

Love at The First Rose:

The Gender-Biased Narrative of Love in *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*

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Abstract

The Bachelor and *The Bachelorette* are some of the most successful reality TV shows of the 21st century and continue to reach a sizable audience. The *Bachelor/ette* franchise may not be perfectly representative of dating reality, but its success demonstrates that it does represent the narrative of love deemed ideal by society. This study examined the latest seasons of *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*, season 20 and season 12, respectively, to analyze narrative themes between the seemingly identical programs. Data was collected for “pre-date” reaction, date activity, date conversation, “post-date” reaction, and elimination ceremonies. Special note was taken anytime “I am falling in love” or “I am in love” were said during the show. Analysis revealed significant gender differences between the two shows concerning gender-stereotypical group date activities, the importance of the family for the female, and the need for men to prove they disobey societal commitment phobia norms.

Keywords: *The Bachelor*, *The Bachelorette*, love narrative, reality TV, commitment phobia, gender differences

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In the spring of 2002, ABC launched one of the biggest reality TV show hits of the decade: *The Bachelor*. Riding the success of two seasons of *The Bachelor*, ABC quickly launched a spin-off, *The Bachelorette*, in the summer of 2003. Both shows are still on air, with *The Bachelor* recently concluding its 20th season and *The Bachelorette* concluding its 12th season. Although viewership has declined in recent years - the first season of *The Bachelor* saw 10.7 million viewers - it still pulls in a sizable audience of 8.2 million viewers, most of whom are women, and 2.4 million are 18-49 years old. (Poggi, 2015). Between August 2015 and May 2016, the latest season of *The Bachelor* was the fourth most popular TV series on Twitter with an average of 248,000 tweets per episode (Nielsen, 2016).

Since its conception, ABC continues to launch spin-off shows: *Bachelor Pad*, *Bachelor in Paradise*, *Bachelor in Paradise: After Paradise*, and *Ben & Lauren: Happily Ever After?*. None of these shows received the same acclaim as *The Bachelor/ette*. Nevertheless, the franchise developed a group of loyal followers who coin themselves Bachelor Nation. Other media have not overlooked the popularity of the franchise and the show inspired numerous adaptations, including skits on Saturday Night Live, the *Burning Love* (2012) mini-series parody, and Lifetime fictional TV show *Un-Real* (2015).

The *Bachelor/ette* franchise is a romance reality TV show comprised of one bachelor/ette whittling down 25 suitors through a myriad of dates over the course of the season until they find the person they are ready to propose to. On *The Bachelor*, the 25 suitors are all females ready to settle down and be one the bachelor proposes to in the season finale. On *The Bachelorette*, the

suitors are 25 males ready to settle down and propose to the bachelorette in the season finale. Throughout the season contestants go on a variety of dates all over the world in the hopes of determining if they have found ‘the one’. If a contestant does not win the hand of the bachelor/ette, that contestant may become the bachelor/ette for the next season of the alternative show. For example, season 12 *Bachelorette* Jojo Fletcher was previously a runner-up suitor to Ben Higgins on season 20 of *The Bachelor*. Aside from the gender of the contestants, the two shows purport themselves as identical.

Some critics may be quick to pass off the *Bachelor/ette* franchise as reality TV “garbage” with little impact on the societal narrative of love. Such critics underestimate the influence of such a popular form of media. Reality TV may not be perfectly representative of reality. Yet, in presenting itself as authentic, and selling itself as entertainment, it does demonstrate a carefully constructed narrative that represents a different form of reality. The narrative in hit reality TV shows, such as *The Bachelor/ette*, can therefore reveal a deeper societal narrative. Comparing seemingly identical shows, like *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*, may lead to a better understanding of the complexities of society’s narrative of love. In particular, it can reveal if the narrative of love varies depending on one’s gender.

Literature Review

Authenticity on TV

Reality TV can be loosely defined as “unscripted entertainment programming” (Mitarca, 2016, p. 20), but contains many sub-genres beneath this broad categorization. *The Bachelor/ette* franchise falls under the romantically themed reality TV genre, but most specifically falls under the “Must Marry TV” genre (McClanahan, 2007). The Must Mary TV genre is a television trend

that uses a game-show format to pair a woman and man in a long-lasting romantic relationship, claiming to give men and women the opportunity for true love and life-long happiness. These shows send the message to audiences that in order to be fulfilled, individuals must find ‘the one’ at some point in their lives (McClanahan, 2007).

Bachelor/ette programming can also be defined as a “docusoap” (Mitarca, 2016; Glebatis, 2007). A docusoap is a genre that combines the documentary genre with the soap opera genre. It is a documentary in that it films supposedly ordinary people and presents events that truly occur. However, due to heavy editing in the production room, it takes on the quality of a soap opera. A docusoap is genre “built in the editing room, through abrupt cuts between scenes and characters in order to keep up the audience’s interest”; so it does not focus on the depths of subjects, like documentaries” (Mitarca, 2016, p. 21). It becomes serial in nature and frames “melodramatic content so that audiences are more likely to become invested in the program” (Glebatis, 2007, p. 323). The serial nature of the docusoap makes it easier for audiences to emotionally invest in program content due to the formation of parasocial relationships (Glebatis, 2007). A parasocial relationship is a one-sided relationship in which a viewer experiences feelings of connectedness towards a media personality, despite the lack of interaction or realism. Parasocial relationships are more likely to form with serial programming because “after watching a series regularly for a period of time... viewers become familiar with the personalities, preferences, and habits of characters and may come to feel that they know the characters as well as friends or neighbors” (Glebatis, 2007, pg. 322). Parasocial relationships indicate a viewer is actively absorbing and processing program content.

