
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Romance-Themed Novels: Influenced on Relationship Satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

This paper was conducted to explore romance-themed novels that influence relationship satisfaction. It further described the perception of the reasons given by participants for reading romance-themed novels, the lived experiences of the participants that made them engage in reading romance-themed novels, and the impacts of reading the romance-themed novels on the relationship satisfaction of the participants. This study utilized the qualitative research method. This study's sixteen (16) participants were selected through a case study method. The researcher's semi-structured interview guide was used in data gathering through interviews. The thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke was used to analyze the qualitative data. Codes, categories, and common themes were identified from the transcript of in-depth interviews. Ten (10) emergent themes were established from the participants' responses that were classified under three (3) overarching themes that provided answers to the sub-problems. The emergent themes were extracted from the significant statements of the key participants. For the reasons given by participants for reading romance-themed novels, the overarching theme, *Reasons of the Informants in Reading Romance-themed Novels*, has five (5) emergent themes that were classified as *Align Interest, Entertainment, Social Influence, Educational, and Therapeutic*. For the participants' lived experiences that made them engage in reading romance-themed novels, the overarching theme, *Lived Experiences in Engaging Reading Romance-themed Novels*, has two (2) emergent themes classified as *On-time availability and Baseline for real-world situations*. For reading romance-themed novels on the relationship satisfaction of the participants, the overarching theme is *the Impacts of Participants' Relationship Satisfaction*; two (2) emergent themes were created, namely *Establishing Strong Emotional Bonds and Enlightened Disposition*. The findings and recommendations derived from the study were used to disseminate the positive impact of reading romance-themed novels on students' relationship satisfaction.

KEYWORDS

Romance-Themed Novels, Relationship Satisfaction, Female, College Students, Qualitative Study, Thematic Analysis, Phenomenological Design

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1. Introduction

Novels are fiction works that are written in a narrative style. It tells a story that the readers adore reading. Over time, the novel changed and currently contains a variety of genres. Novels can be classified under the following genres: classic, chick lit, mystery/thriller, horror, science fiction, fantasy, young adult, and romance.

According to Romance Writers of America (2019), romance-themed books sell the most of all these genres for \$1.08 billion annually, with millennial readers making up the second-largest customer group. Around 29 million people comprise the core audience or regular readers of romance novels (Peterson, 2019), while the number of extended readers who occasionally choose or read this genre is substantially higher. However, the majority of readers in this genre are women. According to survey results from Romance Writers of America, 84% of the genre readership were women.

The *awit* and *corrido* are the traditional forms of romance in the Philippines. Until the first quarter of the 20th century, when the novel and the short story were created, the enormous popularity of these stories persisted unabatedly. The allure of the new connection has captivated the young Filipino woman who is in love. Because of the intensity of their love, these women submit to their sweethearts' desires (Nolasco, 1994). This is remarkably accurate in the story.

According to Chirino and Loarca's tales of their expedition to the Philippines, the epic's depiction of love relationships used research from Philippine literary works that revealed how women in pre-colonial periods obeyed their partners out of respect. Women are also respected by their partners. The prehispanic Filipina was her husband's queen (Singson, 1994).

Researchers have noticed that consumers enjoy reading romance novels as a diversion whenever they have the time. It is a relationship education and entertainment medium that encourages open communication and strong emotional bonds between partners. This is how readers, especially women, want to know if romance novels are realistically representational of what they anticipate will happen in real life, particularly regarding relationship satisfaction with their partner.

This paper examines the influence of romance-themed novels on women's relationship satisfaction study. The researchers want to know how romance-themed novels can affect a couple's relationship. The underlying assumption of this study is that women's contentment with their romantic relationships may be influenced by the concepts and imagery found in romance-themed novels. This study aims to determine whether participants manage their relationships according to the romance novels they read and how they generally manage their relationships.

2. Theoretical Background

The following are the theories relevant to strengthen the study. The main theory of this study is the Cultivation Theory, which George Gerbner originally developed. The next theory is the Uses and Gratification Theory by Jay G. Blumler and Elihu Katz. The third theory that will support the study is the theory of Norman Holland called Psychological Reader-Response.

George Gerbner was a Hungarian-born American journalist who researched television content and developed Cultivation Theory. Cultivation Theory is one of the more thoroughly examined and intricately detailed theories of the consequences of mass communication. The theory was formulated in 1969 during Gerbner's Cultural Indicators Project (Potter, 1993). He and his associates advocated it at the Annenberg School for Communication. This focuses on the potential impact of romance novels' messages on readers' conceptions of love. It depends on whether the medium is used and whether relationship beliefs operate as mediators to explain any potential relationship between them. The research's main area of interest is how people's relationship expectations and beliefs affect their perceptions of their romantic lives. This theory explains how romance-themed novel readers adopt certain relationship beliefs, ideals, and expectations.

According to Signorelli and Morgan (1990), the cultivation theory proposes that "heavy television viewers will be more likely to perceive the real world in ways that reflect the most stable and recurrent patterns of portrayals in the television world." In other words, the idea contends that among frequent viewers, the main themes of television are regarded as representations of reality. This idea can explain the results of this study because it claims that female readers of romance novels will start to see the world as their favorite characters do. Achieving such an ideal is seen in these romance books as a sign of personal success for the individual. Furthermore, they argue that a loving, romantic, secure, and sexually gratifying relationship is vital to a successful partnership. This poses numerous issues because many of the prevalent themes in romance books are unrealistically idealistic.

