

From Brand to Genre: The Hallmark Movie

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Andrea Braithwaite¹

Abstract

Hallmark movies are a hit. While most broadcast networks in the United States and Canada are struggling to maintain an audience, Hallmark has launched three additional cable networks and services in the past four years. Much of this success can be attributed to Hallmark's investment—both ideological and economic—in the made-for-TV movie, a form of programming that Hallmark has re-popularized and re-branded—and transformed into a genre. To work through my suggestion that we consider the Hallmark movie as a genre, in the same way we can speak productively about the Western or the buddy cop film, I examine: the structure and content of the Hallmark movie formula; the movies' use of studio system-style production practices; and fan discourses and fan-made content. In re-visiting the Hallmark made-for-TV movie as a genre, we can gain greater insight into how both genres and media companies are navigating the digital media environment.

Keywords

brand, emotion marketing, genre, Hallmark, made-for-TV movie

In December 2018, humor website McSweeney's Internet Tendency posted its "Guidelines for Female Protagonists in Hallmark Christmas Movies." The tongue-in-cheek advice includes having "a serendipitous encounter with a generically good-looking young man from her past," doing "that thing her town has done every year since its founding," and "jump[ing] to conclusions (i.e., I should never have believed in love!)" (Trebenski 2018).

¹Ontario Tech University, Oshawa, Canada

Corresponding Author:

Andrea Braithwaite, Ontario Tech University, c/o Ontario Tech University, 2000 Simcoe St N, Oshawa, ON L1G 0C5, Canada
Email: andrea.braithwaite@ontariotechu.ca

Lampooning character types, locations, and narrative events, these guidelines demonstrate the recognizability and predictability of Hallmark movies. Broadcast in ever-increasing numbers during its “Countdown to Christmas” programming, which launches each October across Hallmark’s multiple television channels and rebroadcast during the summer for “Christmas in July,” the made-for-TV romance movies have become a North American pop culture phenomenon and a runaway ratings success. While most American television broadcast networks are struggling to find and keep audiences amidst the rise of streaming services, Hallmark Media (Hallmark’s entertainment division; formerly Crown Media) has only expanded, adding two more channels to its roster: Hallmark Movies & Mysteries in 2004, and Hallmark Drama in 2017. Made-for-TV movies anchor all of these channels year-round; Hallmark now produces between eighty and one hundred new movies per year to keep its channels stocked. Each new addition features the same tropes McSweeney’s mocks in the company’s Christmas-themed installments, and many are now oriented around other seasons or celebrations like summertime or Valentine’s Day, making these movies a fitting example of what Neale ([1980] 2021, chap. 4) describes as the hallmark of a film genre: difference in repetition.

What can we learn about contemporary media production and reception by approaching the Hallmark movie as a genre rather than a branded product? I start by reviewing the history of Hallmark Media and the Hallmark Channel to establish a clear timeline of the company’s move into television programming. I then look closely at what comprises the Hallmark movie formula. This helps us understand how Hallmark movies are made and how the company exerts control over key elements of the creative and production processes to ensure that each of its made-for-TV movies offers the same feel-good experience. I also examine audience responses to Hallmark movies to see how viewers make sense of them *as* Hallmark movies. In translating its brand into a movie formula, the company has created an endlessly recombinant set of character types, iconography, and storylines that help distinguish the Hallmark movie and its platforms from romantic comedies and Hollywood more broadly. By exploring Hallmark movies’ history, production, and reception we can more carefully consider the implications of treating them as a distinct and distinctive storytelling form, and revisit some of the assumptions we may hold about how genres work in film and television.

