

“If My Hubby Ever Did Half the Stuff My Book Boyfriends Did... I’d Put Him Six Ft in
the Ground”: Narratives of Interpersonal and Gendered Violence as Discussed in
Romance Novel Review Websites

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in Sociology.

Whitman College
2015

Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by Anna Sophia Wester Teague has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in Sociology.

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May 13, 2015

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Acknowledgements

First, I want to thank my grandmother for inspiring this thesis:
I know you're watching, and now you know that I found the suitcase of books at the
back of the closet.

I would like to thank all of my professors in the Sociology Department for their
invaluable feedback and support, during the thesis process and over the past four years.

Additionally, I want to thank Professor Annie Peterson for teaching me how to think
critically about media and gender.

None of this would have been possible without the support of my parents and friends.

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INTRODUCTION

Narratives normalizing intimate partner and sexual violence are widespread in the United States (Tjaden and Thoennes 1998; Wood 2001). These narratives are part of a reality of sexual violence which has reached epidemic proportions. According to the 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, nearly one out of every five women in the United States have been raped in their lifetime (Black et al. 2011)¹. Media plays an important role in the maintenance of societal narratives, reinforcing and establishing their legitimacy (Hubbard 1985). Movies, television, video games, and pornography have typically been at the center of discussions regarding the roles and effects of media in society (Custers and Van Den Bulck 2013; Itzin 1992; Lee et al. 2011). A moral panic regarding the effects of youth exposure to sex and violence in media has played a significant part in propelling a wave of academic inquiry (Davis et al. 2006; Franiuk and Scherr 2013; Kirsh 2006; Mesch 2009).

This inquiry has also been extended to romance novels, a well-established genre of formulaic fiction often grouped with the mystery or crime genres. The hugely popular romance genre, a \$1.08 billion a year industry, definitely warrants study. According to a report commissioned by Romance Writers of America (RWA), the romance genre had nearly a 55 percent market share of all fiction in 2004. The closest runner up is the ‘mystery/thriller’ genre with nearly forty percent (RWA

¹ According to the study, this includes “completed forced penetration, attempted forced penetration, or alcohol/drug facilitated completed penetration” (Black et al. 2011:1).

2005). The RWA report also claims that 64.6 million Americans read at least one romance novel in 2004, and that a devoted 35 percent of romance readers have been reading for more than twenty years (2005). The size of the romance genre alone justifies academic analysis, but the genre is significant in that it is a predominantly female category of media. According to the RWA report, fifty five percent of romance readers identify as female (Romance Writers of America 2005). Authors of romance are also predominantly female.² As a result, many academic analyses of the romance genre follow sexist attitudes toward female-authored media, depriving it of the status of serious literature or even failing to examine it at all (Cawelti 1976). Additionally, academic analyses often frame the novels as “silly” (Jenson 1984:21) and the readers as uncritical consumers (Toscano 2012). The dangers of contemporary romance novels, many of these analyses claim, is that they socialize the readers into patriarchal gender roles and teach them that their ultimate purpose should be “monogamous marriage and feminine domesticity” (Cawelti 1976:41; Modleski 2008).

These critiques could be leveled at all types of popular media, including videogames, movies, and pornography, all of which have at some point been acknowledged as the products of a male-dominated industry which perpetuates misogynist narratives. However, aimed at romance, this critique is especially puzzling in relation to the popularity of romance novels among women and the predominantly

² Using Amazon.com’s list of one hundred “Most Popular Authors in Contemporary Romance,” Harlequin.com’s extensive Author Index, and Barnesandnoble.com’s list of twenty one “Featured Romance Authors,” I determined that the vast majority of romance authors identify themselves as female. Since the frequency with which male authors publish under female pennames cannot be determined, and the fact that male authors pretend to be female in order to fit into the female space,

female authorship of the genre. The claim that romance novels contain misogynist narratives would seem contradictory to the reality that women are both writing and reading these narratives. The presence of misogynist content in a genre that is almost entirely consumed and produced by women challenges arguments that identify the male-dominated culture industry as the source for misogynist content. This seeming contradiction is the basis for this thesis.

In the context of a society where violence against women is pervasive, this thesis adds to the existing literature which explores why women are reading and writing narratives that, arguably, aid in a society-wide, oppressive and violent treatment of their gender. Thus, in this thesis, I ask: how do readers make sense of their consumption and production of misogynist narratives that perpetuate the violence against and oppression of women? In order to explore this question, this study will analyze the user-created content on romance novel review websites. An examination of how romance readers discuss these narratives with one another is best executed within the female space of the romance community. By performing an analysis of the comments, blogs, and forums on these websites, this study is able to access a broad sample of romance readers who participate on the websites. My findings reveal that these review websites facilitate analytical and self-critical discussions of the genre in which the users debate the presence and function of misogynist narratives in romance. They also act as the basis for communities of readers to share their experiences, reject or accept narratives they find in the novels, and perform critical diagnostics of the genre.

Using data gathered from five romance novel review websites, this research project provides an analysis of how romance novel review websites function as a platform for reader discussions regarding the presence of gendered violence in the genre. Departing from the plethora of content analyses which only examine the content of the romance novels themselves, this study focuses on the experiences of the readers. Examining the romance genre from the perspectives of the readers allows this thesis to explore how those directly involved in consuming romance novels discuss the criticized features of the romance genre.

DEFINING “ROMANCE”

Romance fiction, despite being long derided as frivolous, damaging, pornographic, and an instrument of the patriarchy, is one of the most popular and lucrative genres of literature (Gravdal 1991; Franiuk and Scherr 2012; Modleski 2008; Radway 1984; Romance Writers of America 2005; Toscano 2012). The romance genre’s success has spurred a significant body of research that hypothesizes a wide range of reasons for the genre’s success. These encompass the marketing prowess of businesses like Harlequin Industries which pander to a population of intimacy-starved women (Modleski 2008), a reflexive need for narratives which validate traditional gender roles threatened by the rise of feminism (Radway 1984), and the idea that romances function to assist women in navigating the social reality of intimate partner violence (Russ 1973).

It has been argued that essentialist gender roles—framing men as sexually aggressive and women as sexually passive—leads to the prevalence and normalization of gendered violence (Herman 1998:20). Therefore, it is possible that the romance genre—which, some scholars argue, consistently represents gender in essentialist ways (Ménard and Cabrera 2011; Percec 2012; Radway 1984)—contributes to the presence of gendered violence in our society and the normalization of narratives of intimate partner violence.

In order to effectively discuss analyses of the genre, it is necessary to present a basic definition of “romance.” This study will begin by using the broad definition of the romance genre provided by RWA, which outlines the formulaic nature of the genre:

Two basic elements comprise every romance novel...

[1] A Central Love Story: The main plot centers around individuals falling in love and struggling to make the relationship work. A writer can include as many subplots as he/she wants as long as the love story is the main focus of the novel.

[2] An Emotionally Satisfying and Optimistic Ending: In a romance, the lovers who risk and struggle for each other and their relationship are rewarded with emotional justice and unconditional love.

Romance novels may have any tone or style, be set in any place or time, and have varying levels of sensuality—ranging from sweet to extremely hot. These settings and distinctions of plot create specific subgenres within romance fiction (“The Romance Genre” 2014).

This definition is quite general, reflecting the breadth of the romance category and, therefore, the importance of this study, given the presence of intimate partner violence across romance subgenres (Franiuk and Scherr 2013; Kokkola 2010; Sonnet 1999). In the section that follows, I present the existing literature relevant to an

analysis of narratives of reader discussions of intimate partner violence in romance novels.

Literature Review

Understanding how romance readers interpret the narratives of violence in the genre is important since the genre is so popular and the narratives within the books reach a huge audience. Any media that is highly consumed merits study based on the idea that the messages within popular media can “recommend and validate specific social orders” (Hubbard 1985:124). This concept, however, must be examined in relation to the idea that in the same way that cultural objects are not created within a cultural vacuum, audiences do not consume in a vacuum and are influenced by their experiences and the social and cultural milieu (Schudson 2002).

Academic inquiry which focus on audience interpretation complicates the claim that mass media validates certain messages, because it acknowledges the myriad of influencing factors between the media object itself and what individual consumers ultimately understand. Post-Frankfurt School audience reception analyses focus on this process of interpretation, arguing for an agentic framing of audiences which treats the consumption of media as an active, critical process (DeVault 1990; Griswold 1993; Radway 1984). Past research on romance novels has focused on how or why they function as cultural objects, how critics have cast the genre as regressive in relation to intimate partner violence and pornography, and how they might be considered empowering.

Sociology of Literature and Audiences as Agentic

Sociological examinations of literature changed significantly in the 1970s and 1980s as cultural studies adopted understandings of popular culture which included the framing of audiences as agentic and as “users and manipulators of symbols” (Griswold 1993:456). Previous to this change, as illustrated by Lazarsfeld and Merton’s (1977) work, mass media was understood as “a structure of social control” that works to create a society “conformative to the social and economic status quo” (558). A significant portion of the academic literature on the romance genre follows this framework, performing condescending analyses which treat mass media audiences as uncritical consumers (Modleski 2008). These analyses often label the entire romance genre as regressive, dangerous, and promoting the ideals of the patriarchy, supporting a vision of romance readers as brainwashed, agency-less, and indiscriminating (Radway 1984).

Jennifer Crusie Smith rejects the “faulty premises” and “sloppiness” of this approach to romance in academia, arguing for a more equitable and effective framing of the genre in academic interrogations (1997:82). She identifies and problematizes two approaches in academic research and analysis of the genre: first, the issue of small, non-generalizable sample sizes being used in critical analysis which make sweeping generalizations about romance and its readers. Second, Crusie Smith criticizes the moralizing framing of literature in which “the only reality worth writing about is the politically correct version of what a woman should want” (1997:83).

The move of media inquiries away from the understanding of mass media as hegemonic was complemented by an increased recognition of authors, editors, and other involved actors as creative “agents who interact with texts” and affect the systems of production (Griswold 1993: 465). Michael Schudson’s cultural framework follows the idea that “readers are co-authors,” a concept developed in concert with changing academic framings of media production and consumption (2002:145). The addition of Jauss’ (1982) “horizon of expectations”—the experiences and world view which a reader brings to each interpretation of a text—added weight to the movement of academic inquiry away from understandings of mass media as hegemonic and audiences as passive consumers (Griswold 1993:457). The validation of the consumer’s voice as subject worthy of study created space for analyses of subversive textual readings and legitimated genres and medias previously marginalized by academia as ‘popular culture.’

Many feminist frameworks support the empowerment of audiences as active consumers, using reception aesthetics and understandings of power and intersectionality to add new dimensions to audience studies (Griswold 1993). The introduction of gender, class, race, nationality, and life experience as variables which affect the consumption and interpretation of media, spurred relevant sociological investigations into the role of gender and interpretation (Howard and Allen 1990), the effects of sex stereotyping in children’s books (Grauerholz and Pescosolido 1989), and the effects of and impetus behind women *Reading the Romance* (Radway 1984).

At the same time, some feminist critiques of the romance genre treat the consumption of romance novels as an unconscious choice which “socializ[es] women into patriarchal norms [and] perpetuat[es] women’s powerlessness” (Thompson et al. 1997:437). This framing presents women romance readers and authors as if they are entirely steered by the pressures of a patriarchal society (Griswold 1993). By understanding the woman reader as so easily molded, these critiques ignore the agency inherent in active consumption. Radway (1984) critiques academic underestimations of romance readers, asserting that when readers are treated as if they are unable to “identify all the relevant features or to describe [the] effects” of a text because they are “untrained in the techniques of literary analysis,” the study of the genre ignores the voices of the most relevant population (7). Therefore, researching the perspective of the reader naturally problematizes the treatment of romance readers as “cultural dupes of a hegemonic patriarchal structure” and treats them as agentic (Thompson et al. 1997:437).

Romance as Regressive

A significant number of previous academic analyses have found that the romance genre contains problematic narratives regarding intimate heterosexual relationships (Douglas 1980; Hall 2008; Modleski 2008; Nyquist 1993; Snitow 1980; Toscano 2012). Many of these scholars utilize content analysis of a very small sample of romance novels to make generalized claims regarding the presence of oppressive, gender-normative (Snitow 1980) and covertly misogynist narratives (Modleski 2008) in the entire romance genre. Despite these limitations, the fact remains that a

significant number of studies have found the presence of these narratives in the romance genre.

