

Is Edward Cullen a “good” boyfriend? Young men talk about *Twilight*, masculinity and the rules of (hetero)romance

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Abstract: The popular romance is a pervasive and ubiquitous part of popular culture, which has been critically and rigorously analysed by a wide range of scholars. While this body of work is diverse in its critiques of popular romance, studies often share a common research question: how are the narratives embedded within these love stories understood by those who consume them? While women are undoubtedly the target market for this genre, my research takes a different, less orthodox approach to answering this question. Drawing from a broader study on how young men make sense of being boyfriends and (hetero)romance, I asked twenty-two young men from a high school in Aotearoa/New Zealand about their interpretations of a well-known young adult text that can also be classified as contemporary popular romance, *Twilight*. By talking with young men about *Twilight*, and, in particular, Edward Cullen, I was able to garner insights into how they decoded gendered performances of (hetero)romance within the film and more generally, what it means to be a “good” boyfriend.

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Keywords: (hetero)romance, gender hegemony, hegemonic masculinity, male femininities, male oppression, pariah femininities, *Twilight*

Introduction

The popular romance is a pervasive and ubiquitous part of popular culture (Roach 2), which has been critically and rigorously analysed by a wide range of scholars. Some scholars argue that the popular romance oppresses women (and the notion of femininity) by depicting a subservient heroine whose ultimate goal is to marry her hero (Allan; Bealer; Franiuk and Scherr; McRobbie; Miller; Modleski; Radway; Shachar; Taylor). Others, however, suggest that this interpretation of the popular romance is too simplistic, and that the genre often interprets gendered (hetero)romance in ways that can be counter-hegemonic (for example, Kamblé; Regis; Roach; Selinger, 2012).

While this body of work is certainly diverse in its critiques of the popular romance, it shares common goals, including questioning how the narratives embedded within these love stories are *understood* by those who consume them. While women are undoubtedly the target market for this genre, my research takes a different, less orthodox approach to answering this question. Drawing from a broader study on how young men make sense of being boyfriends and (hetero)romance, I asked twenty-two young men from a high school in Aotearoa/New Zealand about their interpretations of a well-known young adult text that can also be classified as contemporary popular romance, *Twilight*.^[1] For this article, I will pay specific attention to how these young men made sense of Edward Cullen – the vampire-hero of *Twilight* – and, in particular, his performances of (hetero)romance.

Reading the Romance

It is now well-established among scholars (Kamblé; Regis; Selinger, 2007, 2012) that the popular romance is not just “trashy”, unintelligent “brain candy” (Kamblé 2). Instead this genre produces novels (and moving image productions) that “display intelligence, worthy politics, and aesthetic accomplishment” (Selinger 308-309). Kamblé goes further by arguing that the popular romance has an important “epistemological foundation” that speaks to the complex “workings of love narratives” across historical and contemporary periods (2). As such, rich debates continue to surface among scholars about the meanings behind these narratives and what impact they may have on those who consume these texts.

Janice Radway’s research in *Reading the Romance* was pioneering in uncovering the complex relationship between the patriarchal discourses embedded in popular romance novels and how women readers invest in and make sense of these romance stories. The popular romance genre, as Radway outlined, takes on a series of predictable conventions. Alongside certain plot devices – like a happily ever after ending (71-72) – popular romances tend to portray the heroine and hero in “conservative” (187) ways. For example, the heroine, although often portrayed as “spirited” (123) and “independent” (125, 132) is also characterised as both “childlike” and innocent (126). In stark comparison, the hero is imbued with a “spectacular masculinity” (128) where “every aspect of his being, whether his body, his face, or his general demeanor, is informed by the *purity of his maleness*” (128, emphasis added). Although there are often glimpses of a gentler side (128), the hero is largely depicted as unemotional, worldly (132), and aggressive (128). The heroine in turn takes on more

subservient qualities within her relationship with the hero, which Radway argued demotes women's agency within their relationships with men (127, 208, 214).

Even though the women in Radway's study often acknowledged that these stories were vastly different from their own worlds, she found that readers made many connections between the narratives within romance novels and their own lives (186-87). Radway concluded that the gendered roles of the heroine and hero embedded in the popular romance were not only accepted and normalized by women readers but also deeply desired by them. For instance, readers displayed a yearning for a romantic relationship that emulated the characteristics and gendered roles in the novels they read (202-203).

Since Radway's study was published, a range of scholars have looked at the popular romance in different ways that has moved scholarship of this genre in new directions (for example, Allan; Kamblé; Regis; Selinger, 2007). Thus, many of Radway's "sweeping claim[s]" (Regis 12) have been re-examined. While many agree with Radway that readers derive great pleasure from consuming popular romances (for example, Regis 13; Roach 2-3), there is an acknowledgment that these "cultural narratives" (Roach 3) are not solely normative and can have counter-hegemonic meanings (Kamblé 28; Regis 11-13; Roach 6-8). For example, the genre should not solely be understood as promoting a Happily Ever After via a glorification of women's subservience to men. Instead, it should be acknowledged for its often complex storylines (Kamblé 2; Regis 11-12; Selinger 2012, 35; Selinger 2007, 308-309) where heroines take on agentic roles within the plot, like having professional careers.

