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Fall 2020

### **Who Feels All the Feels? Individual Differences in Emotional Responses to and Enjoyment of Depictions of Romantic Relationships**

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## **Who Feels All the Feels? Individual Differences in Emotional Responses to and Enjoyment of Depictions of Romantic Relationships**

**Valerie Ellen Kretz**

*This experiment investigated relationship satisfaction and attachment orientations as moderators of emotional responses to and enjoyment of typical movie and television relationship portrayals. The effects of comedy versus drama exposure were also examined. Participants were 306 adults. Results showed that participants with higher relationship satisfaction experienced more amusement in response to the comedies and hope in response to the romantic movies than those with less satisfaction. Participants with higher attachment avoidance experienced less romantic feeling and hope in response to the romantic movies and less amusement in response to the comedies than those with less avoidance. Main effects of relationship satisfaction and attachment orientations were also found. Additionally, relationship satisfaction and attachment anxiety led to greater enjoyment whereas attachment avoidance led to lesser enjoyment. Higher relationship satisfaction led to more hopeful feelings, which led to greater enjoyment in the romantic movie conditions only. Results are discussed in light of social comparison theory and differential susceptibility to media effects.*

### **Introduction**

Across the media landscape, there are plentiful examples of romantic relationships. Movies and television shows in particular often focus on couples. In film, there are entire genres like romantic comedy devoted to portrayals of romantic love, and on television, one need not look further than prime time to find instances of dating and married couples. Given their ubiquity, it is unsurprising that an increasing number of studies have worked towards documenting the effects of such portrayals on real-world relationship outcomes like beliefs, expectations, and satisfaction (e.g., Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Holmes & Johnson, 2009; Lippman, Ward, & Seabrook, 2014; Kretz, 2019; Reizer & Hetsroni, 2014). These studies are frequently built on social cognitive theory or cultivation theory. Another theory that could be applied to the study of relationship portrayals is social comparison (Festinger, 1954). Based on social comparison theory, portrayals of relationships could elicit a variety of reactions from viewers. For example, comparing one's own romantic life to a grand romantic gesture in a movie could result in feeling jealous. However, the degree to which one experiences jealousy could vary. Someone who is dissatisfied with their romantic life would likely experience more jealousy than someone who is satisfied with it. Other traits of the viewer, like their general orientations toward relationships (i.e., attachment, Bowlby, 1969) may also influence the experience of

viewing romantic content. Yet there is a lack of empirical research on these topics.

In light of that gap, the primary aim of the present study was to investigate whether relationship satisfaction and attachment orientations serve as differential susceptibilities (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013) to the effects of viewing typical movie and television portrayals of romantic relationships. The effects examined include emotional responses and enjoyment. The present study also has important practical implications because it sheds light on how viewers respond to popular forms of media content. The key comparisons in this experimental study include exposure to romantic movie versus television depictions and comedic versus dramatic depictions of romantic relationships. To develop hypotheses, differential susceptibilities are considered based on social comparison and attachment theories and research.

#### **Differential Susceptibilities to the Effects of Romantic Relationship Depictions**

In their Differential Susceptibility to Media Effects Model (DSMM), Valkenburg and Peter (2013) suggest that three types of variables may make individuals more or less susceptible to media effects: dispositional, developmental, and social. Within the model, a key role of these differential susceptibility variables is moderating the impact of media exposure on cognitive, emotional, and excitative responses. Consistent with the notion of differential susceptibilities as moderating variables, there is evidence that depictions of romantic relationships elicit varying responses from different groups of individuals. For example, in one study, undergraduates who were currently in a romantic relationship and were assigned to watch a romantic comedy movie subsequently made more positive evaluations of their relationships than those in a control group who watched a film with no relationship themes. In contrast, those who were currently single and saw the romantic comedy made less positive evaluations of a previous relationship compared to those in the control group (Holmes & Johnson, 2009). These results, which reflect differential susceptibilities, could be explained by social comparison theory.

**Social comparison theory.** Proposed by Festinger (1954), social comparison theory asserts that individuals rely on comparisons with others to evaluate themselves on any number of dimensions (e.g., opinions and abilities). Individuals may make upward comparisons, to those better off, or downward comparisons, to those worse off in a particular domain. Both upward and downward comparisons can lead to assimilation effects, moving towards the target of comparison, or contrast effects, moving away from the target of comparison (see Buunk & Gibbons, 2007 for a review). Different types of comparisons lead to differing cognitive and

emotional outcomes. Upward comparisons with assimilation (e.g., I could achieve what the target has) and downward comparisons with contrast (e.g., I'll never sink to the level of the target) have more positive consequences. Conversely, upward comparisons with contrast (i.e., I'll never achieve what the target has) and downward comparisons with assimilation (e.g., I'll probably sink to the level of the target) have more negative consequences (Suls, Martin, & Wheeler, 2002). Furthermore, specific emotional responses have been theorized regarding upward comparisons. Upward comparisons with contrast lead to feeling jealous, whereas upward comparisons with assimilation lead to feeling hopeful (Smith, 2000).

Social comparison theory then seems to suggest that any given media depiction of romantic relationships could evoke very different emotional responses, depending on whether viewing elicits a comparison and whether that comparison is upward or downward and leads to assimilation or contrast effects. Research regarding reality television provides general support for this notion. In an experiment, participants watched a reality TV clip featuring ill-behaved young people and responsible older adults after upward or downward, assimilation or contrast comparisons were prompted, and the findings indicated that viewing the same clip elicited different emotional responses depending on condition (Lewis & Weaver, 2016).

