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Leading Lad(y) in Love: Gender and Agency in Two Self-Reflective Romantic Comedies

The creation and dissemination of media allows for the spread of social and cultural norms, particularly through increasingly digital methods of communication. In order to market different forms of media to consumers, these creations are grouped by themes and genres, each with respective tropes and characteristics that make every fabricated category unique. One such category is the romantic comedy, a genre categorized by stories of love and romantic relationships paired with comedic elements for levity and traditionally marketed toward a female audience. However, some content creators make artifacts that push the “normal” boundaries of genres as a way to highlight audience expectations and the problematic patterns of thought that these artifacts perpetuate, among other self-reflective functions. What can romantic comedies with satirical elements tell us about the romantic comedy genre and romance in general?

In this seminar paper, I explore self-reflective artifacts that simultaneously break and follow this genre’s norms, actively parodying genre conventions and themes. I combine my interest in media self-reflexivity with my interest in romantic comedies by studying two particularly introspective romcoms – *Isn’t it Romantic* (2019) starring Rebel Wilson and *Playing it Cool* (2014) starring Chris Evans. *Isn’t it Romantic* tells the story of a woman who hates romantic comedies and finds herself trapped in a romantic comedy. Main character Natalie discovers that she loves herself, opening herself up to others in the end after going on a dreamlike journey of self-reflection. *Playing it Cool* tells the story of a man writing a romantic comedy script, despite his inexperience with love, and whose life ultimately turns into a romantic comedy. The unnamed main character played by Evans realizes the importance of those around him, taking a step back from his self-absorbed mindset and putting forth the effort to care about

his friends and grandfather as he pursues the first woman he ever truly loved. Both movies “pick on themselves,” using tropes of the romantic comedy movie genre while characters explicitly protest against them. Considering gender’s role in the construction and perpetuation of social and cultural norms in both media and “real life,” I argue that these two films serve as foils of each other, with one representing a “female” point of view and the other as a serious, dramatic interpretation of a “male” romantic comedy. These films are good artifacts for comparison as I explore how humor functions as a mechanism to present a new narrative about gender norms.

In this paper, I review the literature on romantic comedies, the influence of romantic relationships on other aspects of life, and interpretation of media by audiences and scholars. Next, I state my research questions about gender and humor in romantic comedies and detail my approach to addressing these questions. I used a content analysis to analyze both films separately and a comparative analysis to study both films together. I analyze my findings and further discuss the implications of my research after reflecting about gendered perceptions surrounding relationships and romance, expectations for and the performance of gender roles, the recurrence of trope characters via genre convention, and the function of satire in mass media. Finally, I conclude my paper by reviewing my most significant findings and offering a suggestion for further research in this topic area.

Literature Review

The literature about the concept of romance is extensive, yet specific articles about romantic comedy films are decidedly less widespread. To start my study of romantic comedies from a scholarly perspective, I looked into existing research on romance and gender, gender roles, the recurrence of tropes within genre-bound media, and sexuality, a significant aspect of romance addressed within Western romantic comedies.

Media are not neutral – they promote and push a way of thinking about the world through the messages portrayed within. Romantic comedies have such an influence as they display formulaic approaches of “ideal” romance to a receptive audience. Claire Mortimer’s book *Romantic Comedy* provides a thorough introduction to the genre. She stresses the difficulty in reducing a genre to a simple summary but states that the “dynamic of the film rests on the central quest – the pursuit of love – and almost always leads to a successful resolution” (Mortimer 4). Mortimer further explains the genre by detailing its history, changes in character roles within the genre, and characteristics of male and female lead roles. She also raises the question of if “happily ever after” exists in “real life” by reflecting on modern films that involve powerful female characters (133). Mortimer’s volume was useful for my study as I developed definitions of mechanisms, formulated romantic comedy tropes, and considered gendered differences within my artifacts of study.

