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The Effects of Film Viewing on Young Adults' Perceptions on Love and Intimacy

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 1920s, the film industry has shaped and changed the ways that society views social norms. Unrealistic standards have been portrayed to young adults through films since their popularization. The unrealistic portrayals of love and intimate relationships can become damaging if one's life does not seem to resemble what they are being shown on the big screen. Lippman, Ward, and Seabrook (2014:138) emphasize how "ninety-four percent of youth surveyed by Bachen and Illouz (1996) indicated that they looked to TV and movies for examples of romantic love" which could pose problems if the examples of romantic love being shown are unrealistic. Young adults are in a critical period of their lives where they have an abundance of information available to them that can shape their ideals and beliefs as they transition into adulthood. Baran (1976:473) inquired that "the media may indeed serve as a contributing factor to an individual's picture of his or her sexual self." Experiences that we are unfamiliar with that are portrayed in films are some of our only options at viewing relationships and we often compare aspects of our lives to plots of our favorite movies. Anticipatory socialization is strengthened by the romantic ideals in movies as movie viewers aspire to connect with those they are viewing. Attitudes towards what the ideal intimate relationship looks like is shaped greatly by what is being viewed in the media especially as the consumption of media has increased due to the developments of new technology used for leisure activities such as movie viewing.

Repeated exposure of not only unrealistic portrayals of intimacy and romance, but also

of harmful depictions of the romanticization of hypermasculinity, hyper aggression, intimate partner aggression, stalking, and negligence of consent can shape and ultimately desensitize viewers beliefs on what an appropriate relationship looks like within society. Kretz (2019) argued how “repeated exposure can lead to the formation or reinforcement of knowledge structures” such as relationship beliefs (Kretz 2019:27). Movie viewers who intend to learn from this form of entertainment may be more likely to endorse romantic beliefs and ideals (Kretz 2019).

In this literature review, I intend to explore what effects romantic themes in films have on young adults and how their attitudes and beliefs surrounding love are shaped by the romantic ideals in films. Movies are an agent for socialization and thus should be assessed to see their implications on society. I am hypothesizing that young adults feel less satisfaction in their intimate partner relationships after comparing themselves to the “ideal” relationships portrayed in films.

MOTIVATIONS FOR WATCHING MOVIES

People are motivated by a need to be accepted and to connect with others, so it is not shocking that young adults use movies to learn about and develop their interactions and relationships with others. Hefner and Wilson (2013) investigate this idea. Hefner and Wilson (2013:167) examined that “individuals reported watching romantic comedies in order to learn were more likely to endorse romantic beliefs than were those who watch for other reasons.” This concept has been prevalent since the popularization of talkie films in the 1920s. American sociologist Herbert Blumer interviewed high school and college aged students in search of finding out how they were affected by the popularization of movies and the content of the movies they were exposed to. Inaccurate depictions of what an ideal life was supposed to look

like was a common theme in movies watched by the students studied. A student expressed how he was “eager to see such pictures as would teach me better and more effective methods of love-making and I often wished that the object of my devotion and admiration at the particular time could acquire the same feeling as the movies stirred within me” (Blumer 1933). This response shows that since the beginning of the popularization of films, young adults utilized movies as a way to learn about the world and how to interact with others.

In Hefner and Wilsons’ study, the participants expressed that they watched films to acquire knowledge and ended up endorsing romantic ideals regardless of how often they consumed this material (Hefner and Wilson 2013). They expressed “motives for viewing mattered more than sheer viewing” (Hefner and Wilson 2013:170). If people are viewing movies to learn, they are more likely to endorse the ideals and beliefs shown in the movies. Movies are an outlet for individuals to learn, assess, and compare their lives and relationships to unrealistic beliefs.