Programs in soap opera genre, despite that they contain wholly fictitious content, often become intensely real to viewers (Glebatis, 2007). Avid fans of soap operas will send cards, gifts, and ask for advice from characters on the shows – *even though the characters do not exist*. Studies have found that heavy viewers of soap operas hold more distrustful attitudes and expect more marital problems (Glebatis, 2007). Considering that these effects occur for fictitious programs, the effects may be even more significant for a program that is purported as real and is conducive to the development of parasocial relationships.

Previous research has found *The Bachelor* impacts some viewers. Researchers Laura Vandenberg and Steven Eggermont conducted a three-year-long study on 498 Belgian adolescents to explore the motivations and effects of romantically themed reality television, such as *The Bachelor* (2011). At the time of their study, 41% of American prime-time reality programs were sexually oriented. They found that viewing romantically themed reality TV was a significant predictor of the frequency girls talk about sex with peers and of the boys' perception of sexual experience of peers (Vandenberg & Eggermont, 2011).

In a study on the content of dating shows and viewer perceptions of dating, researchers observed that dating shows like *The Bachelor* have themes that affirm attitudes that “women are sex objects, that dating is considered a game, and that men are sex-driven” (Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007). Researchers found that men were more likely to perceive higher realism in dating programs and more likely to endorse such attitudes. The higher the frequency of viewing, the more likely they were to endorse these attitudes. They also found significant correlation between frequency of viewing and endorsement of two dating behaviors: drinking alcohol and use of a hot tub or spa early in a dating relationship (Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, &

Smith, 2007). This research suggests that reality TV's seeming portrayal of authenticity may affect viewers' behaviors after the TV gets turned off.

Modern Societal Narratives of Love

The popularity of the *Bachelor/ette* franchise's narrative of love largely stems from its placement within the larger, societal narrative of love. Society's narrative of love has not been consistent throughout history, and the current pain of love is situated in a period of modernity (Illouz, 2011). Modernity marks a period of "sobering up" in which society became more secular and individualistic with questions arising concerning equality and identity. Modernity transformed love in that it brought to light gender role differences and brought about the idea that love could assist in social mobility and freedom. A key element in this transformation was the emergence of "marriage markets". Sociologist Eva Illouz defines marriage markets as "encounters which seem to be monitored by individual choice and taste in which individuals seem to choose and exchange the attributes desired in another" (Illouz, 2011, p. 50). Previously, marriage was a social negotiation that largely depended on equal social standing and finances. In marriage markets, one could exchange "sexiness" for social mobility. Consequently, the choosing of a partner became a more complex sociological endeavor with an expanded field of partners to choose from. These marriage markets serve as the foundation for romantically themed reality shows like *The Bachelor*.

The emergence of marriage markets led to the transformation of sexual freedom, resulting in "commitment phobia", and a transformation in the emotional interactions of heterosexual couples (Illouz, 2011). According to Illouz, commitment phobia is primarily associated with males. This is due to males choosing a sexual market over a marriage market, which is due to the

association that more sexual partners correlates to more power. Men can “choose younger, less affluent, less educated partners” (Illouz, 2011, p. 77) and thus have a wider field to choose from. Women have more exclusivist pairing strategies because they have a smaller field of choice. They must enter the marriage markets earlier due society placing more emphasis on a woman’s age and fading attractiveness than on a man’s, making the undesirability of a woman’s age as a factor for decreasing sexiness. The tension between female exclusivist pairing strategies and male commitment phobia results in differences in how they are expected to behave in love (Illouz, 2011). Although the *Bachelor/ette* franchise may initially appear to contradict commitment phobia because all participants on the show actively seek a life-long partner, arguably part of appeal of the show is the juxtaposition to society and why love hurts.

Myths of *The Bachelor/ette*

The *Bachelor/ette* franchise writes its own narrative of love, and the basis stems from the ‘fairytale’ love story. There are two primary myths that fall under the fairytale love story that *The Bachelor/ette* emphasizes (Glebatis, 2007; McClanahan, 2007): “Myth #2: There’s such a thing as ‘love at first sight’” (Galician, 2004, p. 127) and “Myth #10: The right mate ‘completes you’ - filling your needs and making your dreams come true” (Galician, 2004, p. 207). The program emphasizes Myth #2 with the limo entrance in episode one and consistent references throughout the season to the limo entrance, even if the bachelor/ette may not choose the ‘love at first sight’ suitor by the end of the season (Glebatis, 2007). The program emphasizes Myth #10 by means of the competition for the bachelor/ette, the display of how life is better with the bachelor/ette, and the portrayal of rejected suitors as losers (Glebatis, 2007; McClanahan, 2007).

