

Chapter 6

**WHERE FANTASY MEETS REALITY:
MEDIA EXPOSURE, RELATIONSHIP BELIEFS AND
STANDARDS, AND THE MODERATING EFFECT OF A
CURRENT RELATIONSHIP**

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ABSTRACT

Two studies investigated popular media exposure, dysfunctional beliefs about romantic relationships, ideals, and relationship satisfaction, with relationship status as a moderator. Study 1 showed positive associations between amount of television consumed and beliefs “the sexes are different” and “mindreading is expected”, as well as decreased relationship satisfaction. Individuals’ relationship status moderated the relationship between television consumption and standards regarding an ideal partner, with higher standards held by those not in a relationship who consumed more television. Study 2 tested associations using an experimental paradigm in which participants were exposed either to a romantic comedy manipulation or control film. Participants in relationships were more satisfied if they had viewed the manipulation film compared to those who viewed the control film. Those not in relationships were less satisfied if they had viewed the manipulation film compared to those who had viewed the control. Results are discussed within the frameworks of cultivation, social cognitive, and social comparison theories and suggestions for future work are proposed.

Several researchers (Bachen & Illouz, 1996; Haferkamp, 1999; Holmes, 2007; Rubin, 1985; Segrin & Nabi, 2002; Shapiro & Kroeger, 1991; Signorielli, 1991) have argued that popular media may serve as an important source of information on the nature of romantic relationships, particularly for teens and young adults who tend to embrace cultural models of romance and sexuality (Bachen & Illouz, 1996). Indeed, Bachen and Illouz (1996) reported that 90% of young people look to movies and 94% to television for information about love, while in comparison only 33% turn to their mother and 17% to their father. However, given the often exaggerated and unrealistic nature of media portrayals (Johnson & Holmes, 2009;

Jowett & Linton, 1980; Pardun, 2002; Tanner, Haddock, Zimmerman, & Lund, 2003), individuals using such a resource to form and regulate their relationship beliefs and expectations may feel as though their own relationships do not measure up to those observed media ideals. The implications this might have for how individuals experience their romantic relationships are considerable and yet little research has looked at the connection between popular media consumption and individuals' beliefs about, and satisfaction with, their own relationships. Study 1 in the current work therefore sought to build upon a small number of past analyses of romance and media by exploring associations between individuals' television consumption, relationship beliefs, relationship and partner ideals, and romantic satisfaction. Additionally, the role that relationship status might play on such associations was explored. Study 2 used an experimental design to examine individuals' responses to exposure to a media stimulus. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first work to explore these associations experimentally, allowing for some basic establishment of causality.

Media Effects: A Theoretical Framework

Two major theories of media effects are cultivation theory (Gerbner, 1969; Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980, 1994) and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986, 2002). According to cultivation theory, individuals exposed over a prolonged period of time to portrayals of reality as defined by television come to develop perceptions that are consistent with these portrayals. That is, television's themes and images serve to cultivate in viewers beliefs and attitudes about their social environment that echo the cultural norms such themes prescribe. The emphasis in this theory is placed on the notion that cultivation of perceptions occurs only through repetitive, consistent, and long-term exposure to patterns common to most programming. With most popular programming presenting consistent and therefore mutually reinforcing content, television is argued to be a major source of socialization for the viewing public (see Gerbner et al, 1994). In the case of romantic relationships then, prolonged exposure to television-defined relationship norms may, over time, cultivate viewers' relationship perceptions and shape conceptions of the 'appropriate' beliefs and expectations to have.

Social cognitive theory suggests a more active process in which through observing media characters' actions and behaviours, individuals learn what is valued or deemed appropriate in society regarding romantic relationships and internalize this information into their own beliefs, expectations, and ideals. The *vicarious capability* of individuals allows them to engage in 'observational learning', witnessing and considering the experiences and responses of others rather than learning through the consequences of their own actions only (Bandura, 2002). Behavioural models are not limited to those in an individuals' own immediate social environment. Indeed, those observed in the media may serve as symbolic models (Bandura & Huston, 1961; Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963), suggesting to individuals by example what constitutes an 'ideal' partner or relationship. Furthermore, with an individual's own immediate environment likely to be constrained to largely the same set of people each day, these symbolic media models may in fact outweigh those immediate sources in shaping their social reality because they broaden what can be observed (Bandura, 1999, 2002).

A further tenet of social cognitive theory is the role individual differences play in what is attended to and internalized from exposure to media models. According to Bandura (2002),

attentional processes vary from individual to individual and determine what is construed from media portrayals, while *retention processes* determine what is retained and internalized. The preconceptions held by individuals influence the attractiveness, functional value, and salience of a particular media portrayal. That is, the influence of a particular media message on an individual (in this case, messages about romantic relationships) is not confined to mere 'copycat' but rather is subject to individuals' *a priori* understanding of reality and their ability and will to integrate the media message into their own reality. Within this line of reasoning, when considering the effects that media messages may have on perceptions about romantic relationships, it seems important to consider the potential moderating effect of whether an individual is in a relationship of their own at the time research is carried out. An individual's own direct experiences within their relationship are likely to have an influence, as such individuals have a real point of reference guiding how media messages on romantic relationships are attended to and internalized.

