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Setting the Mood: An Examination of the Roles of Romance-Related Mood, Situational Similarity, and Character Attribute Similarity in Selective Exposure to Romantic Comedies

Jessica R. Frampton
Clemson University

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SETTING THE MOOD: AN EXAMINATION OF THE ROLES OF ROMANCE-RELATED MOOD, SITUATIONAL SIMILARITY, AND CHARACTER ATTRIBUTE SIMILARITY IN SELECTIVE EXPOSURE TO ROMANTIC COMEDIES

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
Communication, Technology, and Society

by
Jessica R. Frampton
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Accepted by:
Dr. Erin Ash, Committee Chair
Dr. Darren L. Linvill
Dr. Stephanie Ruhl
ABSTRACT

Two studies were conducted in order to explore how romance-related mood, situational similarity, and character attribute similarity affect selective exposure to romantic comedies. Eight hypotheses were proposed based on traditional mood management theory (MMT). MMT predicts that people make media selection choices based on a desire to alter a negative mood state and achieve a positive mood state (Zillmann, 1988; Zillmann & Bryant, 1985). For this study in particular, MMT predicts that people in a negative romance-related mood would choose to avoid media content that reminds them of their negative romance-related mood. Content could remind participants of their negative romance-related mood through either situational similarity (Study 1) or character attribute similarity (Study 2). Situational similarity was operationalized through subgenre (female-led comedies vs. traditional romantic comedies), and character attribute similarity was operationalized through age.

Experimental research was conducted with college-aged female participants in order to test the hypotheses. Results from a series of ANOVAs and hierarchical regressions revealed that, in general, the hypotheses proposed in this study were not supported. In fact, this study found results contrary to predictions made based on traditional MMT predicted outcomes. This suggests the need for future studies of MMT and its extensions, particularly in regard to motivations for counter-hedonic media selection choices.

Keywords: mood management, selective exposure, romantic comedies
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Each year, film companies spend millions of dollars on audience research in order to predict who wants to view their movies and how to best reach those people (Potter, 2011). Researchers have noted that audiences for romantic comedies have typically been women (Bernard, 1997; McDonald, 2007; York, 2010). Given the female-saturated audience of romantic comedies, the phrase “chick flick” has emerged as a colloquial title for the genre. Ferriss and Young (2007) explain that the word “chick” was used in the 1970s to refer to women. Seen as derogatory at first due to its framing of women as childlike creatures in need of protection, the term eventually began to signal female solidarity and empowerment, perhaps spurred on by the popular acceptance of “chick culture” in the 1990s. Chick culture is defined as “a group of mostly American and British popular culture media forms focused on primarily twenty-to-thirty something middle-class women” (Ferriss & Young, 2007, p. 32). One of these media forms is film.

Given that the majority of romantic comedies feature female protagonists, the popularity of romantic comedy films among women can perhaps be explained by character identification and gender, rather than genre. In fact, previous research suggests that females are drawn to programming with female characters, and males are drawn to programming with male characters (Knobloch, Callison, Chen, Fritsche, & Zillmann, 2005; Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2006; Oliver, 2000). Viewer attributes, such as gender, are not the only thing that research on media selection has explored in relation to viewer content choices. Media theorists have also recognized that emotional needs play a
role in media selection (Nabi, So, & Prestin, 2011). Specifically, affective states have been proposed as motivation for selective exposure (e.g., Bartsch, Appel, & Storch, 2010; Kim & Oliver, 2011). Zillmann’s mood management theory (Zillmann, 1988; Zillmann & Bryant, 1985) and its extensions represent a prominent theoretical development in research on media selection and affective state.

Mood management theory (MMT) predicts that people selectively expose themselves to media in order to alter a negative emotional experience and achieve a positive mood state (Zillmann, 1988; Zillmann & Bryant, 1985). The theory assumes human behavior is based on hedonic motivations—that people desire pleasure and avoid pain (Higgins, 2006). For example, supposing that the dissolution of a romantic relationship is a negative emotional experience, MMT predicts that people in this situation will choose to consume media that cheers them up or distracts them from their pain, rather than content that reminds them of their circumstances. Selection of content unrelated to the circumstances that elicited the negative emotional state instead of content related to the negative state is known as semantic affinity, a concept that is discussed in detail in the literature review. Kim and Oliver (2011) examined semantic affinity and found that those who imagined unhappy romantic situations, such as breaking up, did in fact tend to refrain from selecting a romance-related story more than those who imagined a happy or neutral romantic situation. Alternatively, those in a happy romantic situation might choose to watch content about a happy couple. MMT predicts that those in a happy romantic situation will choose to watch a happy couple because people desire to watch happy content in general in order to prolong and maintain positive moods (known as
hedonic valence) (Kim & Oliver, 2011; Nabi et al., 2011). Furthermore, viewers in a happy romantic situation would not need to avoid the content since the content is not related to a negative emotional experience (semantic affinity) (Kim & Oliver, 2011).

Though research suggests these theoretical predictions apply to traditional romantic comedies, in which the entire plot focuses on a woman meeting a man and then finding eternal love, it is hard to say whether these findings would extend to more contemporary chick flicks that place less emphasis (if any) on finding the perfect mate. In fact, popular press writers have suggested that the traditional “chick flick” genre is dead (Claes, 2011; Sutherland, 2014). Instead, the traditional girl-falls-in-love-with-boy romantic comedy has been replaced by the female-led comedy (FLC), wherein the focus of the movie is not on men and romance, but on female friendships, self-validation, and human experience regardless of gender (Winch, 2012; York, 2010). One example of this new form of chick flick is Bridesmaids (2011). The plot of Bridesmaids (2011) focuses on the relationship between the protagonist (Annie), Annie’s best friend, and her best friend’s other bridesmaids. The core of this movie is relationships among the female characters. Romance with a male is merely a subplot. Given that the main focus of the plotline is not a romantic relationship, MMT predicts that someone who has a negative romance-related mood might still choose to watch a FLC, because a movie that focuses less on a happy romantic relationship triggers less of a need for avoidance.

In addition to a genre shift, contemporary romantic comedies also depict different characters than romantic comedies of the past. Specifically, some recent romantic comedies feature middle-aged or older women, generally over the age of 40. One such
example is the FLC *Mamma Mia!* (2008). In the movie, Donna (Meryl Streep) is preparing for her daughter’s wedding and is excited to reunite with her two old friends. Unbeknownst to Donna, her daughter invites three of her mother’s former lovers to the wedding in order to try to figure out which of them is her father. When Donna discovers her old flames are at the wedding, she turns to her friends for support. The movie also depicts a complex, strong relationship between Donna and her daughter in comparison to the generally weak ties the women have to the men in their lives. Given that movie audiences are mostly comprised of people under the age of 44 (see Nielsen, 2013), the impact of the age of actors in movies on younger people’s intent to view motion pictures for mood management is worth investigating.

Theoretically, there should also be even less of a need for avoidance by romantically unhappy younger audiences when deciding whether or not to view a movie that casts older people as the main characters. Since attributes such as age influence perceived similarity with another (see Goethals & Darley, 1977; Suls, Gastorf, & Lawhon, 1978; Zanna, Goethals, & Hill, 1975), younger audiences might not perceive themselves—and by extension, their moods—to be similar to the older characters in the movie. The lack of perceived similarity could trigger less of a need for avoidance because a film focused on older characters may reduce perceptions of semantic affinity to one’s own circumstances.

Using MMT as a theoretical lens, this study seeks insight into college-aged females’ selective exposure to romantic comedies as it relates to romance-related mood. Selective exposure is defined as the “actual use of messages in noncaptive situations
(Zillman & Bryant, 1985), leaving facets of information processing and persuasive effect aside” (Knobloch-Westerwick, Hastall, & Rossmann, 2009). Specifically, this study investigates the roles of situational similarity and character attribute similarity in the effects of semantic affinity. The romantic comedies explored include traditional romantic comedies (those focusing on a heterosexual romance as the main storyline) and female-led comedies. MMT predicts that individuals who are happy about their relationship status would choose to watch all forms of the romantic comedy, while those unhappy about their relationship status will choose to avoid traditional romantic comedies. Furthermore, unhappy individuals might choose to watch a romance-related film if it features older protagonists rather than characters close to their age. Perceived intended audience, perceived similarity with the characters, and anticipated enjoyment are also addressed as possible factors that influence selective exposure. Practical implications in light of the findings are discussed in the discussion section of this paper.
CHAPTER TWO
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

From Screwball Comedies to Female-led Comedies

Female-led comedies contain a combination of elements from different subgenres of romantic comedies that were popular at various times. For example, in a typical FLC, one can note the witty dialogue of screwball comedies, the blatant acknowledgment of premarital sex of radical romantic comedies, and the happily-ever-after of neo-traditional romantic comedies. This section draws on the historical outline of romantic comedies by McDonald (2007) to trace the development of elements in romantic comedies starting with the screwball comedies of the 1930s and 1940s. Then, other subgenres of the traditional romantic comedy are discussed. Upon conclusion, this section provides evidence demonstrating that, although the FLC represents a major genre shift in terms of both the content and marketing of films targeted toward women, the FLC is actually a continuation of the romantic comedy genre.

The screwball comedy. The debut of the screwball comedy can be traced back to 1934 with *It Happened One Night* (1934) and *20th Century* (1934) (Harvey, 1998). Marshall (2009) noted that unlike successive romantic comedy subgenres, screwball comedies were popular with both genders, not just women. Conventions of this subgenre include male and female protagonists who dislike each other at first but end up married or remarried, an aggressive and predatory female, characters who act in unpredictable ways, a conflicting social class element, slapstick humor, and verbal sparring (Marshall, 2009; McDonald, 2007; Shumway, 1991). McDonald (2007) suggested that a noticeable theme
within early screwball comedies is reverse class snobbery, or the idea that being poor is morally superior to being rich. This makes sense given that America was in the midst of the Great Depression when the subgenre was created. Another theme McDonald pointed out is “the idea that people in love will do everything they can to torment each other” (p. 20). She claimed love in these movies is depicted as “a game each combatant wants to win and is prepared to cheat in order to do so,” but ultimately, the game ends in a “benevolent draw” (p. 23). After all of the witty banter and jarring insults, there is always the conservative ending of marriage.

Though marriage might be the end of the movie, Shumway (1991) argued that screwball comedies do not portray marriage as the end of romance. In fact, he claims screwball comedies mystify marriage and portray it as a desirable goal of a romance that will continue on well after the wedding day. He theorized this is a cultural response to a decline in marriage rates and the growing divorce rates of the 1930s. In contrast, McDonald (2007) and Greene (2010) both suggested that it is merely a response to the 1930 Production Code. After public outrage at suggestive humor and immorality depicted in movies, film studios imposed the 1930 Production Code upon themselves to calm everyone and ease public condemnation of Hollywood. The code dictated what was morally acceptable movie content and what was not (Greene, 2010). After the introduction of the code, “studios found it beneficial to turn to a style of romantic comedy that championed traditional values, particularly the beauty of love, fidelity, and marriage” (Greene, 2010, p. 56). In other words, the marriage ending in screwball comedies was a response to a public moral panic.
Regardless of the motivation for depicting marriages, because marriage looms at the end of every screwball comedy, women are ultimately limited to the roles of mothers and wives in this subgenre. These women’s roles—and the importance of finding a suitable mate—are also common in later subgenres, particularly the sex comedy and neo-traditional comedy (McDonald, 2007; York, 2010). Though the screwball comedy slowly disappeared from theaters during World War II, elements from them can be seen in almost all subsequent subgenres (Britton, 1983; Harvey, 1998; Krutnik, 1990).

The sex comedy. A clash between male and female protagonists is a theme also prominent in the sex comedy of the 1950s and 1960s (McDonald, 2007). The tension between males and females in sex comedies differs from screwball comedies in that conflict is seen as an inevitable product of nature, specifically a desire for sex. Furthermore, the films imply men and women have biologically different goals for sex. The central theme of the sex comedy is that men want sex without marriage, while women want sex within marriage (McDonald, 2007). The development of this subgenre followed quickly on the heels of Alfred Kinsey’s release of Sexual Behavior in the Human Female, the first issue of Playboy, and the first use of the word “virgin” in a successful non-pornographic film that skirted the Production Code rules. All of these events occurred in 1953 (McDonald, 2007).

Conventions and tropes of this subgenre include disguise and masquerade (mainly on the male’s part as he tries to trick the female into bed), battling lovers, insults and embarrassments, an anti-marriage speech, sexual teasing, the triumph of the “good girl” over the sexually available one, fancy apartments, and glossy costuming (McDonald,
2007). Most notably, a push toward consumerism is also introduced in this subgenre and is further emphasized in later romantic comedies (McDonald, 2007; York, 2010). The sex comedy targets both men and women in advertisements for items that help them seem appealing to the opposite sex (McDonald, 2007).

Though the protagonists in sex comedies joke and bicker about sex, in the end, the woman always wins. Sex is withheld until marriage and never enacted in the movie (McDonald, 2007). Given this, the sex comedy’s popularity started to decline after the invention of birth control in the 1960s. As women became more sexually liberated, the Women’s Movement gained momentum, and society at large shifted in moral views, movies about “saving it until marriage” no longer appealed to audiences (McDonald, 2007).

The radical comedy. The radical comedy emerged in the 1970s starting with *Harold and Maude* (1970), a film about a young man obsessed with death and his relationship with an elderly woman he meets at a funeral who eventually dies (McDonald, 2007). In the 1970s, the divorce rate doubled, single parenthood was increasingly common, feminists and homosexuals were politically active, and more and more women were entering the work force (Henderson, 1978). In a time of such uncertainty and change, McDonald stated that, “the romantic comedies of the early to mid-1970s clearly reflect this mood of upheaval in their willingness to jettison former rules” (p. 51).

