

# What does it mean to be “romantic”?

## Young Canadian adults’ conception of romance and romantic gestures

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### Abstract

This paper explores the relevance of romantic ideals and symbols for young adults. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 17 young Canadian adults, we examine their engagement with both romantic and non-traditional practices and ideas for love. Across genders, sexual orientations, and relationship arrangements, most participants self-identified as romantic while maintaining critical distance from traditional romantic clichés. Participants endorsed a model of romance decoupled from grand narratives of destiny, stability, and effortless connection, while remaining closely anchored in everyday cultivation of intimacy, compatibility, and emotional security through romantic gestures. We argue that this construction of romance as a quotidian practice is mainly shaped by two cultural forces: a collective criticism of romance and the therapeutic culture injunction that relationships maintenance requires ongoing “work.” The findings contribute to debates on cultural scripts and therapeutic logics in youth intimate life by recasting romantic ideals as a flexible, reflexive repertoire integrated into diverse relationship forms.

## Introduction

*It is much easier to refuse to participate in romantic rituals, to resist pressures towards conventional marriage, to be cynical about “happy ever after” endings than it is to avoid falling in love.*  
Stevi Jackson, *Even Sociologists Fall in Love*

Are young adults still “romantic”? The question is echoed in media (Fellizar 2018), on social media, and in sociological literature (Dalessandro 2021). The latter has been grappling for decades with the task of identifying the dominant cultural paradigm framing contemporary Western love experiences (Luhmann 1986; Giddens 1992; Illouz 2013; Belleau *et al.* 2020; Poder 2023). Our paper weighs in with a discussion of intriguing findings in our current research on Canadians’ ideals and conceptions of love: the overwhelming majority of young adults that we interviewed (aged 20 to 30, N=17) defined themselves, their intentions and interactions with their partners as “romantic,” regardless of their endorsement or rebuttal of the traditional cultural tenets of Romantic love (e.g., exclusivity, unicity, and eternity of “true” love), and irrespective of their gender, sexual orientation, or relationship arrangement.

We present a description of young adults’ conceptions of “being a romantic person” and “romantic gestures,” and we provide a sociological interpretation of the apparent contradiction between a critique of romantic love ideology and the unabating interest in romantic practices. Our analysis reveals a shift from an idealized, traditional blueprint of “grand” romance (as interviewees defined it) towards a more vernacular understanding of “romantic.” Participants disconnected “being romantic” from overwhelming passion, expectations of exclusivity, uniqueness of love, and the soul mate myth, and often criticized these tenets of traditional romance (especially as reproduced by cultural productions such as romantic comedies) as unrealistic, deceptive, and conducive of inequalities. Partially rejecting traditional norms and expectations, however, does not entail giving up on what we could call romantic “atmospheres” (Bille *et al.* 2015) and meaning-constitutive symbolisms and practices (Gross 2005; Finch 2007; Miller 2008). Interviewees located romance within everyday practices, gestures, and moments intended to express love and enhance intimacy in routine situations. Romantic gestures are defined as small, ordinary acts and/or tokens (spanning from presents to household chores) that intentionally demonstrate commitment and attention to the addressed person. Thus identified, romantic gestures can travel beyond the traditional boundaries of romance to percolate into young adults’ relationships with friends, siblings, and roommates. In addition, they become entirely compatible with intimate practices such as consensual non-monogamy, whose ethics collide with the main tenets of the traditional romantic paradigm (Ferrer 2021). The novelty lies not in the skeptical view of traditional romantic beliefs, which have been collectively criticized for more than a century, rather in the ways romantic practices are pragmatically salvaged by young adults through a reference to mutual validation and expression of love and commitment (Reis *et al.* 2017). We argue that, in order to account for this social construction of romance as an everyday cultural practice partially disconnected from traditional normative frameworks, we must address the strong influence of a century of therapeutic culture, notably the idea of relationships as requiring cultivation, intention,

even “work” (Celello 2009; Davis 2010; Quinn 2018), on current expectations and normative frameworks for intimate relationships.

## Rise and Fall of a Romantic Blueprint for Love in the West

For historians and sociologists of intimate practices and love semantics, *romantic love* indicates a temporally and geographically situated discursive production culminating in a new conception of erotic and conjugal love that took shape between the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Europe and North America (Luhmann 1986; West 2017), and related practices. This production coalesces into a set of historically and culturally specific beliefs about love, its nature, and its unfolding: real love lasts forever, culminates in marriage and warrants the choice to marry (Evans 2003), happens only once in life with the right person (“soul mate”) and has the power to overcome any obstacle; only through love is one’s life complete and happy (Hahn 2008); the beloved is unique and irreplaceable, one can’t help choosing them and “falling” in love (Tyrell 1987); hence, love is exclusive (Leupold 1983; Tyrell 1987; Wolkomir 2009) and the unique fuel of sexual desire (Reddy 2012).

