

Bridging Theory and Practice in Psychosexual Therapy:

Cultural and Clinical Global Insights

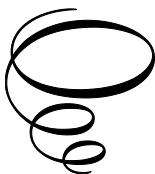
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READING FOR CONNECTION: THE THERAPEUTIC ROLE OF ROMANCE NOVELS IN ENHANCING COMMUNICATION AND INTIMACY

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Introduction

Modern-day romance novels offer readers compelling emotional journeys that intertwine love, desire, and the complexities of modern life. At their core, these narratives explore two fundamental dimensions of intimate relationships: communication and emotional connection. As tools for self-reflection and relational insight, romance novels can serve a valuable function in therapeutic contexts, particularly for enhancing intimacy and communication between partners.

Communication about intimacy can be challenging, even in healthy long-term relationships. Many couples struggle to find shared time and to express their sexual desires, boundaries, and needs effectively. Research has consistently shown that sexual communication—including self-disclosure of preferences, desires, and boundaries—is strongly associated with both sexual and relationship satisfaction (Metts & Cupach, 1989; Byers, 2011). Strong dyadic communication also predicts greater relational adjustment, intimacy, and long-term happiness (Carroll et al., 2013; Ledermann et al., 2010; Karakose & Ledermann, 2023).

Yet, expectations about how relationships “should” look or feel can sometimes interfere with satisfaction. These expectations, often grounded in internalized sexual scripts shaped by media, culture, and prior experiences, influence how individuals perceive and pursue emotional and sexual intimacy (Newstrom et al., 2021; Zagefka & Bahul, 2021). Because sexual scripts are learned from early life and reinforced through cultural narratives, interventions that engage with and potentially reframe these scripts can offer therapeutic value.

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified relationship stressors while also reshaping leisure behaviors. Amid widespread uncertainty, many turned to reading—especially romance novels—as a form of escape, self-soothing, and connection. Romance novels, which often promise a “happily ever after” (HEA) or “happy for now” (HFN) ending, offered readers a narrative counterbalance to a world of loss and disruption (Brayzen Bookwyrms, 2022). Many also began sharing books with partners, using them to spark conversation, humor, connection, and intimacy.

Romance fiction, broadly defined, focuses on developing romantic relationships and often centers on emotional and sexual growth between characters. A unique hallmark of the genre is its affirmation of desire, especially female pleasure and agency, which challenges traditional heteronormative sexual scripts (Rubiner-Zinn, 2018). These narratives frequently portray protagonists learning to communicate needs, establish boundaries, and prioritize mutual satisfaction—skills that mirror therapeutic goals in sex and couples therapy.

Unlike visual pornography, where sex typically drives the plot, romance novels tend to use sex as a vehicle for character development and emotional deepening. While erotic content varies, ranging from “closed door” stories with no on-page sex to highly explicit “open door” scenes, this variability allows readers to select content aligned with their comfort levels and preferences (Salmon & Symonds, 2004; Nassor, 2023). Erotic fiction may more effectively activate fantasy, imagination, and emotional reflection than visual erotica, which researchers have linked to increased sexual dysfunction in some partnered contexts (Danebeck et al., 2009; Palaniappan et al., 2016).

Romance novels have become increasingly inclusive in both narrative and representation, broadening their appeal across age, gender, and sexual identity. These shifts open the door for their use in therapeutic contexts—not as prescriptive self-help material, but as vehicles for fantasy exploration, emotional modeling, and communication practice. Previous studies have explored the impact of sexual scripts in romance literature (e.g., Cabrera & Ménard, 2013; Klein et al., 2019; Garciano et al., 2023), but few have empirically examined how shared engagement with the genre may influence intimacy and communication in real-world couples.

This chapter presents findings from a survey study of 586 participants recruited through romance author social media groups. It examines how reading romance novels—whether alone or with a partner—affects relationship dynamics, including emotional communication, sexual and relational satisfaction, and perceived stigma. Participants engaged with the material in a variety of ways: some read simultaneously with partners,

others read aloud, listened to audiobooks together, or discussed scenes and themes with one another.

Guided by an integrative sex and couples therapy (ISCT) framework, this chapter evaluates whether shared romance novel engagement enhances couples' communication and intimacy, and whether it mitigates shame or stigma often associated with erotic reading. In doing so, it offers empirical support for a novel, culturally resonant bibliotherapy tool: romance fiction as a means of deepening connection and enhancing relational well-being.

Theoretical Framework

This study applied Sexual Script Theory (SST) through the lens of ISCT to examine how romance novels can help individuals and couples reshape sexual narratives. SST conceptualizes sexual behavior through three interrelated scripts: *cultural scenarios*, *interpersonal scripts*, and *intrapsychic scripts*—each influenced by social norms, personal experience, and internal meaning-making (Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Wiederman, 2005). Romance novels can mirror this structure: cultural scripts shape genre conventions, interpersonal dynamics unfold between characters, and intrapsychic scripts are reflected in protagonists' internal journeys.

