

“The Most Beautiful Thing in the World”: A Rhetorical Analysis of Relational Dialectics and Friendship in the Musical *Kinky Boots*

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Abstract

In this article, we examine Kinky Boots, a musical that won the Tony Award for Best Musical in 2013 and continues to win over audiences with its positive message about acceptance, as a rhetorical text through William K. Rawlins' theoretical construct of relational dialectics regarding friendship. Through rhetorical criticism as a research method, we apply Rawlins' concepts of political and personal friendships, as well as the dialectics of affection and instrumentality, expressiveness and protectiveness, judgment and acceptance, and the ideal and the real to examine notable relationships between characters in the musical. Specifically, we examine the relationships between Charlie and Nicola, Charlie and Lola, and Don and Lola. Through this analysis, we suggest that when participants in the musical's relationships fail to negotiate dialectic tensions, their relationships can resultantly cease to exist. We also note that the balance of relational dialectics appears to be conducive to healthy relationships. We posit that Kinky Boots provides theatre-goers with life lessons regarding relational dialectics that they can apply to their own real-life relationships, and that Kinky Boots may serve as an effective teaching tool for undergraduate students learning about relational dialectics.

Keywords: *Relational Dialectics, Friendship, Kinky Boots, Musical Theatre*

Introduction

Kinky Boots, a popular 2013 musical written by Harvey Fierstein and featuring music and lyrics by Cyndi Lauper, addresses themes of acceptance between two very different communities. It was based off a 2005 film of the same title, which was inspired by true events (“Kinky Boots Broadway,” n.d.). The musical debuted on Broadway at the Al Hirschfeld Theatre on April 3, 2013, where it remained until April 7, 2019, and received generally positive critical reviews. Ben Brantley (2013, April 4) of the *New York Times* offered glowing praise of Lauper’s lyrics, even though he criticized the show’s penchant for clichés. Thom Geier (2013, April 9) of *Entertainment Weekly* commended *Kinky Boots*, calling its debut “cause for celebration.” Marilyn Stasio (2013, April 4) of *Variety* praised Lauper’s “sequined score,” Jerry Mitchell’s choreography, and many of the performances, despite her critiques of the show’s “cheerfully inane book.” *Kinky Boots* was also successful at both the Tony Awards and the Olivier Awards. In 2013, *Kinky Boots* received six Tony Awards: Best Actor in a Musical (Billy Porter), Best Choreography, Best Orchestrations, Best Original Score, Best Sound Design of a Musical, and Best Musical (“Kinky Boots,” n.d.). In 2016, the British production received three Olivier Awards for Best New Musical, Best Actor in a Musical (Matt Henry), and Best Costume Design (Shenton, 2016, April 3). The show continues to be a fan favorite even after closing on Broadway in 2019 (“Kinky Boots,” n.d.), with many professional regional theatres looking to obtain the rights from Music Theatre International to produce their own productions once the Covid-19 pandemic ends.

The musical tells the story of Charlie Price, who inherits his family’s failing shoe factory in Northampton after his father’s death. Charlie returns to Northampton from London, where he lives with his fiancée Nicola and works in real estate, in an attempt to save the factory. While in

London, Charlie meets Lola, a flamboyant drag queen with a talent for designing footwear, and realizes that he may be able to save the factory by servicing the niche market of sturdy-yet-sexy footwear for drag queens. Charlie recruits Lola to design boots for the factory, but she is not readily accepted by the factory's employees, especially Don, who challenges Lola to a boxing match. Lola allows Don to win, and in exchange for sparing Don the embarrassment of losing, Lola challenges him to "accept someone for who they really are." As the factory employees plan to showcase their "kinky boots" at a fashion show in Milan, Charlie becomes increasingly demanding. He argues with Nicola, who ends their engagement, and he humiliates Lola in front of his staff, causing her to storm off. Don, who has accepted Lola's challenge to accept Charlie, convinces his team to work overtime and sacrifice a week's pay in preparation for the fashion show. Charlie apologizes to Lola via voicemail and travels to Milan. He is forced to walk the Milan runway by himself, but is redeemed by the arrival of Lola and her troupe, as well as the factory employees, who all model the footwear. At the end of the musical, the characters celebrate the success of their enterprise, their own uniqueness, and their ability to "change the world when [they] change [their] mind[s]."

