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Abstract

The current study examined the associations between television and movie use, romantic ideals (belief in love conquers all and soul mates), and relationship satisfaction amongst adults who were currently in romantic relationships. Participants were 306 individuals aged 18 to 64. They were asked about their media use, their romantic beliefs, and their current relationship. In addition to overall time spent watching television and movies, seven specific genres were measured. Results indicated that viewing each genre of television and movie analyzed (including relationship reality TV, TV drama, TV comedy, soap opera, and romantic movie) was positively associated with romantic ideals. The results for television were not in the hypothesized direction or consistent with prior studies. Television drama and romantic movie viewing were the strongest predictors of belief in love conquers all and relationship satisfaction whereas soap opera viewing was the strongest predictor of belief in soul mates. None of these associations were moderated by age or relationship length. Additionally, mediation analyses showed that specific genres of viewing were positively associated with relationship satisfaction via romantic ideals. The implications of viewing television and movies for adults' romantic relationships are discussed.

Television and movie viewing predict adults' romantic ideals and relationship satisfaction

Within a six month period, the *Chicago Tribune* cautioned readers that, "Hollywood's relationship myths can wreak havoc on real-life romance," (Reynolds, 2014) while a *USA TODAY* headline proclaimed, "Professor: Couples can avoid divorce by watching movies" (Palma, 2014). These disparate headlines point to a scholarly quandary; experts and studies disagree on whether romantic media consumption is good or bad for real-world romantic relationships. It seems intuitive that the extraordinary romances portrayed in media set viewers up for unrealistic views of relationships. However, unrealistic beliefs are not always bad. They can, for example, lead to positive self-fulfilling prophecies. In this way media use might lead to beliefs that either help or hurt relationship functioning. Further complicating the matter, media depictions of romance vary. Whereas "happily ever after" is a staple of romantic movies (Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Johnson & Holmes 2009), other forms of media, like television, might portray relationships differently. It is plausible that some media messages lead to maladaptive romantic beliefs but others lead to adaptive ones. As reviewed below, although some studies have examined aspects of this media use ➔ relationship beliefs ➔ relationship outcomes puzzle, no one study has examined simultaneously which media is associated with unrealistic beliefs and whether such beliefs are helpful or harmful to relationships. The present study seeks to partially fill that gap by investigating the associations between movie and television use, romantic ideals, and relationship satisfaction.

Media Viewing and Relationship Beliefs

Multiple theories (e.g., cultivation, social learning, General Learning Model) predict that media use impacts consumers' conceptions of the real world and could be fruitfully applied to the context of romance-related media. However, Cognitive neo-associative theory (CNAT), as

discussed by Barlett and Anderson (2013), which suggests both short-term and long-term media effects, will be applied here. Barlett and Anderson propose that the process of spreading activation may lead to the formation and reinforcement of knowledge structures over time. More specifically, repeated exposure to linked concepts may create links in memory between them. The more frequently individuals have been exposed to the linked concepts, the more likely they are to have those concepts linked in memory, and the more likely that their knowledge structures include the depicted components. Regarding the present study, the knowledge structures that result from repeated exposure to depictions of couples might include beliefs about relationships. In support of this contention, prior research has sometimes found associations between media use and relationship beliefs.

Research on media use and relationship beliefs has generally examined unrealistic beliefs (Stevens Aubrey & Gamble, 2014). However, some unrealistic beliefs are maladaptive whereas others are adaptive. Regarding maladaptive beliefs, researchers have investigated the associations between movie and television viewing and relationship myths including: disagreement is destructive, mindreading is expected, partners cannot change, one must be a perfect sexual partner, and the sexes are different (Haferkamp, 1999; Holmes, 2007; Holmes & Johnson, 2009; Shapiro & Kroeger, 1991). The findings within this body of research are inconsistent. For example, a study by Haferkamp (1999) found that overall television exposure was associated with greater endorsement of partners cannot change, sexual perfectionism, and the sexes are different, but a study by Holmes and Johnson (2009) found that overall television exposure was associated with mindreading is expected and the sexes are different. Inconsistent findings are perhaps unsurprising as there is little evidence that movies and television portray

relationships in ways that are consistent with these myths except for studies on gender stereotypes in media (see Collins, 2011 for a review).

Other media researchers have examined beliefs that are idealistic and regarded as adaptive (Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Holmes, 2007; Lippman, Ward, & Seabrook, 2014). These studies often include romantic ideals such as love conquers all, one and only (the existence of soul mates), partner idealization (one's ultimate partner will be perfect), and love at first sight, as proposed in Sprecher and Metts's (1989) Romantic Beliefs Scale (RBS). Early research showed that endorsement of these romantic ideals was positively associated with relationship satisfaction when assessed concurrently (Jones & Cunningham, 1996; Sprecher and Metts, 1999). More recent research suggests that relational maintenance behaviors (i.e., positivity, openness, assurances, shared networks, and shared tasks) may underlie that positive association. Ledbetter (2017) found that amongst college students romantic ideal endorsement predicted greater relationship quality via maintenance behaviors, suggesting that individuals who espouse romantic ideals may engage in more positive communication, which leads to greater relationship satisfaction.

Several studies have examined the links between media use and endorsement of romantic ideals. Holmes (2007) investigated soul mates in particular and found that preference for romance media was associated with belief in soul mates amongst undergraduates. Regarding movies, Hefner and Wilson (2013) examined the presence of all four romantic ideals in romantic comedies. They found that the ideals were often explicitly endorsed and that love conquers all was the most frequent overarching theme. Hefner and Wilson followed up with an examination of the associations between viewing and romantic ideal endorsement amongst undergraduates. They found that overall movie watching was positively related to total romantic ideal scores as

well as the partner idealization subscale, whereas romantic comedy movie viewing was

positively related only to partner idealization. Finally, Lippman, Ward, and Seabrook (2014)

investigated the associations between romantic ideals and exposure to movies and television also

with an undergraduate sample. They found that relationship-focused sitcom viewing was

associated with lower endorsement of romantic ideals on the whole and the soul mate and partner

idealization subscales, that marriage reality television viewing was associated with greater

endorsement of partner idealization and love at first sight, and that romantic movie viewing was

associated with greater endorsement of love conquers all. Together these studies suggest that

movie viewing reinforces idealized romantic notions (at least some of them) whereas certain

genres of television viewing, especially sitcoms, may undercut romantic ideals amongst college

students. These findings regarding romantic ideals are built upon in the present study by

examining the associations between viewing several movie and television genres and romantic

ideal endorsement amongst a more diverse sample of adults (relative to college students).