The narrative of love in *The Bachelor/ette*, along with Myths #2 and #10, exists in a world of heterosexual imaginary, particularly patriarchal heterosexuality (McClanahan, 2007; Yep & Camacho, 2004; Pozner, 2010). Heterosexual imaginary “promotes heterosexuality as the only acceptable social arrangement that can possibly lead to romance and then marriage to achieve happiness” (McClanahan, 2007, p. 306). Heterosexual imaginary carries connotations as to how gender should behave, such as the stereotype that women must act as a care-taker for men (Yep & Camacho, 2004).

Previous research focuses on the manifestation of these gender differences in *The Bachelor* in relation to the fairytale narrative, primarily as female contestants compete for the affection of the bachelor. In order for any of the female contestants to achieve their fairytale ending, they must behave in an accepted manner (Yep & Camacho, 2004; Pozner, 2010; Dubrofsky, 2009; Dubrofsky, 2011). First, the show teaches that a sign of a man’s affection is the amount of money he spends on gifts and dates, and one should not expect an emotional connection (Pozner, 2010). Men must provide both pleasure and financial comfort, and women must put aside cynicism and wait for prince charming to come. It is acceptable for women to give up their careers in the hopes of finding love - and they cannot have a better career than the man - but less acceptable for men to do so. In order to be appealing, women must fit a white, Western tradition of beauty: the contestants are under a size 6, and usually have long blonde hair, supermodel bodies, and surgical enhancements (Pozner, 2010; McClanahan, 2007; Brophy-Baermann, 2005; Dubrofsky, 2011). Finally, the women must be emotional, but not too emotional (Dubrofsky, 2011).

In examining *The Bachelor*, equally valuable are the “losers”, the women sent home, and the “winner”, the woman who gets the proposal. A key character in the *Bachelor* docusoap is a woman who initially seems like she will be a viable contender, but slowly unravels throughout the season, becoming more and more emotional, until she provides “the money shot” (Dubrofsky, 2009). The money shot is a term taken from film pornography, but in *The Bachelor* it is a shot that “shows a woman’s emotions as spectacular and excessive, signaling that she is unable to control herself and therefore unfit for love” (Dubrofsky, 2009, p. 355). A female contestant who provides the money shot is quickly sent home.

Although the fairytale love story has been widely discussed in relation to *The Bachelor*, less has been researched on *The Bachelorette* and what tropes may be found in this program. Even less has been said on comparing *The Bachelor* to *The Bachelorette*, with the exception of an analysis conducted Michelle Brophy-Baermann (2005). In her comparative research on the third season of *The Bachelor* and first season of *The Bachelorette*, she found that there are noticeable gender differences between the shows, despite obeying the same formula. Namely she found that the male suitors are portrayed as confident, sometimes arrogant, and the female suitors are portrayed as hopeful and desperate. She also found that dates tend to involve “guy things” (2005, p. 33) and physical activity, so women who can be “one of the guys” have an advantage. Additionally, the female suitors get into more fights with each other, and if females are rejected, they tearfully leave talking about broken hearts. If males are rejected, they blame the bachelorette for not choosing them. Brophy-Baermann did find some similarities between the shows, namely the importance of alcohol in the dating ritual and the emphasis of family values throughout the show (2005).

Brophy-Baermann provides a useful entry into the world of comparing *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* but does not go as in depth as other studies focusing on either *The Bachelor* or *The Bachelorette*. If *The Bachelor/ette* both endorse the narrative of a fairytale love story, are there gender differences in the portrayal of this story? Female contestants may be expected to behave in a certain manner, but how are male contestants expected to behave? Additionally, the basis of the show concerns the dates that contestants go on, yet little research has focused on the possible narrative importance of these dates, if there is one. This research hopes to fill some of these gaps left in previous analysis of the hit franchise.

Method

The primary method used in this research was a narrative inquiry asking “why this story here-and-now?” (Bamberg, 2016). The data consisted of the latest season of *The Bachelor*, season 20 starring Ben Higgins as the bachelor, and latest season of *The Bachelorette*, season 12 starring Jojo Fletcher as the bachelorette. Both were contestants on previous seasons of the franchise, although it is never mentioned on Ben’s season that he competed on season 11 of *The Bachelorette*. It is a central point of discussion for Jojo’s season, and she competed on season 20, Ben’s season, of *The Bachelor*.

Each episode was an hour and a half long, totaling to 30 hours of footage for the combined seasons. The only episodes analyzed were those understood to be within the ‘real’ timeline of the show, not those filmed after the show finished production like the “Men/Women Tell All” episode and “After the Rose” episode. Episodes of each season were watched in alternative order; i.e. the researcher watched episode one of *The Bachelor*, then episode one of *The Bachelorette*, then episode two of *The Bachelor*, episode two of *The Bachelorette*, and so

forth. This was done to ensure more comparative data collection and highlight abnormalities. No episodes of either season were watched prior to data collection.