We can appreciate the difference in scale between this set of beliefs and the main connotation of “romantic” in everyday parlance, which the *Oxford Advanced American Dictionary*<sup>1</sup> defines as “connected with or about love or a sexual relationship”, e.g., in expressions such as “a romantic candlelit dinner” or “a romantic comedy”. This general, common-sense definition, and the related repertoire of symbols, are generally regarded as referring, or at least alluding, to the set of beliefs that delineates the cultural blueprint for romantic love: romantic rituals are embedded in a romantic conception of love (Evans 2003; Jackson 1993). When analyzing the romantic dimension of the romantic comedy genre, for instance, scholars look at the presence of the beliefs that we have presented above. In their study of romantic ideals in media productions, Hefner and Wilson (2013) coded the romantic blueprint as encompassing four main themes: love can overlook flaws (or idealization of the partner); love can seek out that one perfect mate (or the soul mate); love can happen instantaneously (or love at first sight); and love can overcome all obstacles (or love conquers all). In its historical form, the romantic blueprint also prescribes the right institutional and relational framework to encapsulate the right passionate emotions and feelings, notably monogamous, heterosexual, lasting coupling / marriage (Jackson 1993; Roseneil *et al.* 2020).

In North America and Europe, the romantic love blueprint has undergone decades of highbrow criticism for the shortcomings of its idealization of bonds (Giddens 1992). Feminist scholars have highlighted the detrimental consequences for women of romantic love myths (Evans 2003; Jackson 1993; Langford 1999), conducive of gendered inequalities, glamourizing passivity and suffering, and even concealing violence and abuse (Lelaurain *et al.* 2021; Papp *et al.* 2017). But lay criticism, and even moral panic, have accompanied the dissemination of the romantic love blueprint since its inception, with romantic cultural productions regularly accused of misrepresenting the reality of love relationships and leading youth astray (Brooke 2015; Jarvis 1999; Santovetti 2011; Shapiro & Kroeger 1991). By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a high level of social anxiety surrounded the growing popularity of (romantic) novels. Romantic narratives were suspected of corrupting youth by triggering emulative behavior — a notable example being “Werthermania” linked to Goethe’s renowned epistolary novel (Furedi 2015). As early as the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, consumer goods for courtship and romance became available across Europe, causing philosophers and churchmen to begin decrying the commercialization of sentiment (Holloway 2020) – a discursive

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/american\\_english/romantic\\_1](https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/american_english/romantic_1) (accessed on Sept. 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2025)

trope that shows remarkable longevity. Unsurprisingly, by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century lay criticism of romantic beliefs had already percolated into media representations of romantic love (Morin 2012; Piazzesi *et al.* 2020), materializing in more realistic messages found in recent *rom coms* (Hefner & Wilson 2013; Johnson & Holmes 2009; Pezoldt *et al.* 2025) and even in Disney princess narratives (Hefner *et al.* 2017). Critical distance from romantic illusions has become a well-rehearsed cultural landmark (as opposed to being uniquely a scholarly posture) (Morris 2019). In recent years, thanks to the popularity of non-monogamous relationships, lay and scholarly voices have called attention to the incompatibility between polyamorous ethics and the romantic love paradigm (Ferrer 2021; Lipnicka 2025; Milona & Wendling 2024).

Notwithstanding this long critical tradition, recent empirical research shows the pervasive character of romantic beliefs in North America (Belleau *et al.* 2020; Dong 2024; Vannier and O’Sullivan 2017) and in Western countries more generally (e.g., in Sweden [Wängqvist *et al.* 2016]). We suggest avoiding a simplistic understanding of the career of romantic love blueprints through the dichotomy between its acritical embracing and its unconditional rejection. Instead, we adopt a historically informed perspective (Pinto 2017) linking the evolution of cultural repertoires for love – i.e. collective beliefs regarding what love is, what it means for individuals and communities, what one can undertake in its name – with more general societal transformations affecting love as a social practice (Gross 2005; Human & Quayle 2020; Luhmann 1986; Piazzesi 2022).

### **Young adults and romantic love**

The intertwining between continuity and change in cultural repertoires and practices is particularly visible in younger generations in North America. Traditional patterns of relationship formation, where a linear trajectory going from coupling to marriage and family marks the transition to adulthood, have undergone transformations in terms of temporality, diversity, and sequencing. “Settling down” in a stable, cohabiting relationship is generally delayed due, among others, to longer educational paths, which may also postpone leaving the parents’ household (Choi & Ramaj 2024; Haan, Cheng & Zu 2023), to increasing financial vulnerability for young adults (Statistics Canada 2023a), and to the exploration of a diversity of intimate relationships (Tillman, Brewster & Holway 2019). Scholars observe a generalized skepticism towards traditional, normative patterns for intimacy in young adults, especially among women (Giraud 2017; Koontz *et al.* 2019) and LGBTQ+ persons (Cannas Aghedu *et al.* 2024), and enhanced awareness of inequalities and the politics of intimacy (Dalessandro 2021). Intimate patterns diversify increasingly during adolescence (Boisvert, Poulin & Dion 2023; Dusseau 2025; Rauer *et al.* 2013; Tienda *et al.* 2023), with dating apps and some subcultures (e.g. *hook-up culture* [Wade 2017]) encouraging experimentation and self-exploration. At the same time, young people’s expectations towards intimate relationships have heightened in recent decades: intimate bonds are required to provide a safe haven of psychological security, support for individual self-fulfillment, and validation of the individual worldview (Finkel 2017; Tillman, Brewster & Holway 2019). Highly diversified intimate paths tend to lead towards committed, living together relationships later on (Rauer *et al.* 2023; Roseneil *et al.* 2020). Studying the aspirations of young people in the U.S., Willoughby and James (2017) reported the “paradoxical” finding that emerging adults still valued and desired marriage while delaying or avoiding it altogether. Caution and careful evaluation of compatibility appear to be central to young adults seeking intimate stability (LeFebvre & Carmack 2022), as romantic commitment must be coordinated with other challenges characterizing the transition to

adulthood (Shulman & Connolly 2013). Finding stability in intimacy appears to be a central concern of many dating app users, too (Hobbs et al, 2017; Lundquist & Curington 2019; Portolan, McAlister, 2021).