Only through constant, repeated exposures to the medium, consistent, and long-term exposure, can such concept cultivation take place. People's perceptions of the world may be altered due to repeated exposure to these novels' prevalent themes and ideologies, leading them to believe that the symbolic world depicted is a reasonable and accurate representation of reality. This research shows that there may be a connection between people's views and opinions about relationships and their reading of romance novels. Readers cultivate the dominant relationship beliefs and ideals through constant exposure to the materials.

Using Gerber and Gross's Cultivation Theory, Holmes believes that popular media helps to cultivate relationship beliefs or serves to confirm social stereotypes. Those who embrace these ideals and attitudes may struggle to establish and sustain healthy relationships because of how the media portrays ideal "happy" relationships. The current study investigates this by examining the

association between readers' preferences for romance-themed novels and their attitudes toward romantic relationships. Although the media is the same, people use it for various purposes.

One theory that supports this study is the Uses and Gratification Theory. According to Elihu Katz and his partners Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch (1973), the Uses and Gratification theory discusses the effects of the media on people. It discusses how people utilize the media to meet their needs and feel satisfied when they are met. In other terms, the idea focuses more on what people of media do with them than what media do to people. As a result, it encompasses all human emotions, pleasures, and moods. For example, sometimes people use media to unwind, escape from reality, and reduce tension and stress.

The psychological communication perspective, known as Uses and Gratification, contends that people actively seek out media that they believe will meet particular needs (Katz et al., 1973; Rubin, 2009). According to this theory, people who use media independently choose the media they use and the kind of media they consume in order to satisfy their needs as fully as possible (Alajmi et al., 2016).

Moreover, finally, the theory to support our study is Psychological Reader-Report by Norman Holland. Norman Holland (1980) states that reading romance novels affects readers psychologically. He states, "All of us, as we read, use the literary work to symbolize and finally to replicate ourselves. We work out through the text our characteristics, patterns of desire and adaptation. We interact with the work, making it part of our psychic economy and making ourselves part of the literary work – as we interpret it. For, always, this principle prevails: identity recreates itself.

Norman Holland agrees that readers' motivations significantly impact what they read, notwithstanding his assertion that an objective text exists, at least in his early work. Because he thinks reading entails a transaction between the reader and a genuine text, he refers to his approach as transactive analysis. Instead of focusing on the text, Holland examines what readers' interpretations tell about them. As a result, he is sometimes called a subjective reader-response critic due to his examination of the readers' subjective experiences.

Holland believes that we respond psychologically to literary works and everyday life situations. When people read, the same circumstances that make their defenses appear in real-world interactions will do the same. For example, suppose they quickly dislike new acquaintances who remind them of their alcoholic father. In that case, they will likely dislike any fictional character who reminds them of him.

Both Holland and Tompkin believe that romance novels affect readers psychologically. One way it affects the readers is by forming one's identity. The Psychological Reader-Response Theory (1980) asserts that reading is a culture unto itself. It is the result of the interaction between the reader and the text, both of which have intrinsic qualities and traits that, when combined, result in a singular and exceptional conclusion. Women may be drawn to romance novels because they allow them to confront essential messages and meanings. Norman Holland (1980) presents the psychological effect of romance novels on readers.

Holland refers to the pattern of our coping mechanisms and psychological issues as our identity theme. According to him, we constantly project our identification themes onto the situations we see daily, which causes us to view the outside world through the prism of our past psychological experiences.

As a result, the text, which already has solid ideological implications, may affect the reader's beliefs and actions. Sarah Benjamin (1999), "The reader and the text unite to be accountable for meaning construction: as a result, certain aspects of the textual objects the meanings that are absorbed."

Romance novels' ability to support and validate female readers impacts their beliefs and actions. Romance novels advise the types of relationships that should take precedence in a woman's life. These novels significantly influence how certain assumptions and viewpoints regarding relationships are presented. The formulaic writing style of romance novels encourages the repeated socialization of romance. Helen Mae Sterk (1986), a great scholar in romance literature, introduced nine basic steps in the plotline of romance novels.

The first step is the Cute Meeting. This is the point at which the hero and heroines first meet. Many novels stress the idea of love at first sight, and women may drive on this occurrence and believe it is usual that it may happen to them. A soulmate is introduced in the first step.

The idea of soulmates is one of the romantic ideals of a love story, and the idea of destiny is also created. As a result, individuals who believe in soulmates and destiny spend their lives searching for the "right one." Adopting such a belief may end the relationship as relational satisfaction is low.

Second is the Complication step. It focuses on the two individuals facing a dilemma in their relationship. This step teaches people that disagreement is destructive in a relationship. The complication is depicted as unfavorable, but in reality, it is essential and healthy. Relational psychologists realized that arguments and complications are natural and normal for couples and may also be healthy in a relationship as they can help couples practice compromise and communication.

Those who have yet to experience the second step may adopt the pessimistic view about the ability of couples to compromise or change their relationship. With this, partners cannot change their mindset. Women who encounter failure on this step start to believe that people will not change over time, as well as their partners. These women are drawn to romance novels because their fictional couple can permanently resolve the problems in their relationship.

In this step, the power play continues, wherein the hero has a stronghold over the heroine. There has been a significant emphasis on traditional sex stereotypes in romance novels. Christian Smith (1990) conducted a study on the characteristics of the female and male leads in romance novels and found that heroines are intelligent, funny, pretty, popular, and resourceful. Male leads are handsome, humorous, caring, strong, courageous, protective, the initiator, rich, and have good social status.