In this article, we apply Rawlins' theoretical construct of relational dialectics and note how these dialectics relate to friendship in order to analyze relationships in *Kinky Boots*. For this study, we used the musical's 2013 Broadway script and the November 2018 recorded performance at the Adelphi Theatre as streamed on Broadway HD as our rhetorical text. *Kinky Boots* features a number of examples of political and personal friendships, as well as examples of the dialectic of the private and public, the dialectic of the ideal and real, the dialectic of the freedom to be independent and the freedom to be dependent, the dialectic of affection and instrumentality, the dialectic of judgment and acceptance, and the dialectic of expressiveness and

protectiveness. We specifically examine the relationships between Charlie and Nicola, Charlie and Lola, and Lola and Don. We suggest that *Kinky Boots* provides its audiences with lessons that can be applied to real-life relationships. By experiencing relational dialectics in fictional relationships in a musical, theatre-goers can introspectively examine how relational dialectics pertain to their own relationships. Furthermore, we posit that *Kinky Boots* may serve a pedagogical function in communication courses for students learning about relational dialectics. Due to the musical's popularity and ability to connect with young adults, *Kinky Boots* is well-suited to be a classroom teaching tool. We suggest that undergraduate students may be more inclined to discuss relational dialectics through a text like *Kinky Boots*, as it has the potential to minimize some of the discomfort they may feel in applying these concepts to their personal lives in a public setting.

Literature Review

This study utilizes the theoretical construct of relational dialectics as presented in two books by communication scholar William K. Rawlins: *Friendship Matters: Communication, Dialectics, and the Life Course* (1992) and *The Compass of Friendship: Narratives, Identities, and Dialogues* (2009). In the former book, Rawlins (1992) defines the relational dialectics of friendship. The latter book focuses on the dialectic of individuation and participation and classifies personal and political friendships (Rawlins, 2009).

We would be remiss not to mention the work of Leslie A. Baxter and Barbara M. Montgomery, who also studied relational dialectics. The dialectics Baxter and Montgomery (1996) describe include the dialectic of routine and novelty, the dialectic of connection and autonomy, and the dialectic of openness and privacy (pp. 3-17). Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) definitions are generally used to examine romantic relationships, while Rawlins' (1992;

2009) definitions are applied in the context of friendships. Although there are romantic relationships that develop in *Kinky Boots*, the relationships that we are studying in the musical are friendships (with the exception of the relationship between Charlie and Nicola), and for this reason, we chose to focus on the text's friendships using Rawlins' relational dialectics.

Rawlins (1992) introduces the concept of relational dialectics as a means of the "communicative management of friendship" (p. 7). He distinguishes between contextual relational dialectics and interactional relational dialectics. The dialectic of the private and the public and the dialectic of the ideal and real are classified as contextual dialectics, while the dialectic of the freedom to be independent and the freedom to be dependent, the dialectic of affection and instrumentality, the dialectic of judgment and acceptance, and the dialectic of expressiveness and protectiveness are classified as interactional dialectics (Rawlins, 1992, p. 7). Contextual relational dialectics stem from western cultural standards of communicating within friendships. The dialectic of the private and the public "articulates the tensions produced as experiences and behaviors of friendship transcend private and public realms" (Rawlins, 1992, p. 9). Rawlins (1992) states that friendship has a "marginal position" in relationships, as friendship does not possess the same legalities and intimacies as kinship and marriage (p. 9). He posits that friendships must be negotiated privately and cannot be forced. Although these negotiations are generally held in good faith, they can carry sinister notions, as in his example of suicide pacts (Rawlins, 1992, p. 9). The dialectic of the ideal and the real intersects expectation-versus-reality in friendships. Rawlins (1992) states that friendships can result in otherwise unanticipated communication situations, positive or negative (p. 11).