Different groups interpret media artifacts differently, with some internalizing media messages in the ways that they live their daily lives. Johnson and Holmes address how adolescents interpret media, particularly romantic comedy feature films, and how such interpretation impacts the ways that they see themselves and their relationships with other people. Using a basic grounded theory methodology, the authors conducted an analysis of forty romantic comedy movies, using open, axial, and selective coding strategies to find and analyze categories of interaction within relationships and determine how those messages influence young people. Axial categories of relationship interaction identified in this study include affection, commitment, demonstrating caring, gestures, importance of partner, relationship issues, relationship with ex, romantic speech, expression of emotions, family and friend approval, one-of-a-kind relationship, open communication, relationship discussion, sexual activity, time

together, and trust in partner. Johnson and Holmes reveal that romantic comedies offer contradictory messages about the roles of persons within a relationship, marriage, and romantic behaviors expected, giving young people an unclear view of romance and further heightening unrealistic expectations of speediness and intensity in relationships (366). The ways that women view and interpret romantic comedy artifacts is also of particular interest to researchers due to the stereotype of romcoms as “chick flicks.” Caperello and Migliaccio focus on how women’s viewing of romantic movies helps them make sense of their own lives while reinforcing systems of power inherent to the genre, like patriarchal notions of the gendered status quo, in the process. Using a Feminist Interactionist Cultural studies perspective, these scholars found that these films influence the ways in which the interviewed women formed expectations for romantic relationships, constructing idealized views through their interactions with the movies (Caperello and Migliaccio 215). In this way, audience and artifacts share an interactive relationship as viewing and interpreting romantic comedies reinforces genre tropes and how people interpret their own lives, relationships, and themselves.

These expectations and roles in relationships have a tangible, physical impact on the people within such typically heteronormative unions. A study by Sharp and Keyton explores how perceptions of desires and expectations in romantic relationships literally shape women’s bodies by impacting how women view and change themselves, adding to the body of literature linking romantic relationships, body dissatisfaction, and disordered eating (16). The authors maintain physical appearance as a key factor in dating, courtship, and marriage, with standards of appearance vastly different for women than for men (17). In the analysis of messages within romantic comedies, it is imperative to consider the “real world” norms that may infiltrate the fantasies presented in media artifacts.

Daughton's analysis of the film *Bull Durham* gives additional themes to consider when studying romantic comedies, as she argues that this movie "works against heteronormative viewing in many ways by infusing its scenes with an ironic sensibility" (97). By conducting a feminist rhetorical analysis, the author supports her claims through explanation of gendered societal norms, standards, and stereotypes and then breaking apart specific scenes using her explanations as a foundation for analysis. Even though this study does not discuss either *Isn't it Romantic* or *Playing it Cool*, this source is useful as an example of breaking down a film, particularly one that uses an ironic undercurrent to challenge gender norms while remaining an artifact that reinforces traditional Hollywood practices. My study offers something unique to the field and adds to Daughton's analysis as I also examine ironic pieces of media. This analysis also reflects on how specific characters impact viewer perceptions and experience, which could be the case for the main characters in *Isn't it Romantic* and *Playing it Cool*.

Research Questions

The existing research and my interest in my chosen artifacts led to the following research questions. My main research question asks if the gender of the main character in my films impacted how a movie follows or breaks genre conventions, and if so, to what extent this is true. Secondly, I sought to answer how satire reveals and perpetuates gender and filmic norms, a quality not directly addressed by existing literature. Finally, I was curious if characters' actions and agency could impact viewer perceptions and experience of a film, and I prepared myself to answer this question by considering different ways that my chosen films could be interpreted by their audiences.

Approach

I approached my study by conducting a comparative analysis of the verbal and nonverbal communication within *Isn't it Romantic* and *Playing it Cool*, thinking about the interaction between romance, humor, and gender. In order to complete my analysis, I watched these films multiple times and took copious notes so that I could look back and examine moments, storyline, and discussions that referenced romance or displayed gender performance at the same time. This allowed me the opportunity to take a closer look at the films since movie scripts were unavailable. I paused often so I could record relevant quotes pertaining to romance, atmospheric elements, and mark important sections of scenes and dialogue, giving me the opportunity to take notes on verbal and nonverbal components to code later.