Media influence on young people's view of love and romance consistently generates concerns, as mainstream representations of romantic love are believed to foster unrealistic expectations and/or reproduce traditional inequalities (Kretz 2019). However, there is little evidence of a clear relationship (Vannier and O'Sullivan 2017), and scholars have argued that influence depends more on motivations for consumption of romantic cultural productions (Hefner and Wilson 2013) than on the latter's intrinsic persuasive power (Fox & Frampton 2024). Romantic beliefs (Vannier and O'Sullivan 2017) and romantic consumption (Kretz 2019) have been found to be conducive of relationship satisfaction due to the positive impact of partner and bond idealization. Experimenting with romantic fantasies outside of actual relationships can foster emotional literacy and peer socialization among adolescents (Détrez 2025).

Our paper contributes to understanding the integration between traditional and anti-traditional blueprints for love in young adults' conceptions of intimacy. Since romantic events appear to have a remarkable influence on the lives of young adults (Blumenstock & Papp 2022; Leverenz *et al.* 2025), insights into their implicit theories of intimacy become crucial to apprehend behavioral trends and logics for decision making. Our study investigated young adults' willingness or hesitations to self-define as "romantic", their conceptions of what counts as "romantic" gestures or occasions, and whether they expressed criticism towards traditional romantic blueprints for intimate relationships.

## Method

Data stems from a mixed methods study with Canadian adults aimed at documenting their beliefs, expectations, and ideas in matters of intimacy. Our starting point was the observed integration of romantic and non-traditional beliefs in recent cultural productions (Morin 2012; Piazzesi *et al.* 2018), which we surmised would result in hybrid beliefs sets in the general population, too. In the last decades, scholarship observed a shift from classical romantic storytelling to more pragmatic representations of intimate relationships in TV-shows, with clear references to feminist themes and critiques of traditional heterosexuality and gender roles (Reinhardt-Becker 2015). Following these observations, we intended to map the distribution of traditional (romantic) and modern expectations and ideals across sociodemographic variables (stage one, survey methods) and the logics of their negotiation by individuals in everyday life (stage two, interview methods). Ethical clearance was issued by the Université du Québec à Montréal Human Research Ethics Board (certification # 2022-4196) and written informed consent was provided by all participants. In stage one (data and results are not discussed in this paper), we applied a latent class analysis (n=3988, Canadian participants 18+) to build a 5-class model based on two indicators of endorsement of a traditional, romantic conception of relational optimality (i.e., belief in the unicity of love and in love's power to overcome any obstacle) and two indicators of a detraditionalized view (i.e., belief in the acceptability of casual sex and of consensual non-monogamy). The model was organized on a spectrum going from the most traditional to the most anti-traditional profile, demonstrating structured hybridity of intimate beliefs and related distinct sociodemographic profiles across the sample. During winter 2024, we recruited 10 of the best-fitting observations in each profile (n=50) and the first author conducted follow-up, in-depth interviews in French and English (mean length M = 85.7 min, range: 48-115 min; 49 took place on Zoom, one in person). We collected data on

age, gender, sexual orientation, relationship status, ethnicity, highest degree earned, and personal income (see Table 1 for coding). Participants were invited to discuss their relationship status; present and past relationship(s); conception of love, sexuality, monogamy / non-monogamy, relationship optimality; household work and financial arrangements; what they valued most in their relationship and whether they sought to improve it. We fully transcribed interviews using *Happy Scribe* (advanced automatic speech recognition platform) and, consistent with best practices for automated transcription (Mojadeddi & Rosenberg 2024; Wollin-Giering *et al.* 2024), carefully revised outputs and anonymized data. We performed coding with NVivo 14 and carried out analysis following an abductive approach (Timmermans & Tavory, 2022), in which theoretical hypotheses stemming from the framework of the study were combined with theoretical sensitivity for and openness to emerging themes and puzzling observations.

Data discussed in this paper pertain to participants 30 years old and under (n=17) and stem from a section of the interview grid aimed at exploring the interviewee's posture with regards to romance and encompassing questions such as: *Do you consider yourself a romantic person? What does "being romantic" mean to you? Can you give me an example of gestures that you would consider "romantic" in your relationship?* French quotations have been translated into English by the authors for the purposes of this paper. All participants' names are pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

