

Romantic Media Exposure's Effect on Relationship Beliefs and Expectations

by

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Abstract

In modern American societies, media exposure has been increasing over time, imposing possible negative side effects (Crone & Konijn, 2018). Exposure to romantic movie media may be influential to persuading a person's beliefs as well as their relationship satisfaction (Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2017). Inconsistencies regarding interpersonal relationships when compared to romantic movie media may lead to levels of dissatisfaction (Gala & Ghadivali, 2020). Due to previous findings, romantic movie media may enforce unrealistic and idealized beliefs (Hefner et al, 2017; Hefner & Kretz, 2021). Exposure to portrayals of relationships in movies could reinforce ideals such as “love as the key to happiness” (Hefner et al., 2017; Timmermans & Coenen, 2019). Using experimental methods, this study works towards expanding upon previous research focusing on romantic Disney film exposures to assess the effect on someone's romantic belief and satisfaction levels.

Keywords: Disney, romantic movie media, relationship beliefs, relationship satisfactions, idealization

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Media Influence

Media plays a major role in society, specifically for children growing up surrounded by devices like smartphones, televisions, and tablets (Crone & Konijn, 2018). They are often referred to as “digital natives” and don’t remember a time before the internet existed (Crone & Konijn, 2018). The world is saturated with media and the effects of this are unknown. A potential positive is that technology has made communication easier. During COVID-19 technology has allowed for greater connectivity in ways that would have previously been impossible. However, there may be more to media platforms such as movies, TV shows and social media than communication and forming connections.

Communication is vital for humans to form healthy relationships with other people, whether that be familial, recreational, or romantic connections. In addition, with different types of widespread media increasing in popularity, attitudes for interpersonal connections can be easily persuaded. According to recent studies, movies and television appear to be the most influential in shaping attitudes towards romantic relationships and dating (Gala & Ghadiyali, 2020). This may particularly be the case when there is less communication with parents (Hefner & Kretz, 2021). Less communication with familial figures appears to impact a person’s ability to understand healthy romantic attitudes. In turn, children utilize forms of media, most commonly movies and television, to seek education for social interactions (Taba et al, 2020). Movies and television may shape beliefs regarding these social interactions portraying different forms of interpersonal relationship skills and sexuality. Beliefs or expectations for personal validation, relational maintenance and displays of affection, can develop from media exposure (Taba et al., 2020). Expectations elicited from media exposure may enforce ideals surrounding stereotypical

relationships and gender roles, in turn leading to an unrealistic perspective on dating (Vaterlaus et al., 2018). Currently the effects that unrealistic beliefs from movies have on romantic relationships are unknown.

Idealization

Arguably, the largest movie company targeting young viewers is Walt Disney Pictures (Hefner & Kretz, 2021). This has been the case since their first film in 1937. Disney is the third largest movie producing company, worth over 90 billion dollars, having made 22 princess movies. However, it is heavily criticized for its stereotypical themes surrounding love. Themes like “love at first sight”, “idealization”, “one and only one”, “happily ever after”, “soulmates” and “love conquers all” are ideals Disney films expose viewers to (Hefner et al., 2017).

Exposure to romantic films of this nature encourage values in heterosexual love idealizing these romantic beliefs (Hefner & Kretz, 2021). These messages could influence children’s perceptions, shifting them toward idealized forms of romance that are disconnected from reality. Viewers often absorb what they are exposed to and reflect those behaviors. Therefore, ideals portrayed in films may be considered markers of a satisfactory relationship (Hefner et al., 2017; Hefner & Kretz, 2021). Disney’s popularity as a film company shapes the identities of children, encouraging and endorsing relationship beliefs giving viewers a false perception of romance.