ROMANTIC THEMES

Romantic themes can be seen across all genres of film, but Hefner and Wilson thought it would be most impactful to assess romantic ideals within romantic comedies as they have been a popular choice of movie genre since the popularization of movies. Hefner and Wilson (2013) recognized five themes throughout their content analysis research on romantic comedies. The first theme they observed was surrounded by viewing expressions that suggested there was only one perfect love for characters which they called the “soul mate” or “one and only” (Hefner and Wilson 2013:156). The next theme they observed was characterized by expressions of thinking a character had no flaws and were essentially perfect which they labeled as “idealization of other” (Hefner and Wilson 2013:156). The following

theme they addressed was characterized by expressions that conveyed that love is all that is needed to have a successful romantic relationship which they categorize as “love conquers all” (Hefner and Wilson 2013:156). The final romantic theme that was assessed was “love at first sight” which was observed as expressions that insinuated that love happens immediately when individuals meet (Hefner and Wilson 2013:156). Shapiro and Kroeger (1991:233) argue that “individuals who are more exposed to the popular romantic media will have more dysfunctional/unrealistic beliefs about intimate partner relationships” like the themes Hefner and Wilson (2013) observed. They also recorded romantic challenges that they viewed in films that interfered and oftentimes contradicted the romantic theme or ideals expressed.

Through Hefner and Wilson’s (2013:161) content analyses of the 52 highest grossing romantic comedies, the researchers found that “three fourths of the films in the sample featured an overarching romantic ideal.” The themes that appeared most often were “love conquers all” (65%) and “soulmate/one and only” (15%) (Hefner and Wilson 2013:161). Kretz (2019) was able to conclude that “television drama and romantic movie viewing were the strongest predictors of belief in love conquers all” (Kretz 2019:2) which shows how much of an impact this theme has on society. Believing in unrealistic romantic ideals can be harmful to young adults because they may never experience the themes they are seeing within movies and that could lead to them feeling less satisfied with their lives after hearing characters express “I know in my heart, you’re the only one for me” and not gaining those same experiences. Although “love conquers all” and “soulmate/one and only” were most commonly depicted themes in films, Emmers-Sommers et al. (2006) observed the “idealization of other” theme was endorsed and believed by the most participants while being interviewed.

It is important to address how the romantic ideals and challenges were portrayed in films

to get a full picture on what is influencing young adults in our society into believing unrealistic ideals. Hefner and Wilson (2013) observed that ideals were typically portrayed in positive lights and romantic challenges were portrayed negatively. Johnson and Holmes (2009:352) noticed that “relationships were shown to have both highly idealistic and undesirable qualities” yet the relationship challenges and “transgressions” were downplayed and were not seen to have lasting effects or impacts.

ROMANTICIZATION OF RELATIONSHIP VIOLENCE, OBSESSION, AND NONVERBAL CONSENT

Romantic ideals within movies can lead to damaging mentalities that take the ideals one step too far turning them into dangerous behaviors. Harmful phenomena such as romanticization of intimate partner violence, stalking, and viewings of disregard for consent are prevalent in movies. These have become increasingly prevalent themes within films and have been expressed in a positive light (Johnson and Holmes 2006). Johnson and Holmes (2006) studied how sexual consent was displayed in films and noticed overwhelmingly that appropriate consent was rarely portrayed. A “nonconsensual sex code” was designed for instances where the coder “perceived at least one character [who] did not agree to, was forced into, or was coerced into sexual behavior” and included refusing to abide by someone not consenting or refusing (Jozkowski et al. 2019:758). The researchers found that “nonverbal cues-both explicit and implicit-dominated consent depictions in mainstream films” (Jozkowski et al. 2019:760) which perpetuates confusion on what is appropriate for gaining consent from others.

College students that Jozkowski et al. (2019:760) studied, reported their beliefs and attitudes around consent as being consistent with the nonverbal consent that films show as “the most common cues college students report using to communicate consent” were consistent with

the nonverbal cues that they viewed characters used most in the films. Jozkowski et al. (2019:760) also observed that in movies, consent was sometimes seen as irrelevant to include because “the audience ‘just senses or knows’ when a character consents to sex”. This is a harmful idea because if young adults are trying to learn through watching films, they are not being exposed to how consent should work and therefore are not learning what appropriate consent should entail.

Stalking in movies is oftentimes viewed as someone being obsessed with someone else and although the audience may think this is endearing, stalking is an incredibly serious action that is criminal. Lippman (2018:396) argues that the “persistent pursuit is evidence of love” trope is considered a romantic ideal in films because of how much people are affected by ideals displayed in films. This trope has led to the romanticization of stalking-the ultimate “persistent pursuit is evidence of love” which can become harmful if young adults believe that stalking behaviors are appropriate and acceptable. It was found that “exposure to a film that portrayed persistent pursuit as romantic” was associated with “higher levels of stalking myth endorsement” (Lippman 2018:398).