These counter-hegemonic – or heteroglossic (Francis 478-80) – portrayals of the heroine are becoming more commonplace with the rise of new sub-genres. For example, in erotica, the heroine is not simply type-cast as sexually passive, but can take on "non-Vanilla" (Roach 6) and agentic sexual practices that test the boundaries of Radway's initial assessment of what a "typical" heroine should look like (Roach 6-7). Therefore, these narratives do not always "reconcile...women to the limits and threats specially posed to them as women" (Roach 2). Instead, romance stories can do the opposite, by "teaching women to refuse to accept such limits and threats as normative and empowering them to expect or demand better for themselves" (Roach 2).

Radway's depiction of the hero has also been dismantled as too simplistic. Instead, it is now argued that lead male characters take on qualities that reflect the economic and social milieu of the time (Kamblé 89-129). Although there are certainly still Alpha-type heroes with a "spectacular masculinity" depicted within the genre (Radway 128),^[2] there are now, more than ever, depictions of non-macho heroes (Kamblé 123-24). Even the fantasy of finding a "good man" – the central trope within the Happily Ever After narrative – has been argued to be an "antidote" to the "dangers" of patriarchy (Roach 9). As Roach explains, the popular romance often depicts a woman marrying a "good man" who "possess[es] the unlikely high alpha traits that both guarantee he can protect the heroine and that render him immune to the predations of patriarchy" (9); predations like men's ability to use of violence towards their (hetero)romantic partners.

Alongside these various arguments, is a broader rejection of Radway's claims about reader investment. Regis, for example, doubts whether any popular romance text could have a *significant* influence on its readers (13). While Regis concedes that popular romances could certainly inspire readers in various ways, she argues that it is unlikely that these "love narratives" (Kamblé 2) could inform significant social change (13). As she claims, it is unlikely that any popular romance could actually "reorganize" the "readers' lives" (Regis 13).

Young Men Reading The Romance?

It is therefore clear, even from this briefest summary, that the terrain of scholarship dedicated to analysing the popular romance is rich with complexity and contradiction. I personally became interested in this genre and the effects it could have on society while designing fieldwork for my latest study. This study, drawing on a combination of qualitative feminist research, critical masculinity studies, and critical youth studies, explored how twenty-two young men^[3] (aged 16) from a high school in Aotearoa/New Zealand made sense of being boyfriends and whether an entitlement to oppress women was already a part of their sense-makings. I used the film *Twilight* (2008), a contemporary, well-known film that depicts young people's (hetero)romantic practices, as a springboard into talking with these young men about being boyfriends. Therefore, my approach to looking at the popular romance was rather unorthodox. While I started out with the intention of talking with young men about (hetero)romance, *Twilight* became integral to my research, which in turn fueled my interest in the popular romance genre and its impact on young people.

My fieldwork unfolded in different parts. Once I found a high school that was willing to take part in my study, I invited all of their Year 12 male students to participate. Twenty-two accepted. Together, we watched the film during class time and then, across four consecutive weeks, I conducted three semi-structured focus groups and a number of individual interviews. During these discussions, I talked with young men to ascertain how they made sense of Edward Cullen's (the vampire-hero of *Twilight*) performances of (hetero)romance, as well as their views on gendered roles in (hetero)romantic relationships more generally. After each of these discussions, I transcribed all recordings in full and then used thematic analysis (Berg 304) to interrogate key themes that emerged from young men's talk.

But why *Twilight*? The decision to use *Twilight* was multi-faceted. Partly, it reflected my critical youth studies commitment. I wanted to ensure that my discussions with these young men about being boyfriends would be inclusive for all participants (see Nayak and Kehily), and I did not want to exclude or embarrass participants who may not have had experiences of (hetero)romance. I also chose the film *Twilight* because it was incredibly popular (Pomerantz par 6) and therefore well-known among the age-group I was interviewing. Although women are clearly *Twilight's* target market (Click, Miller, Behm-Morawitz and Aubrey 2), most of my participants had already seen the first film and the one or two who had not were familiar with the storyline. In this way, like other well-known love stories, *Twilight's* storyline (which will be summarized shortly) already had a degree of cultural currency among my participants.

I also chose to specifically use the first film in the *Twilight Saga* for a range of methodological reasons. It would have been unrealistic to expect young men to invest time in reading an entire book (or series of books) in preparation for the focus groups and individual interviews. Viewing a film was more pragmatic. Once I had decided to use the film version, I then had to choose whether to show part or all of the Saga. It would have been impractical to ask young men to view the entire Saga in all its five parts. I therefore chose to only show the first film as this was easily viewed in one sitting, which then enabled me to conduct the focus groups and individual interviews in a timely manner.