Jane Monckton-Smith writes about how contemporary ideals of romantic love can become dangerous, adding to the normalization of intimate partner abuse, specifically male violence towards women. She writes that some women “cite love as the explanation for staying with men who are violent to them, and abusive men will often cite it as the reason for their violence” (2012: 44). Supporting Monckton-Smith’s argument, Dianne Herman (1989) claims that the socialized, binary attitudes toward sexuality, which position men as aggressive and women as submissive, are a main factor in the presence of rape in American society. “Our culture can be characterized as a rape culture because the image of heterosexual intercourse is based on a rape model of sexuality” (Herman 1989:21). The blurring of romance with an understanding of sex as an act of domination creates a social-sexual milieu in which rape becomes hard to distinguish as abnormal.

Ann Barr Snitow (1979) writes that all romance novels are based on the dichotomous tension between male and female, “two species incapable of communicating with each other” (143). In the romance narrative, however, these two opposing bodies are forced to interact, creating the story-driving anxiety of the narrative in which the heroine must navigate the social-sexual pressures put on her (i.e. navigating the opposing pressures to be both sexual and virginal, or the pressure to maintain a relationship with a man who is abusive) (157). The addition of the happily-ever-after trope in romance means that, as Ann Douglas observes, the heroine

“must love the Harlequin man no matter how viciously he treats her” (1980:26).

Eventually, the outcome is that the hero expresses his love for the heroine, but this does not occur until after she has suffered greatly, often at his hands.

Instead of focusing primarily on scenes of outright physical harm, Monckton-Smith (2012) compares romance novels to women’s consumption of horror films, which show brutal, highly sexualized violence against female bodies and the harsh realities of intimate partner abuse. Monckton-Smith writes that women in the romance genre have it fairly easy: “Women are not terrorized, injured or killed, although in this genre, they are often belittled and humiliated” (2012:47). Monckton-Smith also examines the societal trope of the woman in a heterosexual relationship as the caretaker of the relationship, playing off the essentialist ideas that femininity is nurturing and that women capture and tame men. This conceptualization, she writes, “privileges[s] male autonomy and aggression and position[s] the women as the keeper of an unpredictable and primal force” (2012:48).

There are also analyses of the romance genre which frame narratives of gendered violence as “culture’s insidious retribution for women’s liberation, punishing women by offering them seemingly women-centered stories that continually reinforce women’s passivity and thralldom to exciting but domineering men” (Wardrop 1995:1). This argument is not unbelievable in light of the plethora of research which identifies the persistent blending of violence and romance in the genre. The combination of violence and sex is a common theme identified in analyses of romance novels (Graval 1991; Modleski 2008) as well as in media targeted toward

female audiences such as the popular *Twilight* Series or “The Vampire Diaries” TV show (Franiuk and Scherr 2013; Frann 2012; Kokkola 2011). Male violence, specifically, is framed as acceptable and even desirable. Following the social valuing of hyper-masculinity, romance frames masculinity as muscled, aggressive, and the antithesis to its categorization of femininity as soft and passive.

Modleski (2008) writes that the formulaic nature of the romance genre allows readers to understand the hero’s violence toward the heroine as “the result of his increasingly intense love for the heroine” (32). Therefore, as the hero’s violence and hostility toward the heroine become symbols of his love, “male brutality comes to be seen as a manifestation not of contempt, but of love” (33). Snitow’s (1979) analysis also examines this process of interpreting male violence as romance, writing that “the heroine is always trying to humanize the contact between herself and the apparently under-socialized hero, ‘trying to convert rape into love making’” (153). In romance novels, the presence of rape is more emphasized by critics than the presence of intimate partner violence (Gravdal 1991; Hazen 1983; Larcombe 2005; Philadelphoff-Puren 2005; Toscano 2012). Perhaps this is because the idea of women writing rape scenes for other women to enjoy is more volatile and baffling than intimate partner violence in which, theoretically, there is an abuser and a victim. Female-written, romanticized rape complicates the easy dichotomy of woman-as-oppressed, male-dominated media as oppressor. It creates a space where feminist arguments for women’s sexual agency—‘take pleasure from whatever you want’—

falter in relation to the idea that women might take pleasure in misogynistic narratives which harm women.

Why are women writing and reading about this sort of subject matter? Pairing an understanding of the reader audience as agentic with the presence of these narratives raises questions about the existence and function of ‘rape fantasies.’ Kathryn Gravdal outlines two key points when approaching this topic. First, it is crucial to “recognize that women, like men, have been taught to view male aggressiveness as flattering” (1991:19). Second, Gravdal presents a psychoanalytic approach which understands the female reading of rape as an “anxiety-mastery fantasy” that

enable[s] women to contemplate sexual violence without fear of consequence... not because they wish to be victims of rape but because they can, in the safe space of imagination, explore violent conflicts between men and women and rehearse strategies for living with male aggression” (1991:18).

Janice Radway (1984) offers a similar argument, writing that a possible cause behind the continued production and consumption of these narratives of violence is not that “women are magnetized or draw to it, but because they find it increasingly prevalent and horribly frightening” (1984:72). According to Radway, romance authors’ “preoccupation with misogyny may be the mark of a desperate need to know that exaggerated masculinity is not life-threatening to women, ” *not* a “masochistic desire to experience it vicariously” as the rape fantasy discourse suggests (1984:168).

The framing of the rape fantasy as an “anxiety-mastery fantasy” has implications in terms of how rape functions—or is used by romance authors—as a

method of navigating the stigmas attached to agentic female sexuality while writing stories which largely involve women in sexual relationships. The ‘use’ of rape in romance novels is seen by some scholars as a method of writing female sexuality in a social and cultural context in which female sexuality is stigmatized (Toscano 2012). By removing the agency from the heroine in a sex scene, romance authors also remove the stigma or shame associated with a woman enjoying sex. Framing the encounter as being driven entirely driven by aggressively sexual masculinity allows the heroine, and the female readers, to avoid the stigmatizing narratives which label sexually empowered women as slutty or whorish, thus maintaining their ‘virginal’ purity. Toscano (2012) differentiates between physical virginity from ‘virginal’ status, writing that because sometimes rape is an attempt by the hero to possess and know the heroine, it “leaves the heroine’s core selfhood inviolable, even when her body is violated” (11). The continuation of the heroine’s purity is necessary since it is what eventually ‘tames’ the hero and allows him to fall in love with her. The promise of a happy ending works to negate the horror of the rape, an action which would otherwise be entirely unacceptable.

Forced seduction, a term used frequently in the romance genre, is often at the center of discussions regarding rape and intimate partner violence. As the term connotes, forced seduction is a literal reframing of rape as romantic, a subversive blending of sex, romance, and physical or psychological domination. The heroine initially resists the hero’s advances, but eventually succumbs to him. Some academics and readers see these scenes as rape scenes, the aspect of force immediately negating

any romance in the interaction. The function of forced seduction can be viewed similarly to rape fantasies, removing agency from the seduced to the seducer. Toscano describes forced seduction as something more subversive than rape by examining it as a discursive act: “it is not simply to rape, but to compel an interaction between two speaking persons; to lead the Other aside or astray using persuasive language, to make the Other complicit with her own violation” (2012: 9). Perhaps most interesting is the palatability terminology of ‘forced seduction,’ especially when compared to ‘rape’ or ‘sexual assault.’ Forced seduction represents the dangerous space where rape becomes seduction and consent is always implied. In a society where perceptions of sexual assault are extremely muddled, especially in regards to acquaintance rape, the presence of a concept like ‘forced seduction’ can be seen as a representation of divisive narratives at work.

Narratives of Interpersonal Violence

A discussion of rape-as-fantasy and rape-as-seduction requires a discussion of rape in contemporary society. After all, cultural texts cannot be divorced from the social milieu in which they are created and consumed. Nina Philadelphoff-Puren (2005) argues that an examination of rape in literature can “expose the manner in which literature, in the context of rape, is able to function as a form of legal reasoning which has the power to disqualify a woman’s testimony” in court (31). The discourses in romance, such as the legitimation of forced seduction as consensual since “women say ‘no’ when they mean ‘yes,’” can affect the legal processes regarding rape, validating and promoting narratives which complicate the social and, thus, legal

definitions of rape (32). These narratives of violence-as-romance, as well as affecting the legal system away from a pro-woman stance, can also be used by the victimized women themselves to validate their experiences with an abusive partner.

Julia Wood (2001) examines the narratives used by victims of intimate partner violence, revealing narratives which mirror (or are mirrored by) those found by other scholars in contemporary romance novels and other texts targeted at women (Clawson 2005; Franiuk and Scherr 2013; Hall 2008; Hubbard 1985; Ménard and Cabrera 2011; Ruggiero and West 1977; Toscano 2012). Wood (2001) locates two narratives which normalize intimate partner violence in contemporary society. The first, the fairy tale romance, offers women several scripts to use when their ‘Prince Charming’ is abusive and the relationship fails to “lead to approval of family and friends and a good, complete life” (257). Among these are “the good outweighs the bad,” “I can control/stop it” (251), and the idea that “their partners were not their ‘real selves’ when they were violent” (257). Wood also identifies the dark romance narrative, which functions when the fairy tale romance narrative fails, and considers male violence to be a normal component of romantic heterosexual partnerships. The dark romance narrative is based in essentialist gender roles which identify women as nurturing and men as aggressive. It also follows social scripts that treat a relationship with a man as the ultimate achievement for a woman, and stigmatize ‘single’ status. The dark romance narrative insists that “abuse and unhappiness are not reasons to abandon the relationships because women are supposed to be forgiving and because they need men to be complete” (253).

Some of Wood's participants use the belief that "love can conquer any hardship" to justify remaining in their abusive relationships (Wood 2001:250). This belief is recurring in the romance genre which subjects its heroes and heroines to a spectrum of challenging experiences and then allows them a 'happily-ever-after' at the end of the novel. The reliability of the 'happily-ever-after' ending in the romance genre changes the interpretation of the text. The experienced romance reader knows that, whatever happens in the story, the hero and heroine will realize their love for each other and end up, ostensibly happy, together. Modleski (2008) writes that "since readers are prepared to understand the hero's behavior in terms of the novel's ending, some of the serious doubts women have about men can be confronted and dispelled" (35). Similar to the idea that romance readers understand or infer the "codes" of the genre, readers familiar with the required 'happily-ever-after' will understand that whatever the hero does to the heroine, he loves her deep down. Therefore, to the veteran reader, scenes of forced seduction, verbal abuse, or rape become representations of the hero's evolution toward the realization that he loves the heroine.

Debates on Pornography

Feminist arguments regarding pornography generally fall into two categories: (a) that pornography is a tool of the patriarchy and objectifies women and the female body for the pleasure of men, and (b) that pornography can be empowering, educational, and sex-positive for women whose sexuality has been stigmatized by a patriarchal society (Weinberg et al.; Thompson et al.). The idea that pornography is

the domain solely of men is quickly becoming incorrect and outdated (Kuckenberger 2011), and therefore treating romance as the female antithesis to mainstream male-focused pornography bears little analytical power. However, the idea of romance as a space for feminine sexual fantasies is entirely operational. This, combined with the fact that the romance genre has been critiqued as pornography, validates the comparison of debates regarding romance and pornography.

Just as pornography is the commodification of sexuality, some scholars frame the romance genre as a specific commodification of heterosexual female sexuality. As the term “mommy porn” suggests, the romance and sex-based fiction could be conceptualized as the feminized equivalent of visual pornography (Parry and Light 2014; Snitow 1979). Esther Sonnet (1999) examines the market aspects of the romance genre through a critical feminist perspective, arguing that the capitalist publishing mechanism has adapted to the “re-invented” female sexuality of “post-feminist” consumerist culture (171). In order to capitalize on the ‘self-empowered’ female sexuality, Sonnet argues, “mass market press invokes discourses around female sexuality, feminism, and the pleasures of reading sex” (171). This rather cynical framing of “fiction by women for women” raises issues of capitalist, consumer-driven media and culture and the functioning of gender politics within the resulting cultural milieu (169). In the same way that the visual pornography market arguably profits from selling content that makes available fetishized and taboo content, romance novels can be seen, not only as commodification, but as the subversion of a rising, empowered female sexuality.