Comparisons made while viewing may also impact enjoyment. Nabi and Krucmar (2004) suggest that enjoyment is an attitude with affective, cognitive, and behavioral components. Positive and negative emotions can contribute to media enjoyment, cognitive judgments like social comparisons are intertwined with enjoyment, and behaviors during viewing like attention can indicate enjoyment. There is no direct evidence regarding the association between social comparison and enjoyment of relationship content. However, studies regarding media selection do provide relevant insights. They suggest that individuals in unhappy relationship circumstances are more likely to choose love lamenting music and to avoid happy romantic films (Kim & Oliver, 2011; Knobloch & Zillman, 2003). Individuals who are in unhappy circumstances may avoid romantic content because they anticipate making an upward social comparison that will make them feel bad; whereas individuals in positive circumstances may seek out happy romantic content because they anticipate making an upward social comparison that will make them feel good. Underlying these consumer choices is the notion that exposure to relationship messages can be enjoyable but may not be depending on the nature of the comparison the viewer makes.

**Satisfaction as individual difference.** There are many factors that predict which type of comparison an individual will make

in the context of romantic relationships. One such factor is relationship satisfaction. There is some empirical indication that level of satisfaction with one's self or situation can lead to different emotional responses to a given media depiction. For example, a study of female undergraduates' retrospective reports of watching surgical makeover shows revealed that body satisfaction was associated with feeling more hope while watching (Nabi and Keblusek, 2014). Similarly, in a meta-analysis, initial body satisfaction moderated the association between exposure to body-focused images and subsequent body satisfaction (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). Together these suggest that individuals with higher satisfaction may respond more positively to idealized portrayals compared to those with lower satisfaction.

Regarding romantic relationships in particular, there is further evidence that relationship satisfaction is relevant to the types of comparisons that individuals make. In a study wherein married adults were asked to report the frequency with which they made upward and downward, assimilation and contrast comparisons to others' relationships, individuals reported making downward comparisons with contrast most frequently followed by upward comparisons with assimilation (Buunk, Collins, Taylor, VanYperen, & Dakof, 1990). Put differently, participants most frequently made comparisons that made them feel better. However, the more dissatisfied an individual was with their own relationship, the more likely they were to report making downward comparisons with assimilation, reporting feeling negative emotions because they felt similar to someone worse off. Thus, although individuals may make both upward and downward comparisons in everyday life, relationship satisfaction is related to whether one feels better or worse after making the comparison. Those with higher satisfaction may feel even better after viewing others' relationship problems whereas those with lower satisfaction may make less enhancing comparisons and experience less positive outcomes.

**Attachment as individual difference.** Another differential susceptibility that may impact responses to romantic relationship portrayals is attachment orientation. Attachment theory, originally proposed by Bowlby (1969), has a long tradition in scholarship. Today, adult attachment theory suggests that there two attachment dimensions, anxiety and avoidance, which explain how individuals relate to others (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Attachment anxiety, a belief about oneself, is often described as a fear of rejection. Attachment avoidance, a belief about others, is characterized by a fear of intimacy. These are continuous dimensions. When individuals are low in both anxiety and avoidance they are regarded as having secure adult attachment, but if they are high in one or both they are thought of as insecure.

Attachment orientations may impact how viewers respond to media depictions of romantic relationships. In an experiment, participants who were higher in attachment avoidance reported less pleasant feelings after viewing images of positive social scenes and participants who had attachment anxiety reported greater arousal after viewing negative social scenes (Vrtička, Sander, & Vuileumier, 2012). This research suggests that viewers who have higher avoidance may respond less positively to idealized relationship portrayals and that those who have higher anxiety may respond more strongly to portrayals of relationship problems.

#### **Summary**

Emotional responses to depictions of romantic relationships in television and movies may be moderated by individual differences as predicted by social comparison. Despite the complexity of possible responses afforded by the combination of upward and downward comparisons that result in either assimilation or contrast, in general, it seems as though those who are more satisfied or in a better situation experience stronger positive affect (e.g., amusement) and greater enjoyment in response to idealized content. In contrast, those who are less satisfied or are in a worse situation experience more negative affect (e.g., sadness and anxiety) and less enjoyment. Furthermore, attachment may also impact how viewers respond to depictions of relationships. Particularly, viewers with more attachment avoidance respond less positively to positive relationship portrayals, whereas viewers with more attachment anxiety respond more strongly to negative relationship portrayals. This is the basis for the predictions of the present study, which were tested via an experiment with a 2 x 2 design including media type (romantic movie versus television) and genre (comedy versus drama). The romantic movie conditions focused on idealized relationship depictions, whereas the television conditions focused on relationship problems, which are typical of these types of media (DeSouza & Sherry, 2006; Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Kim et al., 2007). The comedy conditions were more lighthearted, and the drama conditions were more serious in tone.

#### **Hypotheses**

Based on the theories and research findings described, in the present study relationship satisfaction and attachment orientations were expected to moderate the effects of condition on certain emotional responses and enjoyment. The different emotional responses that each condition would elicit are self-evident. For example, comedy clips should elicit more amusement than drama clips. However, such differences are also supported by empirical studies documenting the emotions that viewers associate with different genres of movies (Bartsch, 2012) and emotions experienced while watching various genres of television reported retrospectively (Nabi, Stitt, Halford, & Finnerty, 2006). Specific predictions follow.

***Amusement and sadness.*** In the present study, relationship satisfaction was predicted to moderate the effect of genre on amusement and sadness. Those with higher (relative to those with lower) relationship satisfaction would be more amused after exposure to comedies and, conversely, less sad after viewing dramas.