**Table 1—Sample characteristics (n=17)**

| Pseudonym | Age | Gender              | Sexual orientation                        | Relationship Status         | Ethnicity | Highest Degree                  | Personal income (CAD) |
|-----------|-----|---------------------|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------|---------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Alex      | 30  | Non-binary or other | Bisexual<br>Pansexual                     | Non-monogamous relationship | White     | College or professional studies | 10 000-29 999         |
| Alice     | 30  | Woman               | Demisexual                                | Monogamous relationship     | White     | College or professional studies | 10 000-29 999         |
| Amandine  | 28  | Woman               | Heterosexual                              | Monogamous relationship     | N/A       | Bachelor's or higher            | 10 000-29 999         |
| Connie    | 30  | Woman               | Asexual                                   | Monogamous relationship     | White     | Bachelor's or higher            | 30 000-59 999         |
| Elisa     | 30  | Woman               | Pansexual                                 | Non-monogamous relationship | White     | Bachelor's or higher            | 30 000-59 999         |
| Gaëlle    | 25  | Woman               | Pansexual                                 | Single                      | White     | Bachelor's or higher            | 30 000-59 999         |
| Kareem    | 29  | Man                 | Heterosexual                              | Monogamous relationship     | White     | Bachelor's or higher            | 30 000-59 999         |
| Linda     | 30  | Woman               | Heterosexual                              | Monogamous relationship     | White     | College or professional studies | 10 000-29 999         |
| Lise      | 30  | Non-binary          | Asexual                                   | Monogamous relationship     | White     | Bachelor's or higher            | 30 000-59 999         |
| Lucy      | 24  | Woman               | Heterosexual                              | Monogamous relationship     | Arab      | College or professional studies | 10 000-29 999         |
| Megan     | 26  | Woman               | Heterosexual                              | Monogamous relationship     | Asian     | High school                     | 60 000-99 999         |
| Pauline   | 26  | Woman               | Queer                                     | Non-monogamous relationship | White     | Bachelor's or higher            | 10 000-29 999         |
| Penelope  | 24  | Woman               | Heteroflexible<br>Bisexual<br>Questioning | Monogamous relationship     | White     | Bachelor's or higher            | 30 000-59 999         |
| Rose      | 28  | Woman               | Heterosexual                              | Monogamous relationship     | White     | Bachelor's or higher            | 10 000-29 999         |
| Sylvie    | 27  | Woman               | Heterosexual                              | Monogamous relationship     | White     | Bachelor's or higher            | 10 000-29 999         |

|       |    |                     |           |                             |       |                      |               |
|-------|----|---------------------|-----------|-----------------------------|-------|----------------------|---------------|
| Tom   | 25 | Non-binary or other | Gay       | Non-monogamous relationship | White | Bachelor's or higher | 10 000-29 999 |
| Tyana | 26 | Non-binary or other | Pansexual | Non-monogamous relationship | White | Bachelor's or higher | 30 000-59 999 |

## Results

We first present results relative to participants' willingness to self-define as “romantic” and the clarifications that they felt the need to provide in support of their self-definition. We then proceed to data related to participants' examples of what constitutes a romantic gesture, practice, or occasion, and show the relative coherence of cultural repertoires across the sample. Finally, we present participants' self-distancing from clichés and myths associated with the traditional blueprint for romantic love.

### *Self-defining as “romantic” – or not*

When asked whether they considered themselves to be a “romantic person,” fourteen out of seventeen participants in the subsample responded “yes” and two “no” (see Table 2 for results). Tyana hesitated, expressed their discomfort with the idea of excess and idealization linked to the qualification “romantic,” but also noted a correspondence between traditional symbols and their own behavior (“there is something of ‘too much’ in ‘romantic.’ At the same time, sometimes I *do* ‘too much’”). There was strong agreement across gender, sexual orientation, and relationship status in self-defining as “romantic,” suggesting common cultural underpinnings. In addition, many participants across these variables used expressions, gestures and/or vocal intonations indicating enthusiasm, pleasure, and delight when answering that they considered themselves “romantic” — as if wanting to evoke the emotional atmosphere that they associate with romance. Hence, the inclination to be “romantic” was largely seen as positive: gratifying for oneself, delightful for the other person, and enriching for the relationship.

**Table 2** — Number (proportion) of participants self-identifying as “romantic”

| <i>Do you consider yourself a romantic person?</i> |           |                                                                                                      |
|----------------------------------------------------|-----------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Answer                                             | n (%)     | Participants                                                                                         |
| Yes                                                | 14 (82.3) | Alex, Alice, Amandine, Elisa, Gaëlle, Linda, Lise, Lucy, Megan, Pauline, Penelope, Rose, Sylvie, Tom |
| No                                                 | 2 (11.7)  | Connie, Kareem                                                                                       |
| It depends                                         | 1 (5.9)   | Tyana                                                                                                |

The two people who declared not considering themselves “romantic” provided intriguing explanations for their answer. Connie identified romance with planning, as in “organizing a restaurant dinner in advance” and taking care of all the related details. Being unable to do so, she said, she is “unfortunately” not a romantic person, which she blamed on her neurodivergence. Kareem, too, who self-defined as “Asperger” during the interview, explained that his lack of romantic inclination stems from his inability to feel and correctly label the emotions that “romantic” traditionally entails. This limitation, however, does not prevent him from performing the gestures that he understands as “romantic”: he knows that his girlfriend expects them, hence

they help “keep my partner interested”. Hence, even participants considering their stance as not romantic long for the effect and for the emotional experiences that are culturally associated with romance.

### *What counts as “(being) romantic”*

Interviewees spoke at length about their understanding of what “being romantic” means in intimate relationships. We organized definitions in two broad categories, named after the two expressions that participants most often employed: *small gestures* and *quality time*.

Fourteen participants agreed that “romantic” encompasses the *small gestures* that one does to please the beloved person, whether these be everyday gestures or exceptional ones. Among these gestures, doing chores for the partner counts as romantic for seven participants, giving gifts for six, and sending messages for five.