Relationship Beliefs, Expectations, and Ideals

Both cultivation and social cognitive theories suggest the potential for media to shape viewers' beliefs, expectations, and standards for romantic relationships and partners. The significance of this lies in the role these expectations, standards, and beliefs may play in influencing the quality of individuals' relationships. Eidelson and Epstein (1982) identified five dysfunctional relationship beliefs that can be detrimental to individuals' relationship quality and which are often seen in couples seeking counselling: 1) disagreement is destructive, 2) mindreading is expected, 3) neither partner nor relationship quality can change, 4) sexual perfectionism, and 5) the sexes are different. These dysfunctional relationship beliefs have been linked to decreased relationship satisfaction (Baucom & Epstein, 1990; Baucom et al, 1996; Bradbury & Fincham, 1987; Kurdek, 1992), increased relationship distress (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982; Epstein & Eidelson, 1981), and destructive problem-solving responses (Metts & Cupach, 1990).

Further to these dysfunctional beliefs, the relationship and partner ideals individuals hold may also serve to adversely affect relationship satisfaction. Recent theory and research (Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, 2001; Fletcher & Kinninmonth, 1992; Fletcher & Simpson, 2000; Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000; Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999) has shown that individuals hold specific standards regarding the ideal attributes of a romantic partner and the preferred qualities of a romantic relationship. Overall, discrepancy between ideals and reality has been linked to decreased relationship satisfaction and increased relationship distress (Fletcher et al, 1999). Research has frequently highlighted the issue of media portraying romance in manner to suggest what characteristics and qualities are socially desirable in a partner and relationship, and the potential social and emotional consequences of settling for less than that ideal (Bogg & Ray, 2002; Brown, Steele, & Walsh-Childers, 2002; Buerkel-Rottfuss & Mayes, 1981; Dubino, 1993; Haferkamp, 1999). Furthermore, these media portrayals seem to suggest that highly idealized qualities in both partners and relationships are common (Johnson & Holmes, 2009). It is the presentation of the 'ideal' as 'typical' that arguably makes media influential and potentially harmful. From both cultivation and social cognitive theory perspectives, media depictions may serve as a source of unrealistic and unhealthy relationship beliefs and ideals because they socialize individuals

into believing that unrealistic depictions are in fact representative of relationships in reality and are therefore applicable to their own relationships.

Media Messages

Although the romance- and relationship-related content of television and film is severely under-explored, the few analyses carried out thus far have revealed a number of noteworthy themes. In their content analysis of 26 Disney animated films, Tanner et al (2003) found that a major theme was the notion of ‘love at first sight’, with characters possessing particularly idealized qualities, including sweetness for women, bravery for men, and beauty for both. The majority of these films (18 of the 26) portrayed couples who fell in love within a matter of minutes, married, and lived ‘happily ever after’. In a content analysis of popular movies targeted towards young adults, Signorielli (1997) found that a third of the female characters were motivated by a strong desire for romance with their idealised ‘right one’. Similarly, in an analysis of European soap operas, Liebes and Livingstone (1998) found that characters dedicated their lives to finding “happiness and true love” (p. 170) (although it should be noted that contrary to this idealized notion was the finding of relationships to also be full of undesirable qualities such as conflict, deception, infidelity, and feelings of possessiveness and jealousy). In another content analysis of the 15 films viewed by the largest number of teens in 1995, Pardun (2002) found that a major theme regarding relationships was the notion that love “just happens” “then ‘somehow’ you just end up married” (p.224).

A recent content analysis of 40 romantic comedy films (Johnson & Holmes, 2009) found that relationships were often portrayed as simultaneously possessing the most desirable positive qualities typical of both new (passion, excitement, and physical closeness) and of more established relationships (deep feelings of love, provision of emotional support, and prioritization over other aspects outside the relationship). Also identified in this study were certain relationship behaviours promoting dysfunctional relationship beliefs such as “mindreading is expected” and “disagreement is destructive” (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982).

A further potential source of dysfunctional relationship beliefs comes from prime-time television programming. In their content analysis of such programs, Kim et al (2007) found men and women to be presented as having different relationship needs, with men avoiding commitment and needing independence, and women seeking emotional intimacy, supporting the belief of men and women as different in relationships.

