

Exposure Time to Romance Depicted in Media and its Influence on Beliefs about Romantic Relationships among Adults

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ABSTRACT

Media has become saturated with messages about romance. Yet, very scarce work has been done in studying the effects of romance oriented media on beliefs about romantic relationship. The present study aims at investigating the relationship between exposure to romantic media, perceived realism of the media and beliefs about romantic relationship among adults. An Expost facto research design was used and a sample of 439 individuals (121 males and 318 females) over age 18 was selected through purposive sampling. Online portals were used to circulate the survey. Sprecher and Metts Relationship Beliefs Scale (1989) and Rubin's Perceived Realism Scale (1985) were used. The data was analysed inferentially by using Person Product Moment Correlation to establish relationships and t-test to study gender differences. The findings revealed that exposure to romantic media was not significantly related to beliefs about romantic relationships (except for beliefs about love at first sight), but perceived realism of media was significantly related to scores on Relationship Beliefs Scale. No significant gender differences were observed with respect to scores on Relationship Beliefs Scale, Perceived Realism Scale and exposure to romantic media. Thus, it was concluded that mere exposure to screen romance alone did not influence beliefs about romance; rather it was influenced by the extent to which people internalised these messages.

Keywords: *Romantic Media, Beliefs about Romantic Relationships, Perceived Realism of Media.*

It is only in the past 300 years that society has to come agree that individuals have a deep seated need for self-expansion which they acquire by establishing an exclusive, intimate and committed relationship with a companion whom they chose as their life partner, a witness to their life. This construct has been overwhelmingly presented in mass media and has come to structure people's relationship routines. Movies, drama, music, poetry, literature and the like

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have portrayed inadequate and unrepresentative role models which engender unrealistic expectations in those who are exposed to them. These surreal role models become resources that people use in their future relationships. Thus, caution and diligence must be followed religiously by policy makers in the entertainment industry to prevent exploitation of the public.

Romantic love

Love is central to a life well lived. For many people love is the only thing that gives meaning and purpose to their existence. Love, Play and Work are crucial to a healthy life. Though there are different kinds of love, romantic love is the major focus of people and they spend considerable amount of time and energy in finding, establishing and maintaining a love relationship.

Media's role in cultivation of unrealistic expectations and beliefs about romantic relationships

Romantic movies as socializers

The number of individuals who are exposed to romantic media has steadily increased since 1930. One reason viewers are drawn to this is because romantic media depicts relationships as relatively easy and full of possibilities which instils a sense of hope for real-life romance. People seek media that portrays relationships working despite all obstacles. Another reason why people are attracted to romantic media is because they provide lessons about love and intimacy.

There is also abundant research to prove that children learn appropriate sex-roles from media, about different occupations, positive familial interaction and they can also learn about different races, social groups and ethnicities, media can challenge stereotypes and so on (Signorielli and Kahlberg, 2001). If this is the case, media as a socialising agent can also be used to reveal authentic and credible information that can enlighten young consumers about the dynamics of romantic relationships and promote healthy habits and realistic expectations.

Learning from romantic media

There are three major theoretical perspectives that can be used to explain how viewers learn from media, they are

Uses and gratification

Uses and gratifications is a perspective that focuses on why individuals seek out particular types of media content (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). The idea is that people bring diverse characteristics to a media encounter and make different choices about what media to consume, therefore exercising control over their media consumption. Rubin (2002) summarized five assumptions on which this theoretical perspective is based: (1) The use of media is purposive and functional; (2) People choose content based on the ways in which they feel it will satisfy current desires or needs; (3) People bring certain predispositions to

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their interactions with mass media, which inevitably shape their expectations about the content; (4) Social and psychological conditions, such as interpersonal interactions, tend to help determine how effective media are in satisfying needs and desires; and (5) The reasons people choose media dictate the effects of that use. As a theoretical perspective, uses and gratifications emphasize audience activity and choice, meaning that people exercise control over their interactions with media. Instead of looking at what media do to individuals, this perspective focuses on what individuals do with media (Klapper, 1963).

Social cognitive theory

According to social cognitive theory (SCT), individuals can learn by watching others (Bandura, 1986). This social learning can occur in face-to-face interactions, but it can also happen within the context of the media. That is, individuals can learn new behaviours by watching models perform these actions on the screen. Social cognitive theory has its roots in social learning theory, which was concerned primarily with the conditions under which children imitated others.

