

## **Portrayal of Types of Romantic Love Depicted in Movies by Race: A Content Analysis**

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study, guided by the theory of social learning, is to examine whether race influences the portrayal of love by comparing healthy and unhealthy dynamics in romantic movies featuring Black and White main characters. Past research indicates that Black women are portrayed in the media through limiting stereotypes, which may influence perceptions of intimacy and partner treatment (e.g., Ward et al., 2023). Gender stereotypes of African American women in the media may increase acceptance of intimate partner violence against Black women and lower sympathy for them as victims, creating an environment where mistreatment and abuse are normalized (Moss et al., 2022). This study contributes to the literature by examining how race shapes the representation of main character traits and the types of romantic relationships depicted in films. The purpose of this study is to examine whether Black romance films depict more unhealthy relationship dynamics and lower overall relationship health in comparison to White romance films, predicting that Black couples would be portrayed as less healthy overall. A pilot study of 27 African American undergraduate students at Clark Atlanta University identified 33 popular romance films, from which six plot-comparable films (two children's, two coming-of-age, and two adult) were selected for analysis. Using a structured checklist, films were coded for the race of the lead couple, age category, unhealthy dynamics (e.g., infidelity, manipulation, intimate partner violence), healthy dynamics (e.g., commitment, trust, communication), and key character traits. Relationship quality was evaluated by comparing the presence of healthy and unhealthy characteristics across films. A chi-square analysis revealed no significant racial differences in individual healthy or unhealthy dynamics; however, White-led romances demonstrated significantly higher overall scores. These findings suggest racial differences in the overall portrayal of romantic quality in film. Future research should examine interracial relationships and additional racial groups, as well as explore how media portrayals of romance influence audience expectations and relationship norms.

*Keywords:* Media representation, stereotypes, relationship quality

### **Portrayal of Types of Romantic Love Depicted in Movies by Race**

Racial differences in the portrayal of romantic relationships in film are understudied. Hefner and Kretz (2021), Pezdolt et al. (2022), and Ward et al. (2023) suggest that media representations vary across racial groups, potentially reinforcing distinct relational norms and stereotypes. Guided by Social Learning Theory, which posits that individuals learn behaviors by observing others (Kretchmar, 2024). In the context of media exposure, this theory suggests that viewers may adopt behaviors and expectations based on on-screen portrayals, including those related to romantic relationships. Media representations often reinforce racial and gender stereotypes, shaping audience perceptions of relationship norms and expectations (Hefner & Kretz, 2021; Pezdolt et al., 2022; Ward et al., 2023). Additionally, endorsement of such stereotypes has been linked to greater tolerance of mistreatment or intimate partner violence, as audiences may perceive certain behaviors as deserved based on how characters are portrayed (Moss et al., 2022). Although prior research has examined media effects on attitudes and behavior, limited research has been done directly comparing the portrayal of romantic dynamics in Black and White romance films. This study aims to address this gap by examining racial differences in healthy and unhealthy relationship dynamics in romance films, as well as the behavioral characteristics of the romantic leads.

### **Literature Review**

The following review will investigate how romance films have often shaped cultural understanding of what love should look like. In many of these films, ideals of passion, sacrifice, and ultimate commitment are major themes that are deemed to be necessary for successful relationships. Yet, beneath these narratives lie a multitude of unhealthy dynamics that can contribute to what is called "struggle" or toxic love by many who frequent these movies. Within these films are portrayals of infidelity, emotional and physical abuse, or just endurance of mistreatment for the sake of love. Researchers in media and relationship studies argue that repeated exposure to patterns such as these can reflect, influence, and reinforce societal beliefs, in turn, leading to a cultural acceptance of problematic behaviors. By analyzing how romance films present these themes, specifically according to the race of the lead couple, it can be better understood the ways in which the type of romance shown varies across different cultural contexts. These portrayals may differ depending on the racial identity of the leading couple, which can influence the prevalence of themes such as endurance, sacrifice, unhealthy relational dynamics, and idealized love.

### **Types of Romance Films by Race**

Romance media often emphasize attributes and dynamics in romantic partners and relationships. For example, an analysis of 204 Hallmark movie posters and titles found that these films frequently highlight partners who can provide physical protection, European beauty standards, and demonstrate investment in romantic relationships (Dyer & Fisher, 2025). Similarly, Pezdolt et al. (2022) conducted a content analysis of 41 teen romance drama films between 1961 and 2019 and found that frequent viewers of romance films are more likely to hold idealistic romantic beliefs. Their research also indicated that these films reinforce double sexual standards and traditional gender roles, often portraying men as the primary initiators and declarers of idealized romantic sentiments. Supporting this, Hefner and Kretz (2021) found that

exposure to Disney princess films led many participants to perceive men as the dominant partners in romantic relationships while reinforcing female gender stereotypes.