Previous Media Effects Research

The few studies that have examined the effects of media on romantic relationships support the general hypothesis that media consumption is related to romantic ideals and beliefs about relationships. Holmes (2007) found a relationship between preference for romance media and the belief that partners can be romantically destined for one another. Haferkamp (1999) examined the relationship between television viewing and dysfunctional relationship beliefs and found greater television consumption to be related to the belief that the ‘sexes are different’. This study also showed a positive relationship between soap opera viewing and the belief that “mindreading is expected”, a rather unrealistic perception of

romantic communication. Segrin and Nabi (2002) found a significant association between consumption of romance-oriented television and idealized expectations of marriage. Greater romance-oriented television consumption was associated with heightened expectations such as “we would spend as much time together as possible” and “we would be physically intimate every night” (p. 253). Shapiro and Kroeger (1991) found significant correlations between romance novel and romantic comedy film consumption and the beliefs “disagreement is destructive” and “mindreading is expected”. This study also showed a nonsignificant tendency for individuals who consumed more of these types of media to be less satisfied in their own relationships.

Important to note in this study however, and in others carried out investigating the effects of romance media, is that none took into account the important role that relationship-oriented individual differences may play on how individuals relate media messages to their own romantic lives. With this in mind, Study 1 sought answers to the following research questions:

Research question 1. Will participants’ average amount of television consumption per week be associated with relationship beliefs, idealised relationship/partner standards, and relationship satisfaction?

Research question 2. Will being in a relationship versus not in a relationship at the time of the study moderate the influence of participants’ television consumption?

STUDY 1 METHOD

Participants

Two hundred seventy-one undergraduate students from a large public university in the Northeast USA participated in exchange for extra credit (76 men and 195 women; average age 19.8, *SD* 1.7). Four percent of respondents classified themselves as Asian-American, 2% as Hispanic/Latino, 87% as Caucasian, 2% as African-American, and 5% as “other”. Ninety-six percent of the respondents identified themselves as heterosexual, 1% as gay/lesbian/homosexual, and 3% as bisexual. Seventy-five percent of the respondents reported that they were in a relationship or had been dating for at least two months at the time of the study. All remaining participants had experience of previous relationships but were not dating or in a relationship at the time of the study

Measures

Television consumption. Average weekly television consumption was assessed following a procedure inspired by Shrum, Wyer, and O’Guinn (1998). Participants were asked to indicate how many hours of television they watched during each of four time periods during the typical weekday (6am-noon, noon-6pm, 6pm-midnight, midnight-6am), the typical Saturday, and the typical Sunday. In order to get the best estimate of “typical” consumption habits, participants were asked to assess their television viewing both *during the last two*

months and during the last summer (the research was conducted during an autumn semester). A composite variable was created to represent an estimate of each participant's average number of hours of television consumption during a "typical" one-week period.

Dysfunctional relationship beliefs. Eidelson and Epstein's (1982) Relationship Beliefs Inventory (RBI) assesses a number of dysfunctional/unrealistic beliefs typically seen in clients undergoing couples therapy. The measure consists of 40 items that form five subscales (Disagreement is Destructive, Mindreading is Expected, Partners Cannot Change, Sexual Perfectionism, and The Sexes are Different) and was accompanied by a 7-point scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*). Sample items include "I get upset if I think I have not completely satisfied my partner sexually" and "Men and women will always be mysteries to each other". Internal reliability for the RBI scales has previously been shown to range from .72 to .81 (see Eidelson & Epstein, 1982). Cronbach's alpha for the current study ranged from .71 to .75.

Ideal partner/relationship standards. Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, and Giles' (1999) partner and relationship scales were used to assess respondents' conceptions of an imagined ideal partner/romantic relationship. Respondents were asked to first close their eyes for a minute and to think about what their absolutely "ideal" partner and relationship would be like. They were then asked to rate the importance of 30 partner characteristics and 25 relationship traits in that imagined ideal partner/relationship, using a 7-point scale (1 = *Very unimportant*, 7 = *Very important*). The partner characteristics form three factors (Partner Warmth-Trustworthiness, Partner Vitality-Attractiveness, and Partner Status-Resources) and the ideal relationship traits form two factors (Relationship Intimacy-Loyalty, and Relationship Passion). Examples of ideal traits/characteristics include: "Passionate", "Trustworthy", and "Confident". Each of these factors has previously shown good internal (ranging from .79 to .93) and test-retest (ranging from .76 to .86) reliabilities (see Fletcher et al, 1999). Cronbach's alpha for the current study ranged from .80 to .92. A global Ideal Partner/Relationship variable was created by aggregating the five factors.

