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Romance cinema for debunking gender bias of non-egalitarian couple relationships in higher education

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Romance cinema may recreate cisgender heterosexual couple representations by means of image-making, with the use of gender bias or traditional images that have considerable effects on how women and men are represented or are expected to behave, which may confront egalitarian models of relationships. This study aims to analyze how the traditional model of couples is represented in the 20 romantic highest-grossing movies selected from the years 2000–2010, and whether the reading of non-egalitarian images awakens different meanings and reflections by experts and undergraduates in Higher Education (areas of education and communication). For this aim, a mixed methodology was used, first qualitative (six in-depth interviews with academics and film analyses of the selected movies), then quantitative (questionnaire to 251 undergraduates analyzing films), and then qualitative again (personal reports from the same students). Results confirmed the reflective making of gender bias and non-egalitarian images of couple relationships in six of the box-office films, with moderate percentages in categories of Submission, Dominance, Dependence, and higher percentages of Manipulation, either for/from women or men. The study concludes that romance cinema was positively valued by students and academics as an enabling cultural product for the analysis, reflection, and deconstruction of non-egalitarian images, so that higher education students can be guided to critically seek suitable understandings of gender and couple relationships.

KEYWORDS

higher education, gender bias, couple relationships, romance cinema, critical reflection, undergraduate students, film education

1. Introduction

Cinema is a recognized cultural medium for analyzing human life and its basic moral attitudes (Zhang, 2017; Pippin, 2019; Saidovich et al., 2022). Besides providing meaning to a playful and recreational act, where the challenge to “learn to learn, to learn to live” takes on all its consistency, it prompts consideration of the value of interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships (Padva and Buchweitz, 2017). Cinema is a powerful transmitter of values and relationship models of all types, representing the world and offering situations that are contextualized within specific historical and sociocultural milieus. Cinema is also a generator of identification processes (Willis, 2017) and empathetic involvement (Gallesse and Guerra,

2019), making it more or less permeable in its representational intentionality; in this sense, cinema can be a platform for experiences “lived by others” and thus a powerful instrument for understanding and comparing one’s own experiences (Malyshev, 2018). Thus, the images represented contribute to a “practical culture” around constructs that can be fed and reshaped by the events and representational behaviors (good or bad) carried out by film characters (Munshi, 2017). Accordingly, cinema provides pivotal representations via images that can assist citizens in recreating social interactions or relationships. The images conveyed and evoked either by the narrative and its points of view, or the characters, their roles, values, and reactions, are the main instigators of audience reactions. These reactions may either awaken and enrich the audience’s perspectives or reinforce traditional, limited, and non-egalitarian versions of relationships.

The “romantic” genre is often an ill-defined term in cinema. The most widely accepted view refers to a film genre that focuses on love and romantic relationships. There are several subgenres within this genre: comedy, drama, and romantic thrillers. In this paper, we are interested in romantic cinema from the first decade of the present century; this interest is twofold. Firstly, because despite being reviled (Lizada, 2022) and accused of oversimplifying and making a theme too basic, the romantic genre continues to be widely consumed (Gammon, 2022) especially by younger audiences (Gala and Ghadiyali, 2020). In fact, its consumption increased during the pandemic (Tello Díaz, 2021), suggesting that we seek out certain movies, depending on our individual or contextual needs. Rutledge (2018) and Capers (2022) have argued that romantic movie scenarios can be healthy, relaxing, and therapeutic, disputing the negative claims about watching romantic films. Secondly, because regardless of consumer needs, this study focuses on the images of relationships revealed in romance cinema. In modern societies, the advancement toward egalitarian relationships among couples must represent diversity in sexuality, multiculturalism, or intimacy. However, these images are not as common as expected in such films, especially considering that they are commonly consumed by young audiences in the genre of romance and its subgenre of romantic comedies (rom-coms). In such cases, images of relationships use gender bias, cisgender relationships, and traditional images, which can shape how women and men are represented and how they are expected to behave. In the absence of egalitarian representations, such biased portrayals must be considered critically, enabling students to develop a better understanding of couple relationships. Therefore, in this study, we consider that, although the romance genre has long been regarded as inferior by critics and scholars alike, it has a powerful reach due to its high rate of consumption. This makes it a significant image-maker of couples that can be used to foster reflection and open discussion in the context of higher education.

Images in films are not necessarily causal or conscious, but rather subjective, and rely upon the audience’s media-reception skills. The aforementioned skills include decoding, critical reflection, intercommunication, and identification with the characters (Igartua et al., 2009). In this paper, which is particularly concerned with the use of cinema in education, the educommunication model (Aguaded and Delgado-Ponce, 2019) serves as an approach for framing images from the perspective of civic participation and critical reflection. This involves questioning the information available and the possible non-neutrality of the media, social media, and any information

transmitter within connectivity culture (Van Dijck, 2016). This model provides instruments for understanding, situating, and debunking the social production of media and transmedia in plural and multicultural societies. From the values of democratic dialogue, the media prosumer can assume a critical distance, becoming a conscious consumer capable of reflecting on herself, relationships, and how reality is portrayed by the media. Coe and Yeung (2019) found that cultural creations and educational systems in general are commodities, although they cloak the underlying economic networks. In this paper, the approach of educommunication inspires us to sensitize ourselves to the images transmitted and omitted in widely consumed movies.

