



Trauma, Gender, Love, and Teen Drama

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Abstract

Research suggests that past trauma can contribute to the downfall of long-term romantic partnerships. This study implemented a content analysis of a television show *13 Reasons Why* to examine the realism of the depiction of adolescents' romantic attitudes and quality of relationships. The show is intended to depict real, unfiltered experiences of adolescents in today's society. The specific goal of the presented study was to examine the relationship between the depictions of adolescents' romantic expressions and their experiences with trauma. Additionally, the study examined differences in the depiction of romantic expressions based on the gender of the characters. Statistical analyses revealed that past traumatic experience was the only significant predictor of romantic expressions. Specifically, characters who had experienced the most trauma were the least likely to express romantic ideals.

Keywords: romantic expression, ideals, challenges, trauma, adolescent, television, content analysis

Introduction

Understanding how traumatic experiences in adolescence affect romantic expression is paramount in understanding future trends of long-term companionship. Research suggests that the brain is particularly vulnerable to trauma during adolescence as it has not yet reached full development (Sharma et al., 2013). Additionally, another prior study indicates that experiencing an incidence of trauma is becoming more prevalent during adolescent years, with these incidences occurring at unprecedented levels (Saunders & Adams, 2014). Perhaps, the combination of a vulnerable mind and the increased likelihood of experiencing trauma are contributing factors in today's romantic ideals. Current research on marriage trends has shown that the percentage of individuals who are married has decreased while the percentage of individuals choosing to never get married has increased (Taylor, 2010). Though there is a multitude of reasons as to why one may not get married, one possible reason for the declining institution may be the ideas of romance formulated during adolescent years. For example, social media and television shows have shown to influence the audience's self-concept through exaggerated portrayals of real experiences (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). Further, during this

time of sexual/romantic exploration, teens seek out popular media for advice concerning relationships and intimacy (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). My study attempts to examine the depiction of romantic relationships of adolescents who have experienced some level of trauma and those who have not. Although the depictions on TV shows do not always reflect the reality, stereotypes and unrealistic content may potentially have an effect on their audience.

The goal of this content analysis was to find out if the depiction of romantic expressions by adolescents in a realistic television show would differ based on the gender of the character and experiences of trauma. A hypothesis is that adolescent characters who have experienced more trauma would be depicted to express more challenges to romantic ideals, and adolescent characters who have experienced less trauma would be depicted to express more romantic ideals. This article examines any gender differences in the expression of romantic ideals and challenges.

Literature Review

While fictional television shows are not true representations of real-world trends, research suggests that adolescents are inclined to watch television shows in which they can relate to the plot and the characters (Potter, 1992). Others propose that since adolescents do not have enough years to formulate their own conceptions about their experiences, they are influenced by what is portrayed in teen dramas, arguing that they do not relate to the storyline, but base their persona on what they see (Garel, 2019). However, extensive research has shown that current adolescent-aged individuals are drawn to television they identify with, which portrays situations that they can envision occurring in their own lives (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). Additionally, research suggests that during this stage of development, adolescents are aware of their lived experiences and opt to find media in which they can connect to fulfill their need for introspection (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). Thus, given the popularity of teen drama television that displays traumatic events, it is presumed that many viewers have at least had exposure to an incidence of trauma.

Preceding research in adolescent trauma discusses prevalence rates of traumatic experiences as follows: one episode of sexual victimization, including rape and attempted rape, (28%), physical abuse (19%), bullying/harassment (29%), witnessing violence (70%), and traumatic death of a loved one (18%) (Saunders & Adams, 2014). Studies also found a correlation between childhood trauma and later romantic attachment styles (e.g., Yumbul, Cavusoglu, & Geyimci,

2010). For example, physical/emotional abuse and neglect during childhood may be positively related to paranoid, inattentive, dismissive attachment styles and negatively related to secure attachment styles in adulthood (Erozkan, 2016). Those with insecure attachment styles are more likely to negatively perceive romance and lack enjoyment in romantic partnerships as compared to those with secure attachment styles in childhood (Sheinbaum et al., 2015).