Writing about movies of the 1970s, Henderson (1978) claimed that the “romantic comedies” of the day were not romantic comedies at all. Instead, the movies emerging
from Hollywood lacked any sort of romance, as they no longer depicted a strong heroine that developed a friendship with a male over time. Rather, these films portrayed a “relationship” that was built on false pretenses and commitments for trivial stakes only. Some radical romantic comedies even end with the couple separated as a way to question the very ideology of romance (McDonald, 2007).

The main themes of radical romantic comedies are self-absorption and self-reflexivity about the importance of romantic relationships. Other conventions and tropes of this subgenre include frank acceptance of pre-marital sex, emphasis on sexual desire and pleasure for both genders, a masquerade that is never revealed, urban settings, realistic costumes, use of romantic music from the 1940s for nostalgic purposes, and pessimism about happiness in monogamous relationships. Despite the bleak outlook for romance in these movies, radical romantic comedies still depict their protagonists searching for the blissful and meaningful relationships depicted in romantic comedies of the past, even if they don’t find one by the end of the movie (McDonald, 2007).

The neo-traditional comedy. The neo-traditional romantic comedy is the most common type of romantic comedy today. As McDonald (2007) stated, “...the neo-traditional romantic comedy is not so much a significant subgenre as the dominant current form of the genre” (p. 85). Emerging in the 1970s, it became widely popular after When Harry Met Sally was released in 1989 (Krutnik, 1998). These movies returned romance to romantic comedies. Though they depict hardships of romantic relationships like radical romantic comedies do, the couple ultimately overcomes the hardships against all odds. The ability to overcome these hardships is at times completely unrealistic, as
characters result to means such as time-travel or speaking to the dead (McDonald, 2007). However, this subgenre insists on the couple reuniting by the end of the movie, and the importance of the heterosexual couple is undeniable (McDonald, 2007; Moddelmog, 2009).

There are several conventions and tropes in neo-traditional romantic comedies. Movies in this subgenre are more than likely set in New York City, the birthplace of American materialism (McDonald, 2007). This city has become such a staple of neo-traditional romantic comedies that filmmakers now just use recognizable parts of New York to set a romantic mood instead of actually creating a romantic scene (McDonald, 2007). The titles of the movies themselves usually reference romantic relationships, a city, weddings, or the couple itself (McDonald, 2007). The title, posters, and type-casted actors all suggest that a movie is a romantic comedy so that the audience knows exactly what they are getting when they buy a ticket to a neo-traditional romantic comedy (McDonald, 2007; York, 2010). Other conventions and tropes include a de-emphasizing of sex; a nostalgic return to romantic scenes of the past; and an ironic, mocking self-acknowledgement of themselves as romantic comedies (McDonald, 2007).

The neo-traditional romantic comedy is a subgenre that has resulted in critical dismissal and the general devaluation of the romantic comedy genre (Berry & Errigo, 2004; Ferriss & Young, 2007; Jermyn, 2011; Marshall, 2009; McDonald, 2007; Shumway, 2003). McDonald even wrote of this subgenre that, “...it employs so formulaic a storyline, it is so over-familiar a product, that it is easy to take for granted” (p. 2). A report by Nash Information Services (2014) showed that the romantic comedy genre as a
whole declined from more than 142 million tickets sold and 10 percent of the market share in 1999 to two percent of the market share and slightly more than 23 million tickets sold in 2013. Given that only a few of the 10 to 20 movies launched by a studio during the course of a year will be profitable, studios have started spending more money on fewer movies (Joshi & Hanssens, 2009; York, 2010). As York mentioned, movie franchises these days need to bring something new to the table—not something “formulaic and over-familiar”—with each successive film in order to be successful, and neo-traditional romantic comedies are failing at that task. In order to survive as a mainstream genre and become more profitable by appealing to a wider audience, romantic comedies have undergone a shift to become “women-driven blockbusters,” or female-led comedies (Winch, 2012; York, 2010).

**The female-led comedy.** As previously mentioned, the FLC differs from previous romantic comedy subgenres in that it places less emphasis on the romantic couple and the need for sexual fulfillment. A protagonist’s romance with a man is solely a subplot. Similar to radical romantic comedies, self-reflexivity and self-validation are more important to the women in these movies (Hollinger, 2008; Winch 2012; York, 2010). As York stated:

> The new women’s film is defined by a combination of elements of women’s films from over the decades; for example, they continue to touch on topics of consumerism, romance, beauty, and escape; however, overriding this subject matter is a theme of validation. (p. 4)
No longer is a female protagonist’s self-worth determined by whether or not she can catch a man, rather, it is determined by whether or not she can succeed at all other areas in her life—such as friendships, work, school, or personal interests (York, 2010). Hollinger wrote that in these films, “[women] can be whatever they want to be and have whatever they want to have” (Hollinger, 2008, p. 225). She also argued that “whatever they want to have” can entail a renewed acceptance of traditional femininity, as discussed in the following section on chick culture. Likewise, Winch supported the argument that female-led comedies no longer depict women that rely solely on men for their self-worth and identity validation. Instead, much of a female character’s self-validation comes from her relationships with other females. Winch wrote, “female friends supply significant emotional and moral support, playing a fundamental role in validating each other’s identities” (p. 69).

Other scholars are more critical of the idea that contemporary romantic comedies are post-feminist texts that reject patriarchal ideologies (see Ferris & Young, 2007; Holmlund, 2005; Tally, 2006). For instance, critical scholars point to the fact that women are ultimately delegated back to the roles of wives and mothers by the end of these movies. Winch (2012) addressed this concern, however, when she stated that any romantic relationships in FLCs are pragmatic in nature, meaning that they serve a functional purpose. For example, she suggested that in FLCs, women often choose to seek good prospective husbands for stability and security rather than romance. Moreover, she argued that the wedding ceremony is approached as “an economically astute decision,” and is actually “used as a vehicle for female sociality as girlfriends shop their
way to the perfect bridal spectacle” (Winch, 2012, p. 65). In other words, marriage in the
movie is merely another plotline that sustains the focus on female friendships rather than
a focus on heterosexual romance itself.

There are several other themes that relate to modern females that are addressed by
FLCs—such as cheating, divorce, weight gain, growing older, getting cancer,
transitioning from college to career, and growing up without a father (York, 2010). York
stated, “put simply, these texts are the screen versions of women’s own lives” (p. 11). In
other words, the FLC provides a refreshing realism that is in stark contrast to the
unbelievable triumph of obstacles depicted in neo-traditional romantic comedies. Perhaps
this is one reason that the subgenre has had widespread global box office success (York,
2010).

York (2010) identified other characteristics of FLCs (or women’s blockbusters, as
she has termed them) that make these movies so successful. First, FLCs are high concept
– their storylines can be summed up in a short phrase or sentence that is easy to translate
into other languages. The next is that the movies offer ample opportunities for product
placements, commercial tie-ins, and cross-promotions, thus creating a franchise out of the
movie. The film studios are selling audiences more than a ticket to the movie. They are
selling the foods eaten and clothes worn by characters, the spin-off television series, the
books later written about the characters, the silly bumper stickers with lines from the
movie, and much more. The last characteristic is that FLCs use aesthetics to relay both
style and story. As Potter (2011) noted in his book on media literacy, movies with fast
cuts, quick motion within a frame, loud music, and sound effects generate arousal in
audiences, and arousal makes viewers pay more attention, experience a movie more vividly, and remember the characters better than a movie without such characteristics. With saturated colors, glossy close-ups, and montage cutting, the FLC has visual appeal that is similar to blockbusters of any genre (York, 2010).

Though it could be argued that the FLC is a break from the romantic comedy genre, rather than a subgenre, because it does not have the implication of sex at its heart (see McDonald, 2007, p. 13), the FLC fits McDonald’s definition of romantic comedy: “a romantic comedy is a film which has as its central narrative motor a quest for love, which portrays this quest in a light-hearted way and almost always to a successful conclusion” (p. 9). In the traditional romantic comedy, the protagonist is on a quest for a man’s love. In FLCs, the quest for love is a quest for self-love or a quest for platonic love from female friends. As Winch (2012) stated, when feuding female friends in FLCs reunite, “their love for each other is emphatically celebrated to the point where they are seen to be the primary lovers in the films. Their conflict is forgotten, and sugar-coated in romance” (p. 77). Though the protagonists in these movies are looking for different kinds of love, which includes a love that does not always lead to sex, it is a quest for love nonetheless, and characters search for this love in similar ways. Namely, the FLC’s quest for love is narrated to audiences through the witty banter of screwball comedies, the consumerism of sex comedies, the self-reflection of radical comedies, and the happy endings of neo-traditional comedies.
Chick Culture

Chick culture emerged in the 1990s and is essentially a collection of pop culture media that revolve around women. These media consist of magazines, television shows, blogs, books, music, and of course, movies (Ferriss & Young, 2007). At the heart of chick culture are the ideas of consumerism and post-feminism (Ferriss & Young, 2007; Radner, 2010; Winch, 2012; York, 2010).

Consumerism is prevalent in both neo-traditional romantic comedies and FLCs, though the FLC perhaps emphasizes it more heavily (McDonald, 2007; Radner, 2010; Winch 2012; York, 2010). Instead of referencing social and political events like radical romantic comedies, neo-traditional romantic comedies and FLCs reference pop culture and products that domestic audiences can buy (McDonald, 2007; York, 2010). Radner (2010) and Winch (2012) both proposed that participating in consumerism is one of the ways in which female characters in the FLC confirm their identity and experience self-fulfillment. Purchasing material goods is seen as a public demonstration that a woman is successful both economically and socially, and FLCs encourage viewers to do likewise through product placement and cross-market enterprises (Winch, 2012). The film industry benefits from portraying women as eager consumers, because as York argued, an emphasis on consumerism in the FLC is a result of an industry need to spin a movie into a franchise by selling movie-related items such as books, clothes, and soundtracks in order to maximize profit. Radner noted that several recent romantic comedies are set within the fashion world and contain product placement from large fashion companies, urging women to pursue fashion in order to be seen as feminine or “girly.”
The girliness represented in neo-traditional films and FLCs is directly related to post-feminism (Radner, 2010; Winch, 2012). Ferriss and Young (2007) and Winch (2012) both conceptualized post-feminism as a rejection of feminism and its blaming of patriarchy for inequalities faced by women. Post-feminists tend to view feminists as angry, self-proclaimed victims of patriarchy (and men in general) that are stuck in issues of the past (Ferriss & Young, 2007; Negra, 2008). Post-feminists, in contrast, refuse to be labeled as victims, instead believing that women can achieve anything they desire (Ferriss & Young, 2007; Radner, 2010; Winch, 2012). As Winch stated, post-feminists “have a horror of appearing to be victims... Victimhood exposes an inability to take advantage of all the possibilities and strategies of empowerment that are apparently available to the young urban woman” (p. 71). Ferriss and Young noted that some critics believe that girliness is one such strategy of empowerment for post-feminists because it allows them to reclaim and refashion their sexuality. However, some feminist critics also believe that girliness is demeaning to women because it exploits them as sex objects, leading them to overvalue their appearance (Ferriss & Young, 2007). Holmlund (2005) is one such critic who argued that post-feminist representations of women in chick culture do not endorse true freedom for women, but merely the freedom to shop and cook. Similarly, Winch suggested that post-feminists do not want to appear too masculine and powerful, so girliness is emphasized. It is doubtful that a consensus will be reached among critics about whether or not the post-feminism of chick culture is beneficial for women. Hollows and Moseley (2006) and Ferriss and Young (2007) suggested that, rather than arguing about whether post-feminism is a good or bad thing, a more practical
use of theorists’ time would be constructing new ways to understand the relationship between feminism and chick culture.

**Older Women in Romantic Comedies**

One positive implication of increased consumerism and post-feminism in contemporary romantic comedies is more complex portrayals of older women. Historically, older women have been underrepresented in Hollywood films, as the United States is youth-centric and demonstrates ageism towards women (Gullette, 2011; Hatch, 2005; Jermyn, 2011; Tally, 2006). Even when older female characters are depicted, much younger actresses usually play them. Some examples of this can be seen in movies such as *Forrest Gump* (1994) and *Star Trek* (2009). In *Forrest Gump* (1994), Sally Field plays Forrest’s mother although she is only 10 years older than Tom Hanks (who plays Forrest). Likewise, Winona Ryder plays the mother of Zachary Quinto’s character in *Star Trek* (2009), despite only a six-year age difference (Buchanan, 2014). So, even when older characters appear in a film, older actresses are still burdened “to in fact look an age that most older women, without the benefit of surgery, personal trainers, expensive treatments, etc. cannot attain” (Tally, 2006, p. 52). However, in many cases, contemporary romantic comedies depict characters with age-realistic actresses. Tally noted that this is a kind of realism rarely seen in Hollywood films and that it is a direct result of post-feminist marketing attempts, as will be discussed later in this literature review.

Older women in media have also historically been portrayed as under-developed characters fulfilling negative stereotypes (Hatch, 2005; Henneberg, 2010; Jermyn, 2011).
Potter (2011) suggested that elderly characters are typically portrayed as eccentric, infirm, stubborn, and foolish. Likewise, Henneberg stated that older women are often depicted as wicked old witches, selfless godmothers, or demented hags, while Jermyn noted that they are depicted as interfering mothers. However, several contemporary romantic comedies have not only been featuring older characters portrayed by age-realistic actresses, but they also provide a space for alternate representations of older women. Recent romantic comedies with older protagonists portray older women exploring their independence, sexuality, and self-worth. For example, in *It’s Complicated* (2010), Jane (Meryl Streep) has an affair with her ex-husband while also having a fling with her architect. Throughout the movie, she openly discusses what it means to be an independent, divorced woman. Tally (2006) suggested that the FLCs in particular reflect “contemporary struggles to redefine what middle age might be for a generation who has lived through the women’s movement and the struggle to have children at a later age than earlier generations” (p. 51). York (2010) and Winch (2012) argued that the use of more developed older characters also supports the film industry’s efforts to expand the market for romantic comedies to a global audience that includes older women.