Finally, I used *Twilight* because of the concerning themes about gendered control and “oppressive intimacy” (Elizabeth 26) that, as a feminist, I interpreted when I first read the books and viewed the films. I do acknowledge that a number of feminist critics have pointed to a range of counter-hegemonic gender narratives within *Twilight*. For example, Bella, the heroine of *Twilight*, has been said to take on a “hero identity” (Murphy 62) when she transitions into a vampire in *Breaking Dawn*. Readers of *Twilight* – including a significant number that self-identify as feminist (Steiner 203; Wilson 53) – have been documented as both enjoying the series while also actively engaging in and resisting many of the story’s hegemonic romance narratives (Miller 174; Petersen 61-2; Steiner 203; Torkelson 219-220). With this said, I cannot detract from my own (and others’ – see Bailie; Bealer; Donnelly; Groper; Happel and Esposito; Miller; Mukherjea; Murphy; Petersen; Summers; Taylor; Torkelson; Wilson) feminist concerns about *Twilight* and the ways it promotes more hegemonic “love narratives” (Kamblé 2) that support men’s control of women: for example, incessant depictions of men’s use of paternalism, possessiveness and threats of violence towards (hetero)romantic partners. I was therefore interested to find out how young men would “read” these hegemonic messages and whether they would endorse or challenge these themes.

This use of *Twilight* to speak with young men about gendered issues is timely. Allan recently argued that more critical masculinities scholars need to recognize the popular romance as an important genre to analyse, particularly in terms of the ways that the hero – and masculinity – is depicted within various storylines (24-25). In addition to this, while numerous research articles have explored how young women have invested in and made sense of *Twilight* (for example Bealer; Summers; Steiner; Petersen; Bode; Behm-Morawitz, Click, and Aubrey), to date, only one study has sought to provide a sustained account of young men’s opinions on the Saga. Click, Miller, Behm-Morawitz and Aubrey conducted a qualitative study with 42 male fans of *Twilight* to specifically find out why young men become fans of texts that are more targeted towards young women, and, importantly, what these male fans think of the film’s story and its characteristics (225-234). While I also sought young men’s views about *Twilight*, my fieldwork was not concerned with young men’s fandom experiences of *Twilight* (none of my participants identified themselves publicly as fans, although most had already seen the film). Instead, I used the film, and its key *oppressive* narratives surrounding paternalism, possessiveness, and violence, as a springboard into discussions with young men to find out whether their understandings of (hetero)romance included an endorsement of boyfriends being oppressive towards their girlfriends. The following section outlines these oppressive narratives from the first film in more detail.

Introducing *Twilight*: The love-story and Edward Cullen

Twilight is the first instalment in a multi-part saga, released first in book form (four parts) for the young adult fiction market and later adapted into a five-part film epic by movie giant Summit Entertainment. For the purpose of this article, it will be the film *Twilight* (the first in the Saga) that will be the focus of this discussion. From the books alone, Stephanie Meyer – *Twilight*’s author – has earned in excess of US\$14 million, and the films have grossed over US\$2.5 billion from the global box office (Pomerantz par 6). In 2008, Meyer was named by *Time Magazine* as one of the world’s “most influential people” (Silver 121). These global

successes make analysing *Twilight* a meaningful activity. Not only has *Twilight* been consumed by a significant number of young people, but as this article will argue, many of its oppressive themes about gendered roles within (hetero)romantic relationships were endorsed by young men. This article showcases specifically how young men make connections between the gendered roles they viewed in the film and what they think boyfriends should be entitled to do within (hetero)romantic relationships with young women.

Twilight is a fantastical story set in Forks, Washington, USA. The story – in all its parts – is written through the voice of Bella Swan, the story’s heroine. The script begins as Bella, aged seventeen, arrives in Forks to live temporarily with her estranged father, Charlie. Edward and Bella’s relationship starts to evolve early in the film. When Edward meets Bella in their first science class together, his initial reaction to her appears to be one of disgust. Through a series of events, however, it becomes clear to the viewer that Edward is not repulsed by Bella; instead he has a deep, almost uncontainable desire for Bella that troubles him. As the film progresses, we learn that Edward is a vampire and his desire for Bella, the mortal human, is twofold: he desires to kill her (by drinking her blood), yet also strongly desires her romantically (a feeling that Bella reciprocates). This is where themes surrounding (hetero)romantic intimacy and oppression take form.

On the surface, however, *Twilight* can be seen as a story about falling in love for the first time, and like most popular romances, Edward and Bella’s love is largely based on heteronormativity. Martin and Kazyak explain that “heteronormativity structures social life so that heterosexuality is always assumed, expected, ordinary, and privileged” (316) and is fueled by a hegemonic ordering of the binary sex system which is focused on “the seemingly natural attraction between two types of bodies defined as opposites” (Schilt and Westbrook 443). *Twilight* is littered with these types of heteronormative cues (Donnelly 179). For example, Edward and Bella’s union is heterosexual, they are exclusive romantic partners to one another, and their relationship is formalized in the fourth film *Breaking Dawn Part 1* where they wed. This progression of intimacy seems “natural” (Schilt and Westbrook 443) and “expected” (Martin and Kazyak 316), and thus presents to the audience a version of (hetero)romantic love that is normative and legitimate in terms of how gender and sexuality should be performed in a predominantly heteronormative society.