In a study by Hefner and Kretz (2021), 12 Disney princess films were evaluated for endorsement of beliefs by era groupings (i.e., classic, transitional, and modern). Idyllic beliefs were tested against challenges within relationships portrayed in these movies. Challenges were characterized as love taking more work to get what you want. Idyllic beliefs were based on a “Romantic Belief Scale” or RBS, by Sprecher and Metts (1989) testing individuals’ endorsement of idealizations such as the idea of soul mates, love at first sight and love conquers all. Results

show challenges are met with either no reaction or a negative reaction in Disney films (Hefner & Kretz, 2021). Classic Disney films are focused heavily on a “happily ever after” type ending where all ends well, which is considered unrealistic. Idealized romantic beliefs are most prevalent in these classic Disney films from the 1980’s and prior, such as *Sleeping Beauty* (Geronimi, 1959). On the contrary, modern Disney films focus on independence, where romance doesn’t appear out of thin air, but instead requires work. Strongly held beliefs in idealization could be due to Social Cognitive Theory which states, “learned behaviors from media such as romantic ideals are more likely to be viewed positively, as opposed to challenges which are negativity thought of” (Bandura, 2002). Idealizing romanticized beliefs showcased in media could affect the well-being of a person who distorts their expectations into a false perception of reality (Hefner et al., 2017; Hefner & Kretz, 2021). Strong media popularity and saturation in society could increase romantic movie exposure, influencing the impact on a person’s perceptions of realistic romantic attitudes. However, it is unknown whether these endorsed portrayals in media affect satisfaction in real relationships.

Relationship Satisfaction

Exposures to unhealthy media portrayals can promote beliefs and attitudes, such as possessiveness, jealousy, and unrealistic expectations, that can lead to unhealthy relationship outcomes (Gala & Ghadivali, 2020). The quality of relationships from unhealthy exposures is assumed to make a person less satisfied in their relationship. Discrepancies in representation for relationship quality result in lack of self-worth, conflicts in relationships and disharmony, as well as levels of dissatisfaction (Gala & Ghadivali, 2020). Although movie media exposure may have an impact on beliefs, its influence on satisfaction levels are inconsistent within previous research.

In a study by Kretz (2019), ideals were predicted to provide better quality of relationship and better communication leading to higher levels of satisfaction. This study used Hendrick's (1988) Relationship Assessment Scale or RAS to measure satisfaction. Participants reported romantic movies contributing to their negative perceptions of relationships (Kretz, 2019). Findings displayed a possibility for romantic movies to enforce satisfactory romantic thoughts and feelings for participants which contradict their beliefs. Essentially, romantic media exposures may elicit beliefs thought to be negative but do not affect participants' ability to feel satisfied in relationships. Additionally, participants report expectations for an idealized relationship possibly linked to fantasy beliefs or escapes from reality (Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2017). Romantic beliefs inherently lead to romantic expectations that are difficult to obtain in realistic relationships. Therefore, a disconnect between beliefs and reality is expected to affect satisfaction. Despite an understood gap between expectations and reality, participants acknowledged unrealistic expectations while maintaining satisfaction in their romantic relationships (Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2017). One explanation for high unrealistic beliefs and high levels of felt satisfaction could be due to viewing healthy role models portrayed in media (i.e., those who are confident and self-aware). Participants report they are more likely to feel satisfied in their relationship because they are encouraged to respond to and communicate needs with their partner (Gala & Ghadivali). On the other hand, how satisfied might participants feel when media portrays distortions that elicit negative feelings rather than encouragement or motivation?

In a study by Vaterlaus et al. (2018), college students and adolescents were asked their thoughts and feelings regarding distortions created from media exposures. Responses display a distortion of reality where expectations for false ideals were high because of movies promoting stereotypical roles for men and women. Participants expressed high levels of social pressure on

platforms like Facebook and Instagram, shaping the way viewers think, especially for those younger whose identities were developing (Vaterlaus et al., 2018). The more someone feels the need to fit in and be accepted by others, the stronger influence the media has (Vaterlaus et al., 2018). Due to a need for acceptance in social settings, romantic media exposure may become influential in eliciting mental ideals regarding relationships. Participants currently in romantic relationships reported the influence of media on their relationship expectations, suggesting that the effect of media is not just on younger inexperienced individuals (Vaterlaus et al., 2018). However, romantic movie media exposure seems to prime college students predisposed ideals and beliefs about relationships. Priming ideals may increase the ability to easily recall an intensity of emotional perception for predisposed beliefs viewed during adolescence (Tukachinsky & Dorros, 2018). The stronger the emotional involvement and idealization instilled by high levels of media exposure, the more likely someone is to view their current romantic partner as less favorable or unsatisfactory (Tukachinsky & Dorros, 2018). Movie media can have a powerful effect on romantic beliefs and attitudes for varying ages most likely a result from consumption rates (Jalilova, 2020). Although, level of exposure is not the only influence on expectations or satisfaction.