For data collection, the researcher noted “pre-date” reaction, the type of date (i.e. one-on-one, group date, hometown, etc.), date activity, conversations during date (taking particular note if anything was said by contestants along the lines of “falling for...” or “in love with...”) “post-date” reactions, and elimination ceremonies. No data was analyzed during collection to eliminate researcher biases in data collection. After data collection, notes were coded and reorganized into themes and conversation for each date. Data was then comparatively analyzed, comparing both dates within each season (i.e. comparing one date on *The Bachelor* with other dates on *The Bachelor*) and across seasons (i.e. comparing a date on *The Bachelor* with a date on *The Bachelorette*).

Show Formula

The Bachelor and *The Bachelorette* follow nearly identical formulas (see Figure 1). For the sake of simplicity of explanation, the following is the premise for *The Bachelor*. The bachelor, a previous contestant in the franchise, hopes to find his future wife in a sea of 25 hopeful female suitors. Over the course of the season, the bachelor and suitors go on a series of dates planned by the bachelor and the producers.

In the first episode, the bachelor meets each of the contestants individually as they step out of a limo to make a first impression. Contestants may dress in costume, give the bachelor a present, or say something witty to stand out. The contestants spend all night at a cocktail party and may try to speak individually with the bachelor. After the first episode, suitors and the bachelor go on a series of dates all over the world. The possible dates are a one-on-one date, two-

on-one, group date, hometown date, and fantasy date. The one-on-one date are one suitor and the bachelor; all involve a daytime activity and end with dinner. The two-on-one dates are two suitors and the bachelor; the bachelor must eliminate one of the suitors before the date ends. The group dates are a group of suitors and the bachelor; all involve a group activity and end with a cocktail hour in which contestants may speak with the bachelor individually. In hometown dates the bachelor visits the hometown and family members of each of the suitors. The fantasy date begins as a one-on-one date, but the bachelor may offer the suitor the chance to stay overnight together in the “fantasy suite” without any cameras. Each episode ends with a rose ceremony in which the bachelor gives roses to the suitors he wants to stay in the show. If a contestant does not receive a rose, they are eliminated. Contestants may leave of their own volition. In the finale episode, the finale two suitors meet the bachelor’s family and he chooses one suitor to propose to. The formula for *The Bachelorette* is identical except that one of the suitors proposes to the bachelorette in the finale rather than the female proposing.

(Figure 1)

I. Episode One - First impression

- A. Get out of limo
- B. Long cocktail hour
- C. Rose ceremony

II. Episode Two

- A. Group date
- B. One-on-one date
- C. Group date
- D. Rose ceremony

III. Episode Three

- A. One-on-one date
- B. Group date
- C. One-on-one date
- D. Rose ceremony

IV. Episode Four - Switch to new location, in US

- A. One-on-one date
- B. Group date
- C. Two-on-one date
- D. Rose ceremony

V. Episode Five - Switch to new location, outside of US

- A. One-on-one date
- B. Group date
- C. One-on-one date
- D. Rose ceremony

VI. Episode Six - Switch to new location, outside US

- A. One-on-one date
- B. Group date
- C. One-on-one (or two person date on Bachelorette, for the first time ever)
- D. Rose ceremony

VII. Episode Seven - either in same location, or switch to different location

- A. One-on-one date
- B. One-on-one date
- C. Group date
- D. One-on-one date
- E. Rose ceremony

VIII. Episode Eight - Hometown dates

- A. Hometown 1
- B. Hometown 2
- C. Hometown 3
- D. Hometown 4
- E. Rose ceremony

IX. Episode Nine - Switch to new location, outside US. Fantasy Suite.

- A. One-on-one date
- B. One-on-one date
- C. One-on-one date
- D. Rose ceremony

X. Episode Ten - Finale

- A. Suitor A meets Bachelor/Bachelorette family
- B. Suitor B meets Bachelor/Bachelorette family
- C. All day date with one of the suitors
- D. All day date with other suitor
- E. Reject one of them
- F. Proposal

Results

Types of Dates

The first area of analysis concerned the type of dates contestants embarked on over the course of two programs and if there was a gender difference in date activities. In some contrast to Brophy-Baermann's findings, there is not an overt gender difference in all the dates between the two shows. The most gender stereotypical activities take place on group dates, whereas individual dates are more gender neutral. Group dates focus on the suitors participating in an activity, often a competition based one. On *The Bachelor*, the group dates involve the women, in chronological order: (1) going to school and doing "school" related activities, like bobbing for apples and placing states on a map, (2) participating in a scientific assessment of love to see if they were physically compatible with Ben, (3) playing a game of soccer, (4) performing in a Vegas talent show, (5) taking Spanish lessons and using what they learned to cook a Mexican dish, (6) swimming in the ocean and feeding wild pigs, and (7) rowing boats on a lake and flying a kite at a barn. These dates are not too overtly stereotypical until compared with the men's dates. On *The Bachelorette*, the group dates involve the men: (1) pretending to be firefighters and "rescuing" Jojo from a building, (2) participating in "love sports" at ESPN, (3) performing at a stand-up comedy show called Sex Talks, (4) playing a game of football, (5) sand surfing, (6) playing a game of soccer, and (7) playing truth or dare and other games in a hotel room.

The individual dates focus more heavily on travel as a date activity. Of the fourteen individual dates on *The Bachelor*, eight involve travel as one of the main date activities, usually traveling by helicopter or boat. Of the thirteen individual dates on *The Bachelorette*, five involve

traveling as a date activity and four involve general walking or hiking to another location as a date activity. The non-travel date activities are designed as a collaborative experience for the couple in which they must work together, such as in dance lessons.

