was significantly related to the idealization of other belief, one of the more frequently occurring themes in such movies. In fact, according to Study 1, idealization of the romantic interest was the second most common category of relational expressions, constituting roughly one third of all ideal expressions. As an example, a young man in *Something's Gotta Give* (2003) tells his older love interest, whom he clearly idolizes: "How great is it for you that I'm not intimidated by your brilliance?" In another film, *The Holiday* (2006), one character talks about his love interest to a friend by saying: "I can't believe a girl like that would actually be with a guy like me."

Generally, the finding pertaining to this ideal suggests that recurring expressions at the scene level may be more important than the overarching theme in influencing viewing beliefs. According to Study 1, idealization of other was never featured as the takeaway message in these movies. Although there is some empirical evidence that the overall message takes precedent over narrative details when individuals try to recall a story (Graesser et al., 2002; Zwaan & Singer, 2003), the results of my study indicate that the more detailed expressions may be what actually influences heavy viewers' beliefs. Future research should investigate the ways in which viewers interpret these depictions and ascertain whether expressions at the scene level carry more weight than the overall theme of the movie.

Why would exposure to romantic comedies be related to one particular ideal and not to the others? It stands to reason that viewing would be unrelated to endorsement of the love-at-first-sight ideal because it was rarely expressed at the scene level in such films, according to Study 1. My findings also revealed that this particular ideal was never the focus of the overarching theme in these movies. In other words, despite the fact that many young people endorse such an idea, popular romantic comedies seldom encourage the notion of people falling

in love instantaneously.

In contrast, the love conquers all ideal was more commonly featured in the films. Of the four ideals, it was the most frequent overarching theme in the films, according to Study 1, and the third most frequent ideal at the expression level. Thus, viewers can encounter a good number of examples of this ideal in romantic comedies. One possible explanation for the lack of findings here may pertain to a ceiling effect. Research indicates that of all the ideals, the notion of love conquering all is the most widely endorsed by young American adults (Sprecher & Metts, 1989, 1999). Results from my study support this idea, in that love conquers all received the strongest endorsement ( $M = 5.01$ ) among the four ideals I measured (soul mate:  $M = 3.68$ ; love at first sight:  $M = 2.73$ ; idealization of other:  $M = 3.93$ ). Thus, it may be that this ideal is already so pervasive in Western culture that viewing romantic comedies does not make a substantial difference in viewer endorsement.

It is more difficult to explain the lack of findings regarding the last ideal—soul mate/one and only. According to Study 1, this ideal was the most prevalent in romantic comedies at the expression level. In fact, just under half of all expressions focused on the soul mate/one and only ideal. In addition, this ideal was the only other ideal besides love conquers all that was identified as an overarching theme in these movies. Why would this fairly pervasive ideal be unrelated to viewing? One possibility is that the soul mate ideal may not be explicit enough in the plot for viewers to detect, even though my coders could reliably identify it. Another possibility is that the soul mate ideal is close in meaning to idealization of the partner such that the two are inherently linked in the plots. For example, if a film depicts the main female character as the soul mate of the primary male character, she may also be portrayed as wonderful, flawless, and perfect. In other words, soul mate/one and only may work in tandem with idealization of other

in these movies to depict a global idealization of partner. Future research should explore how viewers interpret various expressions of ideals in these films.

Overall, then, the relationship between viewing these films and individuals' romantic beliefs is modest. There is no overall correlation between romantic comedy exposure and endorsement of romantic ideals. Nevertheless, heavy viewing of romantic comedies does seem to predict stronger endorsement of one ideal in particular—the idealization of the romantic interest.

The remaining hypotheses and research questions pertain to the idea that some viewers may be affected more strongly than others. Hypothesis 3 posited that the relationship between romantic comedy exposure and romantic beliefs would be stronger among those with less relational experience. This hypothesis was not supported. The findings here contradict cultivation theory (Gerbner, 1998), which stipulates that the strongest effects of media exposure are likely to occur among people who have little real-world experience with a particular topic. In my study, none of the relational experience variables (i.e., number of past relationships, length of longest previous relationships, and existence of current relationship) altered the null findings. Similarly, Segrin and Nabi (2002) found that relational status—dating or not dating—did not interact with television viewing to predict unrealistic attitudes about marriage.

There are at least two possible reasons why relational experience did not moderate the findings. First, the sample involved college students who, for the most part, have relatively little relational experience. For instance, the average number of previous relationships for my sample was roughly two, and the average length for the longest relationship was approximately 1 ½ years. It may be that relational experience is a more potent factor among older participants or even among participants who do not attend college; both groups are more likely to have

participated in serious, committed relationships. Second, number and length of past relationships may not adequately measure “experience.” In fact, a large number of previous relationships may indicate relational failures rather than relational experience. Future research should explore more carefully the concept of relational experience and how it might interact with viewing romantic comedies to predict endorsement of beliefs.

Hypothesis 4 proposed that the association between viewing and beliefs would be strongest among those who perceived movies to be highly realistic. This potential moderator was not significant either. Before drawing any firm conclusions here, it should be pointed out that the perceived reality measure I used pertained to movies in general and not to romantic comedies specifically. I did this to prevent demand characteristics and disguise the true purpose of the study. However, if the measure had been more closely linked to romantic comedy films, perceived reality may have emerged as a significant moderator. One approach for future work would be to ask participants about their perceptions of realism regarding a variety of different genres (e.g., romantic comedies, action, and horror), similar to how motivations for viewing were measured in the present study. The challenge will be to avoid participant fatigue due to repetitive foils that are included mainly to mask the true purpose of the research.

Another factor that was hypothesized to influence some viewers more than others was individual motives for watching these films. In particular, Hypothesis 5 predicted that the association between viewing and beliefs would be strongest among those who reported watching romantic comedies with the motivation to learn. Results revealed that viewing these films to learn did not significantly moderate the association between exposure and endorsement of romantic beliefs. However, those participants who reported watching these films 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. On the one hand, this finding is not directly supportive of Hypothesis 5. On the other hand, 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.”). Therefore, I concluded that Hypothesis 5 was partially supported.

From a theoretical perspective, this finding makes sense. The uses and gratifications theory asserts that there are a number of reasons why individuals watch screen media (Palmgreen, 1984; Perse & Rubin, 1988; Rubin, 1994; Ruggiero, 2000). One of the most potent motivations for viewing television and films is learning. Rubin (1984) found that people who viewed television with the motivation to learn reported a more engaging experience (i.e., goal-directed, purposive, and selective) than did those who were viewing to pass the time. Other studies also have found stronger effects among people who report using media to learn as opposed to other motivations (Diddi & LaRose, 2006; Namsu, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009). In the case of my study, watching romantic comedies to learn was related more strongly to the endorsement of romantic ideals than was watching for other reasons.

My findings are consistent with prior research demonstrating that individuals often seek out romantic media in order to learn about love and relationships. For example, Steele (1999) discovered that adolescents often read magazines in order to learn about issues of romance and love. Zurbriggen and Morgan (2006) also found that college students sometimes view reality dating shows because these programs provide information about romance and dating. The evidence in my study indicates that some individuals watch romantic comedies with the intent to learn, and they in turn are the ones who report stronger ideals.

The pattern for learning is also consistent with social cognitive theory. According to Bandura (1984), screen media provide potent social learning exemplars for viewers. Being motivated to learn from such films can only enhance this type of effect. In addition to individual motivations, the films themselves provide messages that are likely to encourage learning. The results of Study 1 indicate that expressions of romantic ideals are frequently rewarded in the plotline and rarely are punished. Research indicates that viewers are more likely to learn when a modeled behavior is positively reinforced or rewarded than when it is punished (Bandura, 1965). Putting both ideas together, if an individual watches a romantic comedy in order to learn and sees ideal expressions that are rewarded more often than not, it stands to reason that this viewer will absorb the ideals and subsequently endorse romantic beliefs.

Admittedly, we must be cautious about asserting causal effects here given that the data are correlational in nature. It could be, for example, that individuals who already strongly endorse ideals, especially those pertaining to idealization of the partner, are deliberately seeking out these movies in order to find support for their existing romantic beliefs. However, the motivation finding poses a challenge to this selective exposure idea. If the individuals who most strongly endorse romantic beliefs are not those who watch the movies frequently but rather those who watch the movies to learn, it suggests that social learning is the more likely process at work. Future research should involve experimental and longitudinal studies to tease out the direction of causality in these relationships.

The final hypothesis predicted that the association between viewing and beliefs would be stronger among those who perceive themselves to be similar to romantic comedy characters. This hypothesis was not supported in that perceived similarity with the characters did not moderate the relationship between viewing romantic comedies and endorsing romantic beliefs.

According to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2002), viewers who feel similar to the characters onscreen will pay more attention to the content and learn more from these models than will those who feel no such similarity. Indeed, there is plenty of evidence that identification with and feeling similar to characters depicted in screen media is associated with stronger media effects (Cin, Gibson, Zanna, Shumate, & Fong, 2007; Harrison, 1997; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Tian & Hoffner, 2010). However, most of this research involves attachment to recurring characters commonly found in television series. It may be that the nature of movies (two-hour storylines with nonrecurring characters) does not allow for strong bonds of identification to develop. Future research should consider investigating whether viewers identify with characters in movie sequels or films that feature recurring characters (e.g., *Sex and the City*, 2008).

The final research question concerned whether the sex of the participant moderated the association between viewing and endorsement of romantic beliefs. Again, this moderator was not significant in the regression analysis. Clearly, women are bigger fans of romantic screen media than are men (Fischhoff et al., 1997; Harris et al., 2004; Segrin & Nabi, 2002), and also believe more strongly that love, faithfulness, and lifelong commitment are important elements of relationships (Meier et al., 2009; Rose & Frieze, 1993). It stands to reason that they may be influenced more by such movie content. However, Study 1 demonstrated that male characters in these films are more likely to express idealistic statements than female characters are. In addition, previous research suggests that men are influenced more than women by the content of reality dating television shows (Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007), and that men hold significantly stronger romantic ideals than do females (Sharp & Ganong, 2000; Sprecher & Metts, 1999; Weaver & Ganong, 2004). All of these patterns suggest that sex of the individual should matter. Yet my sample may have contained too few men (29%) to adequately test this

idea. The unequal sample sizes for men and women presumably reduced the power to detect an effect for sex as a moderator. Future research should investigate how men and women are influenced by romantic comedy exposure using roughly similar numbers of both sexes.

Altogether, the results of this study demonstrate that romantic comedy viewing is related to young people's beliefs about romance, but in nuanced ways. The belief in an ideal partner showed the most consistent relationship to overall viewing of romance films. However, endorsement of the four ideals collectively was predicted not by sheer exposure but instead by the motivation to learn from these films.

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). Others have even argued that viewing these films is unhealthy for relationships (Fletcher et al., 1999; Johnson & Holmes, 2009). Yet the more nuanced results of this study do not support such broad claims. At the very least, my 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 (Sprecher & Metts, 1999). In one study, Murray et al. (1996) surveyed 360 partnered and married people and discovered that idealization in romantic relationships was linked with higher levels of relational satisfaction. As a way of explaining this association, the researchers found evidence that individuals often projected their idealistic beliefs onto their current relationships. If that is the case, then repeated viewing of romantic comedies that promote the idealization of the other could encourage viewers to think of their own relational partners as wonderful and perfect. In other words, my findings support the notion that viewing

romantic comedies might be helpful for relational partners.

Alternatively, such films could remind people of the shortcomings of their own relationships, particularly in those cases in which the partner is already perceived as less than ideal. Future studies should explore the effects of watching movies, which contain characters who idealize partners, on people's romantic relationships.

The findings also suggest that the greatest impact of romantic comedies will be on those people who watch such content to learn. Understanding who these individuals are and where such motives come from will be an important step in determining whether these films have any utility in a therapeutic sense. It may be that encouraging struggling couples to watch romantic films could enhance relational functioning, but only if the individuals in the partnership are motivated to learn from such depictions.

Future research should continue to unpack the complexities associated with viewing romantic comedy films and endorsing ideal beliefs. My study demonstrates that there is some evidence that romantic comedies do influence viewers to endorse ideals within certain contexts. However, more work is needed to understand which content is most influential, and which viewers are most likely to be impacted by exposure. By increasing the scope of these examinations, future work can enable researchers, students, relational partners, and industry producers to better understand this relationship between exposure and effects.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The purpose of this dissertation was to investigate the nature of romantic comedy films and their influence on young adults. I conducted two studies. 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 survey of undergraduate students that assessed the association between viewing romantic comedy films and beliefs about love, relationships, and romance. One of the goals of this dissertation project was to link the romance-oriented movie content analyzed in Study 1 to the measure of exposure to such films in Study 2, in order to more carefully assess whether viewing certain types of content encourages the learning of romantic ideals among young adults.

Based on the results of these two studies, I have developed three general conclusions from this dissertation project. First, romantic ideals as well as challenges are prevalent in romantic comedy films. Indeed, 100% of my sample included either an ideal statement or a challenge expression, and most included both. The results of Study 1 (the content analysis) demonstrated that for the takeaway messages, ideals were more common than challenges. In other words, the overarching theme of these movies is more likely to reinforce idealistic love than to challenge it. However, at the level of individual character expressions throughout these films, challenges were more common than ideals. There also were slight differences between the film and expression levels in terms of types of ideals. At the SET or scene level, just under half of all expressions focused on the soul mate/one and only ideal. Love conquers all and idealization of other also appeared fairly often but love at first sight was rarely expressed. At the film level, love conquers all overwhelmingly was the most common theme, followed by soul

mate/one and only. Neither of the other two ideals was identified as an overarching theme for these movies.

Second, there are particular contextual features commonly associated with the expressions of ideals and challenges. In terms of ideals, men express ideals more often than women do, and ideals are more often rewarded than punished. The opposite is true of challenges. That is, women express challenges more often than men do, and challenges are more often punished than rewarded. Taken together, these results suggest that ideals may be absorbed more readily than challenges by viewers. When expressed by individual characters, ideals are frequently rewarded, and when accompanied by challenges, those contradictions to ideals are typically punished. The role of challenges, then, may be more as plot devices that set up tension and conflict in the storyline than as serious, counter messages about relationships.

Third, Study 2 revealed that there is evidence of an association between exposure to romantic comedy films and endorsement of idealistic beliefs. In particular, heavy viewers of such movies were more likely to endorse the idealization of the partner than were light viewers. Although exposure to these films did not predict endorsement of the other three ideals in my study, there is evidence that motives for viewing may be important. In particular, viewing romantic comedies with a motivation to learn was positively associated with endorsement of the collection of romantic beliefs. Unexpectedly, overall movie viewing also predicted endorsement of romantic beliefs.

The findings have several implications for theory. From a cultivation perspective, the collective results of these two studies provide nuanced support for Gerbner's (1998) hypothesis in two ways. First, greater romantic comedy viewing was associated with stronger endorsement of the idealization of other belief. Study 1 demonstrated that idealization of other is commonly

expressed in these films, so this pattern is consistent with the tenets of cultivation theory. However, it must be noted that viewing did not relate to the three other ideals, all of which are commonly found in such movies. This is a challenge for cultivation theory. Second, overall movie viewing was predictive of endorsement of romantic beliefs. This finding supports Gerbner's (1969) original proposition that program type should make little difference in the cultivation effect of television. Indeed, Gerbner and colleagues (1980) argued that the formulas on television are so pervasive that what people watched in terms of genre or particular program is irrelevant. Along the same lines, the fact that overall movie exposure predicted ideals suggests that the formulas for portraying romance on the screen may be fairly pervasive and consistent across all genres.

The results of my study also provide support for uses and gratifications theory. This theory focuses on why individuals seek out particular types of media content (Bryant & Thompson, 2002; Katz et al., 1974; Rubin, 2002). My study demonstrated that there was a positive relationship between watching romantic comedies for the purposes of learning and the endorsement of 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). It also is consistent with other work that shows that using media in order to learn is associated with greater involvement with the content (Diddi & LaRose, 2006; Namsu et al., 2009; Rubin, 1984). In fact, the results of my study demonstrate that the reasons why people choose to consume media may be more influential than exposure per se. Indeed, Study 2 indicates that watching these films in order to learn is a better predictor of beliefs than the sheer amount of exposure to romantic comedies.



My findings also have several implications for social cognitive theory. First, there was no support for the moderating effect of perceived similarity. Bandura (2002) argued that when viewers feel similar to the models onscreen, they will pay more attention to the content and learn more from these characters than in situations where no such connection is felt. My study did not support this idea, but it is first important to note that the measure of perceived similarity I used did not pertain to all romantic comedy characters, but only the “favorite” character for each respondent. Second, there was an effect for learning in that those viewers who reported watching these films to learn also reported stronger idealistic beliefs. As indicated above, this finding supports the uses and gratifications perspective but it also underscores the idea that people turn to the media for social learning. Third, the findings from the content analysis indicate that ideals are contextualized in a way that is likely to encourage learning. According to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1984), behaviors that are reinforced in a positive way are more likely to be imitated and learned than are behaviors that are punished. In this case, romantic ideals are often rewarded in the plotline and when they are challenged, these contradictory ideas are typically punished. Thus, if ideals are learned via exposure, this provides support for social cognitive theory. Future research should investigate the impact of rewards and punishments in the context of romantic ideals onscreen. For example, do viewers notice these reinforcements? Do rewarded expressions have more impact in terms of attention, enjoyment, and social learning? Future work should address these types of questions.

My dissertation not only has theoretical implications but also has a couple of practical implications. First, it appears that romantic comedies are most influential on those people who watch such content in order to learn. It may be that encouraging struggling couples to watch romantic films could enhance positive relational functioning, such as greater feelings of love and

stronger commitment. Research has shown that believing in these romantic ideals does lead to positive relational functioning (Sprecher & Metts, 1999). Thus, if individuals in the partnership are motivated to learn from such depictions in films, this could translate to a positive effect of romantic comedy exposure.

A more specific impact of watching these movies is that viewers are more likely to endorse idealization of other beliefs. Research has demonstrated that idealizing one's partner is associated with positive relational outcomes, such as stronger relational satisfaction (Murray et al., 1996). This suggests a second practical implication in that viewers should consider viewing romantic comedies if they want to rekindle the spark or feel stronger bonds of affection with their relational partners.

The studies in this dissertation are a first step in better understanding how romantic comedies and other romantic media may affect viewers. Several ideas for future research have emerged from this project. For one, there needs to be a deeper understanding of ideals and challenges in movie content. For example, what are the different ways that ideals can be rewarded and do these different reinforcements matter? If a character expresses an ideal and it is followed by a passionate kiss, is this reinforcement more powerful than a smile? To be sure, research indicates that media content that is arousing can enhance viewer attention and memory (Lang & Dhillon; 1995). In all likelihood, sexual responses to ideals may be potent components of social learning. Future work also should unpack what constitutes a challenge expression in these films. It may be that realistic statements, such as "it takes hard work to make a relationship last," function differently than direct contradictions of ideals, such as "we may love each other, but love is not enough." Do viewers perceive both types of messages as challenges? Finally, future researchers should investigate the presence of ideal themes in other genres of film. Given

that Study 2 revealed an effect for overall movie viewing (regardless of genre), there is reason to suspect that other genres of movies also contain expressions and themes of romantic ideals. Perhaps there are fewer challenges in other genres, which may serve to strengthen the ideals even more.