Because previous research on romantic ideals suggests that they are adaptive beliefs (Jones &

Cunningham, 1996; Ledbetter; 2017; Sprecher and Metts, 1999), watching media that

encourages endorsement of these ideals might be beneficial to relationship quality, whereas

watching media that discourages such beliefs might be harmful. This possibility can be

understood further through the examination of associations between media use and an important

relationship quality indicator, relationship satisfaction.

Media Use and Relationship Satisfaction

There is some prior research regarding media use and viewers' relationship satisfaction

(Holmes & Johnson, 2009; Reizer & Hetstoni, 2014; Shapiro & Kroeger, 1991). Two such

studies found that college students' television exposure, assessed overall (Holmes & Johnson,

2009) and as "relationship genres" (reality TV, family dramas, and sitcoms) (Reizer & Hetsroni, 2014), was associated with lower relationship satisfaction. In contrast, in an experimental study, college students currently in a relationship experienced increased satisfaction after exposure to a romantic comedy movie (Holmes & Johnson, 2009). These findings provide an interesting picture of possible contrasting effects of television and romantic movies on relationship satisfaction. However, the picture is yet incomplete.

First, it is unclear what mechanisms might account for these divergent results. Conceivably romantic beliefs might partially explain the associations. However, no study to date has explicitly examined romantic ideals as mediators of the associations between media use and relationship satisfaction. Additionally, prior studies on media use and relationship satisfaction relied on college students, a relatively homogenous group, which limits generalizability of those findings to the adult population. Whether the same associations would be found amongst a broader sample have not yet been thoroughly investigated. The purpose of the present study then was to explore the associations between relationship satisfaction and self-selected exposure to various movie and television genres in a sample of U.S. adults aged 18 to 64 and also to test whether romantic ideals mediate these potential media effects.

Combining the propositions of the GLM and the findings of prior research regarding media use, romantic ideals, and relationship satisfaction, viewing television, especially relationship-related television, may be associated with lower relationship satisfaction via lesser endorsement of romantic ideals, and viewing movies, especially romantic movies, may be associated with greater relationship satisfaction via higher endorsement of romantic ideals. It is also plausible that these associations may be moderated by individual differences.

Differential Susceptibility to Portrayals of Relationships

Valkenburg and Peter's (2013) Differential Susceptibility to Media Effects Model (DSMM) suggests that dispositional, social, and developmental susceptibilities may moderate the effects of media use on related outcomes. In the present study, the moderating effects of age and characteristics of one's current relationship are relevant. In their study regarding media use and romantic ideals, Lippman et al. (2014) investigated the associations between romantic ideal endorsement and relationship status, virginity status, and amount of dating experience. They found no significant associations. However, they noted that because college students' relationships are likely short term, their experiences might have little impact on their romantic beliefs. Accordingly, older adults' relationship experiences may be more influential.

In keeping with Lippman et al.'s (2014) suggestion, it is plausible that age, relationship length, and relationship status will affect the extent to which viewers are influenced by media depictions of romantic ideals. Specifically, it seems possible that individuals who are older, have been with their partners for longer periods of time, and who are in seemingly more committed relationships will be less susceptible to the knowledge structure changes that theoretically result from media use. However, given that research regarding media viewing and relationship outcomes has almost exclusively relied on undergraduate samples, it is unsurprising that no other research thus far appears to have examined the moderating influence of variables like relationship length.

Building on the research discussed, the central concern of the present study is to examine the associations between media use, romantic ideals, and relationship satisfaction. The key questions investigated are: 1) whether findings of varyingly valenced associations between relationship outcomes (beliefs and satisfaction) and television versus movie exposure are replicated when assessing exposure to different genres within the same sample, 2) whether those

same associations are replicated with a sample of participants who are not undergraduates, that

is, individuals with more diverse relationship experiences, 3) whether age, relationship length, or

relationship status moderate the associations between media viewing and relevant outcomes, and

4) whether romantic ideals underlie the associations between media use and relationship

satisfaction. To address these questions, a group of participants aged 18 to 64 were asked to

complete a survey. They were asked about their demographics, relationship status and length,

romantic ideals, relationship satisfaction, overall television and movie use, and frequency of

viewing various genres of television and movies including television dramas, television

comedies, reality TV dating shows, reality TV wedding shows, soap operas, romantic comedy

movies, and romantic drama movies.

Hypotheses and Research Questions.

As described, in prior research, when a connection was found between movie viewing,

both movies in general and romantic movies, and romantic ideals, viewing was associated with

greater belief in the ideals (Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Holmes, 2007; Holmes & Johnson, 2009;

Lippmann et al., 2014). Furthermore, viewing a romantic movie in an experimental setting had a

positive impact on relationship satisfaction (Holmes & Johnson, 2009). Regarding television, the

association between viewing and relationship outcomes is somewhat less clear, but a negative

association is more often found. Although Lippmann et al. (2014) found that marriage reality

show viewing was positively associated with endorsement of romantic ideals, relationship-

focused sitcom viewing was negatively associated with endorsement. Furthermore, the

association between viewing television, both in general and relationship-focused genres such as

reality TV, and relationship satisfaction is consistently negative (Holmes & Johnson, 2009;

Reizer & Hetsroni, 2014). Thus, generally speaking whereas television viewing is linked with

negative relationship outcomes, romantic movie viewing is linked with positive relationship outcomes. The following hypotheses are offered:

Hypothesis 1: Reality TV show, soap opera, television drama, and television comedy viewing would be negatively associated with romantic ideal endorsement, but romantic comedy and romantic drama movie viewing would be positively associated with romantic ideal endorsement.