**Film Audiences**

The FLC reflects a change in the way marketers and film producers think about the audience for romantic comedies. By adding a wider variety of characters, universal themes, and blockbuster aesthetics, FLCs and their marketing materials are meant to appeal to more than just young women. Through a brief examination of research on
Audience attributes and perceived intended audience, the formation of the audience for romantic comedies may be better understood.

**Audience attributes and selective exposure.** Austin (1983) stated that in the earliest days of film, both Hollywood and the social sciences were ambivalent toward audience research. After the widespread use of television cut into movie profits, the demand for audience research rose. Early audience research and theory saw audiences as passive receivers of media (Berger, 1995; Croteau & Hoynes, 2002; Davis & Baron, 1981). Since then, theorists have suggested that audiences actively seek out certain types of media in order to satisfy their needs. These needs include things such as to be informed or educated, to be entertained, to enhance social interaction, or to escape the stresses of daily life (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974).

Since the emergence of theory that assumes audiences actively select media to which they expose themselves, various attributes and states of media users have been studied in order to determine what makes them more or less likely to view certain types of content (e.g., Bartsch et al., 2010; Hall, 2005; Weaver, 2011). For instance, Hall explored the impact of personality traits such as extraversion, neuroticism, and psychoticism on audiences’ genre preferences for movies, television, and radio. Bartsch et al examined the role of the need for affect in audiences’ experiences of horror and drama movies. Weaver (2011) looked at the race of both movie casts and audience members in his examination of the role that actors’ race plays in audiences’ intent to view a film. The role of audiences’ emotions—such as loneliness—have also been examined (Katz et al., 1974; Peplau & Perlman, 1982).
Of course, in addition to attributes of the potential viewer, the content of a movie is also a determining factor in whether or not someone will view a film. Research has demonstrated the overall theme of the movie is a strong predictor of selective exposure (Cooper, 1999). Beyond theme and basic genre preferences, people also tend to look at the types of characters within a movie to determine whether or not to watch. For example, multiple studies have shown that audiences are drawn to content with characters that have the same or similar attributes as themselves (Knobloch et al. 2005; Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2006; Weaver, 2011). For example, Weaver (2011) examined the role actors’ race had on audiences for romance movies and found that White audiences have more interest in seeing romance movies with White casts than romance movies with Black casts. Since viewers typically prefer to see movies with characters similar to themselves, marketing a movie in a way that emphasizes the intended audience’s similarity to the characters becomes imperative for film companies’ success.

**Intended audiences and marketing.** Film studios design and market movies in order to target a certain audience, whether that be a niche audience or a mass audience (Potter, 2011; Tally, 2006; York, 2010). The advertising for a film generates knowledge and expectations about the movie within the intended audience, and the success of a movie is largely dependent on this advertising (Gutman, 1982). Indeed, Weaver (under review) found that perceptions of the intended audience can be the deciding factor in a person’s decision on whether or not to view a film.

Researchers have suggested that traditional romantic comedies are historically marketed exclusively to women (McDonald, 2007; York, 2010). Marketing practices for
traditional romantic comedies typically include a slower release of the film at certain theaters and an advertising campaign that only plays during commercials for female-gear television shows like *Oprah* (Kramer, 1999; Tally, 2006). As a result, the marketing indicates to viewers that the intended audience for romantic comedies is women. However, the FLC has a different intended audience—everyone. Between the universally appealing theme of self-validation, new settings, and the spectacular aesthetics of the FLC, these movies are targeted to such a wide demographic that the FLC “brings older and younger heterosexual women, lesbians and gays, heterosexual men, and transnational views together to transform what was once a small domestic following into a large, sutured, global audience” (York, 2010, p. 5). The intended audience for FLCs is communicated to viewers through various marketing strategies (Ferriss & Young, 2007; Tally, 2006; York, 2010).

The FLC differs in traditional marketing approaches for romantic comedies in that it is marketed “in the same way that all blockbusters have been in the past: with spectacle aesthetics and a focus on ancillary marketing and foreign box office” (York, 2010, p. 4). York claimed that ancillary marketing is the most responsible for global box office achievement. In particular, soundtrack advertisements and sales, early awareness campaigns, fan websites, cross-promotions, and advertisements and trailers in print, television, radio, and other films are utilized in order to inform audiences about upcoming FLCs.

Tally (2006) stated that in order to market movies with older actresses in particular, marketers turn to celebrity interviews. During celebrity interviews, older
female actresses often refer to the importance of their real-life families. However, these women are also “glamorous Hollywood actresses” that are exploring their sexuality on screen (Tally, 2006, p. 40). By acknowledging their roles as both mothers and sexual career women, older actresses can be viewed as “having it all” in the sense that they have combined active careers with real-life motherhood (Tally, 2006). In this way, the marketing of the movies fits with the post-feminist themes of neo-traditional romantic comedies and FLCs. The marketing for FLCs especially has been so successful that FLCs often surpass male-driven, action-packed, mainstream movies in their total earnings (York, 2010). For example, *Mamma Mia!* (2008) has earned over $609 million worldwide, which is more than other popular comedies—such as *Step Brothers* and *Tropic Thunder*—that were released in the same year (Box Office Mojo, n.d.).

**Theoretical Explanations for Selective Exposure to Romantic Comedies**

Mood management theory may be used to help explain the growing popularity of FLCs over traditional romantic comedies. MMT predicts the selection of media based on affective states of the audience that are susceptible to change (Zillmann, 1988; Zillman & Bryant, 1985). Thus, MMT predicts that FLCs may not only appeal to people with different physical or personality attributes, but people with different moods as well. As previously mentioned, MMT is based on the hedonistic assumption that people want to experience pleasure and avoid pain. Since its inception, the theory has found a great deal of support across a variety of contexts (see Oliver, 2003 for a review). For example, Knobloch and Zillmann (2002) found that students in a bad mood listened to positive, upbeat music in order to feel better. Likewise, Carpentier et al. (2008) found that people
in a positive mood choose to expose themselves to positive media in order to keep feeling positive. The findings of these two studies support one of the key components of MMT—hedonic valence, or whether the content is positive or negative.

Throughout the years, other key components of MMT in addition to hedonic valence have emerged, including absorption potential (how captivating the content is) and semantic affinity (the closeness of the content to one’s own current circumstances) (Kim & Oliver, 2011). Nabi et al. (2011) stated:

For each, the underlying principle is the same. If a message reflects one (or presumably more) feature that might perpetuate the negative state—for example, high absorption potential or mood-related content—the message is likely to be avoided in favor of one that would interrupt the negative state, such as a message of an opposite valence or on a topic unrelated to the mood source. (p. 122)

In other words, MMT predicts that people are likely to expose themselves to captivating, happy content that is not related to their negative mood, while they will avoid movies that reflect their negative mood.

When considering selective exposure to romantic comedies and romance-related mood in particular, the idea of semantic affinity becomes more salient. Research has already begun to examine MMT in the context of selective exposure to romance-focused media. For example, Kim and Oliver (2011) conducted research to explore the effects of relationship-based mood on content selection. They found that individuals who imagined unhappy romantic situations were less likely to select content about happy and romance-related stories compared to those who imagined happy situations. This supports the
semantic affinity postulate proposed by Zillmann (1988) and Zillmann and Bryant (1985). They also offer alternative explanations for their results, suggesting three possible self-regulatory motivations—self-protection, self-improvement, and self-enhancement—may be at play. Respectively, these motivations suggest that people avoid content that might make them jealous or anxious about the future by comparing their romantic failure to successful romantic relationships, while they will choose to expose themselves to content that provides inspiring messages or provides an opportunity to improve self-esteem through comparison with more unfortunate others.

**MMT extended.** Notably, not all of the findings from Kim and Oliver (2011) support the original assumption of hedonic motivations for human behavior. Namely, those in a pessimistic mood preferred sad stories rather than happy stories. To incorporate findings like this, MMT has been extended to include counter-hedonistic selections on the parts of media users, especially selections that involve negative hedonic valence or high semantic affinity (e.g., Knobloch-Westerwick et al, 2009; Nabi, Finnerty, Domschke, & Hull, 2006; Oliver, 1993; Oliver, 2003; Oliver, 2008). For example, Oliver (2003) found that people enjoy watching horror movies or tearjerkers (movies with negative valence), which seemingly goes against the hedonic valence postulate of MMT. Likewise, Nabi et al. (2006) found that people experiencing regret are more likely to expose themselves to programming on the topic of their regret, which is in direct conflict with the semantic affinity postulate. In studies such as these on counter-hedonic media selection, researchers have suggested that media users made counter-hedonic selections for reasons such as to restore self-esteem through comparison with unfortunate others.
(Kim & Oliver, 2011; Mares & Cantor, 1992) or to gain insight into their own situations (Oliver, 2008; Vorderer & Knobloch, 2000). As Kim and Oliver stated, “individuals may reflect on rather than escape from their troubles, accept or even rationalize rather than deny negative situations, and, finally, alleviate rather than exacerbate distress” (p. 124). In other words, people might be making counter-hedonic media selections as a way to cope with a negative life event rather than to regulate their mood.

**Coping.** The idea of coping as a reason for both hedonic and counter-hedonic media selection has found support among several researchers (e.g., Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2009; Lohaus, Ball, Klein-Hessling, & Wild, 2005; Minnebo, 2006). Coping is essentially any cognitive or behavioral effort to manage negative moods or events (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Suls and Fletcher (1985) identified two different types of coping—approach and avoidance. Approach coping involves directly engaging with a stressor (i.e., counter-hedonic choices), while avoidance coping refers to withdrawing from a stressor and its related emotions (i.e., hedonic choices). Both types of coping have been observed in people regarding their selection of romance-related content (e.g., Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2009). Knobloch-Westerwick et al. (2009) found that individuals who were single and unhappy with their romantic life sought more information about romance than happy singles (approach coping), and newsreaders in a relationship who were unhappy with their romantic relationship did not read stories about relationship problems (avoidance coping).

However, Knobloch-Westerwick et al.’s (2009) study differs from the present study in the type of media presented to participants. Where Knobloch-Westerwick et al.
(2009) had participants browse through a “newsmagazine,” the present study asks about participants’ interests in films. A magazine article could provide relationship-related content, but it probably does not follow the story of a single couple as they triumph over obstacles to a happy ending like a romantic comedy does. Therefore, it is possible that unhappy participants would compare themselves and their relationship to the successful relationship heavily depicted in romantic comedies more than they would to a magazine article. This would most likely result in avoidance to the romantic comedy with the motivation of self-protection (Kim & Oliver, 2011). Since newsmagazines are seen as sources of information, perhaps a counter-hedonic choice in this medium is driven by Kim and Oliver’s motivation of self-improvement. In sum, despite counter-hedonic findings for other media, traditional MMT is most likely to apply to selective exposure to romantic comedies because of romantic comedies’ rich relationship content and abundance of comparison opportunities.

Hypotheses

Given the mixed evidence for MMT and related studies on romance-related content and audiences, this study attempts to explore whether the predictions of MMT hold up when conditions that may influence perceptions of semantic affinity are varied. Specifically, two aspects of semantic affinity – conceptualized as similarity to one’s current circumstances – are explored: whether the circumstance that elicited a particular mood is emphasized and whether character attributes are similar to the potential viewer’s. Two studies were conducted to test the effects of these factors on semantic affinity and selective exposure. Study 1 examines selective exposure as it relates to romance-related
mood and two romantic comedy subgenres (traditional romantic comedies and FLCs) that place different levels of emphasis on romance-related circumstances. Study 2 tests hypotheses that examine selective exposure as it relates to romance-related mood and similarity to the film’s characters, operationalized for this research as the age of its characters. Additionally, this study explores the roles that mood, genre, and actors’ age play in anticipated enjoyment. Perceptions of the intended audience and perceived similarity with characters are also explored for Study 2. In turn, mood, perceptions of the intended audience, anticipated enjoyment, and perceived similarity are evaluated as possible predictors for selective exposure as well.

Mood and genre might interact to affect anticipated enjoyment for a movie. This is because MMT suggests those in a negative romance-related mood will be reminded of their negative mood if they watch movies about happy couples. This means they are likely to anticipate less enjoyment of a movie featuring happy couples than someone in a happy romance-related mood, who has no reason to feel sad or upset by seeing content featuring happy couples. Therefore the following hypothesis was proposed:

H1: Participants in a negative romance-related mood will be less likely to anticipate enjoyment of a traditional romantic comedy, but equally likely to anticipate enjoyment of a female-led comedy compared to those in a positive romance-related mood.

Next, since FLCs have less of a focus on romantic relationships, MMT predicts that they should trigger less of a need for avoidance in people with negative romance-related moods than traditional romantic comedies that focus on a happy couple. This is
because people in a negative romance-related mood should desire to avoid content high in semantic affinity. It seems reasonable, then, that the content with a greater level of emphasis on the relationship-relevant circumstances, as is the case with traditional romantic comedies, would lead to greater levels of avoidance than would contemporary female-led comedies in which romantic storylines play a minor role in the film. Therefore, the following prediction was made:

H2: Participants in a negative romance-related mood will be less likely to select a traditional romantic comedy, but equally likely to select female-led comedies compared to people in a positive mood.

Furthermore, given all of the research presented throughout the literature review, there is reason to believe that mood, perceptions of the intended audience, and anticipated enjoyment might all affect selective exposure. Therefore, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H3: Romance-related mood, perceptions of the intended audience, and anticipated enjoyment will predict selective exposure to romantic comedies.