ISCT merges the relational focus of couples therapy with the explicit attention to sexual functioning found in sex therapy (Guttman, 2020). This approach emphasizes mutual understanding, communication, and emotional connection as foundations for sexual satisfaction (Nelson, 2020).

When used therapeutically, romance fiction can offer a nonthreatening entry point for discussing desire, curiosity, and intimacy, referred to as the erotic curiosity spectrum (Nelson, 2008). Through shared reading, couples can re-examine sexual expectations and co-create more adaptive, pleasure-affirming scripts, making romance novels both a reflective and connective tool in therapy.

Review of Literature

Reading Romance Novels

Romance novels, a bestselling genre generating over \$1.4 billion in 2022 (Curcic, 2022), have grown significantly in popularity, readership diversity, and thematic complexity. While historically aimed at women aged 35–54, today's readers span genders, backgrounds, and ages (Van Dien, 2023). The appeal lies in the interplay between familiar narrative structures—notably the promise of a Happily Ever After (HEA) or Happy for Now (HFN)—and

the genre's wide variety of subgenres, tropes, and explicit content levels. Predictive emotional resolution allows readers to explore emotionally complex and often sexually charged plots in a safe and affirming context (Van Dien, 2023; Cheyne, 2019).

Romance novels have increasingly included diverse representations of relationships and identities, including LGBTQ+ characters, body positivity, neurodiversity, disability, kink/BDSM, and non-monogamy. Readers report using the genre for relaxation, distraction, sexual inspiration, and social engagement (Kraxenberger et al., 2021; Diekman et al., 2000). While some critics argue the genre fosters unrealistic expectations, empirical research (e.g., Brackett, 2000; Cameron, 2020) finds that readers approach these texts primarily as escapist fiction rather than relationship blueprints.

Romance fiction has also been linked to improved empathy, reduced gender role stereotyping, and enhanced interpersonal sensitivity (Fong et al., 2013, 2015; Mar et al., 2006, 2009). These findings suggest that romance may function similarly to other narrative forms in promoting emotional attunement and social skill development, especially when read and discussed with a partner. This aligns with arguments that fiction, especially romance, models emotional communication and mutual recognition (Modeleski, 2008; Garciano et al., 2023).

Critically, romance novels often challenge traditional sexual scripts by portraying consensual, communicative, and pleasure-centered relationships. Contemporary works emphasize bodily autonomy, consent, and emotional labor, contributing to feminist discourse (Cameron, 2020). This shift away from the historically male gaze toward more egalitarian portrayals of desire can support healthier sexual expectations.

Sexual Communication

Sexual communication is a key component of relational satisfaction (Byers, 2011; Frederick et al., 2017). It includes both the frequency and quality of discussions about sexual preferences, boundaries, and desires. When partners engage in open sexual self-disclosure, they experience greater intimacy and satisfaction (MacNeil & Byers, 2005; Metts & Cupach, 1989; Mallory et al., 2019). In contrast, couples who avoid or inadequately engage in such discussions are more likely to experience dissatisfaction (Clark & Wiederman, 2000; Montesi et al., 2011; Coffelt & Hess, 2014).

Sexual Scripts

Sexual scripts—internalized cultural templates for behavior—strongly influence how individuals navigate sex, consent, and communication (Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Wiederman, 2005; Newstrom et al., 2021). Heteronormative expectations often contribute to unequal sexual dynamics and emotional labor (van Anders et al., 2021). Romance fiction may provide counter-narratives that help disrupt these scripts by modeling emotional honesty, negotiation, and mutual desire.

Shared Activities and Relationship Satisfaction

Shared leisure activities, such as reading together, are positively associated with relationship satisfaction (Aron et al., 2000; Johnson et al., 2006; Abbasi Kharaju et al., 2024). These activities promote emotional bonding, deeper communication, and shared meaning-making. As narrative fiction encourages readers to simulate social interaction (Mar & Oatley, 2008), romance novels offer a unique opportunity for couples to engage collaboratively with stories that center on emotional and sexual intimacy.

Reading Romance with Partners vs. Viewing Pornography

Comparisons between romance reading and pornography use offer further insight. While visual pornography has been associated with increased arousal and experimentation, it also carries risks of sexual dysfunction and unrealistic expectations, particularly among women (Danebeck et al., 2009; Resch & Alderson, 2013). Erotic fiction, conversely, may sustain arousal over time due to its reliance on imagination and emotional engagement (Palaniappan et al., 2016; Coles & Shamp, 1984). Moreover, romance novels often affirm sexual exploration within relational and emotional contexts, potentially making them more acceptable and useful in therapeutic settings.