Relationship satisfaction. The satisfaction subscale of Spanier's (1976) Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) was administered to assess respondents' relationship satisfaction. The DAS is a well-known measure designed to assess functioning in romantic dyads. The measure was originally validated with married and divorced couples, with couple members no longer together instructed to answer the items referring to the last month of their previous relationship (Spanier, 1976). The measure was also created such that each subscale can be used independently while still maintaining good validity and reliability (see Spanier, 1976). The satisfaction subscale consists of 10 items and has previously shown strong internal and test re-test reliability. Following Spanier's methodology, participants in the current study were instructed to think about their current relationship while answering the scale; those not currently in a relationship were instructed instead to think about their most recent significant relationship. The satisfaction score is thus to be interpreted as either satisfaction with a current relationship or with the most recent relationship, depending on the relationship status of the participant. Cronbach's alpha for the current study was .87. Items were answered on a scale of 1 to 7 and a satisfaction score generated through calculating the average across the items.

Procedure

The measures were administered separately to groups of 35 at a time. Rigorous means were used to ensure that each respondent felt entirely comfortable during the study (e.g., adequate space between seats, sealed envelopes for the measures, total anonymity). False purpose scales were embedded in the packets of questionnaires in order to help mask the exact content of the research.

STUDY 1 RESULTS

Initial Analyses

Table 1 presents zero-order correlations between Study 1 variables, as well as means and standard deviations. Participants were estimated to consume on average 23.88 hours of television per week (3.41 hours per day). The data was carefully explored and normality on the TV consumption variable was determined to be acceptable. Data analyses were conducted with and without a number of extreme values and the findings presented below were identical with and without those participants.

Television Consumption and Dysfunctional Relationship Beliefs

As Table 1 shows, zero-order correlations indicated a positive association between television consumption and a number of dysfunctional relationship beliefs (Eidelson & Epstein, 1981), specifically with the belief that “The Sexes are Different” ($r = .16, p < .01$) and that “Mindreading is Expected in Relationships” ($r = .15, p < .01$). Hierarchical multiple regression was performed in order to test for an interaction between relationship status (participant in a relationship or not) and television consumption habits. The interaction term was created in accordance with Aiken and West (1991). Average number of television watching hours per week and relationship status (0=Not in a relationship; 1=Dating or in a relationship) were entered at Step 1 and their interaction term was added at Step 2. As can be seen in Table 2 however, no interactions were found.

Table 1. Zero- The Order Correlations between Study 1 variables (N = 271)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Average Number of TV Watching Hours Per Week	—	-.04	.07	.16**	-.01	.15**	.11	.10	-.16**
2. Participant Currently in a Relationship (0=No, 1=Yes)		—	.02	-.06	-.01	.13*	.14*	.11	.28***

Table 1. (Continued)

3. Sexual Perfectionism Belief	—	.17**	.13*	.23***	.27***	.03	.01	
4. The Sexes are Different Belief		—	.30***	.12*	.12*	-.03	-.12*	
5. Partners Cannot Change Belief			—	.15*	.29***	.01	-.11	
6. Mindreading is Expected Belief				—	.46***	.23***	-.01	
7. Disagreement is Destructive Belief					—	.10	-.07	
8. Idealized Partner/Relationship Standards						—	.14*	
9. Relationship Satisfaction							—	
Means and SDs	<i>M</i> =	—	<i>M</i> =					
	23.88		3.85	3.63	2.97	3.54	2.71	5.82
	<i>SD</i> =		<i>SD</i> =					
	15.06		.71	=1.01	.68	.90	.87	.59
								.65

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 2. Beliefs, Romantic Standards, and Relationship Satisfaction Regressed on TV Consumption, Relationship Status, and Their Interaction.

Beliefs, Ideals, & Satisfaction	Step 1			Step 2		
	β	<i>T</i>	<i>p</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Sexual Perfectionism Belief</i>						
Average Number of TV Watching Hours	.06	1.03	<i>ns</i>	-.01	-.06	<i>ns</i>
Participant in a Relationship	.02	.24	<i>ns</i>	.01	.22	<i>ns</i>
TV Watching X Relationship Status	--	--	--	.08	.67	<i>ns</i>
Model 1 $R^2 = .00$, $F(2, 267) = .55$, $p = ns$						
Model 2 $R^2 = .00$, $F(3, 266) = .52$, $p = ns$						
<i>The Sexes are Different Belief</i>						
Average Number of TV Watching Hours	.15	2.55	.01	.22	1.84	<i>ns</i>
Participant in a Relationship	-.06	-.94	<i>ns</i>	-.06	-.92	<i>ns</i>
TV Watching X Relationship Status	--	--	--	-.08	-.64	<i>ns</i>
Model 1 $R^2 = .03$, $F(2, 266) = 3.79$, $p < .03$						
Model 2 $R^2 = .03$, $F(3, 265) = 2.67$, $p < .05$						
<i>Partners Cannot Change Belief</i>						
Average Number of TV Watching Hours	-.01	-.22	<i>ns</i>	.13	1.10	<i>ns</i>
Participant in a Relationship	-.02	-.25	<i>ns</i>	-.01	-.20	<i>ns</i>
TV Watching X Relationship Status	--	--	--	-.17	-1.41	<i>ns</i>
Model 1 $R^2 = .00$, $F(2, 267) = .05$, $p = ns$						
Model 2 $R^2 = .01$, $F(3, 266) = .69$, $p = ns$						