In his discussion of interactional dialectics, Rawlins (1992) defines codification as "the relationships among self's and others' behaviors and the meanings self and others assign to those

behaviors” (p. 15). He establishes that codification has a pivotal role in private negotiations of friendship. The relational dialectic of affection and instrumentality examines the “nature of caring for a friend as an end-in-itself and/or as a means-to-an-end” (Rawlins, 1992, p. 17). The relational dialectic of judgment and acceptance describes how friends examine which quirks make a friend endearing or repellent (Rawlins, 1992, p. 20). The relational dialectic of expressiveness and protectiveness explains the role of trust in communication between friends, specifically when friends withhold the truth to preserve feelings (Rawlins, 1992, p. 22).

In *The Compass of Friendship*, Rawlins (2009) acknowledges that we find comfort in friendships, and that sharing stories – which creates “co-knowledge” – encourages the development of friendships (p. 1). Rawlins (2009) notes the fluidity of friendships, stating that “friendships are questions of degree” (p. 13). He discusses the impact of communication on personal development and elaborates on contradictions in communication, such as the clashing of multiple possibilities during social interactions (p. 16). He acknowledges how participants in a friendship pick up on similarities and differences between each other, noting that “the similarities and differences that we select are inherently relational propositions” (Rawlins, 2009, p. 20).

Communication scholars have utilized Rawlins’ relational dialectics in their research in many different sub-disciplines of communication studies, particularly in health communication (Amati & Hannawa, 2013; Dean & Oetzel, 2014; Oetzel et al., 2015; Ohs et al., 2015; Toller, 2005) and instructional communication (O’Boyle, 2014; Striley, 2014). However, relational dialectics as a theoretical framework has rarely been used to study fictional texts. While a number of scholars have explored rhetorical messages in musical theatre (Brooks, 2018; Edney, 2007; Krasner, 1995; Morra, 2009; Symonds, 2009; Wolf, 2018), to date, few scholars have examined how relational dialectics are portrayed in musicals, the impact these portrayals may

have on theatre-goers, and how musicals may serve as teaching tools in communication courses. In 2013, Schrader used Rawlins' relational dialectics to study the musical *Wicked* to analyze the relationship between the musical's two main characters, Elphaba and G(a)linda. Schrader (2013) observed that although this is a fictional friendship, Elphaba and G(a)linda's participation in the relational dialectic of judgment and acceptance and their resultant loyalty to each other serves as a lesson for how audience members may wish to conduct their own friendships. Schrader (2013) further posits that upon applying Rawlins' relational dialectics to a text, we can see how friendships are sometimes more impactful than romantic relationships. Bachert and Schrader (2017) applied relational dialectics to the musical *Ragtime*, studying four of the text's fictional relationships before discussing discernable takeaways from the portrayal of these relationships, notably the pivotal role of the relational dialectic of dependence and independence.

Furthermore, there have been few studies that have examined how the connections between communication theories and musical theatre may serve a pedagogical function. In their article applying Burkean dramatism to the musical *Little Women*, Beasley & Beasley (2016) suggested that dramatism can be used for character analysis to help students understand their characters better in theatre courses. Similarly, in her article applying social constructionism to the song "Wonderful" in the musical *Wicked*, Schrader (2011) proposed that the song be used to teach social constructionism in communication theory courses. Our study aims to contribute to the body of literature on relational dialectics as they pertain to rhetorical analysis of fictional relationships; we also seek to contribute to the body of literature on how theatre may serve as a pedagogical tool for teaching communication theories to undergraduate students.

Analysis

This analysis observes instances of Rawlins' relational dialectics, as well as political and personal friendships, as seen in the relationships between the characters in the musical *Kinky Boots*. We specifically analyze the relationships between Charlie and Nicola, Charlie and Lola, and Don and Lola to observe instances in which the partners must manage or negotiate relational dialectics. We selected these three relationships because they experience the most conflict in the musical, and because they represent different types of relationships: a longstanding romantic relationship, a new friendship, and an antagonistic relationship that later becomes a friendship through open-mindedness and understanding.