On *The Bachelor*, the individual dates involve: driving around southern California with Ice Cube and Kevin Hart, relaxing in a hot tub in a jacuzzi store, a plane ride that ends with a hot tub in a prairie, eating and swimming at a spa, a helicopter ride over Vegas, marrying couples in Vegas, walking a runway in a show for Fashion Week in Mexico, a balloon ride that ends with a picnic, traveling on a yacht and fishing, volunteering at a Youth Center, spending a day alone in Wrigley field, rafting down a river, releasing baby turtles into the ocean, and swimming in a waterfall. On *The Bachelorette*, the individual dates involve flying to San Francisco and going to the Golden Gate bridge, yoga, swing dance lessons, a husky-led sled ride that ends with a hot tub in the woods, shopping at beachside stores, climbing on rocks at the beach, watching and participating in performance art, eating snacks in a car and watching gauchos (Argentinian cowboys) tame horses, a private jet ride, making wine at a vineyard and drinking wine in a hot tub, petting horses and speed shooting at a ranch, walking through an outdoor market in Thailand and getting a foot massage, a hike to a monk temple, and a boat ride through Thailand and picnic on a beach.

The other possible date formulas for the show are two-on-one dates and hometown dates. As there are only two-on-one dates for each season, there is less content to analyze but they tend to also be gender neutral activities, although activities on *The Bachelorette* are somewhat more physical activity based. On *The Bachelor*, the first two-on-one date involves a tour of the contestants' home - because these contestants are twins - and the second two-on-one date

involves a boat ride and picnic. On *The Bachelorette*, the first two-on-one date involves a hike and the second two-on-one involves tango lessons. The hometown dates have no gender difference in type of activity.

Content of Dates

Although the individual dates and group dates may vary in the date activities, a significant portion of time on all dates is left for discussion between the bachelor/ette and suitors. It is assumed this is so they can connect on an emotional level rather than purely physical level. Some of the conversations presumably vary between *The Bachelor/ette* due to the personality of the bachelor/ette and the questions they choose to ask on dates. However, some themes emerge that are dependent on the gender of suitors.

Group Dates.

At the beginning of the process, there is little gender difference between contestants in terms of content discussed on group dates. When suitors talk individually with the bachelor/ette on group dates, they mainly talk about how “crazy” of a process the show is. The second most common group date conversation topic concerns problems the suitors have with fellow contestants. In both programs there is a suitor - Olivia on *The Bachelor* and Chad on *The Bachelorette* - who the rest feel monopolize time with the bachelor/ette. A significant portion of the initial dating rounds concern suitor-initiated conversations about difficulties with Olivia/Chad. Olivia eventually provides the “money shot” (Dubrofsky, 2009) as she unravels and Chad is sent home for threatening the other male suitors with violence. After they are sent home, conversations about other contestants decrease, although they do not disappear entirely. However, after that point, if a contestant tries to “bad-mouth” another suitor they are quickly sent

home. This is the case with James T. insulting Jordan on *The Bachelorette* and Leah spreading lies about Lauren B. on *The Bachelor*. However, on *The Bachelorette*, if a suitor tries to talk to Jojo while she is in the middle of a conversation with one of the men, she tells the intrusive suitor that she needs more time. He then waits until it is his turn to talk to her. On *The Bachelor*, Ben does not halt any interruptions to conversation, even after a contestant once interrupts him in the middle of a speech to the group.

Individual Dates.

The individual dates grant more time for personal conversation and viewers learn the most about contestant's lives on these dates. The individual dates tend to concern the emotional background of the suitor rather than the bachelor/ette, although there is more discussion of Jojo's personal background than Ben's. If the contestants discuss their personal background, the female suitors are significantly more likely to talk about their relationship history and the male suitors are significantly more likely to talk about an event in their life that changed them. If females talk about their relationship history, it concerns relationship failures and how that changed them into who they are in current relationships. For example, on her first date Caila talks about how she thought her previous relationship was fate until her "heart caught up with [her] mind". On her first date, Amanda talks about her previous marriage and how the father did not invest time in herself or the kids. Lauren H. talks about getting cheated on in her four-year long relationship. In contrast, males are more likely to talk about a significant negative event in their lives that brought them on *The Bachelorette* journey. For example, Luke talks about being in combat in Afghanistan and losing fellow members of his team made him appreciate life. James talks about being bullied as a child and how it stuck with him. Chase talks about the impact his parents

divorce had on his life and how he decided that marriage is forever. Robby talks about his past relationship, but he first talks about his best friend dying in a car accident the past year and how that made him realize how short life is.

Female contestants, both suitors and the bachelorette, are also more likely to talk about family on dates. In the episode prior to hometown dates, Jojo asks all of her suitors how they feel about bringing her home to meet their family, whereas Ben discusses it with only a couple of suitors. After hometown dates, Jojo is more likely to ask her suitors what it was like for them to have her meet their family, or she talks about having her suitor meet her family. On *The Bachelor*, the female suitors, not Ben, are the ones who are more likely to bring up the significance of not seeing Ben for a week after he meets their families.