Twilight also can be interpreted as following heteronormative conventions that (hetero)romantic love must be “exceptional, powerful and transformative” (Martin and Kazyak 333). Edward and Bella’s love for one another is quickly established a third of the way into the film. However, this does not look like an ordinary, everyday love. Bella’s first person narrative to the audience declares that it is an “unconditional” and “irrevocable” love^[4] – one that is forever and unbreakable. From this point on, their (hetero)romantic feelings for one another gather intensity. Arguably this intensity is at its peak when they first kiss, which builds rapidly with passion and force, appearing out of control until Edward screams “STOP” and throws himself across the room. This scene shows that their desire for one another is potentially explosive and volatile. After this kiss, Bella and Edward’s intimacy deepens in other ways. For example, the film depicts a series of unique and poignant romantic moments, like Edward (who does not sleep because of his vampiric constitution) holding Bella each night while she sleeps and carrying her to the treetops of Forks where they spend time talking and holding one another. These romantic moments give the illusion that Bella and Edward’s love is unique and exceptional – a one-of-a-kind love.

Twilight, however, is not just a love story; it is a love story distinctly marked by notions of danger and violence because of Edward's dualistic character. In one way, he is cast as a contemporary version of Prince Charming (Murphy 57) who embodies a hegemonic or, as Radway would describe it, a "spectacular masculinity" (128). For instance, he not only has super-human muscularity and strength, but is also irrefutably attractive and shows a deep devotion towards Bella. This makes Edward appear to be an ideal boyfriend. Edward, however, has another side: he is a violent monster who strongly desires to kill Bella and drink her blood (Bailie 146; Miller 168; Taylor 391-92; Wilson 94). Shortly after he reveals himself to be a vampire, he screams at Bella:

I'm the world's best predator, aren't I? Everything about me invites you in – my voice, my face, even my smell. As if I need any of that! As if you could outrun me. As if you could fight me off.[5]

Then shortly after this outburst he says softly to Bella:

And so the lion fell in love with the lamb.[6]

This lets the audience know that he is in love with her, but that this love is encased within a desire to kill her. Therefore, even when they declare their unconditional love for one another, the risk of Edward hurting Bella is "never completely vanquished" (Bailie 146).

As well as Edward's violent urges, he more subtly displays dominance over Bella through his paternalistic treatment of her (see Groper 134; Mukherjea 11-16). This is illustrated in the film in two key ways. Bella's childlike innocence and inexperience is illuminated by Edward's paternalistic treatment of her (Mukherjea 11-16). For example, when Edward and Bella flee the baseball game due to the imminent threat of James (another vampire from a rival clan who wants to kill Bella), Edward puts Bella's seatbelt on for her – an act that resembles a parental behaviour towards a small child. Edward holding Bella while she sleeps is another way that he is able to position himself as her protector, which in turn depicts Bella as childlike (Mukherjea 16). This treatment of Bella feeds seamlessly into "the dynamic in their relationship of perpetual rescuer and rescued" (Silver 125). One of Edward's most prominent and early acts of rescue is when he stops an out-of-control van from careening into Bella. These paternalistic behaviours become a dominant part of Edward's character and his protectiveness of Bella is presented as proof of his love for her (Wilson 88).

As the film progresses, however, these paternal behaviours morph into possessiveness (see Miller 168-70; Taylor 36-37). Not only does Edward want to protect Bella from harm, he also starts to dictate where Bella is allowed to go and with whom she is allowed to associate. For example, after Edward and his family learn of James' intentions to kill Bella, Edward instructs Bella to leave Forks. This instruction is clearly non-negotiable: Bella protests at first, but she eventually succumbs to this command, even though she will have to leave her father, Charlie. Another example is at the end of the film when Edward shows disdain for Bella interacting with Jacob Black, the story's other male lead. In the later installments of the Saga, Edward starts to restrict Bella's movements. For example, he immobilizes Bella's car so that she cannot drive to visit Jacob.

Altogether, *Twilight's* complex depictions of boyfriend behaviour presents the audience with many conflicting notions of gendered roles in (hetero)romantic relationships. According to *Twilight*, the ideal (hetero)romantic relationship seems to be one marked by irrevocable love and unbridled passion, yet it is underscored by control, possessiveness, and danger. In turn, *Twilight* shows its audience that a desirable and thus hegemonically masculine (Schippers 94) boyfriend is devoted, romantic, protective and selfless, yet also is able to be physically violent towards his girlfriend. Together, these elements of *Twilight's* love story do what many "storybook romances" (Towns and Adams 568) do: they present a version of "perfect-love" that is problematic (Towns and Adams 568); a version that is idealized while also founded on gendered (male) oppression.

Male Oppression, Gender Hegemony and *Twilight*

Underpinning this analysis of *Twilight*, and my project in general, is a feminist understanding that the social world is organized by a hegemonic order of gendered identities, and that within this order, various types of male oppression are both legitimated and carried out (Young 39). This understanding is indebted to Mimi Schippers' definition of gender hegemony – a gender order that privileges hegemonic masculinity over a range of femininities (86). Schippers' work is innovative because it brings focus back to how femininities are constructed and treated within this gender order. To do this, Schippers reworks Raewyn Connell's (2005) notion of hegemonic masculinity by redefining it as the exclusive rights to qualities *when embodied by men* that establish and legitimate men's dominance over women (94) in ways that are ascendant over enactments of femininities that both men and women can be seen to embody (94). Therefore, when women embody idealized versions of femininity – versions that "establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity" (94) – Schippers labels these as characteristics of hegemonic femininity: a controversial yet useful term that denotes both a subservience to hegemonic masculinity and an ascendancy over less desirable versions of femininity that can be embodied by both men and women (94).