Charlie and Nicola

Of the three relationships we observe in *Kinky Boots*, the only one that is a romantic relationship is that of Charlie and Nicola. Charlie's relationship with Nicola presumably began as personal, but we see their relationship shift to become more political, ultimately resulting in their separation. Though the audience is made aware that Nicola and Charlie have been together for quite a while, it seems that the characters want different things from the moment they are introduced on stage. When Nicola is introduced, she is swooning over a pair of shoes said by Charlie to cost "three month's rent" (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 8). Nicola tells Charlie, "If you want to slip a ring on my finger, you'll first slip these shoes on my feet" (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 7). Here we see the relational dialectic of affection and instrumentality introduced. Nicola's statement references both oppositions of the dialectic, as she expects Charlie's instrumentality in paying an exorbitant price for her shoes while also offering affection in their upcoming marriage. Her statement foreshadows that this dialectic will be one that the characters will struggle with later in the musical.

In the following scene, Nicola and Charlie find themselves in a “dirty and small and dreary” flat in London (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 11). Nicola is delighted because they are in London, but Charlie is less than enthusiastic. The relational dialectic of expressiveness and protectiveness can be observed as Charlie feigns excitement for his new metropolitan lifestyle. In the script, the stage directions suggest Charlie’s dissatisfaction, instructing the actor who plays him to deliver his lines “meekly” (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 11). In the Adelphi Theatre performance we observed on Broadway HD, Killian Donnelly, who plays Charlie, uses facial expressions to convey his discomfort in the flat, making it clear that Charlie is only staying in London for Nicola. Additionally, Charlie tells Nicola, “I’m happy if you’re happy,” despite evidence that Charlie feels regret in abandoning his family’s legacy, the shoe factory (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 11). Charlie is practicing protectiveness by withholding his true feelings regarding his new situation, whereas Nicola coaxes expressiveness with loaded questions like, “I’m ecstatic! Aren’t you?” (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 11). It isn’t until the very end of the musical that Charlie is finally expressive to Nicola. When Charlie mortgages the flat without telling Nicola, she angrily confronts him and accuses him of trying to be a hero. Charlie finally acknowledges that he wants to stay in his hometown and run the shoe factory, admitting to Nicola that “London was for you” (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 82).

The relational dialectic of judgment and acceptance also plays a pivotal role in the interactions between Charlie and Nicola. Nicola exhibits far more judgment than acceptance when presented with the notion of using the factory to produce shoes for drag queens rather than selling the factory to be converted into apartments. Nicola explains to Charlie that his father had approached a realtor months prior to his death to discuss the sale of the factory (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 55), and by revealing this painful truth, Nicola rejects Charlie’s plan, which he

presents for her acceptance. When he attempts to make the case for his own plan for the factory, Nicola snaps, “Are you deaf? Your father was cashing out! You owe him nothing. The prison door is open. You’re free, Charlie. All you need to do is walk away” (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 56). In the performance observed for this article, Cordelia Farnworth, who plays Nicola, delivers her lines with such vitriol that it makes it clear to the audience that Nicola’s view has no room for acceptance of Charlie’s new idea.

Additionally, the relational dialectic of judgment and acceptance can be observed when Nicola and Charlie separate. Nicola initially expresses acceptance in their terminal interaction, stating, “No one can ever say I didn’t stand by my man. And I’ll stand by you still if you give me but one reason” (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 82). In turn, Charlie expresses judgment, revealing that he has always disapproved of the London plan, which, in turn, is met with more judgment from Nicola. Nicola chides Charlie for “hankering to be a hero,” which is judgmental of his staunch position that he has an obligation to provide for his employees (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 83). The two ultimately favor judgment over acceptance, as Nicola returns to London and Charlie remains in Northampton to prepare for the Milan Fashion Show.

From this relationship, the audience can see that when one opposition in a dialectic is favored over another, the relationship can cease to exist. When used as an example in a communication studies course, students may recognize that Nicola and Charlie’s choice to favor one opposition in each dialectic over the other leaves little room for negotiation. Students may make connections between this relationship and personal relationships they have seen in real life, noting that negotiating tensions in a dialectic is essential to the survival of a relationship.