Future research would benefit from using different methodological designs that can tease out the issue of causality. With the correlational data in this project, it is impossible to ascertain whether viewing romantic comedies impacts beliefs or whether individuals with stronger beliefs are choosing to view these films. In order to ascertain the direction of causality, future research should incorporate experimental methodologies or longitudinal designs to investigate the links between viewing romantic comedies and endorsing romantic beliefs.

Scholars also should explore the ways in which people process romantic ideals in the media. That is, are viewers aware that these ideals are present in such films? How do individuals interpret ideal expressions and themes? How are challenges perceived? Gerbner (1998) argued that viewers are more likely to be impacted by exposure to media content when they do not view messages critically. Therefore, one obvious question is whether viewers accept ideal messages as realistic or accurate portrayals of romantic relationships. Future work should address this issue.

One way that researchers could investigate the different ways viewers interpret ideal expressions portrayed in these films would be to manipulate parts of the content. For instance, future work might look at the role of humor, which occurs throughout the plotlines. If humor is constantly coupled with romantic ideals, how might that alter a viewer's interpretation of the message? Designing an experiment that manipulates the inclusion of humor would be one way to assess how this contextual feature affects viewer reactions. Similarly, if characters joke with

each other every time a challenge is expressed, that too may influence how such critical statements are interpreted. Careful experimental work could determine whether the use of humor serves to enhance or undermine ideal and challenge expressions on viewers' beliefs about relationships.

The influence of ideal expressions versus takeaway themes is also a path for future research. According to my findings, idealistic overarching messages are more common than realistic themes in these movies. However, at the individual scene level, challenges are more common than ideals. Which messages do viewers remember most when they watch such films? Do vivid scenes that reward ideal expressions make more of a lasting impact? Or does the overarching moral or theme of the movie make a stronger impression? More work is needed to determine if overarching themes or individual expressions are more influential on viewer beliefs.

Aside from an experimental design, another method that could help tease out these nuances would be by conducting a focus group study. All of the research to date relating to media influence on romantic perceptions and beliefs, including this project, has employed questionnaire survey methods (Edison, 2006; Eggermont, 2004; Ferris et al., 2007; Segrin & Nabi, 2002). However, questionnaires are limited in their ability to uncover the reasons behind why participants respond in particular ways. For example, it is more difficult for a closed-ended questionnaire to gauge *why* participants may consider romantic comedies to be unrealistic or *how* viewers interpret ideal portrayals. Future work that incorporates focus groups could enable researchers to gather more in-depth data by asking participants to engage in discussions about these related concepts.

Follow-up surveys could also help understand this area more completely. For example, future studies could explore how often people compare their own relationships to movie

prototypes. When asked about their ideal relationship, do people often cite a relationship depicted in media? Are movie relationships rated as more ideal, desirable, or stable when compared to participants' past relationships or parents' relationships?

Future work also should more carefully examine the differences between male and female viewers with regard to romantic media. Although women like and watch romantic media more so than men do (Fischhoff et al., 1997; Harris et al., 2004; Segrin & Nabi, 2002), there is some evidence that men actually may be more influenced by romantic content (Ferris et al., 2007). In Study 1, I found that male characters express ideals more often whereas female characters express challenges more often in romantic comedies. In Study 2, I found that women watch these films more, but yet there was no sex difference in the association between exposure and belief endorsement. Clearly, men and women seem to respond differently to romantic media, but we do not have clear and consistent patterns as to how those differences translate into effects. Future work should show men and women scenes from these films that depict male and female characters expressing dissimilar themes. For instance, in one scene from *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), the female character points out that two people from different social classes face a huge obstacle when thinking about starting a romantic relationship. She asks: "Besides, can a lady of wealth and noble marriage love happily with a poet and player?" The male character responds emphatically with a love conquers ideal expression: "Yes, by god! Love knows nothing of rank." In this example, the female character points out the gritty realism associated with the parameters of their relationship. In turn, the male character presents an ideal alternative to a female target. In short, such sex differences could generate differing sex-role expectations among viewers, particularly with regard to how men and women should approach conversations in intimate relationships and what they might expect to hear in return. Future research should

more carefully investigate how men and women may react to and process such portrayals.

There may be other individual differences that are crucial in predicting how viewers will respond to such content. For instance, it stands to reason that individuals who are wildly in love will perceive romantic comedies differently than will individuals who are in unhappy relationships. Gerbner and his colleagues (1980) introduced the concept of “resonance,” which may be relevant here. That is, the association between viewing romantic comedies and endorsement of beliefs may be influenced by how much the content “resonates” with a person’s relational situation. Individuals who are highly satisfied with their current relationship may perceive the content to be consistent with real life and hence more believable. However, individuals who are dissatisfied with their romantic relationships may find the idealistic content of romantic comedies to be a poor representation of reality. Future research should investigate relational satisfaction as a potential moderating variable between exposure and beliefs.

Future studies also should explore the concept of realism as it relates to such content. It may be, for example, that the fantastic or exaggerated nature of the content in some of these films works against any strong or consistent impact they may have on beliefs. Viewers may enjoy the entertainment value of the plots but dismiss the content as “unrealistic.” To be sure, I found no moderating effect for perceived reality, but my measure was associated with all movies in general, and not romantic comedies specifically. Even so, perceived reality of the content may be less important than experiential reality. Many might argue that most adults would judge fictional media as unrealistic if asked to compare it to real life. The more critical question is whether they experience the content as realistic while they are viewing it. Green and Brock (2002) have argued that accepting narratives as true is a cognitive default, because discounting the fictional information requires more mental effort. Thus, viewers may choose to perceive a

romantic comedy as realistic while watching it, even if they rate it as unrealistic in retrospective reports. Future research should explore this possibility in greater detail.

Another individual difference that may play a role is age of participant. This project investigated the effects of romantic comedy exposure on young adults. It may be that the patterns I predicted would have been stronger with a younger audience. In fact, others have suggested that age could make a difference when investigating the link between media content and beliefs about romance (Ferris et al., 2007; Segrin & Nabi, 2002). These scholars have argued that younger viewers will be more influenced than older viewers, in part because of relational experience. Future research should explore whether teens in particular, a group just learning about relationships, are more susceptible to the messages in romantic media.

In summary, this project is the first step toward building a program of research on romance and media. The findings of this dissertation demonstrate that ideals are present in romantic comedies, and that exposure to these movies does predict beliefs in some viewers. There is still much work to be done to better understand contextual features in the plotlines, the direction of causality between exposure and beliefs, and individual viewer differences that might explain how people process these movies. Researchers who specialize in interpersonal communication should continue to investigate the influence of holding romantic ideals on relationship functioning. With continued work from researchers in a number of fields, we can move toward a deeper understanding of this form of popular culture and its effects. Romantic comedies as a genre have weathered criticism for being unrealistic and predictable. Yet it may be that such messages in the media have the potential to encourage positive conceptions of relationships and to help people weather occasional relational storms in their own lives.

CHAPTER 6:  
TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1

*List of Coded Movies with Release Dates in order of Highest Grossing Box Office Receipts*

Movie title	Release year
1. <i>My Big Fat Greek Wedding</i>	2002
2. <i>What Women Want</i>	2000
3. <i>Hitch</i>	2005
4. <i>There's Something About Mary</i>	1998
5. <i>Sex and the City</i>	2008
6. <i>Runaway Bride</i>	1999
7. <i>Knocked Up</i>	2007
8. <i>Bringing Down the House</i>	2003
9. <i>Sweet Home Alabama</i>	2002
10. <i>Mr. Deeds</i>	2002
11. <i>Something's Gotta Give</i>	2003
12. <i>50 First Dates</i>	2004
13. <i>The Break-Up</i>	2006
14. <i>Notting Hill</i>	1999
15. <i>You've Got Mail</i>	1998
16. <i>How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days</i>	2003
17. <i>Shakespeare in Love</i>	1998

(continued)



*List of Coded Movies with Release Dates in order of Highest Grossing Box Office Receipts  
(continued)*

Movie title	Release year
18. <i>Norbit</i>	2007
19. <i>Maid in Manhattan</i>	2002
20. <i>America's Sweethearts</i>	2001
21. <i>Two Weeks Notice</i>	2002
22. <i>Failure to Launch</i>	2006
23. <i>Along Came Polly</i>	2004
24. <i>What Happens in Vegas</i>	2008
25. <i>The Wedding Singer</i>	1998
26. <i>27 Dresses</i>	2008
27. <i>Six Days, Seven Nights</i>	1998
28. <i>Bridget Jones' Diary</i>	2001
29. <i>Shallow Hal</i>	2001
30. <i>Fool's Gold</i>	2008
31. <i>Down to Earth</i>	2001
32. <i>She's All That</i>	1999
33. <i>Bewitched</i>	2005
34. <i>The Holiday</i>	2006
35. <i>Forgetting Sarah Marshall</i>	2008
36. <i>The Wedding Planner</i>	2001

(continued)

*List of Coded Movies with Release Dates in order of Highest Grossing Box Office Receipts  
(continued)*

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Movie title	Release year
37. <i>Love, Actually</i>	2003
38. <i>Just Married</i>	2003
39. <i>Never Been Kissed</i>	1999
40. <i>Forces of Nature</i>	1999
41. <i>Music and Lyrics</i>	2007
42. <i>Serendipity</i>	2001
43. <i>Just Like Heaven</i>	2005
44. <i>Kate and Leopold</i>	2001
45. <i>Made of Honor</i>	2008
46. <i>License to Wed</i>	2007
47. <i>Must Love Dogs</i>	2005
48. <i>No Reservations</i>	2007
49. <i>Rumor Has It</i>	2005
50. <i>Because I Said So</i>	2007
51. <i>Fever Pitch</i>	2005
52. <i>Bridget Jones: Edge of Reason</i>	2004

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*Note.* Top 52 highest-grossing romantic comedy films from 1998-2008, according to Box Office Mojo (2008)

Table 2

*Percent Agreement for Unitizing at SET level*

Movie Title	%	Week
<i>You've Got Mail</i>	78	1
<i>Sweet Home Alabama</i>	67	1
<i>Sex &amp; the City</i>	69	2
<i>Kate &amp; Leopold</i>	70	3
<i>My Big Fat Greek Wedding</i>	72	3
<i>Wedding Singer</i>	75	4
<i>Maid In Manhattan</i>	77	5
<i>How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days</i>	74	6
<i>Hitch</i>	76	7
<i>The Break-Up</i>	80	8
<i>Fever Pitch</i>	73	9
<i>Notting Hill</i>	89	10
Overall Mean % Agreement	75	

Table 3

*Reliability kappas for Source Variables at SET level*

Movie Title	Variables				
	Sex	Race	Age	Sexuality	Prominence
<i>You've Got Mail</i>	.95	.99	.94	1.0	.97
<i>Sweet Home Alabama</i>	.89	1.0	.95	1.0	.91
<i>Sex &amp; the City</i>	.93	1.0	.97	1.0	.93
<i>Kate &amp; Leopold</i>	.94	1.0	.96	1.0	.92
<i>My Big Fat Greek Wedding</i>	.94	1.0	.99	1.0	.94
<i>Wedding Singer</i>	.92	1.0	1.0	1.0	.91
<i>Maid In Manhattan</i>	.97	1.0	.99	1.0	.98
<i>How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days</i>	.95	1.0	1.0	1.0	.97
<i>Hitch</i>	.98	1.0	.99	1.0	.95
<i>The Break-Up</i>	.93	1.0	1.0	1.0	.94
<i>Fever Pitch</i>	.96	1.0	.98	1.0	.97
<i>Notting Hill</i>	.95	1.0	1.0	1.0	.98
Overall Mean <i>kappas</i>	.94	1.0	.98	1.0	.95

Table 4

*Reliability kappas for Target Demographics at SET level*

Movie Title	Variables				
	Sex	Race	Age	Sexuality	Prominence
<i>You've Got Mail</i>	.80	.95	.83	.99	.88
<i>Sweet Home Alabama</i>	.78	.95	.85	1.0	.81
<i>Sex &amp; the City</i>	.84	1.0	.95	.98	.80
<i>Kate &amp; Leopold</i>	.76	1.0	.94	.98	.82
<i>My Big Fat Greek Wedding</i>	.92	.94	.92	1.0	.83
<i>Wedding Singer</i>	.89	.97	.96	.98	.79
<i>Maid In Manhattan</i>	.87	.93	.92	1.0	.84
<i>How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days</i>	.96	1.0	1.0	.99	.86
<i>Hitch</i>	.91	.95	1.0	.99	.82
<i>The Break-Up</i>	.93	1.0	.98	1.0	.85
<i>Fever Pitch</i>	.94	.97	.96	1.0	.91
<i>Notting Hill</i>	.90	.95	.92	.96	.90
Overall Mean <i>kappas</i>	.88	.97	.94	.99	.84

Table 5

*Reliability kappas for SET Type of Expression, and SET Reinforcement, Film Relational Message*

Movie Title	Week	SET Expression	Reinforcement	Film Relational Message
<i>You've Got Mail</i>	1	.92	.73	.50
<i>Sweet Home Alabama</i>	1	.86	.74	.50
<i>Sex &amp; the City</i>	2	.86	.76	.67
<i>Kate &amp; Leopold</i>	3	.86	.75	.50
<i>Wedding Singer</i>	3	.84	.89	.50
<i>My Big Fat Greek Wedding</i>	4	.87	.81	.83
<i>Maid In Manhattan</i>	5	.88	.85	.83
<i>How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days</i>	6	.85	.84	.67
<i>Hitch</i>	7	.95	.83	.83
<i>The Break-Up</i>	8	.98	.81	1.0
<i>Fever Pitch</i>	9	.90	.78	.83
<i>Notting Hill</i>	10	.93	.78	1.0
Overall Mean <i>kappas</i>		.90	.80	.72

Table 6

*Frequencies of Demographic Information for Sources*

	<i>N</i>	Ideals %	<i>N</i>	Challenges %
<b>Sex</b>				
Male	245	65	324	44
Female	130	35	415	56
<b>Race</b>				
Caucasian	356	95	692	94
African-American	14	4	23	3
Asian	0	0	0	0
Hispanic	3	1<	16	2
Mixed	1	1<	3	1<
Other	1	1<	5	1
<b>Age</b>				
Child	6	1	2	1<
Teen	7	2	11	1
Adult	352	94	705	95
Elderly	10	3	21	3
Other	0	0	0	0

(continued)

*Frequencies of Demographic Information for Sources (continued)*

	<i>N</i>	Ideals %	<i>N</i>	Challenges %
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>				
Heterosexual	371	99	735	99
Gay	3	1<	1	1<
Other	1	1<	3	1<



Table 7

*Frequencies of the Demographic Information for Targets*

	<i>N</i>	Ideals %	<i>N</i>	Challenges %
<b>Sex</b>				
Male	167	44	464	63
Female	193	52	250	34
No Target	15	4	25	3
<b>Race</b>				
Caucasian	324	86	667	90
African-American	15	4	27	4
Asian	2	1<	0	0
Hispanic	8	2	4	1<
Mixed	2	1<	3	1<
Other/Unknown	9	2	13	2
No Target	15	4	25	3
<b>Age</b>				
Child	39	10	125	17
Teen	13	4	30	4
Adult	282	75	532	72
Elderly	14	4	17	3
Other/Unknown	12	3	10	1

(continued)

*Frequencies of the Demographic Information for Targets (continued)*

	Ideals		Challenges	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
<b>Age</b>				
No Target	15	4	25	3
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>				
Heterosexual	304	81	520	70
Gay	1	1<	1	1<
Other/Unknown	55	15	193	26
No Target	15	4	25	3

Table 8

*Frequencies of the Prominence of Sources and Targets*

	<i>N</i>	Ideals %	<i>N</i>	Challenges %
Source Prominence				
Primary Characters	250	67	493	67
Secondary Characters	125	33	246	33
Target Prominence				
Primary Characters	238	63	502	68
Secondary Characters	122	33	212	29
No Target	15	4	25	3

Table 9

*Descriptive Statistics of Scale Variables*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Actual Range of Mean Scores	Possible Range	$\alpha$
Romantic Beliefs	4.16	.90	1.36-6.71	1-7	.80
Love Conquers All	5.01	1.26	1-7	1-7	.82
Idealization of Other	3.94	1.23	1-7	1-7	.74
Soul mate/One and Only	3.67	1.38	1-7	1-7	.69
Love at First Sight	2.73	1.28	1-7	1-7	.48
Perceived Reality	3.33	1.10	1-7	1-7	.73
Uses and Gratifications	4.42	1.11	1-7	1-7	.82
Escape	3.88	1.66	1-7	1-7	.82
Entertainment	5.82	1.32	1-7	1-7	.92
Learning	3.57	1.59	1-7	1-7	.85
Perceived Similarity	4.03	.79	1.69-6.54	1-7	.86
Satisfaction with Life	4.93	1.17	1.80-7	1-7	.85
Depression	.58	.41	.00-2.30	0-3	.80

Table 10

*Principal Components Analysis for the Romantic Beliefs Scale*

Item	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
1. If I love someone, I know I can make the relationship work, despite any obstacles.	<b>.66</b>	.16	.25	-.07
2. If I love someone, I will find a way for us to be together regardless of the opposition of the relationship, physical distance between us or any other barrier.	<b>.79</b>	.22	.12	-.03
3. If a relationship I have was meant to be, any obstacle (e.g., lack of money, physical distance, career conflicts) can be overcome.	<b>.82</b>	.05	.12	.00
4. I believe if another person and I love each other we can overcome any differences and problems that may arise.	<b>.82</b>	.22	.06	-.08
5. I'm sure that every new thing I learn about the person I choose for a long-term commitment will please me.	-.01	<b>.62</b>	.34	.13
6. The relationship I will have with my 'true love' will be nearly perfect.	.10	<b>.80</b>	.14	.17
7. I expect that in my relationship, romantic love will really last; it won't fade with time.	.37	<b>.64</b>	.05	-.09
8. The person I love will make a perfect romantic partner; for example, he/she will be completely accepting, loving, and understanding.	.32	<b>.75</b>	-.04	-.09
9. Once I experience 'true love', I could never experience it again, to the same degree, with another person.	-.00	.02	<b>.85</b>	-.02
10. I believe that to be truly in love is to be in love forever.	.30	.09	<b>.69</b>	-.02
11. There will be only one real love for me.	.24	.22	<b>.68</b>	.12
12. I need to know someone for a period of time before I fall in love with him or her.	-.14	-.14	.08	<b>.86</b>
13. I am likely to fall in love almost immediately if I meet the right person.	.01	.31	.16	<b>.74</b>

Eigenvalue: 4.26 1.76 1.37 1.03

% Variance explained: 32.8 13.6 10.5 7.9

*Note.* Factor 1: Love conquers all. Factor 2: Idealization of other. Factor 3: Soul mate/one and only. Factor 4: Love at first sight.