H1: Relationship satisfaction will moderate the effect of stimulus genre on amusement such that participants with higher levels of satisfaction will experience greater amusement in response to the comedy conditions as compared to the drama conditions.

H2: Relationship satisfaction will moderate the effect of stimulus genre on sadness such that participants with lower levels of satisfaction will experience greater sadness in response to the drama conditions as compared to the comedy conditions.

***Romance.*** Relationship satisfaction was also predicted to moderate the effect of type of exposure on romance. Individuals with higher relationship satisfaction were expected to experience more romantic feelings after romantic movie exposure. Additionally, given that individuals who are high in attachment avoidance have a fear of intimacy (by definition), participants with higher attachment avoidance were expected to experience less strong romantic feelings as a result of romantic movie exposure.

H3: Relationship satisfaction (H3a) and attachment avoidance (H3b) will moderate the effect of stimulus type on romance such that participants with higher levels of satisfaction and lower levels of avoidance will experience greater romantic feelings in response to the romantic movie conditions as compared to television conditions.

***Anxiousness.*** Participants with lower relationship satisfaction were expected to experience more anxiousness than those with higher relationship satisfaction in response to the television conditions, especially the television drama clip due to its more serious tone. Furthermore, research shows that individuals who are high in attachment anxiety experience greater levels of arousal in response to negative social stimuli (Vrtička et al., 2012). Thus, in the present study, participants with relatively higher attachment anxiety were expected to experience higher levels of anxiousness as a result of exposure to the television drama clip.

H4: Relationship satisfaction (H4a) and attachment anxiety (H4b) will moderate the effect of stimulus type on anxiousness such that participants with lower levels of satisfaction and higher levels of anxiety will experience greater anxiousness in response to the television drama condition as compared to the other three conditions.

***Envy and hope.*** The idealized romantic relationships portrayed in the romantic movie conditions may be regarded as upward comparison targets. Related theorizing suggests that participants with lower levels of relationship satisfaction (relative to those with higher satisfaction) may be more likely to engage in upward comparisons with contrast and to experience more envy. Conversely, those with higher (rather than lower) relationship satisfaction may engage in more upward comparisons with assimilation and experience more hope (Smith, 2000). Thus, relationship satisfaction was expected to moderate the association between type of exposure and envy and hope respectively.

H5: Relationship satisfaction will moderate the effect of stimulus type on envy such that participants with lower levels of satisfaction will experience greater envy in response to the romantic movie conditions as compared to the television conditions.

H6: Relationship satisfaction will moderate the effect of stimulus type on hope such that participants with higher levels of satisfaction will experience greater hope in response to the romantic movie conditions as compared to the television conditions.

***Enjoyment.*** Based on social comparison theory and studies regarding media selection (Kim & Oliver, 2011; Knobloch & Zillman, 2003) viewers with higher relationship satisfaction should respond more favorably to idealized relationship depictions. Thus, viewers with higher relationship satisfaction were expected to enjoy the romantic movie clips more than those with lower relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, the emotions associated with social comparison were expected to mediate this association. One might expect that experiencing envy would lead to decreased enjoyment. However, empirical research has found that envy increases enjoyment (Lewis & Weaver, 2016). Building on the hypotheses regarding envy and hope, relationship satisfaction was expected to decrease envy and thus decrease enjoyment and increase hope and thus increase enjoyment, especially when viewing the idealized romantic movie portrayals.

H7: Relationship satisfaction will be associated with lesser enjoyment via lesser envy (H7a) and greater enjoyment via more hope (H7b), especially for those in the romantic movie conditions as compared to the television conditions.

In previous research, the higher someone's attachment avoidance the less pleasant they felt in response to positive (but not negative) social scenes (Vrtička, et al., 2012). Accordingly, in the present study individuals with attachment avoidance were expected to enjoy the clips, especially the romantic movies, to a lesser degree.

H8: Attachment avoidance will moderate the effect of stimulus type on enjoyment such that participants with higher levels of avoidance will experience less enjoyment in response to the romantic movie conditions as compared to the television conditions.

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

With IRB approval granted, a sample of 306 adults aged 18 – 64 who were currently in a romantic relationship of at least three months long and living in the U.S. was recruited through Qualtrics for a project on media and romantic relationships. A screening process was used with the aim of recruiting a representative sample in terms of gender and age. Thus, the sample included 152 men (50.3%) and 154 women (49.7%), and the ages of participants were widely distributed ( $M = 41.3$ ,  $SD = 13.93$ ). 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 vast majority of participants identified as heterosexual (92%), but a few participants identified as gay or lesbian, bisexual, or “other” (7%). Finally, the majority of participants reported being white or European-American (71%).

#### **Design**

The experiment used a 2 x 2 design with media type and genre as the independent variables. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: romantic comedy movie, romantic drama movie, television comedy, and television drama.

#### **Procedure**

All participants completed an online questionnaire with an embedded video clip as the experimental manipulation. Participants went through the following process: 1) answering a series of survey questions some of which were unrelated to this experiment, 2) viewing the video, 3) answering questions regarding the experiment’s dependent variables and stimulus, and 4) answering demographic questions.

#### **Materials**

Participants saw one of four 3-minute clips that were typical of romantic movie or television portrayals. Video clips were pretested with undergrads. They rated the extent to which each clip was representative of the target condition, and the average was 5.7 on a 7-point scale,  $SD = 1.24$ . Thus, these clips were representative. Furthermore, a two-way ANOVA was conducted to test for differences in representativeness. There were no significant main effects, and the interaction was not significant. All conditions were equivalently representative.