The theoretical predictions surrounding actor age are less clear. Because age can influence perceived similarity with characters (see Goethals & Darley, 1977; Suls, Gastorf, & Lawhon, 1978; Zanna, Goethals, & Hill, 1975), younger audiences might not perceive themselves to be in a similar situation to older characters in romantic comedies. Therefore the following hypothesis was proposed:
H4: Participants will perceive themselves as more similar to the characters in a movie with an age-similar cast than they will to the characters in a movie with an age-dissimilar cast.

Additionally, since previous research has found that character attribute similarity can affect perceptions of the intended audience (Weaver, under review), the following prediction was made:

H5: Participants will perceive themselves to be part of the intended audience for a movie with an age-similar cast more than a movie with an age-dissimilar cast.

Next, mood and actors’ age might influence anticipated enjoyment because audiences typically desire to watch content featuring characters similar to them. If characters are dissimilar, they might perceive the content to be unrelated to them, and therefore uninteresting. However, as MMT would suggest, those in a negative romance-related mood might anticipate less enjoyment of watching characters similar to them achieve relationship-related happiness compared to those in a positive mood. This is because semantic affinity would theoretically be high for movies with both character attribute similarity and situational similarity, and those in a negative mood would not want to be reminded of the negative mood. A movie with older characters would have less semantic affinity, as there would be less character attribute similarity. Thus the following hypothesis was proposed:

H6: Participants in a negative romance-related mood will be more likely to anticipate enjoyment of a romantic comedy with an age-dissimilar (older) cast,
whereas those in a positive romance-related mood will be more likely to anticipate enjoyment of a romantic comedy with an age-similar (younger) cast. Overall, research suggests people prefer media with similar age characters (e.g., Harwood, 1997; Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2006). Therefore, younger people may be more likely to select films with age-similar protagonists in general. However, selection may be dependent on romance-related mood and perceived semantic affinity for romantic comedies. Again, MMT suggests that those in a negative romance-related mood would not want to be reminded of their negative mood, so they would be less likely to select films that are high in semantic affinity (whether through character attribute similarity or situational similarity). If this is the case, then those in a negative romance-related mood may not want to watch characters close to their age succeed at a relationship because a movie depicting this would be high in semantic affinity, whereas there would be less semantic affinity when watching older characters engage in romantic activities because the character attribute similarity is lower. Therefore:

H7: Those in a negative romance-related mood will be less likely to select romantic comedies with an age-similar cast than with an age-dissimilar cast, whereas those in a positive mood will be less likely to select romantic comedies with an age-dissimilar cast than films with an age-similar cast.

Lastly, given all of the research presented throughout the literature review, there is reason to believe that mood, actors’ ages, perceived similarity with the characters, perceptions of the intended audience, and anticipated enjoyment might all affect selective exposure. Therefore, the following hypothesis was proposed:
H8: Mood, actors’ age, perceived similarity with the characters, perceptions of the films’ intended audience, and anticipated enjoyment will predict selective exposure.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

The hypotheses were tested in two separate studies that draw heavily from the research methods employed by Kim and Oliver (2011) and Weaver (2011). For both studies, an experiment was chosen because of its ability to demonstrate causality. By isolating and manipulating the predicted independent variables, in this case mood, genre, and actor age, any changes in the dependent variables (perceptions of the intended audience, anticipated enjoyment, perceived similarity with characters, and selective exposure) can be attributed to the independent variables. Specifically, Study 1 used a 2 (mood) X 2 (genre) mixed factorial experimental design, and Study 2 used a 2 (mood) X 2 (actors’ age) factorial experimental design.

Study 1

The first study was a 2 (mood) x 2 (subgenre) mixed factorial experiment that tested the semantic affinity postulate of mood management theory by exploring romance-related mood as it relates to selection of romantic comedy subgenres. In the study, mood was treated as a between-subjects factor and subgenre as a within-subjects factor. Participants who had been randomly assigned to a positive or negative mood induction task read plot synopses for both a traditional romantic comedy that emphasized a romantic relationship and a female-led comedy (FLC) that focused on female friendships, rather than a romantic relationship.
Participants

This study included only female participants, rather than both females and males, so that gender would not be a confounding variable. Since the main characters in both of the movies were females, it is likely that women would naturally feel more similar to and identify more with the characters than men would. This in turn could affect the results of this study. Furthermore, as previously noted, the romantic comedy genre has been historically marketed to a young female audience, which has led most people to believe that this genre is meant only for young women. This study is not meant to explore marketing for romantic comedies or gender-based audience assumptions. Rather than trying to control for previous movie marketing exposure and gender of characters, this study focused its attention on the effects of mood and situational similarity for females only. College-aged females in particular were not only selected for this study because of the aforementioned marketing of the genre toward younger women, but also because the number of people aged 12-24 going to see movies in theaters is growing (Nielsen, 2013). Additionally, college-aged people are the age group that uses subscription-based video on-demand services such as Netflix the most often (Nielsen, 2015).

A total of 79 females participated in this study, aged 18 to 25 ($M = 19.30$, $SD = 1.25$). Participants were drawn from undergraduate communication courses at a southeastern university. Of those 79 participants, 33 (41.8%) reported being currently in a relationship, and 46 (58.2%) reported being single. The majority of participants reported that they were Caucasian (89.9%). Four participants reported that they were Black (5.1%). One participant reported that she was Asian (1.3%). One participant reported that
she was Native American (1.3%), and two participants reported that they were of mixed race (2.5%).

**Treatment of participants.** An Institutional Review Board approved this study before data collection began in order to ensure ethical treatment of participants. Each participant was given an informed consent document (see Appendix A) that explained the study and any potential risks, discomforts, and potential benefits associated with completing the study. This document also explained their rights as participants. Namely, the document explained that the researchers would protect confidentiality and that participation was voluntary, meaning participants could withdraw consent to participate at any time without penalization. Only participants who provided informed consent could continue to the study.

**Study Design**

**Manipulation of romantic situation.** Following the procedure used by Kim and Oliver (2011), romance-related mood was manipulated through a writing task. Participants were randomly assigned to either a positive mood or negative mood group. They were then asked to recall and write about a time when they either experienced a positive romance-related mood (for those in the positive mood group) or a negative romance-related mood (for those in the negative mood group). They wrote about their experience by typing their response to the prompt in a response box on the survey platform. The prompts read as follows:

Good mood: Imagine a time when you felt happy or excited about a romantic relationship. For example, you may have fond memories of a particularly fun date, a thoughtful gift, your first kiss, a crush noticing you, or your partner telling you he/she loves you. After you have thought of a time that you felt happy or
excited about a romantic relationship, please describe it in the box below and explain how it made you feel happy or excited.

Bad mood: Imagine a time when you felt upset or sad about a romantic relationship. For example, you may have memories of a time when you went through a rough breakup, got into a bad argument, or got rejected by a crush. After you have thought of a time that you felt upset or sad about a romantic relationship, please describe it in the box below and explain how it made you feel upset or sad.

**Manipulation check.** Adapted from Kim and Oliver (2011), two questions were used to ensure that the hypothetical relationship scenario task induced the intended romance-related moods. Participants were asked to indicate how they felt using a 5-point semantic differential scale using two items—happy/sad and content/upset. The two items were averaged to create an index of romance-related mood.

In mood manipulation pre-tests conducted prior to data collection, participants also responded to the manipulation check. Despite repeated tests of various writing task prompts, the difference in mood between those assigned to the “good mood” condition and those in the “bad mood” condition never reached significance. The mood manipulation check was not significant in the full study either. The researchers decided to move forward despite this, because self-reported “mood” might not be the best way to measure the success of the manipulation due to issues of social desirability. Participants might not have wanted to admit that they were unhappy because happiness is highly valued in society. In addition, individuals (including the participants in this study) do not like to think their feelings have been manipulated and, thus, they may have hesitated to report a sad or upset mood. Furthermore, the mood manipulation task was meant to prime participants to be thinking about relationships in a positive or negative light. Priming is
thought to cause unconscious change that would be difficult to capture via self-reported measures in an online survey. Ultimately, being tasked with writing about a positive or negative experience likely primed participants to be thinking about one or the other situation.

**Stimulus materials.** Drawing from Weaver (2011), four original movie plot synopses were created that were one to two paragraphs long each. One synopsis was for a traditional romantic comedy, while another was for a FLC. Two other synopses (one for an action movie and one for a horror movie) served as distractors in order to disguise the true purpose of the research. The synopses were designed to be similar to plot synopses in popular movie databases such as the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com) and Rotten Tomatoes (www.rottentomatoes.com). They consisted of a title in bold at the top, a plot description, and a list of the cast underneath. Each synopsis was also accompanied by a “movie poster” in order to further emphasize the themes of the movies. Original movie synopses and posters were created instead of using existing movies’ synopses in case participants recognized the existing film and this recognition influenced their responses. See Appendix B for the full plot synopses and posters used in the study. See Table 1 for movie titles and brief plot synopsis descriptions.

Table 1

**Movie descriptions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Movie Title</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Horror</td>
<td>Levels to Kill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A couple witnesses a series of gruesome murders in a parking garage before fighting for their own lives.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Action Bringing Home Bradley

After a series of peace talks with belligerent countries goes awry, a diplomat must fight his way back home with the help of a team of special agents.

Female-led comedy (FLC) Wed Over Heels

Two female best friends start a business together and face a series of mishaps.

Traditional romantic comedy Let’s Work on It

A woman struggles to tell her coworker that she is in love with him.

Measures

The dependent measures were all adapted from scales established in previous studies. Before each scale was computed, the internal consistency of the items was verified using the reliability coefficient Cronbach’s alpha. Items with an alpha greater than .70 were considered reliable. Demographic and potential control variables were also measured and are described below.

Selective exposure. Selective exposure in the current study is operationalized as behavioral intent to view a movie. Adapted from Weaver (2011), the selective exposure measure consisted of three items. Participants were asked to rank how much they agreed with three statements on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The items were: “I would rent or stream (e.g., Netflix) this movie,” “I would go to the movie theater to see this movie,” and “I would watch this movie if it was on television.” The responses were averaged to create the selective exposure measure. Using Cronbach’s alpha, the reliability estimate was .87 for FLCs and .79 for traditional romantic comedies. Therefore, the mean of the items was computed to create a composite measure.

Cronbach’s alpha values are reported for traditional comedies and FLCs separately due to the within-subjects design of the experiment.
measure of selective exposure for both FLCs ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 1.42$) and traditional romantic comedies ($M = 4.90$, $SD = 1.22$).

**Anticipated enjoyment.** Anticipated enjoyment referred to how much a participant feels like he or she might take pleasure in viewing the movies based on reading the synopses. The anticipated enjoyment measure was adapted from Xie and Lee (2008) and is a 7-point Likert-type scale. The measure asked participants to rate how much they agree with two statements using a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The statements read as follows: “I believe/feel this movie would be enjoyable to watch,” and “I believe/feel this movie would be interesting to watch.” A Pearson correlation revealed that the two items in this measure were positively correlated for FLCs, $r = .94$, $p < .001$, and for traditional romantic comedies, $r = .84$, $p < .001$. Therefore, the mean of the two items was computed to create a composite measure of anticipated enjoyment for both FLCs ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 1.54$) and traditional romantic comedies ($M = 5.30$, $SD = 1.18$).

**Perceived intended audience.** Perceived intended audience related to how much a participant felt that a movie was made for them and people like them. The perceived intended audience measure was adapted from Weaver (under review) and consists of three items on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The items in the scale are: “I believe I am a part of the intended audience for this movie,” “I believe most of my friends would enjoy this movie,” and “I believe this movie was made for me.” Using Cronbach’s alpha, the reliability estimate was .87 for FLCs and .79 for traditional romantic comedies. Therefore, the mean of the
items was computed to create a composite measure of perceptions of the intended audience for both FLCs ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 1.32$) and traditional romantic comedies ($M = 5.27$, $SD = .97$).

**Demographic measures.** After responding to all dependent measures, demographic information was also collected. Participants were asked to indicate their age by writing in a number. Race/ethnicity was measured by having participants select from a list that included White/Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, Pacific Islander, or Other selections.

**Control measures.** In anticipation of potential confounding variables, data for anticipated control measures were also collected. Because participants’ real-life relationship status might affect participants’ responses to the dependent variables and reaction to the manipulation, relationship status was examined as a potential control variable. Relationship status was measured through the following close-ended response question: What is your relationship status? Participants could indicate that they were “Single” or “In a relationship.” Because frequent movie-goers may have different movie preferences than those who rarely watch movies, four questions adapted from Weaver (2011) asked about frequency of movie viewing: “On average, how often do you see a movie in theater,” “On average, how often do you rent a movie to watch at home,” “On average, how often do you stream a movie on Netflix or similar service provider,” and “On average, how often do you watch a movie airing on television.” The response options for these questions included the following: “never,” “less than once a month,”
“once a month,” “2-3 times a month,” “once a week,” “2-3 times a week”, and “daily.”

Descriptive statistics for these variables can be found in Table 2.

Table 2

*Descriptive Statistics for Control Variables*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>MIN</th>
<th>MAX</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Status</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movie Viewing Frequency</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theater</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>.60</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rent</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stream</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* In a relationship was coded as 1, and single was coded as 2.

**Procedure**

Participants were recruited in person or via email from communication classes and were offered the opportunity to participate in a study about “movie interests.” Those who chose to participate were given a link to a web-based platform where they completed the study. The website randomly assigned participants to groups. Participants were first asked to complete the mood-manipulation writing task. Written instructions asked participants to recall and write about a time when they felt happy/upset in a romantic relationship. The web-based platform forced participants to spend at least one minute writing before the “next” button appeared to move on to the next page. The next page consisted of the manipulation check items.

