

**Alone on Christmas? No Can Do:
The Troublesome Portrayals of (Single) Women in Christmas Romantic Comedy Films**

Genevieve Mishon

Department of Sociology & Department of Film and Media Studies, Wagner College

SO 491: Senior Seminar

Dr. Bernadette Ludwig

May 24, 2021

Abstract

This thesis is an analysis of American-produced Christmas romantic comedy films and the ways in which this genre presents gendered expectations. By studying fifteen films — a varied selection of the most popular made-for-television, theatrical and streaming Christmas movies produced after 2000 — I explore the roles that the films' characters play within their social environments and what the overall message is about American cultural values in relation to the holiday season. Overall, women in these films are presented as out of place in the office and rather belonging in small-town American homes where they are able to prioritize love and family. This excludes (happily) single people and women who manage to work and raise a family simultaneously. Through these presentations of women, I find that Christmas romantic comedies stress a need for romantic relationships around the holidays, especially among women, and present women and men in traditional gender roles.

Alone on Christmas? No Can Do:

The Troublesome Portrayals of (Single) Women in Christmas Romantic Comedy Films

For many people, the December holiday season means cuddling up on the couch with a blanket, some hot cocoa, and watching one of the many heartwarming Christmas romantic comedies. But for individuals who are involuntarily single these films may leave them feeling sad by the end of the movie because they are without a romantic partner on Christmas unlike the women in these movies who eventually find love for the holidays. With all of these films centered around romance, it is hard to ignore the constant reminders to couple during the holiday season and, as a result, many who are single tend to experience sadness (Sharp & Ganong, 2011). For many Americans, this holiday is considered part of cuffing season; a cultural concept that associates this time of the year with being in a romantic relationship by “cuffing” someone or, in other words, finding someone to commit to spending these holidays with, and maybe even longer. With countless films debuting each year in theaters, on television networks like Hallmark and Lifetime, and now on streaming sites like Netflix, Christmas romantic comedies have populated the holiday season with stories of (mostly) women escaping from their lonely lives in corporate America to find love under the Christmas tree (Brayton, 2021; Rosewarne, 2018).

The holiday season in the US consists of many consumerist activities and one of them is watching Christmas movies. The Christmas movie category is filled with romantic comedy storylines that often feature a young woman finding love during the holiday season, usually with a man. For many Americans, watching these movies are a crucial element of the Christmas season. By studying numerous Christmas-centric films, one central question this thesis addresses is what do romantic Christmas movies communicate to audiences about gender norms and romantic relationships? Movies often reflect and reinforce societal norms. Therefore, the

common romantic storylines that appear in Christmas movies produced in the US for American consumers reflect the values that mainstream American society has attached to this holiday, or at least what individuals aspire to around Christmas time (Rosewarne, 2018). Considering that Christmas is a peak moment of cuffing season, these movies enhance the societal pressure to be in a relationship around the holidays. Furthermore, while these films depict women as happiest when coupled during the holidays, they also manage to endorse traditional gender roles and norms of American society and suggest that women are to follow them in order to have a happy holiday season. Thus, another question this thesis attempts to find out is what gender roles and expectations do mainstream American holiday movies perpetuate?

Literature Review

Romance is a popular genre commonly found in American movies and television shows. Romance even emerges in movies that are not labeled or advertised as romantic films, partly because many viewers like to root for a love interest. However, the romantic relationships depicted in most of these films, regardless if they are explicitly labeled or advertised as a romance film or not “may engender unrealistic expectations (of sex, love, and romance) in those who are exposed to them” (Galloway, et al., 2015, p. 688). The overwhelming majority of American Christmas movies feature heterosexual romance as a main theme, suggesting that romance is an essential aspect of the Christmas season. In fact, it is hard to find a Christmas movie today without a love story, especially when it comes to films that target adult audiences. Sharp and Ganong (2011) found that (single) viewers of these movies reported that the “holidays reminded them of their single status, encouraging thoughts about their romantic lives, and increasing the likelihood of experiencing sadness” (p. 971). Since American society favors those who are coupled during the holidays, single women, who are often the main characters in these

movies, cannot escape the constant reminders that they also ought to be in a committed romantic relationship during this time of the year.

Indeed, these films encourage coupling, marriage, and family, and thus make the point that being single is undesirable. In this sense, these movies are merely a reflection of the values and beliefs of an American society that has marriage and family at its core. The majority of romantic plotlines that exist between a woman and a man in American cinema, highlights the importance of the institution of marriage and heteronormativity in American society. This begins early, as Cherlin (2009) observed “the main message we are giving to young adults and single parents is ‘Get married’” (p. 11). For example, non-married female characters in the films are often “hyper focused on finding a man,” and the movies usually end “with lead female characters marrying” (Sharp & Ganong, 2011, p. 975). There is an assumption that in order for women to be happy or feel complete, they must be coupled (Taylor, 2011) and/or on the path to having a family.

