

Media Consumption: Association With Implicit Theories of Romantic Relationships

Taylor M. Kracht and Darcey N. Powell*
Department of Psychology, Roanoke College

ABSTRACT. Media has grown in popularity throughout time, and with it, so has media's ability to influence those who watch it. Specifically, romantic media has the potential to influence personal romantic beliefs. However, to date, research has typically relied on self-reported questionnaires for determining associations. Therefore, the present study examined the influence of romantic reality media on a specific set of romantic beliefs (i.e., individuals' implicit theories of relationships) using an experimental procedure. Participants from a small liberal arts college first completed an online, prevideo survey ($N = 128$) assessing their prior romantic media consumption and their current romantic beliefs. A subset of the participants ($n = 81$) then came into a computer lab and watched 1 of 3 videos: emphasizing growth beliefs, emphasizing destiny beliefs, or a nonromantic media video. Immediately after the video, participants filled out a postvideo survey assessing their romantic media consumption and postvideo romantic beliefs. Analyses revealed a significant 3-way interaction between implicit theories of relationships, wave of data collection, and video condition, Wilk's $\lambda = .80$, $F(2, 74) = 9.38$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .20$. Specifically, participants who watched the growth video had a significant change in their implicit theories of relationships beliefs; there was not a significant change in beliefs for participants who watched the destiny video. Results are discussed in relation to cultivation theory, professional implications in the counseling fields, and future directions.

Keywords: implicit theories of romantic relationships, media, romantic beliefs, romantic reality media, cultivation theory

Media may play a significant role in the cultivation and modification of romantic ideals. Popular films, such as Disney princess movies, have been associated with strong themes such as emphasizing romantic ideals, displaying gender differences (i.e., damsel in distress), and overcoming challenges (Hefner et al., 2017; Tonn 2008). These strong themes have been found to have an influence on viewers' beliefs on love, their relationship-contingent self-esteem, and, for men, an endorsement in masculine strategies for courtship (Hefner & Kretz, 2021; Tonn, 2008). It may be, though, that other forms of romantic media (e.g., romantic reality media) can also influence individuals' beliefs about relationships. As such, the following research assessed the

influence of romantic reality media on young adults' romantic beliefs. We recognize that many factors contribute to individuals' romantic beliefs (Frazier & Esterly, 1990) and the success of their relationships (Le et al., 2010), but opted to focus on romantic media, and specifically romantic reality media, as a contributor to their beliefs in this study. Furthermore, we could have examined many different types of romantic beliefs, but we chose to focus on implicit theories of relationships (ITRs).

Implicit Theories of Relationships

Implicit theories are beliefs about the stability of a characteristic, in someone or something, and the situations that might stimulate change in it (Ross, 1989). These beliefs impact how someone interprets

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or reacts to certain situations, and thus, individually held implicit theories can influence behaviors (Ross, 1989). Knee (1998) acknowledged that implicit theories can play a role in relationships, in that people have assumptions about how relationships are cultivated and developed, and whether certain aspects of relationships are unchangeable. Knee (1998) posited two components of aspects of ITRs: destiny and growth beliefs. It is important to note that destiny and growth beliefs are orthogonal and both exist on a continuum; they are not dichotomous (i.e., growth or destiny; Knee, 1998; Knee et al., 2003). Therefore, there are technically four groups of beliefs: (a) the evaluators with high destiny/low growth, (b) the cultivators with high growth/low destiny, (c) the optimistics with high on both, and (d) the helpless with low on both (Knee et al., 2001). Although there are four groups, most studies have predominately focused on individuals' growth and destiny beliefs separately (i.e., high versus low destiny beliefs and high versus low growth beliefs).

Individuals with stronger destiny beliefs, or a soulmate perspective, tend to believe that to have a satisfying relationship they need to find the right person, of which there may be only one person, or a select few people, in the world (Franiuk et al., 2002; Knee, 1998). Individuals with stronger growth beliefs, or a work-it-out perspective, tend to believe that satisfying relationships are cultivated and are a matter of working at it together (Franiuk et al., 2002; Knee, 1998). There are distinguishable differences in relationship expectations and behaviors between those who endorse stronger growth beliefs and those who endorse stronger destiny beliefs.