Most participants agreed with what Pauline explained: small romantic gestures convey the idea that partners “choose each other every day”, as opposed to taking the other person for granted. These gestures, which are ordinary and differ from to grand, public displays of love (as Tom clearly highlighted during their interview), are specifically intended for the person they are addressed to, and take into account their needs, moods, desires, and wishes. Sylvie found it very romantic when her partner cleared the snow off her car early in the morning after a blizzard. Alex hates cooking, but will cook for their partners to show that they took the time to do something special. Tyana reported the same behaviors. Kareem, who explained that he “had to learn” to perform the romantic gestures that his partner expected, made a list of “small things and big things [...], whether it was putting the dishes away, vacuuming, doing the [cat’s] litter box, giving [my partner] a back massage, playing with her hair, saying she’s pretty, saying she’s pretty when she says she’s feeling ugly, and saying, yes, you do, when she says that I’m a liar.” By performing these gestures, Kareem takes care of the relationship while learning a specific cultural repertoire.

Gifts can be seen as small gestures or as bigger ones. Pauline and her partner are not fond of big presents, but they like exchanging gifts that just say, “It made me think of you.” She finds it romantic when he comes back from the supermarket with her favorite cookies. For Lise, too, it is romantic to buy or receive a gift that says, “I thought of you”. Once in a while, Lucy’s partner surprises her with flowers, or just brings back her favorite chocolate on his way home from work: to Lucy, these presents count as romantic gestures, that she often reciprocates. To find the perfect present for her partner on a special occasion, she consulted an app that suggests gifts based on one’s astrological sign. Tom likes to bake small treats and to gift them as an expression of their love, to show that they care. When Megan expressed her slight dissatisfaction with the “routine” she and her partner had slipped into, she mentioned that she missed spontaneity and romance, such as surprises and unexpected presents. Around Christmas, Amandine gave her partner a romantic advent’s calendar with love messages in a glass jar for him to draw from once a day. After a couple of years of dire financial straits, prior to the interview Kareem bought rather expensive Christmas presents for his partner (“this year, I went out of my way to make her feel appreciated”).

Participants also considered sending and receiving messages as romantic gestures. Penelope and her partner are in a long-distance relationship, and send each other declarations of love in addition to the everyday updates. Elisa and her partner are polyamorous, and he has another stable relationship: Elisa feels cherished and loved when he sends her a “good night” message while he’s with the other person.

The second broad category of definitions of what is “romantic”, *quality time*, includes all references to special moments spent with the partner. Ten participants mentioned the exact expression “quality time”, eight of which did so to substantiate their definition of “romantic” (Connie used the term but denied being romantic). Tyana did not use the exact expression, but referred to creating “special moments” as a central expression of their love for their significant other(s). Participants often oppose these special moments to bigger, more conventional celebrations: what counts as romantic is spending “quality” time with each other, rather than the setting (“It needs not be too complicated”, said Lise). Hence, special moments can be created through simple changes of routine behaviors. For Pauline, it is a question of focus: reducing the presence of screens can increase the level of attention that two people give each other. Some structure contributes to intentionally carving out a moment together. Feeling that her partner was having a lot of “quality time” with his other lover, while Elisa and he, who live together, were sharing a dull routine of chores, couch, and videogames, Elisa restored a romantic element to their time together by framing it as “date night”. On those nights, they dine out and/or do a fun activity out of the house (“no chores”): “that rekindle a certain... a certain desire, a certain craving”. This was the first thing Elisa mentioned when asked about romantic gestures. Lucy and her partner “try to make date nights all the time”, which can be as simple as playing video games together. Amandine prepares picnic lunches for small escapades with her partner, but they also occasionally “camp” in the living room with a mattress on the ground and candles all around. Lucy and her partner’s special moments are also anniversaries and Valentine’s Day. For Valentine Day’s celebrations, participants referred positively or negatively to a sort of full package involving flowers, chocolate, cards, and dining out. Sylvie mentioned celebrating with all the frills the year prior to the interview, and being disappointed when it didn’t happen the following year. Rose said she and her boyfriend do celebrate, but “without flowers or presents or other stuff”, they just spend the night together. For Tom and their partner, Valentine’s Day is “off the table” since a traumatizing experience at a restaurant: “they gave roses to everyone else except us. We were the only same-sex couple in the... or like, obviously non-heterosexual couple in the restaurant... was kind of terrible”. Remarkably, some participants extend romantic gestures beyond the usual boundaries in love relationships: Tyana and their friends started dating among them, not to look for additional partners, rather with the intention of giving each other the same one-on-one dedication that the “date” format implies for (prospective) partners. Gaëlle, too, understands romantic gestures as meaningful between friends, and talks about her best friend as “the love of my life”.

A last, crucial remark concerns the striking presence of popular therapeutic tools in participants’ accounts of romantic gestures or moments. All the eight participants who mentioned the expression “quality time” in connection with romance, as well as Tyana who described the idea without naming the concept, declared that they were knowledgeable regarding the *five love languages* theory. The idea that people speak different love languages, determining how they express and expect to receive demonstrations of love, stems from Gary Chapman’s 1992 bestseller *Five Love Languages* (2015). The five languages are *words of affirmation*, *quality time*, *gifts*, *acts of service*, and *physical touch*. For Chapman, as all the interviewees were able to explain, speaking the love language of one’s partner is the route to happiness in a relationship.