Limitations in Previous Literature

Despite increasing scholarly interest in romance fiction, few studies have examined its therapeutic potential within applied clinical contexts. Much of the existing research has focused on literary analysis or individual psychological outcomes such as arousal or fantasy (Kamlé et al., 2021; Wu, 2006; Cabrera & Ménard, 2013), rather than relational dynamics. Notably, there is a lack of empirical research assessing how reading

romance novels with a partner may influence communication, intimacy, or satisfaction within romantic relationships.

Furthermore, most prior studies have relied on narrow samples—typically white, cisgender, heterosexual, college-aged women—limiting the generalizability of their findings (Dosch et al., 2016). The current study attempts to address these gaps by using a more diverse sample and examining how romance fiction might function as a shared activity that supports emotional and sexual connection. It also considers how readers perceive social stigma related to the genre, especially when shared with a partner.

Research Aims

To explore these questions, this study investigates whether sharing romance novels with a partner, through joint reading, discussion, or listening, improves communication, sexual satisfaction, and relationship quality. It also examines the prevalence of stigma or concealment associated with reading the genre.

Four main aims guided the study:

1. To assess whether shared romance reading is associated with better emotional and sexual communication. It was hypothesized that readers who share romance novels with a partner would report higher communication and sexual communication satisfaction than those who do not, and that more frequent sharing would further enhance these outcomes.
2. To evaluate whether shared reading is linked to greater sexual satisfaction. It was expected that both participation in and frequency of shared reading would correlate with higher sexual satisfaction.
3. To explore associations between shared romance reading and overall relationship satisfaction. Readers who share novels with a partner, particularly more frequently, were hypothesized to report greater relationship satisfaction.
4. To examine perceived stigma and concealment. It was hypothesized that more than half of the participants would report feeling mocked or needing to hide their reading from others.

Methods

Study Design and Participants

This study used an IRB-approved, cross-sectional survey to examine the relationship between romance novel reading and outcomes related to communication, sexual satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction. Data were collected via an anonymous online questionnaire hosted on Google Forms. Eligibility criteria included: (1) being over the age of 18, (2) identifying as any gender, (3) actively reading or listening to romance novels, and (4) currently having a sexual partner of at least six months.

Participants (N = 586) were recruited through social media groups focused on romance fiction, including Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and Threads. A subset of the sample (n = 191) identified as regularly sharing romance novels with a partner (e.g., reading together, listening to audiobooks, or discussing storylines).

The full sample was predominantly female (91.5%) and white (86.2%), with most identifying as heterosexual (84.5%) and U.S.-based (89.1%). The median age range was 32–40 years. Among those who shared reading with their partners, participants were slightly more diverse in terms of gender and race, though still primarily white (74.9%) and female (78%).

Measures

Demographics

Participants reported their age, gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, education level, employment status, income, and geographic location.

Romance Reading Behavior

A self-developed Romance Reading Questionnaire (RR_Q) assessed how participants engage with romance novels, including solo versus partnered reading, time spent reading, and discussions with partners. Ten items explored emotional and sexual engagement with stories, including fantasy, masturbation, emotional closeness, and sexual scripting. Internal consistency for this scale was high ($\alpha = .82$, N = 586).

Communication and Relationship Measures

Couples Communication Satisfaction Scale (CCSS; Jones et al., 2018): A 12-item Likert scale assessing satisfaction with communication quality,

partner responsiveness, and initiation. Items were gender-neutralized for inclusivity. Internal consistency was excellent ($\alpha = .94$).

Dyadic Sexual Communication Scale (DSC; Catania, 2021): This 13-item measure assesses comfort and openness in discussing sexual matters. Items are rated on a 6-point scale, with higher scores indicating stronger sexual communication ($\alpha = .89$).

Quality of Sex Inventory – Satisfaction Subscale (QSI; Shaw & Rogge, 2016): A 12-item measure of sexual satisfaction, rated on a 6-point scale (0–5). Higher scores reflect greater sexual satisfaction. Reliability in this sample was exceptionally high ($\alpha = .99$).

Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI; Funk & Rogge, 2007): A 16-item measure of overall relationship satisfaction, including emotional closeness and frequency of disagreement. Total scores range from 0 to 81. The CSI demonstrated strong internal reliability ($\alpha = .97$).

Results

Aim 1: Shared Romance Reading and Communication

H1.1: Readers who share romance novels with a partner reported significantly higher communication satisfaction (CCSS) than those who do not share ($M = 46.73$ vs. 41.59 , $z = -5.91$, $p < .001$).

H1.2: No significant difference in sexual communication (DSC) was found between those who share reading and those who do not ($M = 58.79$ vs. 59.05 , $z = -0.73$, $p = .468$).