Table 11

*List of Romantic Comedy Movies with Weighting Scores for Romantic Content*


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Movie title	
<i>The Break-Up</i> (2006)	1
<i>Just Like Heaven</i> (2005)	2
<i>50 First Dates</i> (2004)	2
<i>Knocked Up</i> (2007)	3
<i>What Happens in Vegas</i> (2008)	3
<i>Forgetting Sarah Marshall</i> (2008)	3
<i>Music and Lyrics</i> (2007)	3
<i>Norbit</i> (2007)	4
<i>Sex and the City</i> (2008)	6
<i>What Women Want</i> (2000)	6
<i>The Holiday</i> (2006)	6
<i>My Big Fat Greek Wedding</i> (2002)	7
<i>Fool's Gold</i> (2008)	8
<i>Along Came Polly</i> (2004)	10
<i>27 Dresses</i> (2008)	11
<i>Made of Honor</i> (2008)	11
<i>Hitch</i> (2005)	12
<i>Bewitched</i> (2005)	12
<i>Failure to Launch</i> (2006)	12
<i>License to Wed</i> (2007)	13

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Table 12

*Bivariate Correlations for Romantic Media Exposure Variables*

	1	2	3	4
1. Viewing of Romantic Comedies	1.00			
2. Ranking plus Viewing	.98**	1.00		
3. Ranking plus Viewing (weighted by content)	.97**	.97**	1.00	
4. All Romantic Media	.86**	.90**	.86**	1.00

\*\* $p < .01$

Table 13

*Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Endorsement of Romantic Beliefs*

Predictor	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$
Step 1	.07**	
Age		-.05
Race		.02
Parents' Relational Status		-.06
Churchgoing		.12*
Depression		.02
Life Satisfaction		.17**
Overall movie viewing		.18**
Step 2	.00	
Romantic Comedy Films		-.05
Total $R^2$	.07	
$N$	322	

*Note.* All coefficients are from the full model. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ .



Table 14

*Bivariate Correlations for Romantic Belief Subscales*

	1	2	3	4
1. Idealization of Other	1.00			
2. Love Conquers All	.47**	1.00		
3. Love at First Sight	.11**	-.11*	1.00	
4. Soul mate/One and Only	.39**	.39**	.09	1.00

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

Table 15

*Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Endorsement of the Idealization of Other Ideal*

Predictor	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$
Step 1	.09**	
Age		-.06
Race		.01
Parents' Relational Status		-.06
Churchgoing		.07
Depression		-.07
Life Satisfaction		.13*
Overall movie viewing		.27**
Step 2	.01*	
Romantic Comedy Films		.11*
Total $R^2$	.10*	
$N$	322	

*Note.* All coefficients are from the full model. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Table 16

*Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Endorsement of the Love Conquers All Ideal*

Predictor	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$
Step 1	.06**	
Age		-.08
Race		.09
Parents' Relational Status		.05
Churchgoing		.06
Depression		.02
Life Satisfaction		.19**
Overall movie viewing		.10
Step 2	.00	
Romantic Comedy Films		-.03
Total $R^2$	.06	
$N$	322	

*Note.* All coefficients are from the full model. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Table 17

*Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Endorsement of the Love at First Sight Ideal*

Predictor	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$
Step 1	.02	
Age		-.03
Race		-.06
Parents' Relational Status		-.08
Churchgoing		-.02
Depression		.00
Life Satisfaction		-.09
Overall movie viewing		-.03
Step 2	.00	
Romantic Comedy Films		-.01
Total $R^2$	.02	
$N$	322	

*Note.* All coefficients are from the full model. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Table 18

*Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Endorsement of the Soul mate/One and Only Ideal*

Predictor	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$
Step 1	.06*	
Age		.00
Race		-.01
Parents' Relational Status		-.09
Churchgoing		.19**
Depression		.12*
Life Satisfaction		.11
Overall movie viewing		.04
Step 2	.00	
Romantic Comedy Films		.07
Total $R^2$	.07	
$N$	322	

*Note.* All coefficients are from the full model. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Table 19

*Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Two-way Interaction between Romantic Comedy Exposure and Relational Experience in Predicting Endorsement of Romantic Beliefs*

Predictor	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$
Step 1	.07**	
Age		-.09
Race		.04
Parents' Relational Status		-.06
Churchgoing		.12*
Depression		.02
Life Satisfaction		.14*
Overall movie viewing		.16**
Step 2	.01	
Romantic Comedy Films		-.06
Relational Experience		.04
Step 3	.00	
Relational Experience * Romantic Comedy Exposure		.04
Total $R^2$	.07	
$N$	321	

*Note.* All coefficients are from the full model. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Table 20

*Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Two-way Interaction between Romantic Comedy Exposure and Relational Status in Predicting Endorsement of Romantic Beliefs*

Predictor	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$
Step 1	.07**	
Age		-.08
Race		.04
Parents' Relational Status		-.05
Churchgoing		.13*
Depression		.03
Life Satisfaction		.14*
Overall movie viewing		.15*
Step 2	.02	
Romantic Comedy Films		-.02
Relational Status		.12*
Step 3	.00	
Relational Satisfaction * Romantic Comedy Exposure		.05
Total $R^2$	.09	
$N$	329	

*Note.* All coefficients are from the full model. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Table 21

*Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Two-way Interaction between Romantic Comedy Exposure and Perceived Reality in Predicting Endorsement of Romantic Beliefs*

Predictor	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$
Step 1	.07**	
Age		-.06
Race		.02
Parents' Relational Status		-.05
Churchgoing		.12*
Depression		.02
Life Satisfaction		.15*
Overall movie viewing		.16**
Step 2	.01	
Romantic Comedy Films		-.03
Perceived Reality		.08
Step 3	.00	
Perceived Reality * Romantic Comedy Exposure		-.07
Total $R^2$	.08	
$N$	329	

*Note.* All coefficients are from the full model. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ .



Table 22

*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*

Predictor	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$
Step 1	.07**	
Age		-.06
Race		.01
Parents' Relational Status		-.04
Churchgoing		.13*
Depression		.00
Life Satisfaction		.16**
Overall movie viewing		.15**
Step 2	.02*	
Romantic Comedy Films		-.05
Learning		.15**
Step 3	.01	
Learning * Romantic Comedy Exposure		-.07
Total $R^2$	.09	
$N$	326	

*Note.* All coefficients are from the full model. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Table 23

*Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Two-way Interaction between Romantic Comedy Exposure and Perceived Similarity in Predicting Endorsement of Romantic Beliefs*

Predictor	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$
Step 1	.07**	
Age		-.07
Race		.04
Parents' Relational Status		-.06
Churchgoing		.12*
Depression		.02
Life Satisfaction		.16*
Overall movie viewing		.16**
Step 2	.00	
Romantic Comedy Films		-.04
Perceived Similarity		.02
Step 3	.00	
Perceived Similarity * Romantic Comedy Exposure		-.05
Total $R^2$	.07	
$N$	328	

*Note.* All coefficients are from the full model. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Table 24

*Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Two-way Interaction between Romantic Comedy Exposure and Sex in Predicting Endorsement of Romantic Beliefs*

Predictor	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$
Step 1	.07**	
Age		-.06
Race		-.01
Parents' Relational Status		-.06
Churchgoing		.12*
Depression		.02
Life Satisfaction		.15*
Overall movie viewing		.18**
Step 2	.01	
Romantic Comedy Films		.07
Sex of Participant		.14
Step 3	.00	
Sex of Participant * Romantic Comedy Exposure		-.18
Total $R^2$	.08	
$N$	327	

*Note.* All coefficients are from the full model. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ .

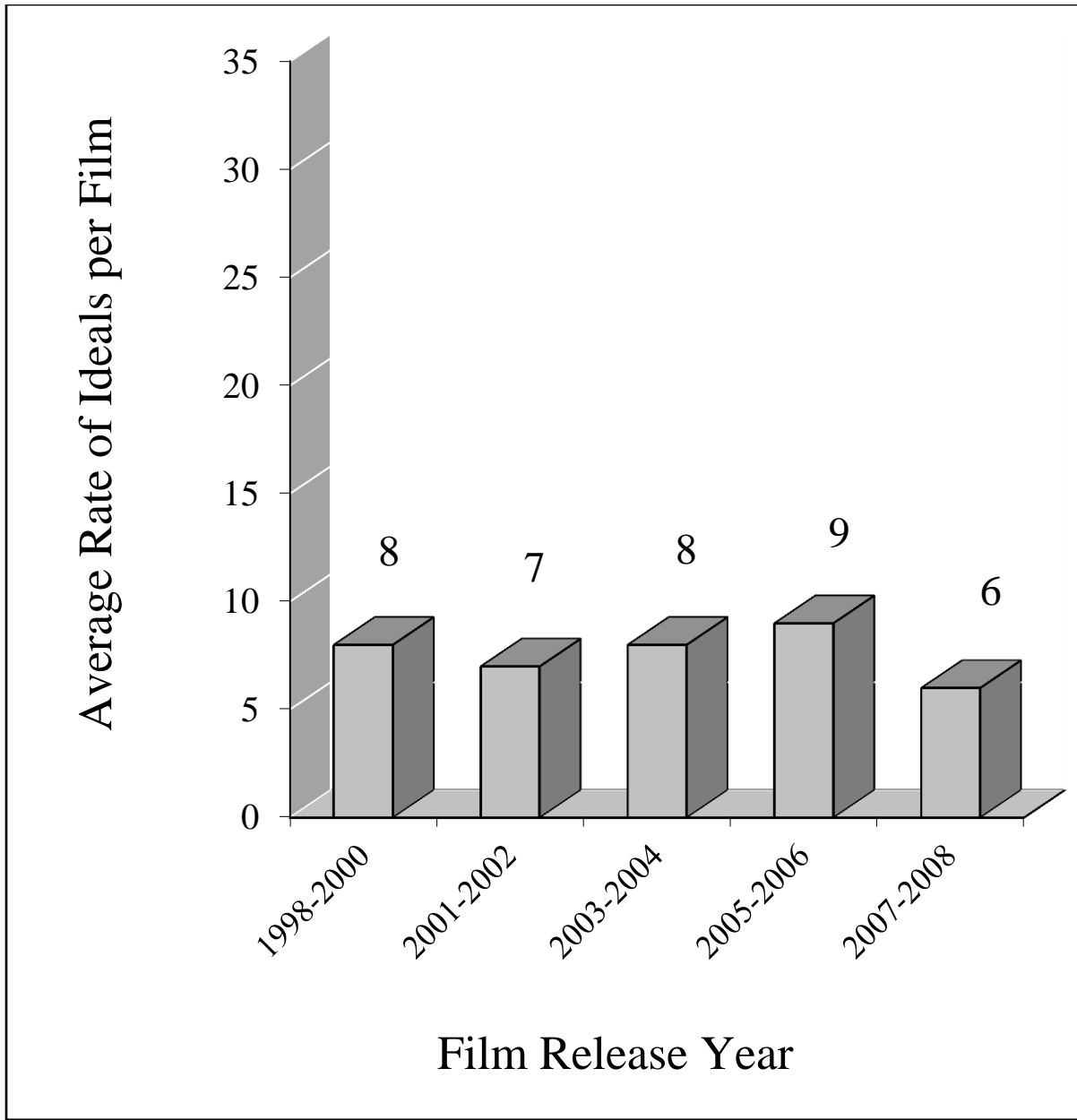


Figure 1. Average rate of ideal expressions per film over time.

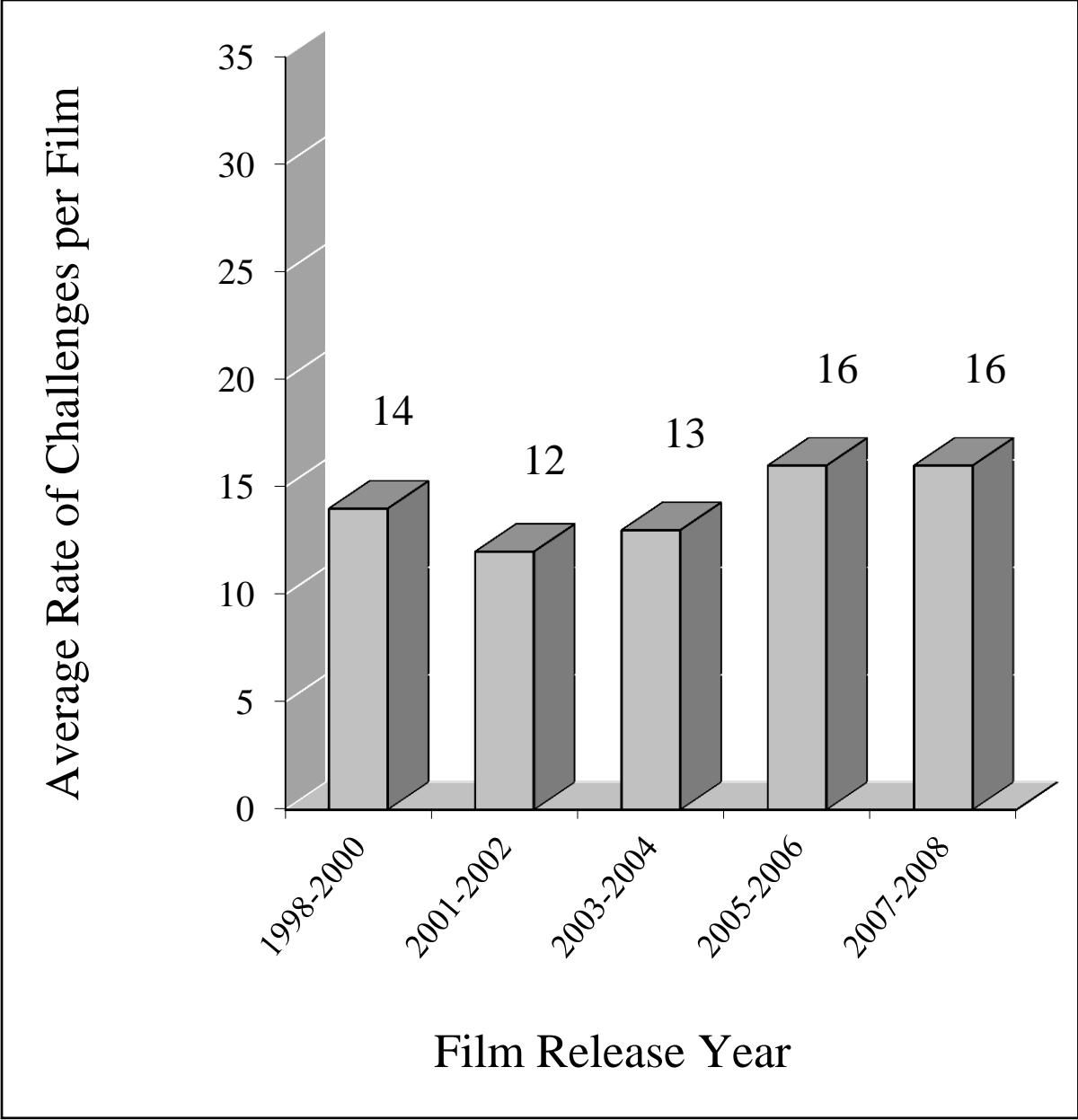


Figure 2. Average rate of challenge expressions per film over time.

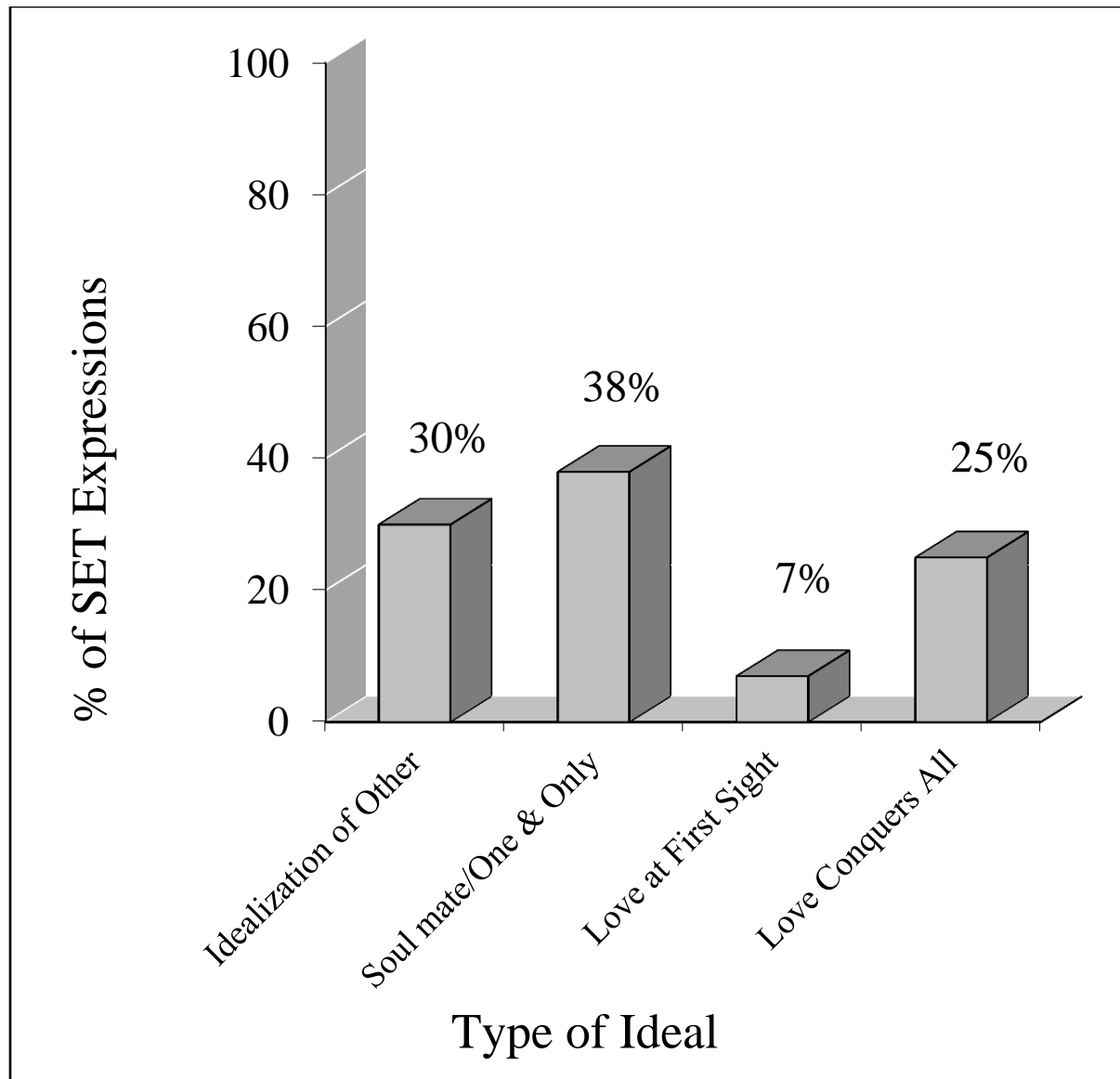


Figure 3. Type of ideal expression at SET level.