According to Schippers, women pay the price when they fail to adhere to the rules of hegemonic femininity (95). Therefore, when women perform gender in ways that are not hegemonically feminine – in other words, when they do things in ways that are (hegemonically) masculine – these enactments become socially defined as pariah femininities (95) because of the threat these displays pose to the hegemonic order of gendered identities. For instance, within this gender order, men are meant to possess qualities like being sexually assertive, physically strong, and authoritative (91). Yet, when women perform these same masculine practices they disrupt this order. Pejorative pariah labels like "slut", "dyke", and "bitch" (95) are therefore assigned to these deviant performances in order to contain the threat these displays of masculinity by women pose to the ascendancy of hegemonic masculinity. Likewise, when men's gendered performances resemble those of hegemonic femininity – being compliant, defenceless, and physically weak (96) – they are derisively defined as versions of male femininities. In similar ways to pariah femininities, these embodiments of hegemonic femininities by male bodies are "culturally

defined as contaminating” (96), as they threaten the scaffolding that places hegemonic masculinity as dominant.

Gender hegemony enables various forms of structural oppression to exist. Young’s definition of male oppression is useful here in ascertaining what these structural conditions can look like. When the dominant group is founded on a white, middle class, heterosexual version of masculinity that privileges men who are physically strong, assertive, and sexually dominant, women become defined stereotypically as the opposite: weak, passive, vulnerable, subservient (Schippers 91; 94-95). This process then enables “a systematic and unreciprocated transfer of power from women to men”, whereby women are often expected to take on gendered roles that serve men (Young 47). These conditions, in turn, make possible certain “social practices”, like men’s use of control and physical violence towards women they are involved with romantically (Young 57).

The following section will focus largely on how young men assign qualities of hegemonic masculinity to Edward’s oppressive performances as Bella’s boyfriend, and will analyze what this suggests about how young men understand (hetero)romance and being boyfriends in general. This analysis will consider the extent to which young men wish to emulate these qualities in their own lives. The following section will also showcase what acts of (hetero)romance – performed by both Bella and Edward in the film – young men consider contaminating and therefore feminine. Focus will be placed on how young men talk derisively about these feminine enactments within the film and what this suggests about how they make sense of gendered roles in (hetero)romantic relationships in their own lives.

Young Men Talk About Edward Cullen, hegemonic masculinity and being “good” boyfriends

Twenty-two young men took part in my study (all names used in this article are pseudonyms). In every focus group, I asked young men whether they thought Edward Cullen had qualities that made him a “good” boyfriend. Overwhelmingly, they argued that Edward was a “good” boyfriend because he protected Bella. They particularly praised the way Edward protected Bella and would put himself in harm’s way to ensure that she was safe. They specifically linked this to Edward’s muscularity and physical capabilities. For example, across all three focus groups, a favorite scene in the film was when Edward “ripped off James’ head”.^[7] Edward’s retaliation against James saved Bella’s life. Another favorite scene was when Edward saved Bella from a violent situation involving a group of men who had cornered her in a dark, isolated area of town. One young man remarked on Edward’s “mad driving skills” as he entered this particular scene driving incredibly fast in order to get to Bella quickly. Shifting from the film to reflect on their own lives, each focus group indicated that protecting one’s girlfriend – a key feature of benevolent paternalism – was a hegemonically masculine (Schippers 94) practice that they felt “good” boyfriends should demonstrate.

Young men’s endorsement of these benevolent forms of paternalism, however, should not be viewed as innocuous. Instead, their praise of Edward’s paternal practices suggests an endorsement of men’s dominance over women – a feature of how young men define the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Schippers 94). This in turn speaks to how young men

think young women should act as girlfriends. For example, if hegemonic masculinity involves being protective of women, then the ideal version of femininity – what Schippers (94) calls hegemonic femininity – involves girlfriends being vulnerable and in need of protecting, which is a highly subordinating position to take within a (hetero)romantic relationship.

Despite these gendered underpinnings of benevolent paternalism, an in-depth critical feminist examination of boyfriends being paternalistic towards their girlfriends does not feature strongly within existing scholarship. Scholars (for example, Cikara et al; Glick et al; Moya et al; Sarlet et al) within the field of social-psychology have attempted to address some of its effects within (hetero)romantic relationships by focusing largely on sex roles. As Connell articulates (21-27; 67-71), however, sex-role studies assume men and women fall into two separate “blocs” (69): men simply take on male sex roles, females simply take on female sex roles. This approach tends to ignore how power forms the basis of gendered relations (Connell 27), and in turn fails to examine the complexities and nuances of how gendered identities develop overtime (67-71). As such I argue that the social-psychology studies cited have presented overly simplistic descriptions of what male (hetero)romantic oppression (in the form of benevolent paternalism) is, how it is practiced and to what effect. What my findings attempt to show is that young men’s overwhelming praise of Edward’s paternalism points to qualities they think boyfriends should be entitled to possess in general. These qualities, I argue, are strongly shaped by complex gendered systems of power that privilege hegemonic versions of masculinity (Schippers 94), like being in control of and the protector of vulnerable women.