Cinema establishes points of reference for societies, epochs, and theories by providing material that would be difficult to recreate from other non-audiovisual parameters alone. It broadens systems of reference, sociological canons, and cultural or ethical models. The relevance of cinema as a powerful instrument for transmitting meaning is evident (Chaparro, 2014; Klinger, 2021). This is precisely the foundation on which this study is based: to use the potentialities of cinema to turn students into reflective image-makers who are aware of powerful influences and can discern which images are under- or misrepresented. According to Morín (2008), cinema provides students with three kinds of potential: (1) to elicit and generate reflective dialogues on various topics, aiding in their understanding; (2) to present ways of seeing, broadening understanding, and experiencing the world in particular spaces and contexts not conceived of; and (3) to offer them the opportunity to confront the images seen with their own experiences and to construct, reshape, or consolidate the sense and meaning of their lives.

According to Van Belle (2022), mediatization deals with long-term cultural transformations in and through the media. However, the effect of media, such as cinema, is not equitable among its viewers. Numerous variables, such as age, gender, or cultural capital, can determine the level of influence, and it is possible to pinpoint specific media events that have caused more radical changes than others. In this study, we focus on university students with educational profiles that are more closely linked to critical reflections on the consumption of film products.

2. Deconstructing non-egalitarian/ biased couple relationship images in romance cinema

Societies are still influenced by myths and biases regarding the roles of women. In particular, myths about relationships are based on a traditional model of relationships that continues to have negative effects on the vision and experiences of women. Cinema, as a cultural product, can be consumed from a position of passivity, perpetuating such gender biases, or from a reflective and critical position, which is the one that guides this research. Specifically, in romance cinema, the role of women is seen and experienced with consequent repercussions if certain non-egalitarian values are assumed to be normal or idealized, which feeds on these stereotypes. A misreading or normalization of such portrayals can be counterproductive, which is why critical media education is needed to enable audiences to understand how to process and avoid normalizing these images and biases.

Some studies have focused on cinema as an enabler of reflection and critical dialogue in education. Decoster and Vansieleghem (2014)

have shown various ways of understanding the cinema/education binomial, analyzing cinematographic pedagogy and reflecting on the pedagogical discussion among Giroux (2004), Benjamin (2008), and Deleuze (2013), highlighting the need for reflection to understand the implications of cinema for thought and education. More importantly, however, students can reflect on cinema, but they cannot be fully aware of the extent of its moral and ethical impact (Barral et al., 2018). Gozávez and Contreras emphasized the importance of attention and commitment training to mold “citizens capable of understanding the ebb and flow of reasoning that constitutes the substance of the democratic process” (Gozávez and Contreras, 2014, p. 135). Agudede (2013) stressed the need to adapt to the constant changes in global communication, where cinema has the power to represent changes and milestones. Recently, Ferrada (2020) studied the coexistence of the three meanings of dialogic pedagogy between Socrates, Freire, and Bakhtin by pointing out the critical act of knowing and reading reality, based on discovery; learning to elicit reflections; and developing a critical consciousness that can lead to transformation.

According to previous research (Gómez, 2004; Capdevila et al., 2011; De Sanmamed, 2012), the established alternative and traditional models help us understand the meanings constructed about a cultural manifestation for analyzing films. The traditional model, based on gender stereotypes, is inequitable and sexist, and includes a series of variables carrying a negative connotation. In contrast, the alternative model is based on a relationship of equality between the members of the couple, with friendship, respect, and consideration for both.

Various types of readings come to light in romance films, and it can be determined to what kind of representations each type of reading is referring. Traditional models are associated with non-egalitarian images, such as submission, dependence, manipulation, domination, abuse, or violence. Conversely, alternative models highlight equality and shared values, such as friendship, independence, sharing, respect, or dialogue, which are the most relevant images for this study. When applied to films, to identify whether the relationships portrayed belong to one model or the other, we include the analysis of images associated with women, men, or both, via types of interconnection, such as domination and submission, which are shown as the two sides of the same equation, in which men mainly exercise dominance over submissive women. Dependence appears associated with women with respect to men but women can manipulate men too (Estrada, 2010; Mendoza, 2018). It should be noted that it is equally biased to associate women with submission as with domination, as reported by Luce Irigaray, who criticizes the idea of egalitarian gender aspirations as desirable (Bovone, 2022). Thus, the focus must be placed on the bias and expectations that forced such representations, instead of widening gender and couple identifications or behavioral expectations. In this regard, based on the five categories that make up the traditional model (submission, domination, manipulation, dependence, and violence), the literature on couple relationships has associated some of these categories with men and others with women (Herrera, 2016; Kabeer, 2016; Ozaki and Otis, 2017; Willis and Nelson-Gray, 2017; Arriaga et al., 2018). Meanwhile, more specific studies on couple relationships between young adults and teenagers include these specific categories (Mogollón and Villamizar, 2015; Núñez et al., 2015; Flores and Browne, 2017; Breitenstein et al., 2018). The closed and traditional associations between categories and gender are shown in Figure 1.