A Brief History of the Hallmark Channel

Hallmark’s three television channels are run by Hallmark Media, the entertainment arm of Hallmark Cards, Inc. Founded in 1910 to sell greeting cards, the family-owned Hallmark has steadily branched out to other retail avenues, including gifts and party supplies, stationery, keepsakes, and television programming. While the latter may seem like an unusual move for a greeting card company, Hallmark’s now-retired senior management Robinette and Brand (2001) explain that it is “evidence of the powerful emotional component embedded in the brand’s Equity [sic]. When companies achieve this emotional breadth, they can take brand extensions into unexpected and amazingly

profitable territory” (p. 54). Hallmark’s founding vision about the “value of expressing emotion in building and maintaining relationships” has become its primary branding strategy, directing its business ventures including its move into media entertainment (Robinette and Brand 2001, 15).

The Hallmark Channel debuted in 2001, and Hallmark Media “made deal with all the major [American] distributors so that the channel appeared in standard cable television line-ups” by 2003 (Newman and Witsell 2020, 4). Previously the Odyssey Network, which ran primarily religious programming (and in which Hallmark held significant stakes), the rebranded channel broadcast syndicated content like *Little House on the Prairie* (NBC 1974-1983), *Matlock* (NBC/ABC 1986-1995), and *The Lone Ranger* (ABC 1949-1957), with a smattering of original material including the occasional made-for-TV movie that usually aired around Christmas (Newman and Witsell 2020, 4). When the company’s second channel—the Hallmark Movie Channel—launched in 2004, it initially followed this same programming pattern while expanding its roster of upbeat and uplifting movies purchased from small, independent production companies. By 2009, the Hallmark Channel had enough to fill its first “Countdown to Christmas” event, and later reproduced this success with its “Christmas in July” programming beginning in 2013. One of the most significant developments for the Hallmark movie was the formation of Crown Media Productions in 2015 (now Hallmark Media); this newly-formed production company gave Hallmark creative and economic control over all steps of the made-for-TV movie process. Hallmark quickly made the most of its in-house production capacity with the development of additional themed movie blocks beginning in early 2016, including “Winterfest,” “Loveuary,” “Spring Fling,” “Summer Nights,” and “Fall Harvest.” This investment in made-for-TV movie production accompanied other lucrative brand endeavors: from 2015 to 2016, Hallmark established its Home and Gifts line of home décor, and also opened two new Crayola Experience locations in Orlando, Florida and at Minnesota’s Mall of America.

Hallmark’s economic and ideological commitment to emotion-driven branding continues: in 2017 Hallmark Media launched its third television channel Hallmark Drama, as well as a subscription-based app Hallmark Movies Now, and its new publishing house Hallmark Publishing released its first book. In 2018 Hallmark Media added its Hallmark Channel Radio to the Sirius XM line-up and its official podcast *Bubbly Sesh* appeared across app stores; Hallmark Movies Now started streaming a limited amount of app-only content in 2019, though Hallmark Media’s CEO Wonya Lucas insists the television channels currently remain the company’s top priority (Goldberg 2021). The history of Hallmark Media and Hallmark’s television channels is one of determined movement toward full control over both production and distribution. Unlike the wider transnational media landscape, in which massive take-overs and buy-outs are the more common strategy for vertical and horizontal integration, Hallmark is expanding from within and using the momentum of its “emotion marketing”—“the effective creation, utilization, delivery, or exchange of emotional value”—to guide its growth both within and beyond its broadcast television networks (Lenz 2001, xiv).

The Hallmark Movie Story Structure

A simple, specific formula ensures that Hallmark's made-for-TV movies stay on-brand. Each Hallmark movie follows the same nine act structure, which "function[s] to produce regularized variety" (Neale [1980] 2021, chap. 4). Walter Metz marvels at how "[g]iven the demands of the Hallmark Channel's marketing of the films as light-hearted, inspirational dramas, the scripts are incredibly tightly constrained. And yet, each film has to be distinctive at the same time" (Metz 2018). Advice to aspiring Hallmark scriptwriters for how to master this requirement includes watching as many Hallmark movies as possible to get a feel for this pattern, and even using a stopwatch to mark the precision with which important narrative moments appear (ProPath Screenwriting 2020). Key emotional and eventful moments are earmarked for specific acts: the lead characters' meet cute happens in Act One; Act Four ends with a deeply affective lingering look and confessional exchange of past personal experiences. While the budding romance seems irreparably damaged in Act Eight, the romantic leads inevitably reconcile in Act Nine.