Hypothesis 2: Reality TV show, soap opera, television drama, and television comedy viewing would be negatively associated with relationship satisfaction, but romantic comedy movie and romantic drama movie viewing would be positively associated with relationship satisfaction.

As discussed by Lippmann et al. (2014), because the relationship experiences of college students are limited, they may rely upon media to inform their beliefs to a greater extent than older adults. Put differently, differential susceptibilities may play a moderating role in these effects. Therefore, participants with less relationship experience, as represented by age, relationship length, and relationship status, were expected to be impacted to a greater degree than those with greater relationship experience. Thus also hypothesized:

Hypothesis 3a: Age will moderate the associations between media viewing and romantic ideals such that the association will be stronger for participants who are younger.

Hypothesis 3b: Relationship length will moderate the associations between media viewing and romantic ideals such that the association will be stronger for participants who have been in their relationships for less time.

Hypothesis 3c: Relationship status will moderate the associations between media viewing and romantic ideals such that the association will be stronger for participants who are in dating relationships versus those who are engaged, married, or in a domestic partnership.

Hypothesis 4a: Age will moderate the associations between media viewing and relationship satisfaction such that the association will be stronger for participants who are younger.

Hypothesis 4b: Relationship length will moderate the associations between media viewing and relationship satisfaction such that the association will be stronger for participants who have been in their relationships for less time.

Hypothesis 4c: Relationship status will moderate the associations between media viewing and relationship satisfaction such that the association will be stronger for participants who are in dating relationships versus those who are engaged, married, or in a domestic partnership.

Given that prior research often examined the associations between relationship outcomes and a single genre (e.g., Hefner & Wilson, 2013) or a small subset of genres (e.g., Lippman et al., 2014) and sometimes collapsed several genres into one group for analysis (e.g., Reizer & Hetsroni, 2014), another goal of this study was to create a somewhat larger picture of how television and movie viewing are related to romantic ideals and relationship satisfaction. Thus, the present study also aimed to address these questions:

Research Question 1: Of reality TV, soap opera, television drama, television comedy, and romantic movie viewing, which are the strongest predictors of romantic ideals when considered together?

Research Question 2: Of reality TV, soap opera, television drama, television comedy, and romantic movie viewing, which are the strongest predictors of relationship satisfaction when considered together?

Finally, given that research suggests an association between endorsement of romantic ideals and relationship satisfaction, the possibility that the associations between media use and relationship satisfaction are mediated by romantic ideals was also explored. Building on the previous hypotheses, it was anticipated that:

Hypothesis 5: Reality TV, soap opera, television drama, and television comedy viewing would be negatively associated with relationship satisfaction via lesser romantic ideal endorsement.

Hypothesis 6: Romantic movie viewing would be positively associated with relationship satisfaction via greater romantic ideal endorsement.

Methods

Participants.

A sample of 306 adults aged 18 – 64 who were currently in a romantic relationship of at least three months long and residing in the U.S. was recruited through an online panel service. A screening process was used to obtain a sample that included both men and women and heterogeneity in age. Thus, the sample included 152 men (50.3%) and 154 women (49.7%) and the ages of participants were widely distributed ($M = 41.3$, $SD = 13.93$). The vast majority of participants identified as heterosexual (92%), but a few participants identified as gay or lesbian, bisexual, or "other" (7%). Regarding relationship status, most participants were engaged, married, or in a civil union / domestic partnership (65%) while the remainder were "in a relationship" (35%). The length of these relationships ranged from 3 months to 47 years ($M =$

13.0, *SD* = 12.08). Regarding children, 182 did not have children under 18 (59.5%), while 124 did have children under 18 (40.5%).

Individuals without a high school education were underrepresented in this sample (2%) as compared to the U.S. population of adults 25 and older (12%), and those with at least some college were overrepresented (73% versus 59%) (Ryan & Bauman, 2016). Finally, the majority of participants reported being White or European-American (71%), while the remainder of the sample identified as Black or African-American (12%), Asian or Asian American (8%), Hispanic or Latina/o or Chicana/o (5%), American Indian or Alaskan Native (1%), or a combination of these (1%).

Measures.

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for all measures broken down by gender.

Movie and television use. A number of questions were asked regarding media use. Participants were asked to indicate the number of hours that they typically spend watching television each day of the week. Scores ranged from 0 to 167 hours watching television per week with an average of 40 hours. Similarly, they were asked how many movies they watch per month. Their responses indicated that they spent from 0 to 135 hours per month watching movies (presuming an average movie length of 90 minutes) with an average of 13 hours. These variables were log transformed to reduce skewness.[1]

Participants were also asked how often they watched reality television dating shows, reality television wedding shows, television comedies, television dramas, soap operas, romantic comedy movies, and romantic drama movies (1 never, 8 very often). An examination of the correlations between these variables revealed that romantic comedy and romantic drama movie viewing were highly correlated, $r = .73$, $p < .001$, so these items were averaged to create a

variable called romantic movie viewing. Similarly, reality TV dating and wedding show viewing were highly correlated, $r = .73$, $p < .001$, and these items were averaged to create a variable called relationship reality TV viewing.

Romantic ideals. Endorsement of romantic ideals was measured using a modified version of Sprecher and Metts's (1989) Romantic Beliefs Scale (RBS). The 15 statements in the original scale are forward-looking and worded in the first person. For example, "When I find my 'true love' I will probably know it soon after we meet." Whereas these statements make sense when administered to undergraduates who presumably have not yet made a life-long commitment to a partner, at face value they do not appear to be as applicable to relatively older adults. For that reason, the statements were modified primarily with "you" replacing "I" to reflect the same beliefs but more generally. (e.g., "When you find your 'true love' you will probably know it soon after you meet.") Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each statement (1 strongly disagree, 7 strongly agree).