Stronger growth beliefs are correlated with a generally optimistic evaluation of a relationship's potential (Franiuk et al., 2002; Knee, 1998). Having stronger growth beliefs increases the likelihood of using relationship maintenance strategies (e.g., active coping, planning, and positive reinterpretation) in response to negative relationship events (Knee, 1998). Further, stronger growth beliefs are associated with less denial about a relationship hardship (Knee, 1998). Those who hold stronger growth beliefs are also less threatened and less negatively impacted by the idea or realization that their partner is not their ideal mate (Franiuk et al., 2004; Knee et al., 2001). Stronger growth beliefs are also associated with being less likely to acknowledge their part in ending the relationship, especially in women, indicating an increased desire to continue working on the relationship instead

of ending it (Knee, 1998). Furthermore, looking retrospectively on ended relationships, those with stronger growth beliefs were somewhat less likely to agree that the relationship was wrong from the beginning (Knee, 1998), indicating more optimism after its termination as well.

In comparison, those with stronger destiny beliefs tend to place more importance on initial relationship satisfaction (Franiuk et al., 2002; Knee, 1998). Moreover, for those with stronger destiny beliefs, high initial satisfaction and initial closeness are positively correlated with relationship longevity, and may function as successful relationship cues for those who have stronger destiny beliefs (Franiuk et al., 2002; Knee, 1998). However, stronger destiny beliefs increase the likelihood of disengaging and distancing oneself from a relationship in response to a negative relationship event (Knee, 1998; Knee et al., 2003). As such, stronger destiny beliefs are linked to ending a relationship quicker when satisfaction is low early in the relationship (Franiuk et al., 2002; Knee, 1998), including using more withdrawal and avoidance strategies to end the relationships, such as ghosting (i.e., ending the relationship by unilaterally ending communication with the partner; Freedman et al., 2019; Koessler et al., 2019). Stronger destiny beliefs are also associated with being more likely to acknowledge their part in ending the relationship (Knee, 1998). Destiny beliefs' utility is apparent, though, when the beneficial outcome of a relationship is to terminate. For example, an individual with stronger growth beliefs may stay in an abusive or unhealthy relationship for a longer period (Knee & Petty, 2013). On the other hand, those with stronger destiny beliefs may see the conflict in the relationship as a sign that it is not the right relationship and take earlier action to end a potential unhealthy relationship (Knee, 1998).

For the most part, ITR beliefs are thought to be relatively stable, but prior research has shown that ITR beliefs can be malleable and altered upon exposure to specific stimuli (Franiuk et al., 2004; Knee et al., 2003; Wickham et al., 2010). One potential influence on individuals' ITR beliefs is exposure to media, specifically the genre of romantic media.

Media's Influence of Relationship Beliefs

According to cultivation theory, media has the power to change a viewer's perception of reality over time (Gerbner et al., 1986). Gerbner et al. (1986) and Gerber et al. (1980) used the difference between symbolic reality and objective reality to test how the compelling nature of television facts

is accepted as truth in the real-world. Gerbner et al. (1980) found that the underrepresentation of the older adult population in television dramas persuaded viewers that older adults were a smaller portion of the real-world population, when in reality, that population was growing. Similar associations were found in media's display of violence. Most television programs show more action-violence than is true in the real world (Gerbner et al., 1986). Research by Gerbner and colleagues (1979, 1980, 2002) found that heavy exposure to violence in television programs cultivated inflated perceptions of people involved in real-world violence.

Gerbner et al. (1986) postulated that the cultivation process goes beyond comparing television facts with real-world statistics. They proposed that the most interesting and important areas for cultivation involve the perceptions of general issues and assumptions in one's own beliefs. Television facts are likely to grow as a basis for a broader view of the world, thus making television a significant source for the cultivation of values, ideologies, assumptions, beliefs, and images (Gerbner et al., 1986). This is known as the cultivation of value systems (Hawkins & Pingree, 1982).