Even though being single is sometimes a choice when it comes to one’s relationship status, remaining single is viewed by many in society as a “problem for women,” (Budgeon, 2016, p. 402) or as “a failure to perform heterosexuality adequately” (Taylor, 2011, p. 22). These movies push the idea that being single is less of a choice and more of an unfortunate situation for women that requires a remedy. Therefore, these movies actively contribute to singlism in American culture. “Singlism” is the discrimination against single individuals that is “manifested in everyday thoughts, interactions, laws, and social policies-” (Sharp & Ganong, 2011, p. 957) and the assumption that everyone wants to get/be married and have kids (Sharp & Ganong, 2011; Carr & Byrne, 2005). This is a pressure that women face more often than men, especially in the media because single men are more likely to be portrayed as bachelors. Single men who choose a

life of independence are attempting to avoid the work and financial responsibilities that come with managing a marriage and raising a family (Gerson, 2010). Additionally, singleness is depicted as a temporary state within young women's lives and is not considered an adequate long-term lifestyle. Only those who attempt to "escape" or end their single status are visible and accepted in society (Taylor, 2011). The responsibility for escaping singlehood rests with women, instead of accepting that remaining single is a viable lifestyle.

In addition to pressuring women towards marriage, these films also suggest that motherhood is the next probable step towards being complete as an American woman. Family life is often portrayed in films as incredibly gratifying, more than paid work, and the natural role for female characters. These films push motherhood by glamorizing family life and portraying it as utopian (Hundley, 2000). The main characters tend to have positive relationships with their relatives and have very well-behaved children, which in reality is not always the case. This implies that family life is worth giving up a career or a life of independence.

Moreover, these movies, specifically the ones made for television, often suggest that women have to make a compromise between love and work and that they should not attempt to have it all (Hundley, 2000; Brayton, 2021). Women will turn down promotions to keep family at the forefront, and then these characters are rewarded with happiness and love in return (Hundley, 2000). When female characters choose this path, they reinforce normative gender roles and the importance of small-town America as opposed to corporate America. Additionally, Hallmark movies present conservative values that perceive women as being happier in rural family-oriented spaces as opposed to work spaces (Brayton, 2021). They show this by "featuring an unassuming but unhappy woman who retreats from a hectic corporate career and bustling city life to find romance, family and new career opportunities in a bucolic fictional town" (Brayton,

2021, p. 51). These storylines suggest that women are out of place in these types of corporate spaces and can only find love once they give up their jobs and the big city life to settle down in an ideal American small-town (Rosewarne, 2018). Brayton (2021) claims that “women’s unhappiness (in these movies) can be directly attributed to the working conditions of late capitalism and cut throat corporate culture, which leaves them ‘empty’ and devoid of love and romance” (p. 61). Yet again, these films suggest that women cannot handle the working lifestyle and belong in more nurturing environments, like the home.

In addition to women choosing love and family over their career, other common themes arise like rejecting capitalist greed, and spreading fortune to those who are less fortunate, all to credit the “spirit of Christmas.” Brayton (2021) suggests that “no other film genre than Christmas movies offers a more sustained and recognizable roasting of capitalism with its attention to socioeconomic inequality, workaholism and corporate greed” (p. 53). For a holiday that has consumerism at the heart of it, these movies resist this ideal by presenting a magical “spirit of Christmas” value that encourages generosity, which often leads to character transformation. However, these movies rarely feature the original religious meaning of the holiday, except for occasional re-enactments of the nativity scene. Overall, these movies repeat plotlines that are familiar to most American viewers, are entertaining, and are generally easy to understand (Zacharek, 2020) and, therefore, easy to consume. Although, at the same time they reinforce gendered societal pressures through repetitive storylines of women who wish for love during the holidays.

Data and Methods

A total of fifteen American films focusing on Christmas and produced after 2000 were used for this analysis. I selected these films either because I had previously watched them, I had

seen them advertised as popular, or because they were easily accessible via YouTube and other streaming services like Amazon, Netflix and Hulu. This list includes some of the most popular romantic comedy Christmas films, as well as some of the most popular streaming and made-for-television Christmas movies.¹ I paid particular attention to social norms and overarching themes. While watching all of these films I took detailed notes on any dialogue or plot points that seemed to be reflecting values of American society, and how lead characters interacted with their social environments. Then I drew connections between common behaviors or themes in order to understand what these films are collectively communicating to audiences.