While trauma may be a predecessor towards views on romance, another possible antecedent is the sociological construction of gender. Research suggests that the differences in childhood trauma between men and women are mainly in the types rather than frequencies or magnitude. For example, a study of homeless youth by Gwadz, Nish, Leonard, and Strauss (2007) found that females reported more emotional and sexual abuse, whereas male youth reported more physical abuse. The same study found that all three types of abuse (physical, emotional, and sexual) were associated with the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in females, whereas only sexual abuse was associated with PTSD in male youth. Remarkably, an alternative study suggests that males are less likely to reveal traumatic experiences and/or any indications of maladapting in adherence with the conventions of masculinity (Vogel et al., 2014). Furthermore, there is strong evidence that experiences of trauma during childhood and early adolescence is strongly associated with the development of mental illness (Vila-Badia et al., 2021). Whether certain types of trauma will lead to more or less healthy romantic attitudes and behavior is unclear. Irrespective of trauma, research indicates that adolescent females tend to emphasize more romantic ideals than their male counterparts (Shulman & Scharf, 2000). Taking all together, gender and past childhood trauma may affect attitudes towards romance and love in adulthood.

Method

Research Design and Procedures

This study employed a content-analytic study of the television show *13 Reasons Why* (Yorkey et al., 2017). The unit of analysis was all depicted adolescent age characters on the show. To determine the age of the characters, the study analyzed context clues including high school attendance, verbal cues, physical attributes, and developmental characteristics. Character expression was coded for seasons 1-3, for all 13 episodes in each season, totaling 39 episodes. Every episode was coded from start to finish with each averaging 56.85 minutes. Approximately 26 adolescent aged characters had recurring roles in the series. Of these roles, characters

exemplified diversity in race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, personality, intelligence, experience, athleticism, and overall attractiveness, akin to the representation in the existent adolescent population.

Variables and Measures

The two predictors were gender and the level of trauma. Gender was determined based on the visual appearance of the characters. Level of trauma was operationally defined as overtly depicted distress, such as change in behavior/thought, or disturbance in an individual after experiencing, witnessing, and/or being associated/exposed to a serious traumatic incidence. Serious trauma in this study focuses on suicide, sexual assault, violence/potential violence, serious harm/threats of serious harm to physical being or reputation, and events of similar severity. Observed traumatic experience was coded as follows: (0) no observed trauma, (1) one observed incidence of trauma, (2) two observed incidences of trauma, and (3) three or more observed incidences of trauma. A character in the show was presumed to have no trauma unless specified through context clues or verbal declaration.

Expressions about romance were coded as either romantic ideals or anti-romantic (or challenges to romantic ideals). The definitions were borrowed from Hefner and Wilson (2013). Specifically, romantic ideals were defined as a positive outlook on love and lasting intimate relationships with another individual, not including exclusively initiating/describing sexual advances. These are expressions that idealize another individual, declare love at first sight, describe soul-mates/traditional marriage, and/or hope that love will prevail (Hefner & Wilson, 2013). Challenges to romantic ideals are defined as a negative outlook on traditional aspects of love and lasting intimate relationships, having realistic or negative expectations of romantic attraction. These could be statements about a potential intimate relationship that is solely in the pursuit of sexual advances, or that denounce or contradict romantic ideals and lack of hope for future love, including realistic statements and antiideal statements.

Results

The collected data comprised of 230 data points, with expressions of romantic ideals or challenges as the unit of analysis. No unusual patterns were detected (see Tables 1-3). The outcome variable was a nominal, two-level variable, coded as romantic ideals or challenges to romantic ideals. To determine if gender and traumatic experiences of the characters had a significant effect on the types of expressions were made, a multinomial logistic regression test

was computed. This test is appropriate when the outcome variable is nominal. The results revealed that only traumatic experience was a significant predictor of romantic expression (*trauma*, $\chi^2 = 155.8$, $df = 1$, $p = .000$; *gender*, $\chi^2 = 0.44$, $df = 1$, $p = .509$).