In addition to gendered stereotypes, race also shapes the depiction of romantic narratives. African American women are frequently represented through three stereotypes originating from the U.S. Antebellum period; the Strong Black Woman, the hypersexual Jezebel, or the aggressive Sapphire (Ward et al., 2023). Ward et al. (2023) demonstrated that these stereotypes are reinforced through media exposure in two experiments: one with 204 African American participants and another with 438 African American and White participants. In the first study, support for the Sapphire stereotype was particularly pronounced among Black men, while in the second study, participants perceived women depicted as Sapphires to be less feminine, and White women viewed Black women as less warm and friendly.

Similar to that of Ward et al. (2023), Coleman et al. (2020) found that Black women surveyed ( $n = 113$ ) reported low endorsement of the realism of television portrayals; however, higher television consumption may increase perceived realism, the belief that media portrayals reflect real life. These racialized portrayals contrast sharply with depictions of White women, who are often represented as the “damsel in distress,” embodying hyper-femininity and idealized romantic traits. Such differences suggest that the race of the lead characters influences narrative themes, including endurance, relational struggle, and unhealthy dynamics, and may shape unrealistic expectations regarding partner behavior and relationship norms. Collectively, this body of research indicates that the type of romance depicted in media is shaped by character roles, gender expectations, and narrative conventions, which vary across cultural and racial contexts. Understanding these portrayals provides a foundation for analyzing how race can bias the depiction of romantic relationship dynamics in film and television.

### **Types of Relationship Dynamics Showcased**

A key concern in studying romance media is its normalization of unhealthy relationship patterns, such as intimate partner violence (IPV), infidelity, and codependence. Moss et al. (2022) found that exposure to media supporting gender stereotypes about African Americans encouraged acceptance of IPV and reduced sympathy for Black women who were victims. Comparably, many romance films emphasize relationships over individual autonomy, promoting codependent dynamics. An analysis of Topic Model Network (ANTMN) examined 188 romance comedy movie scripts between 1980 and 2019, and observed that White-centered films typically highlight mutual fulfillment and individuality, whereas Black-centered films often focus on relational hardship or unhealthy dynamics rather than character development outside the romance (Moore & Ophir, 2022).

Beyond instances of violence within a romantic relationship, negative portrayals of a relationship may unknowingly contribute to the concept of what race or culture deserves a happy ending or one marked by hardship. Rice et al. (2023) found that racial discrimination acts as a stressor in Black romantic relationships, leading to fewer positive interactions, more conflict, and compromised relational functioning. In response to systemic stressors such as racial discrimination, certain coping strategies can improve relationship outcomes. Williams and Baptiste (2023) found that Black heterosexual married couples who reported higher levels of self-compassion and open communication, particularly among women, experienced fewer negative interactions and greater overall relationship health. Open communication, a factor linked to healthier relationships, is often underrepresented in Black-centered romance films, which may contribute to the portrayal of increased relational conflict. Similarly, repeated

exposure to struggle-focused narratives in Black romance films may influence audience expectations, making it more difficult for young viewers to envision relationships that are healthy and free from persistent conflict (Dunn, 2022). In contrast, White-centered romance films often emphasize mutual fulfillment, open dialogue, and idealized resolutions, further highlighting how media portrayals can shape perceptions of relational norms across racial contexts.

After interviewing 30 cisgender, heterosexual women at an unnamed Historically Black College or University (HBCU), participants typically navigated their heterosexual aspirations by maintaining high standards for romantic partners while also managing societal and cultural pressures (Dunn, 2022). These pressures may be influenced by repeated exposure to struggles depicted in Black romance films. This perspective is contrasted with the findings of Dyer and Fisher, which did not consider the role of cultural or societal stressors. Dunn's findings are in alignment with the broader pattern observed in media: Black-led romance films frequently portray hardship-based relationships, whereas White-led romances often depict idealized, conflict-minimized partnerships. Frequent exposure to hardship-focused romantic narratives may lead young viewers to anticipate conflict and dysfunction in their own relationships, limiting their perception of healthy romance. Collectively, these studies highlighted stereotype reinforcement, cultural stressors, and narrative framing as factors that influence how romance is portrayed in the media. Understanding these factors allows researchers to critically examine how race depicts romantic dynamics, informing the current study's investigation into the relationship between the race of lead characters and the portrayal of healthy and unhealthy relationship patterns in film and television.