### *Self-distancing from romantic clichés*

Enthusiastic self-definitions as “romantic” were accompanied by some important caveats. Participants felt the need to clarify their rejection of some of the tropes, beliefs, and symbols associated with traditional romantic blueprints. Interestingly, such clarifications often resulted in the expression of ambivalent stances that embraced the culture of romance while criticizing related beliefs regarding the nature of love – or the other way around. Tom stated they considered themselves as romantic, but not in the sense of “large public displays of love”. Lise, too, rejected some of the tropes of romance, such as flowers on Valentine’s Day. Penelope called her romantic behaviors, such as giving each other pet names, “corny”, but she completely embraced them and said she is “a very romantic person”. Amandine declared enjoying classical romantic stories while deeply despising the gendered structure of the unfolding narrative, where a brave prince saves the “poor little girl” and there is no room for women’s agency. Rose stated her belief that “love at first sight” is nothing but a myth, and at the same time her belief that such myth might provide a good description of how her current relationship began. Rose also distinguished her being romantic from gestures and practices that would count as too “intense” (e.g., long messages, being on the phone with one’s lover all the time). Contrary to the myth of passionate, overwhelming love as maintaining lovers in a permanent state of bliss, Amandine explained that the optimal relationship is a mixture of passion and calm, romance to break the routine and comforting emotions to provide secure ground. Pauline, who was in a non-monogamous relationship at the time of the interview – hence a relationship form that may be regarded as incompatible with classical romantic storytelling –, said that she is a “Disney Princess” style romantic person and loves “love in general”. Gaëlle declared loving romantic storytelling (e.g., Disney or the classical story of Tristan and Iseult) and the idea of love at first sight (“someone who loves you instantly and understands you”), but also affirmed, as we saw, that romantic gestures can be meaningful beyond the couple — e.g. with friends or roommates. Alex struggled with the definition of “romantic” (which the interviewer purposefully did not provide): “I can spell out my attachment styles, my love language, but romance, I’m like: What is it? I don’t know”. Prompted to attempt a definition, Alex said that if “romantic” is “giving someone my attention when I’m with them” and “putting the person in the spotlight”, then they definitely were romantic.

## Discussion

Late night, come home / Work sucks, I know /  
 She left me roses by the stairs / Surprises let me  
 know she cares.

Blink-182, *All the small things* (1999)

Our study aimed at documenting whether young Canadian people today are repositioning themselves in relation to traditional blueprints of “romance” and what are their ideas about being “romantic” in intimate relationships. Our main finding is the very high degree of agreement in the sample regarding self-defining as “romantic person.” The strong consensus among participants registers across the very variables that might intuitively be expected to decrease convergence of view with regard to traditional blueprints of intimacy: gender, relationship arrangement, and sexual orientation. While previous research has found no significant difference in romantic beliefs between North American men and women (Leverenz *et al.* 2025; Sprecher & Toro-Morn 2002), for decades non-binary, queer, and non-monogamous individuals and groups have openly rejected

traditional romantic blueprints due to their historical meshing with mono- and heteronormative prescriptions for intimacies (Few-Demo & Allen 2023; Hammack *et al.* 2028; Lamont 2017; Lipnicka 2025).

When it comes to embracing behaviors and atmospheres qualified as “romantic,” our data shows that individuals entertaining non-normative intimate practices report similar views, semantic repertoires, and gestures than individuals situating themselves within more traditional groups. This finding suggests a strong cultural agreement in the age cohort, regardless of relationship, gender, and sexual diversity. The plausibility of embedding romantic gestures within mainstream as well as non-normative forms of intimacies is linked, we argue, to two major reinterpretations of “romance.” The first is a dissociation between the spirit of “romance” and myths and clichés traditionally linked to it and to its normative character, including gender roles, exclusivity (one can love only once), the irresistible power of love (love at first sight), the belief that love suffices for a relationship to thrive (love overcomes every obstacle), and indissolubility (real love lasts forever). More than a century of social skepticism and decades of feminist and queer criticism have clearly injected the public sphere with cultural tools allowing to articulate such self-distancing (Piazzesi & Blais 2026). Our data suggest that rejecting traditional romantic myths and clichés based on their delusional and politically outdated character could be regarded as a core competence in the performance of contemporary romance, especially for women and non-monogamous people. Indeed, women in our sample insisted that their awareness of the limitations of romance as a model for intimate optimality and on their ability to critically engage with the deleterious consequences of romantic myths – for instance, their undermining effect on gender equality and women’s access to self-realization and agency. These findings are consistent with previous work on dominant intimate beliefs and behaviors among emerging adult women (Giraud 2017; Santelli 2018).

What is even more compelling, as a matter of fact, is that the “spirit” of romance is not thrown out with the proverbial bathwater of the antiquated clichés and myths. On the contrary, across the sample, the idea of “romantic” is preserved as meaningful and associated with behaviors and intentions that foster intimate connection, tell the partner that they are special, express mutual election, produce a sense of exceptionality, spice up daily routines and/or break the dullness of habits. To do so, some aspects of the material dimension of traditional romantic culture are strategically mobilized to create atmospheres and qualify relationships (Holloway 2020; Miller 2008): participants listed symbols and tokens, spaces and objects that tap into the classical and commercial semantic repertoire of romance to frame a situation, gesture, or intention — candles, escapades, chocolate, flowers, surprises, date night, love messages, and so on. Such symbols and spaces appear to enable the “displaying” (Finch 2007) of commitment, intentionality, and ultimately of the meaningfulness of the bond.