H1.3: Time spent reading with a partner significantly predicted higher communication satisfaction after controlling for covariates ($B = 2.48$, $\beta = .34$, $R^2 = .11$, $p < .001$).

H1.4: Time spent reading with a partner did not significantly predict sexual communication ($B = -.66$, $\beta = -.11$, $R^2 = .16$, $p = .380$), though age ($\beta = .19$, $p = .024$) and sexual orientation ($\beta = .19$, $p = .038$) were significant covariates.

Aim 2: Shared Romance Reading and Sexual Satisfaction

H2.1: Readers who shared reading reported significantly higher sexual satisfaction (QSI) than those who did not ($M = 40.84$ vs. 33.87 , $z = 4.45$, $p < .001$).

H2.2: Time spent reading with a partner significantly predicted higher sexual satisfaction, controlling for covariates ($B=2.90$, $\beta = .21$, $R^2 = .11$, $p = .008$).

Aim 3: Shared Romance Reading and Relationship Satisfaction

H3.1: No significant difference was found in relationship satisfaction (CSI) between readers who share and those who do not ($M = 67.72$ vs. 64.49 , $z = -1.19$, $p = .236$).

H3.2: Time spent reading with a partner significantly predicted greater relationship satisfaction after accounting for covariates ($B=2.12$, $\beta=.17$, $R^2=.07$, $p = .030$).

Aim 4: Perceived Stigma and Concealment

H4.1: Only 18.6% of readers reported being mocked by a partner for reading romance, and 42.2% by others. These results suggest that fewer than 50% reported experiencing stigma from partners, contradicting H4.1.

H4.2: A slight majority (60.6%) reported not feeling the need to hide their reading, also contradicting H4.2.

Additional Supplemental Descriptive Insights

Correlations: Time spent reading with a partner positively correlated with CCSS ($r = .29$, $p < .001$) and QSI ($r = .22$, $p = .003$), but negatively with DSC ($r = -.18$, $p = .016$). No correlation was found with CSI.

Demographic Factors: Age was negatively correlated with time spent reading and sexual satisfaction. Gender, education, and income were modestly related to outcomes.

Fantasy and Intimacy: Nearly all participants reported arousal and increased desire from romance reading. 60.4% reported masturbating with a partner after reading. 69.8% felt encouraged by books to talk about sex.

Advice and Emotional Closeness: 60.8% reported gaining communication advice from romance novels; 83.4% felt emotionally close to their partner when discussing reading.

Discussion

Shared Reading Enhances Emotional Communication (Related to Aim 1: H1.1 and H1.3)

The current study's findings support Hypothesis 1.1: individuals who shared romance novels with their partners also reported significantly greater satisfaction with emotional communication than those who did not share reading experiences. Additionally, support for Hypothesis 1.3 revealed that the frequency of shared reading positively predicted communication satisfaction, underscoring the relational value of consistent engagement with shared narrative material. Notably, 83.4% of the full sample ($n = 586$) reported feeling emotionally close to their partner when discussing what they had read, indicating that conversations around these narratives can elicit a meaningful emotional connection even when reading is not explicitly shared.

These findings align with self-expansion theory (Aron & Aron, 1996), which posits that engaging in novel, shared activities can promote closeness by fostering mutual growth. Reading together allows couples to reflect on characters' motivations and conflicts, stimulating dialogue that may remain unexplored. Such conversations support perspective-taking and shared meaning-making, both central to deepening relational bonds (Aron et al., 2000; Reis & Shaver, 1988).

From an SST perspective, shared romance reading facilitates the negotiation of interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts. By discussing stories that often center on emotional vulnerability, trust, and intimacy, couples may reshape maladaptive scripts or reinforce positive ones, contributing to more satisfying communication patterns. Therapists applying SST in integrative practice may consider shared narrative engagement a low-cost, emotionally resonant intervention to normalize emotional dialogue and reframe relationship dynamics.

Sexual Communication (Related to Aim 1: H1.2 and H1.4)

Contrary to Hypotheses 1.2 and 1.4, this study found no statistically significant difference in sexual communication between individuals who shared romance reading with their partners and those who did not. Additionally, the amount of time spent reading together did not predict higher levels of sexual communication. These findings suggest that while shared reading may foster emotional intimacy, it may not directly translate into more effective communication about sexual topics.

However, descriptive data offer a more nuanced perspective. Many participants reported feeling encouraged to discuss sex with their partners (69.8%) and receiving advice about sexual experiences (73%) from the content of romance novels. Furthermore, 93.7% of respondents reported increased sexual desire, and 60.8% indicated that romance novels had helped them learn how to talk about sex. These outcomes suggest that although shared reading may not immediately impact how partners communicate about sex, it may act as a catalyst for future sexual dialogue by enhancing self-awareness and promoting reflective engagement with sexual themes.