According to Ann Douglas (1980), romance novels are targeted at women readers who become addicted to them and their “anti-feminist” content (Douglas 1980). Douglas writes,

[Romancenovels] are porn softened to fit the needs of female emotionality. They are located inside the female consciousness, but so are most current hard-porn (heterosexual) stories...Female, not male, consciousness is the most satisfactory repository and register for the forced acknowledgement of male power. The [romance] heroines initially resist domination, but so do the hard-core heroines. Breaking down female antagonism is half the fun (27).

As well as understandings of romance novels as pornographic and, therefore, oppressive to women, there are analyses of the romance genre which liken it to pornography in a positive light. In the same way that consuming pornography can promote “erotic empowerment,” it is possible that the romance genre can promote in women readers feelings of empowerment within their romantic relationships (Weinberg et al. 2010:1391). Expanding from Weinberg et al.’s findings—that watching porn encouraged their participants to experiment sexually and made them feel confident in pursuing their own pleasure—the consumption of romance novels can be seen as framing romantic, primarily heterosexual, monogamous relationships as exciting, desirable, pleasurable, and achievable.

The romance genre, characterized by the required ‘happily-ever-after’ ending in every book, is seen by some scholars as enabling women to explore social scripts of romantic relationships which tell them that they—average, untalented, women with flaws (Douglas 1980)—deserve a healthy, ‘happily-ever-after.’ At the same time, the socializing scripts in romance novels, just as in pornography, can be seen as

destructive. Feminist arguments against pornography are very similar to arguments against the romance genre, claiming that they encourage violence against women by normalizing misogyny, sexism, and patriarchal attitudes (Weinberg et al. 2010:1389).

Weinberg et al. use a framework of cultural studies which actively resists the Frankfurt School's treatment of consumers as "cultural dupes" who "indiscriminately and automatically take on the behaviors they see...but rather select those that fit in most easily with other aspects of their...socialization" (2010:1391). This framework leaves space for consumers and audiences to be critical, active participants in their consumption. Thompson et al. also resist the moralizing and paternalistic conceptualizations of consumers, but they argue against feminist frameworks as well as those of the Frankfurt School. They argue that even feminist critiques can be determinist because they frame view readers "as unhappy and, more important, unknowing victims of patriarchal oppression" who do not recognize the oppressive narratives they are consuming (1997:438).

Romance Genre as Empowering

Stephanie Wardrop's (1995) assessment of the genre as empowering, despite what she identifies as the sado-masochistic narratives which some scholars interpret as "insidious retribution for women's liberation" (1), follows Thurston's (1987) idea that it is the representation of women as "transcendently powerful" which draws women to contemporary romance (61). In her article on how sadomasochism functions "as an element of power relations within a larger social context" Wardrop posits that the romance genre uses "codes" in order to express the nuances of female

power within the storyline (1995:3,11). Explaining how women reading romance novels are able to find narratives of intimate partner abuse empowering, Wardrop, asserts that female readers are familiar with the “tropes and modes” of the genre and know how to interpret them in ways that most academics, lacking experience with the genre, cannot (11).

Using the idea that the genre employs ‘codes,’ Modleski (2008) takes the stance that the romance narrative in romance novels is based on a female revenge fantasy. The heroine, and the reader, gains satisfaction from knowing that the heroine is “bringing the man to the knees and that all the while he is being so hateful, he is internally groveling, groveling, groveling” (37). However, Modleski also undermines this interpretation and offers an alternate view which removes power from the heroine/reader. She connects the revenge fantasy to what she labels “the disappearing act,” a climactic moment in a novel when the heroine is gravely threatened or leaves the hero and her absence forces him to desperately realize that he loves her after all. Heroines, Modleski asserts, must undertake “an entire process of self-subversion” in order win and keep the hero (38). Therefore, the revenge fantasy of bringing the hero to his knees, requires the heroine to undermine herself, giving the narrative a dubiously empowering status.

Jennifer Crusie Smith’s (1997) discussion of the romance genre provides a narrative which is not often found in the academic literature examining the genre. Her perspective may be unique because she is a romance author herself. Instead of viewing the genre as reproducing a patriarchal, male-focused framing of femininity,

Crusie Smith views the romance genre as a bastion of resistance against patriarchal constraints on female sexuality. This women-centered genre, she argues, “puts women at the center of their own sexuality” and reframes them as active participants in the pursuit of their own pleasure (90). By frankly discussing women’s sexuality, Crusie Smith argues, the romance genre undermines patriarchal views of women as “helpless, asexual beings who must be seduced to respond” (90).

Crusie Smith criticizes the older romances in which “the Patriarchy rages” and female power is reduced to petty manipulation and passive aggression. Instead, she calls attention to contemporary, female-focused romances which “consistently place women at the center of their narratives, dealing with things that engage their hearts and minds” (89). The cornerstone of Crusie Smith’s defense of the genre is that women read romance because it reflects their lived realities.

If the novels weren’t telling the truth, they wouldn’t command half the paperback market and be read by housewives, university deans, high school students, retirees, liberals, conservatives, northerners, southerners, and every other descriptor of women possible. They couldn’t because contrary to everything some feminist critics say about romance readers, women are not stupid nor are they out of touch with reality. And neither is the romance fiction they read (92).

Crusie Smith’s claim is that romance novels resonate with romance readers because they mirror their lived experience. This argument follows the five-part model Schudson (2002) uses to examine the success of cultural objects.

According to Schudson (2002), “a rhetorically effective object must be relevant to and resonant with the life of the audience” (145). In relation to the highly successful romance genre, this implies that the genre’s success is due to its relevance,

or *resonance*, to the lives of consumers. Schudson emphasizes that the role of resonance is a macro, cultural relationship between “object, tradition and audience,” not simply a relationship between the individual consumer and a cultural object (146). This model is similar to Ron Lembo’s (2000) argument regarding the plausibility of media. Romance readers relate to the narratives they find in the novels, finding them plausible, and therefore legitimizing the discursive power of the novels (2000:129). Participants in Lembo’s study who did not find television content plausible would change the channel, just as a reader might stop reading a book, discontinuing the implausible depiction of reality.

Wood (2001) also deals with how romance novels work in relation to readers’ life experiences. Her research uses narrative theory to explain how victims of domestic violence justify their experiences. Since “humans rely on narratives to make sense of their lives,” it follows that all forms of human narrative creation and self expression can be examined as sense-making, coping mechanisms (242). The romance genre is a primarily female space in which romance authors and readers—applying the notion that readers create their own meaning from a text (DeVault 1990; Jenson 1984; Radway 1984)—can form narratives with which to understand their lives. Some scholars postulate that romance novels create spaces in which women are encouraged to react to the stressful experiences of their daily existence, resisting the socialized repression of “fears, anxieties, and resentments they ordinarily keep in check” (Nyquist 1993:166; Radway 1984). Radway follows this conceptualization, framing romance as a place in which women can safely negotiate their oppression,

‘experiencing’ through the heroine, buffered by the reliability of the happily-ever-after and the omniscience granted to them as readers (1984).

Similarly, the presence of the “Brutal Hero” trope in romance can be seen as a method of proving that “an ideal love is possible even in the worst of circumstances and that a women can be nurtured and cared for even by a man who appears gruff and indifferent” (Radway 1984:71). In a patriarchal society, it is logical that female-produced and consumed cultural texts would attempt to navigate their experienced oppression. Snitow (1979) writes that the “particular sort of unreality” in romance novels helps women overlook the “elements in social life women are encouraged to ignore” (143). Instead of understanding male indifference, cruelty, or abuse as what it objectively appears to be, romances reveal that “the hero really loves the heroine and wants to marry her” (Snitow 1979:146). Similarly, in her analysis of gothic³ novels, Joanna Russ examines how the novels reflect versions of reality in which the heroine/reader is terrified of the hero/significant other who either “[1] loves her, [2] hates her, [3] is using her, or [4] is trying to kill her” (1973:688). This confusion, leads to the creation of coping narratives which attempt to make sense of the experiences of the heroine/reader.

According to Wood, “narratives are most urgently sought when experience does not make sense” (2001:242). Romance novels, a dominantly female space, offers a perfect arena for discursive examinations—however covert and stigmatized they

³ Modern gothics are a subsection of the romance genre which is usually darker, full of considerable fear and danger, and often featuring murderous plots in which “the heroine does nothing but worry” before the happily-ever-after ending (Russ 1973:671).

may be—which deal with gender norms, sexual agency, and patriarchal narratives of womanhood. The existence of this predominantly female space is remarkable in a society where media generally follows patriarchal, male-centered narratives. As Schudson (2002) theorizes, “the power of a cultural object or message exists by virtue of contrastive relationships to other objects in its field” (2002:144). Cultural objects do not exist in a vacuum and therefore inherently exist in relationships with other objects. Therefore, according to this model, romance novels wield cultural power because they exist in contrast to other media. Specifically, their status as a female-dominated genre sets them apart from the media of male-dominated mainstream culture.

Jenson’s (1984) brief historical analysis of female literary space and retaliatory male stigmatization draws connections between the idea of a female-dominated, genre-based community and the stigmas associated the romance genre. As, Jenson observes, when women authors moved into the previously male-dominated world of literature, men “abandon[ed] the area rather than be tainted by the presence of women” (23). Thus, since male fantasy is the cultural “measure of worth,” the male departure means that the space becomes stigmatized as worthless, or “trash” (Jenson 1984:24). The pattern of female presences devaluing an activity or object is not uncommon, and explains why predominantly female spaces, such as the romance genre, remain largely absent of men. Therefore, it can be seen that it is the stigmatized status of the genre which allows it to remain a discursive space for women.

Implicit in the analysis of an empowering discursive female space is the idea of community. Nancy Chodorow (1978) offers a historical analysis of how American women form social networks, initially “supporting and reconstituting *one another*” before the suburbanization and isolation of the family unit removed the support of this female community (36). After this change, women were left to fulfill their roles as mothers and wives, the primary emotional, spousal, and parental sustainers of their families, without receiving any support—what Chodorow calls ‘reproduction’—themselves (36). It is possible, that the romance genre provides women with a resource for reproducing themselves, offering spaces in which they can review their experiences with a ‘community.’

Radway’s study, discussed in-depth in the next section, examines a romance reader network connected by a bookseller. Radway was surprised to learn that the readers did not know each other before participating in the group discussions orchestrated for the purposes of the study. This is somewhat expected in light of Chodorow’s analysis of the absence of female networks. The women in Radway’s study rarely discuss romance with others, and express joy and surprise when they discovered that other readers shared their experiences with reading romance. The romance community, Radway realizes does not function on an immediate, interpersonal level. Instead, it is a “huge, ill-defined network composed of readers on the one hand and authors on the other” (97). This implies, that it is the books themselves in conjunction with a larger, more abstract community, not actual book

groups, which solve the sense of isolation and disempowerment felt by the readers in the absence of a direct female community.

Radway's *Reading the Romance*

Janice Radway's (1983; 1984) study on a romance reader community is a seminal work on the topic of romance novels as well as sociological examinations of literature and processes of interpretation in general. Treated by many as a hallmark work, Radway's study is referenced prominently by the majority of academic authors addressing the romance genre specifically (Crane 2001; Crusie Smith 1997; DeVault 1990; Franiuk and Scherr 2013; Gill and Herdieckerhoff 2006; Griswold 1993; Jenson 1984; Larcombe 2005; Modleski 2008; Mukerji and Schudson 1986; Nyquist 1993; Sonnet 1999; Thompson et al 1997; Toscano 2012; Wardrop 1995; Wood 2001) as well as in scholarship on audiences and media studies. Radway's ethnographic study of the "Smithton readers," a group of women romance readers who formed around a bookseller she calls "Dot," examines the process of reading from the readers' perspective, offering an in-depth look at why women read romance. Her treatment of literary meaning as partly produced by the reader (1984) follows trends in literary and culture studies which focus on interpretation as a crucial point of analysis (DeVault 1990; Giswold 1993).