Most of the main characters in these films were either women or a heterosexual duo, with the exception of two films that featured homosexual characters. All of these characters were portrayed to be in their twenties and thirties with the exception of a few characters in *Love Actually*. Except for two of the films, all of the main characters and most of the side characters were heterosexual individuals. Although the films featuring non-heterosexual characters followed similar conventions as the other Christmas romance films, they also addressed (at least briefly) the effect that their sexual orientation had on their lives and how this aspect of their identity limited them in certain ways. The majority of the main characters in these films were white. One film featured mostly African American characters and a few others featured a mixture of some white and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) characters. The main characters are also commonly middle/upper-class with jobs that are usually mentioned very little. Moreover, lower-class characters appeared more often in the films that featured BIPOC characters.

¹ See appendix for full list of films.

For the most part, these films focused on thin and conventionally beautiful people. Only one film features an overweight lead, who is played by Queen Latifah in *Last Holiday*. However, in this film her character is portrayed as lonely and essentially invisible to society at the beginning. Furthermore, other films that feature overweight side characters appear as a laughingstock. *Love Actually* features a few female characters who are depicted as overweight in the film and are targeted and portrayed as undesirable to men as a result. In these films “femininity is partially defined as thin, flawless, attractive women who ought not concern themselves with their appearance” (Hundley, 2000, p. 22). These movies present beauty through a very narrow lens. It is safe to say that this film genre is under-representative of the American population, however it is evolving slowly but surely to include BIPOC and/or LGBTQ+ characters among others.

Findings

The main purpose of this thesis is to analyze the romantic comedy Christmas genre and its subject-matter with two central questions in mind. The first concentrating on what these films communicate to audiences about gender norms and romantic relationships. While the second question focuses on what gender roles and expectations mainstream American holiday movies perpetuate. One of the main themes in many of the films is the expectation that women should bring home a male date for Christmas. The film *Holidate* exemplifies this, when two young and single strangers, Sloane and Jackson, make a deal to be each other's dates for all holidays so they never have to be alone. Sloane is intensely singled out by her family at Christmas because she is the only one of her siblings who is not married or in a committed relationship. When Sloane is complaining about Christmas with her family, she tells Jackson “Every time I walk into a room, I’m showered in a sea of pity and sad glances” because she is single. So, in order to avoid

incessant reminders from her family about the need to find a man, Sloane feels as if she has no other choice but to bring a fake boyfriend to her family holiday gatherings. The criticism that Sloane experiences for being single is a reflection of American society's stigmatization of people who choose to remain single (Carr & Byrne, 2005). Often "women's social identities reflected being invisible in their families, less valued than their married siblings, and knowing that their parents preferred them to be married" (Sharp & Ganong, 2011, p. 960). Sloane very much experiences this pressure, mostly from her mother, and feels at fault for her single status. Her mother tells her that she's "much prettier with makeup" on, when she is already wearing makeup, and suggests that she "could at least put on a nice top." This criticism from her mother further perpetuates stereotypes of femininity, specifically beauty standards.

Similar circumstances occur in *The Christmas Contract*. In order to make her ex-boyfriend, Foster, jealous and to present to her family during the holiday season that she has successfully moved on from their breakup, Jolie strikes a deal with her friend's older brother, Jack, to be her fake date on Christmas. Sometimes it is easier to find a fake date than to face questioning family members over the holidays and to avoid sitting at the kids table, which actually happens to Sloane in *Holidate*. Carr & Byrne (2005) argue that "single persons are the target of stigmatization," and single people are highly conscious that they are targets, making the stigma more existent (p. 84). Sloane and Jolie, like many single heterosexual women, have internalized this stigma and believe that the holidays are easier when spent with a date even if they have no romantic feeling towards that person.

The expectation placed on women to bring dates to holiday gatherings is merely one aspect of a society that pressures individuals to couple with the goal of eventually marrying. "The United States is unquestionably a promarriage society," (Carr & Byrne, 2005, p. 84) and

that is reflected in the subtle, and not so subtle messages that these movies send. As mentioned above with *Holidate*, Sloane's mother constantly reminds her that she should be, like her siblings, on a path towards marriage. The alternative is to end up like her aunt who always brings random strangers to holiday gatherings and is portrayed as a middle-aged hyper-sexual outcast. In the US, pressure to marry along with the single stigma are the strongest for those in their late 20s and into their early 30s (Sharp & Ganong, 2011). It is acceptable to be single when women are younger, but eventually a woman's "biological clock starts ticking" and pressure for marriage emerges. After that period of time society gives up on pressuring those who are no longer in their biological prime for childbearing. This social value is evident through the pressure that Sloane faces to couple and the lack of pressure that her aunt experiences who is viewed as a lost cause for love because of her age. In a way, the main characters in *Holidate* initially make fun of these ridiculous film conventions, but in the end, succumb to them as they end up falling into the same traps when the movie ends with the main characters in love.