These characteristics influence the female readers' desire for their male partners. These results show that female adolescents desire the traditional female lifestyle but choose to survive in this egalitarian world by having their desired degree and career.

The third step is Circumstantial Proximity. In this step, women try to win their independence. Not only does this step reinforce the idea of traditional sex stereotypes by dominating the heroine by the hero, but it also shows the idea of soulmates. A woman who tries to escape from the dominating presence of the hero but still keeps on falling in love.

In addition to reinforcing ideals, it indicates that a couple should spend considerable time together to sustain a healthy and successful relationship. The romantic relationship is portrayed as necessary, and couples spend little time together; misunderstandings will arise and might threaten the existence of the relationship.

Fourth, the Escalation of Attraction. This is the step wherein a relationship is established. Sterk (1986) states, "The woman feels anger, resentment, and yet, at the same time, undeniable pangs of love towards this man. He feels aroused and intrigued, stimulated by her resistance to his authority at work and his seductive charms at play. The strong emotions both feel during their clashing of will feeds their attraction to each other". This statement brings the idea that more bickering and fighting within a relationship shows how passionate their relationship is. As fighting deepens their relationship, it also starts to heat up.

At this stage, the love of a woman can change a man's mindset. Female readers love to read this part as it empowers them. On the other hand, heroines changed their love to lust. It is at this stage that sexual perfectionism becomes widespread.

Congruence will be the fifth step. This is the stage wherein couples experience contentment with each other. It further supports the belief that disagreement is destructive. Female readers of romance novels presented the idea that the love of a man completes/fulfills. Therefore, they may believe romantic love is necessary for a happy and content life. In this way, romance novels teach women how to turn a lonely, insecure, self-conscious life into one full of love, confidence, and contentment. In this stage, trust is developed.

The sixth step is Betrayal. Since trust is developed, it will be shattered at this stage by any form of betrayal. During this stage, couples will discover events that may destroy their relationship. With the betrayal happening, separation will take into motion. This is also the stage wherein heroines will believe that man cannot change at all. The woman backed off as she was ashamed of being a fool by her partner. Again, traditional sex roles are depicted as still showing a dominating man and a woman losing.

The seventh step is the Crisis. This is the stage where fate plays a hand in keeping the couples together. At this stage, the man starts to realize the heroine's importance. The Crisis forces them to confront each other and communicate to save their unfinished love story.

The eighth will be the Union. This is the happy ending of the story wherein marriage is successfully done.

Ninth, the Coda. This is the final stage wherein the misunderstanding happens to verify the love of each other. Since this is a romance novel, they will discover their differences, and the mindset of love conquers all.

With these nine basic steps, the positive influences were discussed as the negative influence of reading romance novels on women's relational satisfaction. Learning by exposure and observation is essential, as learning by trial and error is challenging in this modern

society. That is why romance novels exist for women, as this is a haven for them to test the possibilities and outcomes of specific actions and situations.

According to Janice Radway's analysis (1991), romance books can provide readers with the feeling of being cared for and receiving the same level of attention they give to others, which is what women desire in a relationship. She states, "Reading romance novels provides vicarious emotional nurturance by prompting identification between the reader and a fictional heroine whose identity as a woman is consistently confirmed by the romantic and sexual attentions of an ideal male. When she successfully imagines herself in the heroine's position, the typical romance reader can relax momentarily and permit herself to wallow in the rapture of being the center of a powerful and vital individual's attention. This attention provides her with the sensations evoked by emotional nurturance (Radway, 1991).

In her study, she finds that women want to feel what it is like to be in a passionate love relationship in which the man loves a woman. By reading romance novels, women may achieve the feelings they miss and want to feel again or the feelings they never had and might happen for the first time. Radway concludes that women want in a relationship where communication is more critical than lovemaking. "Women read to feel as if they are part of a mutual relationship in which man and woman feel equally strongly about one another.", said Helen Mae Sterk (1986). This statement shows that women value mutual love. These women read romance novels because there is something in the content of the novels that touches on their inner selves concerning their beliefs, standards, and values. As a result, their beliefs and life decisions are according to their desire for the ideal romance and relationship.

Some eminent psychologists believed romantic fiction could significantly affect women's psyche, occasionally leading to unhealthy relationships. Women have high expectations of their partners due to fairy tale romances. Some women envision them as their ideal prince charming. However, most women are lost in a fantasy world that does not exist in reality. According to Susan Q (2007), women use these novels to escape and feel bad for not having the ideal love life. They ignore that reality may differ and that they cannot 'romanticize' everything.

People have ideas for relationships, and these ideals are just as significant as the actual connection, according to research by Sternberg and Barnes (1985) on 24 undergraduate and graduate couples. The researchers also discovered that these values influence how we create our love stories and how content we are with them. We compare our ideal stories to ones and feel good when we sense a match. Positive feelings are produced when a match is thought of, but negative emotions are produced when we realize that the match we were hoping for failed (Sternberg & Barnes, 1985).

Another study in intimate relationships has found that our society's expectations of marriage and partnership may be problematic because they may raise false hopes that, in turn, bring disillusionment. For instance, expecting that one's partner will instantly understand what one needs might lead to disappointment when this expectation is not met, which can result in relationship dissatisfaction (Ellis, 1962).