The cultivation of value systems is evident in the idea of mean world syndrome (Gerbner et al., 1986). Although little to no real-world statistics exist about the extent to which people are selfish versus altruistic, or how likely someone can be trusted, research has found that viewers heavily exposed to violent programs tended to view the world in such a dangerous manner (Appel, 2008; Gerbner et al., 1980). The cultivation of value systems (Hawkins & Pingree, 1982) can also be attributed to the cultivation of romantic beliefs given the exposure to romantic media. With romance being a popular topic in media, the portrayal of romantic relationships in media has the potential to affect a viewer's relationship beliefs (Gerbner et al., 1986).

Mass media (e.g., movies, TV shows, books) romanticizes relationships within the United States (Johnson & Holmes, 2009). Media does this by incorporating romantic themes throughout songs, movies, TV shows, talk shows, and so forth. In visual media (e.g., TV shows, movies) viewers can choose from many different genres. When it comes to relationships, research has predominately focused on scripted romantic media (e.g., Disney, romantic comedies, romantic dramas). Such research consistently found that those types of genre-specific programming have a greater effect on relationship expectations than general TV viewing (Lippman

et al., 2014; National Institute of Mental Health, 1982; Segrin & Nabi, 2002). Disney princess movies have been used in past research due to their idealistic romantic themes (Hefner et al., 2017; Tonn 2008). However, in recent years, Disney films have transformed into themes consistent with independence, and less solely relied on romantic "happily ever after" endings (Hefner et al., 2017; Hine et al., 2018). In fact, princesses in later films are more likely to stay single (e.g., Moana; Hine et al., 2018). As such, today's viewers see more realistic representations of love and romance in Disney princess movies than their parents' generation saw (Hefner et al., 2017).

Beyond Disney movies, romantic comedies also portray strong relationship themes, such as the concept of a soul mate or one-and-only love, idealization of partners, love conquers all, and love at first sight (Hefner & Wilson, 2013). Studies have found that viewers' preference for viewing romantic themed media has been significantly correlated with "love finds a way" (Lippman et al., 2014) fantasy rumination, marital intentions (Galloway, 2013), belief in predestined soulmates, and an expectation for mind reading in relationships (Holmes, 2007; Holmes & Johnson, 2009). Furthermore, outside of merely preference, frequent viewing of romantic comedies and dramas can influence viewers' idealizations that love conquers all (Galloway, 2013). Romantic comedy exposure can also predict viewer's idealization of their partner, especially if they are watching to learn about romance (Hefner & Wilson, 2013). Further, Holmes and Johnson (2009) found that those who were in relationships had greater relationship satisfaction if they viewed a romantic comedy manipulation compared to a control. Meanwhile, those not in relationships had less relationship satisfaction if they watched a romantic comedy manipulation compared to a control.

More recently, scholars have explored both scripted and unscripted romantic media. Such research revealed that genres of romantic media are differentially associated with romantic beliefs, such that greater consumption of soap operas was associated with a stronger belief in soulmates than consumption of romantic movies (Kretz, 2019). Moreover, viewing reality dating programs was positively correlated with adversarial sexual beliefs, endorsement of sexual double standards, as well as beliefs that men are sex-driven, appearance is important in dating, and that dating is a game (Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006). Research on the impact of watching wedding-based reality media

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has been mixed. Some research reports that greater consumption is associated with stronger beliefs in the idea that real love gives couples the strength to overcome anything (Hefner, 2016), whereas other research reports that greater consumption is not associated with the idea that love finds a way but was positively associated with stronger beliefs in love at first sight and idealizations of partners (Lippman et al., 2014). Overall, scripted and unscripted media across various genres can portray differing relationship ideals and beliefs, and viewers' perceptions are impacted by what the media they are watching portrays (Lippman et al., 2014). These findings support that the media has a role in cultivating expectations of romantic relationships and marriage.