Similar to Sloane's experience, the young women in *Happiest Season*, also face pressure from their parents to couple, specifically into heterosexual relationships, and to eventually have children. Harper and her two sisters, Sloane and Jane, consistently compete for their parents' affection. In order to win acceptance from their parents, they need to be coupled and on the track towards a traditional nuclear family. When Harper brings Abby to her parents' house for Christmas, pretending that she is her orphan friend instead of her girlfriend, Harper's parents and friends continuously invite Harper's high school boyfriend to gatherings to try and push them back together. Additionally, their father makes it a point to parade his grandchildren (Sloane's children) at a dinner event to his political donors. When Sloane asks if she can help promote her father's campaign for mayor he tells her "you just bring that beautiful family and show them off"

followed by “these might be the only grandchildren we ever have.” However, considering that Sloane was an attorney before she became a full-time mom, she can clearly offer more than motherhood to her father’s campaign. Moreover, Sloane and her husband are separated but she is afraid to tell her parents because they will be disappointed since she is only valued in her family as the mother of their grandchildren. When Sloane finally shares with her parents that her marriage has ended, she tells them “without my family I am worthless to you,” in reference to her father’s earlier remarks. Furthermore, the youngest daughter, Jane, who is single and has never been in a serious relationship, is continuously overlooked and underappreciated by her parents because they “gave up on her,” as the mother claims, while her two older sisters get all of the positive attention. Hence more reasons why Harper feels pressured by society and her family to fulfill the normative expectation to become a heterosexual wife and mother which forces her to hide her sexual orientation. Therefore, it is not just about Harper being gay but also about how children, specifically women, feel like they have to live up to their parents’ expectation of being married to a man and eventually becoming a mother.

A similar pressure to marry appears in *Four Christmases* that leads the two main characters to rethink their future as a couple who initially do not want to get married. In *Four Christmases* Brad and Kate, who are in a heterosexual relationship, avoid their families around the holidays because their parents and siblings remind them that their cohabitation lifestyle is unacceptable compared to conventional marriages. When asked why they don’t get married, Brad responds by saying “we’re happy. Marriage just brings pressure and stress.” This film is realistic in terms of its depiction of families that make mistakes and are not “picture perfect.” Kate and Brad see marriage as the beginning to the end and do not want to end up like their divorced parents. Furthermore, they are portrayed as not being ready to take care of children. For

example, when holding a baby, Kate accidentally hits the baby's head on a kitchen cabinet, then later in the film Kate cannot swaddle baby Jesus, and Brad cannot stand the sight of puke, which is something that babies do often. This is another film that highlights America's pressure for marriage and family, by presenting a couple that lives outside the norm. However, even though Kate and Brad begin the film with a reluctance to follow the path towards marriage and family because they see how badly it turned out for their parents, by the end of the film they have a baby in their arms; and thus, like in *Holidate*, they follow the American expectation.

Additionally, this movie addresses the fact that divorce impacts many people including children of divorced couples, but the main characters still somehow have hope that they can make it work. Marriage often ends in divorce in the US, so movies like this one could be attempting to "endorse" relationship ideals (Wilson & Hefner, 2013). Thus, *Four Christmases* attempts to look past the United States' discouraging rates of divorce in order to preserve the value of marriage and family in American society.

Furthermore, these films reflect what Sharp and Ganong (2011) refer to as society's promotion of "marriage and motherhood as central to women's identities." (p. 958). Similar to how Kate in *Four Christmases* is not portrayed as suited for motherhood, Jessie, the main character in *A Bride for Christmas*, struggles to be a successful bride. Jessie has run away from the altar on her wedding day on three separate occasions. Even though Jessie does not feel ready to get married, her mother pressures her down the aisle time and time again, even when she expresses uncertainty. Therefore, Jessie has made marriage a priority, so once she realizes that she is in love with Aiden, she immediately asks him to marry her. *A Bride for Christmas* is a perfect example of how Americans, specifically heterosexual women, are in a hurry to get married (Cherlin, 2009).

It is not just young single women in these films, who are pressured to be in a committed relationship, and ideally in a marriage; so are single parents with young children. But in contrast to films about single individuals where women's mothers play a central role in pushing for coupledness, in movies such as *Christmas on the Bayou* and *The Perfect Holiday*, the women's young children take center stage, as the men need to win them over in order to earn the love of the women. Rosewarne (2018) suggests that single parents are often featured in romantic narratives because being "partnerless" is viewed as "a temporary state before characters transition into romance and ultimately a nuclear family and existing children speeds up the construction of the nuclear unit" (p. 23). For example, in *Christmas on the Bayou*, Caleb seems to spend more time with Katherine's son than with her, and wins the son over before she even takes an interest in him. In the end, the main reason why she wants to be with Caleb is because he would make a good father to her son. This dynamic illustrates the fact that these men have to act as replacements for the deadbeat, almost villainous fathers that are barely involved in their children's lives. Furthermore, usually female characters are single because they divorced a bad man, whereas male characters are usually widows, making their separated status not a choice, and more endearing (Rosewarne, 2018). Considering that in the US, fathers are more likely than mothers to be absent in their children's lives, these portrayals reinstate the social perception that, unlike men, women are naturally good mothers.