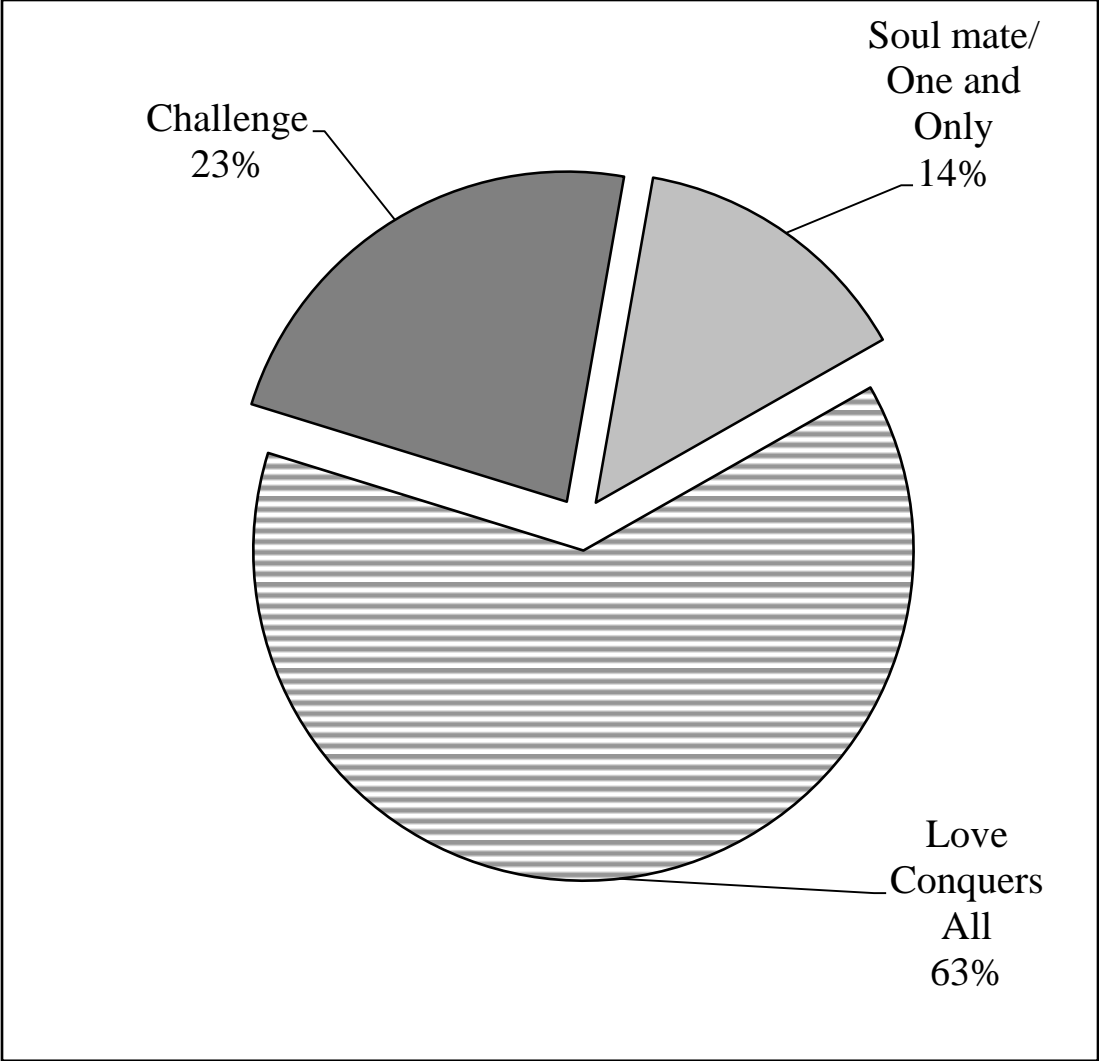


Figure 4. Type of overall relational message at film level.

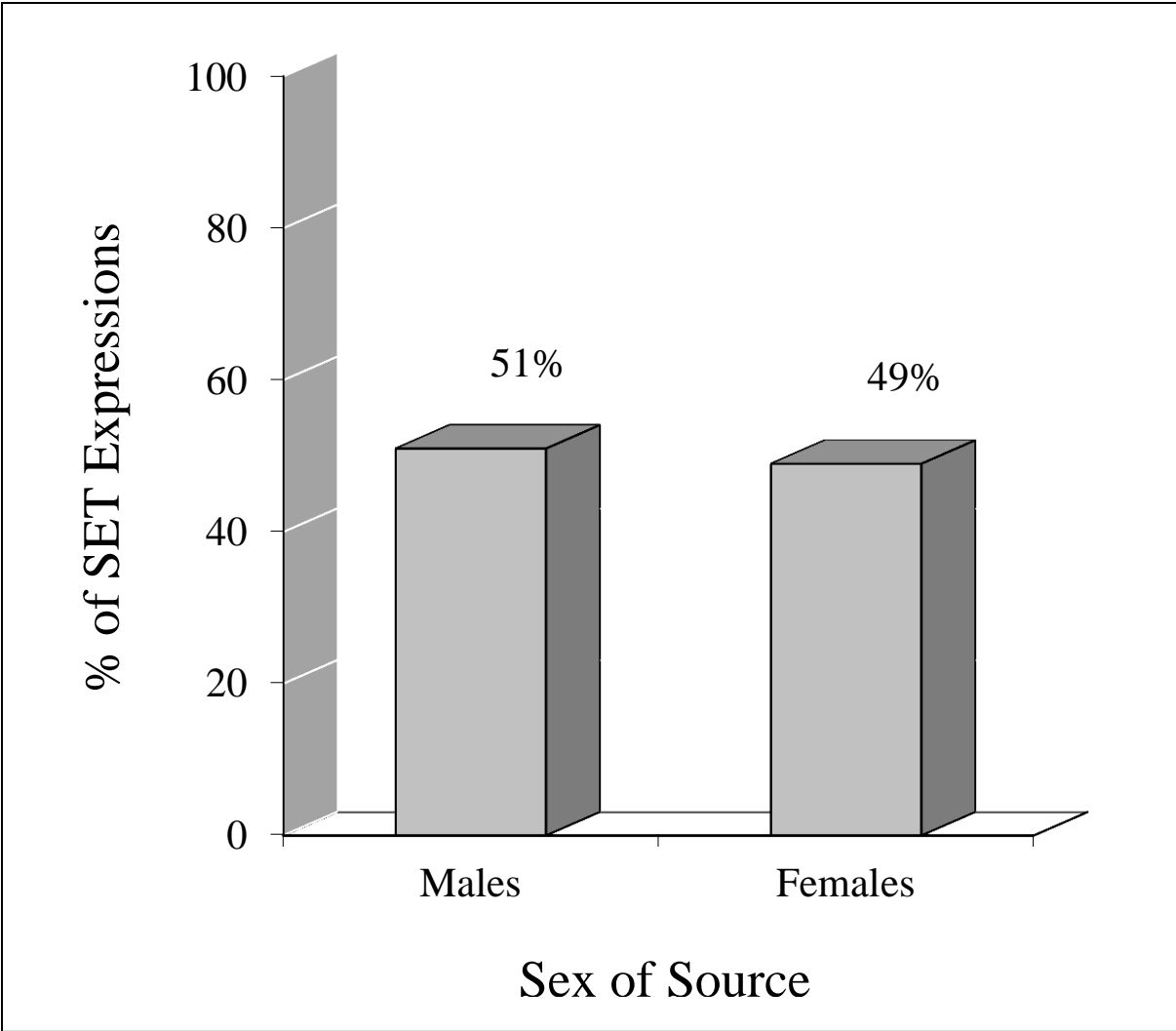


Figure 5. Frequencies of sex of source for expressions about relationships.



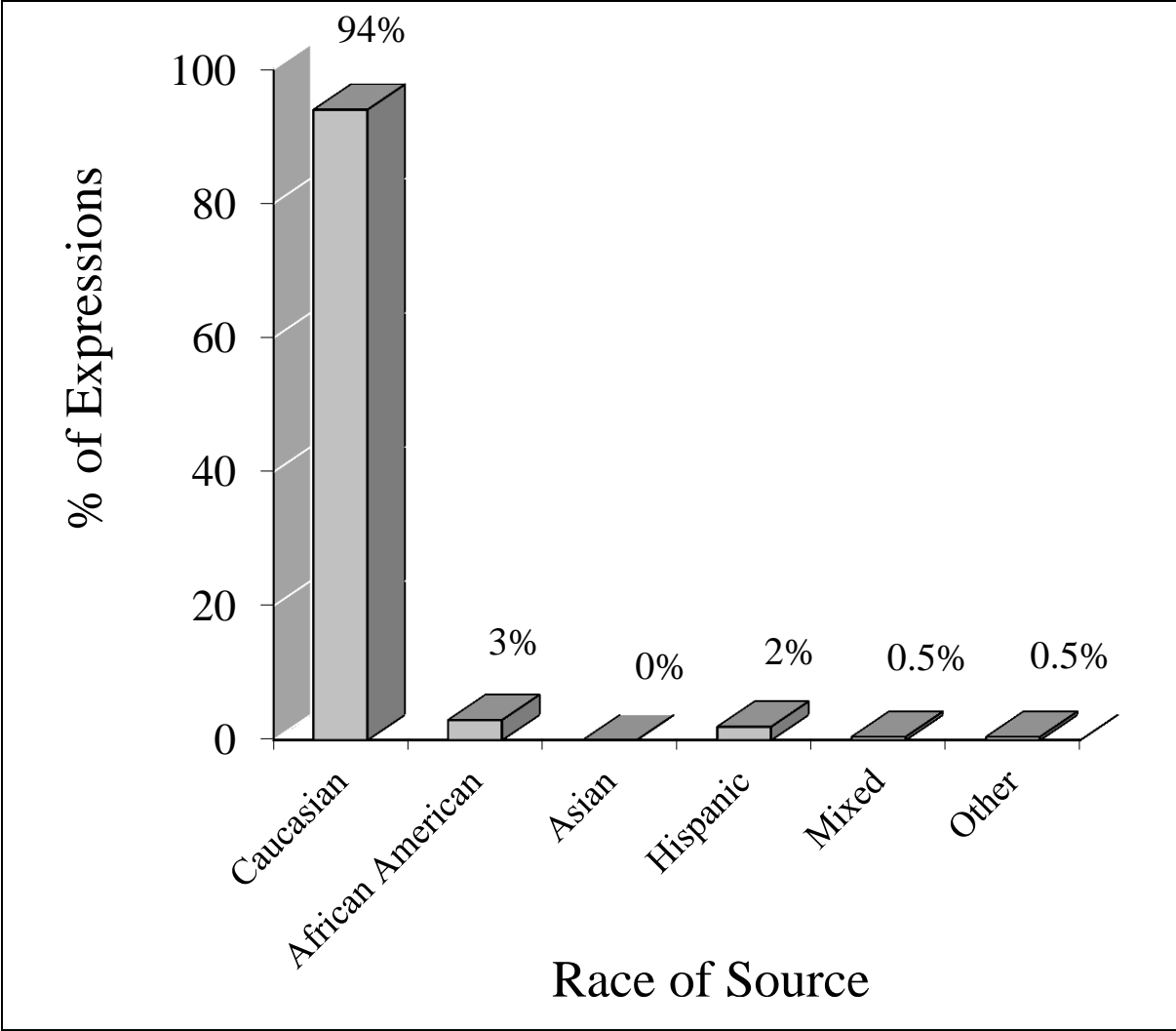


Figure 6. Frequencies of race of source for expressions about relationships.

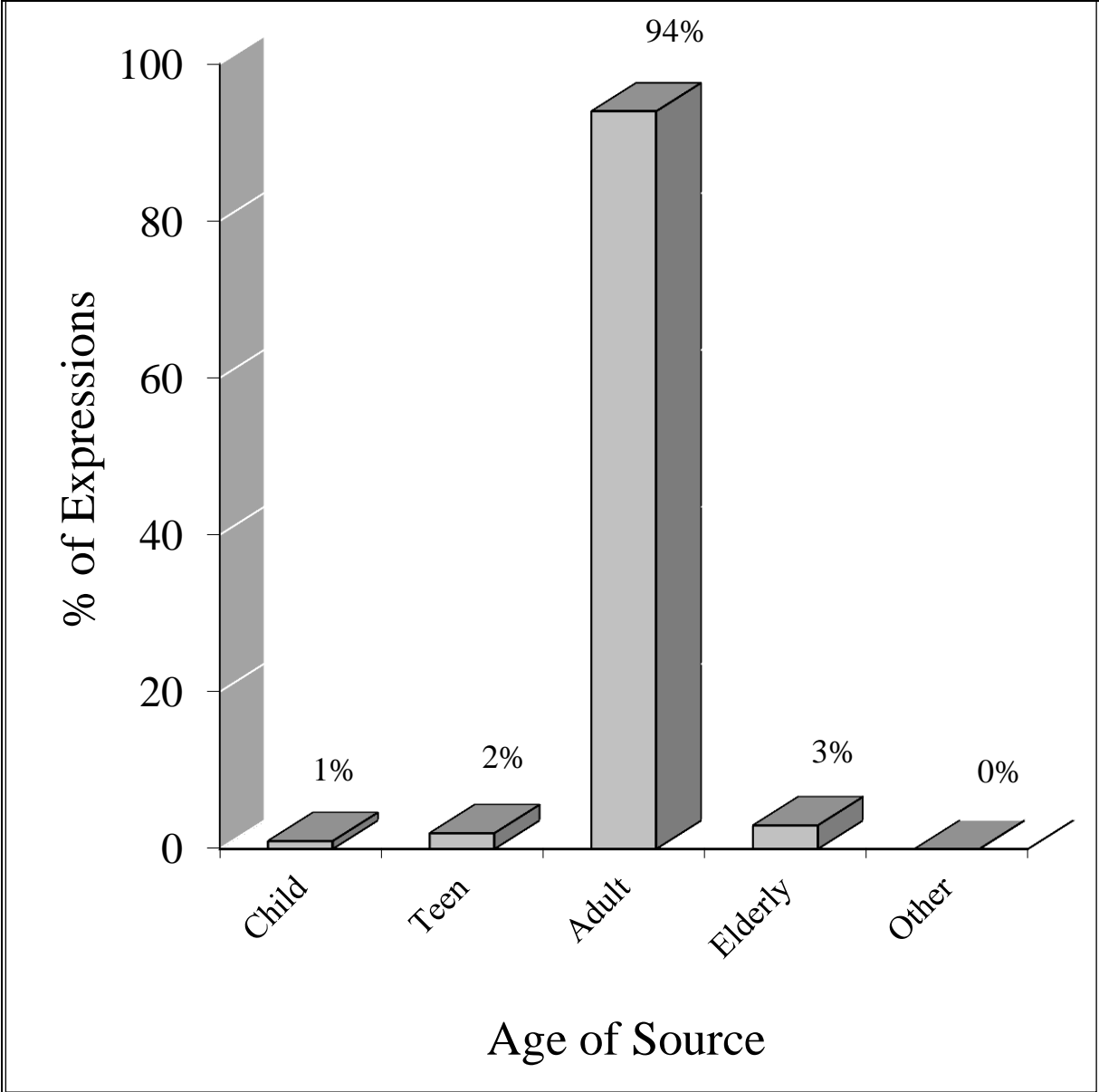


Figure 7. Frequencies of age of source for expressions about relationships.

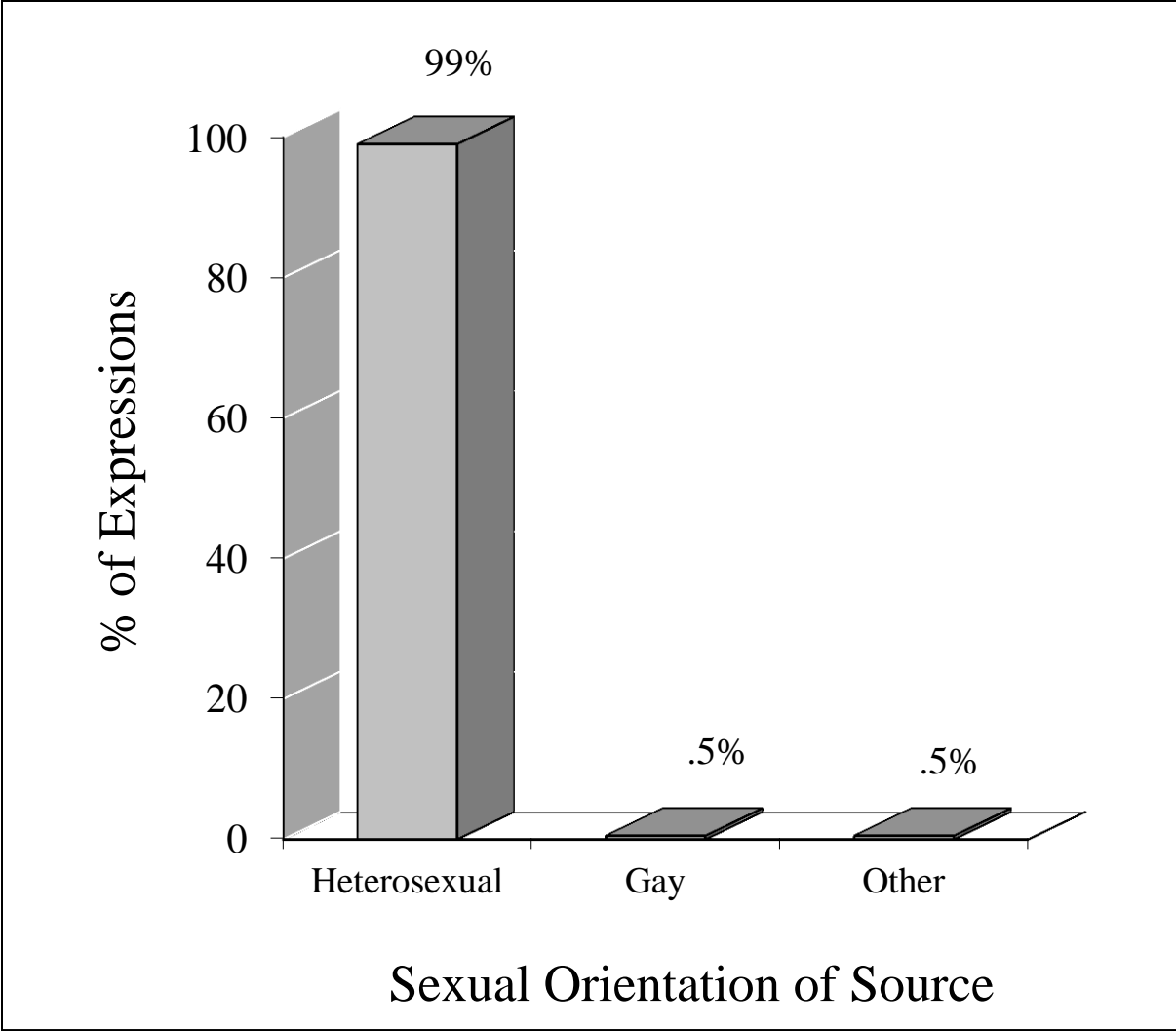


Figure 8. Frequencies of sexual orientation of source for expressions about relationships.