Media Consumption

Watching TV continues to rise in popularity (Krantz-Kent, 2018). In 2018, 80% of Americans watched TV daily. Watching TV accounted for more than half of all the time Americans spent in leisure activities/sports, therefore, making watching TV the leisurely choice for most Americans (Krantz-Kent, 2018). Within the emerging adult population, in the 2013–2017 statistics period, almost 75% of 15- to 35-year-olds watched TV on a given day (Krantz-Kent, 2018). With the development of streaming devices (e.g., tablets, phones, computers, and TVs connected to the internet), TV programs, videos, and movies are now easily accessible from various devices. Having a television is no longer the only way people can engage in TV watching (Krantz-Kent, 2018). Thus, the accessibility to media has increased and media engagement continues to be a common past-time for most Americans.

When it comes to specific genre watching, in a sample of 2,200 respondents, 63% of 18- to 29-year-olds mostly watched romance media and 68% mostly watched romantic comedies (Watson, 2018). In a sample of similar size, 77% of women and 55% of men indicated that romance media was their favorite genre, and 84% of women and 67% of men indicated that romantic comedy was their favorite genre (Watson, 2019). Furthermore, reality TV first made an appearance in the top 10 rankings in 2000 and, since the 2002–2003 season, has consistently captured the largest percentage of the audience watching the top 10 broadcast programs (Nielsen, 2011). In addition to being a preferred genre for media consumption, a recent poll found that more than 60% of 25- to 34-year-olds believe at least some reality romances to be genuine (Tiley, 2016). Therefore, because the blending of romantic

media and reality TV is popular among emerging adults, it is justified to examine whether romantic reality media influences their romantic beliefs.

The Present Study

Previous researchers have predominately examined associations between media consumption and romantic relationship beliefs using self-reported questionnaires, which has the limitation of selective exposure (e.g., Kretz, 2019; Segrin & Nabi, 2002). Specifically, those with idealized views of marriage could selectively expose themselves to romanticized media content because it is consistent with their already held beliefs. Limited research has experimentally examined the association. For example, Holmes & Johnson (2009) demonstrated the utility of an experimental manipulation of romantic media to test cultivation. The current study extended the research by measuring the malleability of growth and destiny beliefs while addressing selectivity bias for the media by assigning a film genre using an experimental design. The two assigned romantic reality media compilations were created from the same source. The romantic reality media used in this study was derived from the reality TV show, *Married at First Sight* (Kinetic Content, 2014). *Married at First Sight* is a show where four experts in romance pair strangers to get married, such that the couple does not meet until at the altar. If they choose to go through with the wedding, the show follows the couple for six weeks, and after the six weeks, the couple decides if they are going to stay married or get divorced (Kinetic Content, 2014). Lastly, the nonromantic (i.e., object media) video was a specific episode from the series *Everyday Miracles* (BBC, 2014), which has no romantic content.

The primary aim of this study was to examine whether watching romantic reality media can modify participants' ITRs. A two-part experimental study was conducted. Participants completed an online survey about their ITRs and amount of romantic media consumed. They were then randomly assigned to one of three media conditions, which they watched in a computer lab. Immediately afterward, they completed a second online survey, once again capturing their ITRs. First, we hypothesized that those who reported watching romantic media in their regular pastime would have higher destiny beliefs and lower growth beliefs. Second, we hypothesized that those who were randomly assigned to either romantic reality media condition (i.e., compilation highlighting destiny beliefs and compilation highlighting growth beliefs) would

report higher destiny and lower growth beliefs on the postvideo survey than those randomly assigned to the nonromantic media condition. Given that prior research has demonstrated that watching romantic media can influence relationship expectations and beliefs, the analysis for the second hypothesis was also conducted controlling for participants' reported frequency of romantic media consumption.

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of emerging adults from a small liberal arts college in the Southeast. A target sample size of 148 was sought.