This scenario also plays out in *The Perfect Holiday*. Even though Nancy is at the time going through a divorce, she is eager to find a new husband and potential father to her three children, who are still struggling with the fact that their parents are splitting up. Both in the movies and in real life, over time, American women feel pressure for marriage and family from their social environments as their friends couple/marry and less desirable men are available

(Sharp & Ganong, 2011; Fallon & Stockstill, 2018). Nancy is very eager to maintain the traditional family structure when she brings Benjamin home to meet the kids on only their second date, which reflects the trend in US society, that people tend to rush into new relationships very quickly as Americans have “sped up the hands on the relationship clock” (Cherlin, 2009, p. 201).

Conversely, when a single father is the romantic interest, he is perceived differently than the deadbeat fathers in movies with a single mother as the main character. Additionally, their children’s birth mothers are rarely ever mentioned and it is not always clear if they are separated by divorce or by death. The potential lovers in *The Princess Switch* and *The Holiday* are both single dads who appear to be very good fathers to their daughters. In *The Holiday*, when Amanda meets Graham’s daughters for the first time, the girls express a desire to have a woman around more often. One girl says “we never have grown-ups here, at all girls” and the other girl responds “I really like it.” At this moment, Graham begins to feel pressured to bring a new mom home for his daughters, which is yet another example of the central role that children in these films play in recoupling their parents. In *The Princess Switch*, Margaret falls in love with Kevin, a single father who has a very strong and friendly relationship with his daughter who spends plenty of time with them throughout the course of the film. Margaret eventually develops a strong relationship with Kevin’s daughter and after catching the bouquet at another wedding, Kevin tells Margaret that she “might want to hang on to that bouquet,” suggesting that marriage is in their future. Additionally, it is important to note that the gender of the child is an essential plot point, considering these movies posit that daughters need a female figure (a stepmom) and sons need a male figure (a stepdad) actively in their lives.

Another common occurrence in these holiday romantic comedies is that women will relocate to be with men, either to rural towns or royal palaces. In this situation, the lead female character faces a geographical conflict but usually ends up choosing love in a small-town over their career opportunities in the big city. For example, in *Christmas on the Bayou* Katherine turns down a promotion that she has been working towards for a long time to move back to her hometown and be with her childhood crush. Once again, children play a central role as the push mainly comes from her son, who really just wants his mother to spend more time with him instead of at the office. Hence why she chooses to move back to the rural town where she grew up because there is a potential new father for her son and fewer corporate distractions, allowing her to spend more time with her son and birth family. In *Christmas on Wheels* Ashley is faced with a similar conflict when she goes home to her rural hometown in Washington for Christmas and meets Duncan, an attorney whom she eventually grows fond of. At the moment when she finally gets the opportunity to open her dream antique shop in Seattle, she turns it down to stay in her hometown, for love and small-town traditions. The conflict in these types of films is “being fabulous, strong and professionally independent counterposed with the desire to secure a heterosexual partner” (Taylor, 2011, p. 14). It also seems to suggest that women cannot have it all.

This past holiday season (2020) two mainstream US holiday films were released that feature LGBTQ+ lead characters who are “rarely depicted on-screen” (Rao, 2020) or in this genre that is historically rooted in heteronormative standards. One being the *Christmas Set-Up* which is the first romantic Christmas film featuring gay lead characters to premiere on the Lifetime network. And the second, *Happiest Season* is one of the first major Hollywood-produced Christmas films to feature lesbian lead characters. However, these two films seemed to

consist of very similar conventions as previous Christmas romantic comedies. *Happiest Season* goes above and beyond the conventions of the Christmas movie genre by addressing the struggle for family acceptance among LGBTQ+ individuals in conservative families. On the other hand, *The Christmas Setup* barely addresses the issues that LGBTQ+ individuals face in a heteronormative society, and overall focuses on choosing love over big-city life and highly revered career opportunities. The main character, Hugo, goes home to Milwaukee to spend Christmas with his lonely widowed mother and runs into Patrick, his High School crush. When Hugo gets his dream job offer in London, England, he has to make a choice between Patrick and London. Needless to say, he chooses love over his career opportunity. Even though this is a film about two men and thus breaks a major convention of the Christmas romance genre, the main character is presented as very feminine in comparison to his masculine love interest and the film follows a very similar plotline as other movies within this genre, as Hugo chooses love in the suburbs of Milwaukee over a career in London.