This story structure is designed to drive attention to characters and circumstances that fit the brand; the brand becomes these kinds of characters and circumstances. For example, *The Kiss*—the anticipated apothecotic embrace that signals the couple's new-found happiness—comes in the final few minutes of Act Nine, ensuring that all Hallmark movies are chaste explorations of the couple's emotional and not sexual compatibility, anchoring the "brand identity [as] distinctly, and strategically, one of emotion" (Robinette and Brand 2001, 46). Character types are similarly consistent across individual movies: women are strong, independent, and friendly; men are gruffly affectionate, and neither are ever cruel. In Hallmark movies there are no bad people, just bad matches.

Character evolution drives the Hallmark movie's narrative trajectory. Romantic leads are only able to truly connect with each other after they grow as individuals; their capacity for self-reflection guarantees their happily ever after. Protagonists grapple with "Hallmark-level peril"—ordinary, relatable stressors like job security, a past failed romance, and family friction—which they must overcome both logistically and emotionally (ProPath Screenwriting 2021). Hallmark movies' "events" are narratively significant only insofar as they are affectively significant, in keeping with how the company's branding insists that all products "be rooted in emotion, addressing people's most basic, common needs, such as security, happiness, and love" (Robinette and Brand 2001, 45). Similarly, Hallmark movie conflicts are "emotional collisions": different perspectives and goals that need to be reckoned with before the couple can get together for good, most (in)famously centering on what counts as career success—and if it could ever be as fulfilling as successful interpersonal relationships. Such narrow parameters ensure that each Hallmark movie *feels* like every other one. While wannabe Hallmark writers are assured that the company is open to moving beyond this formula, this reassurance references "new" Hallmark stories like *Two For The Win* (2021) in which the guy (and not the gal) returns to *his* small town to learn that worldwide acclaim isn't as emotionally

satisfying as the connections with family and friends who know the real him, from before he was famous (ProPath Screenwriting 2020).

While this might seem like a limited understanding of how to innovate on a formula, it is emblematic of the Hallmark made-for-TV movie genre and a core part of how Hallmark Media manages to produce so many movies each year. The key is *modularity*: the formula rests upon a familiar set of characters, contexts, and choices which can be swapped in and out as the narrative—and the channel’s broadcast schedule—demands. Just like how flipping from “big-city gal” to “big city guy” is perceived as an inflection of the formula, so too is flipping from springtime to wintertime: both are tweaks that result in a “different” movie and part of the “precise economy of difference” that brings the movies together as a genre (Neale [1980] 2021, chap. 4). In order for a Hallmark script to succeed it needs to keep this interchangeability in mind, for as I emphasize in the upcoming discussion of the movies’ fans: “it is the predictable element that keeps people watching” (McClanahan 2020, 129). In this way, Hallmark made-for-TV movies help us rethink another familiar insight in genre studies: that a successful genre film is one that extends or exceeds the formula. As Frow (2015) explains, “Texts are acts or performances which work upon a set of generic raw materials. The relationship is one of productive elaboration rather than of derivation or determination” (p. 25). The coherence of the Hallmark movie genre, in contrast, comes from how each instance remains carefully *inside* the formula.

Making a Hallmark Movie

Hallmark Media’s focus on a single formula for its made-for-TV movies has resulted in the rapid production of a large set of affectively and narratively consistent texts. The company’s careful control over all stages of scriptwriting and shooting ensures that each movie manifests the same thematic, narrative, and character goals to maintain the genre’s “lighthearted” and “feel-good” tone. Ruminating on Hallmark’s massive Christmas movie output, Metz (2018) notes that “[s]tartlingly, the Hallmark Christmas movies rely on the production mechanisms of the Classical Hollywood Cinema”. Here, Metz is making comparisons to the studio system that dominated Hollywood filmmaking from the 1920s to the 1950s—often called the Golden Age of Hollywood—in which movie studios adopted strategies like signing actors and directors to contracts for a number of films at a time (instead of one contract per film), and filming solely on sets rather than traveling to various locations; like actors and directors, these sets were often used in multiple films. These choices “provide[d] a consistent system of production and consumption, a set of formalized creative practices and constraints, and thus a body of work with a uniform style—a standard way of telling stories, from camera work and cutting to plot structure and thematics” (Schatz 1988, 8–9; see also Douglas and Gomery 2005).