A total of 128 participants completed more than just the consent screen on the prevideo survey. Most participants were women (71.9%; 20.3% men, 7.8% did not disclose). Their ages ranged from 18 to 47 ($M = 19.96$ years, $SD = 3.07$) and most participants were underclass students (58.8%; 25.9% upperclass students, 15.4% did not disclose). Similar to the population drawn from, most participants identified as European American (75.0%; 7.8% African American, 3.1% Biracial, 2.3% Latinx/Hispanic, 1.6% Asian American, 1.6% other, 0.8% Native American, and 7.8% did not disclose). Additionally, most participants identified as heterosexual (85.2%; 4% bisexual, 1.6% gay or lesbian, 0.8% asexual, 8.6% did not disclose). Participants varied, though, in their current relationship status (38.3% dating seriously, 35.2% single, 9.4% "talking," 3.9% dating casually, 3.1% on-again/off-again, 1.6% engaged, 8.6% did not disclose).

A total of 81 participants came to the lab to watch one of the video conditions and complete the postvideo survey. Most were women (75.3%; 24.7% men). Their ages ranged from 18 to 47 ($M = 20.00$ years, $SD = 3.52$) and most participants were still underclass students (70.3%; 29.7% upperclass students). Participants identified as predominately European American (82.7%; 9.9% African American, 3.7% Biracial, 1.2% Latinx/Hispanic, and 2.5% other). Additionally, most participants identified as heterosexual (92.6%; 3.7% bisexual, 3.7% gay or lesbian). Participants remained varied in their current relationship status (44.4% dating seriously, 40.7% single, 4.9% "talking," 4.9% dating casually, 2.5% on-again/off-again, 2.5% engaged).

Materials

The following measures are listed in the order that they were completed by participants.

Implicit Theories of Relationships

To assess participants' ITRs, the Implicit Theories of Relationships Scale (Knee, 1998; Knee et al., 2003) was used in both the pre- and postvideo survey. The Implicit Theories of Relationships Scale (Knee, 1998; Knee et al., 2003) consists of 22 questions; each question is scored on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) Likert-type scale. Eleven questions assess destiny beliefs (e.g., "If a potential relationship is not meant to be, it will become apparent very soon") and 11 questions assess growth beliefs (e.g., "The ideal relationship develops gradually over time"). Average destiny and growth beliefs scores were calculated; means, standard deviations, and Cronbach's alphas are shared in Table 1.

Romantic Media Consumption

Participants were then asked a series of questions pertaining to their outside media consumption on the pre- and postvideo surveys. These outside media consumption questions were comprised of six questions: (a) "How often do you watch romantic media" answered on a 0 (*always*) to 5 (*never*) Likert-type scale; (b) "How much do you enjoy watching romantic media" answered on a 1 (*like a great deal*) to 7 (*dislike a great deal*) Likert-type scale; (c) "How likely are you to choose a romantic film over others?" answered on a 1 (*extremely likely*) to 7 (*extremely unlikely*) Likert-type scale; (d) "How much TV do you watch in an average weekday" with the choices of 10+ hours, 8–10 hours, 4–8 hours, or 0–2 hours; (e) "How much TV do you watch in an average weekend" with the choice of 10+ hours, 8–10 hours, 4–8 hours, or 0–2 hours; and (f) "Out of your media consumption, how much is romantic media" answered on a 0–100 ratio scale. Only the first question was used in these analyses and was reverse coded so that higher scores would indicate more frequent media consumption; participants' mean and standard deviation to that question is shared in

TABLE 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Cronbach's Alphas for Core Survey Variables

Variable	Pre		Post	
	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	α	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	α
ITR growth	5.20 (0.66)	.75	5.39 (0.62)	.76
ITR destiny	3.64 (0.81)	.80	3.30 (0.89)	.87
Media consumption	3.43 (1.03)	n/a	3.52 (0.94)	n/a

Note. Higher media consumption scores are associated with more frequent watching of romantic media. ITR = implicit theories of relationships. Higher growth and destiny scores are associated with stronger beliefs.