Young men also praised another feature of Edward’s paternalistic treatment of Bella – that he showed restraint in not killing Bella, which a number of young men interpreted as evidence that Edward loved Bella. These views surfaced when I asked young men for examples from the film when Edward showed Bella he loved her. The discussion turned to one particular scene when Bella had been bitten by another vampire, which left Edward to suck the venom from her wound in order to save her life. This had a significant degree of risk, as Edward’s thirst for Bella’s blood was potentially uncontrollable. If he could not stop sucking once the venom was cleared then he would kill her; if he did not attempt it, however, she would begin transitioning into a vampire. Edward did not want Bella to transform into a vampire as he knew it was excruciating and in becoming a vampire, Bella would lose her humanness – or what Edward referred to as her soul. As the scene develops, the audience sees Edward almost losing control, but eventually managing to show restraint: sucking just enough blood to clear the venom from Bella’s body, but stopping in time so that she remains human.

The young men drew on this display of restraint to talk about Edward’s love for Bella. For example, one young man replied that “He stopped from killing her, so he was like sucking her blood and everything and he stopped. He forced himself to stop”. Another young man summarized this as Edward showing restraint, which he argued was a marker of love because Edward did not want Bella to become a “soul-less” vampire like him. There were also discussions about the ways that Edward, throughout the early parts of the film, actively tried to avoid being around Bella in an effort to protect her from his own dangerous vampiric urges. One of my participants offered this interpretation of why Edward was acting in this manner: “Cos he hadn’t fully learnt yet, hadn’t fully learnt how to control himself, for the will power, for like biting her and whatever”. Therefore, in this instance, Edward’s violent urges

to kill Bella were exonerated by young men as they instead focused on his noble ability to show restraint – a chivalrous act towards someone he deeply cared for.

While studies suggest that young men consider an “ethical” boyfriend to “refrain” from violence (Towns and Scott 46) and male partner violence as “unacceptable” (Sundaram 896; see also McCarry 2009, 340; McCarry 2010, 25), my findings suggest something slightly different. From young men’s talk about Edward, they appear to understand this practice of restraint from violence as a marker of love. While populist thought might see this as a positive viewpoint for young men to hold, I argue that it is decidedly problematic when one considers how young men grapple with what they think (hetero)romantic love is and how they think boyfriends and girlfriends should act.

By praising Edward’s displays of restraint, young men appear to support hegemonic versions of masculinity (Schippers 94) that are based on men being “naturally” aggressive and violent, yet showing love by exerting control and will-power within their gendered performances as boyfriends. This contradictory understanding may, in turn, have implications for how young men think girlfriends should act. By applying Schippers’ (94) definition of hegemonic femininity to young men’s views on Edward, it can be argued that when boyfriends are exalted for showing love by displaying paternalistic control and will-power, girlfriends are exalted as feminine – and therefore deemed lovable – when they complement these masculine performances. This suggests that being vulnerable and thus dependent on their boyfriends’ ability to be protective and self-controlled is one way that girlfriends can legitimately perform hegemonic femininity. In these circumstances, their physical safety can be read as dependent on the young men they are romantically involved with, who are exalted as “good” boyfriends when showing restraint from being violent.

That young men evoked this understanding to explain why Edward was a good boyfriend is also concerning in light of the frequency by which men use violence within their (hetero)romantic relationships. For example, in Aotearoa/New Zealand, it is predicted that 33 per cent of women will experience some form of physical or sexual violence from a (hetero)romantic partner (Leask 1). As Towns and Adams argue, men who are violent towards their (hetero)romantic partners often take on “dual” identities: what they call the “beast-prince” (564-68). Edward Cullen is a prime example of this. For example, he “splits” (Towns and Adams 566) between being Bella’s exceptional Prince Charming (Murphy 57), whose intense love for her is enduring and forever, and being the most violent and possessive “person” Bella has ever met. His displays of restraint further feed into this dualism. He is violently desirous of Bella, but shows an inordinate amount of restraint because of his love for her and deep fear of actually hurting her. This dynamic imbues Edward with qualities such as unpredictability, volatility, and intensity, which feminists for four decades have argued are critical risk markers for relationships becoming violent (Dobash and Dobash 75-96; Sev’er 80-103; Towns and Adams 564-75). Young men praising the restraint Edward showed in not harming or killing Bella suggests that during our discussions, they normalized dangerous (hetero)romantic relationships marked by men’s unpredictably, volatility and intensity.

