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La La Land Media Criticism

Romantic-comedy films have been a staple in American pop culture for the past few decades. They provide entertainment to the viewer as well as send key messages to their audience regarding romantic ideals and perceptions of how the world around us works. One popular message sent in romantic comedies is the concept of soulmates: individuals who have been pre-destined to fall in love with each other. Studies have shown that those who have belief in soulmates tend to have a preference for romantic media (Holmes, 2007), and thus seek out films that reinforce this belief. However, one of the most highly praised romantic comedies released in the past few years was Damien Chazelle's 2016 film *La La Land*, a film directed towards young adults that provided alternate messages regarding romantic relationships and the concept of soulmates. With a positive tone surrounding less popular romantic ideals, the film sends mixed messages regarding relationships, showing that while romantic relationships do not always last, they can still be beneficial to the individual.

The film chronicles the relationship between Mia and Sebastian, two people who move to Los Angeles in hopes of achieving their dreams of becoming famous. Mia wishes to become a famous actress, while Sebastian wants to open a jazz club. The two cross paths and begin a romantic relationship in the midst of their pursuit of their career goals, but as the film progresses they become aware of the dysfunction of their relationship. The characters realize that their dreams are not able to be achieved if they want to continue their relationship with each other, and their relationship is terminated by the end of the film. The two characters are then able to achieve their goals, and reunite with each other at the end of the film to support each other in their vision.

The main message that the film seeks to send about romantic relationships is the role of soulmates in relation to achieving one's goals. Mia and Sebastian seek to support each other in their endeavors because of their love for each other, but the constraints of their relationship show them that they need to be separated from each other in order to achieve these goals. The film relies on the dynamics of growth beliefs versus the concept of soulmates, positioned with the fact that the couple chooses to not stay together at the end of the film. The couple begins their relationship clinging to the concept of growth beliefs, that they can work together and make their relationship productive and compatible. As the film progresses, however, the couple begins to believe in the concept of soulmates. They cannot work towards a beneficial relationship, but they know that destiny is tying them together even if they choose not to be with one another. At the end of the film, when Mia and Sebastian end their relationship, Mia tells him she is always going to love him. Additionally, the two meet each other at the end of the film after not meeting for five years. The two exchange a smile, and the film ends. This ending demonstrates the belief that while Mia and Sebastian could not work together in a relationship, their position as soulmates still exists.

The arguments between Mia and Sebastian in the film are reflective of their destiny beliefs about each other. Because the two characters believe that they are soulmates and destiny has brought them together, they have a harder time dealing with their own relational conflict. Destiny beliefs are shown to bring about negative attributions of feedback, along with a difficulty to accept conflict and feedback from one another (Knee et al., 2003). Because Mia and Sebastian had entered their relationship believing that they were soulmates, they are discouraged by their inability to work together and solve problems within their relationship. This fact explains why Mia feels the need to escape the conflict, because she is discouraged at the fact that her

relationship is not working out the way it should given that she believes she and Sebastian are destined to be together. She also does not know of any way to work towards a compromise. I believe this message about soulmates to be beneficial to the audience, as it acknowledges the popularity of the 'soulmate' trope in romantic media, while also providing a warning to the audience about the dangers of clinging to this mindset.

An important relational message that is debunked within the film is the idea that couples must be able to read the minds of their partners (Holmes & Johnson, 2009). During the argument regarding the job that Sebastian has chosen, Sebastian tells Mia that he believes that she wanted him to choose that particular job for himself, whether or not he was actually satisfied with it. Mia tells him that he is wrong in making that assumption, yet he tries to continually argue that his choice was based on what she wanted. While venting their frustrations to each other about their relationship, Sebastian tells Mia that he thinks Mia prefers when he is miserable and unsuccessful "because it made you feel better about yourself" (Chazelle, 2016). Mia asks him if he is joking, and he reinforces this attribution he has made. Sebastian knows that he has made an explicit attribution, which is a "conscious, cognitive appraisal concerning why a communicative behavior has occurred" (Newman, 1981), and blames his perception of Mia for their struggles in the relationship. The couple's communication style fails to make up for Sebastian's personal beliefs about why his relationship with Mia is failing. He does not want to blame himself, so he blames Mia. The film shows this scene in a very negative light on his part, and, in doing so, warns viewers about the dangers of this type of harmful communication within an intimate relationship. Instead, the film advocates for proper communication between partners in order to avoid jumping to conclusions like Sebastian did.