After completing the above task, participants were shown the four (traditional romantic comedy, FLC, horror, and action) movie plot synopses and posters in a random order. For each movie, they were asked to fill out the selective exposure, perceived intended audience, and anticipated enjoyment measures described above. At the end of
the selective exposure measure, participants answered an open-ended question asking them to “please briefly explain why you would or would not choose to watch this movie.” This question was not used in any sort of formal data analysis, but was included for feedback purposes only. The last part of the study consisted of the demographic items. After responding to all measures, participants were thanked and debriefed.

Preliminary Statistical Analyses

Prior to data analysis, the normality of the data was verified so that issues could be addressed if necessary. Specifically, the descriptive statistics, as well as the kurtosis and skewness of each variable, were examined. No irregularities were detected. Statistics for all variables can be found in Table 3.

Table 3

*Descriptive Statistics for Dependent Variables*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>MIN</th>
<th>MAX</th>
<th>Skew</th>
<th>Kurtosis</th>
<th>α</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Selective exposure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FLC</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>-.19</td>
<td>.87</td>
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<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>4.90</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-.86</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>.79</td>
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<td>Anticipated enjoyment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FLC</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-.55</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>.94*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>5.30</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-1.23</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>.84*</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FLC</td>
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<td>1.32</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-.45</td>
<td>-.19</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>5.27</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-.56</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: *These numbers are Pearson’s r, not Cronbach’s alphas.

Study 2

The second study employed a 2 (mood) x 2 (actors’ age) between-subjects experiment to test the role that character attributes—specifically, age—plays in selection of romantic comedies. This study was conducted with the same manipulation of romance-
related mood and measures as in Study 1. There were slight variations in stimulus materials and procedure, and an additional measure was added, as described below.

**Participants**

Like Study 1, this study included only female participants rather than both females and males. This was done so that gender was not a confounding variable. Likewise, college-aged females in particular were chosen to participate because college-aged people are one of the age groups that watch the most movies. A total of 88 females participated in this study, aged 17 to 24 ($M = 19.43$, $SD = 1.20$), and were drawn from communication courses at a southeastern university. None of the participants in this study participated in Study 1. Of the 88 participants, 32 (36.4%) reported being currently in a relationship, and 56 (63.6%) reported being single. The majority of participants reported that they were Caucasian (90.9%). Four participants reported that they were Black (4.5%). One participant reported that she was Hispanic (1.1%), and three participants reported that they were of mixed race (3.4%). Participants were randomly assigned to a mood condition (good or bad) and an actor age group condition (young or old). Participant totals for each condition can be found in Table 4.

Table 4

*Conditions for mood and actor age*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Good Mood ($n$)</th>
<th>Bad Mood ($n$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Younger actors ($n$)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older actors ($n$)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes: N = 88*
Study Design

Mood was manipulated using the same mood-induction task used in Study 1. Participants were told to imagine a positive or negative romantic situation they had experienced and write about their thoughts and feelings concerning this situation in a response box on the survey platform. The full writing task prompts can be found on page 35.

Stimulus materials. Much like the first study, this study used original movie plot synopses that were one to two paragraphs long accompanied by “movie posters.” Two movies (the action and horror movies also used in Study 1) served to disguise the intent of the study and were not used for data analysis purposes. The traditional romantic comedy synopsis from Study 1 was used for both experimental conditions. The synopses were designed to be similar to plot synopses in popular movie databases such as the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com) and Rotten Tomatoes (www.rottentomatoes.com). They consisted of a title in bold at the top with text underneath. Underneath the text there were images of the actors in the movie. See Appendix B for full plot synopses and movie posters, and see Table 1 for a brief description of the plot synopses.

Manipulation. The only difference between the conditions’ synopses was the age manipulation. Age was operationalized both through manipulation of images and through text. Thus, one synopsis stated characters were in their twenties and contained pictures of younger-looking actors in the cast list. The other synopsis featured characters over the age of 40 with pictures of older actors in the cast list. Everything else in the synopsis was
the same for each (e.g., the race of the characters were the same in each), and the same movie poster was used for both synopses. See Appendix B for the synopses and poster.

**Measures**

Selective exposure, perceived intended audience, and anticipated enjoyment were assessed using the measures employed in Study 1 (see pages 38-39). After verifying the reliability for selective exposure, the average of the items on this scale was computed to create a composite measure of selective exposure, $M = 4.61$, $SD = 1.38$, $\alpha = .85$. The same was done for perceptions of the intended audience, $M = 4.65$, $SD = 1.40$, $\alpha = .90$. A Pearson correlation revealed that the two items on the anticipated enjoyment measure were also positively correlated for this study, $r = .88$, $p < .001$. Therefore, the mean of the two items was computed to create a composite measure of anticipated enjoyment ($M = 4.97$, $SD = 1.53$). All descriptive statistics can be found in Table 4. The demographic and control variables measured in Study 1—including age, race/ethnicity, relationship status, and movie viewing habits—were also measured. Descriptive statistics for the control variables can be found in Table 5.

Table 5

*Descriptive Statistics for Control Variables*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>MIN</th>
<th>MAX</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Status</td>
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<td>.48</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movie Viewing Frequency</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theater</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rent</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stream</td>
<td>4.97</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* In a relationship was coded as 1, and single was coded as 2.
**Perceived similarity with the characters.** Perceived similarity with the characters was also measured to test its role in movie selection. Perceived similarity related to how close a participant feels their own attributes and states are to the attributes and states of a media character. The perceived similarity with the characters measure was adapted from Weaver (under review) and Eyal and Rubin (2003). It is a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Participants responded to six items on this scale that included: “I feel like I would be able to relate to the characters in the movie,” “The characters in the movie would likely face circumstances that would remind me of my own life,” “I feel like the characters’ goals could be the same as mine,” “I think there might be many points of similarity between the lead characters and myself,” “When I read about a character in the movie, I feel like I could be in his/her place,” and “I feel like the characters in the movie might do the kinds of things I do.” Cronbach’s alpha for the measure was assessed to ensure the scale items were internally consistent, and the average of the items on this scale was computed to create a composite measure of perceived similarity, $M = 4.51$, $SD = 1.36$, $\alpha = .95$.

**Procedure**

The procedure was much the same as in the first study. Participants were recruited in person or via email from communication classes at a southeastern university and were offered the opportunity to participate in a study about “movie interests.” Those who chose to participate were given a link to a web-based platform where they completed the study. Participants were randomly assigned to mood groups. They were first asked to complete the written mood manipulation task. Next, participants read the movie plot
Each participant looked at the horror movie and action movie synopses and posters. Unlike the first study, both factors were between-subjects. Participants were randomly assigned to view a version of the movie with age-similar (young) or age-dissimilar (old) characters. For each synopsis, they were asked to fill out the selective exposure, perceived intended audience, anticipated enjoyment, and perceived similarity with characters measures described above. In order to eliminate potential order effects, the order in which the synopses were presented was randomized for each participant. After the selective exposure measure, participants answered an open-ended response question asking why they would/would not choose to watch the movie. The last part of the survey consisted of demographic items. After responding to all measures, participants were thanked and debriefed.

Preliminary Statistical Analyses

Prior to data analysis, the normality of the data was verified so that issues could be addressed if necessary. Specifically, the descriptive statistics, as well as the kurtosis and skewness of each variable, were examined. No irregularities were detected. Statistics for all variables can be found in Table 6.

Table 6

Descriptive Statistics for Dependent Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>MIN</th>
<th>MAX</th>
<th>Skew</th>
<th>Kurtosis</th>
<th>α</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Selective exposure</td>
<td>4.61</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-.69</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticipated enjoyment</td>
<td>4.97</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-.90</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.88*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intended audience</td>
<td>4.65</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-.52</td>
<td>-.26</td>
<td>.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived similarity</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-.69</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *This number is Pearson’s r, not Cronbach’s alpha.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Study 1

Effects of Mood and Genre on Selective Exposure to Romantic Movies

The first study employed a 2 (mood) x 2 (genre) experiment to test the roles that mood and genre play in anticipated enjoyment and selective exposure. Based on the tenets of mood management theory, it was predicted that people with negative romance-related mood would be less likely to select a traditional romantic comedy, but equally likely to select female-led comedies compared to people in a positive mood. It was also predicted that mood and genre would affect anticipated enjoyment such that participants in a negative mood would report less anticipated enjoyment of traditional romantic comedies than FLCs, whereas participants in a positive mood will report equal anticipated enjoyment for traditional romantic comedies and FLCs. Lastly, it was predicted that mood, perceptions of the intended audience, and anticipated enjoyment would all predict selective exposure.

In order to test the hypotheses, a series of mixed model repeated measure analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were conducted to examine the effects of mood (good vs. bad) and genre (traditional romantic comedy vs. female-led comedy) on anticipated enjoyment and selective exposure. For each test, genre was included as a within-subjects factor, and mood was entered as a between-subjects factor. After main and interaction effects on these variables were tested, data were separated so that predictors of selection for each genre could be examined separately. Thus, two hierarchical regressions were
conducted (one per genre) to examine the effects of mood, perceptions of the intended audience, and anticipated enjoyment on selective exposure.

**Tests for Confounds**

**Current relationship status.** Before beginning data analysis, potential confounds were tested to determine whether they influenced results. First, current relationship status was tested, as a person’s current relationship status may affect a person’s desire to watch certain movies, as well as their anticipated enjoyment and perceptions of the intended audience of romance-related content. For example, people who are single may not want to watch a movie that reminds them they are single by depicting a happy couple. In this case, selective exposure would be affected by current relationship status, meaning that relationship status would confound the effects of manipulated mood. However, results of an independent samples t-test of mood and relationship status revealed that relationship status was not a confound for this study. See Table 7 for group mean statistics.

Table 7

*Group means for potential confounds*

<table>
<thead>
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<th></th>
<th>Good Mood</th>
<th>Bad Mood</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theater</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>-.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.65)</td>
<td>(.53)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rent</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>-.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.24)</td>
<td>(1.28)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stream</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>4.85</td>
<td>-1.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.58)</td>
<td>(1.05)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>3.56</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
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<td>1.41</td>
<td>.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status</td>
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<td>(.50)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes:* Standard deviations in parentheses.
**Movie viewing frequency.** Next, movie viewing frequency was tested to determine if it was a confounding variable for this study to ensure individual differences in movie viewing frequency were eliminated by random assignment. Results of an independent samples t-test of mood and movie viewing frequency items also revealed that the frequency in which participants watch movies in theaters, $t(77) = -.41, p = .68$; rent movies, $t(77) = -.34, p = .74$; stream movies, $t(77) = -1.66, p = .10$; and watch movies on television, $t(77) = -.09, p = .93$, are not confounding variables for this study. See Table 7 for group mean statistics.

**Main Effects and Interaction Effects**

**Anticipated enjoyment.** The first hypothesis predicted that mood and genre would affect anticipated enjoyment such that participants in a negative mood would report less anticipated enjoyment of traditional romantic comedies than FLCs, while participants in a positive mood would report equal anticipated enjoyment for traditional romantic comedies and FLCs. A mixed model repeated measures ANOVA was performed to assess differences between groups. The analysis showed a main effect for genre, Wilks’ $\lambda = .74, F(1, 77) = 27.54, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .26$, such that participants felt more anticipated enjoyment for the traditional romantic comedy ($M = 5.30, SD = 1.18$) than they felt for the FLC ($M = 4.39, SD = 1.54$). There were no main effects for mood, $F(1, 77) = 2.79, p = .10$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$, nor was an interaction between genre and mood revealed, Wilks’ $\lambda = .97, F(1, 77) = 2.25, p = .14$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$. All means associated with this analysis can be found in Table 8. H1 was not supported.
Table 8

*Effects of mood and genre on judgments of film.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable</th>
<th>Condition Means</th>
<th>F statistics</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bad/ Traditional</td>
<td>Bad/ FLC</td>
<td>Good/ Traditional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intended audience</td>
<td>5.27 (.90)</td>
<td>4.53 (1.38)</td>
<td>5.27 (1.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticipated enjoyment</td>
<td>5.22 (1.42)</td>
<td>4.00 (1.59)</td>
<td>5.37 (.97)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selective exposure</td>
<td>4.86 (1.39)</td>
<td>4.12 (1.52)</td>
<td>4.97 (1.07)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes:* Condition means are means by group for each listed variable. Standard deviations in parentheses. *F* statistics are from ANOVA analysis of the effects of mood (good or bad) and genre (traditional or FLC) on listed outcome variables. Total *N* = 79. *p < .001.

**Selective exposure.** The second hypothesis predicted that mood and genre would affect selective exposure such that participants in a negative romance-related mood would be less likely to select a traditional romantic comedy, but equally likely to select a FLC compared to people in a positive romance-related mood. A mixed model repeated measures ANOVA was performed to assess differences between groups. Contrary to the hypothesis, the analysis showed no interaction between genre and mood, Wilks’ *λ* = .99, *F* (1, 72) = .55, *p* = .14, partial *η²* = .01. Therefore, H2 was not supported. However, there was a main effect for genre, Wilks’ *λ* = .81, *F* (1, 72) = 16.98, *p < .001, partial *η²* = .19, such that participants expressed more desire to watch the traditional romantic comedy (*M* = 4.92, SD = 1.21) than the FLC (*M* = 4.31, SD = 1.44). All means associated with this analysis can be found in Table 8.
Hierarchical regression was then used in order to explore how much of the variance in selective exposure can be explained by mood, perceptions of the intended audience, and anticipated enjoyment (H3). A separate hierarchical regression was conducted for each genre. In both models, mood was entered as a first step in the model, with intended audience and anticipated enjoyment included as a second block.

The analysis for FLCs revealed that mood was not a significant predictor of selective exposure, $F(1, 74) = 1.09, R^2 = .02, p = .30$. However, adding perceptions of the intended audience and anticipated enjoyment in a second block led to an overall significant model for predicting selective exposure, $F(3, 72) = 97.74, R^2 = .80, p < .001$. Examination of the regression coefficients also showed that perceptions of the intended audience ($\beta = .20, p < .01$) and anticipated enjoyment ($\beta = .77, p < .001$) both individually predicted selective exposure for FLCs. See Table 9.