<i>Mindreading is Expected Belief</i>						
Average Number of TV Watching Hours	.16	2.62	.01	.23	1.96	.05
Participant in a Relationship	.14	2.24	.03	.14	2.28	.03
TV Watching X Relationship Status	--	--	--	-.09	-.74	<i>ns</i>
Model 1 $R^2 = .04$, $F(2, 267) = 5.73$, $p < .01$						
Model 2 $R^2 = .04$, $F(3, 266) = 4.00$, $p < .01$						
<i>Disagreement is Destructive Belief</i>						
Average Number of TV Watching Hours	.11	1.77	<i>ns</i>	.16	1.35	<i>ns</i>
Participant in a Relationship	.14	2.36	.02	.14	2.38	.02
TV Watching X Relationship Status	--	--	--	-.06	-.53	<i>ns</i>
Model 1 $R^2 = .03$, $F(2, 267) = 4.21$, $p < .02$						
Model 2 $R^2 = .03$, $F(3, 266) = 2.89$, $p < .04$						
<i>Idealized Partner/Relationship Standards</i>						
Average Number of TV Watching Hours	.09	1.49	<i>ns</i>	.36	3.06	.002
Participant in a Relationship	.11	1.72	<i>ns</i>	.11	1.83	<i>ns</i>
TV Watching X Relationship Status	--	--	--	-.32	-2.66	.008
Model 1 $R^2 = .02$, $F(2, 266) = 2.49$, $p = ns$						
Model 2 $R^2 = .04$, $F(3, 265) = 4.06$, $p < .01$						
<i>Relationship Satisfaction</i>						
Average Number of TV Watching Hours	-.16	-2.67	.008	-.25	-2.18	.03
Participant in a Relationship	.27	4.67	.001	.27	4.63	.001
TV Watching X Relationship Status	--	--	--	.11	.96	<i>ns</i>
Model 1 $R^2 = .10$, $F(2, 267) = 14.96$, $p < .001$						
Model 2 $R^2 = .10$, $F(3, 266) = 10.27$, $p < .001$						

Television Consumption and Idealized Relationship/Partner Standards

As can be seen in Table 1, there were non-significant trends between both television consumption and relationship status in relation to participant's standards of an imagined partner/relationship (Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999). As in the previous analysis, hierarchical multiple regression was used to test for an interaction between relationship status and television consumption. Television consumption and relationship status were entered at Step 1 and their interaction term was added at Step 2. Indeed, an interaction was found (see Table 2), $\beta = -.32$, $t = -2.66$, $p < .01$. As can be seen in Figure 1, participants in relationships had slightly higher idealized standards than those not in relationships but had equally idealized standards regardless of how much television they consumed. However, while participants not in relationships showed lower idealized standards if they consumed less television, participants not in relationships who consumed more television had just as high partner/relationship standards as those participants who were in relationships.

Television Consumption and Relationship Satisfaction

As can be seen in Table 1, participants were less satisfied in their relationships in accordance with the amount of television they consumed ($r = -.16$, $p < .01$). Participants currently in a relationship reported being happier with that relationship ($r = .28$, $p < .001$) compared to participants not currently in a relationship and answering the satisfaction subscale with their most recent significant relationship in mind. This is perfectly consistent with expectations of how the measure should perform in accordance with Spanier (1976). As

can be seen in Table 2 however, there was no interaction between television consumption and participants' relationship status.