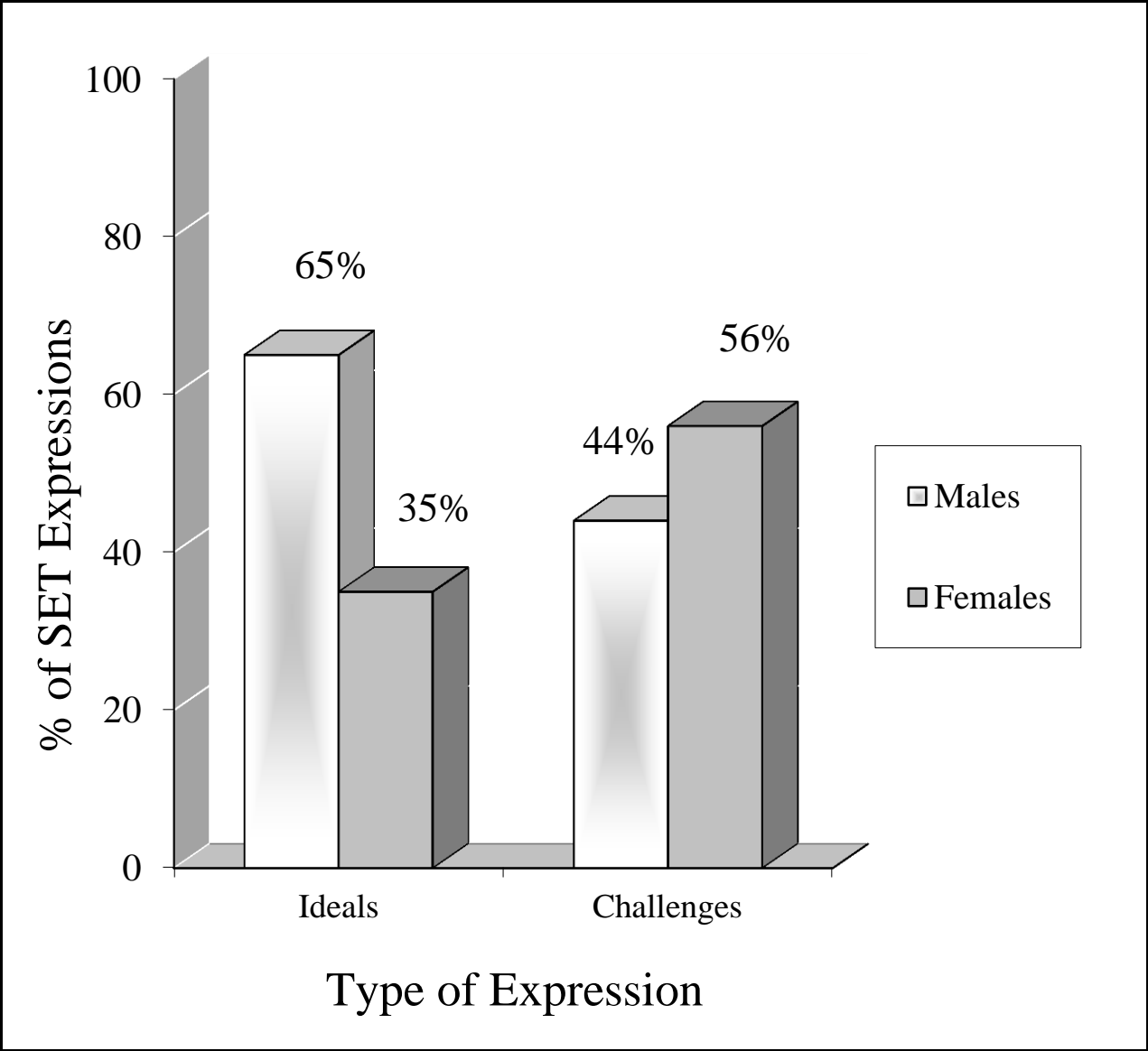


Figure 9. Type of expression as a function of sex of source.

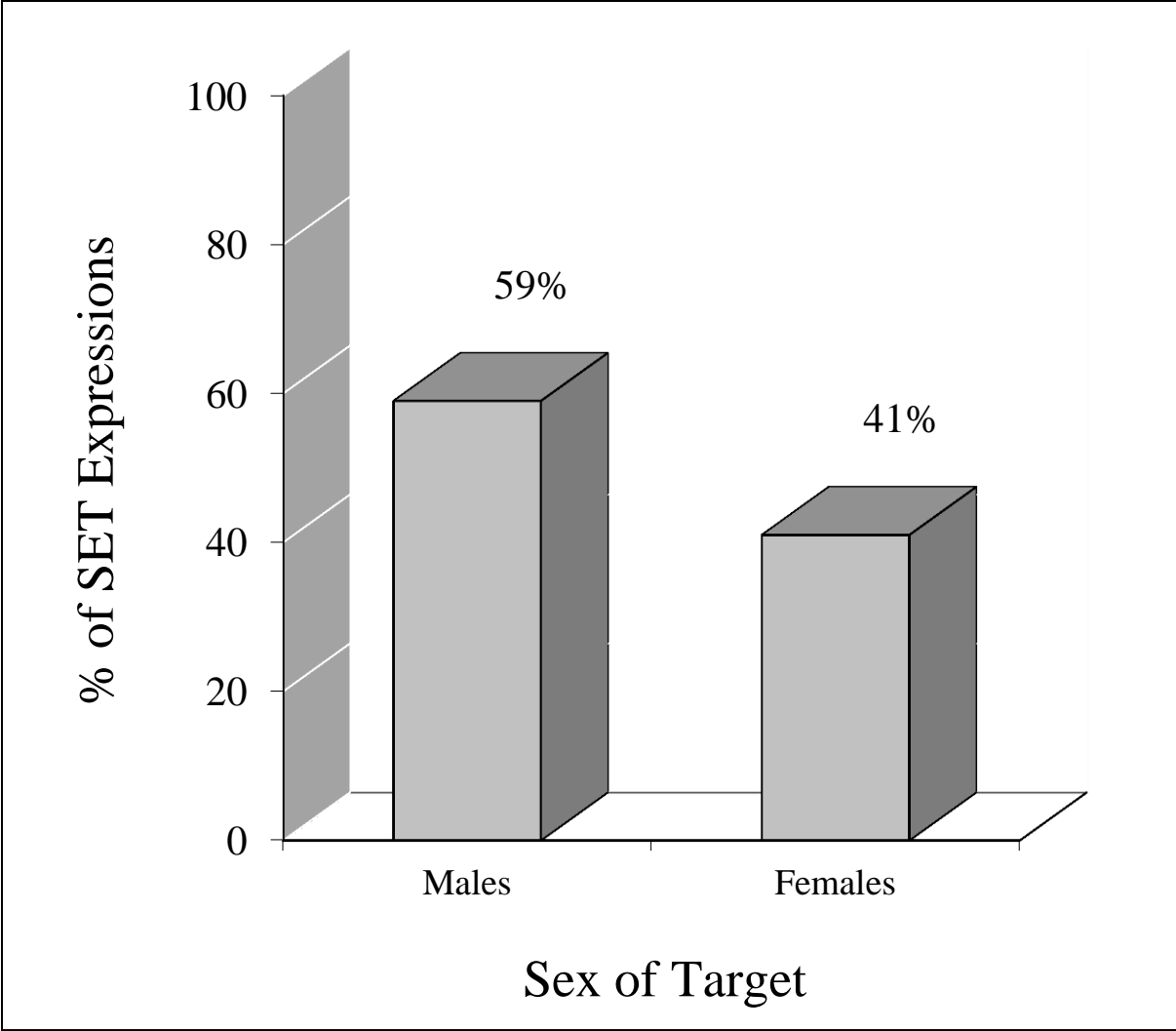


Figure 10. Frequencies of sex of target for expressions about relationships.

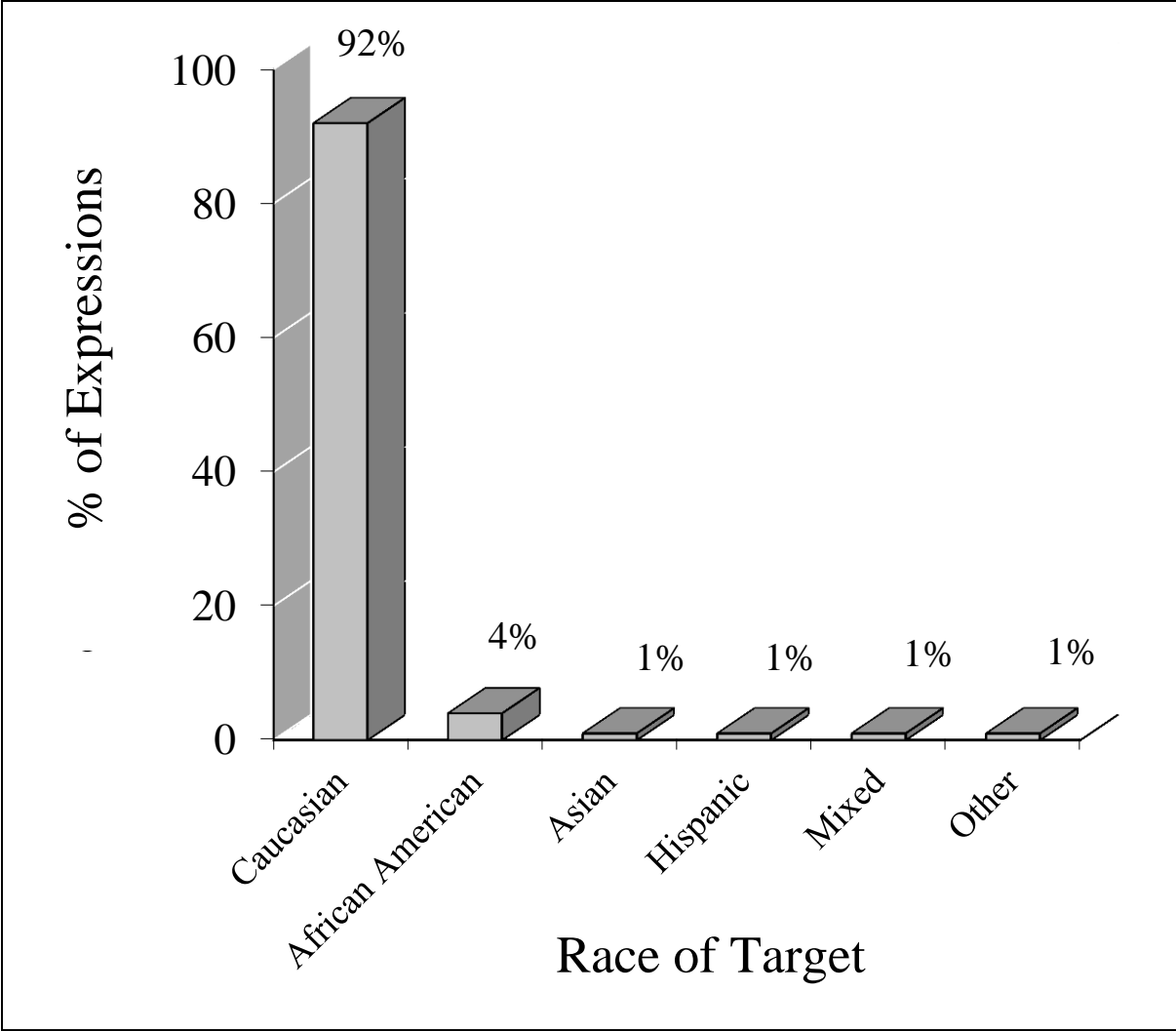


Figure 11. Frequencies of race of target for expressions about relationships.

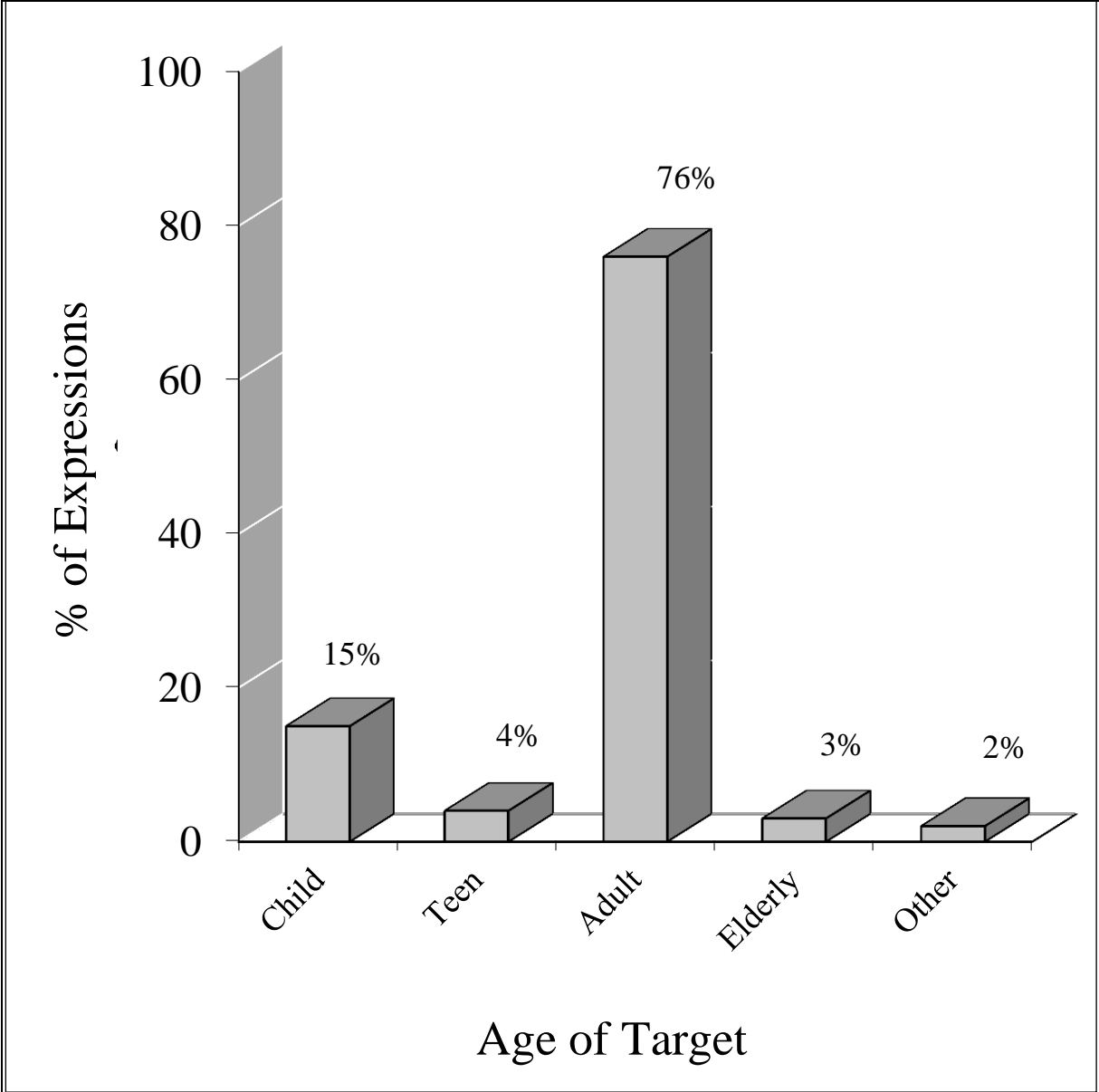


Figure 12. Frequencies of age of target for expressions about relationships.

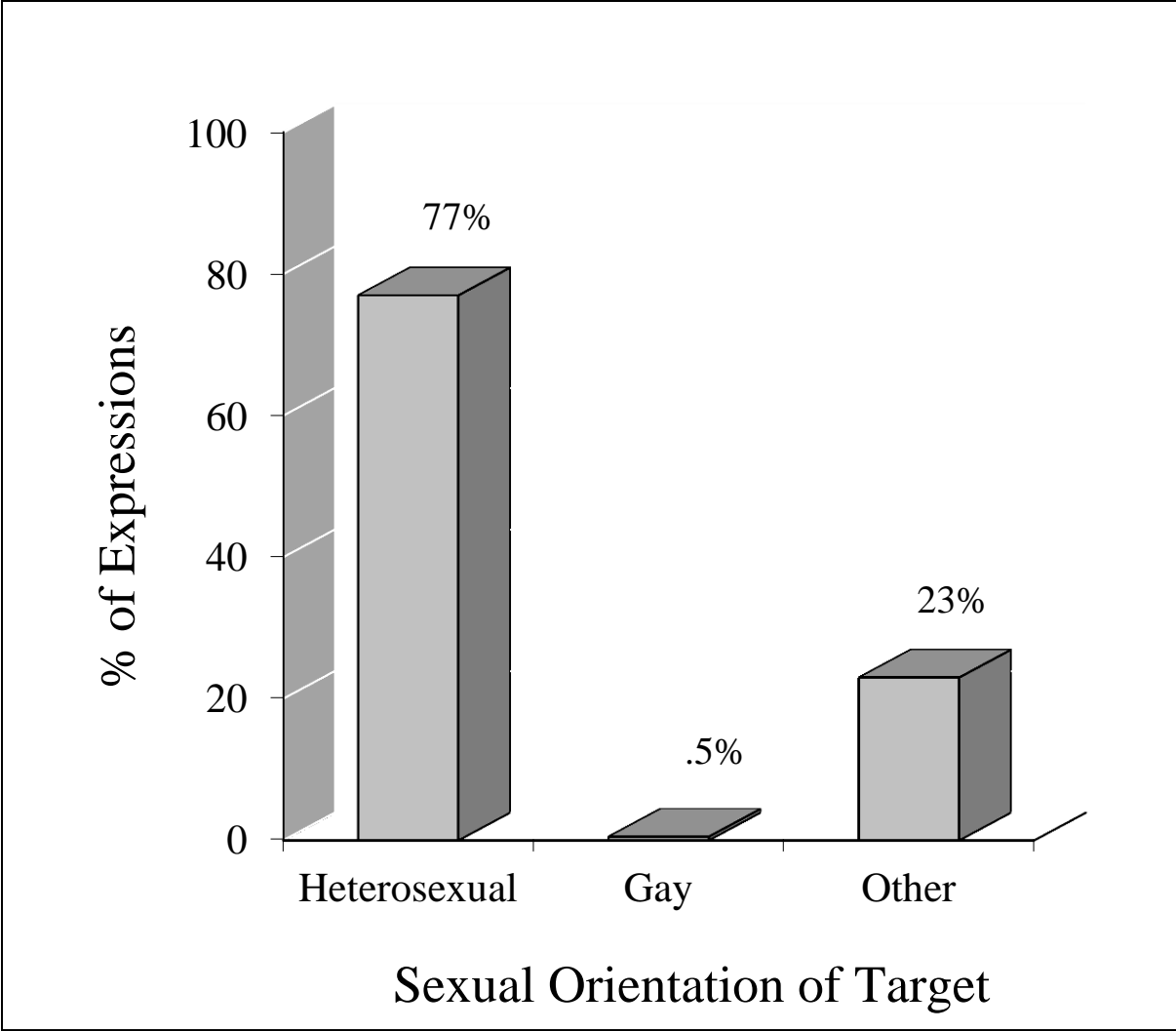


Figure 13. Frequencies of sexual orientation of target for expressions about relationships.