As spectators, we are witnessing how recent romance films may be used to promote egalitarian relations between the sexes, free from traditional patriarchal roles and accompanying stereotypes that, until only a few years ago, seemed inevitable, or the emergence of the “smart” subgenre of “chick flicks” (Radner, 2017). In addition, the more recent entries in the romance genre may depict the realities and complexities of intimacy and modern gender roles (San Filippo, 2021). Conversely, romance films from 2000 to 2010, which are still frequently consumed (Illouz, 2018), even by younger generations (Ariza et al., 2014; Soto-Sanfiel et al., 2019), often perpetuate biases and normalized images of relationships between men and women. This is the area chosen by the authors of this study to identify images of traditional and egalitarian relationships among the couples represented, in which it was necessary to analyze whether awareness and reflection arose in viewers.

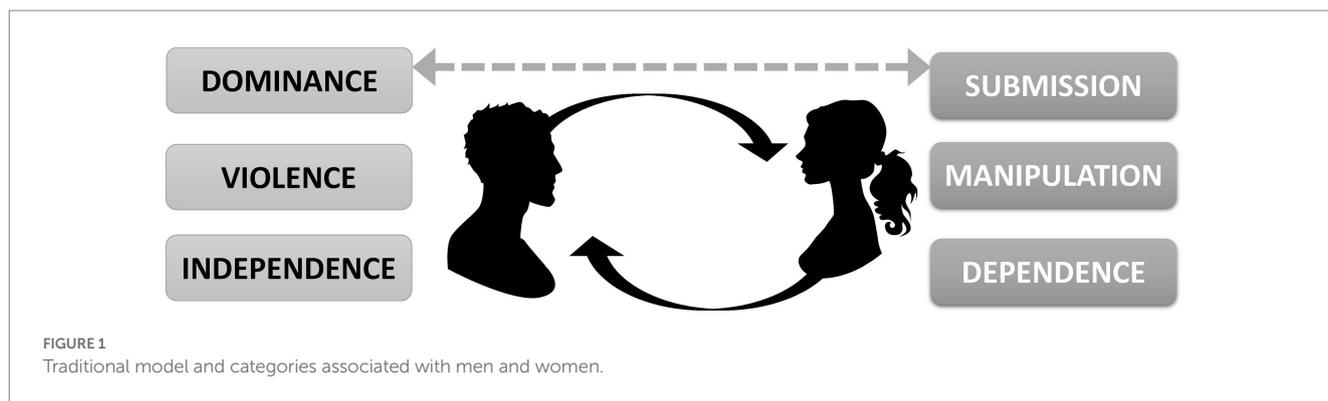
The aim of this study is to analyze how this traditional model is represented in romance cinema and whether non-egalitarian images provoke different readings and reflections in academics in higher education and younger spectators (undergraduate students) in the areas of media communication and education. Both groups are supposedly literate or predisposed to detect non-egalitarian values, and the study aims to find out how they process the images of women, men, and relationships in romantic cinema and understand whether they are aware of the biases. While reflective and critical readings of cinema are possible, this is not always the case (De la Pava Vélez, 2021). The objective is to understand the perceived level of reflection and recognition and ultimately to determine if it is possible to propose the use of this type of cinema as an educational tool to demystify certain non-egalitarian values that are easier to recognize.

The hypotheses supported in this study are that experts and trained students will recognize non-egalitarian images associated with gender bias in romance films (Hypothesis 1, H1), in which associations between men and women are opposed to the egalitarian images expected in advanced or plural societies (H2).

For these hypotheses, and exploring box-office romance cinema as an enabler of image-maker reflection, two research questions were defined: RQ1 (H1): To what extent do non-egalitarian images of couple relationships appear to drive reflection in romance films? According to traditional and egalitarian models, we also proposed RQ2 (H2): What are the associations with images of women, men, or both in romance cinema during the first decade of the 21st century?

3. Materials and methods

Mixed methods have been used to merge and reconcile data for an integrated interpretation of image-making processes (Creswell and Clark, 2017). In this study, after consulting several indexes, we decided to follow the international index of the World Wide Box Office in accordance with the context of the films. The selection was based on the highest-grossing movies, mostly produced in the US, which were framed as “Global Hollywood,” and with considerable worldwide consumption. As Molina (2006) argued, Global Hollywood is a capitalist institution consistent with the concepts of cultural commodification and identity formation in the transnational worldview. Moreover, Global Hollywood embodies the internationalization of financing, production, and distribution (Goldsmith et al., 2012), framing the international impact of American



cinema. The films selected for the study were the top 20 movies released between 2000 and 2010: *Sex in the City I*; *What Women Want*; *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*; *Hitch*; *Meet the Parents*; *The Devil Wears Prada*; *Sex in the City II*; *American Pie 2*; *Valentine's Day*; *The Ugly Truth*; *50 First Dates*; *He's Just Not That into You*; *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*; *Couples' Retreat*; *Chocolat*; *Save the Last Dance*; *The Notebook*; *Dear John*; *Life as We Know It*; and *Letters to Juliet*.