### **Romantic Portrayal Influence on Relationship Dynamics**

Watching romantic comedy films often leads viewers to compare their own love lives to what they see, affecting how they perceive their relationship quality. Kretz and Hefner (2024) found that after conducting a between-subjects, posttest design survey with 319 participants, when shown ideal conditions, participants reported feeling hopeful and grateful about their romantic conditions when seeing couples in turmoil. While this study specifically relates to perception, it further supports the idea that film content is constructed based on specific romantic ideals. For instance, many popular Black romance movies often depict internal conflict, such as what is seen in Gina Prince-Bythewood's *Love and Basketball*, where themes of mistreatment and internal conflict are present. In contrast, White romance films often emphasize external obstacles that characters overcome in the long run, as depicted in Nick Cassavetes' 2004 film *The Notebook*, which had external conflict, with Allie's parents not supporting her relationship with Noah. These examples illustrate how the type of romance differs by the race of the lead couple and shape viewer expectations of their own romantic experiences.

Although much research has been done on the impact of exposure to romantic media, race has not been a dynamic factor in the types of romance films that are being made and the type of romance being displayed on screen. Both factors are crucial to the ways one can perceive their own romantic relationships. This study is unique because it analyzes romance films focused on African Americans. This study will also enrich the knowledge currently known on the impact of the race of a romance movie's lead couple on the type of romance depicted. Previous research has been examined by predominantly focusing on White-centered films, both in terms of viewership and analysis. Thus, this study fills in a gap by analyzing the content of black romance movies, which may explain racial expectations and racially gendered roles.

## **Purpose of the Study**

Prior research demonstrates that there is a correlation between the portrayal of romantic relationship dynamics and race in media. Similarly, the Social Learning Theory indicates an association between the two variables.

## ***Research Questions and Hypotheses***

Media representations play an essential role in forming perceptions of romantic relationships. This study will investigate if romance films featuring Black lead couples will display more unhealthy romantic dynamics than films featuring White lead couples, and if White couples represented are displaying healthier relational characteristics overall. This study seeks to examine and answer the following questions: Do Black romance films tend to display more unhealthy romantic dynamics than White Romance films, and are White couples in these romance films typically displayed as healthier than Black couples? It was hypothesized that Black romance films would display more unhealthy dynamics, and Black couples would be less healthy than White couples overall.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

A pilot study was administered to 27 Black undergraduate students at Clark Atlanta University, an HBCU in Atlanta, Georgia, utilizing Mentimeter's word cloud function. Participants responded to the following prompts in Mentimeter: "What romance films come to mind? What Black romance films come to mind? What White romance films come to mind?" In response to the questions, 33 romance films were identified. Categorized by the race of the lead male and female characters, 14 films were identified as Black, 15 as White, and 4 as either interracial, mixed-race, or neither Black nor White.

### **Measures**

To analyze the chosen films, a structured checklist was developed to evaluate each selected film. On the static checklist, the name, duration, and genre of the film were noted, as well as the release year and box office revenue. The action portion of the checklist consisted of four sections:

1. **Demographic Characteristics.** The race of the lead couple, and the age category of the film (ex., Children's, coming-of-age, adult) were documented.
2. **Unhealthy romantic dynamics.** Some of the following characteristics were coded: infidelity (ex. Occurs when one or both partners in the relationship engage in romantic/sexual involvement with an individual outside of the relationship), emotional abuse, unequal sacrifice (ex. Occurs when one partner is giving more effort or resources to the relationship without reciprocity from their partner), jealousy/possessiveness, manipulation, intimate partner violence (IPV), constant conflict, and sexual coercion (ex. Occurs whenever there is any coercion, manipulation, or persistence around sexual activity without clear consent).
3. **Healthy Romantic Characteristics.** The following characteristics were assessed: commitment, emotional vulnerability (ex. Both partners are willing to express and communicate their feelings with one another in a healthy, honest way), mutual respect/equality, trust/loyalty, open/healthy communication, healthy affection/intimacy, stability (ex. Both partners appear content and secure within the relationship), and supportiveness.

- 4. Character Information.** Leading male and female characteristics, such as their name, employment status, age, and observed personality traits, were documented.

An 'other' category was present for both the unhealthy and healthy portions, leaving room for the possibility of other potential traits not present in the checklist to be included and considered. At the very bottom of the checklist was a section titled 'other notes,' which allowed for any remaining notes or analyses to be written regarding the characters' individuality, romance, and any other external or internal factors that could impact the relationships.