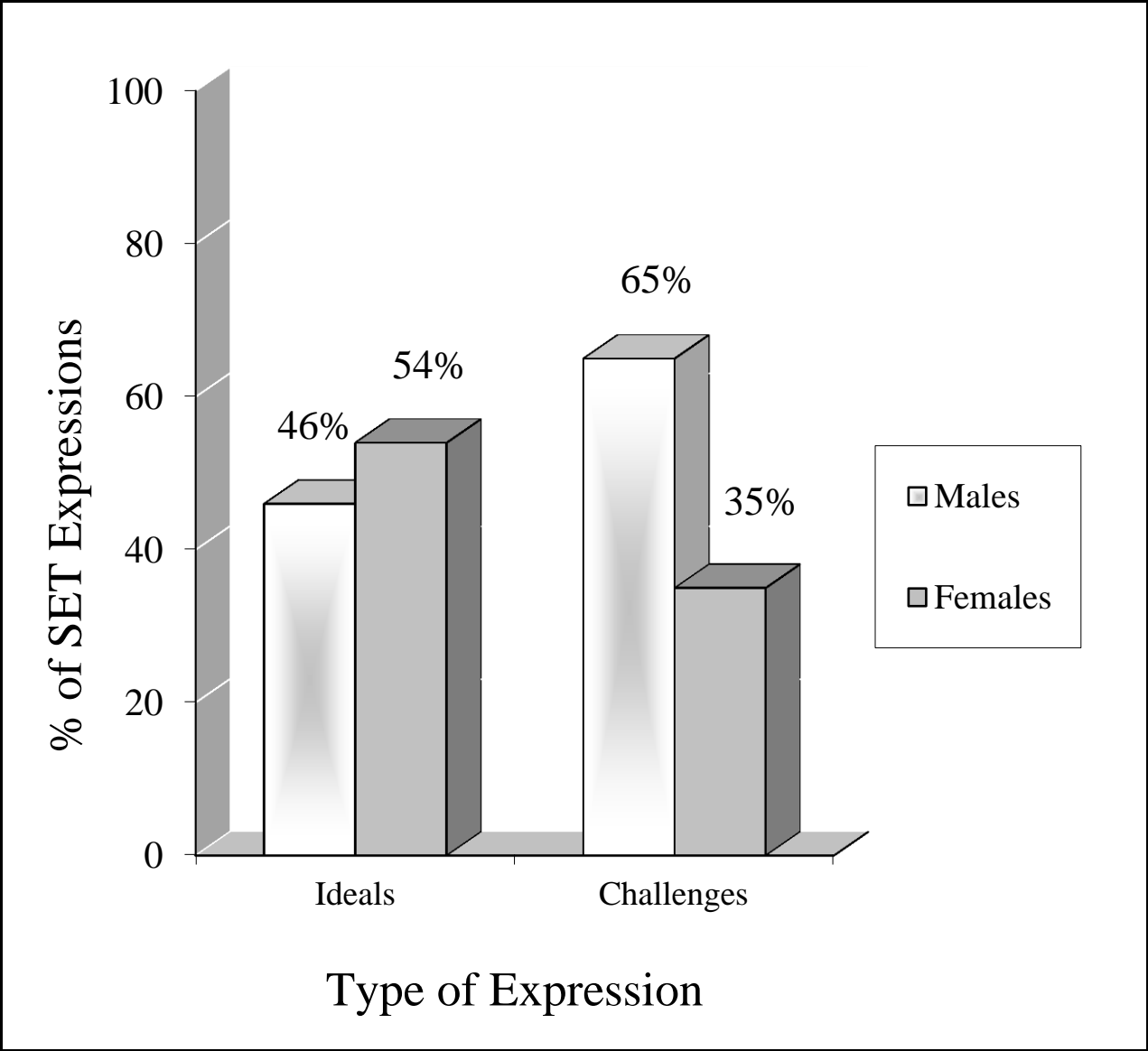


Figure 14. Type of expression as a function of target of expressions.

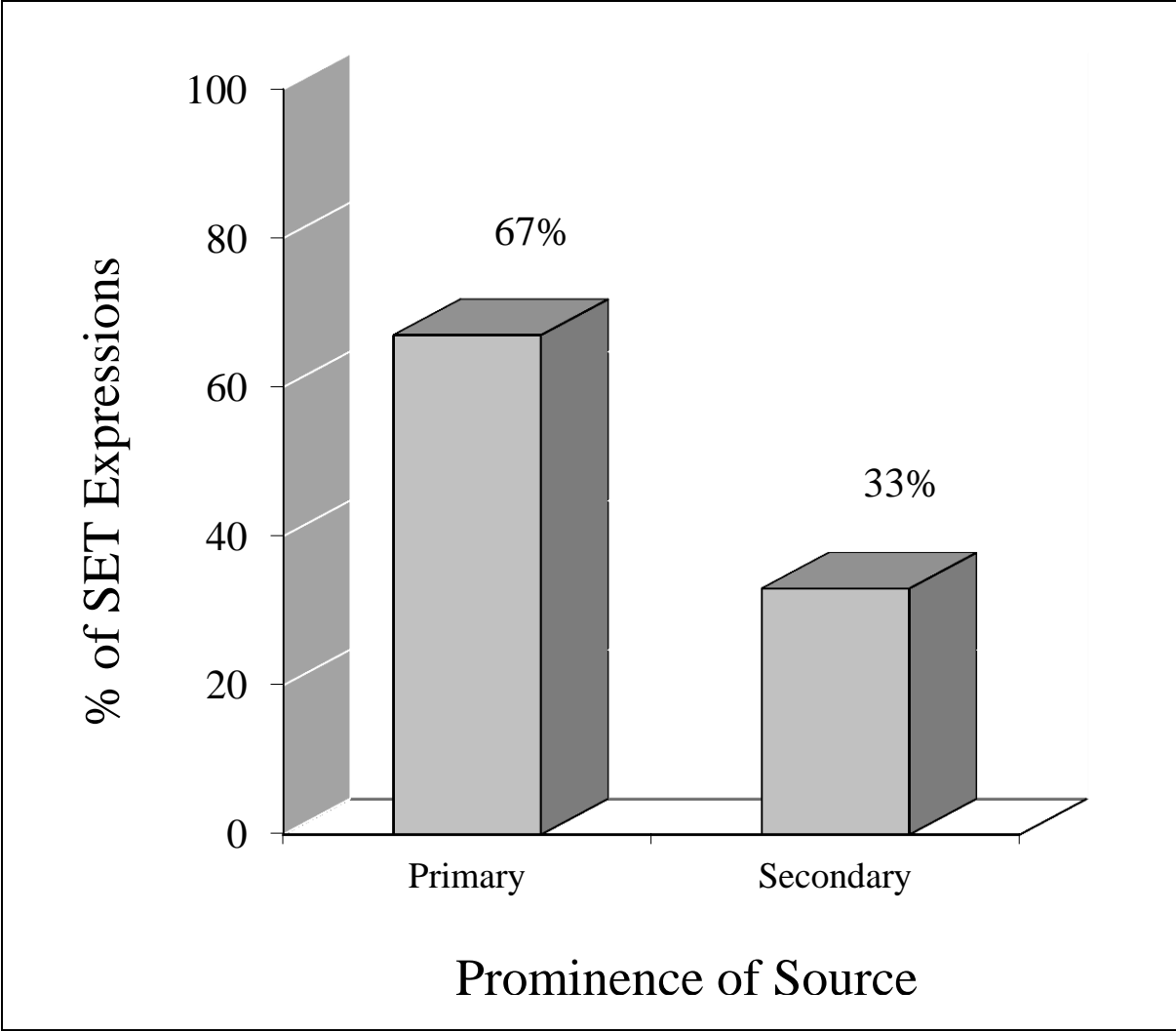


Figure 15. Frequencies of prominence of source for expressions about relationships.

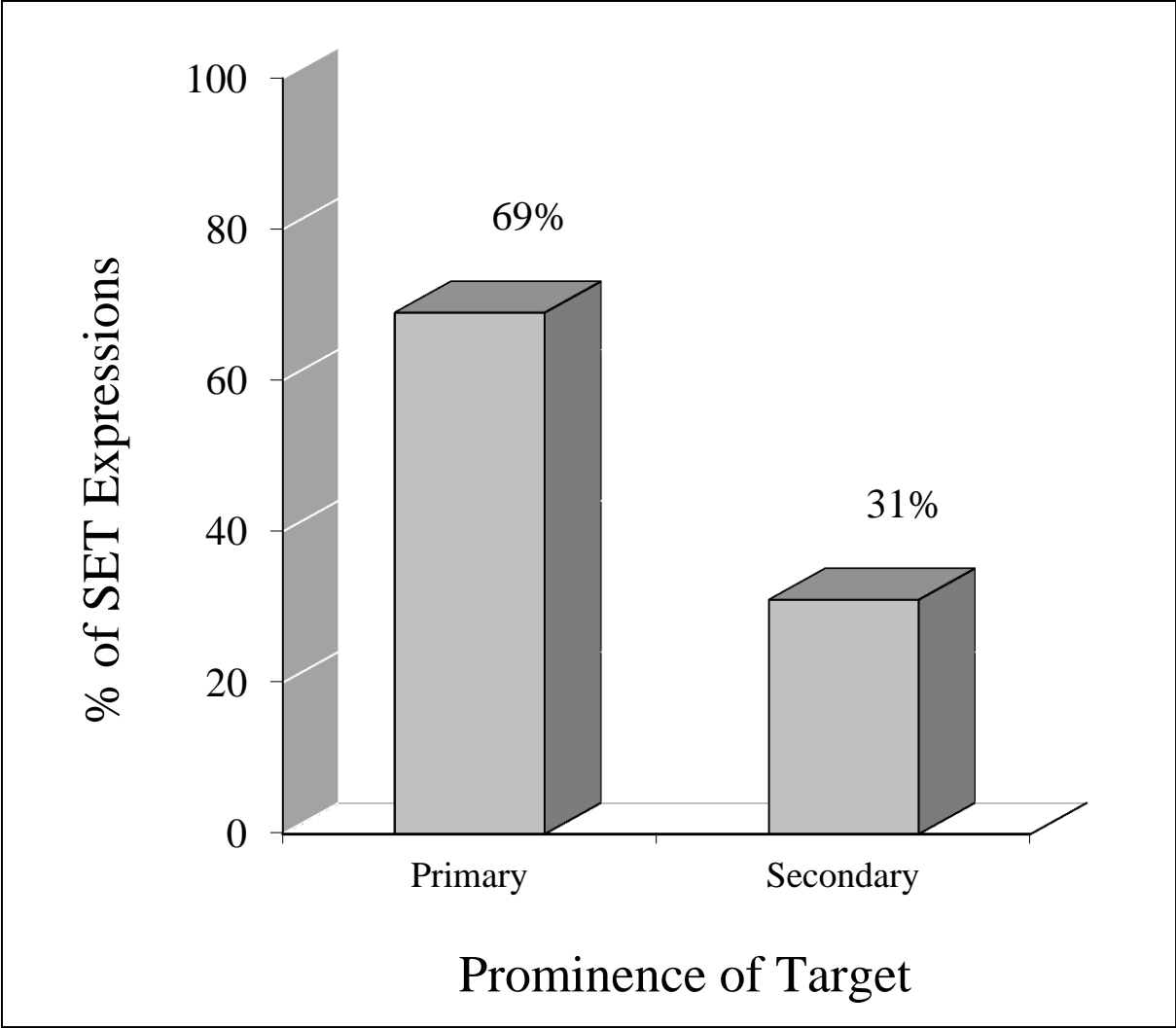


Figure 16. Frequencies of prominence of target for expressions about relationships.

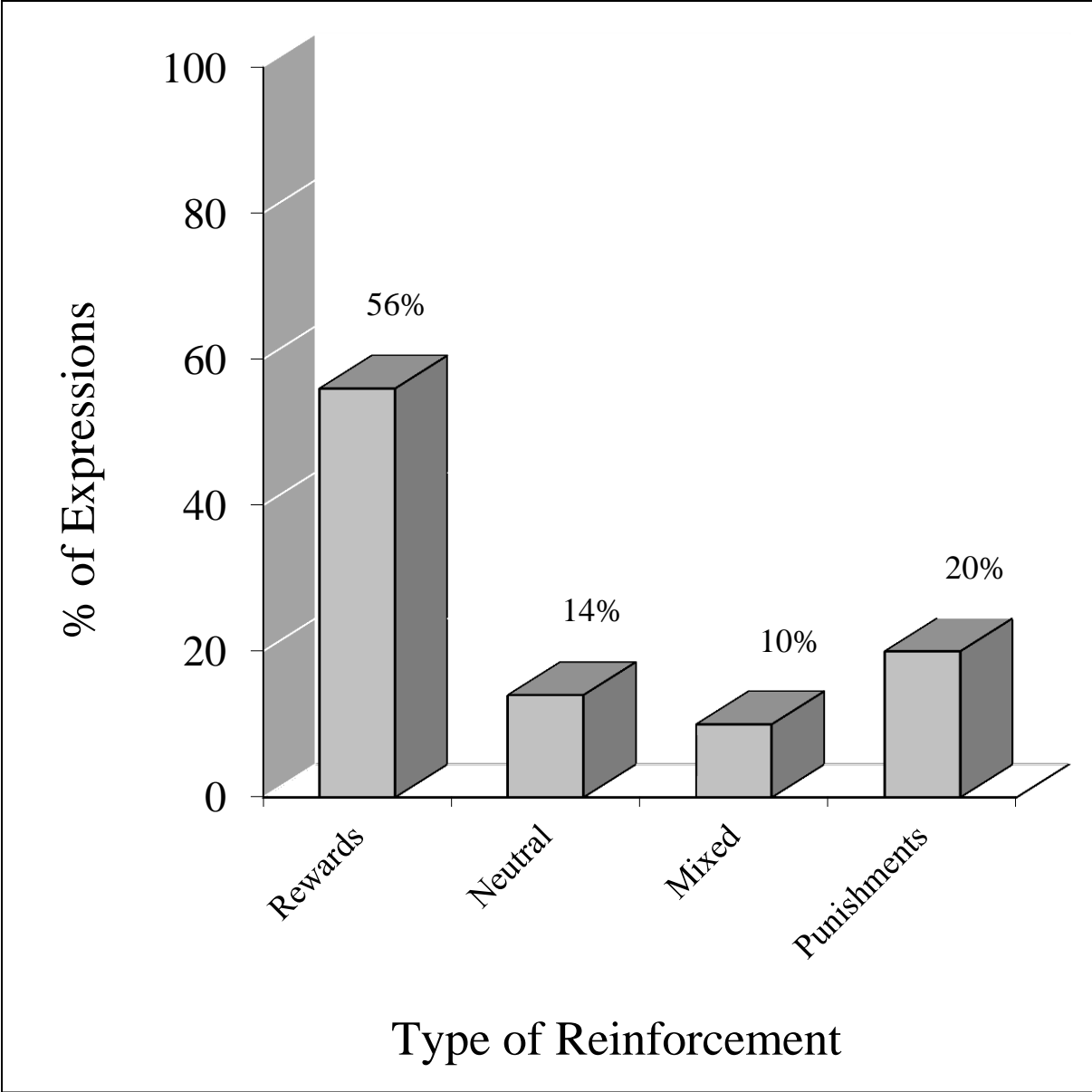


Figure 17. Frequencies of reinforcements of ideal expressions.

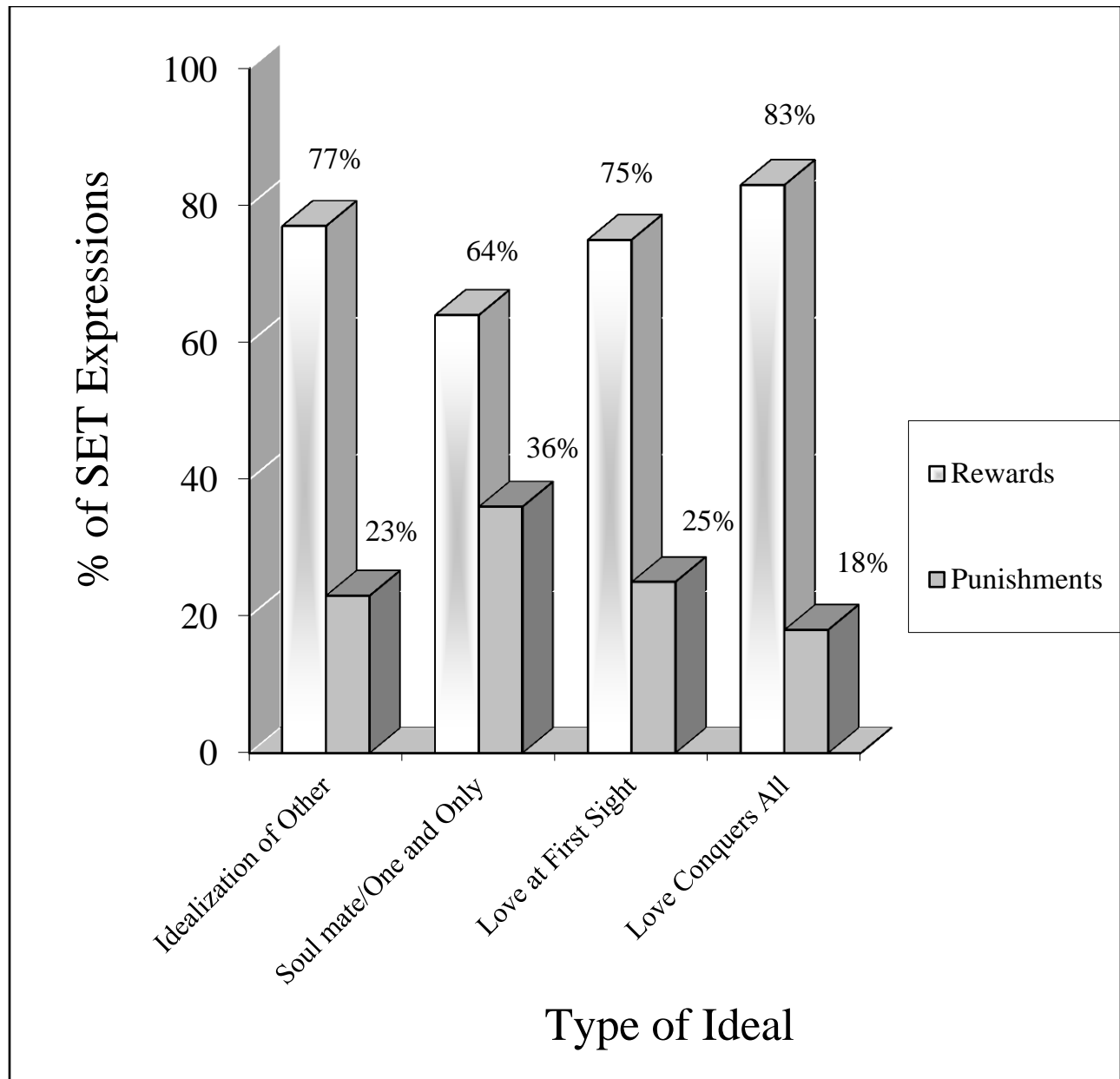


Figure 18. Frequencies of reinforcements of specific ideal expressions.