Dot performs a filtering function, recommending and rejecting novels for her customers so that they are able to easily avoid the 'bad' romances. Radway discovers the complex categorization by which the Smithton readers distinguish between 'good' and 'bad.' One especially significant characteristic of the 'bad' romances is the

presence of an “*unusually* cruel hero who subjects the heroine to various kinds of verbal and physical abuse” (1983:67 emphasis added). Radway’s study focused significantly on the role of romance in the women’s daily lives as a form of escapism. The importance of the believability in the novels becomes apparent in the readers’ explanation for their dislike of these overtly abusive heroes: the readers felt “*they* could never forgive the hero’s early transgressions and they see no reason why they should be asked to believe that the heroine can” (1983:67). Novels which asked too much of their suspension of disbelief were rejected. Using Lembo’s (2000) concept, the Smithton readers’ tastes were based on the *plausibility* of the texts.

While they judge the novels according to some measure of realism or believability, the Smithton readers also realize that romance novels are “little more than fantasies or fairy tales” (1984:59). Although they require a level of plausibility, it is the “unreal, fantastic shape of the story that makes their literal escape even more complete and gratifying” (1983:59). This requires that the ‘good’ romance novels balance fantasy and realism to create a world to which the reader can easily escape.

Dot offers her customers more than just a selection of romance novels. She helps them to find the ‘escape’ that appeals to them, recommending or denouncing novels according to the group’s shared tastes. These tastes often relate to the presence of excessive violence or gratuitous sex, both of which the Smithton readers do not find pleasurable (Radway 1984). Interestingly, the romance review websites examined in this study perform a similar function, allowing women to recommend or revile books to each other. Like Dot, the romance review websites facilitate

conversation-like communications between readers. Just as the Smithton readers offered Radway a unique window into the community of romance, these websites are prime sources for exploring romance reader's experiences and thoughts regarding the genre.

Indeed, Radway presents the Smithton women's use of the word "escape" to describe their reading. For some women, reading is a literal escape which allows them to "deny a present reality that occasionally becomes too onerous to bear" (1983:59). Escaping to a world where true love is inevitable, is a reprieve from the struggles of everyday. The escapist function of the romance genre which Radway identifies also relates to the ways in which the Smithton women accept or reject abusive behavior. By focusing on the strength of the love between the heroine and hero, readers can interpret abusive behaviors as acceptable because they occur in the context of a true love relationship. This ties directly to the narrative model which understands narrative formation as a method of coping with and explaining challenging experience (Wood 2001). By offering an escape to a world where the stresses of living in a patriarchal social world—e.g. the threat of male aggression—are transformed into something desirable—e.g. romantic love—romance novels perform a distinctive function.

The importance of Radway's study lies not only in the ethnographic information she gathered, but also in her treatment of the readers as active, interpretive agents. Even though her analysis focuses on the examination of reader choice and active interpretation, Radway considers the idea that while consumption of

romance novels might “enable women to resist their social role,” it is possible that the novels still work in “the maintenance of the ideological status quo by virtue of their hybrid status as realistic novels and mythic ritual” (1984:17). Epitomized by Radway’s study, there is a tradition of examining the (female) consumption of the romance genre with the aim of explaining *why* women continue to read novels which treat the female gender so poorly. This body of scholarship is often colored by a moralizing examination of how these novels might be harmful to the women who, it is often assumed, read them without a critical, reflective attention (Radway 1984). This patronizing tone of inquiry into women’s media consumption, according to Radway, is lacking because it fails to follow the “fundamental premise of reader-response criticism that literary meaning is not something to be found *in* a text. It is, rather, an entity produced by a reader in conjunction with the text’s verbal structure” (1984:11).

In turn, Radway’s own work has been critiqued for making generalizations which overlook differences in life experience among authors and readers of romance. Thompson et al. observe that Radway’s generalizations about why women read romance is deterministic and ultimately just as oppressive as the patriarchy (1997:448). Reinhartz and Davidsman (1992), however, disagree with this critique, lauding Radway’s study as an example of the use of feminist principles in multiple methods research. They also highlight her use of the New Criticism stance, which acknowledges the role of each reader in interpreting the text according to their unique context (1992:210). The perspective of consumers as agentic is critical to this thesis

because it supports a methodology that examines individual reader's perspectives. By following Radway's conceptualization of an agentic audience and subjective text, and by studying the reader-produced discourses of narratives of gender violence, this study will utilize a bottom-up approach and avoid the "condescending treatment" present in other analyses of mass media (Radway 1984:8). Using Radway's feminist, reader-focused approach, this study updates her research by incorporating the Internet, a central component of the contemporary romance community.

Online "Community," Identity, and Meaning-Making

The advent of the Internet has played a significant role in the changing meaning and nature of community. Sherry Turkle (2011) writes that using the term 'community' to describe online spaces, or "virtual worlds," is inaccurate because the idea of community is based on "physical proximity, shared concerns, real consequences, and common responsibilities" (239). This argument falls apart, however, when users are considered 'close' to one another in online space. The romance readers, for instance, often feel that they know each other, interacting online as well as in-person. Romance novel review websites are spaces for shared concerns which relate to the real consequences readers experience as result of their reading. Therefore, keeping in mind Turkle's (2011) argument for the dilution of the definition of 'community,' this thesis purposefully follows the use of the term by the users on the romance novel review websites.

Working with online, user-created content necessitate drawing from previous research relating to community, identity, and meaning-making. Erving Goffman's

(1959) seminal work on interpersonal interaction and performativity uses the language of the theater, dramaturgy, to explain how individuals present themselves in a desirable way in interactions. Individuals, or actors, change their presentation of self and their behavior based on their audience, differentiating between public front stage and private backstage (1959). The possible effects of individuals displaying an idealized presentation of the self are especially relevant for analyzing discussions online. Studies on the topic of online social interaction and identity have analyzed how users represent themselves. Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) used Goffman's model of interaction to examine online representations of the self. They found that the bloggers and users of Second Life programs in their study wanted to re-create their offline selves online, contrary to the idea of "whole persona adoption" (2013:110). The idea that online users are not utilizing the relative anonymity of the internet to create blogging personas and avatars which are entirely different than their offline personas implies that the content generated on the romance novel review websites is—for the most part—a genuine reflection of the users' opinions.

O'Brien and Kollok (1997) present George Herbert Mead's concept of self-objectification, the act of understanding the self, as "objects that have meaning relative to other things in their environment" (170). This distancing from the self allows individuals to examine their self-presentation in relation to the audience, or the generalized other. In terms of online self-representation, this distancing happens on a literal level in the creation of online avatars or even simple usernames. These online identities can be seen as masks, used to navigate the line between real and imagined

selves, and the desired social affirmation of these selves (O'Brien and Kollock 1997:171).

The role of social affirmation and identity is especially crucial for stigmatized groups who struggle to sustain an identity as a result of their stigmatized status. In the case of romance readers, the stigma associated with consuming romance fiction functions as a defining aspect of their identity (O'Brien and Kollock 1997:173). The Internet offers a place for stigmatized groups to 'gather' and share experiences. As suggested in Magdalena Wojcieszak's (2008) study of false consciousness in online groups for radical ideologues, because the stigma is homogenous within the group it becomes normative. Wojcieszak cites other research which suggests that individuals who experience continued interaction with "ideologically homogeneous online groups" do exhibit false consciousness, believing that more people share their ideology than actually do in reality (788). However, she also found that the individuals participating in these groups do not believe that the majority of the population shares their opinions. This is significant because, as part of socialization, individuals receive prompts from others—their audience—regarding their behavior, and "adjust their perceptions and behavior in response" (O'Brien and Kollock 1997:157). If shared-interest online groups de-stigmatize behaviors which would be stigmatized in 'real' life, it is possible that this de-stigmatization extends beyond the space of the group. This is noteworthy for this research because if romance novel review websites make narratives conflating romance and violence normative within the group, it is possible that this normalization might extend to the users' everyday

lives. Romance novel review websites, then, can be framed as spaces that foster an environment in which reading romance is not stigmatized but normative.

The existing research on romance novels creates a rich methodological, theoretical, and analytical environment for an inquiry into the narratives in the genre, but it does not reflect contemporary readers' perspectives or the role of the Internet in the romance community. The existing body of literature on the romance genre does not effectively examine the perspectives of contemporary romance readers in conversation with each other. The readers' perspectives on the narratives they consume are especially crucial in light of the literature on media and audience studies which emphasizes the process of interpretation. This study, by focusing on the contemporary *online* romance community, updates Radway's examination of how the community functions as a discursive, female space in which women implicitly and explicitly examine societal gendered narratives through, and in relation to, the romance genre. Examining the readers' perceptions of the genre they consume, and their consumption itself, this thesis fills a gap in the existing research: How do romance readers rationalize their consumption of a media that—as presented in this literature review—contains misogynistic narratives?

THEORY

Judith Arnold (1992) writes, “to belittle romance fiction is to belittle women” (139). This statement, although a fairly dramatic generalization, supports the feminist theory on which this thesis is based. By examining the content on romance novel

review websites, this thesis is focusing on the perceptions of the readers themselves. This method stands in contrast to analyses that focus on the texts themselves, performing examinations from the researchers' academic perspectives.

Feminist theory informs and legitimates this mode of inquiry, allowing for an academic analysis that focuses on the experience of romance readers. Following the lead of some feminist theories of research which explicitly do not privilege the voice of the researcher over the subject, this study will use a framework which recognizes romance readers, online content creators, and consumers generally as "agents who interact with texts," not "cultural dupes" (Griswold 1993: 465; Weinberg et al. 2010). Additionally, using the standpoint employed by third-wave feminist theorists in their analysis of pornography consumption allows for a framing of romance novels "as a means of self-definition and expression," (Weinberg et al. 2010:1390).

As presented in the literature review, many feminist theories focus on the importance of privileging the voice of the subject, problematizing the academic tradition of allocating agency to the researcher and removing it from the subject.

Thompson argues,

To listen to the voices of women is to affirm their agency, and to affirm their agency is to begin to dismantle one of the intellectual underpinnings of oppression, that is, the philosophy that the 'expert' can impose her or his view of reality on the person he or she studies (Thompson et al. 1997: 449).

This supports the use of reader-criticism framework, which treats "literary meaning is not something to be found *in* a text. It is, rather, an entity produced by a reader in conjunction with the text's verbal structure" (Radway 1984:11).

A danger of imposing ideologies or understandings instead of utilizing them as lenses through which to “interpret women’s experiences through their own standpoints,” is that the integrity of the research is compromised. Instead of accurately portraying the experience of the subject(s), the researcher portrays his or her own experience and worldview (Thompson et al. 1997:448). In order to limit the researcher bias, this project uses a feminist theoretical standpoint which emphasizes and values the experience of the romance readers. Using a feminist theoretical approach positions this thesis to explore romance novel review sites from a standpoint that is inherently challenging a hegemonic patriarchal culture. According to Reinharz and Davidman, “studying cultural products through the lens of feminist theory exposes a pervasive patriarchal and even misogynist culture” (1992:147). This approach also exposes cultural objects which oppose the hegemonic ideologies, such as an interpretation of the romance genre as empowering female sexuality.

