

Sexual Agency, Safe Sex, and Consent Negotiations in Erotic Romance Novels

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Abstract

Sexual script theory asserts sexual values and norms are learned through culturally available messaging. A primary site for that messaging is through erotic romance novels written by, and generally for, women. Despite its mass popularity and potential influence on sexual scripts, the social sciences have rarely examined this genre for key themes and messaging. Utilizing content analysis methods, this exploratory research examines erotic contemporary romance novels for themes of sexual agency, safe sex practices and consent. Preliminary analysis of 68 scenes from across 20 novels reveal only half model clear safe-sex practices, but successful consent negotiations are present in all scenes with verbal consent scripts found in approximately 90 percent of the exchanges. These findings are compared to earlier studies and followed brief discussion of future research opportunities.

Keywords: sexual agency, safe sex, consent negotiations, erotic romance novels

Introduction

The romance novel genre, comprised of mostly female authors and female readers, has historically been seen in a dismissive light despite its popularity with the general masses and its billion-dollar market in the U.S. book industry (ranking second only to thrillers). Romance novels have a central love story and an emotionally satisfying ending (sometimes referred to as a HEA – happily ever after). One of the most popular novel subgenres is erotic romance defined as a story in which the sexual interaction is an inherent part of the story, character growth, and relationship development (Romance Writers of American 2019). A 2017 survey of romance book buyers found the most frequent readers to be females age 34 or below and erotic romance to be one of the most popular subgenres (Romance Writers of American 2019). Given the popularity of the erotic romance novel (especially among young female readers), it is surprising to find very little social science research on the genre and its possible relationship to contemporary sexual scripts. To address this gap in the literature, the author examined twenty recent top selling erotic contemporary romance novels for key themes and messaging with attention paid to sexual agency as male and female characters negotiate consent and safe sex practices. The preliminary findings of the content analysis are summarized and compared to prior research.

Literature Review

Social scientists argue people are expected to conform to cultural sexual scripts which help them frame past, current, and future sexual exchanges (Gagnon & Simon 1973). The Western sexual script has been identified as valuing spontaneity as well as men's assertiveness and women's passivity during sexual exchanges. The sum of these values are thought to lead to high risk outcomes such as unintended pregnancies, increased exposure to sexually transmitted diseases, and unwanted exchanges (assault and rape) (see Diekman et al. 2000; Menard & Cabrera 2011). While these sexual scripts are portrayed in numerous media venues, the focus of this analysis is erotic romance novels.

Few current systematic content analyses of modern romance novels exist. A thorough review of the literature yielded only four such peer-reviewed articles published since 2000 with none focusing on the *erotic* contemporary romance novel (Cabrera & Menard 2012; Clawson 2005; Diekman, McDonald, & Gardner 2000; Menard & Cabrera 2011). In strongest alignment with the current study, Diekman, et al. (2000) documented condom use in 78 contemporary romance novels randomly selected from the shelves of bookstores in Columbus, Ohio with publication dates ranging from 1981 to 1996. They found less than 10% of the novels portrayed characters discussing condom use or sexually transmitted disease (STD) prevention with all of these discussions being initiated by male characters. In half of the discussions, the female character rejected condom use. Diekman et al. (2000: 181) concluded "that the romance script actively dismisses concern with STD

prevention.” In their analysis of 20 award winning contemporary romance novels dating, Menard and Cabrera (2011) found contraception, mainly male condoms, was used in approximately 18.5% of sex scenes in books dating from 1989 to 1999 and 57.9% of scenes in books from 2000 to 2009 (an average of 34.8% across all years). They, too, found condoms to be provided primarily by the male characters (80% of the time), contraception was rarely discussed (in only 8.7% of the scenes), and in all cases contraception discussions were initiated by the males. The authors also documented the novels they analyzed generally adhered to the Western sexual script with some evidence of increased female sexual agency with a greater percentage of scenes coded as initiated by a female character over time.

One of the major shifts in romance novel writing from the 1970s to today has been the increased focus on writing explicitly present and character-driven consent (Faircloth 2018). The “no means yes” and rape tropes found in romance novels of four decades ago has been thoroughly challenged by feminists, romance authors, and the general public. Handbooks for writing romances have provided clear moral standards for the genre around coerced sex:

Forced sex or any kind of abuse is out. The bodice-ripper type of romance was mercifully short-lived and is not popular with modern readers. If the hero and the heroine make love, it should be because they both want to (Parv 1999 cited in de Geest and Goris 2010).

Heroes...never rape or explicitly threaten to do so. And they never hit or physically hurt her [the heroine]. Some of the male attitudes common in an earlier generation which were depicted or somewhat exaggerated in romances of their time aren't acceptable now (Clair and Donald 1999 cited in de Geest and Goris 2010).