Firstly, the researchers conducted a qualitative analysis by examining the selected movies and verifying whether each of the variables associated with traditional and alternative models could be observed in the film through inter-reliability correspondences. Considering the categories depicted in Figure 1, we analyzed, identified, and labeled possible biases for men and women, as well as the links established between them, as a result of the deconstruction process of the 20 selected romance films. This analysis revealed that non-egalitarian images were present in 18 of the movies, with higher percentages found for both men and women in images depicting the following: dependence, usually emotional and mainly for women (18 of the movies), manipulation/deceit (13 of the movies), and submission/dominance, overlapping among women and men (10 of them). It is worth noting that 15 of the movies presented more than one couple among the relationships and that, for this analysis, images of all of them were considered.

Secondly, we utilized two types of sources for the study, experts and students of higher education, both in the areas of education and communication. Two different focuses were identified for the analysis, according to Beaudouin and Pasquier (2016): film-centered (romance cinema genre) and reception-centered (students' subjective perception of images in each movie).

Six personal, in-depth interviews were conducted with selected professionals in Castile and Leon, Spain, in the fields of education and communication, as well as with experts in gender and equality. The topics of the interviews were focused on (1) attitudes toward romance cinema, (2) images of men and women shown and their contrast with social reality, (3) the influence of the images represented in cinema on spectators, and (4) the use of cinema for educommunicational purposes. The sources included the following professional profiles: I1 [Interview 1]: Mrs. Senior Lecturer in audio-visual communication at a Spanish university, woman, aged 50–55 years old; I2: Mr. Senior Lecturer in the area of languages and literature at a Spanish university, man, aged 40–45; I3: Mrs. Professor of the master's program in interdisciplinary gender studies, woman, aged 55–60; I4: Mr. Associate Professor in the area of communication at a Spanish university, man, aged 45–50; I5: Mrs. Graduate in education sciences and PhD candidate in

interdisciplinary gender studies, woman, aged 25–30; I6: Mr. Professor in the master's program in interdisciplinary gender studies, man, aged 35–40.

Finally, quantitative (using a questionnaire) data were obtained from a sample of 251 higher education students specializing in education (195 teacher training and pedagogy students) and communication (56 advertising and public relations students) from the University of Salamanca, Spain.

Non-probabilistic purposive or judgmental sampling was used. Several criteria were used to select the sample. Firstly, the university degrees of the University of Salamanca linked to the object of study were selected. Secondly, the questionnaire was given to students in the last year of each chosen degree program to ensure greater academic knowledge of the analyzed variables and to give them a broader view of aspects such as the use of cinema in the classroom (which, although not part of this article, is included in the broader research from which the data originate).

Owing to the fact that the sample was made up of those with highly feminized degrees, there was a predominance of women (199) with respect to men (52). This gender imbalance was taken into account in the data analysis in which contingency tables were made and the chi-square test was applied to determine whether there were significant differences in the data obtained between men and women. The differences were only significant in 3 of the 25 items analyzed in total.

An *ad hoc* questionnaire was designed and validated by six experts, specifically intended to measure students' perceptions of couple images in romantic films. The initial instrument included items that did not withstand the rigor of the four experts who validated it. As a result, the questionnaire was structured into three parts: sociodemographic information (gender, age, and course); attitudes/perceptions toward romance cinema (Likert-type items); and analytical information for romance cinema (semantic differential to determine the presence of categories that make up the non-egalitarian image—manipulation, violence, dependency, submission, and dominance—or the presence of non-egalitarian images in the sample films of the study).

Finally, the same sample of higher education students was asked three open-ended questions in the form of an individual report. These questions were related to (1) their attitudes toward romance cinema, (2) the perception of images of non-egalitarian relationships, and (3) proposals for educommunication. The integration of these individual value judgments was used to configure a stage of connection with expert perceptions, focusing on the object of the study, that of image-maker reflection.

Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS. Each item was measured with consideration given to the frequency per gender, and the data were analyzed for each variable for men and women to compare the average scores. Standard deviations and Pearson chi-squares were applied to obtain differences between men and women and the dispersion of their attitudes; this analytical process served for RQ1. The qualitative data were analyzed according to categories describing non-egalitarian images to gain insight into students' attitudes toward romance cinema. The emerging categories from the expert interviews and student reports were added for a second analysis; this analytical process served for RQ2.

4. Results

The results of the study were organized according to the two main research questions collating higher education students' [Q1: questionnaire 1] and experts' outcomes [I1: interview 1]: firstly, on the female, male, and couple relationship images perceived in romance films in general (RQ1). Secondly, according to the four variables for the analysis of non-egalitarian images, the identification of the images associated with men and women was interlaced with the subjective reception-centered analysis of the 20 selected romance films by students (RQ2).