### Procedure

A list of potential films to watch was determined using a pilot session involving 27 students, who identified 33 romance films. Before evaluation, each film's current US box office results were considered before comparing each film in the Black category to those in the White category based on plot similarity. Six films ( $n = 6$ ) were narrowed down as most similar in plot before being categorized into three groups: children's, coming-of-age/young adult, and adult. In the children's category, Disney princess films, *Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled*, were compared. In the coming-of-age category, *Love Don't Cost a Thing* and *10 Things I Hate About You* were compared. Finally, in the adult category, the dynamics present in *Love Jones* and *La La Land* were compared.

### Results

For each film analyzed ( $n = 6$ ), individual notes were taken regarding the presence of each characteristic previously mentioned. If a characteristic on the checklist was present, two points would be provided. If a characteristic was only partially present, it would be given one point, and if not displayed at all, zero points would be provided to that category. This was done for both categories, which contributed to the couple's relationship score. The relationship score was calculated by subtracting the sum of a film's unhealthy romantic dynamics from the sum of its healthy romantic dynamics (ex., Disney film *Princess and the Frog* had 2 unhealthy romantic characteristics present, subtracted from the 15 healthy romantic characteristics, the couple received an overall score of 13). Results from this study were conducted using a series of Chi-Square Analysis tests on SPSS 25.0. On the first test, the relationship scores of all the Black romance films were added and compared to the summation of the overall relationship scores of the White films. In conducting this test, it was found that the relationship between race and relationship score was marginally significant,  $\chi^2(1, N = 6) = 3.69, p = .055$ . The second test, examining the relationship between race and unhealthy relationship dynamics, found the relationship to be insignificant,  $\chi^2(1, N = 6) = 3.27, p = .071$ . The third and final test, examining race and healthy relationship dynamics, found the relationship between the two variables to also be insignificant,  $\chi^2(1, N = 6) = 0.84, p = .359$ . Based on the Chi-Square analysis, despite being marginal, the only relationship found to be somewhat significant occurred between race and relationship score.

### Discussion

The hypotheses of the study were partially supported. There was no statistically significant difference found between race and unhealthy romantic dynamics, nor between race and healthy romantic dynamics. However, a marginal significance was found between race and relationship score, with White romance films having higher relationship scores in all three age categories. The results of this study could be due to several limiting factors. Due to having a small sample size, there may not have been enough data to calculate significance between

unhealthy and healthy dynamics. Additionally, there is overlap between the categories. Each film of its respective category portrayed both unhealthy and healthy dynamics. There was also not a drastic difference between the number of characteristics portrayed between the two categories, overall affecting the relationship score, and therefore its significance.

One notable qualitative difference between the two categories was the nature of the female characters, specifically in the children's category. In *Princess and the Frog*, Tiana's personality aligns with the strong black woman schema proposed in Ward et al.'s (2023) study, as she displays the hyper independence and resilience often associated with the archetype. This depiction is drastically different from that of Rapunzel, who had an extreme dependence on Flynn's help, aligning with the damsel in distress portrayal. Flynn's protection of Rapunzel on their journey can be loosely supported by the results of Dyer and Fisher's (2025) study. Of the coming-of-age category, the consistent conflict between Allen and Paris in *Love Don't Cost a Thing* as a result of societal pressure in comparison to the relationship of Patrick and Kat in *10 Things I Hate About You* can best be supported by the research of Dunn (2022), who found that Black women maintained high standards for romantic partners in the midst of navigating societal and cultural pressures. Finally, in the adult category, the internal conflict between Nina and Darius in *Love Jones*, in comparison to Mia and Sebastian in *La La Land*, can be supported by the findings of Williams and Baptist (2023). In their study, the researchers found that open communication contributes to overall relationship health. The lack of communication in *Love Jones*, in comparison to *La La Land*, can explain the difference in relationship scores between the two films. Nina's characteristics of being emotionally guarded and strong are also supported by Ward et al.'s (2023) study.

There were a few limitations of the study. Due to time constraints, a small sample size of six films was compared, which may have significance on the results. Also, only two racial categories were examined, leaving differences in romantic portrayal between other racial or ethnic groups to be unobserved. Considering the age of the films, with all of them not occurring within the present decade, cultural relevance is also a limitation of the study. Finally, subjectivity, with romantic and personal characteristics left up to interpretation, was also a limitation of the current study. Implications of the results for future studies can expand upon this study include further exploration of more films, examining this concept among different racial groups throughout decades, and including the perceptions of viewers of romance films to see how these films impact their expectations through the use of surveys and focus groups.

This research highlights the importance of exploring the differences in romantic portrayals between racial groups, as they can impact audience perceptions of what romantic love should look like. As a result, it is imperative that filmmakers take social responsibility in the ways they depict characters and romance depending on race. With the limitations of the study, a platform has been provided for future research as well as information that can be used to initiate positive change for families and individuals who may base their behaviors on what they observe in the media.

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