The authors of the RBS suggested that it has four factors: soul mates, partner idealization, love conquers all, and love at first sight. Whereas some researchers have applied these factors a priori, others have subjected the scale to factor and reliability analyses and have found fewer factors or low reliabilities. For this study, I conducted a principal components analysis with Direct Oblimin rotation, and three factors emerged. There was one item in the analysis that had marginal loading on all three factors and was removed. Regarding the three factors, the first had only one item and was thus eliminated. The second factor represented "love conquers all." The third factor contained the remaining items. The ideas of partner idealization and love at first sight do indeed seem to fit with the notion of the existence of "soul mates." Therefore, two subscales were created by averaging the scores of the relevant items, belief that love conquers all (6 items,

Cronbach's α = .86) and belief in soul mates (7 items, Cronbach's α = .87) with ranges from 1 to 7.

Relationship satisfaction. Relationship satisfaction was measured using the seven-item Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS) created by Hendrick (1981). This scale asks participants to reflect on their relationship with their partner. Each item is a question about the relationship with a specific 5-point scale unique to that item. The items had high internal consistency (Cronbach's α = .89) and, consistent with other studies, were summed to create an index of relationship satisfaction with a range of 7 to 35.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

I first investigated whether any demographic characteristics were associated with romantic ideals or relationship satisfaction. As reported in Table 1, there were no gender differences in romantic ideal endorsement, which contrasts with findings of prior studies with college students (e.g., Lipmman, Ward, & Seabrook, 2014). Given this somewhat surprising result, I followed up with a series of analyses testing for moderating effects of gender and viewing each media genre on belief in love conquers all and soul mates respectively, and there were no significant interactions. There was also no gender difference in relationship satisfaction. Therefore, in this sample gender did not appear to play a significant role in romantic ideal endorsement or relationship satisfaction.

Table 1
Means and Mean Differences by Gender for Primary Variables

	Possible Range	Sample		Women	Men		
Variable		*M*	*SD*	*M*	*M*	*t*	*df*
Media Use							
Relationship reality TV shows	1 – 8	2.66	2.27	3.02	2.30	-2.80[*]	296.64

Television comedies	1 – 8	5.76	2.29	6.05	5.45	-2.29*	304.00
Television dramas	1 – 8	5.75	2.33	6.09	5.42	-2.57*	303.00
Soap operas	1 – 8	2.70	2.56	3.06	2.34	-2.49**	286.16
Romantic movies	1 – 8	5.13	2.00	5.45	4.81	-2.82**	304.00
Romantic ideals							
Love Conquers All	1 – 7	5.41	1.11	5.41	5.41	-.00	304.00
Soul Mates	1 – 7	4.27	1.36	4.18	4.36	1.51	304.00
Relationship satisfaction	7 – 35	27.76	6.05	27.68	27.84	.22	298.00

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

I also conducted correlation analyses (Pearson or point biserial) with other demographic variables including age, race / ethnicity (five items), education, sexual orientation, relationship length, relationship status, and having children under age 18 and romantic ideals and relationship satisfaction. Regarding belief in love conquers all, none of the correlations with the demographic variables were larger than .09 and none were significant. Regarding belief in soul mates, one significant correlation was found. Belief in soul mates was positively correlated with identifying as Asian or Asian American, $r = 0.14$, $p = .01$. Regarding relationship satisfaction, none of the correlations with the demographic variables were larger than .08 and none were significant. To summarize, demographics more broadly played only a small role in romantic ideal endorsement and relationship satisfaction with this sample.

Hypothesis Testing.

To test Hypotheses 1 and 2 regarding media use and romantic ideals and relationship satisfaction, I conducted correlation analyses as shown in Table 2. In the analyses regarding belief in soul mates, I controlled for identifying as Asian or Asian American.

Table 2
Correlations Between Primary Variables

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	Overall TV viewing										
2	Overall movie viewing	.35***									

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
3	Relationship reality TV shows	.40***	.14*							
4	TV comedies	.32***	.21***	.22***						
5	TV dramas	.37***	.27***	.27***	.45***					
6	Soap operas	.33***	.15*	.68***	.24***	.27***				
7	Romantic movies	.36***	.34***	.49***	.49***	.35***	.40***			
8	Love conquers all	.10	.19**	.16**	.19**	.25***	.16**	.27***		
9	Soul mates[a]	.20**	.12	.35***	.18**	.19**	.40***	.32***	.65***	
10	Relationship satisfaction	-.08	.08	-.02	.15*	.16**	.00	.13*	.28***	.26***

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$
[a] Identifying as Asian / Asian American were controlled for in these partial correlation analyses.

Then, to address Hypotheses 3 and 4 and Research Questions 1 and 2, I conducted a series of hierarchical regression models (Hayes, 2018) as depicted in Tables 3, 4, and 5. As shown, I tested for moderating effects of age, relationship length, and relationship status in separate analyses because whereas those variables were strongly related, they are conceptually distinct. In step one, I entered control variables including age, relationship length, or relationship status, identifying as Asian / Asian American (where indicated), overall television viewing, and overall movie viewing. In step two, I entered the five media genres: relationship reality TV, television drama, television comedy, soap opera, and romantic movie. In step three, I entered interactions between the potential moderators and viewing each media genre.