Women in holiday films not only move to small-town America for their love interests and in pursuit of “traditional roles and values” instead of corporate roles, sometimes they fall in love with a prince. And while in these cases they move up the socioeconomic ladder, they also, like the women who move to small towns, have to leave behind their career, friends, and family. For example, in *The Princess Switch*, Stacey, a middle-class baker, switches lives with her doppelganger, Lady Margaret, a soon-to-be-married princess. When they both fall in love while living the other person’s life, they decide to switch locations for good, allowing Stacey to marry the prince. So, Stacey leaves her life in Chicago behind for an upgrade to royal life on Christmas. Similarly, in *A Princess for Christmas*, when the prince is pressured to find a royal bride, Jules, a poor woman from Buffalo who is a detached relative of the royal family, is invited to stay at the

castle for Christmas with her niece and nephew who she is the legal guardian of. They end up falling in love, and when they are ridiculed by his fellow royal folk, they defy the odds and show people the importance of true love. These types of situations are interesting since Americans have class-based expectations about marriage and tend to marry within their socioeconomic class (Fallon & Stockstill, 2018). This social value is apparent through the upper-class people who criticize the prince for wanting to be in a relationship with a woman from a lower-class background. Therefore, both of these films, among others, set unrealistic expectations for women by communicating that “regular girls” can marry into royalty. This is not a convention limited to the Christmas genre but also applies to many Disney fairytale films. In fact, these royal Christmas movies are merely an extension of the Disney princess fairytale stories that have accompanied many young girls throughout their lives. In most of these cases the woman gives up her world to be in his. Their relationship also defies class lines considering many of these fairytales, such as *Cinderella*, allow a “regular girl” to become a princess by marrying into royalty, suggesting that marriage is an easy way for women to climb the social ranks.

In addition to the portrayal of princes liking “regular girls” is the idea that men like women who are different than them when it comes to socioeconomic status and in other ways. The royal men in *The Princess Switch*, *A Princess for Christmas* and *A Christmas Prince* find these regular girls refreshing, because they are so different from the other women these men are used to. In *A Christmas Prince*, Prince Richard falls in love with Amber, a journalist from New York City, who is pretending to be his little sister’s tutor in order to get closer to him for her work assignment. Even though they do not get along in the beginning, he finds it endearing when she wears Converse sneakers to a royal dinner event, and later in the movie he tells her “you’re more genuine than anyone I’ve ever met.” The prince takes an interest in her because she is more

authentic than the royal women within his social circle who are often portrayed in these films as uptight and more concerned with reputation and appearances than anything else. Moreover, often in these movies the characters do not initially like each other, either as a result of a previous meeting or simply because they are so different from one another. But miraculously in the end, love conquers all existing tensions and class differences between the two. A similar cross-class love story takes place in *The Princess Switch*. Once the two women switch lives they almost immediately meet perfect men because opposites attract, and more specifically the prince likes that Stacy is “different.” However, it is important to note that since the two women look identical to one another, the same beauty standards apply in this case. Therefore, these women have to be refreshingly different from what he is used to from his social environment. Since these men are more established in their royal class status (perceived as success), the women will always leave their lives behind to be with the man.

Similar to how these films present women in traditional American gender roles, as belonging in the home and away from the big city, they also suggest how women are “supposed” to act in heterosexual relationships. These movies specifically portray heterosexual women as fitting into a passive role in relation to their male counterparts. In other words, women are often waiting for their man to come around and “sweep them off of their feet” to start the relationship. This passive behavior is manifested in three different ways in these movies: love being unexpected, the spontaneity of soulmates and men organizing elaborate displays of affection that almost always take the woman by surprise.

First, love almost always appears when these women least expect it, which is ironic given that these women are sometimes actively looking for relationships at the beginning of the film. In *The Christmas Contract*, what seems like just a transactional trade-off for the lead woman to

have a fake date on Christmas to make her ex-boyfriend jealous, turns into a beautiful love story when they fall in love with each other. Likewise, in *Last Holiday* once Georgia begins to focus on doing what makes her happy instead of waiting for a man to save her from her miserable life, her love interest finally pursues her. These films communicate to audiences that their special guy will appear when he is ready, not necessarily when she is in pursuit of the relationship. The concept of unexpected love is also the premise for one of the highest grossing and most popular American romantic comedy Christmas films, *The Holiday*.² Iris and Amanda, the two lead women in *The Holiday*, attempt to escape from their lives to get far away from the men who wronged them. When Amanda first meets Graham, she tells him “you are unexpected,” meanwhile Iris says “anything could happen” immediately after she meets Miles, the man who will later become her love interest. *The Holiday* highlights the pressure that single people feel to be coupled especially during this time of the year even after they have just ended relationships, reflecting once again that Americans rush from one relationship/marriage into another (Cherlin, 2009). On the other hand, the movie presents the overused convention of meeting an unexpected handsome stranger right in time for Christmas. Similar to *Four Christmases* and *Holidate*, *The Holiday* also strives to poke fun at the corniness of the romantic Christmas genre through mimicking the conventions that appear in these types of movies. One of the ways that this appears is through the movie trailer voiceover that pops up throughout the film to remind Amanda that she is a cliché of the single woman escaping from her life to unexpectedly fall in love on Christmas in a magical English countryside. Through this element of the story, the filmmaker seems to be exploiting the corniness of the Christmas movie genre, but ultimately the