These young men’s understanding of this relationship between femininity and masculinity was further complicated when they argued that Bella, knowing that Edward was a vampire, provoked his violent tendencies. One pivotal and emotionally-charged scene in the film involves Bella trying to persuade Edward to confess to being a vampire. One young man spoke to this repeatedly, with reference again to Edward showing restraint: “When they

were up at the back of the school, up the mountain and she um she believed that he would show restraint and she kept egging him on...he was trying to get away and she was egging him on...Yes, cos he, after she was egging him on he, was, finally learnt that he could show restraint against her". This response clearly positions Bella as provoking Edward's violent tendencies, effectively exonerating Edward's volatility and violent intentions. Another participant from a different focus group argued that Bella had "lost all reasoning" by deciding to start a relationship with him. Here, Bella is being blamed for the potentially dangerous situation that could have unfolded.

These findings resonate with findings of existing studies (McCarry 2009, 340; McCarry 2010, 26-27; McCarry and Lombard 136-140; Sundaram 898-900; Towns and Scott 46-50): that young men (and women) often explain women's provocation – a key victim-blaming narrative – as causing men to be violent. Of these studies, only Towns and Scott's (2008) work looked in depth at how young men engage with themes of provocation when in a male-to-male group context. My empirical evidence is valuable because it adds to this study, confirming that young men do talk in this way among one another. I also hope to add further depth to this argument by engaging with Schippers' (95) work around pariah femininities. As mentioned, two of my participants positioned Bella's early interactions with Edward as "provoking" and "irrational". By being "provoking" and "irrational", Bella ceases being vulnerable and passive in relation to Edward and, instead, displays aggressive and headstrong qualities. When embodied by Edward, these qualities are praised as characteristics of hegemonic masculinity, but when embodied by Bella, young men see these as contaminating the hegemonic order of gendered identities (Schippers 95).

I argue that young men's pariah-talk about Bella suggests how they may think more generally about what gendered roles should look like in (hetero)romantic relationships. For example, the young men in my study appear to think that a "good" boyfriend (emulated in Edward's character) should command authority and control over a vulnerable and compliant girlfriend. By positioning Bella in these moments as a pariah, they additionally suggest that a boyfriend's ability to be oppressive is threatened when his girlfriend is headstrong and aggressive, in turn indicating that young women should not challenge their boyfriends' dominant status in the relationships. By picking up on an earlier theme in this article, it can also be concluded that women who do challenge their boyfriends' status may risk being deemed unlovable, a threat that could further restrict what women feel they can do within their (hetero)romantic relationships. In accordance with Schippers' (95) work on pariah femininities, pariah talk – as seen in young men's talk about Bella – is an effective way of stigmatizing and punishing young women who go against and therefore threaten this hegemonic order.

In an interesting contradiction, however, young men were also significantly vocal about Edward's more "creepy" attributes. These comments arose from a broader discussion in each focus group about the more negative qualities that boyfriends can possess. I received a range of encouraging suggestions: men only being interested in sex and "one night stands", men being violent towards their girlfriends, men cheating on their girlfriends, and men controlling their girlfriends in ways that isolate them from their friends and restrict their movements. My participants also readily and repeatedly engaged with rhetoric that overt physical violence towards women was unacceptable.

Young men across all three focus groups talked about what they saw as Edward's more harmful performances as Bella's boyfriend. Namely, they drew on the ways he

restricted Bella's movements and his "creepy" practices, such as entering her bedroom at night and watching her sleep without her knowing. Here, is a conversation I had with the young men from one of my focus groups:

Christina: So tell me again, what are the bad things about being protective?
Hubert?

Hubert: Because like the girl or woman might not be able to do what she wants...she could be talking to an old friend or something and he could get over-protective and just push him out of the way and stuff like that.

Christina: And that happens in the film of course, as that happens with Jacob, um, Levi?

Levi: She would feel it's a bit creepy that he's constantly following her and watching over her and that.

Ivan: Like every person needs their own space, like if an over-protective, they are always around you watching everything you do, that's a bit weird.

In another focus group, our discussions about Edward's control of Bella also led young men to talk more generally about how they made sense of these types of (hetero)romantic control in their own lives:

Christina: OK, so protective means a little bit controlling, yeah?

Sergei: Yeah, jealous.

David: Yeah sorta like clingy, it's just like having to watch over them all the time, you don't really, you give them, um what's the, what's the...

Sergei: Impression?

David: The impression you don't trust them.

I would like to give specific analytical focus to David's use of the word "clingy" because of what it suggests about young men's understanding of being boyfriends that has not been covered before in existing literature.

On the surface, this talk indicates that young men view these types of controlling and jealous practices as negative for boyfriends to engage in. Adams' *Masculine Empire: How Men Use Violence to Keep Women in Line* presents a similar finding. His research provides compelling critique of men's homosocial talk about their (hetero)romantic partners, exposing how men's violence against and control of known women is often presented as acceptable in mates' banter with one another (123-33). However, Adams found that there were limits to what was deemed acceptable (174-81). When a man engaged in more severe

forms of intimate partner violence, his mates condemned his actions and equated these degrees of violence as something deviant – something that a “bad man” does (Adams 178). I hope to extend this argument, however, by providing a different evaluation of what may be at play within comments like David’s that position depictions of oppressive controlling boyfriends as deviant. Using Schippers’ (96) framework, labelling a young man “clingy” could imply that he is engaging in deviant performances associated with male femininities. Alek and Demetri from the third focus group also talked of a young man who is controlling and jealous as “clingy”. Alek gave the example of a boyfriend who would “draw her [his girlfriend] away from her friends”. A “clingy” boyfriend therefore appears to be overly invested and dependent on his girlfriend, which could be interpreted as him showing vulnerability and weakness.