Table 1. Frequencies of Observed Traumatic Experiences

Measure of Trauma	Frequency	Percent
No Observed Incidence of Trauma	78	33.9
One Observed Incidence of Trauma	49	21.3
Two Observed Incidences of Trauma	54	23.5
Three or More Observed Incidences of Trauma	49	21.3
Total	230	100.0

Table 2. Frequencies of Gender

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	120	52.2
Female	110	47.8
Total	230	100.0

Table 3. Frequencies of Romantic Expressions

Romantic Expression	Frequency	Percent
Romantic Ideal Expressed	126	54.8
Challenge to Romantic Ideal Expressed	104	45.2
Total	230	100.0

Next, a chi-square test was performed with level of trauma (four levels) and the expression of romantic ideals and challenges (two levels). The test revealed that there was a significant association between traumatic experiences and romantic expression ($\chi^2 = 175.4$, $df = 3$, $p < .001$). To test the strength of association, a phi-coefficient test was used; it showed that the variables had a strong and significant association ($\phi = .873$, $p < .001$). Specifically, those with a higher level of trauma were more likely to challenge romantic ideals; and as incidences of trauma decreased, the likelihood of expressing romantic ideals increased (see Table 4).

Table 4. Crosstabulation of Observed Incidences of Trauma and Romantic Expression

Observed Incidences of Trauma		Romantic Expression	
		Romantic Ideal	Challenge to Romantic Ideal
No Observed Incidence of Trauma	Count	76	2
	% within Level of Trauma	97.4%	2.6%
	% within Romantic Expression	60.3%	1.9%
	% of Total	33.0%	0.9%
One Observed Incidence of Trauma	Count	43	6
	% within Level of Trauma	87.8%	12.2%
	% within Romantic Expression	34.1%	5.8%
	% of Total	18.7%	2.6%
Two Observed Incidences of Trauma	Count	6	48
	% within Level of Trauma	11.1%	88.9%
	% within Romantic Expression	4.8%	46.2%
	% of Total	2.6%	20.9%
Three or More Observed Incidences of Trauma	Count	1	48
	% within Level of Trauma	2.0%	98.0%
	% within Romantic Expression	0.8%	46.2%
	% of Total	0.4%	20.9%

Discussion

Past research suggests that childhood trauma can negatively impact the ways in which one views love and romance. The question that the current study examined was whether this association would also be depicted on a TV show that is supposed to reflect the reality of adolescents' experiences.

The study found no differences in the depiction of romantic and anti-romantic ideals between young men and women. However, traumatic experience did show a difference in the behavior and attitudes about romance and love of young adults. Perhaps, this implies that when traumatic

experiences are introduced, gendered stereotypes are inconsequential when predicting romantic attitudes. Specifically, the study found that adolescent characters who had more traumatic experiences were significantly more likely to challenge romantic ideals, and those who experienced less trauma were more likely to express romantic ideals. Similar to real life experiences, serious traumatic events, such as, sexual assault, suicide, violence, and others, are depicted to alter the views of developing teens in a negative way. However, whether these depictions can also affect adolescent viewers in a negative way, for example to challenge all traditional forms of romantic courtship, needs to be studied in the future.

There were some limitations of the presented study. First, the rating scale to measure depicted trauma was a rough estimate of the degree of its seriousness. Perhaps, totaling all observed trauma that the character experienced would offer a more accurate measure. Secondly, to prevent bias, the study opted to only include verbal cues in its determination of romantic expression. Nonverbal behaviors are also possible indicators of romantic expression so, had they been accounted for, the results would be more inclusive of all romantic reactions to trauma. To increase sample size and be more inclusive, future research should also determine behavioral measures of romantic expression. The biggest limitation was the use of only one show to analyze the trend. A content analysis of multiple shows is warranted to replicate and confirm the findings.

Perhaps even more importantly, more studies of the effect that the media, and such shows as *13 Reasons Why* may have on the young adults with or without past trauma is needed to be able to draw any causal connection between the audience and their behavior.

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