Moreover, romance novels promote the idea that love is great, but on the other hand, they also give us the idea that life is not worth living if it is never experienced. As it is a romance novel, love is the central component of the novel. The behavior or actions portrayed in the novel are based on love or lack of it, which helps explain the motives and emotions displayed by the story's characters. In these romance novels, love is pure, genuine, and vital for it to conquer all. Psychologist Deepti Makhija agrees, "Romance novels affect how you perceive relationships as there is no logical reasoning behind them. Women expect that 'He should love me, no matter what. The relationship must be perfect.' It could be more functional or pragmatic. Both partners need to take equal responsibility and make adjustments in the relationship." Women who read romance novels remembered feeling loved, falling in love, cared for, and valued.

A recent study found that reading too many romances could make it harder to find true love. Reading novels has the potential to impact how women view their romantic relationships. Women may have false expectations of their partners as a result of this. It is difficult for them to exist in the actual world while they are immersed in the world of fantasy. Women read novels as a form of escape, and they create an idea in their minds of what a man should do, only to be disappointed when they cannot have the same perfect connection as in the novels. As a result, they are more likely to be attracted to another man even if they are in a secure relationship. This is because women utilize their emotions to find a new love that meets their expectations rather than addressing the issues in their existing relationship and ending it.

Lynn Neal, an assistant religion professor specializing in Christian romance books, claims that it demonstrates how ideas regarding romance, gender, and sexuality have changed over time. Romance novels of the 1970s frequently featured strong and tyrannical men and feeble, obedient heroines. In recent years, relationships in these stories have shifted toward equality. In order to learn

more about how women participate in consumer culture as both consumers and producers, he also studied romance novels. Neal claims that there have been admonitions against romance novels since 1566. Women's literature, in particular, has long been viewed as a corrupting and perilous influence in the study of American culture (Neal, 2010).

Readers find out what can resonate with them in the text. This is considered the "recognition of the self," Once this is established, readers are open to adopting new learning and meanings. In this way, the text can influence readers' thoughts and actions. For example, women who read romance novels actively identify and explore relational conflicts and concerns, along with the heroes and heroines (Benjamin, 1999).

3. Objective of the Study

This study examined how romance novels affect the happiness of female college students at the University of Cebu-Main Campus during the 2022-2023 academic year. Specifically, it aimed to understand why college students read romance novels, their experiences with reading them, and how these novels impact their relationship satisfaction.

4. Methodology

This segment provides an overview of the research plan, the setting in which the research was conducted, the individuals involved in the study, the tools used for data collection, the steps taken to collect data, and the methods employed for data analysis.

4.1 Research Design

This is a qualitative study that used a phenomenological design. Researchers were also using a phenomenological approach that deals with the personal experiences of some female students about the effects of romance-themed novels on relationship satisfaction. The Phenomenological Approach was used to describe how people perceive a phenomenon. This research aimed to collect data that explains how people experience a phenomenon and how they feel about it. This model acknowledges that there is no single objective reality; instead, everyone has a unique perspective on things.

4.2 Research Environment

The research was conducted within the College of Arts and Sciences Department at the University of Cebu-Main Campus on Sanciangko St., Cebu City, Philippines. Established in 1964, this educational institution offers various academic programs from pre-school to college. Among the diverse courses available, the university offers programs in Engineering, Business and Accountancy Management, Education, Hospitality Management, and Arts and Sciences programs like AB-Psychology, among numerous others. Notably, the University of Cebu boasts a multi-campus presence both within and outside Cebu City. The University of Cebu-Main Campus has adopted a blended learning approach, combining traditional face-to-face classes with online distance learning components for the current academic year.

4.3 Research Participants

The study enlisted female students from first-year to fourth-year students in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Cebu - Main Campus. Specifically, four female students were selected from each academic year level, provided they were actively engaged in reading romance-themed novels and currently involved in a relationship, regardless of the gender composition of the said relationships (i.e., female-female or female-male).

4.4 Research Instrument

The research team employed custom-designed questionnaires, and the interview inquiries featured open-ended formats. Before implementation, the questions underwent a rigorous review process by the research advisor to ensure accuracy and appropriateness. The interview format, whether conducted face-to-face or through online platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, or Messenger calls, was contingent upon the prevailing blended learning modality at the University of Cebu - Main Campus.

4.5 Research Procedures

This section delves into the pivotal aspects of data collection and the subsequent analysis of the gathered information.

4.5.1 Data Collection

Before commencing the study, the researchers diligently sought permission from the Research Advisers and Mentors. During the data collection phase, the choice of interview medium—whether it be Google Meet, face-to-face interactions, or Messenger calls—was contingent upon the participants' availability, prioritizing accessibility, convenience, and time efficiency, particularly in light of the prevailing educational model of Blended Learning. Participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and exclusively serve research purposes. Additionally, they were encouraged to offer detailed explanations and insights to enhance data validity. Participants were made aware that interviews might be recorded, but their consent was paramount; if they declined,

their responses were meticulously transcribed during the interview. Upon the successful culmination of data collection, the researchers sincerely thanked the participants for their valuable contribution to the study.

4.5.2 Analysis of Data

Following data collection, the researchers employed Thematic Content Analysis, recognized for its proficiency in scrutinizing open-ended queries and generating reliable qualitative research (Ghazi & Ali, 2020). To facilitate analysis, the researchers translated and encoded vernacular responses into English. This analytical approach encompassed five sequential phases: (1) Transcription, wherein tape-recorded data was transcribed and reviewed for preliminary comprehension; (2) Checking and Editing, whereby data was segmented into smaller, semantically coherent units by identifying themes within each paragraph; (3) Analysis and Interpretation, involving the psychological interpretation of the themes derived in the previous step based on the researchers' insights; (4) Validation, ensuring data validity through multiple transcript reviews and peer evaluations (Karlsson, undated; Krippendorff, 1980; Sarantakos, 1998). Visual aids such as graphs and tables were employed for efficient data analysis and interpretation. Researchers meticulously reviewed the interview data to extract pivotal concepts essential to the study. Both audio recordings and meticulous notes were scrutinized to ensure a comprehensive grasp of the information. Consultations with research advisors played a crucial role in the careful and objective analysis and interpretation of the data.