The romantic comedy movie clip was from *50 First Dates* (2004), and it depicted the main characters’ wedding. The clip ended

with a scene of the husband greeting the wife with their young daughter. The romantic drama movie clip was from *The Notebook* (2004), and it depicted an elderly married couple discussing the progression of her Alzheimer's disease. The clip ended with a scene of the couple having died sleeping in each other's arms. These romantic movie clips both contained idealized, positive portrayals of romantic relationships that are typical of romantic movies (Hefner & Wilson, 2013). The television comedy clip was from *The Big Bang Theory* (2007), and it depicted two couples discussing who is the better couple while on a double date. The clip ended with one of the couples disagreeing about taking a test of their compatibility. The television drama clip was from *Grey's Anatomy* (2005), and it showed a married couple arguing about his decision not to take a job located across the country. The clip ended with the husband making a phone call to accept the job and the wife angrily telling him to leave for his new job immediately. These television clips both emphasized relationship problems, which frequently appear on television (DeSouza & Sherry, 2006; Kim et al., 2007).

#### **Measures**

Internal consistencies for the following measures are reported in Table 2.

***Relationship satisfaction.*** The scale measuring relationship satisfaction was embedded in the survey portion of the study, prior to the manipulation. Satisfaction was measured using the seven-item Relationship Assessment Scale created by Hendrick (1988), which asks participants to think about their relationship with their partner. Each item is a question with a corresponding 5-point scale. The seven items were summed to create an index of relationship satisfaction.

***Attachment orientations.*** Attachment orientations were also measured prior to experimental exposure using the Experiences in Close Relationship Scale - Short Form (Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel, 2007). This scale assesses two factors, avoidance and anxiety, by asking participants to indicate their level of agreement with six statements per dimension on a 7-point scale. The items were averaged to create two attachment variables.

***Emotional responses.*** Emotional response states were measured using a 17-item mood adjective checklist, adapted from Nabi & Keblusek (2014). Immediately after viewing the clip, participants indicated how much they felt each emotion "right now" (1 not at all, 7 extremely). They rated the extent to which they felt amusement (amused, entertained, humored), sadness (sad, blue, gloomy), romance (romantic, loving, warm-hearted), anxiousness (anxious, tense, uneasy), envy (envious, jealous), and hope (hopeful, encouraged, inspired). The items within each scale were averaged to create measures of discrete emotional responses.

**Enjoyment.** Enjoyment of the clip was measured using three items including, “The clip was entertaining,” “I enjoyed watching the clip,” and “I would be interested in seeing the entire (movie / TV episode).” These items were intended to assess the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions of enjoyment. Participants responded to the items on a 7-point Likert scale. The three items were averaged to create one enjoyment variable.

**Prior exposure.** Prior exposure was assessed by asking participants, “How many times have you seen the movie or the exact TV episode the video clip is from before?” Response options were 0, 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 or more. Participants’ responses were used to create a dichotomous variable representing prior exposure (0 = no, 1 = yes).

## Results

### Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics are displayed in Table 1, and Table 2 shows correlations between all study variables. There were significant correlations between all of the emotion items except amusement and sadness. These correlations point to mixed affective responses. That is, as expected, participants did not feel exclusively positively or negatively in response to the clips, they may have felt, for example, both hopeful and sad. Some of these correlations were relatively large. Anxiety and sadness were highly correlated, and romance and hope were highly correlated, suggesting that these emotions frequently co-occurred in response to the stimuli. Additionally, all of the emotional responses were associated with greater enjoyment, but to varying degrees. Whereas positive emotional responses were more strongly associated with enjoyment, negative emotional responses were less so.

The hypotheses proposed specific interactions between differential susceptibilities of participants and experimental condition. Preliminary regression analyses were conducted to check for non-hypothesized interactions that should also be taken into account. These analyses included all of the potential two- and three-way interactions between differential susceptibility variables (relationship satisfaction or attachment avoidance and anxiety), stimulus genre (comedy vs. drama), and stimulus type (romantic movie vs. television). The only unexpected results were significant two-way interactions between attachment and condition. These were incorporated into tests of the hypotheses and are described below. Regression analyses were also conducted to check for any unexpected effects of gender, but no main or conditional effects of gender on emotional responses or enjoyment were found.

### Analytic Strategy for Hypothesis Testing

To test the hypotheses outlined, a series of hierarchical regression analyses and a moderated mediation analysis were conducted. All analyses included prior exposure to the stimulus as a

control variable. To test for interactions predicting emotional responses (H1 – H6), separate hierarchical regression models for each emotion were conducted. In the first block, differential susceptibilities (relationship satisfaction or attachment avoidance and anxiety) and condition were included. In the second block, two-way interactions (those that were hypothesized or that emerged during preliminary analyses) were added. To investigate significant interactions, conditional effects analyses were conducted using PROCESS (Hayes, 2018) Model 1. Results are reported in Tables 3 and 4. To test the hypothesis regarding hope mediating the effect of relationship satisfaction on enjoyment, especially for those in the romantic movie conditions (H7), a moderated mediation analysis was conducted using PROCESS Model 7. Results appear in Table 5. Lastly, to test the hypothesis regarding attachment orientations and enjoyment (H8), a final hierarchical regression analysis was conducted. In the first block avoidance and anxiety, genre, and type were entered. In the second block, the interaction between avoidance and type was added. Results are displayed in Table 4.