Interpreted through the lens of SST, these results point to the potential of romance narratives to influence intrapsychic scripts, shaping internalized beliefs and attitudes about sexuality, even in the absence of overt interpersonal discussion. That is, reading may prime individuals to reframe their expectations and language around sex. Still, without structured opportunities or support, these evolving internal narratives may not yet manifest in partnered communication.

From a clinical standpoint, these findings highlight the value of coupling shared reading with guided therapeutic support, especially for couples who struggle with direct sexual communication. ISCT could incorporate romance narratives into sessions to facilitate safer entry points into discussions around fantasy, desire, and consent. Future qualitative research may further illuminate how couples interpret and talk about sexually explicit or emotionally charged content, potentially identifying the conditions under which sexual communication improvements emerge.

Shared Reading Enhances Sexual Satisfaction (Related to Aim 2: H2.1 and H2.2)

The findings supported both Hypotheses 2.1 and 2.2, indicating that readers who shared romance novels with their partners reported significantly higher sexual satisfaction than those who did not, and that greater time spent reading together was associated with higher levels of sexual satisfaction. These results underscore the potential for shared romance reading to serve as a practical, accessible intervention for enhancing sexual well-being within relationships.

The association between shared reading and sexual satisfaction may be understood through the combined lenses of SST and self-expansion theory. Romance novels frequently present diverse, emotionally resonant depictions of desire, consent, vulnerability, and pleasure, which may serve to challenge narrow or maladaptive sexual scripts. As couples engage with

these stories, they are invited to reflect on and potentially revise their expectations and behaviors. This process aligns with intrapsychic and interpersonal scripting processes, where individuals negotiate meaning within themselves and one another (Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Wiederman, 2005).

Moreover, the shared activity of reading romance novels may facilitate self-expansion—an increase in an individual's efficacy and identity through close relationships (Aron & Aron, 1996). Engaging in a novel and emotionally intimate activity, such as discussing character dynamics or sexual scenarios, may heighten arousal, foster a sense of novelty, and enhance erotic intimacy. In turn, these experiences likely contribute to increased sexual satisfaction, not solely through physical outcomes, but by deepening emotional and cognitive engagement with one's partner (MacNeil & Byers, 2005; Pascoal et al., 2014).

Importantly, these findings suggest that romance fiction may not need to be explicitly sexual to enhance satisfaction. Instead, the relational context in which the stories are shared—characterized by attention, emotional presence, and reflection—appears to be critical in facilitating positive sexual outcomes. This insight offers practical guidance for clinicians: introducing romance novels into therapy may be particularly beneficial for couples who report sexual dissatisfaction but hesitate to engage in direct sexual discussion or behavior-focused interventions.

Shared Reading and Relationship Satisfaction (Related to Aim 3: H3.1 and H3.2)

The findings partially supported the hypotheses related to relationship satisfaction. While Hypothesis 3.1 was not supported—readers who shared romance novels with their partners did not report significantly higher relationship satisfaction than those who read independently—Hypothesis 3.2 was confirmed. Time spent reading together positively predicted relationship satisfaction, suggesting that frequency and quality of the shared activity may be more consequential than whether the activity occurs at all.

This distinction reinforces findings from prior research, which emphasize the quality and frequency of shared relational experiences, rather than the specific activity itself, contribute most meaningfully to overall relationship satisfaction (Aron & Aron, 1996; Malouff et al., 2015; Faulkner & Lannutti, 2010). In other words, it is not necessarily the act of reading romance that enhances satisfaction, but the context it creates for emotional engagement, mutual attentiveness, and shared meaning-making.

From a self-expansion perspective, shared reading offers an opportunity for couples to grow closer through novel, stimulating interactions that foster

inclusion of the other in the self (Aron & Aron, 1996). Discussing plotlines, identifying with characters, and reflecting on emotional or sexual dilemmas portrayed in the text can deepen mutual understanding and promote intimacy—core elements of satisfying romantic partnerships.

The absence of significant differences between shared and non-shared readers in overall satisfaction may also reflect the complexity of relationship satisfaction as a multidimensional construct, influenced by external stressors (e.g., work, finances, caregiving) and internal processes (e.g., attachment style, conflict resolution), beyond any single shared behavior (Byers, 2011; MacNeil & Byers, 2009). It is also possible that partners who are already satisfied with their relationships may be less likely to seek out joint reading activities, while others may turn to reading to reconnect.

Nonetheless, the positive correlation between time spent reading together and relationship satisfaction suggests that frequent engagement in a shared narrative world may buffer against relational stress, support emotional attunement, and reinforce relational bonds over time. These findings provide clinicians with a nuanced strategy: rather than prescribing shared reading as a universal tool, it may be more effective to emphasize consistent, emotionally engaging rituals that reflect a couple's values and relational needs.