5. Results and Discussion

This part encapsulates the outcomes from interviews with the selected participants, presenting their responses to pertinent inquiries. The collected data is subjected to a rigorous analysis employing the thematic analysis method developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), allowing for synthesizing essential information and comprehensively comprehending the study's findings.

In this qualitative study, a meticulous examination was conducted on the transcribed responses of the selected participants, with each participant's contributions being closely scrutinized for their overall coverage and relevance to the study. Notably, significant statements were meticulously extracted, documented, and encoded using Microsoft Word, with each statement being associated with its corresponding response and participant number to facilitate efficient tracking. A total of 144 significant statements emerged from the interviews and questionnaires, shedding light on the dynamics of relationship satisfaction among female students in the College of Arts and Sciences, spanning from first to fourth year, who read romance-themed novels while in a relationship. These 144 coded formulated meanings provide comprehensive insights into the participants' experiences.

This study employed a process of consolidating shared core meanings and recurring patterns, forming eighteen cluster themes. Subsequently, these cluster themes underwent further refinement and restructuring, giving rise to two or more distinct sub-themes, ultimately culminating in the creating of ten sub-themes. These ten sub-themes were amalgamated to generate emergent themes, totaling ten. These emergent themes collectively encapsulate the essence of the study's exploration into the influences of romance-themed novels on the relationship satisfaction of female students. The study's analytical framework draws upon the Cultivation Theory of George Gerbner, Blumler and Katz's Uses and Gratification Theory, and the Psychological Reader-Response Theory by Norman Holland to elucidate the influences and impacts underpinning the study's three sub-problems.

In this research, George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory serves as the primary theoretical framework, shedding light on how media profoundly influences audiences' attitudes and perspectives. Gerbner's work elucidates the impact of media outlets on shaping audience ideas and perspectives, mainly focusing on attitudes rather than behavior, underscoring the potential for a subtle yet significant influence on audience beliefs. Additionally, the study incorporates institutional process analysis, delving into the formulation and dissemination of media messages, and message system analysis, which explores the collective content of these messages, collectively contributing to the cultivation of individual attitudes and personalities based on media exposure. Moreover, Blumler and Katz's Uses and Gratification Theory highlights the active role of audiences as media users who seek to satisfy their specific needs. This theory emphasizes that audiences select media types to fulfill their unique requirements, aligning their media choices with their needs, thereby rendering each selection purpose-driven and goal-oriented.

This research incorporates George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory to illuminate how media shapes audience attitudes, focusing on attitudes rather than behavior. It also integrates Blumler and Katz's Uses and Gratification Theory, emphasizing the active role of audiences in selecting media that satisfies their distinct needs. Norman Holland's Psychological Reader-Response Theory also underscores that readers project their identity themes onto texts, unconsciously recreating the world within their minds through literature. Following a rigorous thematic analysis process by Braun and Clarke (2006), the study yielded eighteen cluster themes, which were refined into ten sub-themes and further categorized into nine major emergent themes, collectively organized into three overarching categories to provide critical context for addressing the study's sub-problems.

I. Reasons why female college students read romance-themes novels:

1. Align interest
2. Entertainment
3. Social Influence
4. Educational
5. Therapeutic

II. Experiences of college female students engaging them to read romance-themed novels:

1. On-time availability
2. Baseline for real-world situations

III. Impacts of romance-themed novels on Female College Students' relationship satisfaction:

1. Establishing a strong emotional bond
2. Enlightened Disposition

Themes were developed to describe the study's responses to the research questions. The three (3) primary themes are discussed in detail, along with the various emergent themes.

5.1 The reasons given by the participants for reading romance-themes novels

5.1.1 Align interest

This theme describes why female college students of the College of Arts and Sciences read romance-themed novels because it aligns with their interests and preferences.

Participant 1 was asked to explain why they read romance-themed novels during the one-on-one interview. She answered:

I read romance-themed novels because I like the plot and how the characters go. And I think it's very interesting to me since I grew up uhmm watching more on love ahhh love stories like soap operas, I mean romance-themed operas and, uhmm, romantic movies. So, I also want to read a book similar to what I watched. *(I read romance-themed novels because I like the plot and development of the character. It is very interesting since I grew up watching more love stories like soap operas, romance-themed operas, and romantic movies. That is why I also want to read books like what I watched.)*

Participant 10 added:

Like, even though how I try myself to try another or different genre, my heart is always looking for romance. Because it's like I can fit like myself, my interests, and my preferences. *(Even if I try reading other genres, my heart keeps returning to reading romance-themed novels because this is where my interests and preferences fit.)*

This theme is supported by the Uses and Gratification Theory by Blumler and Katz. This theory assumes that individuals use the media for their needs (Blumler et al.,1974). Participants select this media based on the expectation that it will satisfy their needs and desires. Participants were satisfied reading romance-themed novels because it aligns with their interests and preferences.

5.1.2 Entertainment

This theme describes how romance-themed novels provide entertainment to the participants. It is also fun to engage on the participants' part. At some point, romance-themed novels are one way to escape reality.