The analysis for traditional romantic comedies revealed that mood was not a significant predictor of selective exposure, $F(1, 73) = .08, R^2 = .001, p = .79$. Thus, H3 was not supported. However, adding perceptions of the intended audience and anticipated enjoyment in a second block led to an overall significant model for predicting selective exposure, $F(3, 71) = 49.42, R^2 = .68, p < .001$. Examination of the regression coefficients also showed perceptions of the intended audience ($\beta = .40, p < .001$) and anticipated enjoyment ($\beta = .51, p < .001$) individually predicted selective exposure for FLCs. See Table 9.
Table 9

Effects of mood, perceptions of the intended audience, and anticipated enjoyment on selective exposure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variable</th>
<th>FLC</th>
<th></th>
<th>Traditional</th>
<th></th>
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<td>Step 1</td>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td>Step 2</td>
</tr>
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<td>.10</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.33)</td>
<td>(.15)</td>
<td>(.28)</td>
<td>(.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intended audience</td>
<td>.20*</td>
<td>.40**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.08)</td>
<td>(.11)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticipated enjoyment</td>
<td>.77**</td>
<td>.51**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.07)</td>
<td>(.09)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R² change</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.79**</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.68**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Values are standardized regression coefficients (and standard errors) from hierarchical linear regression. Values are coefficients after entry of each step, as labeled. R² change indicates incremental R² by listed step. Good mood was coded as 1, and bad mood was coded as 2.
*p < .01, **p < .001

Study 2

Effects of Mood and Actor Age on Selective Exposure to Romantic Movies

The second study was a 2 (mood) x 2 (actors’ age) experiment that tested the roles that mood and character attributes play in perceived similarity, perceptions of the intended audience, anticipated enjoyment, and selective exposure. Based on the tenets of mood management theory, it was predicted that those in a negative mood would be less likely to select romantic comedies with an age-similar cast than with an age-dissimilar cast, while those in a positive mood would be less likely to select romantic comedies with an age-dissimilar cast than films with an age-similar cast. It was also predicted that participants in either a negative moods or a positive mood would perceive themselves to be more similar to age-similar characters than age-dissimilar characters, and that mood and age would affect perceptions of the intended audience such that participants will
perceive themselves to be part of the intended audience for a movie with an age-similar cast compared to an age-dissimilar cast.

Additionally, it was hypothesized that mood and actors’ age would affect anticipated enjoyment such that participants in a negative mood would report less anticipated enjoyment of movies with age-similar characters than age-dissimilar characters, whereas participants in a positive mood would report more anticipated enjoyment for movies with age-similar characters than age-dissimilar characters. Lastly, it was predicted that mood, actors’ age, perceived similarity with the characters, perceptions of the intended audience, and anticipated enjoyment would all predict selective exposure to the film.

In order to test the hypotheses, a series of two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were conducted to examine the main effects of mood and actor age on perceived similarity, perceptions of the intended audience, anticipated enjoyment, and selective exposure as well as potential interaction effects. Table 11 reports the descriptive and test statistics associated with these analyses. Then, hierarchical regression was used to determine whether all of these variables would predict participants’ selective exposure to the films.

Tests for Confounds

Current relationship status. Before beginning data analysis, potential confounds were tested to determine whether they influenced results. First, current relationship status was tested because a person’s current relationship status may affect a person’s desire to watch certain movies, as well as their perceived similarity to the characters, anticipated
enjoyment of, and perceptions of the intended audience for a film about romance. For example, people who are single may not want to watch a movie about romance at all. In this case, selective exposure would be affected by current relationship status rather than the independent variables. However, results of two independent samples t-tests (one of mood and relationship status and the other of actors’ age and relationship status) revealed no differences in participants’ current relationship status between the conditions. See Table 10 for group mean statistics.

Table 10

*Group means for potential confounds*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mood</th>
<th></th>
<th>Actors’ Age</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Bad</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>Young</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>-1.09</td>
<td>1.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status</td>
<td>(.50)</td>
<td>(.47)</td>
<td>(.50)</td>
<td>(.46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theater</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>-.79</td>
<td>2.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.64)</td>
<td>(.76)</td>
<td>(.80)</td>
<td>(.62)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rent</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>-1.13</td>
<td>2.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.22)</td>
<td>(1.29)</td>
<td>(1.17)</td>
<td>(1.34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stream</td>
<td>4.90</td>
<td>5.02</td>
<td>-.42</td>
<td>4.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.39)</td>
<td>(1.30)</td>
<td>(1.20)</td>
<td>(1.46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>-2.85*</td>
<td>1.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.45)</td>
<td>(1.42)</td>
<td>(.24)</td>
<td>(.22)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes:* Condition means are raw means by group for each listed variable. Standard deviations in parentheses. Total $N = 88$. *$p < .01$.

**Movie viewing frequency.** Next, movie viewing frequency was tested to determine if it was a confounding variable for this study. For example, people that view movies frequently may desire to watch more movies overall, thus influencing selective exposure. Results of an independent samples t-test of actors’ age and all items of the movie viewing scale indicate that watching a movie in theaters $t(86) = .81, p = .42$, renting $t(86) = -.01, p = .99$, streaming movies $t(86) = .07, p = .95$, and watching movies
on television, \( t(86) = -0.51, p = .62 \), were not confounding variables for actors’ age conditions. Results of another independent samples t-test of mood and all items on the movie viewing scale indicate that going to theaters, \( t(86) = -0.79, p = .43 \); renting, \( t(86) = -1.13, p = .26 \); and streaming movies, \( t(86) = -0.42, p = .68 \), were not confounding variables. However, participants assigned to the “bad mood” condition reported watching movies on television more frequently than those in the “good mood” condition, \( t(86) = -2.85, p < .01 \). Thus, watching movies on television was controlled for in all subsequent analyses by entering the variable as a covariate. See Table 10 for group mean statistics.

**Main Effects and Interaction Effects**

**Perceived similarity to characters.** The fourth hypothesis (H4) predicted a main effect of actors’ age such that participants in both negative moods and positive moods would perceive themselves to be more similar to age-similar characters than age-dissimilar characters. A two-way ANOVA was performed to assess differences between conditions. Contrary to predictions, this analysis showed no main effect of actor age or of mood. Instead, an interaction between mood and actors’ age was revealed, \( F(1, 83) = 7.77, p < .01 \), partial \( \eta^2 = .09 \). Specifically, results showed those in a good mood reported feeling significantly more similar to older characters (\( M = 4.82, SD = 1.23 \)) than to younger characters (\( M = 4.10, SD = 1.47 \)), whereas those in a bad mood felt significantly more similar to younger characters (\( M = 5.09, SD = 0.93 \)) than to older characters (\( M = 4.08, SD = 1.50 \)). Taken together, these results suggest that those in a good mood perceive themselves to be more similar to older characters, whereas older characters were
perceived as less similar among those in a bad mood. Therefore, H4 is not supported.

Table 11

**Effects of mood and actor age on judgments of film.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable</th>
<th>Condition Means</th>
<th>F statistics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bad/Younger</td>
<td>Bad/Older</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived similarity</td>
<td>5.09 (.93)</td>
<td>4.08 (1.50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intended audience</td>
<td>5.02 (.93)</td>
<td>4.29 (1.49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticipated enjoyment</td>
<td>5.61 (.77)</td>
<td>4.54 (1.56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selective exposure</td>
<td>5.20 (.79)</td>
<td>4.21 (1.52)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes: Condition means are raw means by group for each listed variable. Standard deviations in parentheses. F statistics are from ANOVA analysis of the effects of Mood (good or bad) and Actor Age (younger or older) on listed outcome variables. Total N = 88. *p < .05, **p < .01.*

**Intended audience.** The fifth hypothesis (H5) predicted a main effect of actors’ age such that participants would perceive themselves to be part of the audience for a movie with an age-similar cast more than a movie with an age-dissimilar cast. A two-way ANOVA was performed to assess differences between groups. This analysis showed that neither mood, $F(1, 83) = .13, p = .72$, partial $\eta^2 = .002$, nor actors’ age, $F(1, 83) = 0.47, p = .50$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$, had an effect on perceptions of the intended audience. The variables also did not interact to influence these perceptions, $F(1, 83) = 2.38, p = .13$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$. H5 is not supported.

**Anticipated enjoyment.** A sixth hypothesis (H6) also predicted that mood and actors’ age would affect anticipated enjoyment such that those in a negative mood would
report less anticipated enjoyment of movies with age-similar characters than age-
dissimilar characters, whereas participants in a positive mood would report more
anticipated enjoyment for movies with age-similar characters than age-dissimilar
characters. A two-way ANOVA was performed to assess differences between groups. No
main effects of mood, $F(1, 83) = .13, p = .82$, partial $\eta^2 = .001$ or actor age, $F(1, 83) =
.87, p = .35$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$, were revealed. However, this analysis showed that mood
and actors’ age interacted to have an effect on anticipated enjoyment such that those in a
good mood reported significantly more anticipated enjoyment of movies with older
characters ($M = 5.15$, $SD = 1.44$) than movies with younger characters ($M = 4.63$, $SD =
1.96$), and those in a bad mood reported significantly more anticipated enjoyment of
movies with younger characters ($M = 5.61$, $SD = 0.77$) than movies with older characters
($M = 4.54$, $SD = 1.56$), $F(1, 83) = 4.91, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$. This finding indicates
participants who were in a good mood felt that they would enjoy a movie with older
characters more than they would a movie with younger characters, whereas the opposite
was true for participants in a bad mood. Therefore, H6 was not supported.

**Selective exposure.** The seventh (H7) hypothesis predicted that mood and actors’
age would affect selective exposure such that participants in a negative romance-related
mood would be less likely to select romantic comedies with a younger cast than with an
older cast, whereas those in a positive mood would be less likely to select romantic
comedies with an older cast than movies with a younger cast. A two-way ANOVA was
performed to assess differences between groups. This analysis showed that neither mood,
$F(1, 83) = .001, p = .97$, partial $\eta^2 = .000$, nor actors’ age, $F(1, 83) = 2.60, p = .11$,
partial $\eta^2 = .03$, had an effect on selective exposure. The variables also did not interact to influence selective exposure, $F(1, 83) = 2.47, p = .12$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$. H7 is not supported. See Table 11.

Hierarchical regression was then used in order to explore how much of the variance in selective exposure can be explained by mood, actors’ age, perceived similarity, perceptions of the intended audience, and anticipated enjoyment (H8). In the model, mood, actors’ age, and the television viewing control variable were entered as a first step in the model, with perceived similarity, intended audience, and anticipated enjoyment included as a second block. The analysis revealed that mood and actors’ age together were not significant predictors of selective exposure, $F(3, 84) = 2.50, R^2 = .78, p = .07$. Therefore, H8 was not supported. However, actors’ age was a significant predictor by itself, ($\beta = -.22, p < .05$). In this case, participants wanted to watch movies with younger characters more than they did movies with older characters. Adding perceived similarity, intended audience, and anticipated enjoyment in a second block led to an overall significant model for predicting selective exposure, $F(6, 81) = 47.48, R^2 = .80, p < .001$. Examination of the regression coefficients showed intended audience ($\beta = .31, p < .01$) and anticipated enjoyment ($\beta = .46, p < .001$) predicted selective exposure. Perceived similarity, however, was not a significant predictor ($\beta = .15, p = .09$) of selection. See Table 12.

Table 12

*Effects of mood, actors’ age, perceived similarity, perceptions of the intended audience, and anticipated enjoyment on selective exposure*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variable</th>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th>Step 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mood</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.32)</td>
<td>(.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actors’ age</td>
<td>-.22*</td>
<td>-.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.31)</td>
<td>(.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived similarity</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.31**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.09)</td>
<td>(.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intended audience</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>.46***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticipated enjoyment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R² change</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.70***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Values are standardized regression coefficients (and standard errors) from hierarchical linear regression. Values are coefficients after entry of each step, as labeled. R² change indicates incremental R² by listed step. Good mood was coded as 1 and bad mood was coded as 2. Age-similar was coded as 1 and age-dissimilar was coded as 2. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

Summary of Results

The results of Study 1 indicate that genre affected perceptions of the intended audience and anticipated enjoyment such that participants felt that they would enjoy the traditional romantic comedy more than the FLC and that they were the intended audience for the traditional romantic comedy more than the FLC. However, contrary to expectations, mood did not affect perceptions of the intended audience or anticipated enjoyment. The results also indicate that anticipated enjoyment and perceptions of the intended audience were able to predict selective exposure. For both genres, the more participants felt they were the intended audience for the film and the more they anticipated enjoying the film, the more likely they were to want to watch the film. Mood did not affect selective exposure for either genre.

The results of Study 2 indicate that people with a negative romance-related mood felt more similar to younger characters than older characters and felt that they would
enjoy a movie with younger characters more than movies with older characters. On the contrary, people with a positive romance-related mood felt more similar to older characters than younger characters and felt that they would enjoy a movie with younger characters more than a movie with older characters. Results also indicate that whereas mood did not directly affect selective exposure to a movie, actors’ age predicted selective exposure. This indicates that overall, people were less likely to want to watch a movie with older characters than with younger characters. Perceptions of the intended audience and anticipated enjoyment also predicted selective exposure such that the more people perceived themselves to be part of the intended audience of the movie and anticipated enjoying it, the more likely they were to express interest in watching the movie. Although indirect effects were not examined in this analysis, because the interaction of mood and actors’ age affected anticipated enjoyment, which in turn predicted selection, mood and actors’ age may have had an indirect effect on selective exposure by way of their effects on anticipated enjoyment.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to explore the roles of mood and semantic affinity (operationalized as situational similarity and character attribute similarity) in selective exposure to romantic comedies in order to build on current theorizing surrounding mood and media selection. Specifically, two studies were conducted to test the roles that mood and genre (Study 1) and mood and actors’ age (Study 2) had on selective exposure to movies. In general, the hypotheses proposed in this study were not supported. In fact, this study found results contrary to predictions made based on traditional MMT predicted outcomes. This suggests the need for future studies of MMT and its extensions, as discussed below.