METHODS

Additional to the definition of romance by the RWA offered previously, I further specify the term “romance” by excluding subgenres which are more autonomous and on the fringe of contemporary adult romance genre. These subgenres include erotica, teen/young adult romance, historical, and paranormal romance.⁴ Each of these subgenres contains narrative and thematic aspects which add to the complexity of the presence of misogynistic content in romance. For instance, in

⁴ The choice not to include specific titles like *50 Shades of Grey* was deliberate because of its status as a genre-blurring outlier, despite its relevance to narratives of romanticized intimate partner violence.

supernatural romance the hero's violence is attributed to his non-human nature, in a historical romance a rape scene is distanced from the viewer and validated by conceptions of rape as a thing of the past. The breadth of the definition of romance used for this study keeps the focus on the responsive texts created by the readers on the websites. It is acceptable to keep the definition broad because I am analyzing discursive content *regarding* narratives in the novels, not the novels themselves.⁵

This research focuses on content analysis of five romance novel review websites with the aim of exploring how women justify their consumption and enjoyment of romance novels, despite the narratives of gendered violence. Using a Google search, I found *All About Romance* (likesbooks.com), *Heroes and Heartbreakers* (heroesandheartbreakers.com), and *Smart Bitches, Trashy Books* (smartbitchestrashybooks.com). Through snowball sampling from links within the first three websites, I found *Romance B(u)y the Book* (romancebytheblog.blogspot.com) and *Dear Author* (dearauthor.com). Each website is structured differently, as I describe in a coming section, but they all have an internal search function. I used this function to search the sites' blog posts, reviews, user comments, and/or discussion forums for discussions relating to my keywords. I established my initial keywords based on my literature review: "rape," "abuse," "violence," and "genre critique." After my initial exploration of the sites and an initial search with the keywords, I added: "forced seduction," "brutal," "patriarchy," "deal

⁵ Analyses of other categories which share relevant narratives, subject matter, and audiences with romance novels, will be used in this study as examples of previous research and as methodological and theoretical justification. Examples of these are analyses erotic fiction (Sonnet 1999), teen romance (Franiuk and Scherr 2013; Kokkola 2010), "Chick-Lit" (Gill and Herdieckerhoff 2006), and Christian romance fiction (Christopherson 1999).

breakers,” “alpha,” “dark romance,” and “abus-” (which allowed for abusive/abuse/abuser). Following Babbie’s assertion that “both inductive and deductive methods should be used” when creating coding categories, I selected the additions *inductively* based on keywords I found in my initial explorations of the websites’ content (2013:337).

The use of keywords means that my searches automatically explore *manifest* content, but my analyses of the content surrounding the comments, reviews, and discussions containing the keywords will code *latent* content (Babbie 2013:336). Combining directed and conventional content analysis methods (Berg and Lune 2012:542), I am applying coding categories used in existing literature on the violence in the romance genre as well as inductively generated categories informed from the data itself.

For the purposes of this study, blogs (in this case, romance novel review websites) are considered commercial media accounts “produced for general or mass consumption” (Berg and Lune 2012:283). Berg and Lune categorize this type of public archive as distinct from official documentary records such as court transcripts and police reports or actuarial records such as information held by insurance companies (2012). Berg and Lune define content analysis as “a careful, detailed, systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an effort of identify patterns, themes, biases, and meanings...[which are] performed on various forms of human communications” (2012:249). Babbie defines content analysis as

“the study of recorded human communications, such as books, websites, paintings, and laws” (2013:330).

In order to examine the data most effectively, I will be analyzing both manifest and latent content. Lune and Berg present Strauss’ (1990) relevant distinction between *in vivo codes* (“literal terms used by individuals”) and *sociological constructs* (“terms and categories...[which are] ‘revealed’ in the coding of the text, but do not necessarily reflect conscious perspective of the speaker”) (2012:357). After an initial, cursory coding process, I applied a list of both inductively and deductively selected codes (see Table 1) to my sample of more than 100 comments and 25 blog posts. The aim of this research is to determine how these websites and the users participating on them approach and discuss gender violence *when users discuss it*, not to specifically determine how popular the topic is on the websites. Therefore, I collected no quantitative data on how often the users discuss narratives of gender violence.

There are several levels of interpretation occurring in this research project which must be recognized. Initially, there is the interpretation of the text itself by the romance novel reader who brings unique understandings and life experience to the text. Second, there is the process of the users’ self-interpretation and filtering when they post a review or respond to another’s review or comment. Thirdly, the conscious and subconscious biases I bring to my interpretation of the review and comments. Of these three, the level of bias that can be most accurately described is that of the researcher. As a young, female, sociology student in the socially liberal environment

of Whitman College, my understandings and opinions of the social importance of sexuality, sexual agency, gender norms, and gender relations are entirely relevant to the topic of this thesis. Additionally, my identity as a woman means that I have a significant stake in the propagation of media and cultural artifacts that encourage violence against women. My motivation for this research is based on a desire to investigate a female-dominated form of mass media. The ethical issues relating to this project are minimal since content analysis is a method of unobtrusive research (Babbie 2013:330).

Limitations: Who are the Users?

A significant limitation of analyzing romance novel review websites is that the format of online discussions allow for almost complete anonymity. Any demographic information about the users on the site is subject to the possibility of purposeful and/or accidental falsification and misrepresentation since the users themselves provide the information. Therefore, there is no way to obtain verified demographic data about the users.

The subject of this study is the content created by the users on the five romance novel review websites. The term ‘user’ includes those who generate content on the websites, writing, administering, and generally participating in the websites. Often, content creators who play a recurring or administrative role on the websites clearly declare their gender. For instance, Michelle Buonfiglio, the creator and admin of *Romance B(u)y the Book*, makes her female gender obvious by her name, the pictures of herself she posts on the blog, and the personal pronouns she uses for

herself. The other end of the spectrum is the case of User65 whose username is gender-neutral and does not discuss topics or disclose personal information which might identify gender.

ROMANCE NOVEL REVIEW WEBSITES

The five websites examined in this study offer several functions, the basic and most overt of which is to provide a space for romance novel readers to compare notes on the books they are reading. The websites also provide a platform for readers to form an interest-based community with the other readers, a purpose which is explicitly stated in several of the websites' mission statements. The websites also review many of the same books and often discuss similar topics, occasionally having 'conversations' between sites, building a broader romance community .

Aesthetically, the websites share a very similar color scheme, similar to the cover art on many romance genre books; pastel pinks and purples, and elegant cursive text. Several of the websites are also 'decorated' with actual romance novel covers in both advertising and illustrating roles, many of which feature naked, muscular male torsos. This stereotypical woman-centered appearance makes clear that the intended audience of the genre as a whole and the websites is female and predominantly heterosexual.

All About Romance (AAR), the oldest site examined in this study, was created in 1996 and has the depth of content to prove it. The popular site has more than twelve sections of book reviews, countless discussion forums, author reviews, lists of

novels for easy shopping, and a collection of essays on the history of the genre. *AAR* is a self-titled “labor of love” run entirely by volunteers who maintain and create content on the site. *AAR* facilitates book-buying through links to *Amazon.com* at the end of reviews, but the reviewing process is adamantly unassociated with publishers or authors.

Aesthetically, *AAR* has an entirely purple background and its title is a combination of cursive and print. Although the huge blocks of text, lack of images, and limited internal links for organizational and navigational purposes serve to date the site especially in comparison to the others in this study, *AAR*’s mission statement and general communal, self-critical ambiance are replicated in the other four sites.

The *AAR*’s mission statement is as follows:

Our mission is to provide a back-fence atmosphere, a sense of community for lovers of romance novels, to provide honest, thoughtful and entertaining material in order to promote intelligent and diverse discussion about romance novels, and to help readers determine how best to spend their romance novel dollar (“Our Mission” 2010).

This website, as its mission statement might suggest, functions much as Dot’s informal book club functioned in Radway’s study. Women offer suggestions and insight, and ask questions of the group in the discussion forum platforms (i.e. “Could somebody please recommend a romance book about childhood sweethearts/friends without love triangles or cheating?” [User92]). The discussions on the site are—as will be explored further in this study’s analysis of ‘community policing’—very reflexive, often being critical of the novels as well as themselves as individual readers and members of the wider romance reader community. This reflexive discourse is reflected in part of the site’s lengthy ‘About’ section:

Our philosophy is that open discussion of romance novels and the genre itself, including both the positive and the negative, is productive and necessary. As a genre, romance does not always garner the respect that it deserves, but that's probably not news to you. Honest discussion about what is best and worst about romances (and all points in between) not only demonstrates the willingness of romance readers to maintain objectivity about standards within the genre, but gives publishers and authors valuable feedback that they might not otherwise get to hear about what we're buying (or not buying), and why.

Tying community guidelines to the mission of improving the genre's image and offering feedback to those who ostensibly control the texts of the genre, creates a sense of importance and purpose apart from simply being the "back fence" for romance fans.

Heroes and Heartbreakers describes itself as "a community website featuring daily content for serious fans of the romance genre in all of its forms." Although the site is run by Macmillan Publishers, the site claims to be "publisher-neutral" in the books reviewed and promoted on it. The site does, however, based on the organization and aesthetics, feel more corporate and when compared to some of the other websites which are run entirely by volunteers. *Heroes and Heartbreakers* has several sister sites which follow nearly identical formats and are also genre-specific, focusing on science fiction/fantasy (*Tor.com*), young adult love stories (*swoonreads.com*), and crime/mystery (*criminalelement.com*). *Heroes and Heartbreakers* has a 'Community' section which works similarly to the forums on *AAR* where users can log in and participate in the discussions.

Smart Bitches, Trashy Books has a very warm red and pink theme interspersed with stylized images of horn-rim-wearing, 1950's style women. The

site's title and its tag line—"all of the romance none of the bullshit"—are a combination of printed and cursive lettering, referencing the classic romance novel cover. The goal of *Smart Bitches*, as exhibited by the playful title, is to create a place for "irreverent, silly, and smart discussions about all the topics that romance fans enjoy." Started in 2005 by two romance readers, *Smart Bitches* has grown into a prominent romance review website, even publishing several books. Unlike the large population of reviewers on *AAR*, five women write the *Smart Bitches* reviews, posting a cumulative ten to fifteen reviews a month. The "Bitches," as they refer to themselves, also post on the site's blog, covering all sorts of semi-relevant topics. There is also a fairly active podcast started by one of the "Bitches" in late 2008 which occurs about once a week. The communal aspect of *Smart Bitches* is most vibrant in the comments sections underneath each review, podcast, and blog post. Similar to *AAR*, *Smart Bitches* receives a commission when users purchase books through the links on their websites, but their review process is not directly linked with publishers or authors.

Romance B(u)y the Book (RBTB), a nearly entirely pink blog which uses Google's 'blogspot' platform, was started in 2004 by Michelle Buonfiglio. Buonfiglio stopped updating the site in 2010 but it is still active in that users can still read and comment. The tagline of the site invites women to "Dish with the RBTB Bellas about love, sex, family, life and of, course...romance!" The sense of community on the website is reinforced by the use of "Bellas" as an endearing term for the users of the site.

Dear Author (DA) is most similar to *Heroes and Heartbreakers* or *AAR* in its organization and ambiance, lacking the assertively playful air of *Smart Bitches*. The site's 'About' section states: "We review romance books, talk about ebooks and digital technology related to ebooks, and post about all the issues surrounding romance novels" (<http://dearauthor.com/for-readers/>). Created in 2006 "for readers by readers," *DA* has a core group of eight reviewers who create content for the blog, post reviews, and participate in the active comment sections below each post. They post about ten reviews a week. The aesthetics of *DA* are much more gender-neutral than the other four sites, and the site covers a broader range of the genre including romances featuring gay couples (although the focus seems to be on gay male relationships or "M/M romances").

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Romance readers on romance review websites employ a variety of techniques in their discussions of the presence of gendered violence in the romance genre. These techniques allow them to justify their enjoyment of romance in relation to the stigma surrounding the genre, identify and critique the problematic narratives, relate the narratives to their lived realities, and participate in a community of readers who share their experiences. Some readers do not accept the idea that romance novels contain narratives which are problematic for women. By not acknowledging the problematic narratives in the romance genre, these readers create a framing of romance in which the stigmatization and critiques of the genre are unfounded and the readers are

victims. One of these readers, User24, shares her responses to common critiques of the romance genre. Answering the “but you’re a feminist” reaction from non-romance readers who view romance as regressive and misogynist, User24 wonders,

“Why the ever loving shit would a bunch of women write a fantasy about women being oppressed/mistreated/unempowered [sic] for other women?”

On the surface, this question is a rhetorical jibe at critics of the genre. However, it is also an uncanny rephrasing of my research question. From the perspective of an inquiry which cannot dismiss the plethora of academic material which locates problematic narratives in romance (Douglas 1980; Hall 2008; Modleski 2008; Nyquist 1993; Snitow 1980; Toscano 2012), User24’s comment becomes a lens through which the findings in this thesis can be investigated.

The users on the five romance review sites are surprisingly analytical in their discussions, offering insight which often mirrors or explicitly refutes arguments made in the academic literature. This is surprising because it challenges the perspective in many academic analyses that the consumers are uncritical of the media they consume or of the act of consumption itself. Lembo’s (2000) work on television consumption found that because viewers habitually watch television as a relaxation activity—very similar to romance readers—they are not being actively critical of what they are consuming. These findings make it clear that the majority of romance readers who participate in online review websites do think critically about the genre. Their comments offer stimulating insight into how they navigate the narratives they consume in romance fiction in relation to the narratives they experience in reality.