Hallmark’s movie-making relies on many of these same tactics today. Hallmark makes the most of its shoestring budgets (\$2.5–3 million USD per movie) by using the same locations and props for many different movies, and regularly films in Canada to take advantage of the country’s generous tax incentives (Braithwaite 2022). Hallmark also books its actors to blocks of films and hires the same directors, producers, and

production teams over and over again. This helps Hallmark maintain short and efficient shooting schedules: Hallmark Media knocks out a made-for-TV movie in fifteen days, and the tight timeline is made easier when you have a creative team accustomed to the company's routine. In contrast to the studio system, however, working conditions on set are reportedly more flexible, with many actors quick to praise the company for its commitment to work/life balance (Ng 2019). The repetitive nature of the movies themselves also streamlines the filmmaking process, for the team's familiarity with the rhythm of the formula keeps everyone on track (ProPath Screenwriting 2020).

Another way in which Hallmark diverges from the studio system is its forms of distribution. Classical Hollywood's film studios owned their own movie theater chains, giving them great control (and little competition) over where and how their films were seen. Hallmark's three channels are distributed by cable TV services, meanwhile, into which Hallmark has no input. And while the fledgling Hallmark Movies Now app is under Hallmark Media's control, it is just one of a growing number of subscription-based streaming services, many of which—like Netflix and Amazon Prime—also offer original programming, including romcoms. To stay competitive, even Hallmark Media CEO Wonya Lucas treats the brand as a kind of genre, proclaiming: "There is something about a Hallmark Channel movie that is pretty iconic . . . We are different than all those other movies . . . You can try to do the same movie, you can put it on any other service, but it doesn't have the brand" (quoted in Goldberg 2021).

The movies maintain their iconicity by being iterations of an approved formula and not creative authorial projects. From first pitch to final draft, Hallmark Media treats each stage of the scriptwriting process as a discrete project completable by a competent, contracted writer; writers who hew to the formula and complete rewrites in a timely fashion can find themselves on the list of folks likely to land such a contract in the future. So while Neale ([1980] 2021, chap. 4) has asked critics and audiences to move away from the "often used argument that there is a built-in tendency toward genre in the very pressures for profitability," we can see that economic considerations are part of what makes the Hallmark movie genre possible, accessible, and popular. The interchangeability of tropes, scenery, and even writers suggests that the driving force behind the genre is Hallmark itself.

Hallmark Fans and Followers

Even as Neale ([1980] 2021, chap. 4) would like us to discard the perception that "genres are created simply by repeating the formulas marking those individual films which happen to have been financially successful," Hallmark made-for-TV movies' formulaic structure is a defining element for their fandom and fan communities. In the Reddit online community *r/HallmarkMovies*, for instance, a thread titled "The Hallmark Movie plot structure," features poster *u/Suspicious_Day_6161* offering "my take on the typical Hallmark movie plot structure. . . It's formulaic, but gotta love 'em!" They break the plot down into nine pieces like "The Chance Encounter!" and "The Misunderstanding!" which neatly tracks with the format delineated in Hallmark scriptwriting seminars. The comment section is filled with participants cheerily piling on other common tropes, like *u/Phifty2*'s "At some point someone will say 'You two

are an adorable couple!’ And the leads will stumble over themselves to say ‘Oh we’re not a couple.’” u/Goulet231 adds: “The Dance! It always includes a dip or a twirl,” and u/Saph83 chimes in with “You forgot the long-term but superficial boyfriend that obviously isn’t right for her that dumps her right before her trip to small town, fake European Town etc.” (r/HallmarkMovies 2020).

