

# Romantic comedies affect beliefs about relationships less strongly than expected

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Romantic-comedy films are not a major source for developing unrealistic expectations about relationships among young adults, finds a new study to be published online this week in the National Communication Association's journal *Communication Monographs*.

A survey of 335 undergraduate students in the Midwest of the USA found no significant relationship between reporting watching romantic comedies often and belief in the ideals "love conquers all," "one and only" love (soul mate) and "love at first sight."

"These findings discredit the popular assumption that exposure to romantic comedies is a major source leading to unrealistic relational expectations among young people," said the study's principal investigator, Veronica Hefner, Ph.D., assistant professor of [communication studies](#) at Chapman University, Orange, Calif.

Hefner conducted the online questionnaire survey at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign with Barbara J. Wilson, Ph.D., the university's executive vice provost for faculty and academic affairs. The authors did find, however, that those viewers of romantic comedies who reported watching with the motivation to learn about relationships were slightly more likely to endorse romantic ideals overall and, in particular, the belief in "idealization of partner." Idealizing one's partner includes believing that the partner should be flawless or will be completely accepting, loving, and understanding, according to Hefner.

Compared with exposure to romantic comedies, a stronger influence on viewers' beliefs about relationships was the reason that young people watch these popular movies, Hefner said.

"College students who reported watching romantic comedies to learn about love and relationships were more likely to endorse idealistic romantic beliefs than those who watch for other reasons," she said.

"What really matters is not what you watch, but why you watch."

Again, these students were more likely to believe in idealizing their partners than in romantic beliefs such as love at first sight, but Hefner pointed out that this idealization could have a positive social influence. Some studies have shown that viewing one's partner as wonderful and perfect was beneficial for a romantic relationship and was linked to higher levels of satisfaction in the relationship.

Nearly half of the survey respondents reported they were currently in a relationship. Students ranged in age from 18 to 26 years. Of the 335 respondents, 71 percent were female and 29 percent were male.

The researchers found no differences in responses about romantic beliefs between men and women who responded to the survey. The lack of a sex difference in the findings disputes another popular belief, Hefner said—"that women are the ones who are most idealistic and most influenced by romantic comedies."

In fact, the researchers found that male characters in popular romantic comedies express romantic ideals more often than women do. In this separate study, published in the same article, they performed a content analysis of the 52 top-grossing [romantic comedy](#) films between 1998 and 2008, including 2008's "27 Dresses" and the top-grossing "rom-com" of that period, "My Big Fat Greek Wedding." Of the 52 movies analyzed, 98 percent reportedly featured a romantic ideal expression, whereas 75

percent of the films featured a romantic ideal takeaway message. Ideal expressions were any statements related to one of the four ideals. Takeaway messages were the overall impressions of the films.

"Of the ideal statements expressed in these films, the most common were related to soul mates," Hefner said, "whereas the most common takeaway ideal theme was the notion that love conquers all."

Despite this prevalence of idealism, however, the most commonly expressed statements in these movies overall were actually realistic in nature. These practical expressions or challenges to the ideals, such as "relationships take hard work," were twice as common in these films as were the idealistic comments.

Still, Hefner said, "the bottom line is that the interactions and statements found in these films are not idealistic at all. However, the larger themes of the movies are idealistic. It seems that the couples go through realistic challenges and difficult obstacles, but resolve their differences with ideal conclusions."

**More information:** Hefner, V. and Wilson, B. From Love at First Sight to Soul Mate: The Influence of Romantic Ideals in Popular Films on Young People's Beliefs About Relationships, *Communication Monographs* . [DOI: 10.1080/03637751.2013.776697](https://doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2013.776697)

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