During the one-on-one interview, participant 3 was asked to give their reason as to why they read romance-themed novels; she answered:

I read romance-themed novels for entertainment. *(I read romance-themed novels for entertainment.)*

Participant 6 also added:

So, the reason I read romance-themed novels is because I find it entertaining and all about love and relationships. I have fun reading it. *(I read romance-themed novels because I find them entertaining and all about love; that is why I read them.)*

This theme is supported by the Uses and Gratification Theory of Blumler and Kratz, which emphasizes that participants use this media for their satisfaction when their desires are fulfilled (Blumler et al.; E., 1974). Sometimes, people read romance-themed novels to escape from the real world.

5.1.3 Social Influence

This theme describes how social influences like family members and other external influences can be the reason to let the participant start reading romance-themed novels. Also, participants got started reading romance-themed novels because of the popularity of a particular thing that they enjoyed doing.

Participant 7, when asked who influenced them to read romance-themed novels, replied:

Actually, romance-themed novels started during high school. Then, it just came from my mother since she likes precious hearts romances. Those novels become my basis if I read them. Then I liked reading back then but to a different genre, but my mother, based on her stories she, told me about the stories she read. So, it made me think about reading this kind of genre. *(Romance-themed novels started in high school. I got it from my mother since she liked reading precious romance novels in their time; because of her, I read romance-themed novels.)*

Participant 4 also added:

So uhm, well, I started reading romance-themed novels when I was in high school around uhmm, 7th grade because in our time, I mean, like at that time, Wattpad is very popular, and I think the reason why I read it is, it because it was a trend at that time and because I am an introvert kind of person so I loved to read on my free time and the trend there that time which is most likely they are romance themed. *(I started reading romance-themed novels when I was in high school, around 7th grade. At that time, Wattpad was a trend, and I think the reason why I read it is because it was a trend and because I am an introverted kind of person; I loved to read on my free time, and the trend there that time which is most likely romance themed.)*

This theme is supported by the Uses and Gratification Theory of Blumler and Kratz, which emphasizes one of the needs of an individual, the Social Integrative Needs. According to an article by Communication Theory, it encompasses the need to socialize with family, friends, and relationships in society. The participants' responses demonstrated how social influence introduced romance-themed novels to them, and now they are still into reading this kind of genre. Individuals may start reading romance-themed novels, not because they have any self-interest but because their family and friends read them such that both parties may have something in common to discuss. In today's world, where being trendy matters, people try to match what's new and popular to avoid being left behind.

5.1.4 Educational

This theme describes that romance-themed novels also have lessons to learn that engage participants in reading. By reading romance-themed novels, participants widen their vocabulary, not just their perspective on life. Participants also get and know new words and not just life lessons.

Participant 2 answered the question on what motivates or inspires them to read romance-themed novels; she answered:

The more you read, not only romance-themed novels, the more your vocabulary will widen. Plus, you will learn a lot of new words. In addition to that, you will become more hopeless romantic hahaha. *(The more you read, not only romance-themed novels, the more your vocabulary will widen. Plus, you will learn a lot of new words. In addition to that, you will become more hopeless romantic.)*

Participant 9 answered the same question:

Okay, so it really motivates and inspires me to read romance because of their content. For example, the content in a romance novel is not boring. For something like educational, you can get ideas for education, and then the story has a sense that there is something within the story that can be applied to ourselves and to our relationships with someone and friends. *(It motivates me to read romance-themed novels because the content is not boring or something you can get ideas for education, and the story is very meaningful. It is because of the story that you can apply it to yourself and your relationship with your friends and others.)*

These responses are supported by Norman Holland's Psychological Reader-Response Theory and the Uses and Gratification Theory of Blumler and Kratz. Holland believes that readers' motives strongly influence how they read (Mambrol, 2016). People react to romance-themed novels with the same psychological responses they bring to events in their daily lives. People acquire knowledge, information, facts, etc. Some have the thirst to acquire intellectual and academic knowledge. This shows that romance-themed novels can be used academically. With the help of romance-themed novels, some participants widen their vocabulary. Aside from that, romance-themed novels help the participants by learning real-life lessons that can be applicable to their lives.

5.1.4 Therapeutic

This theme describes that romance-themed novels can give a therapeutic feeling since it is also the participants' one way to relieve stress and the feeling of belongingness. Participants may feel stressed and pressured. Also, romance-themed novels helped some participants feel they were not alone.

During a one-on-one interview with Participant 8, she was asked what motivates or inspires them to read romance-themed novels. She answered:

Ahm, I feel like it's ahm feeling the gap of longingness. That's why I read, I mean, romance-themed novels. *(I feel the gap of longingness; that's why I read romance-themed novels.)*

Participant 5 answered the same question:

Ahh.. When I get bored, reading is my best therapy, so, uhm, let's say just for the pastime. Yeah. (IDI 5-1 SS37) *(When I get bored, reading is my best therapy or for passing time only.)*

Participants 11 also added:

The thing that inspired me is that the relationships around me that I see are like toxic and chaotic, and it's kind of feed my mind that all things in relationship is difficult. So, in that way, I read romance novels because, as we all know, it is like a fairy tale. So that's why for cleansing my mind and heart. *(The thing that inspired me is because the relationships around me that I see are toxic, and it kind of feeds my mind that all things in a relationship are difficult. So, in that way, I read romance novels because, as we all know, it is like a fairy tale. So that clears my mind and heart.)*

These responses are supported by Blumler and Kratz Uses and and Gratification Theory. People have affective needs. According to an article by Communication Theory, it includes all kinds of people's emotions, pleasures, and moods. People use media to satisfy their emotional needs. Also, people are looking for tension-free needs wherein it is to relieve tension and stress. This illustrates that romance-themed novels do not only give real-life lessons but can also be used as therapeutic. Participants tend to relax or enjoy reading romance-themed novels. In fact, by reading, participants feel emotionally connected with the situation and the characters.