Relational Schemas

Societal pressures can also shape expectations around relationships, and this is heightened by the exposure and consumption rates surrounding media (Taba et al., 2020). People with high levels of exposure to romantic movie media may develop false expectations for relationship behaviors, taking the form of relational schemas (Baldwin, 1995). Relational schemas are a representation of how a person interacts with someone else. When people are highly influenced by romantic movie media, they may seek out patterns such as schemas. People

use the comparisons from romantic movie media and relational schemas to make them feel more secure (Baldwin, 1995). These schemas are commonly found in movies and television which can endorse stereotypical messages shaping children's attitudes and can be very damaging to emotional well-being (Jalilova, 2020). Stereotypically, America is a patriarchal society which predominantly is pressured and controlled by men with a heterosexual focus. Due to this, media incorporates cliches within cinema and television surrounding feminine and masculine cultural roles (Jalilova, 2020). Within these forms of visual media, gender stereotypes are embedded which may enforce individual schemas of a hypermasculine male and submissive female (Jalilova, 2020). Many of these stereotypes are reflected in Disney movies where princesses are designed to fit rigid feminine roles such as, dutiful, self-sacrificing, and subservient to men (Hefner & Kretz, 2021). One example of this is the character Aurora, also known as Sleeping Beauty, who is passive and completely helpless as the damsel in distress (Geronimi, 1959). Princess movies are popular for adhering to fairy tale ideals of romance and often end with the happily ever after moment. This enforces unrealistic concepts of gender roles, which could be damaging to views of relationships in comparison to one's views of themselves.

Views of the self can be influential to relationship satisfaction especially when combined with media portrayals of romance. Hefner et al., (2017) assessed relationship contingent self-esteem (RCSE) which occurs when someone derives their feelings of self-worth from whether they are in a romantic relationship and the nature of that relationship. Exposure to portrayals of relationships in movies can contribute to a felt need for validation. Specifically, needs that may be reinforced by the notion of "love is the key to happiness", therefore, effects of media portrayals on romantic relationships appear to be cross-cutting (Hefner et al., 2017; Timmermans & Coenen, 2019).

All in all, the belief there is one and only one love, love being the key to happiness, and love at first sight is perceived to be enforced by Disney movie media at a young age (Hefner et al, 2017; Hefner & Kretz, 2021). Further investigation could display a potential link between Disney enforcing or challenging these instilled beliefs. Couples facing challenges and learning to grow in a realistic way over time is much more impactful as a romantic reality (Kracht & Powell, 2021). Whereas those who believe in destiny are a lot less likely to seek professional help or relationship counseling. This is most likely due to the growth beliefs found in marriage counseling eliciting problem solving tactics and acceptance of differences (Krahct & Powell, 2021). People's perceptions of romantic Disney princess films may enforce ideas that romantic challenges are harder for relationships than an idealized belief. An enforcement of a romantic idealization could be due to the instant gratification displayed in princess films which portray beliefs such as a "one true love". Adhering to these beliefs may be even more satisfactory for a person if their perceptions are felt to be a realistic way to meet their needs. The assumption is, the higher the level of Disney princess movie exposures, the stronger the beliefs in idealized forms of romance. The hypothesis in question becomes, do Disney princess films instill higher or lower levels of satisfaction once exposed?

Current Study

Given that previous research appears inconclusive on whether romantic movie media increases or decreases satisfaction, this study aims at clarifying participants' thoughts regarding relationship satisfaction prior to a romantic media exposure as compared to after the exposure. In addition, previous research expressed romantic media enforcing unrealistic and idealized beliefs (Hefner et al, 2017; Hefner & Kretz, 2021). After exposure to romantic movie media, there appears to be an increase in unrealistic romantic beliefs. This study works towards expanding

upon previous research with a focus on romantic Disney films to assess the effect the exposure has on one's romantic belief and satisfaction.

