

“It must be love”

THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE “ROMANTIC LOVE” CONCEPT¹

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Although love is an emotion experienced in all cultures, the notion of “romantic love” is probably a specific Western cultural concept. This qualitative study among 79 Israeli girls researched the role media play in the construction of the “romantic love” concept, its narratives and behaviors.

“Love is a many-splendored thing,” “Love is stronger than death,” “It must be love,” “All you need is love” – lyrics of popular songs tend to glorify the importance and mythical power of romantic love.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF ROMANTIC LOVE

The intimate feeling we call love can be perceived as a product of social construction processes and therefore as a time- and culture-dependent concept. This perception can be exemplified by the extensive changes the concept of love has undergone in different periods of history – starting with Plato’s “Eros” theory, through the courtship love of the middle ages, and all the way to the research of love in the 20th century (e.g. Singer, 2009; Sternberg, 1998). Consequently, we can say that romantic love is an idea whose meaning and boundaries we internalize through a process of socialization that teaches us which values, beliefs, thinking patterns and behaviors are accepted in the society we live in. In addition, as in the current generation media are dominant agents

of socialization which accompany us from infancy to adulthood, it is interesting to examine the role they play in shaping their audiences’ romantic consciousness.

Contemporary culture provides us with many differing symbols, narratives, and representations through which we can express love. Content analyses of representations of romantic love have found them to be prevalent in a variety of genres and texts, including fairy tales, Disney films, romance novels, magazines, soap operas and pop music. All of these discursive spaces provide romantic models for personal lives and may contribute to the formation and retention of romantic beliefs and attitudes about love and the appropriate ways to express it emotionally as well as behaviorally.

Two main themes stand out in extant scholarship: First, myths of romantic love as employed in pop culture glorify it as an intensely emotional, all-encompassing, and – in extreme cases – even fatal experience. Central among these myths are notions of “love at first sight;” “[we are] destined to be together and nothing can separate us;” “frequent and intense fights are a sign of true and very passionate love;” “love is all you need even if the 2 partners hold completely different values;” “the right partner completes you and makes all your dreams and desires come true” (Galician, 2004). The prevalent use of such myths in popular culture may be responsible for romantic illusions that lead to deep frustrations and disappointments when real relationships fail to match them.

The second theme of these analyses is the oppressive gender roles portrayed in many romantic relationships: Here women’s subordination is presented as desirable, for romantic reasons, and love is a mythical force without which there is no purpose in life. Males, by contrast, are portrayed as the leaders of their communities, heroic warriors, and brave rescuers of the female character from her miserable fate. Thus, yearning for the “missing (male) piece” that will make a girl’s life complete and therefore is the key to happiness and fulfillment perpetuates female dependency on men and serves as the rationale for over-investment of resources in search of the “one and only,” rather than in herself as an independent individual with agency and self-worth.

HOW DO CHILDREN INTERPRET ROMANTIC REPRESENTATIONS?

The potential influence of the media on the romantic perceptions of their audience is especially powerful when discussing young audiences, who form their concept of love through content found in the media and processes of social learning, formation of cognitive schemes, feelings of identification and para-social interaction with lovable characters in the media. In addition, these audiences have yet to accumulate significant romantic experience in the real world to which they can compare the grandiose romantic representations they find in the media.

transformation of Cinderella from a lady in distress to a high-status princess. Although the girls wished they would have a similar romantic fate as that of Cinderella, they still had the ability to negotiate and add to the original story based on their own experiences, hopes, and desires, for example, by declaring

Furthermore, while many studies have considered the active meaning-making processes in which children are engaged while they interact with media texts (e.g. Buckingham, 2008; Lemish, 2007), only a few have focused on how children make meaning of representations of romantic love. Christine Bachen and Eva Illouz (1996) examined how 8- to 17-year-old children and youth in the U.S. interpreted such visual representations in magazine advertising. They found that romantic perceptions of most participants were dependent on visual codes of consumption associated with an atmosphere of wealth and leisure and in the location of the lovers in circumstances and places that deviate from their daily routine. And, similar to Illouz's study with adults, Bachen and Illouz found that the romantic perceptions of children were influenced by the predominant model of love in the media that associates romance with the capitalist market. However, in contrast to Illouz's adult population, Bachen and Illouz did not find socio-economic differences between the children, an issue to which we wish to return in our own study. Lori Baker-Sperry (2007) examined the different ways in which 6- to 7-year-olds interpreted the romantic messages conveyed in Disney's version of *Cinderella* (1950). Her findings indicate that girls embraced the story, identified with the leading female character, and especially enjoyed the

that Cinderella should have kids, although the story does not end this way.