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Table 1. The term “romantic media” was not defined for participants; participants were permitted to use their implicit definition for the term given that romantic media can cross multiple genres.

Demographic Information

On both the pre- and postvideo surveys, participants were then asked demographic questions including age, gender, race, and year in school. Participants were also asked further questions pertaining to their romantic relations. These questions included their sexual orientation, their current relationship status, their longest romantic relationship, and when their last relationship was (if not currently in one).

Experimental Video Conditions

The in-lab session consisted of watching an assigned video and then completing a post-video questionnaire. During the in-lab session, participants watched one of three different videos; two were romantic in content and one was not focused on interpersonal relationships but, rather, on objects. All films were an hour in length to control for time.

Similar to Wickham et al. (2010), two combinations of ITR beliefs (high destiny/low growth and low destiny/high growth) were used for the experimental videos. Both videos were created from the romantic reality series *Married at First Sight* (Kinetic Content, 2014). In the film that depicted the high growth beliefs condition, a couple was unsure of each other at first, but learned to love each other, and stayed together; thus, accurately showing a growth mindset. In the film that depicted the high destiny beliefs condition, a couple believed that they were meant for each other, soon had problems, and chose not to stay together; thus, showing an accurate depiction of destiny beliefs. Although it was decided by the researchers to show the ending of the taping for each couple (i.e., staying together or not), it is recognized that this is a confounding variable and is discussed further in the limitations section.

The romantic reality media films were hand-made by the first author. *Married at First Sight* (Kinetic Content, 2014) is filmed unscripted where the cameras follow three different couples per season. The researcher went through multiple seasons of *Married at First Sight* (Kinetic Content, 2014), Season 1 for the growth video and Season 2 for the destiny video, and selected scenes from each that only depicted the intended couple; no other couples were shown in either video. Each segment was selected to make a coherent video and depict high growth or high destiny attributes in each couple. The created videos were then reviewed by

the second author and small tweaks were made to ensure coherence, flow, and quality depiction of growth or destiny beliefs.

Different endings for each film were chosen to further emphasize either high growth or high destiny beliefs. Supported by the tenets of Cultivation Theory, both films were designed to portray the highest level of each belief from beginning to end. In high growth beliefs, conflict resolution and a work-it-out mentality facilitates growth and maintenance of a relationship (Franziuk et al., 2002; Knee, 1998). Therefore, the film shown to participants illustrates the couple working through their differences together, even when they were less sure about the match in the beginning, and then as they decide to stay married in the end. In high destiny beliefs, high satisfaction is important and certain deal breakers are nonnegotiable, which increases the odds of relationship dissolution; as such, if there is too much conflict, then that person is not the one for them and they should end the relationship (Franziuk et al., 2002; Knee, 1998). Therefore, the film shown to participants portrays the couple feeling quite positive about their match and attraction to the person initially, but then illustrates the couple having disagreements and unresolved conflict, and ultimately deciding to get a divorce at the end. Both researchers reviewed each created film and determined that they each accurately portrayed the assigned ITR.

The third video, nonromantic media, was the entirety of episode two from the documentary series *Everyday Miracles* (BBC, 2014), which did not contain any romantic content. Episode two of *Everyday Miracles* (BBC, 2014) features a materials scientist, Mark Miodownik, who presents historical information about everyday objects used today. He explores what everyday objects (e.g., bicycles, lightbulbs, etc.) used to look like, how they were used in the past, and how they were improved throughout history to become what they are presently.

After viewing the assigned video, participants were asked comprehension questions to validate their attention during the assigned video stimulus. Participants who watched either of the romantic reality media films were asked: (a) “What were the names of the couple” answered with a free response, (b) “What was the outcome of the couple” answered on a binary scale of either Divorce or Remained married, (c) “Do you believe the decision was the right one” answered on a 1 (*definitely yes*) to a 5 (*definitely not*) scale, and (d) “Following your answer on the previous question, why do you think that”

answered with a free response. Participants who watched the nonromantic media video were asked: (a) “What was discussed in the video” answered with a free response, (b) “Did you find what was discussed to be interesting” answered on a 1 (*definitely yes*) to a 5 (*definitely not*) Likert-type scale, and (c) “Why was it interesting or not interesting” answered with a free response.