Table 3
Hierarchical Regressions Predicting Belief in Love Conquers All

Moderator:	Model 1 Age	Model 2 Age	Model 3 Age	Model 1 Relationship Length	Model 2 Relationship Length	Model 3 Relationship Length	Model 1 Relationship Status	Model 2 Relationship Status	Model 3 Relationship Status
	β	β	β	β	β	β	β	β	β
Control Variables									
Age or Length or Status[b]	.00	.04	.05	.02	.05	.06	.02	.03	.03
Overall TV Viewing	.04	-.08	-.08	.04	-.09	-.10	.04	-.09	-.10
Overall Movie Viewing	.15[*]	.09	.09	.15[*]	.10	.10	.15[*]	.09	.09
Adj. R[2]	.02			.02			.02		
F (3, 256)	2.39			2.41			2.42		
Genre Viewing									
Relationship reality TV		.05	.05		.05	.06		.04	-.05
TV dramas		.16[*]	.17[*]		.16[*]	.17[*]		.16[*]	.16
TV comedies		-.01	-.02		-.02	-.02		-.02	.07
Soap operas		.07	.08		.07	.08		.08	-.06
Romantic movies		.15[*]	.16[a]		.15[*]	.14		.15[a]	.17
ΔR^2		.07			.07			.07	
ΔF		4.01[**]			4.01[**]			3.91[**]	
Interactions									
Moderator x relationship reality TV			.04			.03			.07
Moderator x TV dramas			-.07			-.05			.01
Moderator x TV comedies			.00			-.01			-.14
Moderator x soap operas			.02			-.03			.18
Moderator x romantic movies			.02			.08			.01
ΔR^2			.01			.01			.02
ΔF			.36			.38			1.15

Note. [a] = .05, [*] $p < .05$. [**] $p < .01$. [***] $p < .001$. [b] 0 = dating, 1 = engaged, domestic partnership, or married.

Table 4
Hierarchical Regressions Predicting Belief in Soul Mates

Moderator:	Model 1 Age	Model 2 Age	Model 3 Age	Model 1 Relationship Length	Model 2 Relationship Length	Model 3 Relationship Length	Model 1 Relationship Status	Model 2 Relationship Status	Model 3 Relationship Status
	β	β	β	β	β	β	β	β	β
Control Variables									
Age or Length or Status[a]	-.06	.02	.01	-.09	-.03	-.03	-.07	-.04	-.04
Asian / Asian American	.13[*]	.04	.05	.13[*]	.04	.05	.14[*]	.04	.04

Overall TV Viewing	.19**	.02	.02	.18**	.01	.01	.18**	.01	.01
Overall Movie Viewing	.05	.00	-.01	.05	.00	.00	.06	.01	.00
Adj. R^2	.05			.05			.05		
$F (4, 252)$	4.67**			4.39**			4.31**		
Genre Viewing									
Relationship reality TV		.12	.13		.11	.13		.11	.12
TV dramas		.05	.05		.05	.04		.05	.04
TV comedies		.01	.00		.01	-.01		.01	-.08
Soap operas		.27***	.27**		.27***	.28***		.27***	.16
Romantic movies		.13	.11		.12	.09		.12	.13
ΔR^2		.15			.19			.15	
ΔF		9.86***			9.58***			9.84***	
Interactions									
Moderator x relationship reality TV			-.01			-.01			-.01
Moderator x TV dramas			-.07			-.07			.00
Moderator x TV comedies			.03			.06			.10
Moderator x soap operas			-.03			-.04			.14
Moderator x romantic movies			.08			.12			-.01
ΔR^2			.01			.02			.01
ΔF			.51			1.21			.60

Note. $* p < .05$. $** p < .01$. $*** p < .001$. [a] 0 = dating, 1 = engaged, domestic partnership, or married.

Table 5

Hierarchical Regressions Predicting Relationship Satisfaction

Moderator:	Model 1 Age	Model 2 Age	Model 3 Age	Model 1 Relationship Length	Model 2 Relationship Length	Model 3 Relationship Length	Model 1 Relationship Status	Model 2 Relationship Status	Model 3 Relationship Status
	β	β	β	β	β	β	β	β	β
Control Variables									
Age or Length or Status[b]	-.09	-.07	-.07	.05	.08	.07	-.03	-.03	-.04
Overall TV Viewing	-.10	-.19**	-.17*	-.08	-.18*	-.16*	-.10	-.20**	-.20**
Overall Movie Viewing	.11	.06	.04	.14*	.08	.07	.12	.06	.06
Adj. R^2	.01			.01			.01		
$F (9, 257)$	2.08			1.60			1.48		
Genre Viewing									
Relationship reality TV		-.06	-.02		-.02	-.04		-.04	.02
TV dramas		.17*	.16*		.16*	.14*		.16*	.20
TV comedies		.10	.07		.12	.11		.11	-.04
Soap operas		-.02	-.04		-.04	-.02		-.03	-.25*
Romantic movies		.15[a]	.12		.15*	.16*		.15[a]	.15
ΔR^2		.07			.08			.07	
ΔF		3.60**			4.10**			3.78**	

Interactions			
Moderator x relationship reality TV	.01	-.07	-.11
Moderator x TV dramas	.05	-.01	-.05
Moderator x TV comedies	.08	.06	.16
Moderator x soap operas	.06	.15	.29[*]
Moderator x romantic movies	.04	-.03	.00
ΔR^2	.03	.02	.03
ΔF	1.45	.93	1.45

Note. [a] = .06, [*] $p < .05$. [**] $p < .01$. [***] $p < .001$. [b] 0 = dating, 1 = engaged, domestic partnership, or married.

Finally, to address Hypotheses 5 and 6, I conducted two mediation analyses using the PROCESS

macro (Hayes, 2018) as shown in Tables 6 and 7.

Table 6
*Mediation Analysis of Television Viewing Predicting Relationship Satisfaction via Romantic
Ideals*

Predicting Belief in Love Conquers All	
Relationship Reality TV	0.04
TV Dramas	0.08[*]
TV Comedies	0.05
Soap Operas	0.02
Predicting Belief in Soul Mates	
Relationship Reality TV	0.11[*]
TV Dramas	0.04
TV Comedies	0.04
Soap Operas	0.14[***]
Predicting Relationship Satisfaction	
Relationship Reality TV	-0.13
TV Dramas	0.40[*]
TV Comedies	0.34[*]
Soap Operas	-0.20
Love Conquers	1.00[*]
Soul Mates	0.74[*]
Indirect Effects	
Relationship Reality TV ➔ Love Conquers ➔ Satisfaction	0.04
TV Dramas ➔ Love Conquers ➔ Satisfaction	0.08[*]
TV Comedies ➔ Love Conquers ➔ Satisfaction	0.04
Soap Operas ➔ Love Conquers ➔ Satisfaction	0.02
Relationship Reality TV ➔ Soul Mates ➔ Satisfaction	0.08[*]
TV Dramas ➔ Soul Mates ➔ Satisfaction	0.03
TV Comedies ➔ Soul Mates ➔ Satisfaction	0.03
Soap Operas ➔ Soul Mates ➔ Satisfaction	0.10[*]

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Controlling for Overall TV Viewing.