Distinction between Reality and Fictional Fantasies

One of the most prominent techniques users on review websites employ to justify their consumption of romance involves distinguishing between reality and fiction. According to several users, romance readers easily separate reality from fiction, allowing them to accept unacceptable behavior in their (fantasy) partners. Specifically because the reader has made the distinction between reality and fiction, and has placed the behavior in the world of fiction, behavior which would otherwise be unacceptable becomes tolerable or even desirable. For example, User15 writes:

“I think we, as readers, can fall for characters who behave in ways we’d never accept in real life” (User51).

User18 and User22 express similar perspectives

“I find some behavior sexy in books but unacceptable in real life” (User18).

"I'm definitely not a fan of fictional alpha hole behavior manifesting into real life. I have said a million times that if my hubby ever did half the stuff my book boyfriends did...I'd put him 6ft in the ground" (User22).

These comments recognized the presence of romanticized violence and abuse in the genre observed by academic analyses of the genre (Douglas 1980; Hall 2008; Modleski 2008; Nyquist 1993; Snitow 1980; Toscano 2012). User51, User18, and User22 all state that they do not consider the behavior of characters in the novels “acceptable” behavior in real life. This active differentiation between reality and fiction/fantasy means that the readers may not be employing the problematic narratives in their own lives and relationships. If true, this challenges assertions that

women readers utilize the narratives in romances to justify the actions of an abuser (Philadelphoff-Puren 2005; Wood 2001).

For other readers, however, the separation between reality and fiction is not so clear and their experiences in real life inform their consumption:

"I still don't like rape scenes or potential rape scenes (comes too close to home, having been a rape victim myself" (User6)

"...I avoid books that have over-powering alpha males because I had too many bad experiences with men like that who think their big physical size gives them the right to do what they want" (User60)

As self-identified victims of sexual assault, these readers' ability to relegate scenes of forced seduction or abusive behavior to the realm of fantasy is impeded by their experiences in reality. The plausibility of certain narratives, and the enjoyment derived from them, is dependent on each reader's experiences and resulting outlooks.

One of the most prominent academic critiques of the romance genre, as well as American media as a whole, is the conflation of sex and violence (Franiuk and Scherr 2013; Herman 1998:20). In romance novels, the romantic relationship between hero and heroine is often seditiously melded with violence or abuse. As stated in *Beyond Heaving Bosoms*, the book created by *Smart Bitches*, "The fact that the hero Loses His Shit every time he's around the heroine is an indicator of True Lurve [sic] instead of a True Need for a Restraining Order" (2009:144). User67 also identifies the problematic blending of violence and romance:

"Isn't the real subversiveness in the romanticization of rape into forced seduction rather than the inclusion of rape in romance? I.e., by stating that the rape scene, if read correctly, was actually a forced seduction that the act is excusable " (User67).

Just as Kaler (1999), Wardrop (1995) and Radway (1984) discussed the use of codes in the romance genre, several users—such as User67—observe that narratives of intimate partner violence can be framed as acceptable in the context of romance novels. One post on *Romance B(u)y the Book* entitled “You Know She Wanted It, Part, The Second” spurred active discussion regarding romance genre codes on several of the websites. Buonfiglio, reviewing a scene of disputed forced seduction or rape, writes, “there is a scene that could be read by the uninitiated romance fiction reader as flat-out rape” (2007). The comments underneath the post are largely a debate of the meaning of forced seduction, the significance of which will be examined in the section on definitional struggles. Notably absent in these comments were any critiques of Buonfiglio’s insinuation that romance readers’ experience in the genre not only gives them the knowledge to decipher the codes, but that *they do not see rape as rape*.

Users of other websites did not miss the insinuation however, and Buonfiglio’s blog post spurred a post on *Dear Author* entitled “Read Enough Romances and Rape is No Longer Rape” (2007). In the post, the author, referenced only as ‘Jane,’ refutes Buonfiglio’s statement, arguing that the scene in question undoubtedly depicts a rape.

“Let’s not sugar coat it. [The] hero rapes the heroine. There are no nuances that suggest it is not rape. Whether [the author] redeems [the hero] to a readers’ satisfaction is up to each individual reader. But romance readers are not so blind, are we, to repellant behavior that we actually excuse it to make it palatable?” (2007)

The discussion in the comments below this post focuses largely on the role of rape in romance, debating how rape differs from forced seduction or if forced seduction is genre code for rape. Some users, like User69 clearly identify forced seduction as rape:

"Rape is rape. If its forced sexual intercourse, it's rape" (User69).

Other users differentiate between rape and forced seduction:

"I do think its insulting to people who read romance to suggest that we somehow become inured to rape scenes and somehow lose the ability to differentiate them from forced seduction" (User 72).

User72's comment draws parallels between Buonfiglio's post and academic analyses that treat romance readers as uncritical consumers. User72 treats the two terms as obviously different. This is contrary to the view of academics who claim that romance is regressive and that forced seduction is romanticized rape. Thus, the debate among romance readers mirrors the complexities of 'real world' discussions regarding rape which often take place in legal contexts (Philadelphoff-Puren 2005).

The effort to differentiate forced seduction from rape can be read as a manifestation of the use of romance as a coping mechanism. Through the buffers of coded knowledge, as Buonfiglio's post implied, and the fantasy/reality distinction, readers can navigate the experience of rape from a safe distance. Distanced from the rape by the relegation of the experience to the heroine, and with the in-group knowledge that the rape is actually a seduction, the reader can safely experience the horror of a real rape. Kaler (1999) argues that the "distasteful topic [of rape] is made tolerable by the romance readers' coded knowledge" (95) of the genre.

Another article on *Dear Author*, “It’s Still Rock and Roll to Me,” also examines the issue of codes, using the concept of “reader fluency” in relation to genre codes (2013).

“Have readers become too fluent in genre? One thing that seems to be a real strength among Romance readers is the ease with which we can become adept at knowing the kind of books we like and translate genre shorthand when an author doesn’t necessarily spell it out... We may no longer read as closely or as carefully, failing to interrogate things that wouldn’t really sit right if we really thought about them, refusing to be challenged by the possibility of a different perspective or interpretation” (2013).

An important aspect of user’s analysis of the reality/fiction distinction is the idea that narratives learned by reading romance are dangerous if employed in reality. This is a significant critique of the genre as a whole, made both academic and lay/reader critics. For instance, the participants in Wood’s study used narratives similar to narratives found in romance novels to justify their abusers’ actions (2001). User1 voices a similar sentiment on *AAR*: “Such fairytales can encourage people to stay in bad relationships in the optimistic belief that things will improve.” User19 elaborates on this line of thought in another comment thread:

“I think a lot of what can help us love the alpha hero and his heroine together is if we get both perspectives of the story...it makes it more palatable. But IRL [in real life], we don’t know the motives of a guy who seems like a jerk, and even when we do there’s no way of knowing that he’ll change or adapt his ways like we tend to assume in Romance” (User19).

The omniscience given to the reader, especially in the reliably formulaic happily-ever-after world of romance novels, considerably changes the readers’ perception of the hero’s actions toward the heroine. If he is controlling or aggressive, the context of the action within a love story makes clear that his actions are a sign of

his love, not abuse. Thus, the differentiation between reality and fiction or fantasy is facilitated by the readers' knowledge of the romance codes. Academics, who do not necessarily know the codes, are therefore unable to ascribe the narratives they find to the appropriate camp, reality or fantasy. As noted by User23, the difference between what is enjoyable in the fantasy world—as is informed by the omniscient reader perspective—and what would be acceptable in reality is clear.

“I’m afraid I have to confess, I love the He-man stuff...it turns me to goo when the hero is super-protective and primal. Yes, in real life I’d have a problem with some of the borderline stuff they pull” (User23).

The role of the reader’s omniscience in accepting narrative elements like forced seduction is especially evident in this comment from User75:

"I would argue that what makes these stories different than ‘redeemed-rape-in-romance’ stories is her mind set. Not his mind set. Hers. In real life if a girl says no, he’d damned well better stop. But these stories are fantasies. He can read her mind. He knows. She might be saying no, but she means yes. She’s wet and ready. If he walked away like she was asking for (begging for), she would be disappointed in the book....A fantasy like this has nothing in common with actual rape scenes...I am not advocating mind-reading men for real life. In real life, if the girl says no, no is meant" (User75).

Not only does the hero know that the heroine desires the encounter, the reader knows it. In this way, the interaction, which might otherwise be nonconsensual, becomes consensual even if the explicit communication between the hero and heroine indicates otherwise. As User75 clarifies, she would find this unacceptable in real life. In order to make it acceptable, she distinguishes between reality and fiction, placing the “mind-reading men” in the realm of fantasy.

Reader Identification with Abusive Heroes

Ideal masculinity in romance fiction is described as virile, brutal, assertive, muscular, and terse. Almost always, the heroes hold power over the heroine because of their wealth, political influence, social status, physical size, age, or simply how the plot positions them to influence the situation (Nyquist 1993:165). The trope of the powerful hero is quite successful, as is demonstrated by the popularity of the genre, but it is not explicitly problematized more than a few times in the posts and comments analyzed in this study. Generally, the users who do discuss the alpha-male trope do so in a positive light, often adding caveats.

"As long as a woman is able to assert certain boundaries, and there's enough give-and-take in the relationship, I say bring on the macho muscle-bound men..." (User23).

User23 admits to taking pleasure from hyper-masculine heroes, but immediately adds qualifications so that other users know that they are not misogynistic themselves. This demonstrates that there is a stigma against reading 'old skool' romances uncritically even within the romance review websites. This stigma necessitates that the users clarify that they take pleasure in "alpha men" only in the world of fantasy. It is possible that the stigma of enjoying alpha masculinity in romance communities, despite the constant presence of hyper-masculine heroes in romance, is an internalized backlash against the misogyny often associated with the greater societal valuing of muscled, aggressive masculinity. In order to justify the pervasive presence of "alpha heroes," romance readers need to explicitly place "alpha behavior" in the fantasy world.

Monckton-Smith's assertion that men in contemporary society are "allowed to be violent" is mirrored by comments discussing violent masculinity (2012:152).

Many users comment that they are more forgiving toward heroes than heroines.

"In general I think we give a lot more leeway to our heroes. As readers, we do see ourselves in heroes too and identify with their struggles" (User58).

As omniscient viewers of the romance storyline, the reader knows that the hero loves the heroine despite his actions, or that he has experiences in his past which cause him to be aggressive or possessive. With this greater knowledge, the reader can identify with the hero just as much as with the heroine. This framing of the readers' omniscience, however, counters the argument that the romance genre is a female space. Even though a romance novel might be written by a woman and read by a woman, the narrative can still be focused on masculinity.

"I'm just saying that we as women (and I'm definitely including myself in terms of struggling with internalized misogyny) are taught to center men, always. And this often includes focusing more deeply on male suffering than female suffering... Men are always allowed to be more than women" (User62).

Identifying with a romance hero who is abusive toward the heroine is a puzzling position for a romance reader. However, it follows analyses which posit that, in a female-centered-media desert, women have learned to identify with male characters and even to view themselves through the heterosexual male gaze (Berger 1997). This confusion of identity in the context of romanticized violence is evident in User47's comment:

"I knew the Heroine was raped... but I also knew the Hero didn't see it that way—so while I understood the terror for the Heroine, I also understood (to a

certain extent) why the Hero felt he should be able to have sex with her" (User47).

The presence of this opinion in romance is especially disturbing because it mirrors larger societal narratives regarding rape (Philadelphoff-Puren 2008). User47's comment demonstrates the split-identification women experience as a result of patriarchal media: identifying with victim and rapist simultaneously.

In light of this conflict of identity, it makes sense that female readers—and women in general—would form narratives that justify violence done against them by blending it with romance. Romanticizing violence allows the reader to reframe the hero's violence as something desirable, rationalizing the hero's actions and the heroine's/reader's desire. In the next section, I will present another aspect of how romance readers navigate intimate partner violence through a literal framing of rape as seduction.