No studies were found that directly examine verbal and nonverbal consent exchanges in romance novels of any type, making this study's analysis unique.

Purpose

The goals of this preliminary research were to document the extent to which male and female characters in erotic contemporary romance novels negotiate consent and safe sex practices and to compare these findings to past content analyses of the romance novel genre. It was expected the preliminary results would reveal a continued increased trend towards safe-sex practices and female initiation of those practices. While there were no prior studies examining purposeful consent, it was expected that consent would be requested and given (either verbally, non-verbally, or with interior thoughts) in the overwhelming majority of sexual depictions coded, especially given shifting sexual mores and the new directives for romance writers warning them against writing non-consensual scenes. Menard & Cabrera's (2011) documentation that romance novels written in the first decade of the 21st century still adhered to Western sexual scripts in which females are considered the “gatekeepers” of male sexual advances even as female characters are increasingly depicted as sexual initiators, led the author not to make any predictions regarding gender differences in consent negotiations.

Methods

Erotic contemporary romance novels were selected based on the following criteria. *Erotic* novels were selected as it was expected their explicit sexual content would yield more detailed safe sex and consent negotiations. Only *contemporary* romance novels were included as these would be more likely to demonstrate sexual scripts relevant to current socio-historic contexts. There was also a goal to include recent popular titles and authors to make the analysis relevant to the most current readership. Books were selected based on their inclusion as Romance Writers of America RITA award winners, Amazon best sellers, and/or Goodreads favorite erotic novels. There was also an attempt not to duplicate authors. The final book list was comprised of 20 titles from published between 2010 and 2019 (see Table 1).

Each book was coded only up to its first penetrative sexual exchange with the unit of analysis being any sexual exchange scene depicted where the characters were engaged in a behavior that was likely to yield sexual excitement or orgasm. A total of 68 scenes were coded with the number of coded scenes in each book ranging from one to six (see Table 1).

Except for four recorded scenes (one book) involving two male characters and four scenes (one book) involving one female character with multiple male sexual partners, all coded scenes involved one male and one female. Of the 68 scenes coded, 35.3% involved intercourse/penetrative sex, 26% oral sex, 11.8% frottage, 10.3% verbal foreplay, 8.8% digital stimulation of the female, 4.4% masturbation and 4.4% heavy kissing. Sixteen of the scenes (23.5%) were from novels with a bondage sadomasochism (BDSM) or “forced sex role play” theme. These novels tend to have negotiated “contracts” between characters outlining consensual acts and tests for STDs prior to sexual exchanges. An additional sixteen scenes (23.5%)

were coded from “insta-love/lust” themed books identified by their tendency to be very short reads with characters falling almost instantly in love and quickly engaging in unprotected sex with a goal to become pregnant. Insta-love/lust books and their authors dominated the Amazon Top 10 Best Sellers Erotic Romance list (for April 2019) but were not found as often to overlap with the GoodReads or RITA awards list. All coded scenes were kept in the analysis independent of the novels’ overarching themes since the research goal is to capture the types of sexual script messaging found in popular erotic romance novels.

To examine safe-sex practices, scenes were coded for gender differences in risk-taking behaviors based on whether the characters had verified they were “clean” (having been recently tested for sexually transmitted diseases) and/or some form of barrier protection was used to prevent STD transmission. Scenes were also coded for gender differences in discussions about, and the supplier of, condoms or alternative contraception.

Consent was coded as both requested and given across different scenarios. Each scene was coded for whether a verbal consent was requested by which gender. Consent given was recorded as verbal by gender, nonverbal (behavioral responses) by gender, and interior thoughts by gender. Each coded scene may have had more than one type of consent given.

The coding is preliminary in nature given there has been only one coder, the author, and the coding has not yet been analyzed for intra-rater reliability. In addition, the small sample size (n=68) means category percentages should be interpreted with care.

Descriptive statistics are used to summarize the data.