Maintaining romantic intentions without subscribing to their normative implications is achieved, we suggest, through the second major reinterpretation of romance: a change in the scale of romantic gestures. Participants clearly expressed a preference for gestures and tokens that are small, closer to ordinary everyday activities, and possibly more frequent, feasible, and affordable than grand demonstrations of love. Interestingly, romantic intentions are precisely what infuses ordinary gestures, such as buying a box of cookies, with a non-ordinary meaning distinguishing them from what is customary. In their study of British adult couples in long-term relationships, Gabb and Fink (2015) used the term “mundanities” to indicate a clear preference in their sample for small everyday gestures expressing attention, but they filed these gestures under the category of “relationship work” and contrasted them with romance. Based on our findings, we suggest a

different framing: small gestures *do* count as everyday romance for participants in our sample. The tension between the mundane character of the gesture and its romantic value exists only if we postulate that “romantic” must have something “grand” or non-quotidian. Yet this is precisely what interviewees disputed when they rejected conventional frameworks and symbols of romance: it doesn’t have to be big and public to be romantic. Framed through the intention of telling the partner “you are special” and/or “I thought of you,” small gestures inject romance into everyday life, as Human & Quayle (2020) observed in their study with South African couples. Participants in our sample clearly linked the romantic value of small gestures to two elements. First, these gestures are not one-size-fits-all, cliché, or anonymous, rather intended from a specific person (“me”) to a specific person (“you”), which presupposes mutual knowledge and attention to what the partner says, feels, and needs. Second, these gestures demonstrate the ability to hold one’s partner in mind during the course of everyday obligations and errands (“I thought of you”), hence they situate the relationship outside of the ordinary, customary, taken-for-granted routine (consistent with the traditional symbolic value of romance) notwithstanding the quotidian nature of the actions that they materialize in (e.g., buying a box of cookies). The high level of agreement on the logical structure of this romantic framing of mundane gestures, which makes sense also for the interviewees who blamed their not being a romantic person on their neurodivergence, suggests the availability of a generalized cultural blueprint (Quinn 2018). In this cultural framework, observing the partner’s moods, needs, and desires (or the way they experience their world) and acting accordingly becomes explicitly thematized as ongoing demonstration of love (Luhmann 1986; Piazzesi & Blais 2026): such is the definition of the ability to “romance” the world here and now. “Mundanities” express commitment, intentionality, and attention, which translate into the capacity (sometimes assisted by horoscopes and such) to demonstrate one’s love in a way that the partner can understand and appreciate as tailored on their needs.

While more research is necessary to thoroughly describe such cultural model, our findings clearly show that some widely circulating therapeutic concepts have contributed to reshape the perception of romance and romantic gestures. The five love languages semantic repertoire (Chapman 2015), the popularity thereof among the general public can hardly be disputed (Impett *et al.* 2024), is likely a factor in the embedding of the idea of “quality time” into the mainstream understanding of what constitutes an expression of love. Together with words of affirmation (such as compliments), “gifts” (both given and received), “acts of service” (mainly household chores), and “physical touch,” “quality time” is one of the five love languages – or ways of expressing and understanding the expression of love – popularized by Chapman’s book and by the vast amount of social media content that it inspired in recent years (Impett *et al.* 2024). Participants in our sample demonstrated a strong literacy regarding this therapeutic conceptual framework to enhance and maintain intimate optimality, which we suggest as a likely explanation for the high level of cultural and semantic agreement on ideas such as “quality time” as a romantic device. To be sure, the quality time angle has been present in scholarship and mainstream relationship advice for a while (Jiao *et al.* 2025), mostly framed as one component of the necessary work to maintain a relationship. Two notable examples in advice literature: John Gottman’s first pillar for building a strong marriage was “creating rituals of connection,” spanning from daily rituals to more exceptional celebrations (Gottman & Silver 2015; Benson 2016); and Sue Johnson’s bestselling book on secure attachment in love relationships (Johnson 2008) recommended making the effort of being “emotionally present” for the partner. Our results confirm previous findings regarding the perception of quality time as beneficial for relationship quality (Bland & McQueen 2018), but they also demonstrate something else. The five love languages have likely added a new semantic nuance

to this widespread idea: giving “quality time” to the partner is not just a form of relationship work, i.e., something that it is important to do in order to maintain the connection (Gabb & Fink 2015), rather in itself a *demonstration of love*. What self-help previously framed as relationship work is reframed as an injection of extraordinary into the ordinary of everyday life through “romanced” intentionality. We thus observe the stabilization of a semantic repertoire that contributes to romancing the ordinary while promoting ideals of symmetrical mutual commitment and equality in the participation to relationship maintenance practices.