Methodology

Participants

A total of 90 university students (25 male, 63 female, 2 non-binary) enrolled in psychology courses completed the study for partial course credit. The mean age of the participants was (19.6) years. Percentages for race and ethnicity were (90% White, 1.1% Black, 1.1% American Indian, 1.1% other) included for equality purposes but not relevant to this study. Percentages for current relationship status were (71.1% single, 13.3% married, 1.1% never been in a relationship, and 14.4% cohabitating) included to gain understanding of general participant relationship experience. In addition, to determine familiarity with the video clips, participants were asked whether they might have/have not, probably yes and definitely yes to seeing a Disney film (94.4% yes, 4.4% no, 1.1% maybe) having seen it. This study gained IRB approval under the exemption status.

Procedure

The survey was conducted with self-report measures through Qualtrics on SONA. Participants elected to complete this study from the list of available studies on the university SONA page (i.e., the software used to manage the participant pool). Once participants opened the study in SONA, they were redirected to a Qualtrics page containing all of the relevant measures. After consenting to the study, participants completed demographic questions before completing the initial measures of their relationship beliefs and relationship satisfaction. Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of the two video conditions (i.e., romantic or control). After watching the video clip, participants were asked to complete a second assessment

of their relationship beliefs and relationship satisfaction. Upon completion of the study, participants were awarded partial course credit for their participation.

Materials

Video Conditions. Participants were randomly assigned to a romantic video or control group. The romantic video consisted of roughly a minute long Disney princess film clip of Sleeping Beauty, from the classic princess film era (Hefner et al., 2017). The Sleeping Beauty clip depicts a romantic scene between a prince and princess. Those in the control were exposed to a Disney classic film clip of Peter Pan, accounting the same amount of time as the princess film but to a non-romantic movie. The Peter Pan clip depicts a fun fantasy experience intended to elicit similar non-romantic feelings and is also animated. Videos from both conditions were produced in the 1950s. Videos were found and streamed via YouTube and are available in Appendix A.

Relationship beliefs. Romantic beliefs were measured using Sprecher and Metts's (1989) Romantic Beliefs Scale (RBS). Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with 15 statements (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Sprecher and Metts designed the scale with four factors: soul mates, partner idealization, love conquers all, and love at first sight. However, analyses were conducted on a composite of these four factors calculated by averaging all 15 items of this scale. The internal consistency for this scale was $\alpha = 0.84$.

Relationship Satisfaction. Relationship satisfaction was measured using Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew's (1998) Investment Model Scale (IMS). Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with 3 statements (0 = Do Not Agree At All, 6 = Agree Somewhat, 8 = Agree Completely). Rusbult, Martz and Agnew designed the scale with four factors: Satisfaction Level, Quality of Alternatives, Investment Size, and Commitment Levels. An analysis of the

scale with the present study calculated enforcement of just satisfaction levels due to the focus of the current study (3 items). For consistency, level of agreement was altered to a 7-point Likert Scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The internal consistency of this measure in this sample was $\alpha = 0.84$.

Results

After downloading the data from Qualtrics it was determined that there was no way to determine which video participants viewed. That is, there was no way to determine which condition participants were in. This was due to the fact that the videos were included in the survey using HTML that allowed participants to directly stream the videos from YouTube. Therefore, no data was recorded or collected in Qualtrics for these survey items. In turn, it is impossible to determine which participants saw which video. Also, this does not allow us to run the appropriate t-tests comparing post-scores on relationship beliefs and relationship satisfaction between those who saw the romantic video and those who saw the control. However, we have opted to present correlational analyses between relationship beliefs and relationship satisfaction. These analyses are still informative given that the relationship beliefs measure is modeled after what is often portrayed in Disney movies (Hefner et al., 2017; Hefner & Kretz, 2021). Further, 98% of our sample reported having seen a Disney movie and it is therefore likely that their previous exposure to these movies shaped their views of their current relationship.

Correlational Analysis

Overall, the correlation revealed a significant, moderately strong, positive relationship between relationship beliefs and satisfaction ($r = .35, p < .001$). The positive correlation suggests those who are higher in relationship beliefs, are higher in relationship satisfaction. With the aim of the beliefs measure being designed to assess what is portrayed from Disney films, the

correlation suggests Disney movies may be influencing the views that people have of their relationships.