Cultivation theory

According to this theory, heavy viewers of television are more likely than light viewers to see the real world as similar to one depicted in the media. The greater the exposure, the more they come to conceptualise the world in a way that mirror the media's portrayal of reality (Gerber, 1976). Those who are especially most vulnerable have minimum real life exposure; for instance children's perception of the world may be significantly distorted by media because of their limited experience. According to this perspective, young people who watch a lot of romantic comedies are exposed to certain themes which are readily available to them when processing real life romantic situations. Thus availability heuristics is at play (Gross, 1976). For instance, young adolescents based on availability heuristics may come to readily process romantic relationships in the following way: in a successful relationship sex is easy, if a relationship fails, there is nothing that one can attempt to fix it because the person was simply not "the one" (Galician, 2004).

The romantic ideal

There are two ways of studying romantic ideals: a) as types of traits that exemplify what constitutes a perfect relationship. This assumes that there are no set beliefs about ideal relationships but it differs from individual to individual b) more comprehensive collection of expectations about love and relationships that go beyond individual partners. Past research has identified four main themes of romantic ideals,

Idealisation of partner: According to Bell (1975), when a person believes that his or her partner is perfect, they seem to hold this romantic ideal. They exaggerate the trivial positives of the partner and blindly ignore the major flaws.

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Soul mate: This theme of the romantic ideal refers to the notion that there is only one perfect love for each individual (Franiuk, Cohen, & Pomerantz, 2002). It is the idea that real love comes only once, can only be experienced with one person, and that fate and destiny work in tandem to connect true lovers.

Love at first sight: The third major theme of the romantic ideal construct is a belief that a romantic relationship can blossom after a one-time meeting (Bell, 1975). According to this theme, it can take just a mere glance or a short conversation for individuals to fall into love.

Love conquers all: The fourth theme of the romantic ideal is that love will overcome everything. According to this ideal, different values and interests are not pertinent, and financial, social, and geographical concerns are irrelevant. Indeed, conflict in the relationship does not matter for this ideal, because it is the belief that love will somehow find a way.

Perceived realism of romantic media

Lipmann (1922) introduced the concept of perceived realism, which assumed that peoples' realities are influenced by indirect experiences, such as images presented in the media. Galician (1999) found that mass media images in television, movies, and advertisements that are internalised by the audience as mimicking reality affect or reinforce unrealistic ideals about romantic relationships. Furthermore, Bachen and Illouz (1996) discovered that mass media images affect children's perceptions of romance. They noted that from watching media, children associated romance with excessive or grandiose expectations about relationships. Thus mass media, specifically television images, may influence romantic partners to have negative perceptions about their romantic relationships, possibly to the point of terminating their relationships (Galician, 1999).

Perceived realism is thus the extent to which one comes to internalise the content depicted in the media as portraying reality (Rubin, 1985). Those who seem to be high on this construct believe that movies show life as it really is, and that they are just witnessing what can happen in other places. They believe media to be a credible source and use the information obtained from it to regulate their own behaviour in a relationship.

Rationale for the study

Large scale surveys have found an alarming increase in the consumption of television and big screen romance. The largest consumers of television are 16-20 years of age, who watch about 3-5 hours of television per day. With respect to the quantity and quality of movies released in India, a survey revealed 22% increase in the number of romantic movies released per year since 1995 while 77% of love relationships end within the first two years in India and 15% of the nation's total suicide rates are attributed to failed relationships. A deeper look at these alarming trends point to a growing population of intolerant youth who are incapable of facing disappointments. Infidelity seems to be a growing reason for breakups among these youngsters and research has strongly proved that there is a significant relationship between

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exposure to romantic media and lack of satisfaction with the current relationship along with being more open to alternate partners (Gagnon, 2008).

Since, there is an overarching evidence for the number of young people who are exposed to romantic media and the influence of media in shaping people's beliefs, expectations and attitudes towards love; a study into the possible causal relationships between these variables will benefit the society and have serious implications for making necessary policy changes in the Indian entertainment and media industry.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The Ex post facto research design is followed, since there is no control over the variables and the focus is on description of state of affairs as it exist.

Variables

The independent variables: Exposure time to romance depicted in mass media, Perceived realism of mass media

The dependent variables: Beliefs about romantic relationships

Demographic variable: Gender

Sample

Purposive sampling was used. The sample comprised of 439 individuals which included 121 males and 318 females. 78.4 percent of the participants were between 18 to 24 years of age; and 56.9 percent of them were students. Descriptive analysis of the sample reveals a normal distribution.