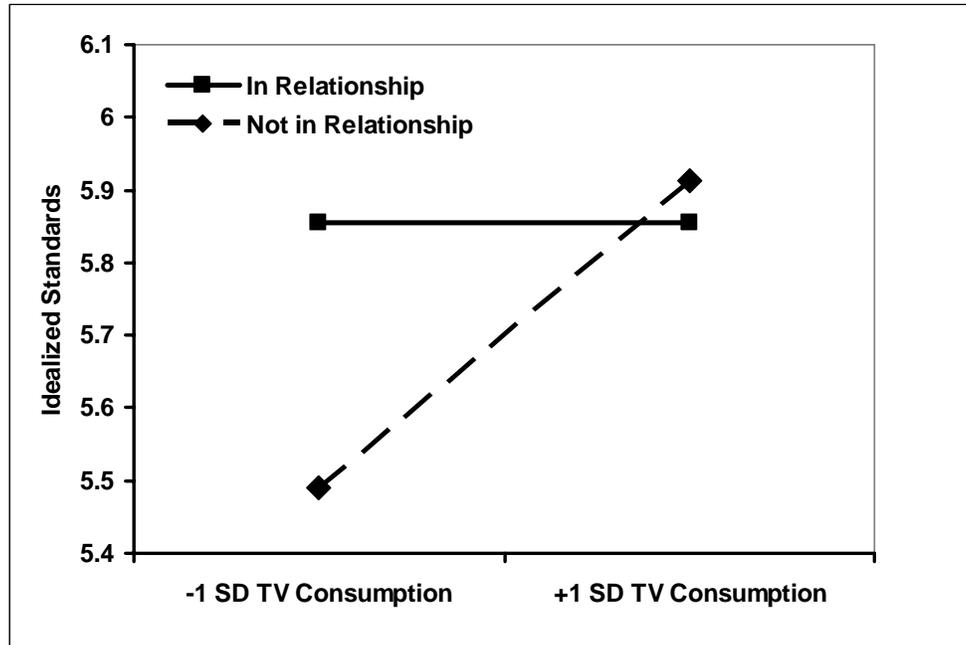


Figure 1. The average amount of TV watching per week in study 1 moderated the association between individuals' current relationship status and relationship standards when assessing their ideal fantasy partner.

STUDY 2

Study 1 sought to examine the relationship between television consumption and relationship beliefs, relationship and partner ideals, and relationship satisfaction. Although informative, the design of such a study does not allow for a direction of causality to be identified. Study 2 therefore employed a 2X2 experimental design investigating individuals' responses to a media stimulus that might serve to provide evidence of a causal influence. More specifically, this study exposed individuals in relationships vs. not in relationships with a manipulation film vs. a control film. The manipulation film contained repeated messages concerning the notion that destiny plays an important role in romance and relationships. The control film also deals with relationships, but none of the relationships is of a romantic nature.

The effects of exposure to such a media stimulus can be understood within the context of priming theory. Priming theory (Berkowitz, 1986; Jo & Berkowitz, 1994) suggests that exposure to media can have a temporary effect on viewers' thoughts and behaviours. This temporary effect is brought about by the media portrayal "priming" semantically related concepts, increasing their accessibility and therefore likelihood in being activated. Furthermore, this theory draws attention to the impact of media portrayals on viewers' feelings and emotions, with the activation of emotion-related ideas similar to those presented in the media arousing associated emotional responses (Jo & Berkowitz, 1994). Much of the

research investigating media primes has typically focused on violent media on aggressive thoughts and behaviours (e.g., Anderson, 1998; Anderson & Ford, 1987) and sexual media on behaviours towards the opposite sex (e.g., McKenzie-Mohr & Zanna, 1990); the current study is to the best of our knowledge the first to experimentally test for associations between romance media and romantic relationship cognitions. The use of an experimental design in Study 2 is not to extenuate the processes described by cultivation theory, which suggests the influence of media messages to occur through repeated exposure over a prolonged period of time. Experimentally testing the temporary effects of exposure to media messages on audience members' thoughts and feelings helps to validate these messages' influential power but without downplaying the influence of longer-term cultivation effects (Berkowitz, 1986; Jo & Berkowitz, 1994).

This second study sought to answer the following questions:

Research Question 1. Will there be a significant difference between participants exposed to a romantic comedy film versus a control film on their immediate beliefs about relationships, idealized partner/relationship standards, and relationship satisfaction?

Research Question 2. Will being in a relationship at the time of the study versus not being in a relationship moderate the effect of film exposure?

STUDY 2 METHODS

Participants

A total of 123 undergraduate students from a large public university in the Northeast USA participated in exchange for extra credit. None of the students had participated in Study 1. The average age was 20.2 years (SD 2.9). Sixty-three percent of the participants reported either being in an exclusive romantic relationship or dating for at least two months at the time of the study. These proportions did not vary between the study groups. The group exposed to the manipulation condition (a popular romantic-comedy movie) consisted of 61 participants (26 men and 35 women) while the group exposed to the control condition (a control film) consisted of the remaining 62 (31 men and 31 women). While there were more overall participants in relationships than not in the study, the distribution of those participants was proportional across film conditions.

Measures

The same measures as Study 1 were given to participants in Study 2 and internal reliabilities were all closely comparable to those reported in Study 1. The exception was the exclusion of the measures assessing television consumption. We reasoned that asking participants to provide an indication of their consumption habits (as a control that the randomization had worked) might bias the participants as to the nature of the study, especially those who had viewed the manipulation film, and we thus chose not to do so. A measure of belief in relationship destiny was also added as a manipulation check.

The destiny subscale of Knee's (1998) Implicit Theories of Relationships Scale (ITR) assesses participants' acceptance of the role of destiny in bringing romantic partners together. Sample items include "Potential relationship partners are either compatible or not" and "Potential relationship partners are either destined to get along or they are not". The items were accompanied by a 7-point scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*). Cronbach's alpha for the current study was .73.