Definitional Struggles

Another common technique readers use to justify the consumption of romance novels involves what I call 'definitional struggles.' These discussions focused on the meaning of two terms, frequently in relation to each other: rape and forced seduction. The very presence of these discussions is significant because it shows the reflexive and critical approach being taken by some romance readers. Further, the existence of this approach in the romance novel review websites conflicts with analyses that do not recognize the role of the reader in shaping the meaning of a text. The following

quotes from User69, User45, and User43 express different views on the acceptability and meaning of forced seduction:

“Rape is rape. If it’s forced sexual intercourse, it’s rape... Yes, it can have its place in a story, whether historical fiction or contemporary” (User69).

"It's never bothered me because [forced seduction] may start out as, well, forced but ends with all being pleased" (User45).

User69 and User43 express the two most prevalent and most conflicting views regarding forced seduction. While some users have equated it to a zero-tolerance policy in which any resistance makes a sexual encounter rape, others focus on the end result. The next most common response in discussions regarding forced seduction is expressed by User43:

"I'm still not sure what ‘forced seduction’ is so I'll have to read everyone's replies and see if I can figure this out" (User43).

This represents the learning curve necessary for users to understand the genre-specific lingo. By spending more time within the romance review website community, User43 will form a definition of forced seduction. The function of lingo will be discussed further in a later section. The importance of this definitional struggle is its role as part of the romance community. If, as Turkle (2011) claims, an essential part of communities is a set of “shared concerns,” then the inter-user debates on the definitions of their shared terms designates the romance novel websites as a community (239).

“I can’t even admit that what I’m reading is romance”: Navigating Stigma

It is not surprising that reading a genre that is accused of being frivolous, damaging, pornographic, and an instrument of the patriarchy involves experiences of shaming and stigmatization. Many women on the romance review websites discuss their experiences with the judgments of others outside of the romance community.

"My life feels like a lie sometimes. As a librarian people expect me to be a book evangelist...I love reading and I want to share that love with everyone... but I don't actually want you to know what I am reading" (User38).

User38’s comment touches on the stereotype that the average romance reader is an “unhappy housewife” (Thompson et al. 1997:438). As a librarian, User38 experiences pressure to consume what is generally perceived as ‘serious’ literature. This stigma extends to romance authors as well. Identifying herself as an author, User40 comments that the stigma of writing romance “is even worse [than reading it].” Sometimes, the users seem to be immobilized by this stigma, unable to ‘come out’ as romance readers.

“I can’t even admit that what I’m reading is romance” (User35).

“I wish I was as brave as you. I stopped telling people what I read a long long time ago” (User90)

User35 and User90 are so affected by the stigma that, outside of the romance review site, they are unable to acknowledge that they read romance. The stigma around romance works to foster the sense of solidarity among romance readers which also support the formation of the romance community.

"Thanks for standing up and telling the world that being a reader of romance is not a thing to be ashamed of" (User80).

Even within the websites, however, there are stigmas and debates about ‘right’ and ‘wrong.’ The stigma attached to enjoying forced seduction or “he-man stuff” (User23), for instance, is a frequent topic of discussion.

"It's never been a guilty pleasure... I love the alpha billionaire hero. Love him. He can even be an ass but he has to be a redeemable ass" (User85).

“I suppose, in the end, I like my protective alpha men, but the out and out douchy [sic] guys can take a hike" (User18).

Based on Wojcieszak’s (2008) research on how online groups based on stigmatized interests can function to reify a false consciousness, romance novel review sites might initially be perceived as spaces where stigma is lessened, but not removed. However, the idea that the review websites foster a false consciousness that normalizes misogynist narratives is contradicted by the presence of active discussions and critiques of those very narratives. The readers discuss the stigma they face as romance readers as well as their own biases—often framed as ‘personal taste’—against certain narrative elements. It is possible that romance review websites create false consciousness, reifying the normalization of romanticized violence, but the presence of discussions addressing the stigma attached to romance novels and readers suggests that this is not the case. The users are exposed to other readers on the review websites, which might de-stigmatize the act of reading romance to a degree, but the users’ discussions and critiques of romanticized violence contradict the suggestion that the websites foster false consciousness normalizing narratives of gendered violence.

The Romance Community and Female Space

As mentioned in the literature review, this thesis uses the term ‘community’ with the understanding that online spaces function differently than person-to-person interactions in physical spaces (Turkle 2011) and that the term is critiqued for its lack of specificity (Fernback 2007). This use is based on the readers’ use of the term to describe the romance novel review websites as well as the lack of a better term. Therefore, because of the expressions of shared experience and interests on the websites, as well as within the larger romance genre, the romance review websites can accurately be labeled communities.

This feeling of community is actively encouraged in some instances. Most blatantly, *Smart Bitches*, *AAR*, and *Dear Author* describe the function of their websites as distinctly community-oriented. “Sarah,” a founder of *Smart Bitches* writes,

“One thing I’ve been working on over the past two years is to summarize the purpose and goal of the site in as few words as possible, which I think I’ve done: *we connect romance fans with one another*, and with the books they want to read” (2015 emphasis added).

The emphasis on community can be found in all five websites. On *Romance B(u)y the Book*, for example, the users affectionately refer to each other as “Bellas.” On *Smart Bitches*, the reviewers refer to themselves as “The Bitches.”

The use of genre-specific lingo across all the websites is also significant since understanding the genre-jargon signifies in-group or out-group status. This lingo includes the following: “deal breaker,” aspects of a book which the reader finds unacceptable, causing her to stop reading; “old skools,” romances which were written

in the 1970s and 1980s and are generally viewed as containing regressive gender roles and “rapey” heroes; “TSTL” or ‘too stupid to live’ characters; and “DIK” or ‘desert island keeper,’ a book the reader liked so much she would take it with her to a desert island. The consistent use of ‘romance lingo’ means that participating in—or analyzing—the review websites requires a learning curve. *AAR* offers a dictionary of sorts, but the other websites rely on the users’ previous knowledge from their participation in the community. Thus, in order to participate in the discussions, users need to be part of the feminized, readers-only space.

The way that readers police their platforms is perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of the formation of the websites as communities. By enforcing norms, the users are performing a basic function of social groups (Kitts 2006). In a comment thread on *AAR*, for instance, User3 critiques the way some users express their judgment of other users’ taste.

"I've read time and time again, here, maybe not in so many words but in tone, that enlightened, intelligent women don't read bodice rippers or older romances with rapist heroes" (User3).

The sentiment behind this comment is expressed repeatedly as the users continually interrogate how they interact with each other respectfully while bring critical of the genre and how the websites function in the context of the larger romance community.

The reflexive community policing is often in defense of differences in taste. A common refrain, which probably has roots in the stigma romance readers experience because of the dominant view of romance as second-rate literature, is the “Imma read what I want” narrative (*Smart Bitches Trashy Books* 2014).

"Every book falls within the depending-on-you-own-taste range...Reading is a personal experience that takes place in one's own mind and a reviewer, like any reader, forms her own opinions from that personal experience" (User7).

This concept of personal taste is staunchly defended on review websites. As Michelle Buonfiglio, the founder of *Romance B(u)y the Book*, writes,

"Don't matter what floats your fantasy boat. Embrace it, and don't let anybody question your right to it."

Similarly, User89 on *Smart Bitches* writes,

"Don't let anyone talk down to you about your reading choices. Don't call what you read 'stupid' or 'silly' – because it's not. The books you read make you happy, so give them their proper due and say 'Yeah, I love this book. It's awesome and funny and romantic and smart and it makes me happy.' Never apologize for what you read. You are neither wrong nor doing anything shameful. The 'Lit Snobs' can take their opinions and shove them where the sun don't shine" (User89).

The emphasis on personal taste allows for the consumption of narratives that would be considered problematic by many of the analyses presented in the literature review, to become legitimate. Recalling the section on stigma, when the choice to read romance novels is framed as a choice made *in spite* of critiques, it can be framed as an empowered choice. The readers are choosing to participate in a predominantly female space which contains narratives of gendered violence.

In many users' attempts to explain the presence of gendered violence in romance, they employ the idea of the romance genre as a method of coping with the real-world struggles experienced by the readers and authors in their intimate relationships. In discussions of the presence of gendered violence, some users' comments mirrored academic analyses of the genre as a space for coping with the

reality of gendered violence. User71, a user whose comments often share connections with academic discourses, offers an analysis of the role of rape in the romance genre:

“One of the reasons I’ve always thought rape in Romance (and forced seduction) is so popular is because it transforms something that is absolutely and totally unsafe for women in real life into something that [becomes] safe in Romance as the rapist reforms and is redeemed. In other words, it’s a way to symbolically take control of something that women have no control over in real life. I’m not commenting on the success or failure of that strategy, but I’ve always felt it’s a part of what’s going on there” (User71).

This analysis closely follows Wood’s (2001) conceptualization of narratives as coping mechanisms as well as work by Nyquist (1993) and Radway (1984) on the romanticization of rape. As gendered violence is conflated with romance, its presence in romance novels can be viewed as regressive. At the same time, the readers’ active choice to read these narratives can be seen as an empowered decision to confront misogynist narratives in a safe space. Instead of drawing away from media which contains threatening narratives, it can be argued that romance readers are changing the format of the narrative and reframing it so that it is buffered by a happy ending. The narratives are still there, but they allow the reader to navigate them in the context of a larger romance community.

"It's so important to remember how much power a book has to help a person feel better, understand, and even heal...Every time [rape or abuse] is written about with understanding, it tells another women *you're not alone*. Is there a better message to send out into the world?" (User54).

As User54 mentions, an important aspect of this framing of romance readers’ consumption of the genre is the way that the authors handle the narratives. It is not enough that the narratives are present in the novels; they must be articulated in such a way that they are believable and approachable for the reader.

Authorship: Uses and Abuses of Gendered Violence in Romance

In the same way that viewers in Lembo's (2000) study reject content they found implausible, some commenters in this study react forcefully to aspects of plot and character development they found unbelievable. They praise authors who were convincing in their storytelling, lauding their skill at making the unbelievable believable, and condemn those who are unconvincing. Many users who relate to enjoying scenes portraying scenes of forced seduction or who support the use of rape as a plot device or tactic for character development, point to the authorship of the novel.

User44 emphasizes the importance of the author's narrative execution in the plausibility and, therefore, the enjoyableness of a forced seduction scene.

“Forced seduction, *if done correctly*, can be pretty interesting...” (User44, emphasis added).

When discussing the presence of narratives of gendered violence, many readers focus on the skill of the author. They point to the author's ability to sell, or make plausible, narrative elements they objectively understand to be problematic, such as the hero raping the heroine.

“I totally love that book and stand by it, but if it weren't for [the author's] talent as a writer many of the scenes would have been totally unacceptable” (User19).

As User19 notes, the way that the author portrays certain behaviors or events can entirely change a reader's judgment of the book as enjoyable or “unacceptable.”

“I really think it's the sign of a gifted author who can make you not only forgive an alpha hole's behavior but get you to like them...If the author can

convince me [that the characters'] reasons for acting they way they do are sound, then I'm more apt to enjoy the book" (User22).

Thus, as User22 observes, in order for a book to be enjoyable, the characters need to be realistic and believable. When dealing with subjects like sexual assault, especially if it is an act committed by the hero to the heroine, writing a story that balances realism and the necessary happily ending is a challenging goal. As User70 writes, for some readers the combination of an abusive or rapist hero with the happy ending trope is unconvincing and implausible, no matter the setting.

"[Happily ever after] is not possible by any stretch of the imagination whether the act be written in the past, present, or future... There is not place for rape in romance. It is not romantic and never will be romantic" (User70).

Given this assessment, it is logical that authors seek to make the combination of romance and violence plausible by romanticizing the sexual assault or abuse. If the hero's abusive behavior is attributed to his intense love for the heroine, he is more easily forgiven and the happily-ever-after becomes plausible.

In the presence of an abusive hero, the author needs to justify his behavior to the reader in order to justify the happily ever after. Some users observe that because an author provides omniscience in the novel that allows them to understand—and possibly identify with—the hero, his actions become justifiable and forgivable.

"I have to give [the author] credit, she writes the characters so sharply, with blistering attention to their thoughts and emotions, that you can almost forgive the men for their borderline abusive ways. Somehow it all seems to make sense" (User16).