Inclusion criteria

- Individuals over 18 years of age.
- Individuals with sufficient proficiency in English language.
- Individuals with Indian Nationality
- Individuals belonging to both the sexes

Instruments

1. Relationship Beliefs scale (Sprecher & Metts, 1989): The scale is a self-reported measure of an individual's attitudes and beliefs about romantic love, romantic relationships and expectations of a potential partner. The current Romantic Beliefs Scale (RBS) consists of four subscales: Love Finds a Way, One and Only, Idealization, and Love at First Sight. The RBS is a 15-item Likert-type scale with scoring ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The scale takes approximately ten minutes to complete and requires a sixth grade reading level. The scale has good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.57 to 0.80) and significant test-retest reliability. Construct validity has also been established by correlating with other scales that measure similar constructs.

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2. **Rubin's Perceived Realism Scale (Rubin, 1985):** This scale measures the extent to which an individual internalises the content depicted in media and comes to perceive the media as mirroring real life. The scale initially consisted of five items but later revised to four because one of the items was eliminated due to its poor correlation with the other items. It is a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The scale has good alternate form reliability and constructs validity.

Procedure

Digital media was used, where the personal data sheet (which included a single item on consumption of mass media in hours per week), Relationship beliefs Scale, Perceived Realism Scale were typed out using Google forms software. The data was collected by posting the form on social media sites including Facebook, Whatsapp Web, online research forums and private messages. The form was available for a period of one month on these digital communication channels.

RESULTS

Table No. 1 Pearson's coefficient of correlation between Exposure time and scores on Relationship Beliefs Scale (RBS)

Measures	1	2	M	SD
1. Exposure time	—	.05 ^{NS}	7.60	10.25
2. Scores on RBS	.05 ^{NS}	—	15.11	15.11

Note: NS – Not significant; RBS= Relationship Beliefs Scale

The table reveals that on an average people consumed 7.6 hours of television per week. Pearson's product moment correlation was done to see if there is a significant relationship between exposure time and scores on RBS. The results revealed a r value of .05 which was not significant at .05 levels. All though these findings refute the plethora of studies that support this hypothesis, it does seem consistent with another area of research which posits that, it is not the mere exposure to the amount of romance depicted in media, but the reason that people have for seeking such forms of display, which influence their beliefs about relationships.

Table No. 2 Pearson's coefficient of correlation between scores on the Perceived Realism Scale (PRS) and Relationship Beliefs Scale (RBS)

Measures	1	2	M	SD
1. Scores on PRS	—	.27**	11.29	3.14
2. Scores on RBS	.27**	—	77.49	15.11

Note: ** $p < .01$, two tailed; PRS = Perceived Realism Scale; RBS= Relationship Beliefs Scale

Pearson's product moment correlation was done to see if there is a significant relationship between scores on the Perceived Realism Scale (PRS) and Relationship Beliefs Scale (RBS).

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The results revealed a r value of .27, which was significant at .01 level. Perceived realism of mass media works by the principle of availability heuristics (Perse, 2006). The more people come to believe in media's projections of love and romance the more readily these instances are available when they are confronted with real life situations that require quick decisions and judgements. Those who internalise onscreen propaganda, develop schemas about romantic relationships which are consistent with the celluloid but not in touch with reality (Perse & Gallon, 2006). Such people do not necessarily require heavy dosages of romantic media to persuade them. Minimum subjection to such dissimulations is sufficient to set the stage for irrational schemas about Eros type love style.

Table No. 3 t- test for exposure time between males and females

Sex	Males			Females			t
	M	SD	n	M	SD	n	
Exposure time	8.90	1.10	121	7.10	0.52	318	-1.64 ^{NS}

NS- Not significant

The independent sample t-test indicates that 121 males and 318 females had mean exposure time of 8.90 hours and 7.10 hours respectively, and the means did not differ significantly at the .05 level. Thus there is no sex difference with respect to exposure time

Table No. 4 t- test for scores on Relationship Beliefs Scale (RBS) between males and females

Sex	Males			Females			t
	M	SD	n	M	SD	N	
Scores on RBS	77.577	15.19	121	77.46	15.10	318	-.06 ^{NS}

NS- Not significant; RBS= Relationship Beliefs Scale

The independent sample t-test indicates that 121 males and 318 females had mean RBS scores of 77.57 and 77.46 respectively, and the means did not differ significantly at the .05 level. It is necessary to note that contrary to popular beliefs, the male attitudes and behaviour towards love is more romanticized in the media (Caveath, 2003). To make sense of these apparently counterintuitive gender differences, we can turn to evolutionary psychology. Women tend to be more pragmatic when seeking a mate. That is, they are more likely to feel that love should develop slowly, and they tend to be cautious before jumping into a relationship—a less romantic attitude. According to evolutionary theory, women must be more selective when choosing mates because, by biological necessity, they must invest more as parents. This means that a more cautious, less romantic approach to love is more adaptive for women than it is for men (Pease, 2012).