Procedure

Students signed up to participate in "the movie study" without knowing what they would watch. Both manipulation and control films were shown on a large screen in an auditorium. One movie was shown on a Monday evening and one was shown on a Tuesday evening and participants had equally been distributed between conditions in accordance with their relationship status. Seating was controlled so that adequate privacy would exist for answering surveys immediately after the viewing. *Serendipity* (Osher, Goldstein, Slotnick, & Chelsom, 2001), a popular Hollywood-produced film in the romantic-comedy genre, served as the manipulation film. The film, which was shown in its entirety without breaks, has repeated themes regarding destiny as a positive attribute of romantic relationships. *The Straight Story* (Edelman, Polaire, & Lynch, 1999), a motion picture drama qualitatively different from the manipulation film and containing no romantic relationship themes, was shown in the control condition. The film is about a man who travels by lawn mower to visit an ailing brother, the people he meets along the way, and his relationship with his adult daughter. We chose this film because it does have relationship themes – but none of them of a "romantic" nature. This film was also viewed in its entirety. Participants answered the questionnaires directly after the end of the viewing. As in Study 1, false purpose scales were embedded in the packets of questionnaires in order to help mask the purpose of the research. Leaving the auditorium at any time before the end of the study disqualified the participant from continuing in the study. This happened only in one case and that participant was dropped from the study.

STUDY 2 RESULTS

Manipulation Check

Confirming the manipulation, participants exposed to the film *Serendipity* endorsed a belief in romantic destiny to a greater degree ($M = 4.14$, $SD 1.15$) compared to those exposed to the control film *The Straight Story* ($M = 3.73$, $SD 1.08$), $t(117) = 2.01$, $p < .05$.

Effect From Romantic Comedy Manipulation

A 2X2 between-subjects ANOVA model (fixed factors) was used to test if being in a relationship vs. not at the time of the study would moderate the effect of exposure to the manipulation film vs. the control film on participants' beliefs, standards, and satisfaction. No

results were found in relation to beliefs or standards. However, as can be seen in Figure 2, a significant interaction was found in relation to participants' relationship satisfaction, $F(1,$

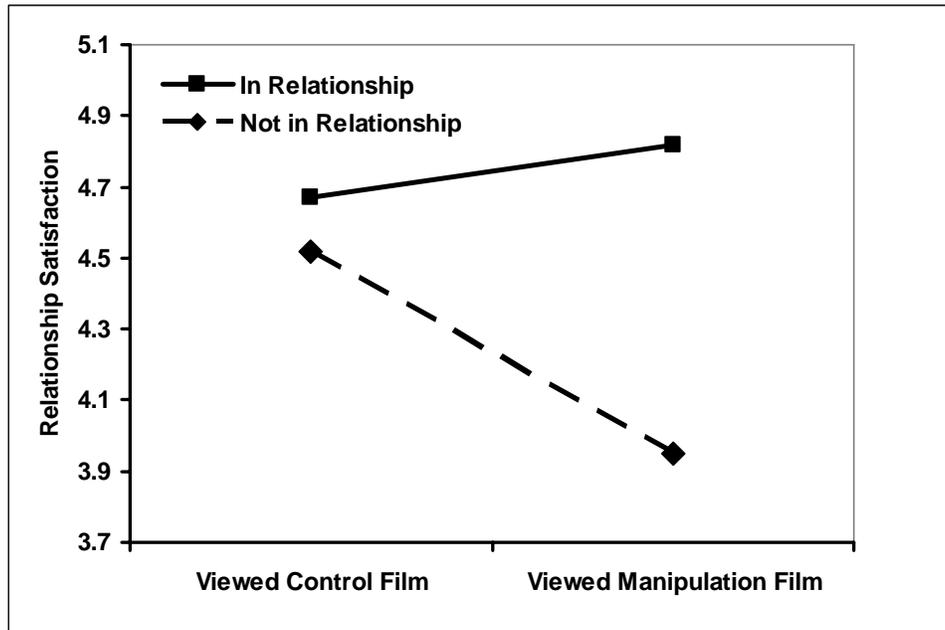


Figure 2. Viewing a manipulation film moderated the association between individuals' current relationship status and satisfaction with either their current or most recent past romantic relationship.

115) = 7.26, $p < .01$. Participants in relationships and thus evaluating their satisfaction in their current relationship reported slightly more satisfaction after exposure to the romantic comedy manipulation film ($M = 4.82$, $SD = .64$) compared to those shown the control film ($M = 4.67$, $SD = .59$). In contrast, participants not in relationships at the time of the study and thus reporting on satisfaction experienced in their most recent significant relationship reported less satisfaction when exposed to the romantic comedy manipulation film ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.03$) compared to those shown the control film ($M = 4.52$, $SD = .67$).