5.2 The lived experiences of the participants that made them engage in reading romance-themed novels

This overall theme describes the study's sub-problem of the lived experiences that the female students have that made them engage in reading romance-themed novels.

5.2.1 On-time availability

This theme describes the availability of the participants or how often they read romance-themed novels. Participants can read romance-themed novels depending on their availability or free time.

During a one-on-one interview of Participant 2, when asked what her usual pattern in reading is, she answered:

What? Like before, when online classes were not yet started, no, during online class. Like I can read at least 3 books in a month. Like that's my goal so that I can buy a new one. That's my usual pattern. I like to read one book per week. *(What? Before, when we were still in online classes, I could read at least 3 books monthly. That is my goal so that I can buy a new one. It is my usual pattern to read one book per week.)*

Participant 10 added:

Currently, I only read during my vacant time and mostly during night time, but before, I used to read every day, every night, and until dawn, hahaha. *(Currently, I only read during my free time and mostly during night time, but before, I used to read every day, every night, and until dawn.)*

Uses and Gratification Theory from Blumler and Katz support this theme. This focuses on the needs or wants of people that meet their satisfaction. According to an article by Communication Theory, this includes having time to engage in everything that gratifies them freely. According to the responses, participants read romance-themed novels depending on their availability since they have other lives, not just a reader.

5.2.2 Baseline for A Real-World Situations

This theme describes participants' awareness and establishing limits between reality and fiction. Participants are aware that romance-themed novels are fiction, but they want to believe and think that at some point in their lives, they can experience the things they read in romance-themed novels. Also, participants read romance-themed novels because they can relate and apply them to real life.

Participant 1 replied when asked how reading romance-themed novels shaped their relationship:

...How do you say this? I believe in it so much because I know that, like, this character or this book is just a buildup. Although it may be close to, you know, real life or it is real life. I don't get myself uhmm so much much on it. It's kinda scary coz it may ahhh ahhh absorb whatever the character is. So, it's kinda scary for me. Uhmm, probably, it just affects my point of view. ahhh, personally, because there are books that have really helped me share my mind, you know, that does not help me to change my point of view. *(It does not affect me as much since I'm very aware of what I'm reading. I'm very mindful. For example, there are excerpts, dialogs, or quotes that I may or could get from the book. I don't believe in it so much because I know that this character or book is just a buildup. Although it may be close to real life. I don't get myself so much on it. It's kind of scary because it may absorb whatever the character is. So, it's kind of scary. Probably, it just affects my point of view, personally, because there are books that have helped in sharing my mind...)*

Participant 6 shared:

For me, the specific factors of reading romance-themed novels are nothing because, for me, it really doesn't affect me because I know that what I read is just fantasy, like literal fantasy, because it is just for pass time, like if I have nothing to do. Then I can just not finish reading it since I'm busy at work. *(For me, there is no specific factors because I knew from the start that reading romance-themed novels is just for fantasy or literal fantasy and the pastime only.)*

This theme is supported by the Cultivation Theory of George Gerbner and the Psychological Reader-Response Theory by Norman Holland. Holland believes that people can strongly be influenced on how or what they read (Mambrol, 2016). It focuses on the reader's interpretation and its revelation about themselves as what they are as a person. People react to things they read with the same psychological responses to the happenings in life. This illustrates the responses that reading romance-themed novels lets the participants establish limits in their relationships since they are fully aware that what they are reading is just fantasy. It may or may not happen in real life. In addition to that, it cultivates one's attitude or personality depending on what they read. People easily get influenced if exposed to a specific media for too long.

5.3 The impacts of the romance-themed novels on the relationship satisfaction of the participants

The themes constructed with main themes provided descriptions of the impacts of romance-themed novels on the relationship satisfaction of the participants and how reading romance-themed novels affects and influences their view of a relationship.

The following three (3) emergent themes characterized the participants' experiences with this study's sub-problem number 3:

5.3.1 Establishing A Strong Emotional Bond

This theme describes how romance-themed novels help participants manage and handle their relationships. Based on the participants' responses, romance-themed novels provide tips, ideas, and ways to handle and manage relationships. With this, participant's relationships with their partner got improved. Their bond with each other got more robust and healthier.

During the one-on-one interview, participant 3 was asked to share how romance-themed novels affect her relationship. She stated:

I believe I managed to create them a strong bond with the healthier relationship I have with my boyfriend. *(I believe I created a strong bond with the relationship I have with my boyfriend.)*

Participant 8 answered the same question:

Ahm, it affects our relationship. Actually, it is not that toxic. Small fights lead to break-ups, but no. However, it is more likely communication. It really affects our communication, and our relationship would work by communicating with each other. *(It affects our relationship, actually; it is not toxic, unlike other relationships. It is more about communication that our relationship would work by communicating with each other.)*

Participant 16 also shared her own experiences:

Ahhmm, my experiences really apply to my partner based on what I read in romance novels. I get ideas and set standards on how to handle my relationship. *(It really applies towards my partner based on what I've read in romance-themed novels. I get ideas and set standards on how to handle my relationship.)*

These responses are supported by the Psychological Reader-Response Theory by Norman Holland. Reading can affect readers psychologically (Mambrol, 2016). The participants' responses demonstrated that they get tips, ways, ideas, and lessons from reading romance-themed novels that help them manage and handle their relationships. These shapes one's identity and resonate with the text. This is considered the self-recognition. Once this is established, they can adopt new learnings and meanings. In this way, text can influence readers' thoughts and actions. Participants established emotional bonds with their partners, and with this, their relationship got more robust.