The Stigma of Reading Romance (Related to Aim 4: H4.1 and H4.2)

This study did not support Hypotheses 4.1 and 4.2, as most respondents did not report feeling mocked, shamed, or compelled to hide their reading habits. Specifically, 81.4% indicated they had not been mocked by a partner for reading romance novels, and 57.8% reported no mockery from others. Additionally, 60.6% denied ever feeling the need to conceal their reading. These findings contrast with prior literature that has long documented the stigmatization of the romance genre and its readership (Brackett, 2000; Radway, 1991).

The results suggest a shift in cultural attitudes toward romance fiction. As Eisler-Burnett (2013) and Cameron (2020) have noted, while elements of stigma persist—particularly in the framing of romance novels as “guilty pleasures”—they appear to exert less control over readers' self-perception and behavior. In the growing public discourse on sexuality, emotional health, and narrative diversity, the romance genre may now be seen as a more legitimate form of personal and relational enrichment.

This shift may also be explained by reader empowerment and the sheer popularity of the genre. With over \$1.44 billion in annual revenue (Curcio, 2022), romance novels are widely read across demographics, which may buffer readers from the effects of marginalization. As the genre increasingly

includes more diverse characters, tropes, and authors, readers may feel affirmed rather than ashamed by their engagement with these texts.

From an SST perspective, romance novels function not only as entertainment but also as instruments for constructing alternative sexual and relational narratives. Readers internalize these scripts, potentially challenging dominant cultural norms and reducing internalized stigma. The absence of widespread shame in this sample may reflect the internalization of more affirming and expansive sexual scripts, reinforcing the therapeutic potential of romance fiction in promoting healthier attitudes toward desire and intimacy.

These findings have practical implications for clinicians, educators, and literary professionals. Therapists can frame romance novels not as frivolous but as meaningful artifacts that contribute to identity formation, sexual agency, and relational insight. Libraries, educators, and booksellers might likewise reconsider how romance fiction is marketed and categorized, shifting from passive tolerance to active promotion, as a tool for emotional and relational well-being.

Reader Demographics

The demographic profile of participants in this study closely mirrors existing industry data on romance readership, lending credibility to the generalizability of the findings within this genre. The average age of participants was 41, nearly identical to the reported average age of romance readers in 2022 (Curcic, 2022). The overwhelming majority identified as women (91.5%), which aligns with estimates suggesting that approximately 82% of romance readers are women. Most respondents identified as white (86.2%) and heterosexual (84.5%), reflecting long-standing demographic trends in both readership and romance publishing.

In terms of education, the sample skewed toward higher educational attainment. While industry estimates indicate that 45% of romance readers have a college degree, 62.7% of this study's participants had either a bachelor's degree or some college education, and 29.7% held a graduate degree. This suggests that the sample represents a relatively educated group of readers, which may influence engagement with the genre and openness to using it as a tool for relational and sexual exploration. Nearly two-thirds (62%) of participants were employed full-time, and 45.8% reported an annual income above \$100,000, suggesting relative socioeconomic stability.

Despite these consistencies, demographic analyses revealed notable patterns. Age was negatively correlated with both the time spent reading with a partner and levels of sexual satisfaction. These findings are consistent

with previous research suggesting that aging may affect sexual satisfaction due to hormonal changes, declines in physical health, and long-term relationship habituation (Gillespie, 2017). However, other studies, such as those by Kim and Jeon (2013) and Thomas et al. (2015), underscore that psychosocial variables—such as emotional closeness and communication quality—often matter more than age alone, particularly for midlife and older adults.

Education and income also played complex roles. While both variables are typically associated with higher life satisfaction and improved communication outcomes, this study found that individuals with higher education and income levels reported spending less time reading romance novels with their partners. At the same time, income was positively associated with relationship satisfaction. One possible explanation is that individuals in higher socioeconomic brackets may face greater time constraints due to demanding careers, which may limit shared leisure activities such as reading. These findings echo earlier studies showing that stressors related to professional life can adversely affect sexual satisfaction and relational intimacy (Guo & Huang, 2005; Nelson & Purdon, 2011; Rausch & Rettenberger, 2021).

These demographic insights carry implications for clinical application. Practitioners may need to consider how variables such as age, education, and income intersect to influence couples' availability, willingness, and motivation to engage in shared reading or similar relational interventions. For example, clinicians working with highly educated or professionally overextended couples may frame shared reading as a time-efficient and low-stakes method for enhancing connection, rather than an additional task.

Future research should aim to include more diverse samples in terms of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and relationship configurations to better understand how shared romance reading functions across different cultural and social contexts. Given that only 7.8% of romance novels published in 2021 were written by BIPOC authors (Curcic, 2022), future studies might also explore how representation within the genre influences relational outcomes and reading behaviors among marginalized groups.