4.1. Perceptions toward romance cinema images of women, men, and couples (RQ1)

According to Table 1, their attitudes toward the reflective potential of images represented in romantic cinema were located in the medium critical values as they did not give forceful answers (never, always). Images of women and men were reported to be seen as traditional or non-egalitarian "sometimes," with no significant differences by gender. In this case, both male and female students reported that biased images were occasionally observed, being more acutely perceived as such by women. However, the coupled images were viewed more critically by the men in the sample. Statistically significant differences by gender were only found in the perception of biased social reality ($\chi^2 = 21.06, p \text{ value} = 0.000$), with the majority of women being less critical. This was also reflected in their open-ended answers:

In my opinion, many of the relationships that appear in romantic cinema present an image that has much to do with reality. [Q144]

I think that cinema continues to show social reality: women look for their prince charming and console themselves by watching romantic movies; however, society begins to move forward, and the liberalization of women becomes increasingly evident, so I think that it should be more faithfully represented. [Q98]

While students consume romance cinema for entertainment, according to Table 1, the majority of them debunked non-egalitarian images as they were aware that such movies present unrealistic images, thus showing the capability for arousing reflection. In fact, as other studies have shown, their responses reflect this aspect of "relax and do not think" while watching a movie (Deleuze, 2013) in which the images presented are already assumed to be unrealistic, or to be something that should not be normalized, as confirmed by their reports:

Cinema tries to manipulate us in the way we treat our partner, friends, and family with differentiation between men and women. [Q42]

In my opinion, romantic cinema greatly distorts the reality of couples' relationships. I believe that they have commercial motives. [Q160]

Academic experts contend that cinema is a transmitter of biased images that must be analyzed for reflection, using examples such as the detection of sexist behavior to foster more egalitarian relationships:

Romantic cinema falsifies reality but, at the same time, addresses society's "true" fantasies. [I2]

Obviously, yes (in relation to romantic cinema showing a biased reality) because the concept of love is typical of the rich West. [I4]

TABLE 1 Undergraduates' perceptions toward images represented in romance cinema.

Romance Cinema reproduces	Gender	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always	Average	SD
Biased social images of reality	M	.0%	46,0%	38,0%	16,0%	2,4,378	,59,326
	W	1,0%	61,9%	35,5%	1,5%		
Woman's traditional images	M	2,0%	50,0%	38,0%	10,0%	2,4,821	,67,726
	W	4,0%	51,3%	38,7%	6,0%		
Man's traditional images	M	4,0%	56,0%	34,0%	6,0%	2,3,280	,66,798
	W	8,1%	57,1%	31,3%	3,5%		
Traditional couple relationships images	M	.0%	44,0%	50,0%	6,0%	2,5,320	,67,736
	W	5,1%	45,5%	42,9%	6,6%		

Source: the authors.

Romantic cinema is, by definition, conservative and wants to meet the public's expectations. This does not mean that it does not change; it evolves according to cultural context. For example, the American romantic comedy of the 1940s was much more liberal than that of the 1980s or the 1990s. [I2]

For the experts, a certain veiled rejection of this genre of cinema was observed based on commonplace tropes and stereotypes. If romance cinema was used for educational purposes, they would consider critical analysis fundamental. The idea of fostering critical thinking was also a constant theme in all interviews as a key element for working with cinema in the classroom. The following verbatim quote in response to the question of how cinema could be used in the classroom to reduce gender inequality included the following ideas:

From my point of view, in two directions: one, go for films that break with the traditional canons, with empowered and autonomous female characters, and, this is important, with male characters that subvert traditional roles. Second, using more "conventional" films and analyzing them from a critical perspective is usually a good starting point for educational programs. [I4]

Experts also extended some of their statements to support the educational potential of eliciting critical awareness in all cinema genres, as well as in other forms of cultural production.

In my view, not only cinema, but all media, can serve to socialize students in the classroom because they show the light and shadows of the reality that is taken up by the director of that film: they serve to denounce, they serve to motivate; the same for equality: when we criticize gender violence, invasions, clitoral ablation, as for inequality, cinema must be used as an educational instrument. You really do have a weapon here; those of you who work on these things, it's tremendous ... [I3].

4.2. Images of non-egalitarian couple relationships associated with men and women (RQ2)

Following their viewing of romance films, students were asked about the presence of the categories that make up the traditional model: submission, dependency, manipulation, dominance, and violence. They were asked to differentiate within the category whether it could be matched to men or women. The outcomes were not as polarized as expected, and some of the associations between images of men and women established in the theoretical framework (Figure 1) were questioned, while others were confirmed, as shown in Table 2.

For the students, the romantic genre showed a slightly more dominant man and a slightly more submissive woman, not clearly at the extreme poles, although contrary perceptions were found in their reports, identifying an evolution, as in the last item.

They are usually very traditional films where they place the stereotypes of dominant and submissive women on the man. [Q16]

TABLE 2 Non-egalitarian images represented in romance films.