Other studies have focused more specifically on girls and their negotiations with romantic texts. Amy Aidman's study (1999) focused on the ways 9- to 13-year-old U.S. girls of diverse geographical, socio-economical, and ethnic backgrounds interpreted Disney's animated movie *Pocahontas* (1995) featuring a romance between a Native American heroine and British hero John Smith. Contrary to many other romantic fantasies, this narrative did not end with "they lived happily after," as Smith had to return to England while Pocahontas chose to stay with her own people on their land (cf. Ill. 1). The girls argued that parallel to the sadness involved in the separation from the lover, they experienced a sense of pride and strength from Pocahontas's choice to stand by her people and not desert them for the sake of love. This finding demonstrates that, like other texts, the romantic text has the potential to serve as a site of multiple interpretations, including those that are sometimes contradictory to and not necessarily in accordance with the hegemonic reading.

Aidman also found that white, middle-class, urban girls demonstrated a more cynical, negotiated reading of the text, ridiculing and doubting the motivations of the producers as well as of Pocahontas. In contrast, lower-class girls of Native American or mixed

origins embraced the character of Pocahontas wholeheartedly and uncritically perhaps due to the absence of other positive media images of Native Americans with whom these girls can identify.

These few studies suggest that representations of romantic love in texts consumed by children and especially girls are meaningful sources of identification, learning, and internalization of romantic narratives and behaviors. At the same time, researchers found that young girls are capable of interpreting romantic texts in a variety of ways, engage actively in negotiations with them, and discover messages that correspond to their individual subjective attitudes as well as interpretative communities.

THE STUDY

In light of these findings, our study from 2008 deals with the role media play in the construction of the "romantic love" concept among girls from the center and periphery of Israel. 79 girls aged 11 to 12 (5th to 6th grade) participated in this study. 41 participants are residents of a city in the center of Israel, characterized by a high socio-economic status, and the other 38 are residents of a city in the periphery, characterized by a low socio-economic status. All the girls were born in Israel, are Jewish, and study in the secular education system. In order to understand and define the girls' romantic perceptions and their origins we chose to use 2 qualitative research methods: writing love stories and focus group discussions.

The combination of these 2 methods enables a thorough examination of the concept of love in the research participants. The stories the girls wrote after they had been asked to imagine their own perfect love story reveal a part of their romantic fantasy world, while the group discussion sheds light on the complex links between idyllic romantic fantasy and the real world.

RESEARCH

The findings show that the media play a central and crucial part in shaping the romantic consciousness of girls participating in our research. Obvious “media traces” could be found in the love stories written by the girls. “Media traces” are marks that directly or indirectly point at specific media texts through which the girls chose to express their romantic world. For example, mentioning the name of the media text in the story, adopting characters that appear in it, or using key messages found in the text (Götz, Lemish, Aidman & Moon, 2005).

The “media traces” were found over a variety of fields: Linguistic media traces (“Once upon a time,” “... and they lived happily ever after”); the characterization of the story protagonists by using names or appearances of famous media characters (the use of names of reality stars from the television show *Survivor*, or describing a love interest as resembling the American actor Zac Efron); adaptation of distinct storylines from media texts or genres (a couple meeting by re-enacting the story from the movie *High School Musical*); a specific reference to a media text in the story (*Romeo and Juliet*, *Beauty and the Beast*); combining romantic myths common in media texts (love at first sight, true love will overcome any obstacle); conveying romantic dialog through technological channels (text messages, Internet chats) and description of emotions demonstrated by commodities, when the perfect love is expressed by buying jewelry, flowers and chocolate, as frequently presented in the media.

While the media clearly influenced the girls’ romantic imagination we could still see some examples of girls keeping their individuality and creativity, mixing the romantic patterns constructed by the media with personal beliefs and values upon which they were raised. For example, a 12-year-old from the periphery chose to end her perfect love story with: “And they lived happily, healthily and modestly

ever after” – a “glocalized” ending combining the global familiar fairy tale ending with local cultural values of modesty, typical of the traditional religious background of the girls from the periphery.

Accordingly, the group discussions showed much evidence of the romantic texts being a significant source for the consolidation of the idea of love for the girls, this by psychological processes of identification, projection and imitation. When we asked who teaches us what love is all about, the girls pointed directly to the media: “First of all magazines, TV and Internet websites. Oh, and there are books in the library about it...” Another girl added: “I don’t really have a clue about what love is, but I watch and learn about it from TV shows and movies like *High School Musical*” (cf. Ill. 2).