The same semantic repertoire of love languages might have played a role in shaping another aspect of the cultural blueprint for romance: the romanticization of household routines, as doing chores for the partner is the most often recurring example of acts of service in Chapman’s book (2015, chapter 7). The association between romantic gestures and doing chores for the partner was one of the most fascinating findings of our study. Traditionally, popular essays and feminist scholarship depicted household labour as the opposite of romance and romantic storytelling: one can think of the famous say, “You start by sinking into his arms and end up with your arms in his sink,” popularized as a consciousness-raising slogan by the British feminist magazine *Spare Rib*<sup>2</sup> in the early 1970s. Betty Friedan (1963) linked women’s unnameable “problem” to being confined in the dullness of domestic routines, and Hochschild concept of a “second shift” (Hochschild & Machung 1989) tapped into this characterization of women’s repetitive, unrecognized, and unrewarding chores. The notion that chores are a potential source of frustration and conflict (Carlson *et al.* 2018) is reinforced by a vast literature documenting that women generally report lower levels of satisfaction with the division of household work in heterosexual couples (see Frank & Frenette 2021 for recent data on Canadians). At the same time, the preoccupation with a balanced division of household labour is no longer exclusive to higher social strata and highly educated individuals, rather appears to inform the reasonings and practices of middle- and low-income couples (Carlson *et al.* 2018). Our data point towards a gradual reframing of chores — or, at least, of some of them — as loving service: domestic tasks become gestures compatible with the romantic framework as long as they are intended and acknowledged to please or relieve, rather than taken for granted as role-conforming duties (consistent with the reframing discussed above). We suggest that the semantic repertoire of the five love languages has played a role in catalyzing this recasting. While the overrepresentation of women, non-binary persons, and people with a high educational level in our sample could explain participants’ literacy in therapeutic concepts and approaches (Wright 2008), it could be argued that the widespread circulation of popularized therapeutic content on social media could create an array of widely available, common cultural references beyond the boundaries of social class and subpopulations (Piazzesi *et al.* 2026). More research is needed to fully understand the implications of the semantic shift, which might point toward a depoliticization of household work through a de-gendering of tasks and their framing as *chosen* acts of generosity and care. Additional data are also necessary to assess the effect of gender difference on this vision of everyday, mundane romanticism, as our sample contained only one heterosexual cisgender man. Despite these caveats, our findings could be relevant for scholars studying the association between the division of household work and satisfaction in intimate relationships.

Some additional limitations warrant caution. The sample is small ( $n = 17$ ), with smaller gender, sexual orientation, and relationship agreements subgroups. Second, as recruitment relied on self-

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<sup>2</sup> The slogan was printed on a purple tea towel offered as a gift to subscribers. See Boycott 2018; the archive of the Glasgow Women’s Library at: <https://ehive.com/collections/8664/objects/1046297/teatowel-you-start-by-sinking-into-his-arms> (accessed on October 9th, 2025).

selection by individuals already engaged with the topic, apparent consensus may reflect sampling bias. Third, interviews are susceptible to social desirability bias, and retrospective reports to recall bias. Fourth, as mentioned, women and non-binary participants are overrepresented, and educational attainment exceeds that of the Canadian working-age population ( $\approx 65\%$  with a bachelor's degree or higher in our sample vs  $33\%$  nationally in 2021; Statistics Canada, 2023b). Accordingly, results should be interpreted as exploratory.

## Conclusion

We began our discussion in this paper by asking whether young adults today consider themselves as “romantic.” Our results suggest a persistence of an interest in romantic blueprints, ideals, and gestures among younger cohorts in North America. Young adults in our sample defined themselves as romantic across differences of gender, sexual orientation, and relationship arrangement. Based on participants’ accounts, the romantic person can competently reject traditional myths, beliefs, and clichés associated with traditional normative frameworks while emphasizing the pleasures of being romantic; and preserves some still viable romantic symbols and tokens while reframing them in scale, personalizing and customizing them within a specific relationship. The vision of romance that emerges from our results is clearly consistent with the gradual spreading, since the late 1960s, of a cultural pattern prescribing a more pragmatic, down-to-earth conception of love and romance, a process in which women, LGBT+ and non-monogamous people, and therapeutic discourse producers have been instrumental. However, the rejection of traditional, normative romance did not entail a “cooling down” of intimate practices: interviewees clearly mastered the logics and symbols of a version of “being romantic” that preserves the spirit of traditional romance, namely its intimacy-enhancing effect, while being compatible with anti-traditional political demands for equality, symmetry, and diversity. Notably, participants stemming from antinormative social locations pleaded in favor of an extension of romance beyond the traditional limits of the “couple”. Romantic gestures still intentionally inject “extraordinary” into routinized interactions and activities, but they do so with a focus on the present, pragmatic feasibility, and on the desires and needs of those involved. Hence, similar to what Weston (1995) observed with regard to gay kinship ideologies in the 1990s, romantic gestures situate the proof of the “authenticity” of bonds within present temporality and mundane reality (the small things you and I do for each other here and now), rather than within a prescriptive, generalized “forever.” The romantic model that interviewees affirmed is disconnected from grand scripts of stability and illusions of effortlessness, but is clearly linked to the quotidian *production* of stability, intimacy, and perceived compatibility. This focus is also pragmatically consistent with young adults’ careful negotiation of intimate commitments with other individual challenges and life goals (Shulman & Connolly 2013), but also with the engrained social awareness of the problems and peculiarities of contemporary intimate relationships (Dalessandro 2021). Beyond the sociological relevance for the study of cultural blueprints for intimacy and their negotiation in everyday intimate practices, our results contribute to the study of implicit relationship theories of young adults, which play a role in relationship maintenance behavior (Weigel et al. 2016). Romantic gestures can be instrumental to individual and dyadic relationship maintenance strategies, such as idealization, attributions, generosity and gratitude, all positively associated with relationship satisfaction (Ogolski et al. 2017).

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## **Conflict of Interest**

All authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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## **Ethical approval and informed consent statements**

Ethical clearance was issued by the Université du Québec à Montréal Human Research Ethics Board (Certification # 2022-4196). Written informed consent was provided by all participants.

## **Data availability**

The data that support the findings of this study can be made partially available upon request to the corresponding author and with the approval of the Université du Québec à Montréal Human Research Ethics Board. The data are not publicly accessible because they contain potentially sensitive participant information, which could jeopardize their privacy and violate the written confidentiality agreement with participants.

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