Female suitors are overall significantly more likely to talk about the impact of family on their lives, such as Lauren B. saying the reason she is selective about men is due to how amazing her father is. Even if they do not talk as much about their own family, they will talk about the value of family. This is the case with Emily when she gets the chance to meet Ben's parents before the finale, and she says "It genuinely makes my heart so happy that I got to meet the amazing people that raised this amazing man. I would want nothing more than to be a part of this family. Obviously Ben cares a lot and that I'm the one girl that gets to be here speaks volumes. I'm so overwhelmed with happiness."

Family is also more likely to be the center of their storyline, as is the case with Amanda on *The Bachelor*. Amanda is a mother of two small girls and it quickly becomes the center of her story. When producers introduce Amanda to the audience, it centers around the fact that she is a mother. In her second conversation with Ben, she tells him about her children. Shortly afterwards

he sets up a chance for the two of them to make barrettes for her kids. It continues to be a center point of discussion for the two of them until Ben finally meets her children on hometown dates. Meanwhile it is almost never discussed that a contestant on *The Bachelorette*, Evan, is also a parent. When producers introduced Evan, they focus on that he is an erectile dysfunction doctor. The fact that he has children is revealed in the third episode through a passing remark when Jojo tells him she thinks he is an incredible father. It is never mentioned again, except when he wins a rose in episode five and says “I feel like my kids will be so excited to know I got the rose. I feel I won for them as much as for myself”.

Reactions to Dates

As dates progress and feelings develop between the suitors and bachelor/ette, a narrative develops concerning when it is appropriate for one’s gender to express sentiments of love. The majority of the suitors express in camera confessionals that they can see themselves falling in love with the bachelor/ette within the first several episodes. However, they convey these sentiments to the bachelor/ette at different points in time, depending on the suitor’s gender. The male suitors tell Jojo that they “think [they are] falling in love with her” sooner than the female suitors tell similar sentiments to Ben. Two of the male suitors tell Jojo they “are falling in love with her” by episode four and continue telling her in subsequent dates. In contrast, it is not until episode six that any female suitor confesses her feelings to Ben. In episode six, Caila tells Ben she is “falling in love” with him, but only does so when she “[feels] a little put on the spot”.

Additionally, the male suitors tell Jojo “I love you” much sooner than the female suitors say the same to Ben. Three of the four male suitors confess they are “in love” with Jojo by hometown dates (episode eight). Two of the men, Robby and Jordan, confess they are “in love”

prior to hometown dates. Luke confesses his love at the end of episode eight. None of the female suitors say “I love you” to Ben until episode nine, after hometown dates. A common expression among the women is expressed by Caila when she says “I feel like I’m ready to tell Ben I am in love with him but I kinda want to talk to my parents first and get their validation”. It is further expressed by Lauren B. when she says “If I get my family’s approval, I will definitely tell Ben I am in love with him.” All of the suitors confess their love for the bachelor/ette before the end of the fantasy date. Ben expresses his love for two of the females immediately after they tell him they love him. Jojo, after expressing several times how much it hurt her that Ben said he loved her and then did not choose her in the end, does not say “I love you” until Jordan is the final suitor.

Another important narrative that emerges is the importance of the male asking for the female’s father’s permission before proposing. On *The Bachelor*, Ben chooses the final winner by proposing to her. On *The Bachelorette*, Jojo chooses the final winner by accepting his proposal to her. However, before any of the men propose they ask the female’s father for her hand in marriage. On *The Bachelor*, Ben calls Lauren B.’s father in the finale episode after he decides she is ‘the one’. On *The Bachelorette*, when the two final men first meet Jojo’s family they are expected to ask for her father’s blessing that same day. Robby asks her father in person, despite not knowing if he is definitely going to be the winner. When Jordan does not ask for her father’s blessing in person, Jojo questions if Jordan is ready for a proposal - “if he is ready without a shadow of doubt that he is ready for an engagement” - and Jordan eventually proves his commitment by calling her father to ask him officially.

The sentiments of those in love are important, but equally valuable are the reactions of those eliminated over the course of the season, most often typified in a goodbye speech. Two of the females on *The Bachelor* choose to leave the show of their own volition. None of the males on *The Bachelorette* leave willingly. If a male contestant is eliminated, he is less likely to show emotion and less likely to be granted a departing camera confessional. Male contestants cry in elimination confessionals in four out of ten episodes. Three of the men in the final ten suitors do not have a departing confessional. When men are eliminated they primarily talk about how they did not see this coming, how much it hurts, and what they could have done differently. In contrast, the majority of the female contestants cry and are likely to be granted a confessional. At least one departing female contestant cries in every episode, and there is at least one female confessional in every episode. When the females are eliminated they primarily talk about how Ben does not know who they are, how much it hurts, how they pictured a future together, and how hard it is to find love, date, and be rejected.