Submissive woman	1	2	3	4	5	Dominant woman
Submissive man	1	2	3	4	5	Dominant man
Manipulative women	1	2	3	4	5	Manipulated woman
Manipulative man	1	2	3	4	5	Manipulated man
Woman dependent on a man	1	2	3	4	5	Woman independent of man
Man dependent on a woman	1	2	3	4	5	Man independent of woman
Woman attracted to Violence	1	2	3	4	5	Woman rejecting Violence
Man attracted to Violence	1	2	3	4	5	Man rejecting Violence
Traditionalisms toward the relationship	1	2	3	4	5	Progressive equity toward the relationship

Source: the authors.

Today, the image of a woman is more dominant, and a man suffers for her love. [Q232]

At first, women were seen as more submissive, and they had been outdone. They are no longer inferior to men. They also decide. [Q117]

Manipulation was perceived as mutual and balanced between the traditional categories, confirming the presence of manipulative relationships. The same applied to dependence, since the students perceived a greater dependence on men among women. However, in several excerpts, they indicated an evolution toward greater interdependence between genders in those films:

Above all, I observe that women are highly dependent on men. [Q135]

Dependence of women on men is appreciated in traditional or older films, but in more modern films it is not appreciated as much. [Q28]

The violence category appeared stable, without being associated with a predominant gender. This could be due to a lack of differentiation symptoms, as discussed in the literature as the camouflage of fun times (O'Connor, 2008) or masculinity (Buchbinder, 2008). In fact, violence was mentioned only once in open reports referring to both genders:

As in life itself, one can see how violence can exist from men to women, and as manipulation by both men and women. [Q144]

Finally, the undergraduates reported that images of romantic relationships were closer to more progressive ideals than traditional frames, without being totally progressive.

Perhaps romantic films tend to be more progressive but cling to the image of platonic love. [Q106]

In general, the traditional approach has been to create romantic comedies, but lately, the roles change from time to time or are equalized. [Q53]

In traditional romantic movies, men rule over women; however, they are currently releasing new films in which the situation is equal for men and women. [Q81]

The image of an independent and leading woman is becoming more frequent. [Q107]

Recent studies have supported this idea of evolution, since conventions and myths are often opposite to those in recent films, with appreciable improvements in female roles or diversity (Radner, 2017). Data from the students' reports indicated that they perceived this shift toward more egalitarian images:

In my opinion, in couple relationships, the stereotypes of a dominant man and manipulative woman remain, although this is changing little by little. [Q38]

In recent years, the relationships shown in romantic cinema have become more balanced between the two genders than they were years ago. [Q145]

All these data were taken from students' reports of general perceptions toward romance cinema; the following table (Table 3) shows their analysis of the 20 selected films. It should be taken into account that not all of the students knew of or had seen the same movies. The table shows those perceptions equal to or higher than 20%. Thus, 18 of the films in the sample are reflected in this table, as *Letters to Juliet* and *Chocolat* showed high percentages of perception of equality: 77 and 49%, respectively. Regardless of the fact that some film's plots correspond to several couples, the students indicated the perceived representation of non-egalitarian images in any of the relationships in each movie.

Since violence was perceived in less than 20% of the films, it is not included in Table 3. For the other four categories, the outcomes revealed more specifically that submission and dependence, although perceived by students in several films, were both present in less than 40% of films, making submission the least perceived category in the analyzed films.

With regard to manipulation, this was perceived as exercised by women on men (with percentages higher than 50%) and by men on women (with the highest percentage of 84% in *Hitch*), which is new for the traditional model. This was the category most frequently perceived by the students in these films.

Dominance also appears in both directions: by men on women and by women on men. In addition, it appears at a high rate of 52% in the movie *Sex in the City I*, but it does so in the opposite direction to the traditional model: it is women who exercise dominance over men. In the study of Lorie's (2015), which is an analysis of the series on which this film is based, it is already indicated that an evolution of gender roles has occurred, although this would require the use of an educational aid for framing such images. This is because viewers are unable to decipher the manner, intent, and emphasis in the transmission; thus, such ideological messaging may become self-cancelling. Dominance is a traditional non-egalitarian image, so this kind of evolution in association with women must be effectively framed and requires critical decoding.

In the last research phase, the students filled out open-ended reports, and it was found that the undergraduates identified a continuum in the traditional associations between the categories and gender, as shown in other studies (Mogollón and Villamizar, 2015; Flores and Browne, 2017):

In men, it is as if it gave him superior power and the most submissive woman, but not in all cases is it so; it must be said that not all films are the same. [Q79]

Traditional images continue to show that women are at the mercy of men and what they want to do. [Q133]

Cinema continues to support and promote the typified social roles of both men and women. The woman is weak and emotional, while the man is a protector and good to capture. [Q69]

In addition, a consensus between the students and experts was found when considering that romantic cinema is directed toward a certain audience, evidencing that it is aimed at women:

Most romantic cinema focuses on female audiences, and I suppose that the Prince Charming fantasy is part of many women's subconscious. Popular cinema offers solutions, and a great solution for loneliness is to fantasize about the ideal couple and, in addition, perfect, that simple. [I2]

Women prefer the romantic genre because they are characterized by being more sentimental than men. [Q109]

This perception was reinforced by the fact that the students showed a great difference in their consumption of the 20 films that made up the sample. The women had seen an average of 10 films, while the men had watched only four. This seems to show that this type of filmography is consumed more by women than by men. Even though the experts were more critical, they did not find this to be a drawback for their use of such films in class. Instead, they highlighted their potential to stimulate critical reflection.