However, during the group discussions, the romantic text was revealed to be not only a guideline but also an arena for an interpretive struggle, through which the girls showed various types of critical reading, unclouded insights regarding the gap between the romantic representation and real life, and sometimes even real resistance and contempt for the content of the

text. This interpretive struggle shows the girls’ ability to doubt the credibility of these texts and their awareness that many texts work with a well-established romantic formula, which serves the interests of the text creators and not necessarily the interests of the audience.

An example of the girls’ sophisticated abilities of critical reading can be found in their reaction to a scene from one of their favorite movies, *High School Musical 2* (2007). After watching together the scene portraying the protagonists’ flamboyant first kiss, during which they are surrounded by many well-known romantic signifiers, a group of 12-year-olds from the center said:

G: Wow! It was too much, it was not believable anymore. It would have been enough to have the fireworks or only to release the balloons from above on the hill, but everything together was just too much.

S: What chance is there that this would happen? But it was so romantic (...)

G: Romantic but kitsch.

Interviewer: Could it be “over-romantic?”

All: Yes.

Interviewer: And then it’s not romantic anymore. (...)

G: At the beginning there were balloons and then the fireworks started. But when the sprinklers started, I said to myself “well, really (...)” [in cynical intonation]

Yet, despite the activeness and critical reading of the girls, one may wonder how the variety of interpretations they offered are actually limited by the currently acceptable boundaries of romantic discourse and to what extent can they really challenge and break the barriers of this discourse. The analysis of love stories written by the girls suggests that the independent creation does not necessarily contain any innovative elements and that it can contain hegemonic and sometimes even oppressive content. In this manner, for example, no love story presented a lesbian love affair, Ethiopian or Arab love interests, or a romantic relation with multiple love interests simultaneously according to the polyamory model. Descriptions of such love stories were completely lacking from group conversations with the girls as well, and their exclusion marked the discourse boundaries and the ideas left out of the romantic lexicon, if by lack of awareness or from there being a taboo that should not be mentioned. Another testimony to the borders of the discourse could be found in the interpretations offered by the girls to the variety of romantic texts that were discussed during the focus groups. As mentioned, some of the texts provoked resistance and even resentment among the girls. But at the same time, the girls said they love these texts and paradoxically even expressed longing to experience for themselves the same media representation that provoked them. We explain this conflictive behavior as a result of the complex arena in which the girls participating in this research are located, where several overlapping and sometimes contradicting discourses are taking place, some of which originate in the media and some stem from other socialization agents such as parents, friends, and other people that surround the girls in real life. Furthermore, we found that the girls from the center, who came from a higher socio-economic status and from a less religious background,

developed different romantic perceptions compared to the girls from the periphery. This finding emphasizes the importance of the cultural context in the understanding of the formation of different interpretive communities. For example, one distinction between the 2 study groups can be seen in the location the girls chose for their love stories. Both in the center and in the periphery, we found that romance lies beyond the familiar and ordinary, in a glamorous, festive space that exceeds the borders of everyday life into the realms of exciting and thrilling fantasy. However, the girls' love stories and group discussions revealed that the sublime romantic space of one group might be perceived as mundane for another, when girls from the periphery described the promenade in Tel Aviv as a glamorous romantic place, while girls who live in the center, near Tel Aviv, described their love stories as taking place in New York, London, or Paris. For instance, one girl from the center chose to name her love story "It all began in Paris," and ended it with this well-known scenario, portrayed in many movies and TV shows: "Mike invited Ashley on a date near the Eiffel Tower. (...) He got closer to her and they kissed in the middle of the street in the pouring rain."

CONCLUSION

Our study shows that the media is a key agent from which children learn what love is through processes of identification and adoption of figures of speech, beliefs and behaviors, alongside their ability to consume romantic representations in a critical, selective and conscious way. Thus, when creating the next children's movie, book or TV show one may want to consider designing alternative plots that can offer the young target audience new role models who dare to break the gender stereotypes and encourage various interpretations. ■

NOTE

¹ This article is based on a Ph.D. dissertation entitled: "What's Love Got to Do with It: The Role Media Play in the Construction of the Romantic Love Concept among Girls from the Periphery and Center of Israel", supervised by Professor Dafna Lemish, Israel: Tel Aviv University, 2013.

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