Discussion

Despite the possibility for similarity due to the formulaic nature of *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*, there are some gender-based differences in the narrative of love subtly woven into each program. The most readily apparent gender differences are the gender stereotypical activities of group dates on *The Bachelor/ette*. The group dates for men tended to be more physical-activity oriented, particularly in relation to sports. The group dates for women tended to be less physically oriented and more mentally focused, such as learning a foreign language or participating in a science lab. Both seasons had a performance centered group date, but even that fell into gender stereotypes as the men's performance focused on their ability to talk about sex

publicly and the women's performance focused on their physical attributes. This was best captured in Olivia's stripper-inspired dance after she pops out of a cake on stage. However, the individual dates tended to be more gender neutral and focused on travel. Through the stereotype differences in the group dates and the individual dates, the producers seem to suggest that there are certain activities acceptable in homosocial groups, but such norms do need to be obeyed in heterosexual relationships. It should be noted that the bachelor/ette rarely participate in the activities of group dates but stand as observers. This also suggests that the activities of the group dates are homosocial activities that are not considered true dating activities. The gender stereotyping of the homosocial activities serves to magnify gender in the programming, which amplifies the ideal of the heterosexual couple because it allows one to escape such norms. Meanwhile, the focus of travel in the individual dates implies a sense of freedom that comes with dating "the one". It suggests that instead of remaining trapped in competition and homosocial norms, if one enters a heterosexual relationship then one will have freedom and happiness due to one's partner.

The other gender differences between the two programs were less apparent because they concerned gender differences in the content of dates and reaction to the narrative, which can be easily chalked up to individual differences between contestants. It is when individual narratives are examined as a group that a pattern forms. When discussing their emotional journeys leading to *The Bachelor/ette*, the female contestants talked about their romantic history and the men talked about a significant non-romantic event that taught them to reexamine life, such as the death of close friends. This overall pattern may be best exemplified by the fact that *The Bachelorette* continually emphasizes Ben's rejection of Jojo, and *The Bachelor* has little mention

of Ben's romantic past. This difference fits in line with Illouz's thoughts on marriage markets and female exclusivist pairing strategies and male commitment phobia. The female's focus on the failures of their past relationships reveals that they are aware of their existence in the marriage market and their desire to find a mate before their 'sexiness' expires. On the other hand, men can be in the sexual market for a longer period of time than women, manifesting in commitment phobia. However, the men on *The Bachelorette* exhibit exclusivist pairing strategies, not commitment phobia. The reason for the men's departure from the sexual market and focus on the marriage market is not due to an awareness of their expiring 'sexiness' but due to a significant non-romantic event that brings an awareness of the shortness of life itself.

The awareness of expiring sexiness presents prominently in two narratives on the show: the importance of family for women and in the women's departing interviews. One of the most common narratives for women centers around the importance of family in their lives. Men usually only discuss their own family if prompted by the bachelorette. The narrative of family manifests in the women talking about the importance of their family (be it the influence of parents or love they have for their kids), the significance of meeting the suitor's family, the necessity of a father's blessing, and family validation before professing their love. The woven narrative in the show illustrates that family should be at the forefront of a woman's mind but not necessarily of a man's mind. Family is integral to a female identity. Perhaps the most blatant illustration of this difference would be the comparison between Amanda and Evan. Although both are parents, the audience learns something new each episode about Amanda's children, and even meets them in hometown dates, yet knows nothing about Evan's children. The audience does not know how old the kids are, how many children he has, or how close he is to them

other than when he says they will be proud he won a rose. The focus of his narrative is that he is an erectile dysfunction doctor. This teaches viewers that a man's importance is his career and a woman's importance is her role as a mother. Such a narrative only serves to further highlight the societal narrative that a woman must find a mate quickly or else her biological clock will run out, and she will not be able to have a family, ergo not be successful to society.

Women's awareness for their deteriorating sexiness, and reason for their exclusivist pairing strategy, can be found in their parting interviews. It is perhaps unsurprising that women are more emotional than men in the parting interviews, as it is fitting with societal norms of masculinity and femininity. Yet, whereas the men focus on their confusion and what they could have done differently, the women focus on the difficulty of marriage markets and their fears of not finding a mate. For men, they are distressed they lost Jojo. For women, it seems they care more about finding a mate in general rather than necessarily distressed at losing Ben as a soulmate. They express a general exhaustion about participating in marriage markets. They seem to feel if they do not leave the market soon, they will never find happiness. This only further highlights their shortened timeline and need for exclusivist pairing strategies.

Although the female contestants maintain the social norm of following an exclusivist pairing strategy, the men disobey the norm of male commitment phobia. Gender roles dictate that women are the more emotional ones in a relationship and men should be stoic. These roles are upheld in some moments of the show, such as in the tearful departures of the females, but the men's quick expression of "I love you" disobeys this role. As evidenced by the confessionals, the men did not fall in love faster than the women. The men simply confess their love to the bachelorette sooner and reiterate their love consistently through the season. One explanation for

this may be an awareness of the societal norm of male commitment phobia. The men on the show must prove they are not afraid of commitment, unlike the real-world counterparts the ladies clearly have experienced. The men exhibit they are not afraid of commitment by more quickly confessing their readiness for love.