Intriguingly, Alek also described these kinds of performances by Edward as being “pussy” acts, which further suggests a feminizing process at play. “Pussy” is a decidedly derisive label that, when used to describe a man, signals his engagement in feminized practices. This is an interesting finding as scholarship has tended to talk of these acts of male aggression and possessiveness within (hetero)romantic relationships – for example, as depicted in Evan Stark’s conceptualisation of coercive control – as gendered masculine acts of control that limit women’s ability to live autonomously (171-290). However, I found that young men feminized these practices. This suggests that boyfriends like Edward who are seen to control their girlfriends too much and are jealous about their interactions with other young men are engaging in practices of male femininity. Here, young men specifically interpreted elements of Edward’s control as a weakness because it made him dependent on Bella.

I suggest that young men’s use of feminizing labels like “clingy” and “pussy” serve the hegemonic order that genders identities by stigmatising boyfriends who break the rules of hegemonic masculinity within (hetero)romantic relationships. According to young men’s interpretations of Edward, boyfriends who obey the dictates of hegemonic masculinity should not appear dependent and vulnerable: these traits are requirements of “good” girlfriends. Men who oppress their girlfriends in these ways are deviant because these behaviours threaten the ascendancy of hegemonic masculinity. Therefore, while young men on the whole seemed to praise many of Edward’s acts of (hetero)romance that subordinated Bella, they criticized him for showing too much control when it threatened the ascendancy of hegemonic masculinity. What this suggests is that boyfriends should maintain idealized amounts of control and dominance over their girlfriends by carefully adhering to the rules of the hegemonic order that gender identities in their lives.

Conclusion

While the popular romance may be traditionally targeted towards female audiences, when asked, male audience members actually can have a lot to say about the gendered performances within these texts. By talking with a group of 16-year-old young men from Aotearoa/New Zealand about *Twilight* and Edward Cullen, I was able to garner insights into how they decoded hegemonic messages within the film about the rules of (hetero)romance and being boyfriends. I argue that these insights, although largely connected to young men’s

talk about Edward Cullen, speak more broadly to how they make sense of gender and oppression within (hetero)romantic relationships.

With this said, there are a number of avenues for future research based on the findings discussed in this article. Although the young men in my study did talk about a few of Bella's performances of (hetero)romance (for example, that she was deviant because she provoked Edward's violent tendencies),[8] it would be valuable to take this further and ask young men in more detail what they thought of how she gendered her interactions with Edward. For example, was Bella a "good" girlfriend and in what ways? In what ways could Bella have been a "better" girlfriend and why? It would be valuable to showcase these narratives in comparison to the ones outlined in this article in order to give a more complete picture of how young men make sense of (hetero)romance within *Twilight*.

In keeping with this idea, it would be valuable to replicate this study in two different ways to delve deeper into how young people make sense of gendered roles within (hetero)romantic relationships. Firstly, it would be useful to see what young women (from a similar geographical location and age group to the respondents in this study) thought of both Edward's performances of paternalism and control, as well as their male counterparts' views about what a "good" boyfriend should and should not do. For example, how would young women react to young men's beliefs that girlfriends should be vulnerable and in need of protecting by a (hetero)romantic partner? Secondly, this study did not take into account class and ethnic variations of how young men made sense of *Twilight*. The young men in my study were predominantly pākehā[9] and from a prosperous farming community. How, for example, would young men from ethnic minorities (like Aotearoa/New Zealand's indigenous Māori people) and/or lower-class groups decode Edward's performances as a boyfriend, seeing that Edward was both white and very wealthy?

Therefore, in summary, by using Edward Cullen as an example of what a boyfriend can look like, I was able to generate talk with young men about depictions of (hetero)romance within the film, but also more broadly about what boyfriends should be able to act like in their relationships with women. In moving forward there are opportunities to use this research premise and broaden the scope of fieldwork to continue this important dialogue about how young men (and women) react to and take meaning from the popular romance.

[1] For methodological reasons (see section "Young men reading the romance" for more detail) I used the film version of *Twilight* as opposed to discussing the novel version with my participants. For this reason, I will only refer to the film *Twilight* throughout this article. I do acknowledge, however, that the novel written by Stephanie Meyer was the original text and therefore preceded the film.

[2] Kamblé argues these depictions are likely a response to "social anxiety" (124) about homosexuality and gay rights.

[3] For this article, all of my participants have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

[4] Quoted from the film *Twilight* (2008).

[5] Quoted from the film *Twilight* (2008).

[6] Quoted from the film *Twilight* (2008).

[7] As previously mentioned, James was another vampire who wanted to kill Bella.

[8] Although outside the scope of this article, it is important to note here that some of my participants also thought that Bella was sexually deviant because she was willing to engage in sexual practices with a “non-human”.

[9] Pākehā is a term specific to Aotearoa/New Zealand. It is an ethnicity marker that literally means Non-Māori. I use it here to describe “white” New Zealand young men.

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