Discussion

As media expands and continues to influence society, the impact movie media has on the views of and norms regarding societal standards also continues to increase (Crone & Konijn, 2018). The purpose of this study was to expand upon previous research to clarify the influence romantic movie media has on relationship beliefs and expectations. In previous research, romantic movie media such as *Sleeping Beauty*, was found to display unrealistic and idealized beliefs that might influence a person's romantic beliefs (Hefner et al., 2017). It was unknown however, whether romantic media increased or decreased a person's satisfaction levels in their relationship(s). In this study, it appears that people who are exposed to movie media and have unrealistic and idealized beliefs about relationships are more satisfied with their relationships. This finding could be due to a gap between expectations and reality, where a person acknowledges unrealistic expectations are unlike that of real life and relationships (Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2017). In turn, people who express their belief in these unrealistic expectations still found satisfaction in their relationships potentially due to working against these understood beliefs and putting in more effort to maintain their relationships. Therefore, people are still able to find satisfaction despite it not aligning with their predisposed beliefs. Another possible explanation for these findings is from a study where college students expressed acknowledgment of unrealistic relationship beliefs understood from media portrayals (Vaterlaus et al., 2018). Participants may have learned from personal experiences the inaccuracies in media portrayals and beliefs, during their adolescence, steering them away from the narrative portrayed in these films and seeking alternative ways to find personal romantic satisfaction to meet their needs.

Essentially, it could be that movie media such as Disney films, has previously had an impact on influencing romantic satisfaction during adolescence. It is also a possibility that Disney movie media is encouraging a romantic stereotype that is universally understood, and that understanding of what is realistic versus unrealistic is encouraging people to work harder to maintain their own satisfaction and happiness. Future research could expand upon these hypotheses.

The only major finding was the positive correlation between beliefs and satisfaction. The study ran with the videos as HTML links to make it easy for participants to view the clips through YouTube. In turn, data was not collected regarding which video was displayed and we were not able to test the effect of exposure to different forms of media on relationship satisfaction. However, we can infer that the exposure to romantic ideals from the film occurred as a majority of our samples reported having seen a Disney movie in the past. Assuming that watching these movies in the past had some effect on participants' relationship beliefs and satisfaction, the positive correlation observed was unexpected. These findings were unexpected due to the majority of research findings expressing higher unrealistic beliefs leading to lower levels of satisfaction because people use media to escape from reality (Vaterlaus et al., 2018). Additionally, people compare their relationships to unrealistic beliefs instilled by movie media and when it does not align, they are found to report dissatisfaction. In one study there was a connection to self-esteem, where confidence levels may cause participants to find satisfaction in their relationships (Hefner et al., 2017). The higher the self-esteem, the less likely they are to compare themselves to those unrealistic idealized beliefs and expectations which could lead to more satisfaction. Future research could explore this connection.

Limitations

Limitations of this study are issues with validity and reliability. The control and prime video exposures during the procedure were unable to be accounted for due to an inability to differentiate the data. Future research could retest to compare a control and prime determining a difference between the two exposures to assess the differences in romantic movie media specifically in the context of the study. An additional limitation of this study is the limited time frame for the study to run. Researchers were unable to re-run the study and account for the loss of data due to personal timelines and deadlines. However, as stated before, the findings were still relevant within the context of the study due to the similarities of the two videos in origin, time-period, and context rather than romantic and non-romantic content. The similarities in the videos were utilized to elicit similar feelings to control and compare solely romantic versus non-romantic feelings. In controlling for similarities within the two videos, it allowed for the generalization of Disney movie media influences on beliefs and satisfaction for the context of the study. Finally, additional examination of a longitudinal approach to the study could be assessed. In this study, participants were presented with the same questionnaire before and after a short video clip. The short time frame in viewing the same relationship questionnaire does not allow for assessment of high exposure rates with movie media. Therefore, a future study utilizing a longitudinal method for movie media exposure could elicit different findings.

Conclusion

Overall, Disney movie media and other movie media with similar themes, appears to be in some way influencing participants' beliefs regarding romantic relationships. After viewing some form of Disney movie media exposure, it appears people are more likely to believe in unrealistic and idealized forms of romance. In addition, people who are exposed to Disney movie media may feel more satisfied in their current relationships. The reasons a person may believe

these unrealistic expectations but still find satisfaction in their own relationships is hypothesized but unknown and could further be explored in future research.

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Appendix A



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L-o0ufCPANo>



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EO2ADZtvYOU>