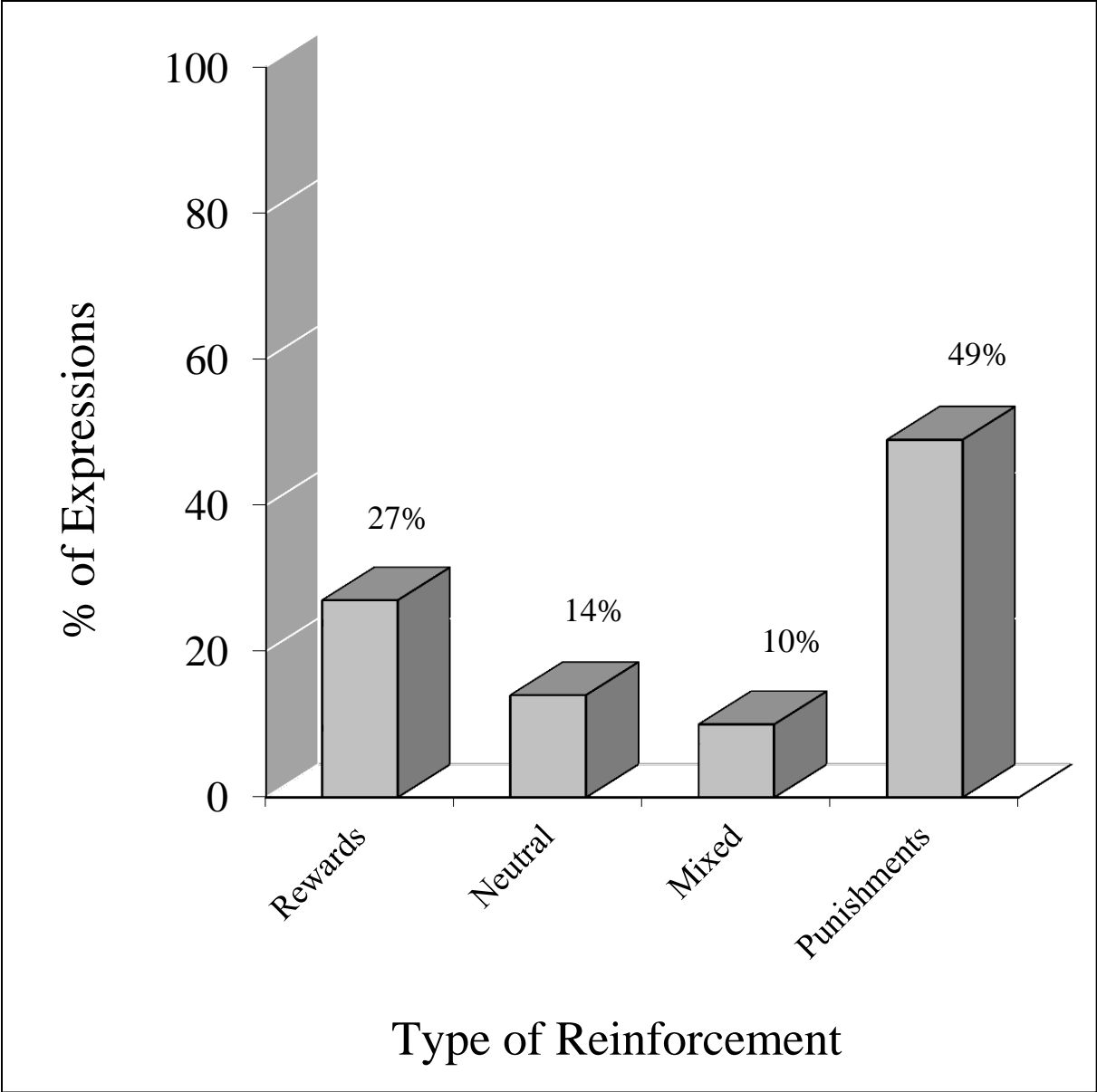


Figure 19. Frequencies of reinforcements of challenge expressions.

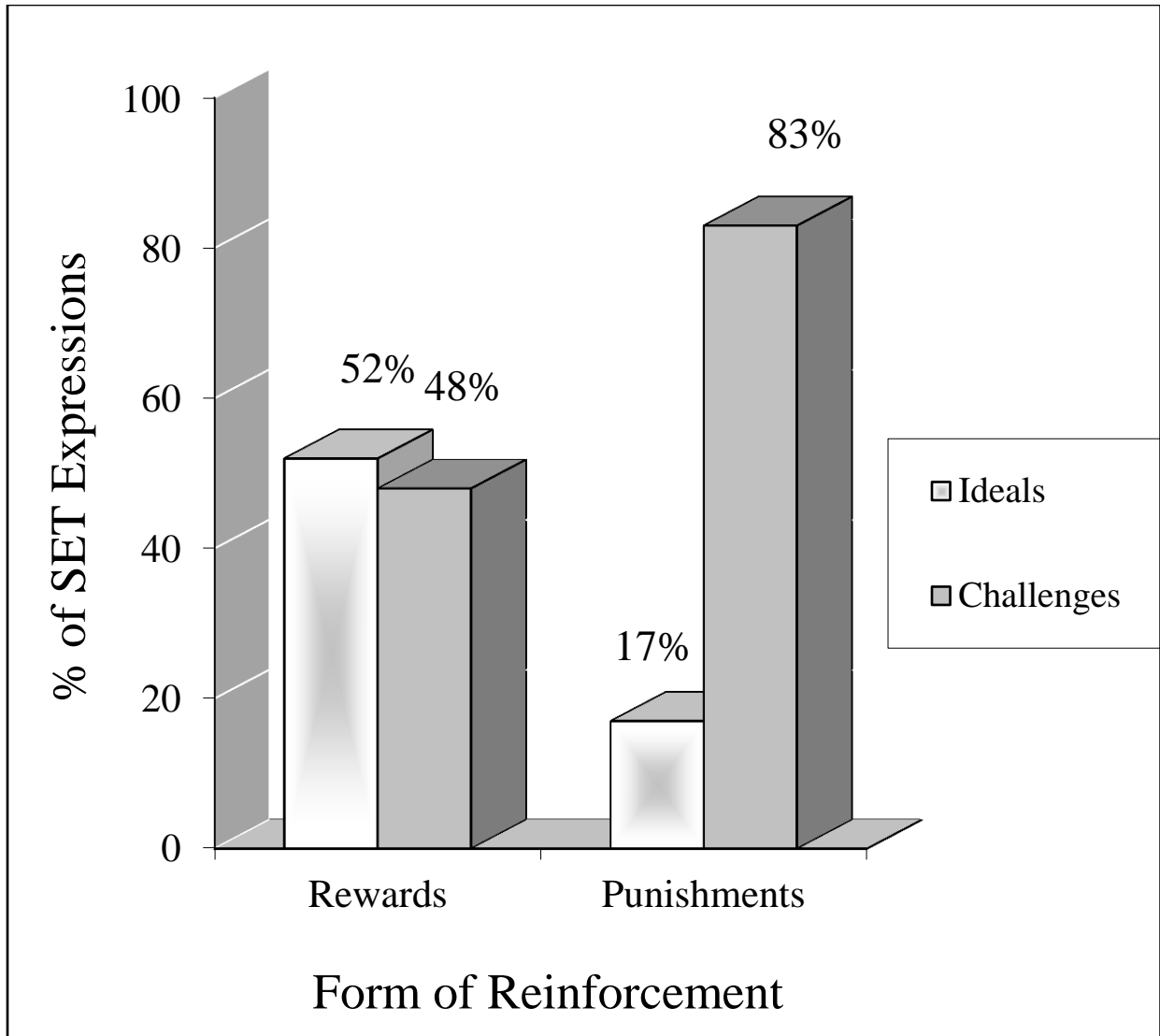


Figure 20. Form of reinforcement as a function of type of expression.

## NOTES

- 1 According to the Major Motion Picture Association (2007), 41% of all frequent moviegoers are between the ages of 12-24. The largest group of frequent moviegoers among teenagers was teens aged 16-17.



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APPENDIX A  
CONSENT FORM

Researchers: Veronica Hefner and Barbara J. Wilson  
January 29, 2010

Dear Student:

We're from the Department of Communication and you are being invited to participate in a research project about personal relationships. This questionnaire will ask you about your beliefs and opinions about relationships, love, and romance, as well as questions about what you do with your leisure time. To be eligible, you must be 18 years of age or older.

You were invited to participate because you are enrolled in a Communication class, but this project is not part of your Communication class. You will receive either extra credit for one of your classes or an entry into a drawing for a \$50 gift card to the campus bookstore. Your participation is completely voluntary, and your course grade will not be affected in any way if you decide that you do not want to participate in this study. You may skip questions that you do not wish to answer, and you may withdraw from the study at any time. Aside from the assignment of extra course credit as compensation for participation, your decision to participate in this research will have no effect on your standing in your classes or at the University of Illinois.

Participation in this study involves filling out a questionnaire online, which should take you about 20-25 minutes. For the questionnaire, you will be asked to think about your beliefs about love and romantic relationships. You also will be asked to give us information about what you like to do in your free time.

The risks with being a participant in this research are no greater than what you might encounter in everyday life. You may skip any question you do not want to answer for any reason, and you may withdraw at any time. Your responses will be confidential and anonymous. Your name will never be associated with a particular survey, meaning even the researchers will not know which survey was yours. The completed data will be kept in secure files on university listservs to which only the researchers will have access.

The primary benefit of this study is that it will further our understanding of what young adults believe about love and relationships. The data gathered in this study may be published in scholarly journals or presented at scholarly meetings, but the focus will be on generalities (not any particular person's answers), and no information that would identify anyone will appear in those reports.

Please feel free to ask any questions you have about this research at any time. You may contact Professor Barbara Wilson (phone: 333-6677, email: [bjwilson@illinois.edu](mailto:bjwilson@illinois.edu)), Veronica Hefner (phone: 333-2683, email: [hefner@illinois.edu](mailto:hefner@illinois.edu)), or the University of Illinois Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (phone: 333-2670, email: [irb@illinois.edu](mailto:irb@illinois.edu)). By clicking the "Next" button below, you will certify that you have decided to participate, having read and understood the information presented, and that you are 18 years of age or older. This is your way of granting consent. If you do not want to grant consent, please do not click "Next" or continue on with this survey. Please contact one of the researchers if you would like a copy of this consent form, or please print this page before moving forward with the questionnaire.

This consent form is valid until January 29, 2011.



## APPENDIX B

### QUESTIONNAIRE

**DIRECTIONS:** Please think about your personal opinions and beliefs about love and romance. On the following scale, please indicate the degree to which you agree with the following statements.

	Strongly Disagree						Strongly Agree
1. I need to know someone for a period of time before I fall in love with him or her.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. If I were in love with someone, I would commit myself to him or her even if my parents and friends disapproved of the relationship.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. Once I experience 'true love', I could never experience it again, to the same degree, with another person.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. I believe that to be truly in love is to be in love forever.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. If I love someone, I know I can make the relationship work, despite any obstacles.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. When I find my 'true love' I will probably know it soon after we meet.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7. I'm sure that every new thing I learn about the person I choose for a long-term commitment will please me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8. The relationship I will have with my 'true love' will be nearly perfect.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9. If I love someone, I will find a way for us to be together regardless of the opposition of the relationship, physical distance between us or any other barrier.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10. There will be only one real love for me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
11. If a relationship I have was meant to be, any obstacle (e.g., lack of money, physical distance, career conflicts) can be overcome.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12. I am likely to fall in love almost immediately if I meet the right person.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13. I expect that in my relationship, romantic love will really last; it won't fade with time.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
14. The person I love will make a perfect romantic partner; for example, he/she will be completely accepting, loving, and understanding.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
15. I believe if another person and I love each other we can overcome any differences and problems that may arise.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

**DIRECTIONS:** Now, please think about romantic relationships in general. For the following statements, please indicate how strongly you disagree or agree with each one.

	Strongly Disagree						Strongly Agree
1. The ideal relationship develops gradually over time.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. Potential relationship partners are either compatible or they are not.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. Arguments often enable a relationship to improve.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. A successful relationship is mostly a matter of finding a compatible partner right from the start.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

- |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 5. Unsuccessful relationships were never meant to be.   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 6. Successful relationships require regular maintenance.  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 7. Early troubles in a relationship signify a poor match between partners.                        | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 8. A relationship that does not get off to a perfect start will never work.                       | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 9. Struggles at the beginning of a relationship are a sure sign that the relationship will fail.  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 10. Without conflict from time to time, relationships cannot improve.                             | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 11. To last, a relationship must seem right from the start.                                       | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 12. A successful relationship evolves through hard work and resolution of incompatibilities.      | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 13. The success of a potential relationship is destined from the very beginning.                  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 14. With enough effort, almost any relationship can work.   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 15. It takes a lot of time and effort to cultivate a good relationship.                           | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 16. Relationships often fail because people do not try hard enough.                               | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 17. Challenges and obstacles in a relationship can make love even stronger.                       | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 18. Relationships that do not start off well inevitably fail.                                     | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 19. A successful relationship is mostly a matter of learning to resolve conflicts with a partner. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 20. If a potential relationship is not meant to be, it will become apparent very soon.            | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 21. Potential relationship partners are either destined to get along or they are not.             | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 22. Problems in a relationship can bring partners closer together.                                | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

**DIRECTIONS:** Below are five statements about your life in general with which you may agree or disagree. Please be as honest as possible when responding to each statement.

- |   | Strongly Disagree |   |   |   |   |   |   | Strongly Agree |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|-------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|----------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. In most ways my life is close to my ideal.                   | 1                 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 1              | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 2. The conditions of my life are excellent.                     | 1                 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 1              | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 3. I am satisfied with life.                                    | 1                 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 1              | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 4. So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.    | 1                 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 1              | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 5. If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing. | 1                 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 1              | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

### Your Current Relationship

**DIRECTIONS:** If you are not in a romantic relationship at this time, please skip to the next section of the questionnaire. If you are currently involved in a romantic relationship, please think about that relationship when responding to the following list of adjectives. Please circle the number that most closely describes your feelings toward this relationship recently.

- |              |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |                 |
|--------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|-----------------|
| Miserable:   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | : Enjoyable     |
| Hopeful:     | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | : Discouraging  |
| Empty:       | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | : Full          |
| Interesting: | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | : Boring        |
| Rewarding:   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | : Disappointing |

Doesn't give me: much chance	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	: Brings out the best in me
Lonely:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	: Friendly
Worthwhile:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	: Useless

All things considered, how satisfied or dissatisfied have you been with your relationship with this person?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Completely Dissatisfied			Neutral			Completely Satisfied

DIRECTIONS: Please indicate on the following list how often you routinely participate in each leisure activity.

**Riding a bike**

Never            Yearly            Monthly            Weekly            Daily

**Fishing or hunting**

Never            Yearly            Monthly            Weekly            Daily

**Hanging out with friends**

Never            Yearly            Monthly            Weekly            Daily

**Watching television**

Never            Yearly            Monthly            Weekly            Daily

**Playing sports**

Never            Yearly            Monthly            Weekly            Daily

**Playing video games**

Never            Yearly            Monthly            Weekly            Daily

**Playing a musical instrument**

Never            Yearly            Monthly            Weekly            Daily

**Going to malls**

Never            Yearly            Monthly            Weekly            Daily

**Watching movies**

Never            Yearly            Monthly            Weekly            Daily

**Going to local parks with friends**

Never            Yearly            Monthly            Weekly            Daily

**Doing activities with a church group**

Never            Yearly            Monthly            Weekly            Daily

**Working at a part-time job**

Never            Yearly            Monthly            Weekly            Daily

**Doing volunteer work**

Never              Yearly              Monthly              Weekly              Daily

DIRECTIONS: Think about your movie viewing during a typical week. Please indicate how many movies you usually watch during the week.

<b>Movies at the Theater</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7 or more
<b>Movies airing on Television</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7 or more
<b>Movies on DVD/VHS/On Demand</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7 or more
<b>Movies on iPod/Phone</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7 or more

DIRECTIONS: For the list below, please indicate how often you have seen each film. Circle “never” if you’ve never seen the movie, “once” if you’ve seen the movie once, “a few times” if you’ve seen the movie 2 or 3 times, or “many times” if you have watched the film on numerous occasions (4+).

***The Dark Knight***

Never    Once    A few times    Many times

***The Day After Tomorrow***

Never    Once    A few times    Many times

***My Big Fat Greek Wedding***

Never    Once    A few times    Many times

***What Women Want***

Never    Once    A few times    Many times

***Spider-Man 3***

Never    Once    A few times    Many times

***Hitch***

Never    Once    A few times    Many times

***Transformers***

Never    Once    A few times    Many times

***Sex and the City***

Never    Once    A few times    Many times

***Knocked Up***

Never    Once    A few times    Many times

***Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest***

Never    Once    A few times    Many times

***50 First Dates***

Never    Once    A few times    Many times

***Spider-Man 2***

Never    Once    A few times    Many times

***Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull***

Never    Once    A few times    Many times

***The Break-Up***

Never    Once    A few times    Many times

***King Kong***

Never    Once    A few times    Many times

***Norbit***

Never    Once    A few times    Many times

***Failure to Launch***

Never    Once    A few times    Many times

***Along Came Polly***

Never    Once    A few times    Many times

***The DaVinci Code***

Never    Once    A few times    Many times

***Star Wars: Episode 3***

Never Once A few times Many times

***What Happens in Vegas***

Never Once A few times Many times

***27 Dresses***

Never Once A few times Many times

***Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix***

Never Once A few times Many times

***Fool's Gold***

Never Once A few times Many times

***Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End***

Never Once A few times Many times

***Bewitched***

Never Once A few times Many times

***The Chronicles of Narnia***

Never Once A few times Many times

***The Holiday***

Never Once A few times Many times

***Forgetting Sarah Marshall***

Never Once A few times Many times

***I am Legend***

Never Once A few times Many times

***The Bourne Ultimatum***

Never Once A few times Many times

***Music and Lyrics***

Never Once A few times Many times

***The Incredibles***

Never Once A few times Many times

***Just Like Heaven***

Never Once A few times Many times

***The Passion of the Christ***

Never Once A few times Many times

***Made of Honor***

Never Once A few times Many times

***War of the Worlds***

Never Once A few times Many times

***Hancock***

Never Once A few times Many times

***License to Wed***

Never Once A few times Many times

***Twilight***

Never Once A few times Many times

DIRECTIONS: Please think about various ways to spend time with different media that you enjoy on a regular basis. For the items below, please rate how much you enjoy/like each activity.

	Strongly Dislike				Strongly Like		
1. Read Romance Novels	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. Read Mystery Novels	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. Read Relationship/Self-Help Books	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. Watch Action Movies	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. Watch Romantic Movies	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. Watch Horror Movies	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7. Watch Suspense and Mystery TV Dramas	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8. Watch TV Situation Comedies	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9. Watch Afternoon Soap Operas	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10. Watch Sports Programs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
11. Watch Quiz Shows	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12. Watch Local and National Newscasts	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13. Watch Talk Shows	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
14. Watch Reality-based TV shows about relationships	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

DIRECTIONS: Suppose you had two hours of free time and you want to watch a movie. Please rank order the following genres from 1 to 8 in terms of which ones you would most prefer to watch, with 1 being most likely to choose and 8 being least likely to choose to watch.

- \_\_\_\_\_ Action
- \_\_\_\_\_ Animation
- \_\_\_\_\_ Documentary
- \_\_\_\_\_ Foreign
- \_\_\_\_\_ Horror
- \_\_\_\_\_ Non-action Drama
- \_\_\_\_\_ Romantic Comedy
- \_\_\_\_\_ Sci-Fi

DIRECTIONS: Please think about the movies you watch, and indicate on the scale below how much you agree with the following statements.

	Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree		
1. Movies present things as they really are in life.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. Movies do not show life as it really is.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. Movies let me see what happens in other places as if I were really there.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. If I see something in a movie, I can't be sure it really is that way.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. Movies let me really see how other people live.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

DIRECTIONS: Please think about your reasons for watching different types of movies. The next set of questions will ask why you watch particular genres of movies: horror, romantic comedy, and action. If you intentionally avoid these movies, please skip these questions. However, if you occasionally view them, please answer.

Please think about your reason for watching horror movies (e.g., *Halloween* or *The Haunting*). Using the scale below, indicate how much you agree with each reason for watching films.

	Strongly Disagree						Strongly Agree
1. I watch horror movies because they entertain me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. I watch horror movies because they help me learn about myself and others.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. I watch horror movies so I can forget about school and other things.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. I watch horror movies because they are enjoyable.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. I watch horror movies so I can learn how to do things I haven't done before.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. I watch horror movies so I can get away from the rest of the family or others.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7. I watch horror movies because they amuse me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8. I watch horror movies so I can learn about what could happen to me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9. I watch horror movies so I can get away from what I'm doing.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Please think about your reasons for watching romantic comedy movies (e.g., *Made of Honor* or *Knocked Up*). Using the scale below, indicate how much you agree with each reason for watching films.