"I remember...being mad that [the author] made me want the hero and heroine together by the end of the book. He treated the heroine in the most abhorrent of ways in the beginning of the book, but [the author is] so talented she made me sympathize. Then I felt all guilty about it" (User17).

User17 recognizes that the romanticization of an abusive relationship is wrong, admitting to feeling guilty for ‘buying’ the narrative that the author successfully ‘sold.’ This illustrates the users’ conscious separation of the fantasy from reality. User17 and User16 both acknowledge that the narratives they are consuming in the romance novels are problematic because of the hero’s behavior, but choose to read the romance regardless. Using a framework that understands consumers as un-agentic, the readers’ continued consumption of romance novels, despite their recognition of the problematic narratives, might be an indication that the readers are confined within a hegemonic, patriarchal media mechanism. A framework that identifies the readers as agentic and capable of choice would follow an interpretation of their choice to read using the empowering aspects of romance. An example of this would be the conceptualization of romance as a coping mechanism: readers consume romance *because* it contains problematic narratives, not in spite of the narratives. Either way, readers who recognize the presence of problematic narratives and still consume and enjoy them—sometimes guiltily, as in the case of User17—give credit to the authors for making the narrative enjoyable and plausible.

Cantor (1989) argues that authors of romance fiction are “culture bearers,” creating texts which are “psychologically liberating but socially regressive” (103). She argues that romance authors are unable to be “agents of social change” because they are trapped in the patriarchy. Thompson et al. present a corresponding idea that both creators and consumers of media are “victims of a patriarchal, capitalistic system of media conglomerates and corporate profits (2010:439). This perspective suggests

that even if romance authors wanted to show realistic views of rape or gendered violence, they would be unable to get their book published or it would not sell. The presence of comments and reviews on the five websites in this study which discuss authors who *do* offer realist narratives, undermines the argument that the publishing process is homogeneously patriarchal system.

Users who discuss the presence of sexual assault or forced seduction in romance often stress the role of an author's skill in representing rape and the recovery period thoughtfully and realistically. Many of these users also discuss the responsibility of romance authors, calling for an increase in the realistic representations sexual assault and gendered violence in order to reflect the lived reality of the readers.

“Authors have to own up to this responsibility and make sure their influence is a positive one” (User68).

“I personally am unable to see [rape] through a fantasy or fiction lens and as a result I expect to see realism when dealing with the aftermath. Some authors I think handle it beautifully while others not so much” (User65).

User50, a romance author, writes of her commitment to representing her characters' experiences realistically:

"As a writer I certainly feel an obligation, if I deal with a character with a traumatic past or present, to present them as truthfully as possible. Reading our 'truth' in stories is one of the ways we all heal, from all sorts of wounds. It's one of the function[s] of stories and always has been" (User50).

While User50's comment problematizes the argument that romance authors cannot be agents of change, it does not dismantle the position completely because it does not take into account the role of the industry as a whole as a narrative-controlling body.

Furthering the framing of romance as a coping strategy, some users discuss how writing or reading scenes of sexual violence can be therapeutic. User60, who identifies herself as a romance author, comments,

“Fiction? Of course. But I thought it was cathartic to write. As the statistics say, many of use were raped or at least forced against our will, and through fiction we can finally get our own sense of power back” (User60).

User60’s perspective is significant in that she has experienced the manifestation of misogynist societal narratives and is also a creator in a genre accused of perpetuating these narratives. As both a critical consumer and a “culture bearer,” User60 contests academic claims that the presence of misogynistic narratives in romance is because romance authors themselves are immured in narratives of the patriarchy (Cantor 1989:103; Thompson et al. 2010). Cantor’s claim that romance authors are unable to be “agents of social change” is especially challenged by the presence of users who identify themselves as romance authors and participate in discussions critical of the romance genre (User50; User53; User60; User75) (Cantor 1989:103). For instance, User50’s explicit commitment to representing her characters’ traumatic pasts realistically has the potential to resist narratives in romance which present sexual assault or abuse as normal and non-traumatic.

As presented in the section on reality/fiction distinctions, User60 comments that she believes romance novels are appropriate places for discussions of sexual violence. This is significant because of User60’s self-identification as a romance author and a survivor of abuse. Similarly, User53 identifies as a romance author and a

“survivor or molestation and rape.” Her comments critique the way some romances handle sexual assault.

“...I've been known to throw books across the room—even those on my kindle—because of how they present survivors. Especially the ‘magic wang’ trope where the survivor is all better now because she found the right guy to screw” (User53).

Following this line of critique, in order for the romance genre to function as a space for women readers to cope with their experiences under an oppressive patriarchal society, the genre must approach misogynistic narratives in a specific way. According to User53, it is not enough for romance novels to contain narratives of intimate partner violence or sexual assault; the novels must present the reality of those experiences. User55 shares this view, commenting,

“Romance-themed fiction that touches in issues of sexual assault is so important... because it allows women the full gamut of the emotional spectrum, the healing process and the acknowledgement that you don't ‘just get over it’ but you CAN move on” (User55).

The romance genre can help its readers to heal, according to User53 and User55, but the genre's representation of the experience needs to be realistic. In order for these experiences to be realistically portrayed, then, the authors themselves need to be skilled. Agreeing with the importance of the presence of rape in romance, User72 emphasizes the author's role in representing rape or abuse in a way that is productive:

“Is rape romantic—No. But neither do I think that it's a subject that shouldn't be dealt with...I'm not sure I agree with the sentiment that there should be no rape in romance. I don't believe it should be there as titillation. But I think it should be there as a subject for writers to deal with. Some may deal with it better than others, but I don't think we can say there should be no rape in romance, full stop” (User72).

In order for romance to present narratives which mirror the gendered violence experienced by the readers while being both pleasurable and realistic, the authors need to walk the line between fantasy and reality in a way that is plausible and satisfying for the readers.

For some readers, realistic depictions of rape have no place in the fantasy world of romance. Often, these users are also those who report using romance as an escape.

"I can't read fiction with horrible characters... I read fiction [...] to escape that. I'm not saying that my fiction has to be unrealistic; I just do not want to spend more time than necessary with nasty people and I don't want to see them have a happy ending!" (User14)

The escapist aspects of romance can also be framed as a coping method. Rejecting or avoiding romances which contain narratives which are "too close to home," allows the readers to control the narratives they consume (User6). They can escape from the reality of their daily lives into the fantasy of the romance:

"Romance novels have gotten me through difficult times" (User31).

"I love the escape, and the romance, especially since I've never been asked out, etc, nada" (User39).

"Romance novels are a fantasy, an escape (some of the time)" (User24).

Romance can become a space for fantasy entirely separate from reality. Instead of dealing with their real-world experiences using the 'safe' misogyny some users observe in romance, these users express a desire to use romance to remove themselves from these experiences. The idea that the consumption of romance is an escapist activity, is common among academic analyses of the genre. It is not,

however, equally common in the user-created content analyzed for this study. This may be because discussions relating to rape, forced seduction, abuse, and gendered violence tend not to draw participation from readers who experience romance as escapist. This disparity between my findings and the literature might also be due to generalized conceptualizations of romance readers as housewives desiring an escape from their chores (Modleski 2008; Radway 1984; Thompson et al 1997). The success of romance, then, relies on the authors' ability to wield narratives in such a way that they can function both as an escape and as a navigational tool for addressing the readers' experiences.

CONCLUSION

By adding to existing literature, this thesis explains how romance readers make sense of their consumption and production of misogynistic narratives. In analyzing how romance readers perceive the presence of narratives that blend romance with violence, arguably normalizing the presence of violence within intimate relationships, this project further affirms the presence of these narratives based on the readers' perceptions of their existence. However, the result of this project is a more complex framing of the dichotomous view of romance as regressive or empowering in academic analyses of the genre. The findings of this thesis do not fall along the same lines as analyses which make the case for romance as either misogynistic or empowering, because the user-created content does not follow such a polarized organization.

Most importantly, by examining the perspectives of the readers, this project employs their expertise in the romance genre and legitimates their experience as readers of romance. The use of romance novel review websites to capture reader responses fills a gap in the existing research, which has not sufficiently examined the romance genre from the perspective of the readers. The result of this approach in conjunction with the current literature is an increased understanding of how romance readers understand the romance genre and the role(s) it plays in their lives: some readers use the genre as an escapist fantasy and others perceive their consumption as a method of coping with the misogyny they experience in reality.

How the genre fulfills the readers' needs depends on several factors. The most significant to the users whose comments were analyzed for this study was the skill of the author. In order for the reader to find a romance novel pleasurable or to effectively use it as a coping mechanism, the narratives must be sufficiently plausible. The differences in what readers find plausible or implausible is related to each reader's individual taste and informed by their life experience.

Similar to assertions made by previous research on online groups (Wojcieszak 2008), romance novel review sites are spaces where the stigma of reading romance is lessened, but not removed. The idea that false consciousness which normalizes misogynist narratives might be fostered in review websites is refuted by the presence of discussions and critiques of those misogynist narratives. The discussions that take place on the review websites are analytical—often rivaling the insight of academic analyses due to their insider knowledge of the genre. The readers who participate in

these discussions are critical of the genre and their own consumption of it. They identify and discuss the presence of misogynistic narratives in the romance genre, attempting to rationalize the pleasure they gain from their consumption of the genre despite the presence of narratives which many of them view to be problematic. The general outcome of this research is a record of the online romance community's reflective negotiation of the narratives of sexual violence in romance novels. Far from being non-critical consumers, the users on the romance review websites offer unique, analytical insight into the world of romance novels.

This project was limited by the anonymity of the online medium. Further research might be able to mobilize the resources needed to examine the same questions in the context of demographic data such as age, race, gender, marital status, income, education, religion, and/or political preferences. Longitudinal studies of romance consumption might be able to track how readers' life experiences affect their consumption patterns or reading preferences. Additionally, an investigation of how reading romance novels affects readers' intimate relationships would shed light on whether, despite their analytical discussions of the problematic narratives in romance, the readers may still be internalizing them and applying them to their intimate relationships.

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Appendix

Table 1. Codes

CODES		DEFINITION
Critique/ID of violence		Critique/identification of narrative of violence in the genre/novel
Power dynamics		Discussion/mention/critique of gendered-power dynamics
Critique of female gender roles		Critique of how female gender roles are depicted
	"TSTL"	"Too stupid to live" description of character
	"Weak"	Identification/critique of depiction of female character as weak, submissive, victim-like
	"Taming"	Heroine "tames" or heals the hero
Critique of male gender roles		Critique of how male gender roles are depicted
	Masculinity	Discussion of what "masculinity" is
	"Brutality"	Identification of hero as "brutal"
	"Bad boy"	Defining 'bad boy', like/dislike
	Possessive	Identification of hero being depicted as possessive (reader can like/dislike)
Community		"Meta" discourse about the online community
	Critique of other critiques	Community policing
Identification with narratives		Personal identification with any part of the narrative
"Forced seduction" = rape		Identification of forced seduction narratives as depictions of rape
Defense of reading		Reader/commenter is defensive about reading/enjoying these books
	Agency (R2R)	Reading choice as agentic, "read what I want to" (independence), "Right to Read"
	Personal taste	Discussing personal taste
	Stigma	Mention/discussion of the stigma of reading

		romances containing these narrative elements
	"Yes, but" approach	Recognition of violent narratives, but still enjoying the books
Justification of narratives		
	Conflict in reality	Discussion of conflict as part of reality and fiction
	Responsibility	Responsibility of the genre to address issues of reality (like sexual/gender violence) appropriately
	Good use/bad use	Good/bad treatment or use of violence by the author (gratuitous v. adding to the plot)
Authorship		Discussion of author's skill, especially in "selling" violent narratives as romantic
Reality/fiction		Reader/commenter discusses different between reality and fantasy/fiction
	Escapism	Reading romance as escapism
	"I can tell the difference"	
"Old skool"		Reference to "old skool" romances as more problematic, depictions of rape as a thing of the past
"Deal breakers"		Aspects of the storyline/depictions of violence which are unacceptable to the reader
Genre Critique		
Education Level		Education level of the writer/readers is discussed
Definitional Struggle		Writers/readers struggle with defining terms, i.e. "what is rape," "what is forced seduction"
M/M		Discussion of homosexual romance subgenre in relation to hetero gender roles, power