We can see the significance of being able to recognize the movie formula in fan-made media as well. One of the most popular Hallmark fan podcasts, *Deck the Hallmark*, has started its own fan awards show The Deckies, which doles out kudos for things like best plot hole and best couple dance—the same sorts of devices fans delight in discussing across online community spaces. Another podcast, *Hallmarkies*, has put together a set of downloadable bingo cards filled with squares like a “community holiday event,” a “big misunderstanding,” and “dating the wrong guy/girl” (Hallmarkies Podcast 2002). Fan-made drinking game instructions circulate widely on social media, and are even picked up by established media outlets (see, e.g., Webster 2017). The premise—taking a sip of your drink anytime the movie includes one of the tropes on the homemade list—presumes the audience finds pleasure in watching and waiting specifically for these stock characters, events, and settings.

These instructions resemble another viral fan creation: the Hallmark movie plot generator. Often with color-coded columns for categories like protagonist, catalyst, and love interest, the mix-and-match approach of these plot generators emphasizes the modularity of Hallmark movies’ generic elements (See Figure 1). The made-for-TV movies’ predictability also lends itself especially well to parody, and the continued popularity of Hallmark’s television and streaming services has been accompanied by increasingly high-profile send-ups of its content. For example, the thirteenth season of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (2021) features the episode “RuPaulmark Channel,” in which the series’ contestants act out campy and queer takes on the Hallmark movie.

An even more sustained satire is the 2021 feature-length film *A Clüsterfünke Christmas* (2021). Written by comedians and Saturday Night Live alumni Rachel Dratch and Ana Gasteyer, and airing on Comedy Central in December 2021, the movie turns many of the Hallmark movie staples into moments of absurdity. In a ribald riff on the genre, *Cup Of Cheer: An X-Mas Rated Comedy* (2020), directed by Jake Horowitz leans heavily on sexual and body humor, underscoring the centrality of modest romantic connections to the Hallmark genre. That Hallmark movies can be so easily and effectively parodied is another sign of the genre’s coherence, as Cawelti ([1978] 2003) explains:

One can almost make out a life cycle characteristic of genres as they move from an initial period of articulation and discover, through a phase of conscious self-awareness on the part of both creators and audiences, to a time when the generic patterns have become so well-known that people become tired of their predictability. It is at this point that parodic and satiric treatments proliferate and new genres gradually arise. ([1978] 2003, 260)

Cawelti’s observation that parodies indicate both solidity and stagnancy is particularly resonant for thinking about the future of the Hallmark movie—and how the genre is on the cusp of its own significant change.

Hallmark Christmas Movie Plot Generator

choose one from each column

Dist. by Universal Uclick © John Atkinson, Wrong Hands

big city	lawyer	returns to her small town at Christmas time	to inherit something	and magically falls in love	with a sensitive guy in plaid
career- oriented	writer		to enter a folksy contest		with an old flame
recently single	baker		to stop some corporate closure		with some guy and his dog
world weary	interior designer		to save the family business		with a single dad and his precocious child
with the wrong guy	early 2000s actor you forgot about		to appease their sassy friend or widowed parent		with Christmas, the town and some guy

...and also the only old man in town might actually be the real Santa Claus.

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Figure 1. A fan-made Hallmark Christmas movie plot generator (Wrong Hands 2019). It visualizes the recognizability and modularity of the Hallmark made-for-TV movie story structure. Reproduced with permission.