#### ***Amusement***

H1 suggested that participants with higher levels of relationship satisfaction would experience more amusement as result of comedy (vs. drama) exposure. Results of the hierarchical regression analysis predicting amusement indicated that the hypothesized interaction (relationship satisfaction x genre) was significant,  $\beta = .24, p = .001$ , and a conditional effects analysis indicated that the effect of genre was stronger at higher levels of relationship satisfaction. Thus, H1 was supported.

There were also unanticipated effects of attachment orientations on amusement. Attachment anxiety was associated with greater amusement across conditions,  $\beta = .22, p < .001$ . Additionally, attachment avoidance and genre interacted to predict amusement,  $\beta = -.28, p < .001$ . A conditional effects analysis revealed that at increasing levels of attachment avoidance the effect of genre on amusement decreased.

#### ***Sadness***

H2 suggested that participants with lower levels of relationship satisfaction would experience more sadness as result of drama (vs. comedy) exposure. Results of the hierarchical regression predicting sadness indicated that those in the drama conditions did report more sadness than those in the comedy conditions,  $\beta = -.37, p < .001$ . However, the interaction of relationship satisfaction and genre was not significant,  $\beta = .03, p = .67$ . Therefore, H2 was not supported. An unexpected effect of attachment anxiety on sadness was also found. Attachment anxiety was associated with greater sadness across conditions,  $\beta = .23, p < .001$ .

### ***Romance***

There were two moderation hypotheses regarding romantic feelings. H3a predicted that participants with higher levels of relationship satisfaction would experience greater romantic feelings in response to the romantic movie conditions (vs. television conditions). Results of the hierarchical regression analysis predicting romance indicated that the hypothesized interaction (relationship satisfaction x type) was significant,  $\beta = .16, p = .013$ , and a conditional effects analysis indicated that at higher levels of relationship satisfaction the effect of stimulus type was stronger. Thus, H3a was supported.

H3b predicted that participants with lower levels of attachment avoidance would experience greater romantic feelings in response to the romantic movie conditions (vs. television conditions). Results of the hierarchical regression predicting romance indicated that this hypothesized interaction (attachment avoidance x type) was also significant,  $\beta = -.20, p = .01$ . A conditional effects analysis showed that at higher levels of attachment avoidance the effect of stimulus type was weaker. Therefore, H3b was supported. In addition, there was an unanticipated main effect of attachment anxiety. Higher attachment anxiety was associated with greater romantic feelings across conditions.

### ***Anxiousness***

There were also two moderation hypotheses regarding anxiousness. H4a predicted that participants with lower levels of satisfaction would experience greater anxiousness in response to the television drama condition (vs. the other three conditions). Results of the hierarchical regression analysis indicated that there was a main effect of television drama exposure on anxiousness,  $\beta = .33, p < .001$ . Participants in the television drama condition felt more anxious than those in the other three conditions. However, there was no significant interaction between relationship satisfaction and condition,  $\beta = .05, p = .435$ . Thus, H4a was not supported.

H4b predicted that participants with higher levels of anxiety would experience greater anxiousness in response to the television drama condition. Results of a hierarchical regression showed that there was a main effect of attachment anxiety on feeling anxious,  $\beta = .27, p < .001$ . However, there was no interaction between attachment anxiety and condition. Therefore, H4b was not supported.

Additionally, there was an unexpected effect of attachment avoidance. Results of the hierarchical regression predicting anxiousness revealed a significant interaction between avoidance and condition,  $\beta = -.14, p = .026$ . A conditional effects analysis showed that the effect of the television drama clip on anxiousness was weaker for participants with higher avoidance.

**Envy**

H5 predicted that participants with lower levels of satisfaction would experience greater envy in response to the romantic movie conditions (vs. television conditions). Results of the hierarchical regression predicting envy indicated a significant main effect of stimulus type on envy,  $\beta = .14, p = .02$ . However, the interaction between relationship satisfaction and stimulus type was not significant,  $\beta = .08, p = .309$ . Therefore, H5 was not supported. Additionally, there were unanticipated effects of attachment orientations. Both attachment avoidance and anxiety were associated with greater envy across conditions,  $\beta = .16, p = .008$  and  $\beta = .24, p < .001$ .

**Hope**

H6 suggested that participants with higher levels of satisfaction would experience greater hope in response to the romantic movie conditions (vs. television conditions). Results of the hierarchical regression analysis predicting hope indicated that the hypothesized interaction (relationship satisfaction x type) was significant,  $\beta = .25, p < .001$ . A conditional effects analysis indicated that at higher levels of relationship satisfaction the effect of type was stronger. Thus, H6 was supported. There were also unexpected effects of attachment orientations. There was a main effect of attachment anxiety. Participants with higher attachment anxiety experienced more hope across conditions,  $\beta = .30, p < .001$ . Additionally, there was a significant interaction between avoidance and stimulus type,  $\beta = -.22, p = .001$ , and a conditional effects analysis showed that those with lower attachment avoidance experienced more hope in response to the romantic movies than those with higher attachment avoidance.

**Enjoyment**

H7a predicted that relationship satisfaction would be associated with lesser enjoyment via lesser envy, especially for those in the romantic movie conditions (vs. television conditions). However, analyses related to H5 showed that relationship satisfaction was not related to the experience of envy, so this hypothesis was not tested. H7b predicted that relationship satisfaction would be associated with greater enjoyment via greater hope, especially for those in the romantic movie conditions (vs. television conditions). This hypothesis was tested through a moderated mediation analysis. The index of moderated mediation was significant,  $.04 (0.02), 95\% CI [.02, .06]$ . An analysis of conditional indirect effects showed that the effect of relationship satisfaction on enjoyment via hope was significant, but only in the romantic movie conditions, effect =  $.03 (0.02), 95\% CI [.02, .05]$ . Therefore, H7b was supported.