Charlie and Lola

The primary relationship in *Kinky Boots* is the unlikely friendship between Charlie and Lola, and there are elements of both personal and political friendship in their relationship. Initially, it appears that their friendship was only political; Charlie needed a way to save his factory and Lola wanted an opportunity for fame. The two saw their alliance as mutually beneficial, but not necessarily a friendship based on affection and caring for each other's well-being. The relational dialectic of affection and instrumentality can be observed in several instances throughout the development of Charlie's friendship with Lola. When Lola first comes to the factory in Northampton, she is only interested in a pair of shoes, and Charlie is only interested in creating a new product to keep his company afloat. At this point, there is no affection in their friendship, only instrumentality. Charlie crafts a burgundy boot for Lola, much to her chagrin, and she demonstrates a passion for designing her own boots (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, pp. 35-40). Charlie displays affection for Lola by praising her knack for design, dispelling her self-deprecation by telling her, "You are passionate about shoes. I haven't heard anyone talk about a heel that way since... not since my father" (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 42). At this point, Charlie's affection is only to solicit Lola's cooperation. If Charlie can persuade Lola, she will potentially save the factory by designing desirable boots. The friendship begins as a political friendship rooted in mutual instrumentality, but later morphs into a personal friendship that illustrates and negotiates the dialectic of affection and instrumentality.

At the end of Act 1, Charlie and Lola are able to develop a more personal friendship by commiserating over feelings of reproach from their fathers through the song "I'm Not My Father's Son." In this song, they learn that they have more in common than they thought, and this shared experience creates a bond, which forms a personal friendship. The interweaving of their

voices illustrates this connection: Lola begins the song as a solo, with Charlie coming in towards the end, and the two swap voice parts so that each character takes a turn as the tenor and the bass. The switching of voice parts suggests that the characters are intertwined, both as friends and because of their shared experiences. As Lola notes, “We’re the same, Charlie boy, you and me” (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 53). By finding common ground with one another, Charlie and Lola’s political friendship becomes a personal one.

Throughout the musical, we can see examples of the relational dialectic of judgment and acceptance between Charlie and Lola. The previously mentioned number “I’m Not My Father’s Son” highlights the moment that Lola and Charlie opt for acceptance over judgment. Prior to this, in their first encounter, Charlie is uncomfortable when he finds himself the employer and potential friend of a drag queen. According to the musical’s script, he recoils at Lola’s touch and flees when she winks at him (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, pp. 24-26). In the Adelphi Theatre performance, Killian Donnelly’s body language makes it clear that Charlie is uncomfortable in the presence of Lola; he turns away from her and jerks at her touch.

Later, Charlie becomes especially judgmental of Lola’s decisions and rationality. In Act 2, he is outraged when she goes over his head to cancel the professional models and replace them with her troupe of drag performers (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, pp. 83-84). Charlie, who is stressed about the Milan fashion show and still reeling from his breakup with Nicola, lashes out at the Price and Son employees, including Lola. His judgment ultimately drives Lola away, as he refers to her and her troupe as “misfits” (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 85). In the end, Charlie is fully accepting of Lola and the drag community after they rescue him from humiliation at the Milan Fashion Show (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, pp. 97-104). The musical’s final number, “Raise You Up,” is a deliberate message about acceptance.

The relational dialectics in Charlie and Lola's relationship emphasize the benefits of balancing both contradictions in a dialectic. By dispelling judgment and fostering an environment of acceptance, both participants in this relationship acquire the rewards they sought. Theatre-goers and students alike may apply this lesson to their own relationships, noting that successful friendships require careful negotiation and balance of both oppositions of each dialectic.

Don and Lola

The third relationship we examined is the friendship that develops from the antagonistic relationship between Don and Lola. The most obvious relational dialectic that can be observed in interactions between Don and Lola is the relational dialectic of judgment and acceptance. Don is outspokenly bigoted towards Lola throughout the duration of the musical. When they first meet, Don mistakes Lola for a cis-gendered woman, calls her "sweetheart," and gets her to sit on his knee. When Lola makes it clear that she is a man in drag, Don reacts with horror. Don judges Lola, imploring her to "try dressing like a bloke" (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 63). Lola is also judgmental of Don, but in a less discriminatory, upfront manner. At first, she appears to enjoy shocking him, but she later cites Don as her reason for initially refusing Charlie's offer to be his designer, stating that Don is "just like every other man in Northampton" and "a stellar reminder why" she started a new life in London in the first place (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 41). Both characters are highly judgmental of each other, and there is little room for acceptance until the fight scene in Act 2, when Don challenges Lola to a fight after they argue over what it takes to be a "real man."