5.3.2 Enlightened Disposition

This theme describes that romance-themed novels increase participants' self-awareness and worth.

During the one-on-one interview, participant 2 was asked how romance-themed novels influence her with her relationships. When questioned, she stated:

You can learn how to understand, how important it is to understand a person, and how important it is to respect personal spaces of a person. That's it. You will learn this in romance books. That's it. *(You can learn how to understand, how important it is to understand a person, how important it is to respect personal spaces of a person. You will learn this in romance books.)*

Participant 4 also stated:

So I think there's a lot; of of it is. I learned some like tips on how to like stand up for yourself and be confident enough that you're lovable despite the flaws that you have. And next is I learned some of the behaviors or habits which is like incorporated to me because of the trauma back you had back then with your past relationships or probably because of your childhood experiences which is kind of unhealthy in our relationship but yeah... *(I think, there are many things I got to learn from it, one of which is that I learned some tips on how to stand up for yourself and be confident enough that you're lovable despite the flaws that you have. And next, I learned some of the behaviors or habits which is incorporated to yourself because of the trauma you had back then with your past relationships or because of your childhood experiences, which is kind of unhealthy with your relationship...)*

Participant 9 added:

So the important experiences while reading romance-themed novels, especially when it comes to problems in your relationship, and then, like, I don't know what the solutions are to solve that problem. When I read romance-themed novels, I can get ideas that this is what I should supposed to do. Mind should not take over you, but sometimes you have to accept and forgive. These kind of thoughts then it is really a great help to me in terms of adjustments. *(The important experience in reading romance-themed novels, especially when it comes to problems in your relationship and then you don't know what would be the solutions but when I read romance-themed novels, I can find possible solutions in mind what are the right things to be done then sometimes you have to accept and forgive that can really help to me especially when we are talking about adjustment.)*

This theme is supported by the Cultivation Theory of George Gerbner. Awareness comes within. People become wary of their actions. This is due to the influence of the environment and media that they are exposed to. They become aware of what they will do to themselves and others. Long-term exposure to media shapes how people of media perceive the world as well as conduct themselves in life. This illustrates the responses; romance-themed novels let the participants see their worth and accept who they are. Romance-themed novels increase the participants' self-awareness, not only of themselves but also of their partners.

6. Conclusion

This study delved into the impact of reading romance-themed novels on the relationship satisfaction of female students at the College of Arts and Sciences, University of Cebu's Main Campus, during the academic year 2022-2023. The primary objectives were to investigate the reasons behind participants' choice of romance-themed novels, uncover the personal experiences that led them to engage in such reading and analyze the effects of these novels on participants' relationship satisfaction.

The study yielded ten (10) emergent themes, which were subsequently grouped into three (3) overarching themes to address the sub-problems effectively. These emergent themes were extracted based on the significant statements provided by the primary informants. Concerning the reasons motivating participants to read romance-themed novels, the emergent themes included Alignment of Interests, Entertainment, Social Influence, Educational Value, and Therapeutic Benefits. Regarding the experiences that led participants to engage in reading such novels, two key themes emerged: On-time Availability and Real-World Relevance. In examining the impact of romance-themed novels on participants' relationship satisfaction, the study identified themes related to establishing strong emotional bonds and an enlightened disposition.

Based on the findings of this study, the following were identified to address the raised problems and issues. First, fostering personal growth is essential for healthy relationships, emphasizing that female students should embark on a journey of self-discovery before connecting with someone, and mutual interest-sharing can contribute to this growth. Second, students should be mindful of differentiating between the realms of fiction and reality when reading romance-themed novels, recognizing that while elements of these stories can be relatable and applicable in real life, they should not serve as rigid templates for relationships, encouraging discernment and a focus on attainable goals. Lastly, enhancing self-awareness and emotional bonds in romantic relationships is crucial; students must understand their own emotions and character to forge stronger connections with their partners, as self-awareness is a foundational step in comprehending the motivations and behaviors of others, ultimately nurturing fulfilling and healthy relationships. These recommendations and concepts highlight the significance of personal growth, discernment, and emotional connection in relationships.

The study had some limitations. It did not encompass male college students who also engage in reading romance-themed novels, which is a significant demographic, including LGBTQ+ members who might have unique perspectives. Furthermore, the study did not thoroughly investigate the socialization skills of female college romance-themed novel readers, potentially overlooking the possibility that some individuals turn to reading due to a lack of confidence in socializing. These limitations underscore the need for future research to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play in this context, including a broader demographic scope and a deeper exploration of the socialization factors at play.

The researcher suggests several potential research topics for future studies. These include conducting a quantitative investigation into the influence of reading romance-themed novels on the level of satisfaction experienced by readers. Another promising avenue for research is the development of methods for monitoring and evaluating female students' engagement with romance-themed novels. Additionally, exploring the impact of reading romance-themed novels on student behavior within romantic relationships would be valuable. Finally, further research could explore the potential negative consequences of consuming romance-themed novels. These suggested research topics offer a range of opportunities to deepen our understanding of the relationship between romance literature and readers' experiences and behavior.

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