H8 suggested that participants with higher levels of avoidance would experience less enjoyment in response to the

romantic movie conditions as compared to the television conditions. The hypothesized interaction between avoidance and type predicting enjoyment was not significant,  $\beta = -.01, p = .878$ . Therefore, H8 was not supported. However, there was a main effect of avoidance,  $\beta = -.21, p = .001$ . Those with higher attachment avoidance enjoyed the clips less across conditions. A main effect was also found for attachment anxiety,  $\beta = .15, p = .013$ . Those with higher anxiety enjoyed the clips more. Additionally, in this analysis, a main effect of genre was found,  $\beta = .14, p = .011$ . Participants in the comedy conditions enjoyed the clips to a greater extent than those in the drama conditions.

### Discussion

The primary purpose of the present study was two-fold, to investigate individual differences that impact emotional responses to and enjoyment of media depictions of romantic relationships. I predicted that relationship satisfaction would create differential susceptibility to the emotional effects of romantic movie versus television and comedy versus drama exposure. Specifically, I predicted that those with lower satisfaction would respond more strongly when negative emotions were evoked, whereas those with higher relationship satisfaction would respond more strongly when positive emotions were evoked. This prediction was not supported in the case of negative emotions. Relationship satisfaction did not moderate the effects of condition on sadness, anxiety, or envy.

However, the prediction was supported in regard to two of three positive emotions, amusement and hope, but not romance. Romantic movies did evoke more romantic feelings, but relationship satisfaction did not moderate the effect. This finding speaks to the power of portrayals of romance to evoke romantic feelings. Romantic movie exposure evoked romantic feelings regardless of participants' level of relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, there was an unexpected main effect of relationship satisfaction on feeling romantic, which reinforces the close association between relationship satisfaction and romance. Even when romantic feelings were not strongly evoked by the clips, individuals with higher relationship satisfaction reported feeling more romantic than those with lower relationship satisfaction.

As expected, the effect of the romantic movie clips (as compared to the television clips) on feeling hopeful was stronger for those with higher relationship satisfaction than those with lower relationship satisfaction. This points to social comparison effects. Because the romantic movie clips contained idealized depictions, I predicted that they would serve as upward comparison targets. The present study did not directly measure or manipulate comparisons made by participants. However, participants reported more envy in the romantic movie conditions than in the television conditions. Envy

is the outcome of comparing oneself to a superior other by definition (Parrott, 1991). Thus, envy reported in the romantic movie conditions signals that the romantic movie clips elicited upward comparisons.

Based on the theorizing of Smith (2000), these results could indicate that the upward comparisons led to contrast effects. However, participants also reported feeling more hope after watching the romantic movie clips than the television clips. According to Smith (2000), feeling hope suggests upward assimilation effects. Might some participants have experienced envy whereas others experienced hope? That is plausible. However, in the present study envy and hope were moderately correlated. It is possible that in the context of romantic movie viewing that envy and hope are both evoked for some viewers. For example, when participants watched the ending of *The Notebook* (romantic drama movie), perhaps they felt envious of the ideal love and commitment between the elderly couple but also inspired by their shared death. In fact, the average for hope was much higher than the average for envy in the romantic movie conditions, which points to stronger assimilation effects. Additionally, the results regarding hope suggest that viewers with higher relationship satisfaction engaged in even stronger comparisons than those with lower satisfaction or that having lower satisfaction inhibited feeling hopeful while watching the otherwise inspirational clips.

The final positive emotion measured was amusement. As expected, the comedy conditions (versus the drama conditions) had a stronger effect on those with higher relationship satisfaction than those with lower relationship satisfaction. Given that the humorous aspects of the comedy clips were about relationships, it seems that individuals with lower satisfaction are less amused by relationship-related comedy or that having higher satisfaction makes relationships a safe topic to joke about.

I also hypothesized that attachment orientations would serve as a differential susceptibilities based on prior research (Vrtička et al., 2012). As predicted, participants who were higher in attachment avoidance were less affected by the romantic movie conditions in terms of romantic feelings, and, unexpectedly, the same trend was found regarding feeling hopeful. Similarly, the comedy conditions had weaker effects on amusement amongst those who were higher in avoidance. Also noteworthy, whereas attachment anxiety did not moderate the effect of television drama viewing on anxiety, there was an unexpected effect of attachment anxiety on all measured emotions. Participants who had higher attachment anxiety reported stronger feelings, both positive and negative, across conditions. In this study, those with attachment anxiety had stronger emotional reactions not only in response to negative relationship portrayals but also in response to positive ones. Based on these results, it appears that both

relationship orientations matter in terms of emotional responses to relationship-focused media.

Regarding enjoyment, based on social comparison theory and research regarding media selection (Kim & Oliver, 2011; Knobloch & Zillmann, 2003), I hypothesized that higher relationship satisfaction would lead to greater enjoyment, especially of the romantic movie clips because they would prompt upward comparison. However, that hypothesis was not entirely supported because relationship satisfaction was positively associated with enjoyment across all conditions. In this study, relationship-related content, whether idealized in nature or not, was enjoyed more by those with higher relationship satisfaction. To what extent then is the association between relationship satisfaction and enjoyment owing to social comparison? Again, whereas social comparison was not measured directly, feeling hopeful is indicative of upward assimilation effects. In this study, amongst those who saw romantic movie clips, but not television clips, relationship satisfaction led to stronger feelings of hope, which led to enjoyment. Thus, social comparison is likely part of the reason that relationship satisfaction influences enjoyment. On the whole, relationship satisfaction appears to be a powerful differential susceptibility when it comes to enjoying relationship-focused content.