I always try to use cinema, not your typical commercial cinema, and when we use it, it is to make a critical analysis of it. There is

TABLE 3 Percentages of non-egalitarian images perceived in the selected romantic films.

Movie	Manipulation		Domination		Submission		Dependence	
	M to W	W to M	M to W	W to M	M to W	W to M	M to W	W to M
Hitch	84		31		20	25	33	23
Sex in the City II		63		36				27
Sex in the City I		51		52			21	33
How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days	22	54		28			20	-
What Women Want	59		32			25	21	24
American Pie II	49		32		25	20	38	20
He's Just not that into You	35	23	23					36
The devil wears Prada		41		41			24	
The ugly truth	40	33					21	
My Big Fat Greek Wedding		20				20		22
50 first dates	28						38	
The notebook	35	27						
Life as we now it		26					26	35
Meet the parents		31		21	24		31	
Valentin's Day		31		24			26	26
Couples's retreat		29	24				29	24
Save the last dance	25					27		27
Life as we know			22					

Source: the authors.

another type of cinema that transmits certain types of issues that do serve, at least to make people think. [11]

Yes, it would be a didactic-educational means for, in this case, detecting and analyzing sexist behavior. Thus, it contributes to education in healthy and free relationships, both in friendships and in couple relationships. [15]

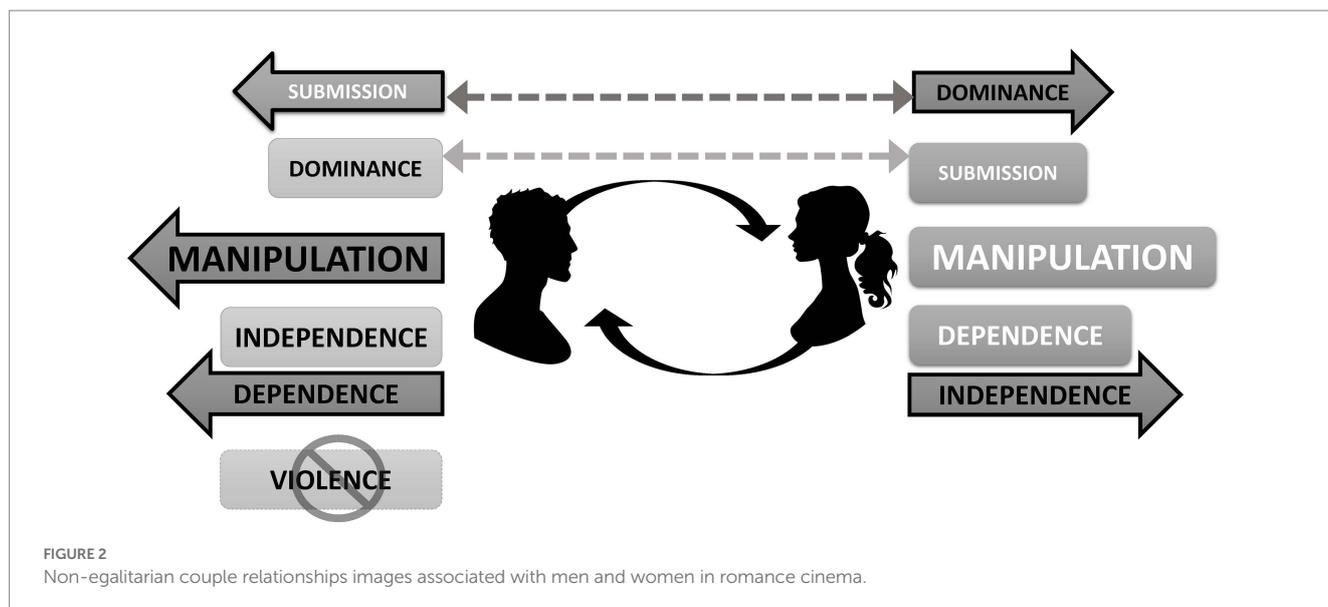
Figure 2 visually represents the results of this image-making process of the romance films by the students, where some categories of the traditional model (compared to Figure 1: black letters for men; white letters for women) are removed because of their underrepresentation, such as violence. Other categories, such as dominance or submission, are less represented (sunken categories)—while others, such as manipulation, are highly perceived (embossed categories). In addition, new categories are added to the other expected gender, multiplying the non-egalitarian images for men and women by generating a new interconnection between the submissive man and the manipulative woman.

The H1 supported in this study was confirmed, because the experts and trained students recognized the non-egalitarian images associated with the traditional model of relationships. However, they also found new categories associated with men and women from the

egalitarian model, such as independence. This finding could establish new pathways in the area of film education, magnifying gender bias and broadening reflection. Eventually, for traditional or new gender bias, romance films can be considered useful image-makers for debunking gender relationship bias between men and women, with the potential to prompt critical reflection on such images and values in advanced or plural societies.