Strengths and Significance of the Study

This study contributes novel insights into the therapeutic potential of romance novels, positioning them as accessible, narrative-based tools within the framework of ISCT. While bibliotherapy has long been used to address sexual and relational concerns (Mintz, 2009; van Lankveld, 2009), few empirical studies have evaluated the impact of shared reading,

particularly in the romance genre, on communication, sexual satisfaction, and intimacy in partnered relationships. Even fewer have used a quantitative methodology that directly engages relational dynamics. By applying SST (Gagnon & Simon, 1973) in the context of partnered reading, this study offers a theoretical and practical model for clinicians seeking to help patients shift maladaptive sexual narratives and improve relational satisfaction.

The study's significance lies in its multidisciplinary integration: it merges literary engagement with sex therapy and relational communication, grounding its findings in theory and clinical relevance. By highlighting the emotional and sexual benefits of shared romance reading, this research expands traditional understandings of couple-based interventions. Rather than requiring intensive therapeutic exercises, romance novels offer an approachable, story-driven avenue for partners to explore desire, initiate dialogue, and deepen emotional connection.

Further, this study recognizes romance novels as not only a form of entertainment but also a medium through which couples can safely explore a spectrum of fantasies, identities, and relationship models. The genre's breadth—from emotionally driven slow-burns to sexually explicit erotica—enables tailored therapeutic applications based on patient comfort and need. Shared reading can promote mutual curiosity, normalize communication about sexual needs, and foster inclusive understandings of intimacy that account for neurodiversity, medical challenges, body diversity, and gender identity.

This research also contributes to dismantling stigma around the genre. While romance novels have historically been marginalized as “low-brow” or “guilty pleasures,” the findings suggest they may offer substantial psychological and relational benefits. Clinicians and educators can leverage these insights to incorporate popular fiction into therapeutic or educational contexts more confidently, challenging assumptions about what constitutes legitimate material for relational growth.

Finally, this study advances the clinical utility of ISCT by offering romance novels as a practical intervention tool for improving sexual and emotional communication. The genre's accessibility, affordability, and emotional resonance make it especially valuable for individuals or couples who may hesitate to engage in more formal therapeutic interventions. This way, the study supports a broader vision of therapy that is strengths-based, culturally attuned, and grounded in patients' real-world experiences.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study offers valuable insights into the relational impact of shared romance reading, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, although the measures employed—such as the CCSS, DSC, QSI, and CSI—demonstrated high reliability and validity, some constructs may have been assessed with overlapping content. This redundancy could contribute to inflated correlations or mask distinct dimensions of communication and satisfaction. Future research might streamline these tools or incorporate qualitative components to deepen understanding of participants' experiences.

Second, the study sample was relatively homogeneous. Most participants identified as heterosexual, white, cisgender women with at least some college education and a relatively high-income level. This demographic skew reflects both broader trends in romance readership and the self-selected nature of the online sampling strategy, but limits the generalizability of the findings. Given that 92.2% of romance novels published in 2021 were authored by white writers (Curcic, 2022), more inclusive representation in literature and research participation remains a priority. Future studies should aim for more racially, culturally, and sexually diverse samples to better reflect the full spectrum of romance readers and their relational experiences.

Additionally, while many participants reported discussing their reading with partners, the study did not account for the quality or depth of those conversations. Future research should explore how couples engage with romance content—whether they discuss character motivations, emotional dynamics, or sexual themes—and how those discussions influence emotional closeness or behavioral change.

Longitudinal designs would also strengthen the field, offering insight into whether the benefits of shared reading are sustained over time or tied to novelty effects. Tracking couples across months or years could clarify whether improvements in communication and satisfaction translate into longer-term relational resilience.

Further, while this study examined shared reading as a self-directed behavior, future experimental designs might assess the effects of specific assigned texts or structured interventions. For example, therapists could recommend romance novels—selected for their treatment-relevant themes—and guide couples through structured reflections or conversations. This could help isolate the mechanisms through which shared reading supports relational growth.

Other valuable lines of inquiry include:

- Examining the impact of genre subtypes (e.g., erotic romance, queer romance, BDSM, fantasy) on outcomes like communication and satisfaction.
- Investigating the influence of character identification on readers' perceptions of self and partner.
- Exploring how shared reading compares with other leisure or intimacy-enhancing activities in strengthening relationships.
- Developing and validating dyadic survey instruments that assess not only individual perceptions but also couple-level dynamics and concordance.

Finally, qualitative research, such as in-depth interviews or focus groups, could explore personal narratives about reading romance, discussing sex, and confronting stigma. Such approaches would offer a richer context for the relational meaning-making processes that quantitative methods alone may not capture. Together, these directions can advance a more nuanced, inclusive, and applied understanding of how popular media like romance novels contribute to relational well-being and therapeutic practice.