² Overall *The Holiday*, grossed between \$205-206 million worldwide (Box Office Mojo), which ranks the film as one of the highest grossing American Christmas films within the romantic comedy genre.

movie ends in the same way as most other stories among the genre, with the two couples dancing together over champagne on New Year's Eve.

Second, the idea that there is “the one” person for everyone (soulmates), and along with that, the belief that everything is meant to be (destiny), arises in these films. In *A Bride for Christmas* Jessie is hyper-focused on finding “the one.” After kissing Aiden, whom she has not had any previous interest in, for the first time, she feels the “fireworks” and immediately decides to propose to him because she believes that they are soulmates (which also speaks to the love being unexpected convention). This sounds quite impulsive, but it reinforces the idea of “the one” which is a common portrayal of love in the media. The idea of destiny appears in *The Princess Switch* when the two women first meet. Lady Margaret claims that her and Stacy were “destined to run into each other” so they could switch lives and find love, and later in the film when the prince is convincing Stacy to marry him he says “You are my destiny. This was the plan. We were meant to be together.” The problem with this romantic ideal of soulmates or destiny, similar to the belief that love is unexpected, is that women are expected to passively wait for “the one” to come into their lives and sweep them off of their feet. Then once he shows up, these women are sometimes expected to give up their lives to be with him. This reinforces traditional American gender norms of courtship which assign heterosexual men the role of initiator while heterosexual women are only allowed to react once the man “makes his move” (Lamont, 2014).

Third, the act of a man performing a big display of affection often in front of other people, such as staging an elaborate gesture, speech or proposal to win over the woman is another example of normative gender roles in heterosexual relationships which is essential to this movie genre. This concept sets a very high standard for heterosexual women to expect of

heterosexual men in American society and often allows for second chances. In *Love Actually*, Jamie goes to Aurelia to propose in front of everyone in Portuguese (her native language which he learned just for this proposal) at the restaurant where she works. Meanwhile the prime minister goes knocking on every door to find Natalie, and then later kisses her in front of all of the audience members while on stage. Heterosexual women are perceived as being easily swayed by a man who makes an effort to be with her and who is not afraid to confess his love for her in front of a group of people. The expectation in the US, as well as other socially similar countries of the Global North, is that one partner, usually the man, will formalize the relationship with a marriage proposal (Baker & Elizabeth, 2014). This means that women will often wait around for the man to progress the couple towards the next step of their relationship.

For a more classic display of love, in *A Bride for Christmas* Aiden gets down on one knee and proposes to Jamie on Christmas day (after only knowing her for four weeks) in front of her entire family and then immediately has a wedding ceremony staged in the house. Even though the only reason why Aiden pursued Jamie in the first place was to win a bet, since he is promising to commit to her through this grand display of affection, she takes him back. When men pull off these stunts, they are sometimes attempting to erase any previous wrongs that they have done to the women, suggesting that if men put effort into a big romantic gesture then all will be forgiven. Still, men should be held accountable for their actions and should not simply be able to start over time and time again by wooing women with romance. Conversely, in *Holidate* (2020) she is the one to make the big speech to win the guy over after previously turning him down. This indicates that more recent movies attempt to flip the script by having women instead of men stage elaborate displays of affection.

Conclusion

Christmas romantic comedy films mirror and reinforce mainstream American cultural values of heterosexual coupling, marriage and family, while discouraging as well as stigmatizing single life and endorsing the traditional role of women in the home and not in the workforce. Overall these depictions place the female protagonist out of the big city and office spaces and into the small-town American home, where she is meant to fulfill a gender normative passive role while her husband leads the way. All of the romantic conventions that present women as passive and men as active in these films — such as love being unexpected, the idea of soulmates/destiny, and elaborate displays of affection — create an expectation that women are to wait for their special man to romance them into the next stage of life, marriage and then eventually family. And even though it is ultimately the female lead who makes these decisions (and the gay male lead in the *Christmas Set-Up*), like moving to a small-town or giving up their dream job, these life changes are never sacrifices that heterosexual male characters are forced to make. These movie portrayals reinforce gender roles within heterosexual relationships and prevent women from living more independent lifestyles. Hence being able to have it all — as in a career, a marriage and a family — or being happily single is not represented as attainable in these movies. Furthermore, although there are so many Christmas films, they typically tend to feature a limited demographic segment of heterosexual, middle and upper class, White, conventionally attractive, able-bodied characters in their late twenties or early thirties (Hundley, 2000; Brayton, 2021; Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Sharp & Ganong, 2011). In the US where dating, marriage and family come in many different forms, these films actually exclude many people with their limited portrayals of the American population.