The fight scene changes the relationship between Don and Lola. Lola, whose father had trained her to be a professional boxer, has an advantage, but this is an advantage of which Don is

unaware. Though Lola initially begins to win, she allows Don to win the fight in order for him to save face and avoid ridicule from his coworkers. By doing so, Lola expresses what could be construed as affection for Don. Afterwards, Lola and Don have a drink at the pub, where Don acknowledges that Lola let him win. She explains her motives and presents her own challenge for him: to “accept someone for who they are” (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 91). Just as Lola expressed affection for Don by allowing him to win the fight, Don, in turn, expresses affection for Lola by accepting her challenge: Don chooses to accept Charlie, forgiving him for his outbursts and persuading his fellow workers to work overtime and give up a week’s pay in order to create the “kinky boots” that Charlie believes will save the business. Through Don and Lola’s negotiation of the dialectic of judgment and acceptance, *Kinky Boots* emphasizes its message about the value of accepting oneself and others.

The relational dialectic of the ideal and the real can also be observed in Don and Lola’s interactions. Don has clearly defined notions of how men and women ideally present themselves, whereas Lola challenges him with the reality that drag queens coexist with people who adhere to strict conservative societal norms. This debate comes to fruition in the tango dance number “What a Woman Wants.” As a tango, which is a rather combative dance style, the song illustrates the conflict between Don and Lola. Lola tangoes with the female factory employees while wearing the “kinky boots,” and she emphasizes that what women want is sensitivity, rather than the traditional masculinity for which Don advocates. Through “What a Woman Wants,” the female factory workers convey that the reality of what they want differs significantly from Don’s ideals (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, pp. 62-68). This contradiction of Don’s ideal with Lola’s real results in a strain on their relationship, as Don is humiliated by being proven wrong by Lola. This relationship stresses the fact that imbalances in the relational dialectics of the ideal and the

real can cause significant tension between individuals. In the case of Don and Lola at this point in the musical, this contradiction prevents a relationship beyond mere tolerance of one another.

The final scene of the musical illustrates the dialectic of judgment and acceptance in order to emphasize the musical's message of acceptance. At the end of the musical, Don, who has struggled with this dialectic in his relationship with Lola throughout the show, joins his fellow factory employees, Charlie, Lola, and Lola's troupe of drag performers on stage at the Milan fashion show. In the performance observed for this analysis, Sean Needham as Don sports the "kinky boots," jeans, a plaid shirt and a puffy vest, and he sings his solo with a growl: "Look out Milan/Here comes Don/And Don has brought some friends along/When you're stuck inside uncertainty/The ones you love/Can set you free" (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 100). At the end of his solo, Don hits a high D in falsetto on the word "free," symbolically blending his traditionally masculine sound with his newly-acquired sensitivity. At the end of the song, the company presents the musical's overall message in six steps, and Don delivers the final step: "you change the world when you change your mind" (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 103).

Don's appearance, lyrics, and sound all illustrate his new acceptance of Lola, showing audience members how people learn from their friends. Don and Lola's relationship may also provide a relatable example for students learning about relational dialectics in communication classes. The characters' struggle with the dialectic of judgment and acceptance is likely one that many students have experienced in their own lives with friends, family, and acquaintances.

Conclusion

In addition to contributing to interpersonal communication studies, Rawlins' relational dialectics can be useful for rhetoricians who study popular culture texts to examine the idiosyncratic push and pull factors in fictional relationships. The relationships between

characters in the musical *Kinky Boots* can serve as examples for the audience of what makes a relationship healthy or unhealthy. In *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, Kenneth Burke (1967) suggests that “art forms...be treated as *equipment for living*, that size up situations in various ways and in keeping with correspondingly various attitudes” (p. 304). When we relate to characters in fictional texts, we are really analyzing our own relationships. In this way, musicals like *Kinky Boots* can serve as “equipment for living,” as they provide their audiences with life lessons.