Mood and Genre-specific Media Selection

The first study explored the semantic affinity postulate of MMT by testing the effects of mood and subgenre on selective exposure. The first hypothesis proposed an interaction effect of mood and genre in which participants in a negative mood would report less anticipated enjoyment of traditional romantic comedies than FLCs, whereas participants in a positive mood would report equal anticipated enjoyment for traditional romantic comedies and FLCs. This hypothesis was not supported, as results indicate that mood was not a predictor for anticipated enjoyment.

However, a main effect of genre was found for anticipated enjoyment such that participants felt more anticipated enjoyment for the traditional romantic comedy than they felt for the FLC. This could be because the mood manipulation task primed
participants to be thinking about relationships (regardless of mood), and this priming led to an increased interest in movies focused specifically on romance. This finding could also be a result of prescriptive genre stereotyping, since as previously mentioned, traditional romantic comedies are heavily marketed toward young women, while FLCs are marketed toward everyone. People who feel they are the intended audience for a movie are likely to anticipate enjoying that movie more, as the movie was created specifically for people like them. Future research should test the role that prescriptive stereotypes about film genres plays in anticipated enjoyment.

The second hypothesis predicted an interaction effect of mood and genre in which people with a negative romance-related mood would be less likely to select a traditional romantic comedy, but equally likely to select a FLC, which has less of an emphasis on romance, compared to people in a positive mood, who would display no genre-based differences in selection. This hypothesis was not supported, as there was no interaction between mood and genre for selective exposure, and mood was not a significant predictor of selective exposure for either genre. One possible explanation for this finding is that there may have been competing motivations for selective exposure taking place within each mood group. As previously described in Chapter Two, Knobloch-Westerwick et al. (2009) found that people in negative romance-related moods make both hedonic and counter-hedonic media selections. In other words, negative moods cause some people to seek pleasurable experiences through media to avoid the pain associated with a breakup, but cause others to seek media that will allow them to “wallow” and therefore process their pain. The hedonic media choice here would be choosing to watch a movie that is
unrelated to the negative mood, the FLC, because it focuses on female friendships rather than romance. The counter-hedonic media choice would be choosing to watch a movie that is related to the negative mood, the traditional romantic comedy. Viewing a film in which a romance ends in happily-ever-after would allow someone who is heartbroken to face his or her negative experience.

In line with this reasoning, Kim and Oliver (2011) suggest that for those in a negative romance-related mood, hedonic selections for romantic media could be explained by the motivation of self-protection, while counter-hedonic selections could be explained by the motivation of self-improvement. The motivation of self-protection would suggest that those in a negative romance-related mood would avoid the traditional romantic comedy in order to protect themselves from exposure to content related to their negative mood. The motivation of self-improvement would suggest that those in a negative romance-related mood would choose to watch the traditional romantic comedy in order to gain insight into how to improve their negative mood. It could be that participants in this study made both hedonic and counter-hedonic choices that were based more on individual differences in motivation and, therefore, drowned out any mood-based effects. Research on this topic has shown hedonic and counter-hedonic motivations for consuming media are relatively stable over time and may be considered a “trait,” rather than a “state” effect (see Oliver & Raney, 2011). If this occurred, then mood would not statistically appear to influence media selection.

The third hypothesis predicted that mood, perceptions of the intended audience, and anticipated enjoyment would all predict selective exposure. This hypothesis was only
partially supported. Results indicate that perceptions of the intended audience and anticipated enjoyment did indeed predict selective exposure for both traditional romantic comedies and FLCs. However, mood did not predict selective exposure for either genre. The explanation for anticipated enjoyment predicting selective exposure is intuitive. If someone believes he/she will not enjoy a movie, then he/she probably will not watch it. Likewise, if a person believes he/she will enjoy it, then he/she probably will watch it. The finding that mood is not a predictor for selective exposure could be a result of the motivations for selective exposure, as described above. Thus, it is important for future studies to measure existing motivations for media selection.

Lastly, the fact that perceptions of the intended audience predicted selective exposure for both genres supports the results of Weaver (under review) that showed that perceptions of the intended audience may be the driving factor behind selective exposure to a movie. This could perhaps be explained by social identity gratifications (Harwood, 1997). Harwood suggested that audiences seek out media that supports their social identity needs and avoid media that does not support their social identity needs. In other words, people are drawn to media content that depicts their ingroup in a positive way, while they avoid content that might depict their ingroup in a negative way (Knobloch et al., 2005; Trepte, 2006). Thus, if people believe they are the intended audience for FLCs or traditional romantic comedies, they are likely to think that people like them are portrayed positively in the movie. In turn, they will be more likely to view the movie.

**Theoretical and practical implications.** In summary, the first study has important implications for both selective exposure researchers and those in the movie
industry. Namely, this study indicates that within the selective exposure paradigm, mood may not be as important of a factor as other variables such as anticipated enjoyment or perceptions of the intended audience. Mood management theory assumes that people make hedonic choices (people seek pleasure and avoid pain), but this study suggests that may not always be the case. Mood management theory and other research about affect-driven media selection must be revised so that it includes concepts such as motivations for selective exposure. Kim and Oliver (2011), Knobloch-Westerwick et al. (2009), and Oliver and Raney (2011) have already started to theorize about counter-hedonic media selection, but more empirical research needs to be conducted to test these ideas and further refine the theory.

Results of this study also indicate that marketing a movie in a way that makes people feel as if they are the intended audience for a movie (even if they are not the actual intended audience) is important for movie success. In theory, movie marketers should have a hurdle to overcome in attempting to market romantic comedies to audiences other than young women, as this genre has traditionally been marketed to that audience. The participants in this study viewed themselves as the intended audience more for traditional romantic comedies than for the widely marketed FLCs, which means that participants thought that movies featuring romance were made for them more than movies about friendship. This could be because college women place a high level of importance on their romantic relationships (see Gilmartin, 2005). College women may believe media with gender-typed messages (such as traditional romantic comedies) are tailored specifically to their interests as opposed to gender-neutral messages (such as
those about friendship). This idea, and the results of this study, would suggest that traditional romantic comedies would remain more popular among college-aged women in comparison to FLCs. However, the box office revenues for FLCs are far greater than those of traditional romantic comedies. This could be because the marketing for FLCs is extremely effective, as suggested in Chapter Two. Thus, movie marketing may be driving a genre shift to a greater degree than audience preferences. This study did not attempt to test marketing strategies for the two subgenres, so future research should explore whether marketing is truly the cause for FLCs’ success in comparison to traditional romantic comedies.

**Mood and Character Attribute Similarity**

The second study explored the effects of mood and character attribute similarity on selective exposure. For this study, similarity was operationalized by manipulating the age of the actors in a movie synopsis and poster. Research has shown that character attributes can influence perceptions of the intended audience (Weaver, 2011), and in turn, perceptions of the intended audience can influence selective exposure to a movie (Weaver, under review). Age is one such attribute that can influence perceived similarity with characters (see Goethals & Darley, 1977; Suls, Gastorf, & Lawhon, 1978; Zanna, Goethals, & Hill, 1975). Based on MMT, those in a negative romance-related mood will avoid movies containing content that is similar to their negative mood. Meaning, young audiences in a negative romance-related mood may avoid movies depicting actors their own age going through relationship struggles because the age of the actors increases the perception of similarity to the situation through strong age-based identification with the
characters. However, young audiences in a negative romance-related mood may be less opposed to watching movies depicting older actors going through relationship-related struggles because the actors’ age lessens the perceived similarity to the situation through a weaker identification with the characters. Thus, the fourth hypothesis predicted a main effect of character age in which the college-aged participants would perceive themselves to be more similar to age-similar characters than age-dissimilar characters. However, results indicate that the mood induction and age interacted to influence perceptions of similarity. Specifically, those in a good mood felt significantly more similar to older characters than to younger characters, and those in a bad mood felt significantly more similar to younger characters than to older characters. The results for participants in a bad mood make sense, since previous research has found that age is a factor in perceptions of similarity with another (Goethals & Darley, 1977; Suls et al., 1978). Participants in a negative romance-related mood could have felt particularly similar to younger characters in comparison to those in a positive mood because the semantic affinity is high for them in terms of both character attribute similarity and situational similarity. Those in a negative romance-related mood were primed to be thinking of when a romance of theirs went awry, and the movie they were exposed to depicts that very thing happening for people similar in age to them. Although the romantic comedy inevitably ends in a happy relationship, a large portion of the movie is devoted to navigating relationship obstacles. Thus, situational similarity and age similarity could have been working together to heighten perceptions of similarity with young characters for those in a negative romance-related mood.
The theoretical explanation for participants in a good mood feeling more similar to older characters than to younger characters is less clear. It could be that because older people are typically thought of as having greater stability in life than younger people, participants who were primed to think about a time when they felt happy and secure in a relationship felt more similar to older people because they felt a sense of life stability in terms of their relationship-related mood. Future research should explore other possible reasons why those with positive relationship-related moods perceive themselves to be more similar to older characters than to younger characters.

The fifth hypothesis predicted a main effect of actors’ age in which participants in either positive or negative moods would perceive themselves to be part of the intended audience for a movie with an age-similar cast compared to an age-dissimilar cast. However, neither mood nor actors’ age had an effect on perceptions of the intended audience. Since perceptions of the intended audience could be related to perceptions of similarity with characters (see Weaver, under review), these results could indicate that age and mood are not as salient of indicators of similarity as some other character attributes. For example, gender may have influenced perceptions of the intended audience since the main characters in the romantic comedies were women, and all of the participants in this study were also women. It is also possible that the marketing for a particular genre plays a larger role in perceptions of the intended audience than age of the characters does. Since the movie was a romantic comedy, it could be that participants were basing their perceptions of the intended audience on genre rather than character age. If this were the case, then there would not be a difference between perceptions of the
intended audience of the movie with older actors in comparison to the movie with younger actors, as was the case in this study.

The sixth hypothesis predicted an interaction effect of mood and actors’ age in which participants in a negative mood would report less anticipated enjoyment of movies with age-similar characters than age-dissimilar characters, whereas participants in a positive mood would report more anticipated enjoyment for movies with age-similar characters than age-dissimilar characters. This prediction reflects the assumption of hedonic motivations that are key to MMT. On the contrary, results indicate that those in a bad mood reported significantly more anticipated enjoyment of movies with younger characters than movies with older characters, and that those in a good mood reported significantly more anticipated enjoyment of movies with older characters than movies with younger characters. This could relate back to perceptions of similarity with characters, as previously explained. Social identity theory would suggest that people would enjoy movies depicting their ingroup (people they are similar to) more than movies predominantly featuring an outgroup (people who are dissimilar) (see Weaver, 2011 for a review). Since those in a good mood felt more similar to age-dissimilar characters than age-similar characters, theoretically they would anticipate enjoying a movie with age-dissimilar characters more than a movie with age-similar characters (and vice versa for those in a bad mood).

Perhaps a better explanation as to why those in a good mood reported significantly more anticipated enjoyment of movies with older characters than movies with younger characters and those in a bad mood reported significantly more anticipated
enjoyment of movies with younger characters than movies with older characters involves motivations for selective exposure. As previously stated, Kim and Oliver (2011) explained that people may selectively expose themselves to romantic content for purposes of self-protection, self-improvement, or self-enhancement. People who are motivated by self-protection avoid content that might make them jealous or anxious about the future by comparing their romantic failure to successful romantic relationships. The motivation of self-improvement involves selecting content that provides inspiring messages and provides an example of a way to improve one’s situation, while the motivation of self-enhancement involves exposing oneself to content that provides an opportunity to improve self-esteem through comparison with more unfortunate others.

In this study, those in a bad mood could have anticipated enjoying a movie with younger characters more than older characters because of a motivation for self-improvement. They could anticipate enjoyment because they think they can learn from characters that are similar to them by watching the characters escape negative romance-related moods to find happiness. Participants in a positive romance-related mood could have anticipated enjoying a movie with older characters more than younger characters because of either a motivation for self-improvement or self-enhancement. If participants think of older individuals as more mature with greater life stability as suggested above, then participants could look to these characters as sources of inspiration for further self-improvement in their own lives. On the contrary, if participants did not think the age-dissimilar characters had greater life stability than themselves, they could have reported greater anticipated enjoyment with the motivation of self-enhancement. Since it is
thought that older people are supposed to have life figured out to a greater extent than younger people, perhaps participants in a good mood felt they would receive a boost in self-esteem by comparing their lives to the lives of the older characters. Their good relationship-related mood could have led them to feel that they were well situated in life, especially in comparison to the older characters facing relationship struggles that are typically resolved by the characters’ age.

The seventh hypothesis predicted mood and actors’ age would interact such that those in a negative romance-related mood would be less likely to select romantic comedies with an age-similar cast than with an age-dissimilar cast, whereas those in a positive mood would be less likely to select romantic comedies with an age-dissimilar cast than films with an age-similar cast. This is because MMT suggests that those in a negative romance-related mood would want to avoid content that is related to their romance-related mood (i.e. content high in semantic affinity). Feeling similar to characters would increase identification with the characters, and thus increase identification with the romance-related activities the characters are involved in throughout the movie. Theoretically, there would be less identification with age-dissimilar characters, so perceived semantic affinity would be lower for movies with age-dissimilar characters.