In short, these female leads who place high importance on being in a relationship around the holidays and are willing to leave everything behind, including their careers, for love are symbols of the “Christmas spirit” that rejects capitalist greed and reinstates our urges to couple during the Christmas season. Yet, it is important to note that in reality, “women are happier when they have both career and family” (Hewlett, 2002, p. 69). So why do these women have to choose in order to have an exceptional Christmas? Thus, the cultural perception that being single is a “problem” for women (Burgeon, 2016) is continuously stressed in these Christmas romantic comedy films by pushing female leads into heterosexual relationships and into the home. Even though more recent films including LGBTQ+ and racially diverse characters offer better representation, the importance of romance and what has erroneously been labeled as “the traditional family” along with normative gender roles remain at the forefront of this genre.

References

- Baker, M. & Elizabeth, V. (2014). *Marriage in an Age of Cohabitation: How and When People Tie the Knot in the Twenty-First Century*. Ontario: Oxford University Press (pp. 4-16).
- Box Office Mojo. (n.d.). *The Holiday (2006)*. Box Office Mojo by IMDb Pro.
https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt0457939/?ref_=bo_se_r_1
- Brayton, S. (2021). Courtship and class conflict in Hallmark’s “Countdown to Christmas”.
Feminist Media Studies, 21(1), 51-65.
- Budgeon, S. (2016). The ‘problem’ with single women: Choice, accountability and social change. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 33 (3), 402-418.
- Carr, D. & Byrne A. (2005). Caught in the Cultural Lag: The Stigma of Singlehood.
Psychological Inquiry, 16 (2 & 3), 84-91.
- Cherlin, A. J. (2009). *The Marriage-Go-Round: The State of Marriage and the Family in America Today*. New York, NY: Knopf.
- Fallon, K. & Stockstill, C. (2018). The Condensed Courtship Clock: How Elite Women Manage Self-development and Marriage Ideals. *Socius*, 4, 1-14.
- Galloway, L., Engstrom, E. & Emmers-Sommers, T. M. (2015). Does Movie Viewing Cultivate Young People's Unrealistic Expectations About Love and Marriage? *Marriage & Family Review*, 51 (8), 687-712.
- Gerson, K. 2010. *The Unfinished Revolution: How a New Generation is Reshaping Family, Work, and Gender in America*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Hefner, V., & Wilson, B. (2013). From Love at First Sight to Soul Mate: The Influence of Romantic Ideals in Popular Films on Young People’s Beliefs about Relationships.
Communication Monographs, 80(2), 150–175.

- Hewlett, S. A. (2002, April). Executive Women and the Myth of Having It All. *Harvard Business Review*, 80(4), 66-73.
- Hundley, H. (2000, February). *Lifetime's Limited Feminism: Defining and Deconstructing Television for Women*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western States Communication Association, Sacramento, CA.
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED437698.pdf>
- Lamont, E. (2014). Negotiating Courtship: Reconciling Egalitarian Ideals with Traditional Gender Norms. *Gender and Society*, 28(2), 189-211.
- Lotz, A. D. (2006). *Redesigning Women: Television After the Network Era*. University of Illinois Press.
- Rao, S. (2020, November). Clea DuVall wanted to see more queer Christmas movies. With Kristen Stewart and Mackenzie Davis, she made one herself. *The Washington Post*.
- Rosewarne, L. (2018). *Analyzing Christmas in Film: Santa to the Supernatural*. Lexington Books.
- Sharp, E. A. & Ganong L. (2011). I'm a Loser, I'm Not Married, Let's Just All Look at Me": Ever-Single Women's Perceptions of Their Social Environment. *Journal of Family Issues*, 32(7), 956-980.
- Taylor, A. (2011). *Single Women in Popular Culture: The Limits of Postfeminism*. London, England: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Zacahrek, S. (2020, December). Sure, Netflix Christmas Movies are Often Patently Absurd. They're Also Occasionally Perfect. *Time.com*. <https://time.com/5921304/netflix-christmas-movies-2020/>

Appendix 1

Films Reviewed:

A Bride for Christmas (2012)
A Christmas Prince (2017)
A Princess for Christmas (2012)
The Christmas Contract (2018)
Christmas on the Bayou (2013)
Christmas on Wheels (2020)
Four Christmases (2008)
Happiest Season (2020)
Holidate (2020)
Last Holiday (2006)
Love Actually (2003)
The Christmas Setup (2020)
The Holiday (2006)
The Perfect Holiday (2007)
The Princess Switch (2018)