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These very same ideas are portrayed in the media which is full of male role models who fall intensely in love with a reluctant woman whom they pursue throughout the movie. These vicarious experiences reinforce the attitudes to which men are evolutionarily predisposed to (Chomsky, 2000).

Table No. 5 t- test for scores on Perceived Realism Scale (PRS) between males and females

Sex	Males			Females			t
	M	SD	n	M	SD	n	
Scores on PRS	11.46	3.09	121	11.23	3.16	318	-.69 ^{NS}

NS- Not significant

Independent sample t-test indicates that 121 males and 318 females had mean PRS scores of 11.46 and 11.23 respectively, and the means did not differ significantly at the .05 level.

DISCUSSION

Descriptive analysis of the data revealed that, on an average individuals are exposed to 7.6 hours of romantic media per week (n= 439), which is greater than the healthy average of four hours per week of overall media consumption (Brandwin, 2014). Also, there appears to be no gender differences with respect to exposure time. That is, most individuals are caught in an insalubrious style of media consumption. But on the positive end, the study reveals that exposure time has no significant effect on relationship beliefs as a whole (as measured by RBS) except for one of its sub scale, Love at first sight [$r(437) = .12, p < .05$]. Rather it is the extent to which people consider celluloid as the embodiment of reality (as measured by scores on PRS) which impacts a person's notions about romantic relationships, especially idealisation of romantic partner ($r = .32, p < .01$).

The exception of 'Love at first sight' can be explained by the fact that, of the 12 popular media myths (as proposed by Galician in her content analysis), it seems to be the most prevalent irrational depiction, occupying the first place (Galician, 2013). Also, 'Love at first sight' seems to be the most glamorised and glorified idea. This implies that, even the less vulnerable audience of romantic mass media have high chances of being influenced by the idea of 'Love at first sight' due to its magnanimous presence in the worlds' celluloid. However, perceived realism as mentioned above seems to be the major contributing factor in shaping relationship beliefs. On an average people have obtained a score of 11.29 on 20 in the PRS (n = 439).

It is also found that on an average men and women do not differ in perceived realism of romantic media; equal proportions of them are vulnerable to mass media propaganda. However, there may be variations in how they perceive love and sex. Studies have found that men are more likely than women to believe that sex on television was portrayed realistically,

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while women were more likely than men to believe that portrayals of love on television were accurate representations of reality (Gardos & Mosher, 1999). Also, the extent to which people come to internalise media's messages depend on other factors like early experiences, past encounters with the opposite sex and an individual's level of critical thinking (Haridakis & Rubin, 2003). Thus gender may not necessarily affect one's tendency to engage in reality check of uncensored propaganda. Further research needs to be done to see if there are differences with respect to specific attributes of media messages

CONCLUSIONS

The following conclusions were drawn from the study

1. There is no significant relationship between exposure time to screen romance and beliefs about romantic relationships.
2. There is a significant relationship between perceived realism of media and beliefs about romantic relationships.
3. There is no significant sex differences with respect to Exposure time, Beliefs about romantic relationships and perceived realism of media.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of the research have some practical implications. Since children below 18 years of age are the most vulnerable to screen romance, adult guidance can create a more conducive viewing environment. Although surplus censorship specifications are already in place, the term "Parental guidance is necessary" (a UA censor certification) is seldom taken seriously. One way to deal with this is through psychoeducation of parents about the impact of movies and other mass media romance on children and young adults who especially believe the media to be the pinnacle of reality. They also need to be sensitized to the ways in which they can help children critically evaluate what they consume from television. This has to start from a fairly early age. Practices such as open ended discussion with children about irrational romantic portrayals and having the floor open to questions can demystify the messages conveyed in the media instead of them being tabooed entities. This can promote critical thinking among children regarding what they see on the screens (Wuppertal, 2007).

Another implication would be the way in which disclaimers are designed. Although Indian films are bombarded with statutory warnings on parental guidance, characters being fictitious, the dangers of smoking, tobacco abuse and liquor consumption, these remain mere silent breaks when people settle in, because of their sluggish fonts and unrelenting videos that the audience know by heart. Warnings that are tailor made for a particular movie using more interesting tactics like including the movies' celebrities to debrief on the incongruity of big screen romance can draw the attention of all. However, this move may have the film industry peeved because they believe that disclaimers take the fun out of watching movies (Wilson, 2012).

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LIMITATIONS

- i. This was entirely an online voluntary survey and hence the participants who decided to take the survey self-selected themselves into the study. This reduced the randomisation of the sample.
- ii. Both the Relationship Beliefs Inventory and Perceived Realism Scale are self-report measures, so there is a question of social-desirability with respect to the responses.

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Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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