For those in a positive romance-related mood, there would be no need to avoid romance-related content since they are primed to think of romance in a positive light rather than a negative one. Previous research suggests that people tend to select media with characters that are similar to themselves in some way (Knobloch et al. 2005;
Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2006; Trepte, 2006; Weaver, 2011), and that age can affect perceptions of similarity with another (Goethals & Darley, 1977; Suls et al., 1978). Thus, for those in a positive romance-related mood, preference for a romantic comedy with younger actors would be greater than for a romantic comedy with older actors.

Overall, the seventh hypothesis was not supported since results indicate that mood was not a predictor of selective exposure. These results can be explained in the same way as the results of the first hypothesis addressed in Study 1. Specifically, participants within the same mood condition could have been making both counter-hedonic and hedonic media choices.

The eighth hypothesis predicted that mood, actors’ age, perceived similarity with the characters, perceptions of the film’s intended audience, and anticipated enjoyment would all predict selective exposure. Results indicated that mood was not a predictor of selective exposure, whereas actors’ age predicted selective exposure such that participants desired to watch movies with younger characters more than movies with older characters. The latter result would make sense theoretically if age was related to perceived similarity with characters, given that previous research has found that people prefer to watch content with characters that are similar to them in some way. However, not all participants felt more similar to age-similar characters than to age-dissimilar characters. Furthermore, results indicate that perceived similarity with characters was not related to selective exposure in this study, contrary to the findings of previous studies. One possible explanation for these results involves the age manipulation itself. Since the age manipulation involved showing pictures of the actors in the movie, participants could
have thought that younger actors were more physically attractive than older actors. Thus, attractiveness of the actors could have been the driving factor in the age-based differences for selective exposure.

Additionally, perceptions of the intended audience and anticipated enjoyment predicted selective exposure such that the more participants felt they were the intended audience of a movie and the more they felt they would enjoy a movie, the more they wanted to watch the movie. The reason that perceptions of the intended audience influenced selective exposure could be explained by social identity gratifications, as described in the discussion of Study 1. The results for anticipated enjoyment are intuitive. If people believe they will not enjoy a movie, they will probably not waste time and money to see it. Likewise, if they believe they will enjoy it, they will think it is worth the time and monetary investment to watch it.

**Theoretical and practical implications.** In summary, this study has important implications for the selective exposure paradigm and for media scholars in general. For participants in a good mood reporting more anticipated enjoyment of a movie with older characters than younger characters, both the suggested motivations (self-enhancement and self-improvement) revolve around the assumption that older women are supposed to be wise with stable life circumstances. Thus, expectations of what life should be like as an older woman should be further explored, especially if the negative stereotypes of older women described in the literature review are ever to be overcome. The effect that these expectations have should be investigated, particularly in regard to movies that depict women over the age of 40 exploring their sexuality. Likewise, the effect that exposure to
such depictions of older women has on women’s understanding of what it means to be a “woman of a certain age” should also be explored. Furthermore, results indicate that other character attributes besides age (such as attractiveness) may be more salient factors in the media selection process. Future research should explore the impact of various character attributes on selective exposure and perceptions of similarity to characters.

Limitations and Future Studies

This study was not without its limitations. First, this study was not completed in a laboratory setting, which could have resulted in the mood manipulation not having as strong of an effect on participants as the researchers intended. Experimental research is best completed in a laboratory setting where there are few, if any, distractions. Previous research conducted in a laboratory setting has been successful at manipulating mood (e.g., Kim & Oliver, 2011). Participants completed the present study on their personal computers in a setting of their choosing. There was no way to control whether participants gave their undivided attention to the study. Completing the mood manipulation task with full attention would likely have a stronger effect on participants than completing the mood manipulation task while also watching a television show, eating dinner, chatting with roommates, etc. Furthermore, the presence of researchers within a laboratory setting would likely cause participants to take the study more seriously than they would when completing it without any supervision.

Next, participants completed the mood manipulation task before reading all of the plot synopses. Thus, the moods created by completing this task could have been altered or dissipated by the time they finished reading the synopses, as Kim and Oliver (2011)
suggested. Furthermore, this study did not control for pre-existing genre preferences, although random assignment should have ruled preferences out as confounds. Lastly, this study had a relatively low number of participants. Future studies would do well to increase the sample size to reduce the potential for error.

In addition to the aforementioned suggestions for future research, future studies could also explore the role of social media marketing and word-of-mouth in overcoming perceptions of the intended audience and selective exposure. For example, if previous movie marketing exposure has primed people to believe that young females are the intended audience for romantic comedies, could word-of-mouth marketing overcome this enough that older men believe they are the intended audience for a particular romantic comedy? Researchers could also further explore the motivations involved in selective exposure to various subgenres of romantic comedies. For example, future studies could explore whether a viewer’s preference for FLCs over traditional romantic comedies is motivated by a desire to learn how to self-love rather than learn how to obtain romantic love.

Another avenue for future research involves exploring the possible media selection motivation of mood identification. Perhaps people in a negative mood make counter-hedonic media selection choices because they simply desire to see that there are others out there that are also suffering. In this case, people would choose media content that is related to their negative mood in order feel as if they are not alone, rather than selecting the content for the purposes of self-enhancement or self-improvement. Lastly, motivations for selective exposure to romantic comedies with actors of different ages and
other characteristics should also be explored in order to learn what character attributes drive perceptions of similarity, identification, and selective exposure.

**Conclusion**

This study used mood management theory to explore college-aged females’ selective exposure to romantic comedies as it relates to relationship-related mood and perceived semantic affinity to the plot and characters of movies. Semantic affinity was explored through both situational similarity (by genre) and character attribute similarity (by characters’ ages). Traditional MMT predicts that people will make hedonic choices, meaning individuals who are in positive relationship-related moods would choose to watch both traditional romantic comedies and female-led comedies because both depict positive outcomes, while those in a negative relationship-related mood would choose to avoid traditional romantic comedies because it perpetuates their negative emotional state by reminding them of why they are unhappy. Furthermore, MMT predicts that those with a negative romance-related mood might choose to watch a romantic comedy if the characters are age-dissimilar, since less similarity would trigger less of a need for avoidance. These hypotheses were not supported, either because mood was not a factor in selective exposure or because people made counter-hedonic media choices. Either way, this study expands MMT by suggesting that its fundamental predictions about semantic affinity may not hold true in all contexts.

It was also hypothesized that mood, actors’ age, and genre would affect anticipated enjoyment, perceptions of the intended audience, and perceived similarity with characters, and that these three variables would in turn would predict selective
exposure. Mood, actors’ age, and genre did affect anticipated enjoyment, perceptions of the intended audience, and perceived similarity with characters to varying degrees.
Likewise, anticipated enjoyment, perceptions of the intended audience, and perceived similarity with characters affected selective exposure to varying degrees. This indicates that selective exposure is more complicated than MMT can predict on its own. Future studies in the selective exposure paradigm must not only consider affect-related choices, but also consider character attributes, genre, perceptions of the self and others, and previous movie marketing exposure in order to better understand media selection.
APPENDICES
Appendix A
Informed Consent Document

Information Concerning Participation in a Research Study
Clemson University

Movie Interests Study

Description of the Research and Your Participation
You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Jessica Frampton and Dr. Erin Ash of the Department of Communication Studies. The purpose of this research is to examine selective exposure to movies.

Your participation will involve completing an online survey.

The amount of time required for your participation will be approximately 25 minutes.

Risks and Discomforts
There are no known risks associated with this research.

Potential Benefits
You will receive no direct benefit from this study. The results of this research will help researchers to better understand selective exposure to movies. Consequently, future moviegoers may benefit from this study.

Protection of Confidentiality
Your participation in this study is confidential. No identifying information such as names will be required on the survey. The information you provide to us will never be shared in a way that personally identifies you.

Voluntary Participation
Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate and you may withdraw your consent to participate at any time. You will not be penalized in any way should you decide not to participate or to withdraw from this study.

Contact Information
If you have any questions or concerns about this study or if any problems arise, please contact Dr. Erin Ash at Clemson University at 864-656-1567.

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Clemson University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) at 864-656-6460 or irb@clemson.edu. If you are outside of the Upstate South Carolina area, please use the ORC’s toll-free number, 866-297-3071.

*Proceeding with the survey indicates you consent to these terms.
Appendix B

Movie Plot Synopses and Posters

Horror Movie Synopsis and Poster

Levels to Kill

Shortly before Christmas, Derek Gould and his girlfriend Meredith go
downtown on a Tuesday night to catch a late movie. All of their usual parking
spots seem to be full, so they decide to park in a parking garage that is just off
of the main street next to a hospital for mentally ill patients. After watching the
movie and taking a stroll around the block to look at holiday lights, Derek and
Meredith realize how late it is and decide to head home.

When they step onto the elevator to go to the top level of the garage where
they parked, the elevator seems to have a mind of its own. It stops at the
second level of the parking garage and the doors open just wide enough for
Derek and Meredith to witness a man jump out of a black luxury car and stab
another man before speeding up to the next level of the garage. The parking
garage elevator continues to open on each floor just wide enough for them to
peek out and witness increasingly gruesome murders. At the top level, the
elevator opens completely, and Derek and Meredith must find a way to escape
the man and his final level to kill.

Cast:

Will Reddy – Derek Gould
Abigail Wayne – Meredith

Martin Swan – Killer
Allyson Cain – Victim
Levels to Kill

Starring Will Reddy, Martin Swan, Abigail Wayne, and Allyson Caine

It costs more than an arm and a leg to park here.

Coming this January
Action Movie Synopsis and Poster

Bringing Home Bradley

It is 2039, and World War III seems imminent. Russia and North Korea have joined forces, and government intelligence agencies suspect the two nations have plans to invade neighboring countries and bomb parts of Western Europe and the United States. In an attempt to end any conflict before it is started, the United Nations sends diplomat Bradley Bridgeman to Russia and North Korea for a series of peace talks. He is accompanied by Central Intelligence agent Kimberly Lynn, National Security Agent Ryan Duran, and Interpol agent Liza Thompson. After the talks take a turn for the worst, this group must figure out how to work together to get back home in one piece.

Cast:

Annie Bauer – Kimberly Lynn
Tom Griss – Ryan Duran

Kyle Packer – Bradley Bridgeman
Katie Abramov – Alina

Rachel Grand – Liza Thompson
Hwan Kim – Chun
Bringing Home Bradley

Another story about Russia being uncool

Kyle Packer  ·  Annie Bauer  ·  Tom Griss  ·  Rachel Grand

Coming this January
Female-led Comedy Synopsis and Poster

Wed Over Heels

Ellie Whitman and Sierra Day have been best friends since the first day of junior high. Now recent college graduates, they decide to move to New York City. When they are not together, Ellie spends most of her time at work as an account manager at a large advertising firm, while Sierra spends most of her free time with William, her boyfriend. Every weekend, Ellie and Sierra walk the streets of NYC in order to check out the latest fashion trends, though they spend the most time looking at shoes. After irresponsible Sierra gets fired from yet another job, Ellie meets Sierra at a coffee shop to console her. While talking, Sierra decides she wants to “be her own boss” and open up a shoe store with Ellie. Though hesitant at first, Ellie eventually concedes and agrees to pay the start-up costs for the store as long as Sierra promises to run the shop during the day while Ellie is at her advertising job.

The shoe shop is an instant success, and Ellie and Sierra often discuss their accomplishments and how happy they are to have each other as friends and business partners. However, things start to unravel when William proposes to Sierra. Instead of fulfilling her duties at the shop, Sierra is busy making plans for a wedding. After Sierra’s mistakes cause them to lose their biggest customer and pulls Ellie away from an important advertising meeting, Ellie has finally had enough. The two must learn to juggle both work and their personal lives if their friendship is going to survive.

Cast:

- Courtney Jones – Sierra Day
- Heather Plume – Ellie Whitman
- Winston Brags – Jacob
- Ethan Connors – William
Wed Over Heels

Heather Plume

Courtney Jones

Who needs diamonds when you’ve got shoes?

Winston Brags

Ethan Connors

Coming This January
Let’s Work on It

Lauren Need, a 25-year-old accountant, has had a crush on Michael from the Marketing department upstairs for the past three years. Unfortunately for her, Michael has also been involved in an on-and-off again relationship with her boss’s secretary, Tammy. When Lauren finds out she is soon being transferred to another branch of the company halfway across the country, she decides that she has to let Michael know her true feelings before it is too late. She then enacts a series of comical, but failed, attempts at telling Michael how she feels with the help of her witty and cynical friend, Christopher. On the day she is set to leave, Lauren realizes that Michael might not be as great as she has imagined him. Instead, the love she has dreamed about has been at her side the whole time.

Cast:

Kelly Slater – Lauren Need
Ben Mills – Christopher

Ryan Smith – Michael
Max Rupert – Mr. Johns

Christine Franklin – Tammy
Felicia James – Margo
Older Actors Version

Let’s Work on It

Lauren Need, a 45-year-old accountant, has had a crush on Michael from the Marketing department upstairs for the past three years. Unfortunately for her, Michael has also been involved in an on-and-off again relationship with her boss’s secretary, Tammy. When Lauren finds out she is soon being transferred to another branch of the company halfway across the country, she decides that she has to let Michael know her true feelings before it is too late. She then enacts a series of comical, but failed, attempts at telling Michael how she feels with the help of her witty and cynical friend, Christopher. On the day she is set to leave, Lauren realizes that Michael might not be as great as she has imagined him. Instead, the love she has dreamed about has been at her side the whole time.

Cast:

Kelly Slater – Lauren Need
Ben Mills – Christopher

Ryan Smith – Michael
Max Rupert– Mr. Johns

Christine Franklin– Tammy
Felicia James– Margo
Let’s Work on It

Sometimes love doesn’t come so easily.

Ryan Smith and Kelly Slater

Coming This January
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