Clinical Implications

The findings of this study suggest that shared romance novel reading can serve as a valuable adjunct in ISCT, particularly for enhancing emotional intimacy, sexual satisfaction, and communication. Given the accessibility, affordability, and cultural relevance of romance fiction, its integration into clinical work offers a promising, non-stigmatizing entry point for couples struggling with traditional approaches to discussing intimacy and sexual dynamics.

Clinicians can use shared reading as a structured yet flexible intervention to help couples revise maladaptive sexual scripts and strengthen emotional and sexual communication. Grounded in SST, romance narratives offer opportunities for partners to reflect on internalized norms, broaden their understanding of sexual and relational possibilities, and articulate preferences in a less confrontational or clinical format. For example, therapists might assign a specific romance novel, chosen for its themes of vulnerability, desire, or conflict resolution, and use it as a springboard for therapeutic dialogue. Discussions can explore how characters navigate communication challenges, express desire, or respond to rejection, creating space for patients to draw parallels to their own experiences.

This approach aligns with evidence-based principles of ISCT, which emphasize the integration of emotional connection and sexual health within the context of relational systems (Guttman, 2020). By incorporating romance novels, therapists can foster co-created meaning, encourage curiosity, and normalize the exploration of fantasy, pleasure, and consent. These sessions may also enhance patients' empathy for one another and support more playful, exploratory dynamics within their sexual relationships—elements associated with sustained satisfaction and long-term couple resilience (Kleinplatz et al., 2018).

For patients who experience shame or discomfort around sexual topics, romance fiction can function as a therapeutic buffer, providing indirect ways to broach sensitive issues. The shared activity of reading also supports time together, which research consistently links to increased emotional closeness and communication quality (Aron & Aron, 1996; Fredrickson, 2001). Importantly, this tool may be especially beneficial for patients hesitant to engage in explicit sex therapy or who come from cultural backgrounds where direct discussion of sexuality is less common.

Therapists working with LGBTQ patients, neurodiverse individuals, or couples managing chronic illness may find romance novels featuring inclusive representation particularly valuable for fostering a sense of belonging, validating diverse experiences of sexuality, and challenging normative scripts. Therapists can increasingly tailor novel selection to match patients' identities, relational concerns, and therapeutic goals as the romance genre diversifies in content and authorship.

Finally, the growing popularity of bibliotherapy in clinical settings supports the broader applicability of this approach. Romance novels offer a unique contribution to this tradition by blending narrative immersion, emotional resonance, and often sex-positive messaging in ways that are both relatable and aspirational. When integrated thoughtfully into therapy, these stories can help couples articulate their desires, navigate vulnerability, and co-create more fulfilling relationships.

Conclusion

This study offers empirical support for the use of romance novels as an adjunctive tool within ISCT, highlighting their potential to foster emotional intimacy, enhance sexual satisfaction, and prompt meaningful dialogue between partners. Drawing on SST, the findings demonstrate how shared reading experiences can challenge entrenched norms, stimulate curiosity, and support the reconfiguration of interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts related to desire, communication, and connection.

Participants who read romance novels with their partners reported greater emotional closeness and higher sexual satisfaction, particularly when reading together frequently. While the act of shared reading did not directly predict improved sexual or overall relationship communication in all domains, readers consistently reported that romance narratives encouraged conversations about sex and intimacy. These results suggest that even if behavioral communication patterns remain unchanged, the psychological impact of shared narratives—empathy, arousal, and fantasy—may still contribute to a couple’s sense of intimacy and connection.

The genre’s capacity to normalize diverse expressions of sexuality and relational dynamics makes it a valuable tool in clinical practice. Romance novels often depict characters who confront emotional vulnerabilities, navigate power dynamics, and renegotiate sexual boundaries—all elements central to integrative therapeutic work. Stories such as Lucy Score’s *Holding on to Chaos* (2017) or Golden Angel’s *Dungeon Master* (2021) illustrate how characters grapple with trauma, miscommunication, and repair, offering rich material for therapeutic exploration.

Moreover, this study challenges the persistent stigma surrounding romance fiction. Most participants reported minimal shame or mockery related to their reading habits, indicating a cultural shift toward greater acceptance of the genre. As romance fiction continues to evolve in representation and complexity, it holds promise as a culturally resonant and readily accessible resource for therapists and patients alike.

In sum, romance novels offer more than entertainment—they are vehicles for intimacy, empathy, and growth. When incorporated into therapy with care and intentionality, they can enhance relational satisfaction and emotional depth, ultimately supporting couples in building more fulfilling, communicative, and connected partnerships.

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