Expanding the Formula

With the recent ignominious departure of former Hallmark Media President and CEO Bill Abbott, Hallmark finds itself at a potential turning point in the use of its formula to scrip stories of who gets a happily ever after. In charge of Hallmark's entertainment division from 2009 to 2020, Abbott was a driving force behind the company's shift to studio-style production strategies, as well as the signature "Countdown to Christmas" programming event. Abbott stepped down from the post after widespread criticism of the Hallmark Channel's decision to pull—and then more criticism when it reinstated—an ad for a wedding planning site that featured a same-sex couple. Abbott has since formed his own media company GAC (Great American Channels) Media LLC., purchased two cable television channels, and rebranded them as GAC Family and GAC Living. Under Abbott's leadership, GAC Family is taking the same steps that helped Hallmark flourish: signing actors to exclusive, multi-film contracts; shooting on short deadlines and tight budgets; keeping characters and storylines tightly constrained. GAC currently appears committed to threading a heteronormative ideology throughout its made-for-TV romance movies, at least in the dozen it aired in the 2021 holiday season, and its promotional promises of "family friendly" fare, including "romcoms that celebrate faith, family and country" give little indication of forthcoming change (GAC Media 2022).

Hallmark, however, is attempting to grow its audience demographics in Abbott's wake: new Hallmark Media CEO Wonya Lucas "want[s] all viewers. We are the kind of brand that everybody should want to watch. That's my fantasy" (quoted in Goldberg 2021). Pointing to the past and present range of the company's other branded products—like greeting cards specifically for LGBTQ, Latinx, Jewish, and Black communities—Lucas insists Hallmark's "brand has inherently been very broad and very diverse and very accepting. So for me, the opportunity is to mirror the brand" (quoted in Goldberg 2021; see also Gidlow 2021). Hallmark Media's speedy production process makes it easy to catch up, and recent made-for-TV movies now include same-sex lead couples, like in *The Christmas House* (2020), *The Christmas House 2: Deck Those Halls* (2021), and *Love, Classified* (2022). Other new offerings continue to expand who Hallmark's movies are about: *Color My World With Love's* (2022) romantic leads both have Down syndrome; *Our Christmas Journey* (2021) features a Black actor with autism; and *Unthinkably Good Things* (2022) follows three Black leading women.

Given the corporate roots and boundaries of the Hallmark movie, this proliferation of sites for finding and diversifying such storylines is an interesting moment in what Cawelti ([1978] 2003, 260) calls the life cycle of a genre. GAC Family's replay of the genre's developmental stage suggests an attachment to it as a kind of sense-making—and money-making—formula. It has, to this point, been a surprising success for a primarily broadcast-only channel in the digital era. Whether the American cable television market will be able to sustain so many spaces for it remains to be seen. Hallmark's investment in additional access points for fans to enjoy its characteristic emotional experience—like the dedicated streaming app, the publishing house, and even Hallmark-branded wines—indicates the company is both cognizant of this potential saturation and still committed to the resonance of the formula itself.

Frow (2015) notes that regardless of how any scholar may theorize them, "[g]enre classifications are real. They have an organizing force in everyday life" (p. 14). We can see their impact in the viewing experience captured by @AlliMichalMoore's widely liked and (re)circulated 2017 tweet: "Does every Hallmark Christmas movie have the same plot? Yes. Am I still going to watch them and act surprised when Susan falls in love with the small-town baker who only wears sweaters instead of falling for the big city CEO? Yes" (Moore 2017). Over the past decade, Hallmark and its Hallmark Media entertainment division have engineered its movies into an organizing force for how many audiences plan and experience their holiday and leisure time—increasingly year-round, as the formula makes it simple to swap seasonal celebrations in and out as needed. Between resuscitating the studio system approach to filmmaking, systematizing the scriptwriting process, and structuring stories around easily interchangeable elements, the Hallmark made-for-TV movie is a rich argument for the resilience and flexibility of positive affect as a corporate practice when meeting the challenges and opportunities of the digital age.

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Author Biography

Andrea Braithwaite, Ph.D., is a Senior Teaching Professor in Communication and Digital Media Studies at Ontario Tech University. Her research examines gendered discourses of sociability and belonging in pop culture. She looks at women and crime in detection stories across media, especially Canadian media. She also discusses representations of and responses to feminist activism in online and gaming communities.