The way men are portrayed in films has become increasingly hyper-masculine and that can be damaging to young adults who think that acting hyper aggressive within a relationship means they are extra romantic. This can cause serious problems that could lean towards intimate partner aggression and abuse. Emmers-Sommers et al. (2006:318) concluded that “individuals’ repeated exposure to media that degrade women would contribute to their more traditional attitudes and the acceptance of degrading behavior.” This is a concerning conclusion that can influence what someone views as being appropriate in a relationship. Emmers-Sommers et al. (2006:311) found that their “results indicate that men prefer films with sex and violence

significantly more than women do, whereas women prefer love stories significantly more than men do” which could lead to relationship abuse if the repeated exposures of those types of films contribute to ones attitudes about relationships as the authors concluded.

SEXUAL CONTENT VIEWING

With streaming platforms and film production companies having more freedom in what types of scenes they can produce, sexual content has increasingly become available to young adults. Baran (1976:473) states that “those who saw movie portrayals of sex as being real and those who saw media characters as experiencing greater sexual satisfaction reported less satisfaction in their own state of virginity.” This concludes that those who view sexual encounters in films may experience less satisfaction in their own sexual encounters or lack thereof. The ways in which sexual acts and behaviors are displayed in films can factor into overall satisfaction in life. Baran did not conclude that watching movies or television that consist of sexual behaviors is entirely a negative experience however. Baran (1967:473) concluded that “the negative relationship between the amount of television viewing and unhappiness as a virgin suggests that the medium may serve as an ‘escape’ from peer pressure.”

There are two sides to the story surrounding the consumption of sexual behaviors in films. Brown et al. (2006:1018) delved into who might be most vulnerable to the increased exposure of sexual content and found that White young adults sexual activity and tendencies to engage in early sexual contact increased through their exposure to sexual content while Black young adults seemed to be more influenced by “perceptions of their parents’ expectations and their friends’ sexual behavior.” The studies together show that there is still little known about what social factors affect young adults as a whole most.

FILM INFLUENCES ON YOUNG ADULTS

A participant in Bachen and Illouz's study (1996) expressed the influence that romantic themes played on her beliefs when she stated "I think in movies it is... that's my problem... I always get so depressed because I see it in movies and think that is how it has to be. Now I am finally realizing that the people that I grow to like are probably more important to me. I just realized that. I always get depressed because I see it in movies and think that is how it has to be...I always used to fall in love with guys just like that (snaps her fingers) and then I find out years later they are not very nice people but I have always loved them" (Bachen and Illouz 1996:306). Although this participant realized that the ideals in the films she watched were not necessarily realistic, she still believed that love looked a certain way which shows how much someone's beliefs surrounding love and intimacy can be influenced by films. Johnson and Holmes (2009:368) came to the same conclusion about how "films appeared to depict relationships as progressing quickly into something emotionally meaningful and significant, but there was little shown to explain how or why this was the case. Adolescents using these films as a model on which to base their own behaviors, expecting that in doing so their relationships will progress in kind, are likely to be left disappointed."

CONCLUSION

With films becoming an increased activity for leisure, learning, and development, young adults are finding that their beliefs in how intimacy and relationships are supposed to look like are being shaped by the movies they watch. The romantic themes and challenges that are being displayed are oftentimes unrealistic yet young adults still yearn for the love they see on the big screen. Movies provide young adults with "a set of expectations" (Bachen and Illouz 1996:306). Repeated exposure to romanticized relationship abuse, stalking, and nonconsensual pursuits are continuing to blur the lines between harmful behaviors while the film industry is

trying to pass off as romantic infatuation. Films not only allow for members of our society to escape from their lives, but they also perpetuate insecurities. Since movies are used as an agent for socialization, it is important that young adults address how the depictions in movies are affecting their satisfaction in their own lives. There was sufficient evidence to conclude that young adults' have felt less satisfaction with their intimate partner relationships in comparison to what they see in the movies.

It would be beneficial if future research focused on how young adults' beliefs surrounding love and intimacy are shaped across different movie genres. Future research could also look into how men and women differ and if one group reports being affected more than the other. It could also be beneficial if people of varying sexual identities are affected. Although there has been a good amount of research done already, there are many aspects that could be further researched and expanded on.

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