Table 7
*Mediation Analysis of Romantic Movie Viewing Predicting Relationship Satisfaction via
Romantic Ideals*

Predicting Belief in Love Conquers All	
Romantic Movies	0.12***
Predicting Belief in Soul Mates	
Romantic Movies	0.23***
Predicting Relationship Satisfaction	
Romantic Movies	0.20
Love Conquers All	1.49***
Soul Mates	0.21
Indirect Effects	
Romantic Movie Viewing ➔ Love Conquers ➔ Satisfaction	0.17*
Romantic Movie Viewing ➔ Soul Mates ➔ Satisfaction	0.05

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Controlling for Overall Movie Viewing.

Media use and romantic beliefs. Hypothesis 1 predicted that television viewing would be negatively associated with romantic ideals but romantic movie viewing would be positively associated with romantic ideals. The results of correlation analyses between viewing and belief in love conquers all and soul mates are shown in Table 2. Each of the measured genres of television and movie viewing (relationship reality TV, TV comedy, TV drama, soap opera, and romantic movie) were positively correlated with belief in love conquers all with values ranging from $r = .16$, $p = .004$ for soap operas to $r = .27$, $p < .001$ for romantic movies. Likewise, each of the genres of television and movie viewing were positively correlated with belief in soul mates with values ranging from $r = .18$, $p = .005$ for television comedies to $r = .40$, $p < .001$ for soap operas. Because the hypothesis suggested that television viewing would be negatively associated with romantic ideals but romantic movie viewing would be positively associated, Hypothesis 1 was only partially supported.

Media use and relationship satisfaction. Similar to Hypothesis 1, Hypothesis 2 suggested that television viewing would be negatively associated but romantic movie viewing would be positively associated with relationship satisfaction. As depicted in Table 2, there were three

genres of media that were significantly correlated with relationship satisfaction: television comedies, television dramas, and romantic movies. Contrary to the direction of the hypothesis, television comedy and drama viewing were positively associated with relationship satisfaction, r = .15, p = .01 and r = .16, p = .006 respectively. Romantic movie viewing was also positively associated with relationship satisfaction, r = .13, p = .02. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was only partially supported.

   Age, relationship length, and relationship status as moderators of media use ➔ romantic beliefs. Hypotheses 3a, 3b, and 3c predicted that age, relationship length, and relationship status (dating vs. engaged, in a domestic partnership, or married) would moderate the associations between media use and romantic ideals. In the analyses regarding love conquers all (Table 3) and soul mates (Table 4), interactions between age, relationship length, or relationship status and viewing the various media genres did not significantly increase the variance explained by the model. Furthermore, none of the interactions were significant for age, relationship length, or relationship status. Thus, Hypothesis 3 was not supported; age, relationship length, or relationship status did not moderate the associations between media use and romantic ideals.

   Age, relationship length, and relationship status as moderators of media use ➔ relationship satisfaction. Hypotheses 4a, 4b, and 4c predicted that age, relationship length, and relationship status would moderate the associations between media use and relationship satisfaction. In the analyses regarding relationship satisfaction (Table 5), adding interactions between age, relationship length, or relationship status and the genres of media viewing did not significantly improve the models. However, one significant interaction was found. Relationship status moderated the association between soap opera viewing and relationship satisfaction, b = .29, p = .03. A probe of the interaction revealed that the soap opera viewing had a significant

negative association with relationship satisfaction for those in dating relationships, effect = -.60, 95% CI [-1.20, -.01] but no significant association with relationship satisfaction for those who were engaged, in a domestic partnership, or married, effect = .27, 95% CI [-.27, .81]. Therefore, Hypothesis 4 was partially supported; neither age nor relationship length moderated the associations between media use and relationship satisfaction, but relationship status did moderate one association between media use and relationship satisfaction.

Comparing media genres when predicting romantic ideals. Research Question 1 was regarding the relative strength of viewing various media genres in predicting romantic ideals. As shown in Table 3 Model 2, two genres were significant predictors of love conquers all, television drama, b = .16, p = .02, and romantic movie, b = .15, p = .05. Thus, television drama and romantic movie viewing are the strongest predictors of belief in love conquers all. As shown in Table 4 Model 2, only one genre, soap opera, was significant in predicting soul mates, b = .27, p < .001. Therefore, soap opera viewing is the strongest predictor of belief in soul mates.

Comparing media genres when predicting relationship satisfaction. Research Question 2 was regarding the relative strength of viewing various media genres in predicting relationship satisfaction. As shown in Table 5 Model 2, there were three significant predictors of relationship satisfaction, overall television, television drama, and romantic movie viewing. Whereas overall television viewing was negatively associated with relationship satisfaction, b = -.19, p = .01, television drama and romantic movie viewing were positively associated with relationship satisfaction, b = .17, p = .02, and b = .15, p = .05 respectively. Thus, the answer to Research Question 2 is that overall television, television drama, and romantic movie viewing are the strongest predictors of relationship satisfaction.