DISCUSSION

The general topic of romance and the media is under-explored. Although many would anecdotally agree that relationship themes prevail in popular media, there are only a handful of content analyses on the topic. Of the few studies analyzing media content, idealised and unrealistic relationship depictions indeed seem prevalent (Carpenter, 1998; Johnson & Holmes, 2009; Pardun, 2002; Signorielli, 1997; Tanner et al, 2003). Similarly, a surprisingly scant amount of research has been carried out on what individuals can learn about romance through media consumption. Previous research (Haferkamp, 1999; Holmes, 2007; Segrin & Nabi, 2002; Shapiro & Kroeger, 1991) suggests that media depictions may have implications for the formation of various relationship-related attitudes and beliefs. The current studies expanded upon these and were the first known to explore the associations between media

variables, relationship beliefs, ideals, and satisfaction while taking current relationship status into account.

Consistent with cultivation theory, Study 1 found an association between television consumption and beliefs “The Sexes are Different” and “Mindreading is Expected”. Content analyses have indeed found a tendency for media to portray men and women as having different relationship priorities (Kim et al, 2007) and partners as happy in their relationships without needing to communicate their relationship needs to one another (Johnson & Holmes, 2009). This finding would appear to suggest that media may influence and shape viewers’ perceptions of how partners should behave in relationships. However, it should be noted that, due to the correlational design of the study, it cannot be ruled out that perhaps it is not media that is influencing individuals’ relationship beliefs but rather individuals with such beliefs who are drawn to media because it appeals to pre-existing notions of how relationships function. Nonetheless, this finding is consistent with previous research (Haferkamp, 1999; Holmes, 2007; Shapiro & Kreoger, 1991) and highlights the need for further investigation.

Providing support for social cognitive theory, Study 1 also revealed an association between television consumption, individuals’ relationship status, and idealized standards. More specifically, individuals not in relationships reported lower idealized standards with lower television consumption and higher idealized standards when their television consumption was greater. This finding would appear to support the notion that media depictions of highly idealized partners and relationships may serve as a source of information for individuals forming their own standards. That individuals in relationships did not differ in their standards if they were heavier television consumers or not suggests that having direct relationship experiences may limit the functional value of media representations. However, as with the finding of an association between television consumption and dysfunctional relationship beliefs, causal direction cannot be determined.

Lastly in Study 1, and consistent with previous research (Shapiro & Kroeger, 1991), a significant relationship between individuals’ relationship satisfaction and television consumption was found, whereby individuals who consumed more television reported less satisfaction. With content analyses suggesting a tendency for certain types of media to present viewers with idealized portrayals of relationships, this finding is consistent with the notion that portrayals across television may serve as an unrealistic reference point from which individuals evaluate their own relationships.

Study 2 also found differences in satisfaction, with those not in relationships reporting less satisfaction after exposure to the manipulation film compared to those exposed to the control, and those in relationships reporting greater satisfaction after exposure to the manipulation film compared to the control. Presenting individuals with a media stimulus, in this case a romantic comedy film, is argued to prime related concepts and feelings in viewers (e.g., Jo & Berkowitz, 1994). In the present study, for those in relationships, being presented with a media stimulus portraying positive relationship experiences may have primed thoughts and feelings about these individuals’ own positive relationship experiences, leading them to report increased satisfaction. For those not in relationships however, being primed with a media stimulus portraying positive relationship experiences could instead evoke feelings of dissatisfaction due to a discrepancy between that which is being viewed and that which is experienced in their own romantic lives.

Some limitations need to be considered when interpreting the findings from the present research. Firstly, it should be noted that effect sizes in Study 1 were small (Cohen & Cohen,

1983, standard for effect sizes, small = 1%, medium = 9%, large = 24%). However, this should be interpreted in the context that effect sizes in cultivation research historically tend to be small (Signorielli & Morgan, 1996).

Study 2 used a specific romance stimulus (that is, a romance film with messages of destiny). Although this provides exploratory evidence that media can at least temporarily influence viewers' relationship evaluations, future studies will need to further investigate similar potential effects using media stimuli with various types of relationship depictions commonly found in television, such as, for example, those found in soap operas and prime-time television programs.

The present studies focused on college students and so generalizability may be limited. There is no reason to assume that these findings would generalise to an older sample who may become increasingly wiser to the unrealistic relationship portrayals found in the media. Similarly, younger individuals with fewer of their own experiences may be more susceptible to media messages than the current sample. Future research should therefore further investigate the potential moderators of age and relationship experience.

Despite these limitations, the current set of studies extends upon previous findings by investigating the potential moderating effect of participants' relationship status. While providing further evidence that media can have an influence on viewers' relationship cognitions and satisfaction, there is still much that needs to be explored. Future work will need to build upon the exploratory findings from Study 2 with more specific hypothesis testing, varying the stimuli participants are exposed to, as well as further testing the moderating effects of various relationship and individual difference variables.

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