Avoidance tendencies are also on display in the couple's argument. Before Sebastian can apologize for what he said, Mia decides to leave his apartment to avoid continuing the conversation. This is the last major argument they have, left unresolved, until they eventually decide to end their relationship. Mia's avoidance method is potentially what is responsible for the breakdown of their relationship, along with the downfall of her own self-worth. Research shows that "strong avoidance methods lead to negative cognitive and affective reactions in the face of a negative social challenge, which in turn leads to a higher likelihood of negative interpersonal behaviors" (Kuster et al., 2015). We find this to be true in the film, as this scene serves as the pivot to both of the characters' descent into despair and their eventual decision to break up. By showing this type of avoidance behavior as destructive to the audience, the film leaves a beneficial message for couples to work towards better communication and conflict management.

The film finally sends a message that since every relationship does not last, members of a terminated relationship must change their approach and expectations in order to have a successful new relationship. At the end of the film, we see that Mia has married a man who can put up with her busy lifestyle as an actress and remains supportive of her endeavors, despite the fact that they do not seem to have the same amount of passion for each other that Mia had for Sebastian. After ending her relationship with Sebastian, Mia recognizes that she must expect a different lifestyle and a different concept of what a healthy relationship should be. In communications research, it is known that a person's relationship schema changes once they end a relationship (Brunson et al., 2019), as shown in Mia's change in relationship expectations for her new husband. They speak to each other in a very matter-of-fact tone, and Mia is not around very often because of her job as an actress. This also aligns itself with growth beliefs, as Mia has abandoned the idea of soulmates in her mind and instead has chosen to marry a man with whom

she can compromise and achieve her own goals with. The audience sees that Mia is a lot happier with herself now that she has grown from her past relationship.

The film seems to favor destiny beliefs in its depiction of Mia and Sebastian, but it makes sure that both types of relational beliefs are shown to have their positive and negative aspects. The film values independence over shared goals, and sends a message that growth beliefs can be more favorable for an individual who is seeking out their own dreams. In terms of being positive messages for its audience, I think that this film carries a positive message for both destiny and growth beliefs, while making sure not to depict each of these mindsets as perfect. Every relationship has its flaws, and that is a positive message to send to audiences since it normalizes a more realistic depiction of intimacy in film. Couples should not have to expect their relationship to be perfect, and we see a lack of perfection but a surplus of happiness in both of Mia's relationships.

Social cognitive theory states that different types of media influence people's beliefs and attitudes regarding romantic relationships (Kretz, 2019), and that scholars of media studies have identified the common relational messages that are sent in film. Viewers of romantic media are susceptible to believing what we see on screen, and *La La Land* serves as a more holistic, introspective romance film compared to other popular romantic comedies. Having romantic idealizations of relationships can be associated with more relational satisfaction in an individual (Jones & Cunningham, 1996), yet this film seeks to move beyond relational satisfaction and more into interpersonal satisfaction. The common trope of "love conquering all" is spun on its head through this film: Mia and Sebastian's love does not conquer all, but they are still able to be happy without each other in the end. The viewers of the film will see how Mia and Sebastian

value their self-worth and personal goals over maintaining their relationship, and will perhaps rethink their own commitments to a relationship in pursuit of their own happiness.

Overall, I believe this film is beneficial to its viewers in terms of the messages it sends about intimate relationships. The depiction of Mia and Sebastian's relationship, while somewhat bittersweet, sends an accurate message about the struggle between achieving relational goals and achieving intrapersonal goals. Additionally, the film highlights the importance of balancing destiny vs. growth beliefs, and the importance of healthy communication between partners. While Mia and Sebastian can be considered soulmates, that does not mean that their relationship is better for the individual than Mia's new relationship that is based on growth beliefs. Instead, the audience learns about the importance of embracing change and growth as one leaves and enters new relationships, no matter what those changes may look like to the individual.

A break away from the norm can be helpful in understanding heartbreak and the long-term effects of relationships. This film helps break away from the norm that people need to be in romantic relationships in order to be satisfied in their lives, and the idea that one must sacrifice their own lives in order to keep their relationship in motion. Love is supposed to make an individual a better, more satisfied person. It is not supposed to weigh each other down. By emphasizing the importance of one's own personal choices and motivations, Chazelle's film seeks to encourage its viewers to seek out love when it can truly benefit your life and the life of your partner, rather than believe that there is no other option but to love someone.

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