The influence of attachment orientations on enjoyment was also investigated. Vrtička et al. (2012) found that the higher participants' attachment avoidance, the less pleasant they felt in response to positive but not negative social scenes. Accordingly, I expected to find that avoidance would negatively predict enjoyment, but only in the romantic movie conditions. However, that was not the case. Attachment avoidance was associated with less enjoyment across conditions. Why the discrepancy between this study and prior research? It could be because of differences in the outcomes measured. Vrtička et al. measured pleasantness, which is purely affective (i.e., "how do you feel ...?"). In this study, enjoyment included three dimensions, affective, cognitive, and behavioral. Viewers may in fact enjoy media that they do not find pleasant. In such circumstances, enjoyment may be better characterized as appreciation (Nabi & Krcmar, 2004), but nonetheless it may be this difference that led to the contrasting findings. The results related to attachment anxiety were also surprising. Vrtička et al. found that anxiety was unrelated to participants' ratings of social images. However, in this study attachment anxiety impacted enjoyment. The higher a participants' attachment anxiety the more they enjoyed the clips across conditions. Generally, these findings demonstrate the importance of attachment orientations in the enjoyment of relationship-focused media regardless of whether that content is idealized in nature or focuses on relationship problems. Those with a

fear of intimacy, avoidance, enjoyed relationship-focused media less, whereas those who with a fear of rejection, anxiety, enjoyed relationship-focused media more.

Overall, the present study points to the continued need to examine the effects of romantic relationship portrayals. A strength of this study is that it relied upon an experiment to capture the immediate effects of viewing. However, there are also downsides to that methodology. For example, this study employed short video clips as stimuli. Future research should consider showing participants longer form media in a more naturalistic setting. Additionally, the significance of individual differences in this study points to the ongoing need to examine differential susceptibilities to the effects of relationship content. Certainly relationship satisfaction and attachment orientations are not the only individual differences that matter. Viewing motivations, for example, might be relevant. Finally, this study illuminates the relevance of social comparison to romantic relationships in media. Future studies should explore social comparison to media depictions of relationships more explicitly.

Romantic content can play an important role in viewers' lives as a way to live vicariously through the romance of others (Caperello & Migliaccio, 2011) or as an activity that couples engage in together (Harris et al., 2004). This investigation of responses to depictions of romantic relationships is important because it sheds light on differential susceptibilities when viewing that type of content. Specifically, watching depictions of relationships in media may more positively influence those who are already experiencing relationship success while negatively influencing those who have insecure attachments. Additionally, relationship-related content is more enjoyable for individuals who have higher relationship satisfaction or who are anxiously attached whereas those with attachment avoidance enjoy this content less.

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**Table 1**  
*Descriptive Statistics for Dependent Variables by Condition*

		Romantic Comedy Movie	Romantic Drama Movie	TV Comedy	TV Drama
Amusement	<i>M (SD)</i>	4.8 (1.65)	3.2 (1.59)	4.6 (1.86)	2.9 (1.66)
	Possible and Actual Range	1 - 7	1 - 7	1 - 7	1 - 7
	Skewness	-0.66	0.68	-.57	0.85
Sadness	<i>M (SD)</i>	2.9 (1.84)	4.2 (1.63)	2.5 (1.63)	3.9 (1.76)
	Possible and Actual Range	1 - 7	1 - 7	1 - 7	1 - 7
	Skewness	0.75	-0.33	0.79	-0.23
Anxiousness	<i>M (SD)</i>	2.5 (1.66)	3.1 (1.73)	2.5 (1.65)	3.9 (1.71)
	Possible and Actual Range	1 - 7	1 - 7	1 - 7	1 - 7
	Skewness	1.05	0.54	1.07	-0.08
Romance	<i>M (SD)</i>	5.4 (1.57)	5.2 (1.64)	3.4 (2.02)	3.0 (1.72)
	Possible and Actual Range	1 - 7	1 - 7	1 - 7	1 - 7
	Skewness	-1.28	-1.14	0.25	0.47
Envy	<i>M (SD)</i>	2.7 (1.86)	3.2 (1.79)	2.3 (1.67)	2.5 (1.71)
	Possible and Actual Range	1 - 7	1 - 7	1 - 7	1 - 7
	Skewness	0.85	0.41	1.14	1.15
Hope	<i>M (SD)</i>	4.9 (1.68)	4.8 (1.66)	3.4 (1.95)	3.2 (1.77)
	Possible and Actual Range	1 - 7	1 - 7	1 - 7	1 - 7
	Skewness	-0.81	-0.74	0.25	0.39
Enjoyment	<i>M (SD)</i>	5.5 (1.46)	5.1 (1.53)	5.5 (1.53)	4.6 (1.56)
	Possible and Actual Range	1 - 7	1 - 7	1 - 7	1 - 7
	Skewness	-1.26	-1.00	-1.13	-0.36

**Table 2**  
*Reliabilities for and Bivariate Correlations between Study Variables*

	Cronbach's <i>α</i> or <i>r</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1 Attachment avoidance	.78											
2 Attachment anxiety	.75	-.48***										
3 Relationship satisfaction	.89	-.53***	-.25***									
4 Prior exposure		.14*	.06	-.03								
5 Amusement	.86	.05	.17**	.10	.25***							
6 Sadness	.86	.19**	.30***	-.09	.02	.18**						
7 Romance	.87	-.03	.15**	.19**	.57***	.27***	.33***					
8 Anxiety	.87	.27***	.35***	-.08	.16**	.75***	.18**	.13*				
9 Envy	.71***	.29***	.33***	-.10	.38***	.52***	.47***	.59***	.20***			
10 Hope	.91	.01	.22***	.15*	.58***	.32***	.90***	.28***	.54***	.34***		
11 Enjoyment	.92	-.11*	.04	.19**	.57***	.11*	.53***	.12*	.20***	.53***	.36***	