My coding sheet was divided into three categories. Firstly, I coded my observations using the coding categories from Johnson and Holmes' study as a foundation for drawing comparisons between my chosen artifacts and the main characters with agency within them. In my use of these coding categories, I defined sections that were not fully described in their study so that I would consistently code relationship-oriented behaviors into their most relevant areas. Secondly, I engaged in open coding in order to find emergent details about main and supporting characters' respective gender, gender performance, and relevant interactions. Using this twofold coding method allowed me to draw conclusions about the expectations associated with characters' trope/role in the film as connected to their respective genders. Thirdly, since both films' main characters mocked romantic comedies, I made a list of the romantic comedy tropes identified as such within the artifacts themselves to see if there was any overlap between the two. The feminist thought used in Caperello and Migliaccio's study helped me tie my comparison to digital rhetoric as a beginning point for better understanding relationships between people and the movies they watch through increasingly digital means (216). After everything was coded, I

looked for dominant themes and how frequently these themes appeared as I considered heteronormative norms of gender and gender performance.

Findings and Discussion

Taken together, these artifacts cover the whole of romance as prescribed by the romcom genre – 84 out of the 106 coding categories as outlined by Johnson and Holmes were featured by one or both films, making these movies representative of the expectations of romance according to romcoms, as these themes are consistent with the existing narrative and study of the genre. However, although both films together filled almost all of the categories, very few categories were shared by the “main couples” of both films. Relationship-based displays of togetherness were also shared by secondary characters, groups of friends, and non-main-character-centered couples in each film, and the main couples in *Isn't it Romantic* and *Playing it Cool* exhibited very different aspects of affection. Romantic displays shared by both films include dancing, kissing, and sharing a private moment (with the couple completely alone and engaging in an activity together) as signs of affection, committing to the relationship (with a verbal proclamation or accepting of togetherness), doing favors (by helping partner accomplish goals or offering a helping hand “in a tight spot”) as a gesture of affection, discussing one’s current relationship, being overtly happy or laughing together (specifically smiling and laughing when with each other), and being playful together (acting silly or not worrying about others’ opinions) in the respective couples’ alone time. This is a result of the differing levels of action afforded to the female Natalie character versus the unnamed male character played by Chris Evans largely due to their environments and respective roles in their stories. Although these ideas are not explicitly highlighted by the main characters themselves, this argument can be made after

examining the different romcom tropes that each character defines and subsequently experiences themselves.

The main characters from *Isn't it Romantic* and *Playing it Cool* both experienced the romantic comedy tropes of terrible pop music in highly emotional scenes, characters waking up with full hair and makeup done, having their thoughts expressed through voiceover or in talking to themselves, and experienced meet-cutes (a cute first meeting). However, Natalie and Evans' character largely experience different romantic comedy conventions in their respective films.

Natalie, the main character of *Isn't it Romantic*, lists a number of reasons why she hates romantic comedies, all of which are tropes that she experiences in her medically-induced-coma-dream. Love-oriented pop songs constantly fill the space between sections of dialogue, every outfit reveal involves purposeful camera panning or full makeover montages, everyone that she encounters finds her clumsiness endearing and her presence “beguiling,” and New York City “doesn't smell like shit anymore” – the streets are filled with flowers, cupcake bakeries, wedding dress stores, and her apartment has transformed into a fabulous penthouse suite (Wilson).

Additionally, the people in her life “follow” her into her experience, finding new roles to fill in her romantic comedy. Her female best friend and coworker becomes her vicious nemesis, her gay neighbor Donnie becomes an “offensive version of a gay guy” reduced to the cliché best friend trope character with the “sole purpose in the story is just to help the main hot chick,” and the swimsuit model on the billboard outside her window comes to life and takes an interest in Natalie's male co-worker, and eventual love interest, Josh (Wilson). Her entire journey revolves around her “three-hour-long” rant about romantic comedies, paired with her perception of how Josh feels about her – a satire-soaked experience of the norms that she'd despised since she was a little girl whose mom pointed out that she didn't exhibit the beauty standards achieved by

romantic comedy stars like Julia Roberts. Her reality – a romcom world of “beguiling” and flowers constructed through her experience of media consumption – completely encompasses her story (Wilson).