5. Discussion

We began by establishing that higher education students can be better guided to become reflective image-makers of non-egalitarian images represented in the romance cinema of the first decade of the 21st century. The results confirmed that the model and images of successful couple relationships represent non-egalitarian values, confirming the H2. This is relevant because the transmissivity effect of such images, although subjectively perceived, can influence younger generations' cultural practices regarding how couple relationships can work. Such representations and conventions require critical judges and educational guidance to elicit Nussbaum's (2010) idea of narrative imagination or an intelligent image-maker. Thus, the results of this study suggest that the use of cinema for educational purposes, specifically romance cinema, requires instruction and progressive



acquisition of skills, mainly training in reflection, comprehension, and critical judgement (Alonso, 2017; Haywood et al., 2019). Learning how to consciously reflect on and decipher the images of couples in romance cinema is paramount because images are not only transmitters but also forces in the reproduction of traditional models of relationships, far from being removed from their evolution or transgression.

The interpretation of couple relationships is inherent to the spectator and what they seek to understand as a subjective process of image-making, with broad frames for interpretation. In addition, images are framed to affect viewers and are not always intended to provoke critical reactions. Thus, if they are framed appropriately with educational guidance, an image will not only have the power to affect viewers, but also the ability to critically change the normalization of conventions, bias, or the omission of images against egalitarian values. Exposure to the misrepresentation of couple relationship images, and even the normalization of dependence, abuse, or domination between men and women, as this study has reported, requires more attention. A re-evaluation of how images of couple relationships are made for the effective reflection and critical dialogue of active spectators is also needed. This is particularly important for younger generations (Morales-Romo and Morales-Romo, 2020), who are often the expected audience in this genre (the rom-com subgenre) and are most in need of educational clues and strategies for reflecting on image-making. The focus on critical reflection and the value of image-makers requires training spaces, within the context of higher education and even before that point, that provide learners with the tools to debunk partially or wholly wrong images shaped by changing contexts, interpretations, unstitching, or remixing.

The outcomes of this study also revealed variability in image making, with differences in the identification of the traditional model categories toward men and women in the analyzed films. This can be considered a symptom of democratization and diversity in critical thinking (Herman and Kraehe, 2018). Even if image-making reflections were not polarized or uniform, perhaps due to the highly variable nature of the romantic cinema genre, several images of the traditional model of couple relationships were found. At the same time, certain levels of progress toward egalitarian relationships were

evidenced in relation to the independence of women, and there was not a high level of representation of the submission or dominance categories in these films, even though little violence was perceived. However, the perception of manipulation by both men and women was the highest category accounted for in the romance films. This should not be misinterpreted as an indicator of evolution simply because traditionally powerful roles are associated with women rather than men, as in the case of the dominance of women over men.

One of the main implications of the outcomes of this study is that it warns of how the traditional categories are multiplied and extended to both men and women, and represented in past box-office romance cinema, which is still being widely consumed by younger generations. The study's participants, including experts and students, suggested that fresh entries in the romance cinema genre could represent progressively more egalitarian images. It will be interesting in the future to compare our data from past decades' films with analyses of new romance films since studies have not yet analyzed such differences or firmly concluded that there is evidence of a contrast between such categories in recent films. Further analysis is needed regarding the expectancy of higher levels of diversity of gender images in current romance films, with new studies analyzing egalitarian model categories of respect, friendship, and mutual consideration. Research is also needed on wider levels of reflections on couple images, considering that most of the couples represented in the films from 2000 to 2010 were white heterosexual couples, as claimed in other studies (Sadeghi, 2019). Analysis of various audience cohorts would also be necessary, contrasting several reflecting and image-making processes among people of various ages and the impact on the evolution of media reception skills.

Finally, there was also evidence of a critical attitude toward this genre of romance cinema, considered inferior by experts for captivating less-skilled audiences. Even considering that romance cinema does not simply address a pre-existing audience, it has the power to constitute a type of audience ready for the consistency of that image, which could be problematic. Despite being consumed primarily for entertainment and not deep thinking (Deleuze, 2013), the reading and debunking of non-egalitarian images by students indicated a degree of reflection. In line with this, cinema was positively valued by higher education

students and experts as an enabling cultural product for the analysis, reflection, and deconstruction of images, which may involve a confrontation with the values of egalitarian and plural societies. Therefore, it is a powerful tool in the field of educommunication. While the participants expected to be reflectors, given their affiliation with the communication and education areas, fostering reflection and debate must become part of civic education in the analysis of cultural media and transmedia at the global level. Audiences are capable of engaging in reflection; however, this is not an automatic process and it must be informed by guiding citizens to critically attend to certain biases and forceful representations while avoiding the normalization of biased images and representations of gender roles and couples.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

NM-R and BM-R contributed to the conception and design of the study and performed the statistical analysis. BM-R organized the database. NM-R and MH-S wrote the first draft of the manuscript and

depicted the figures. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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