	Strongly Disagree						Strongly Agree
10. I watch romantic comedies because they entertain me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
11. I watch romantic comedies because they help me learn about myself and others.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12. I watch romantic comedies so I can forget about school and other things.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13. I watch romantic comedies because they are enjoyable.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
14. I watch romantic comedies so I can learn how to do things I haven't done before.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
15. I watch romantic comedies so I can get away from the rest of the family or others.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
16. I watch romantic comedies because they amuse me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
17. I watch romantic comedies so I can learn about what could happen to me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
18. I watch romantic comedies so I can get away from what I'm doing.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Please think about your reasons for watching action movies (e.g., *Spider-Man* or *Die Hard*). Using the scale below, indicate how much you agree with each reason for watching films.

	Strongly Disagree						Strongly Agree
19. I watch action movies because they entertain me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
20. I watch action movies because they help me learn about myself and others.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
21. I watch action movies so I can forget about school and other things.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
22. I watch action movies because they are enjoyable.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
23. I watch action movies so I can learn how to do things I haven't done before.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
24. I watch action movies so I can get away from the rest of the family or others.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
25. I watch action movies because they amuse me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
26. I watch action movies so I can learn about what could happen to me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
27. I watch action movies so I can get away from what I'm doing.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

**DIRECTIONS:** Please think about your favorite character from a romantic comedy film (e.g., *The Ugly Truth*, *Proposal*) from the last 10 years. When responding to the following items,

please rate how similar you consider yourself to be to the same sex character from that film. For example, if you are a woman and your favorite romantic comedy movie is *What Happens in Vegas*, you should compare yourself with the Cameron Diaz character for each of the following items.

Name of Movie: \_\_\_\_\_.

1. Doesn't think like me	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Thinks like me
2. Behaves like me	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Doesn't behave like me
3. Similar to me	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Different from me
4. Like me	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Unlike me
5. Perceives things like me	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Doesn't perceive things like me
6. Personality similar to mine	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Personality different from mine
7. Does things unlike I do	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Does things like I do
8. Shares my beliefs	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Doesn't share my beliefs
9. Shares my attitudes	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Doesn't share my attitudes
10. Dislikes things I dislike	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Likes things I dislike
11. Morals unlike mine	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Morals like mine
12. Sexual attitudes different from mine	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Sexual attitudes like mine
13. Doesn't share my values	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Shares my values
14. Treats people like I do	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Doesn't treat people like I do
15. Doesn't share my emotions	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Shares my emotions
16. Politics different from mine	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Politics like mine
17. Looks different from me	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Looks like me
18. Different size than I am	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Same size I am
19. Same weight I am	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Different weight than I am
20. Wears hair like I do	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Wears hair different than I do
21. From social class similar to mine	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	From social class different from mine
22. Culturally different	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Culturally similar
23. Economic situation different from mine	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Economic situation like mine
24. Status different from mine	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Status like mine
25. Family like mine	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Family different from mine
26. Background different from mine	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Background similar to mine

**DIRECTIONS:** Below is a list of the ways you might have felt. Please tell me how often you have felt this way during the past week.

0 = Rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day)

1 = Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)

2 = Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days)

3 = Most or all of the time (5-7 days)

1. I was bothered by things that usually don't bother me. \_\_\_\_\_
2. I did not feel like eating; my appetite was poor. \_\_\_\_\_
3. I felt that I could not shake off the blues even with help from my family or friends. \_\_\_\_\_
4. I felt I was just as good as other people. \_\_\_\_\_
5. I had trouble keeping my mind on what I was doing. \_\_\_\_\_
6. I felt depressed. \_\_\_\_\_
7. I felt that everything I did was an effort. \_\_\_\_\_
8. I felt hopeful about the future. \_\_\_\_\_



- 9. I thought my life had been a failure. \_\_\_\_\_
- 10. I felt fearful. \_\_\_\_\_
- 11. My sleep was restless. \_\_\_\_\_
- 12. I was happy. \_\_\_\_\_
- 13. I talked less than usual. \_\_\_\_\_
- 14. I felt lonely. \_\_\_\_\_
- 15. People were unfriendly. \_\_\_\_\_
- 16. I enjoyed life. \_\_\_\_\_
- 17. I had crying spells. \_\_\_\_\_
- 18. I felt sad. \_\_\_\_\_
- 19. I felt that people dislike me. \_\_\_\_\_
- 20. I could not get "going." \_\_\_\_\_

**SCORING:**

Items 4, 8, 12, and 16 get reverse-coded.

**DIRECTIONS:** The next set of questions focus on relationships. If you are not currently in a romantic relationship, please skip to question 4.

Please fill in the following information about your current romantic relationship:

1. Are you currently in a romantic relationship that has lasted at least one month (please circle)?

YES NO

2. How long have you been together? \_\_\_\_\_

3. What is the sexual orientation of this relationship (please circle)?

Homosexual Heterosexual

**DIRECTIONS:** Please fill in the following information about all of your previous romantic relationships (i.e., any romantic relationship that lasted at least one month):

4. How many romantic relationships have you had, that have lasted at least one month? \_\_\_\_\_

5. What was the length of your longest relationship? \_\_\_\_\_

6. Who ended your longest relationship?

\_\_\_\_ Relationship still active    \_\_\_\_ you    \_\_\_\_ your partner    \_\_\_\_ mutual  
       \_\_\_\_ other (e.g., death)

**DIRECTIONS:** Please answer the following questions about you.

**Please indicate your parents' marital status (please circle)?**

Never married            Married            Divorced            Widowed/Deceased

**If relevant, how long have your parents been/were married? \_\_\_\_\_ years.**

**What is your sex?**    M \_\_\_ F \_\_\_

**What is your age?**    \_\_\_\_\_

**Which of the following best describes your ethnic background (please circle)?**

White/Caucasian      African American      Asian      Hispanic/Latino(a)

Other (please describe): \_\_\_\_\_

**Which of the following best describes your sexual orientation (please circle)?**

Heterosexual/Straight    Gay Male      Lesbian      Bisexual

Transgender    Transsexual    Questioning    Queer

**Do you go to church or other place of worship?**

Nearly every week      At least once a month    Sometimes      Once or twice a year      Never

**THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING THIS QUESTIONNAIRE. YOU ARE FINISHED!**

## CURRICULUM VITAE

### **Veronica Hefner**

Department of Communication  
702 S. Wright, 244 Lincoln Hall  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
Urbana, IL 61802  
(217) 333-9210

### **EDUCATION**

- PhD            Communication, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
Degree Anticipated: May 2011  
Concentration: Media Effects/Interpersonal  
Advisor: Barbara J. Wilson, PhD
- MA            Communication, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
Degree Awarded: May 2005  
Concentration: Media Effects/Interpersonal/Political Communication  
Advisor: Kristen Harrison, PhD
- BA            The University of Tulsa  
Degree Awarded: May 2003  
Graduated with Honors  
Major: Communication (Advisor: John Coward, PhD)  
Major: History (Advisor: Paul A. Rahe, PhD)

### **RESEARCH INTERESTS**

- Social and cognitive effects of exposure to media
- The interplay between media and interpersonal relationships
- The role of media in the construction of beliefs about and perceptions within romantic relationships

### **PUBLICATIONS**

- Hefner, V., & Toplak, J. (2009). Hugh Hefner. Entry in *Encyclopedia of the First Amendment* (p. 564). Edited by J. R. Vile, D. L. Hudson, Jr., & D. Schultz. Washington DC: CQ Press.
- Caughlin, J. P., Scott, A. M., Miller, L. E., & Hefner, V. (2009). Putative secrets: When information is supposedly a secret. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 26, 713-743.

- Bond, B. J., Hefner, V., & Drogos, K. L. (2009). Information-seeking practices during the sexual development of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals: The influence and effects of coming out in a mediated environment. *Sexuality & Culture, 13*, 32-50.
- Josey, C. S., Hurley, R. J., Hefner, V. & Dixon, T. L. (2009). The portrayal of race online: A content analysis of the portrayal of racial stereotypes in a new media environment. In R. A. Lind (Ed.), *Race/Gender/Media: Considering diversity across audiences, content, and producers* (2nd ed.). Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Harrison, K., & Hefner, V. (2007). Body image and eating disorders. In S. Calvert & B. J. Wilson (Eds.), *Blackwell Handbook of Child Development and the Media* (pp. 381-406). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.
- Sulkin, T., Moriarty, C. M., & Hefner, V. (2007). Shoring up the base or broadening appeal?: Comparing candidates' issue appeals in campaign websites and television ads. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics, 4*(12), 63-79.
- Beck, S., Claybaugh, S. E., Clark, R. A., Connelly Kosovski, M., Daar, R. B., Hefner, V., Kmetz, T., McDaniel, S., Miller, L. E., Moriarty, C., Qian, Z., Raja, S., Ramey, M., & Suri, R. (2007). Teasing among college men and women. *Communication Studies, 58*(2), 157-172.
- Harrison, K., & Hefner, V. (2006). Media exposure, current and future body ideals, and disordered eating among preadolescent girls: A longitudinal panel study. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 35*(2), 146-156.

### **WORKS IN PROGRESS**

- Wilson, B. J., Bond, B. J., Hefner, V., & Drogos, K. L. (in progress). *Sassy characters on television: A content analysis of disrespectful talk in programs children watch.*

### **CONFERENCE PAPERS AND PRESENTATIONS**

- Josey, C. S., Dixon, T. L., Hurley, R. J., & Hefner, V. (2009, November). The portrayal of race online: A content analysis of the portrayal of racial stereotypes in a new media environment. National Communication Association, Chicago, Illinois.
- Hefner, V. (2008, November). *Romantic relationship ideal in mass media: An explication of a construct.* National Communication Association, San Diego, California.
- Caughlin, J. P., Scott, A. M., Miller, L. E., & Hefner, V. (2008, November). *Putative secrets: When information is supposedly a secret (but actually is not).* National Communication Association, San Diego, California.

- Josey, C. S., Dixon, T. L., Hurley, R., & Hefner, V. (2008, November). *Online news and race: A content analysis of the portrayal of racial stereotypes in a new media environment*. National Communication Association, San Diego, California.
- Hefner, V., & Harrison, K. (2008, April). *The third person effect in girls' body-related responses to print media: A focus group analysis*. Broadcast Education Association, Las Vegas, Nevada.
- Bond, B. J., & Hefner, V. (2007, November). *Information seeking practices during the coming out process*. National Communication Association, Chicago, Illinois.
- Scott, A. M., Hefner, V., & Miller, L. E. (2007, November). *Metaphoric descriptions of friendship development and friendship dissolution*. National Communication Association, Chicago, Illinois.
- Bond, B. J., & Hefner, V. (2007, October). *Coming out of the cyber closet: The Internet as a tool during the sexual self-realization of LGBT youth*. Association of Internet Researchers, Vancouver, Canada.
- Miller, L. E., Hefner, V., & Scott, A. M. (2007, May). *Turning points in dyadic friendship development and termination*. International Communication Association, San Francisco, California.
- Hefner, V., & Miller, L. E. (2006, November). *"We're just like Ross and Rachel:" The connection between romantic-ideal media liking and relational ideal and satisfaction in current romantic relationships*. National Communication Association, San Antonio, Texas.
- Moriarty, C. M., & Hefner, V. (2006, November). *Why Do People Disclose Others' Secrets?* National Communication Association, San Antonio, Texas.
- Caughlin, J. P., Hefner, V., Scott, A. M., Eckstein, J., Miller, L. E., & Gleisner, S. (2006, July). *They don't know that we know: Putative secrets*. International Association for Relationship Researchers, Rethymnon, Crete, Greece.
- Hefner, V., Drogos, K. L., & Bond, B. J. (2006, June). *The Terri Schiavo case: Media effects on end-of-life decision making*. International Communication Association, Dresden, Germany.
- Harrison, K., & Hefner, V. (2006, June). *Media exposure, current and future body ideals, and disordered eating among preadolescent girls: A longitudinal panel study*. International Communication Association, Dresden, Germany.
- Sulkin, T., Moriarty, C. M., & Hefner, V. (2005, August). *Shoring up the base or broadening appeal?: Comparing candidates' issue appeals in campaign websites and television ads*. American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C.

Beck, S., Clark, R. A., Connelly, M., Daar, R. B., Hefner, V., Kmetz, T., McDaniel, S., Miller, L. E., Moriarty, C., Qian, Z., Raja, S., Ramey, M., Suri, R., & Wilson, S. (2004, November). *Teasing among college students*. National Communication Association, Chicago, IL.

### **INVITED PRESENTATIONS**

Hefner, V. (2009, April). *Media and the Body*. Guest lecture for course “Introduction to Health Communication,” CMN 260 (Instructor: L. E. Miller), Champaign, IL.

Hefner, V. (2008, May). *Preventive strategies for mothers seeking to help their children resist negative body image media messages*. Mothers of PreSchoolers, Mahomet, IL.

### **RESEARCH ASSISTANTSHIP APPOINTMENTS**

#### Grant-funded Research Appointments: University of Illinois

2007-08 Project Manager. “The Body Electric (and Print): Mass Media, Physical Identity, and Health.” William T. Grant Foundation. PI: Kristen Harrison.

2007, Sum. Project Manager. “The Body Electric (and Print): Mass Media, Physical Identity, and Health.” William T. Grant Foundation. PI: Kristen Harrison. (Summer.)

2006-07 Project Manager. “The Body Electric (and Print): Mass Media, Physical Identity, and Health.” William T. Grant Foundation. PI: Kristen Harrison.

2005-06 Project Manager. “The Body Electric (and Print): Mass Media, Physical Identity, and Health.” William T. Grant Foundation. PI: Kristen Harrison.

2005, Sum. Research Assistant. “Meta-Study of Social Support for People Living with HIV or AIDS.” National Institute of Mental Health. Co-PIs: Dale Brashers, Daena Goldsmith, and Daniel O’Keefe. (Summer.)

2004-05 Project Assistant. “The Body Electric (and Print): Mass Media, Physical Identity, and Health.” William T. Grant Foundation. PI: Kristen Harrison.

#### Research Appointments: University of Illinois

2009, Sum. Research Assistant. General research assistant. Professor Barbara J. Wilson.

2009, Fall. Research Assistant. General research assistant. Professor Barbara J. Wilson.

2005, Sum. Coder. “Shoring up the base or broadening appeal?: Comparing candidates’ issue appeals in campaign websites and television ads.: PI: Tracy Sulkin.

## **TEACHING APPOINTMENTS**

### Instructor Positions: University of Illinois

2010	<i>Persuasive Speaking</i> , Spring semester	CMN 321
2009	<i>Persuasive Speaking</i> , Fall semester	CMN 321
2009	<i>Study Abroad Pre-departure Orientation</i> , Spring semester	CMN 199
2008	<i>Introduction to Communication Theory and Research</i> , Summer	CMN 102
2008	<i>Study Abroad Pre-departure Orientation</i> , Spring semester	CMN 199
2005	<i>How Media Shape You and the World: Television, Movies, Magazines, and More</i> , Spring semester	CMN 199
2003-2005	<i>Public Speaking</i> , 4 semesters	CMN 101

### Teaching Assistant Positions: University of Illinois

2008-09	<i>Media of Public Discourse</i> , Fall, Spring	CMN 277
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### Course Leadership Positions: University of Illinois

2004-2005	Peer Leader, <i>Public Speaking</i>	CMN 101
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### Instructor Positions: Parkland College

2005	Introduction to Speech Communication, Summer, Fall	SPE 101
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## **MEDIA POSITIONS**

2001-02	Editor in Chief, <i>The Collegian</i> , The University of Tulsa.
2001	General assignment news Reporter/Intern, <i>The Albuquerque Tribune</i> .

## **SERVICE**

### Editorial Board

2007	Section Editor, <i>Rocky Mountain Communication Review</i> .
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### Ad Hoc Journal Reviewer

2008-present	<i>Journal of Social and Personal Relationships</i>
2007-present	<i>Sex Roles</i>
2006-07	<i>Human Communication Research</i>

### Conference Paper Reader

- 2008 Elected to judge papers submitted to the Mass Communication Division of the National Communication Association.
- 2007 Elected to judge papers submitted to the Mass Communication Division of the National Communication Association.

### Conference Panel Chair

- 2008 National Communication Association. "From Advocacy Campaigns to Product Placement: Studies on Advertising."
- 2007 National Communication Association. "Reality Television and Audiences."
- 2006 International Association for Relationship Researchers. "Media and Relationships."

### Conference Paper Respondent

- 2006 International Communication Association. "The Uses and Effects of Media Among Children."

### Departmental: University of Illinois

- 2008 Panelist, Welcome Weekend Graduate Student Panel. "Research at the University of Illinois."
- 2007 Panelist, Welcome Weekend Graduate Student Panel. "Research at the University of Illinois."
- 2006 Panelist, Welcome Weekend Graduate Student Panel. "Research at the University of Illinois."
- 2005 Panelist, Welcome Weekend Graduate Student Panel. "Research at the University of Illinois."

## **AWARDS AND HONORS**

### National

- 2008 Participant, Doctoral Honors Seminar, National Communication Association, Tuscaloosa, AL.

### Campus: University of Illinois

- 2010 *Summer Dissertation Completion Fellowship*
- 2010 List of Teachers Ranked as Excellent by Their Students, Spring, for course: "Persuasive Speaking." *For this semester, evaluations were within the top 10% of all TA instructors, campus wide.*
- 2009 List of Teachers Ranked as Excellent by Their Students, Spring, for course: "Persuasive Speaking."



- 2009 List of Teachers Ranked as Excellent by Their Students, Spring, for course:  
“Media of Public Discourse.” *For this semester, evaluations were within the top 10% of all TA instructors, campus wide.*
- 2009 List of Teachers Ranked as Excellent by Their Students, Spring, for course:  
“Study Abroad Pre-departure Orientation.” *For this semester, evaluations were within the top 10% of all TA instructors, campus wide.*
- 2008 List of Teachers Ranked as Excellent by Their Students, Fall, for course:  
“Media of Public Discourse.”
- 2008 List of Teachers Ranked as Excellent by Their Students, Summer, for course:  
“Introduction to Communication Theory and Research.”
- 2008 List of Teachers Ranked as Excellent by Their Students, Spring, for course:  
“Study Abroad Pre-departure Orientation.”
- 2005 List of Teachers Ranked as Excellent by Their Students, Spring, for course:  
“Public Speaking.”
- 2004 List of Teachers Ranked as Excellent by Their Students, Fall, for course:  
“Public Speaking.”
- 2004 Academic Summer Honors Fellow
- 2004 List of Teachers Ranked as Excellent by Their Students, Spring, for course:  
“Public Speaking.”
- 2007 *Phi Kappa Phi*

Campus: University of Tulsa

- 2003 *Phi Beta Kappa*
- 2003 Jess Chouteau Outstanding Top Ten Senior
- 2003 Outstanding Senior in Communication
- 2002 Harry S. Truman Scholarship Finalist
- 2002 *Phi Alpha Theta*

Journalism

- 2003 First Place SPJ Award, Society of Professional Journalists.
- 2002 First Place OCPA Award, Oklahoma Collegiate Press Association.
- 2001 Tulsa Press Gridiron Scholarship, Tulsa Press Club, \$1,000.
- 2001 *Scripps Howard Internship Grant, Scripps Howard Foundation, \$2,500*

**PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS**

- 2008-2009 Broadcast Education Association
- 2006 International Association of Relationship Researchers
- 2005-present International Communication Association
- 2003-present National communication Association