On the other hand, the main character played by Chris Evans in *Playing it Cool* experiences a different range of romantic comedy tropes. The multiple-personalities romantic comedy script that he has to write “as a favor” includes characters that he describes at the beginning of the film – a gay best friend, bitchy girlfriend, feisty Hispanic woman, and black female detective – that come to life in his apartment as he writes their lines (Evans). His supportive (and real) gay best friend Scott talks about loving scenes from romantic comedies that involve a crowd following and cheering someone pursuing love, and Evans’ character imagines a crowd following him as he rushes to every heart sculpture in San Francisco to stop the wedding of the woman he loves. This male writer’s lived clichés involve his experience as a writer who “writes his own ending,” very different from Natalie’s ordeal within a romance-saturated environment that completely encompasses her experience (Evans). He lives the tortured existence of a man fueled by his passion for a woman already in a relationship, expanding on his misery at length through his role as narrator, but the course of the romantic comedy tropes themselves does not control his existence in the film or how he lives his life. Evans’ character exists within a satirical situation after his first deep interest in a woman changes how he looks at the world: he inadvertently views his reality through the lens of the norm-saturated romantic comedy he’s writing, yet he still autonomously “writes around” this romcom-dominated view and accomplishes his “real life” career and relationship goals.

The satirical nature of both *Isn't it Romantic* and *Playing it Cool* actively presented romantic comedy “norms” and the problematic features of these norms while perpetuating these

patterns alongside heteronormative ideals of gender identity and performance. As a result, the message communicated to audiences may not be taken seriously – when these satirical films make fun of romantic comedies but ultimately use the aspects explicitly defined as problematic to tell a story, audiences are encouraged to reflect on their way of thinking about romcoms but continue to “buy into” such norms as loyal fans of this genre’s artifacts. Part of the reason that gender and conventions line up is due to the aforementioned differences in romantic comedy tropes displayed in each film. As Natalie realizes her affection for Josh, she fights for him, but ultimately realizes that she must love herself instead. After this realization, Natalie wakes up back in the “real world,” full of energy and confidence, approaching her meeting as a talented architect and her romantic prospects with vigor. She assures her female friend and coworker that Josh will not complete her and that “I complete *myself*,” but her coworker points out that she’s actually living the life of a romantic comedy heroine and the movie rapidly ends with a vibrant dance number, potentially undermining her earlier assertion of self-love and ultimately reinforcing the idea of a significant other as necessary to fulfilling one’s desires (Wilson).

On the other hand, Evans’ character finally satisfies himself by actively reaching out to his friends and the woman he wants to explore his feelings with after losing his caring grandfather and reading *Love in the Time of Cholera*, making him realize that he needs to closely hold onto the people he cares most about. His realization occurs almost at the end of the film, with the cheesy romcom-esque ending of visiting every heart sculpture and kissing the woman he loves attempting to bring closure to the deeply personal dialogue of self-reflection. However, his love interest’s declaration of “I hate you” followed by a kiss as a step up from her earlier “I nothing you” as she goes to marry her longtime boyfriend gives the writer main character a comfortable ending to his dramatic tale of romantic angst while not undermining his

introspective journey (Monaghan). This differs from Natalie's undermined declaration of self-love as her friend places Natalie's "real life" experience within the romcom norms that traditionally confine female experience, continuing an understanding of gender that prescribes men as strong and in charge versus women as sensitive and needing a man for true happiness.