Results

Safe Sex Negotiations

Table 2 shows the percent of scenes that were coded as having a risk of pregnancy and/or STD exposure based on the type of sexual exchange. Approximately 63% of the scenes had one or both characters at risk when intercourse occurred due to a lack of condom use or confirmed sexual health history. That risk level increased to 90% for males engaging in cunnilingus and 71.4% for females engaging in fellatio. Even practices that should be relatively safe, such as masturbation and digital stimulation, had added risk for males when fluid exchanges were considered. While half of the sexual exchanges occurring between characters had no to minimal risk associated with them, 23.5% showed a risk for both males and females, 19.1% for males only and 7.4% for females only. Table 3 shows the types of protections negotiated for or supplied by males and females. Half of the exchanges involving intercourse involved no form of male or female protection nor any discussion of protection. In 33.3% of the intercourse scenes a male supplied a condom with females supplying a condom or identifying as being on birth control (oral contraception) in only three such scenes. In two of the seven fellatio scenes (28.6%), a male supplied a condom but dental dams or their equivalent were not used in any of the scenarios in which a male performed oral sex on a female (cunnilingus). When compared to past studies, the preliminary data from this research seems to indicate no major increases in the incorporation of safe sex scripts over the last two decades for this romance genre and minor increases in descriptions of female agency being deployed to protect themselves during sex. (see Table 4). It should be noted the novel sampling framework and coding criteria are not precisely aligned across all three studies which may be influencing the interpretation. Still, the overall patterns when examining safe sex practices and negotiations described in erotic romance novels seem to show a stalled revolution in terms of challenging existing Western sexual scripts emphasizing sexual spontaneity over sexual health.

Consent Negotiations

The descriptive analysis indicates consent (both requested and given) in the erotic romance genre to be the new norm. None of the scenes analyzed involved rape, assault or any non-negotiated forced sex exchanges. As seen in Table 5, verbal consent was requested in approximately 90% of the scenes and granted in almost 80% of the scenarios. Often multiple types of consent were described by the book authors for each scene including behavioral (i.e. sounds, body movements) and interior thoughts. In addition, a third of the sexual exchanges were preceded by formal contracts or agreements regarding the types of sex acts that were acceptable to all participants and the identification of “safewords” that could be used to immediately stop all sexual activity. It is still the case that gender-traditional Western sexual scripts seem to prevail with male characters most often requesting, and female characters most often granting, consent. Similarly,

a separate analysis showed that in almost 75% of the scenes the male character had substantially more sexual experience than their female partners (in almost 30% of the scenes the female was a virgin). However, the rape tropes of the past seem to have been generally erased with both males and females characterized as engaging in sex acts on their own fruition.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the sparse content analysis research on embedded sexual scripts found in romance novels. This preliminary analysis revealed scripts addressing safe sex practices in this genre have not advanced substantially over the last decade and female characters are still portrayed as passive actors relative to negotiations for their own sexual health. However, the movement towards eliminating rape tropes in the genre has been successful and romance novelists are increasingly cited as some of the most skilled producers of explicit and sexy consent negotiation scripts in a cultural context where few such examples exist (Faircloth 2019). The positive shifts in consent scripts over time could serve as a model for similar shifts in safe sex scripts in this genre.

The current study (and future research) would benefit from a clearer sampling framework for novel selections. The author could find no information clearinghouse to identify best selling books and authors for the erotic/romance genre. As a result, it is difficult to compare the findings of this study to prior research. In addition, expanding the coding process to include additional novels, scenes, and coders would increase the reliability of the data. The analysis in the study does not extend beyond the summary level. Future research (with larger samples sizes) could examine gender differences in varying safe sex and consent scripts for significance and effect size. A mixed methods approach with qualitative elements added would help illuminate some of the more nuanced safe sex and consent negotiation scripts being crafted in this genre. The lack of research related to the romance novel genre leave multiple opportunities to examine not only its content for gender and sexuality themes, but also possible consequences of its reach and influence.

Many U.S. media and education outlets have failed to model updated cultural scripts that could improve the sexual health its population. While the romance genre continues to be relatively ignored by scholars, its outreach is expanding. It is important for social scientists focus on the genre's messaging and potential for initiating change in social attitudes and behaviors regarding sexuality and gender.

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Table 1. Books included in study sample

Book Title	Author	Published
<i>Rain</i>	C.M. Steele	2019
<i>Bought for Protection</i>	Fiona Davenport	2019
<i>Copper</i>	Teagan Brooks	2019
<i>I Want You Back</i>	Lorelei James	2019
<i>His Captive Mountain Virgin</i>	Madison Faye	2018
<i>Wicked Dirty</i>	J. Kenner	2018
<i>By the Hour</i>	Roni Loren	2017
<i>Guarding His Obsession</i>	Alexa Riley	2016
<i>Off the Clock</i>	Roni Loren	2016
<i>For Real: A Spires Story</i>	Alexis Hall	2016
<i>The Saint</i>	Tiffany Reisz	2015
<i>Long Hard Ride</i>	Lorelei James	2014
<i>Claim Me</i>	J. Kenner	2014
<i>Beautiful Bastard</i>	Christina Lauren	2013
<i>Release Me</i>	J. Kenner	2013
<i>Rush</i>	Maya Banks	2013
<i>Bared to You</i>	Sylvia Day	2012
<i>Willing Victim</i>	Cara McKenna	2010
<i>Backstage Pass</i>	Olivia Cunning	2010
<i>Liberating Lacey</i>	Anne Calhoun	2009