Romantic ideals mediating television ➔ *relationship satisfaction.* Hypothesis 5 suggested that television viewing would be negatively associated with relationship satisfaction via lower endorsement of romantic ideals. In the mediation analysis (Table 6), belief in love conquers all and soul mates predicted greater relationship satisfaction as expected, and there were three significant indirect effects. Television drama viewing was positively associated with relationship satisfaction via belief in love conquers all, indirect effect = .08, 95% CI [.01, .21], and relationship reality TV and soap opera viewing were positively associated with relationship satisfaction via belief in soul mates, indirect effects = .08, 95% CI [.01, .23] and .10, 95% CI [.01, .26] respectively. The effects of relationship reality TV and soap opera viewing on relationship satisfaction were indirect only. Given that the associations between television drama, relationship reality TV, and soap opera viewing and relationship satisfaction were positive, not negative, Hypothesis 5 was not supported.

Romantic ideals mediating romantic movies ➔ *relationship satisfaction.* Hypothesis 6 suggested that romantic movie viewing would be positively associated with relationship satisfaction via greater endorsement of romantic ideals. In the mediation analysis (Table 7), there was one significant indirect effect. Romantic movie viewing was positively associated with relationship satisfaction via belief in love conquers all, indirect effect = .17, 95% CI [.05, .36]. The effect of romantic movie viewing on relationship satisfaction was indirect only. Hypothesis 6 was supported.

Discussion

There were four goals of this study. The first and second goals were to investigate whether contrasting associations between relationship outcomes and television and movie viewing were replicated 1) when assessing exposure to both types of content within one sample

and 2) amongst adults with more diverse relationship experiences than undergraduates.
Television viewing was expected to be negatively associated and romantic movie viewing
positively associated with romantic ideals based on prior research (Hefner & Wilson, 2013;
Lippman et al., 2014; Reizer & Hetsroni, 2014). However, in this study, all of the genres of
television viewing (relationship reality TV, comedy, drama, soap opera) and romantic movie
viewing were positively correlated with belief in love conquers all and soul mates. In fact, when
considering these genres together and controlling for age or relationship length or relationship
status, television drama viewing emerged as one of the strongest predictors of love conquers all
along with romantic movie viewing. In the corresponding analysis for belief in soul mates, soap
opera viewing was the strongest predictor.

The results regarding relationship satisfaction were similar. Based on prior studies,
overall and relationship-focused television viewing were expected to be negatively associated
with relationship satisfaction (Johnson & Holmes, 2009; Reizer & Hetsroni, 2014), whereas
movie viewing, especially romantic movie viewing, was expected to be positively associated
with relationship satisfaction (Johnson & Holmes, 2009). When controlling for age or
relationship length, overall time spent watching television did indeed negatively predict
relationship satisfaction, and romantic movie viewing did positively predict relationship
satisfaction. Additionally, soap opera viewing negatively predicted relationship satisfaction for
those in dating relationships. However, television drama viewing, the strongest predictor of the
television genres, also *positively* predicted relationship satisfaction when controlling for age or
relationship length.

To summarize, the results of this study generally point to positive implications of
watching television comedies and dramas, relationship-focused reality TV, and romantic movies

for adult viewers. Thus, the results of prior studies regarding media use and romantic ideals or relationship satisfaction were not entirely replicated and in some cases conflicted with prior research. However, the findings of this study do potentially support the contention of the General Learning Model (Barlett & Anderson, 2013) that repeated exposure can lead to the formation or reinforcement of knowledge structures, relationship beliefs in this study.

Why do the findings of this study regarding the outcomes of viewing specific genres of television diverge from prior studies? One possible explanation would lie in different samples. That proposition was explicitly tested when addressing the third goal of the study, which was to examine the role of differential susceptibilities in the associations between media viewing and relevant outcomes. Related analyses showed that, contrary to predictions, age, nor relationship length, nor relationship status moderated the associations between any of the genres of television viewing and endorsement of romantic ideals. (In fact, a post hoc moderation analysis wherein age was treated as dichotomous, college age vs. older, the results were the same.) Additionally, neither age nor relationship length moderated the associations between any of the genres of television viewing and relationship satisfaction. Relationship status was a moderating variable, but only in the case of the association between soap opera viewing and relationship satisfaction. Thus, there was virtually no support for the explanation that the divergent findings are due to differences in age or development between samples. We must then look to other possibilities.

Another possibility lies in how viewing various television genres was measured. In Lippman et al.'s study (2014), participants were asked to indicate how frequently they watched a list of sitcoms that feature dating relationships, whereas in the present study participants were asked how often they view "television comedies." It is plausible that watching relationship-focused sitcoms undercuts romantic ideals, but viewing television comedies in general

encourages romantic ideals. More broadly, perhaps relationship-focused media have different impacts than media of the same genre but with a different primary focus.

Lending further support to that notion, the direction of the findings regarding romantic ideals and two media genres included in this study that specifically feature relationships, relationship reality TV and romantic movies, were consistent, or at least not inconsistent, with the findings of prior research. It appears then that it is important to distinguish between viewing media of a particular genre and viewing shows or movies within the genre that focus on relationships. Again, based on the theoretical propositions of the GLM, repeated exposure to media content may lead to changes in knowledge structures (Barlett & Anderson, 2013). It may be then that there are key differences in content *within* television and movie genres. Perhaps, for example, sitcoms that focus on dating portray relationships in a negative light, undercutting romantic ideals, but comedies of other kinds portray relationships in a positive light that encourages them.

Similarly, the aforementioned study regarding relationship satisfaction (Reizer & Hetsroni, 2014) asked participants how frequently they view reality shows, family dramas, and sitcoms, which were combined to form a measure of viewing "relationship genres." Watching relationship genres was negatively associated with relationship satisfaction in that study. In the current study, participants were asked how often they view television dramas, dating and wedding reality shows, television comedies, and soap operas, which were then analyzed separately. Television drama and comedy viewing were positively associated with relationship satisfaction. It is plausible that the differences in genres specified or the combination of genres versus separate treatment led to differing results.