The main characters have different levels of agency within their respective stories. Each main character must realize different things about themselves in their pursuit of love – Natalie must learn to love herself first, while Evan's character must recognize the significance of those most important in his life before either can attain romantic love. The levels of agency held by the characters in these films could potentially impact viewer perceptions and experience of these films. As a male writer, Evans' character has a lot of control over his existence, while Natalie needs to escape her situation in order to truly "wake up" and realize her self-worth, focusing on improving herself in the common media portrayal of plus-sized women as needing to improve to be accepted and gain self-esteem. Part of this may be the rating of the films – *Isn't it Romantic* is rated PG-13, while *Playing it Cool* is rated R and takes full advantage of that rating by using expletives, open drunkenness, and fairly explicit sexuality. These ratings directly control the two different-gendered main characters' expression of libido within their respective films – the entire coded category of sexual interaction is only experienced by Evans' film, while Natalie cannot really engage in such interaction in the trappings of her PG-13 flick. One may interpret this as an example of regulating female desire – women like the unnamed love interest in *Playing it Cool* are to be fought for, chased after, and desired by men and may even enjoy engaging in sexual relations, but women cannot be portrayed as fighting for, chasing after, or desiring men sexually. Evans' character's friends encourage him to have sex with his object of desire as a way to answer if he truly loves her. In this way, sex is used by this male character as a device, a

means to an end, a conquest that largely disregards how his love interest feels about cheating on her significant other, opposing Natalie's experience of mutual romance and understanding with Josh. On the other hand, Natalie's desire to have sex with the seemingly-too-perfect Blake, a man not slated as her ultimate love interest, is downplayed with humor as she cannot fulfill her desire within her PG-13 "dream" as the camera cuts away and her morning restarts every time intimacy is attempted. Additionally, Natalie, a full-figured woman, appears onscreen wearing her pajamas and tackling her muscular lover, but is not seen in undergarments and passionately touching and kissing a man in bed like the thin love interest of Evans' character; this brings Western beauty standards of thinness into the conversation of romantic comedy tropes.

In these two self-reflective films, the main characters actively make fun of romantic comedies but ultimately reinforce the tropes that they hate. This is true as relationships within the films showcase a variety of interaction including affection, gestures, relationship issues, expression of emotions, and discussion about relationships in general. The gender of the main characters from *Isn't it Romantic* and *Playing it Cool* impacted what romantic comedy conventions were represented in each film. Traditional notions of masculine control and agency within one's circumstances fits the positions in which the main characters of my two artifacts occupy within their respective films.

Conclusion

Studying the topic of self-reflectivity in media is important because such works engage in metanarrative that reveals how media in general is characterized through genre and conventions. Satire's presence in my artifacts of interest and in media in general also impacts how other works of those genres/topics are received by audiences. This reception varies between different demographic groups, a quality worth exploring in media studies, especially as digital media is

increasingly shared on multiple platforms and technologies and made available around the world. The two artifacts that I bring to my conversation of gender are great examples of parody, their respective genre, and parodies within their respective genres, a claim that I can make based upon my experience as an extensive consumer of artifacts in the romantic comedy genre of film.

When people view media, they draw connections and make comparisons between that content and their own lives, seen as “individuals react, respond, and engage movies, interconnecting them with their daily lives...from this interaction comes meaning and experiences (Caperello and Migliaccio 201). Romantic comedies like the two examined in my research are increasingly available through digital means, making the messages about gender and relationships contained within them even more widespread and influential in people’s lives. The self-reflexivity of my chosen artifacts both performs and challenges genre conventions, exposing audiences to new ways to consider the romantic comedy genre but ultimately reinforces how the genre is viewed and created. Audiences need to be aware that the main character in a film often drives the plot of a piece of media, as the decision of having a leading lady versus a leading man has implications far beyond whose name is first in a cast listing.

For future research, I recommend a further dive into the romantic comedy genre, breaking down both “classic” and recent examples of films that scholars and pop culture enthusiasts have labelled as this genre, and comparing how they approach levels of agency of the various characters within them. A larger examination of romantic comedies as a whole in this context will grant researchers a better view of how agency and gender factor into how stories within this genre are told.

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I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received any unauthorized help on this work.

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