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

**Table 3**  
*Effects of Relationship Satisfaction and Condition on Emotional Responses*

	Amusement $\beta$	Sadness $\beta$	Romance $\beta$	Anxiousness $\beta$	Envy $\beta$	Hope $\beta$
Prior exposure	.20***	.21***	.23***	.20**	.18**	.27***
Relationship satisfaction	.10	-.07	.17**	-.03	-.09	.13*
Genre (0 drama, 1 comedy)	.39***	-.40***	-.01		-.13*	-.02
Type (0 TV, 1 romantic movie)	.04	.07	.47***		.14*	-.36***
Condition (0 TV drama, 1 other)				.33***		
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	.22	.19	.35	.12	.07***	.30
F	20.82 (4, 280)***	17.87 (4, 280)***	38.63 (4, 280)***	13.51 (3, 281)***	6.28 (4, 280)***	25.85 (4, 280)***
Genre * Satisfaction	.24**	.03			.13	
Type * Satisfaction			.16*		.05	.25***
Condition * Satisfaction				.05		
$\Delta R^2$	.03	.00	.01	.00	.01	.03
$\Delta F$	11.41**	0.19	6.20*	0.61	0.01	12.84***
Levels of Relationship Satisfaction	<i>b</i> (SE) 95% CI		<i>b</i> (SE) 95% CI			<i>b</i> (SE) 95% CI
-1 SD	0.80 (0.28) [0.26, 1.35]		1.41 (0.29) [0.85, 1.97]			0.69 (0.29) [0.12, 1.25]
Mean	1.46 (0.19) [1.08, 1.84]		1.90 (0.20) [1.51, 2.30]			1.40 (0.20) [1.00, 1.80]
+1 SD	2.11 (0.27) [1.58, 2.65]		2.39 (0.28) [1.85, 2.94]			2.11 (0.28) [1.57, 2.66]

*Note.* All coefficients are standardized and reported within the step they were entered; Empty cells indicate comparisons that were not a part of that particular analysis; \*  $p = .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Table 4**  
*Effects of Attachment Orientations and Condition on Emotional Responses and Enjoyment*

	Amusement $\beta$	Sadness $\beta$	Romance $\beta$	Anxiousness $\beta$	Envy $\beta$	Hope $\beta$	Enjoyment $\beta$
Prior exposure	.19***	.18**	.23***	.16**	.14*	.26***	.36***
Attachment avoidance	-.05	.02	-.14**	.08	.16**	-.13*	-.21**
Attachment anxiety	.22***	-.23***	.24***	.27***	.24***	.30***	.15*
Genre (0 drama, 1 comedy)	.42***	-.36***	.02		-.08	.03	.14*
Type (0 TV, 1 romantic movie)	.06	.07	.48***		.16**	.37***	.02
Condition (0 TV drama, 1 other)				.29***			
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	.25	.23	.36	.21	.18	.30	.06
F	20.50 (5, 285)***	18.86 (5, 285)***	33.67 (5, 285)***	20.26 (4, 286)***	13.50 (5, 285)***	26.07 (5, 285)***	5.54 (4, 296)***
Genre * Avoidance	-.28***						
Type * Avoidance			-.21**			-.22**	-.01
Condition * Avoidance				-.14*			
$\Delta R^2$	.04		.02	.01		.02	.00
$\Delta F$	16.48***		11.36**	4.98*		10.45**	
Levels of Avoidance	<i>b</i> (SE) 95% CI		<i>b</i> (SE) 95% CI	<i>b</i> (SE) 95% CI			
-1 SD	2.34 (0.26) [1.82, 2.86]		2.59 (0.27) [2.06, 3.12]	1.70 (0.31) [1.08, 2.32]		2.05 (0.27) [1.52, 2.58]	
Mean	1.59 (0.19) [1.22, 1.95]		1.95 (0.19) [1.56, 2.33]	1.24 (0.22) [0.81, 1.67]		1.44 (0.19) [1.06, 1.82]	
+1 SD	0.83 (0.26) [0.31, 1.35]		1.31 (0.27) [0.77, 1.85]	0.78 (0.29) [0.21, 1.34]		0.83 (0.27) [0.29, 1.37]	

*Note.* All coefficients are standardized and reported within the step they were entered; Empty cells indicate comparisons that were not a part of that particular analysis; \*  $p = .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Table 5**  
*Relationship Satisfaction Predicting Enjoyment via Feeling Hope*  
*Moderated by Condition*

Predicting Hope	
Prior exposure	1.14***
Relationship satisfaction	-0.01
Genre (0 drama, 1 comedy)	-0.03
Type (0 TV, 1 romantic movie)	1.40***
Satisfaction * Type	0.12***
R <sup>2</sup>	0.30***
Predicting Enjoyment	
Prior exposure	0.67***
Relationship satisfaction	0.03**
Genre (0 drama, 1 comedy)	0.39*
Hope	0.32***
R <sup>2</sup>	0.33***
Index of Moderated Mediation	.04*
Conditional indirect effects of relationship satisfaction on enjoyment via hope	
Television condition	0.00
Romantic movie condition	0.03*

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