Using *Kinky Boots* as an example of Burke’s (1967) “equipment for living,” we suggest that the musical offers learning opportunities for theatre-goers and students alike. As theatre-goers watch a performance of *Kinky Boots*, they learn important life lessons about friendships, judgment and acceptance, and affection and instrumentality. The relationship between Charlie and Nicola illustrates how favoring one opposition within a dialectic can strain a relationship. Audience members can learn from this relationship that failure to attempt to negotiate tensions in a relationship may cause a relationship to fail. Through Lola and Charlie’s relationship, audience members can see how political friendships may morph into personal friendships, as well as how balancing the dialectic of judgment and acceptance and the dialectic of affection and instrumentality is important in establishing and maintaining friendships. Finally, in Don and Lola’s relationship, audience members can learn that by negotiating the dialectics of the ideal and the real, as well as the dialectic of judgment and acceptance, relationships can improve. These lessons can be applied to audience members’ own relationships, and because of these lessons, they may be more inclined to forgive friends or to “accept someone for who they are” (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 91).

Similarly, *Kinky Boots* can be used as a teaching tool to help undergraduate communication students learn and apply relational dialectics. Musical theatre has been used as an effective means of teaching communication concepts to undergraduate students in both the communication and theatre disciplines, as noted by Beasley and Beasley (2016) in their study of dramatism in *Little Women* and by Schrader (2011) in her study of social constructionism in the song “Wonderful” in *Wicked*. We suggest that *Kinky Boots* can serve a similar function in teaching students about relational dialectics due to both the popularity of the show and because students may find it more comfortable to apply theoretical concepts to a fictional text before applying them to their own lives. Instructors may choose to utilize the musical in their teaching in various ways, including using it as a class example, incorporating it as a class project, or even organizing a field trip for students to attend a performance of the production.

First, *Kinky Boots*’ popularity allows it to connect with students. The message of living your truth and accepting others for who they are is one that many students will likely appreciate. The flashy costumes, upbeat music, and large dance numbers may also create interest among students. Furthermore, they may identify with characters in the musical; for example, a student who has felt rejection or disconnect from a parent may relate to Charlie or Lola. This identification may contribute to taking an interest in *Kinky Boots*. Interest is a key motivating factor in student learning (Harackiewicz et al., 2016; Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000), and it can lead to better engagement and more effective information processing (Renninger & Hidi, 2016). Because *Kinky Boots* is a text that attracts and maintains student interest, it is well-suited as a teaching tool for the classroom.

Second, *Kinky Boots*, as a fictional but relatable text, may allow students to apply relational dialectics in a way that is more comfortable to them than immediately applying it to

their everyday lives. Some students are reluctant to share personal stories in class, and certain dialectics, such as the dialectic of judgment and acceptance and the dialectic of affection and instrumentality, may be particularly uncomfortable for students to discuss in relation to their own lives, as it can be difficult to admit when one has used a friend for personal gain, when one has judged a friend unfairly, or when one has accepted a choice made by a friend that is ethically, morally, or legally questionable or unsound. Students may find it easier to learn about these dialectics and how they exist in friendships in a fictional text like *Kinky Boots* before applying them to their own real-life examples, which they may do privately or in an assignment that is only shared with an instructor and not the entire class. Using *Kinky Boots* as a teaching tool for learning about relational dialectics minimizes some of the discomfort students may have in applying these concepts to their personal lives in a public setting. Future research may involve studying classroom use of the musical in teaching relational dialectics in order to further support this conclusion.

The use of relational dialectics as a lens to study the musical *Kinky Boots* accentuates the musical's themes of acceptance and compassion. Through this musical, audience members and students alike can see that when participants in a friendship balance relational dialectics, the relationship tends to be rewarding. When participants favor one opposition over another, the relationship often fails. We hope that when viewing *Kinky Boots* through this lens, audience members and students will find that the most beautiful thing in the world is, in fact, not a shoe, as suggested in the opening number, but a friend.

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