The appeal of *The Bachelor/ette* is that it simultaneously illustrates the pain of love in modernity and details a narrative that suggests this pain can end once you find ‘the one’. The main audience demographic for the franchise are young and middle aged females. Many are presumably females who have experienced the modern pain of love, use an exclusivist pairing strategy, and feel exhausted with marriage markets and commitment phobia. They connect with the pain of the women on the show. Yet, *The Bachelor/ette* offers such frustrated audiences the hope of a fairytale ending as it fills the show with men who disobey societal norms. Thus, the franchise is relatable in its pain, yet offers hope that the pain will end once you find your soulmate.

This glimmer of hope comes with a caveat: in order to find your happy ending, you must obey heterosexual norms. *The Bachelor/ette* promises that eternal happiness can be found in heterosexual relationships. In homosocial relationships, you must participate in activities appropriate to your gender. In relationships, you can participate in gender neutral activities but obey other gender norms. If you are a female, you must value family. You must be emotional, but not too emotional. If you are a male, you must have a successful profession, and be both reserved with emotions and clear how you feel about your partner. If you do these things, then you can find your soulmate in a heterosexual relationship, which will grant you freedom and happiness.

The fairytale love storyline in *The Bachelor/ette* is not a new societal narrative, but is problematic due to the seeming authenticity of the show. The storyline of *The Bachelor/ette* is carefully controlled by producers. Under the guise of “reality” TV, program producers pretend they are merely placing a camera behind an authentic love narrative. The true reality is that it a narrative orchestrated from the beginning to follow a fairytale path and not representative of the common experience of love. However, as evidenced by previous research, reality TV should not be pushed aside because it may have significant effects on its viewers who believe in its authenticity. *The Bachelor/ette* franchise continues to top charts in popularity. It may not be representative of the average relationship, but it is representative of what society deems as ideal for a love narrative. The problem is that the “ideal” love narrative finds its footing in more traditional narratives based in heteronormativity and the pain of love in modernity.

Limitations and Further Research

There are some limitations within this study on narrative differences on dating and love in *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*. One limitation stems from deviations in the formula in the shows, which was presumably done to keep the show unexpected and entertaining for viewers. Deviations from the formula were rare, but did make the “pre-date reaction, date conversation, date activity, and post-date reaction” analysis difficult to notate at times. Other limitations largely stem from possible researcher influence. Although research was approached in a scientific manner, it was difficult at times to eliminate personal feelings entirely while watching the show. This speaks to the power of production and power of the narrative. It is possible personal biases occurred while watching and analyzing the program, despite measures taken to eliminate bias. It is recommended future research uses several researchers in case one

individual becomes invested in some program aspects more than others. A third limitation stems from the amount of data analyzed in a short period of time. It is possible more nuanced data was overlooked. Another limitation comes from the fact that the researcher had watched only one season of *The Bachelorette* and no seasons of *The Bachelor* prior to research, and did not watch *The Bachelor/ette* seasons used in analysis prior to data collection. It is possible prior knowledge would have affected data collection and analysis. A related final limitation is that it is possible the seasons analyzed in this research deviated from the norm of prior seasons for *The Bachelor/ette* franchise.

Further research recommends an examination of every season of *The Bachelor* and the *The Bachelorette*. Since its conception, there have been some changes in the programming of the show which may have changed the narrative somewhat. Thirteen years is a significant period of time, and it is possible the gender narrative may have changed somewhat over the course of the decade. Previous studies analyzing the first three seasons of *The Bachelor* and first season of *The Bachelorette* suggest more restricted behaviors for contestants, particularly in terms of female sexuality, than found in this research. It would therefore be valuable to examine, at minimum, the first season of each series with the latest seasons.

It is also suggested further research examine findings from this work more in depth. The current work analyzed narrative themes throughout the two seasons, and it would be valuable to examine how precisely these narrative themes are conveyed in the show through camera angles, music, dialogue, and so forth. Similarly, the current research focused on activity during the dates and confessional reactions after dates and elimination. A significant portion of the show concerns the suitors sitting in the house and talking about other suitors and talking about the bachelor/ette.

It would be valuable to examine the non-date moments in the show in depth as they assist in developing a narrative. Finally, it is suggested further research may analyze the non-date episodes, the “Men/Women Tell All” episode and “After the Final Rose” episode, in addition to the date episodes. These are filmed long after the production of the show but may be valuable to the narrative themes developed over the course of the production.

Conclusion

The Bachelor/ette franchise is one of the most successful reality TV shows of the 21st century and continues to reach a sizable audience. The narrative of love expressed on the show finds its foundation in the fairytale love story. The *Bachelor/ette* narrative concerns the possibility for happiness and escape from the pains of love in modernity, so long as you are in a heterosexual relationship and obey certain gender norms. When in homosocial groups, one should take part in gender stereotypical activities. When in a heterosexual relationship, one is granted freedom and the chance to escape gender stereotypical activities. The caveat is that one must continue to obey other gender norms. Specifically, females must care about family and understand the pain of marriage markets. The males must be professionally successful and willing to express love as a means of proving they are in the marriage market, not the sexual market. The success of *The Bachelor/ette* franchise likely stems from the predominantly female audiences empathizing with the pain of female exclusivist pairing strategies and finding hope in men disobeying commitment phobia. *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* represents the reality of what society deems to be an ideal narrative of love. It may not represent a truly authentic narrative of love, but does represent its own reality of society.

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