The final goal of this study was to investigate mechanisms that may underlie contrasting associations with relationship satisfaction. Although those contrasting associations were generally not found, the current study nonetheless provided important insights. Notably, both romantic ideals were associated with greater relationship satisfaction, and significant indirect effects were found. In fact, there were three mediated effects found in the television analysis, the directions of which were counter to what was predicted. Television drama viewing was associated with greater relationship satisfaction via belief in love conquers all. Put differently, those who more frequently watched television dramas believed more strongly that love conquers all and in turn reported higher relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, relationship reality television and soap opera viewing were associated with higher relationship satisfaction via belief in soul mates; those who watched more relationship reality television and soap operas believed more strongly in soul mates and in turn reported higher relationship satisfaction. It is worth noting however that these were indirect-only effects, meaning that relationship reality television and soap opera viewing only had positive associations with relationship satisfaction when belief in soul mates was increased. Additionally, as expected, romantic movie viewing was associated with greater relationship satisfaction via belief in love conquers all. This association was also indirect-only, meaning romantic movie viewing was only associated with greater relationship satisfaction when belief in love conquers all was increased. From these findings it is apparent that both television and movies can have a positive influence on relationship satisfaction to the extent that they encourage belief in romantic ideals.

Whereas romantic ideals were the focus of the present study, this is not to imply that romantic ideals are the only possible explanation for associations between media use and relationship satisfaction. In this study, television drama viewing was associated with relationship

satisfaction via belief in love conquers all, but there was a remaining positive direct effect. What other reasons might there be for that association? Very little research has reported on television drama viewing and relationship-related outcomes, and there is nothing to indicate that the messages of TV dramas would encourage relationship satisfaction. In fact, based on the limited evidence available, television drama viewing should be associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction. In a study of adults who were in romantic relationships, Shapiro and Kroeger (1991) found that those who watched television dramas endorsed some relationship myths more than participants who did not watch television dramas. Furthermore, in a survey study, Glascock (2003) found that undergraduate viewers perceived the main male and female characters in television dramas as stereotypically masculine and feminine respectively. Based on the propositions of the GLM (Barlett & Anderson, 2013), TV drama viewing could encourage the belief that men and women vary dramatically in their needs, which is also considered maladaptive (Epstein & Eidelson, 1981). Thus, through the encouragement of maladaptive beliefs, TV drama viewing could undermine relationship satisfaction. Nonetheless, in the present study, viewing TV dramas was associated with greater relationship satisfaction. Perhaps then there is a content or context aspect of television drama viewing that has not yet been identified by scholars and is associated with higher relationship satisfaction.

Additionally, in the present study, soap operas had a positive association with relationship satisfaction when they increased belief in soul mates, but there was also negative association between soap opera viewing and relationship satisfaction amongst individuals who were in dating relationships. A study by Haferkamp (1999) points to one potential explanation for this. Haferkamp found that soap opera viewing was associated with greater endorsement of the dysfunctional relationship belief that mindreading is expected amongst undergraduates. It is

possible that soap opera viewing leads to maladaptive beliefs, which leads to decreased

relationship satisfaction. As to why only dating individuals would be impacted, consistent with

framework of the DSMM (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009), it seems plausible that those in long-term,

committed relationships would be resistant to the message that they can "just know" what their

partner is thinking because of their real-world experiences, whereas those in dating relationships

would be susceptible to that unrealistic message. More generally, while the present study

reiterates the importance of romantic ideals it also points to other mechanisms through which

media exposure, TV viewing in particular, may impact relationship satisfaction.

Study Limitations and Future Research

The preceding discussion of the study's findings presumes a particular causal order, that

media use leads to changes in knowledge structures, which impact relationship functioning as

suggested by the GLM and DSMM. This points to one of the limitations of the current study and

a direction for future research. The primary limitation of the current study is that it was cross-

sectional, which provides no evidence of causal order. It is conceivable that rather than media

influencing viewers' romantic beliefs that consumers' romantic beliefs influence which media

they choose. Individuals who hold idealized beliefs may seek out media that is consistent with

their preexisting notions or consumers who do not hold such beliefs may shun media that

emphasizes romance. Likewise, it is also possible that those who are more satisfied with their

current relationships seek out different types of content than those who are less satisfied.

Perhaps, for example, romantic movies are less appealing to those who are not satisfied in their

current relationships. Furthermore, there could be reciprocal associations between media use and

relationship-related variables. For example, maybe individuals who have idealized romantic

views seek out romance-related media and the messages therein reinforce those beliefs. This

would be consistent DSMM's suggestion that media effects impact media use (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Future studies should examine the associations between media use and relationship beliefs over time. Similarly, researchers should continue to investigate whether individuals who are less satisfied with their relationships spend more time watching television, or if television content in some way contributes to lower relationship satisfaction. Such an investigation may also shed light on why overall time spent watching television is negatively associated with relationship satisfaction but watching some television genres is positively associated with relationship satisfaction.

Additionally, the present study only considered three differential susceptibility variables, age, relationship length, and relationship status. Whereas these were chosen because they were thought to be the most relevant to the outcomes investigated, future research should examine additional individual differences, for example, motivations for media use. Such an investigation may help clarify the impacts of media viewing on adults who are currently in romantic relationships. It may also identify other individual differences that could explain contradictory findings between research with college students and this research with a broader sample. Along similar lines, additional potential mediators of the associations between media viewing and relationship satisfaction should be considered in future research. As alluded to, romantic ideals are only one mechanism through which TV and movies might influence relationship satisfaction. We may come to a better understanding of those associations by examining other beliefs and attitudes about romantic relationships that watching television and movies impacts. Finally, as indicated, future research should continue to narrow in on the relationship portrayals and messages of very particular media content, as even within genres significant differences may exist that lead to varying outcomes.

Conclusion

On the whole, the results of this study point to positive implications of viewing both relationship-focused television and romantic movies for adult viewers' romantic relationships. These findings add to the growing body of literature regarding the forces that keep couples together or draw them apart and provide a foundation for continued investigation into the role that media plays in adults' romantic lives.

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Footnotes

[1] Although a few participants indicated that they watched television for unreasonably large

amounts of time, the corresponding data points were not outliers once they were log transformed,

and they did not significantly impact the analyses. Thus, all participant responses were included.