Procedure

After institutional review board approval (18077) was granted at the southeastern liberal arts college, we recruited participants through email and via SONA systems. SONA systems is the program that the college’s Psychology Department uses to sign participants up for psychological research and allocate course credit for participation. Those who were not a part of SONA systems were sent an email about the study and offered a chance to win a \$15 gift card to a local coffee shop or to apply their credits to their service organization.

Participants were recruited to complete a two-part questionnaire. The first part was completed online before the in-lab session. The questionnaire was hosted on Qualtrics and accessible to participants online at their convenience. After participants finished the first questionnaire, they were emailed about how to sign up for the second part of the study. Participants came into the computer lab during their selected time. Participants were assigned to their experimental condition based on the session they signed up for. On average, the in-lab session occurred 1.5 to 2 weeks after the online prevideo survey.

When participants came to their selected lab time, they watched one of three videos: high growth, high destiny, or the nonromantic media video. All participants in the computer lab at the same time watched the same video content from a shared TV in the lab. There was also a video proctor, who was part of the research team, at all video sessions to make sure participants were paying attention to the video stimuli. As participants watched the video, they were emailed a link to the postvideo questionnaire.

After watching the assigned video as a group, participants turned to their computer screens to complete the postvideo questionnaire. The postsession questionnaire was also hosted on Qualtrics. The postvideo questionnaire contained the same questions as the prequestionnaire but also contained comprehension check questions about the video. There were two different postvideo

questionnaires: one that incorporated the romantic videos’ comprehension check questions and one that incorporated the nonromantic media video’s comprehension check questions.

Results

Preliminary correlations (see Table 2) followed by regressions were conducted to examine the first hypothesis that participants who reported regularly watching romantic media in their pastime would have higher destiny beliefs and lower growth beliefs than those who did not report regularly watching romantic media. Reported romantic media consumption on the prevideo survey was not significantly associated with participants’ prevideo growth beliefs, $R^2_{adi} = .00$, $F(1, 120) = 0.54$, $p = .465$, or destiny beliefs, $R^2_{adi} = .00$, $F(1, 120) = 0.22$, $p = .642$. The association between reported romantic media consumption on the postvideo survey and their postvideo growth beliefs was trending, $R^2_{adi} = .03$, $F(1, 79) = 3.59$, $p = .062$. Specifically, more regular romantic media consumption was marginally associated with higher growth beliefs on the postvideo survey. There was not a significant association between reported romantic media consumption on the postvideo survey and their postvideo destiny beliefs, $R^2_{adi} = .01$, $F(1, 79) = 0.96$, $p = .331$. As such, this hypothesis was largely unsupported.

A 2 (ITR beliefs: growth, destiny) \times 2 (wave: pre-, postvideo) \times 3 (video condition: destiny, growth, nonromantic) mixed analysis of variance (ANOVA) was then conducted (see Table 3)¹ to examine the second hypothesis that those who were randomly assigned to watch either romantic reality media would report higher destiny and lower growth beliefs on the postvideo survey than those assigned to watch the nonromantic media. Of particular interest in this analysis was the 3-way interaction between ITR beliefs, wave

TABLE 2

Correlations Between Self-Reported Media Consumption and Implicit Theories of Relationships on Each Survey

Media consumption	Growth		Destiny	
	<i>n</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>r</i>
Romantic media consumption (pre)	122	-.07	122	-.04
Romantic media consumption (post)	81	.21 [†]	81	-.11

Note. The degrees of freedom for the correlations on the prevideo survey data (top row) were 117. The degrees of freedom for the correlations on the postvideo survey data (bottom row) were 80.

[†] $p < .05$. [‡] $p = .062$.

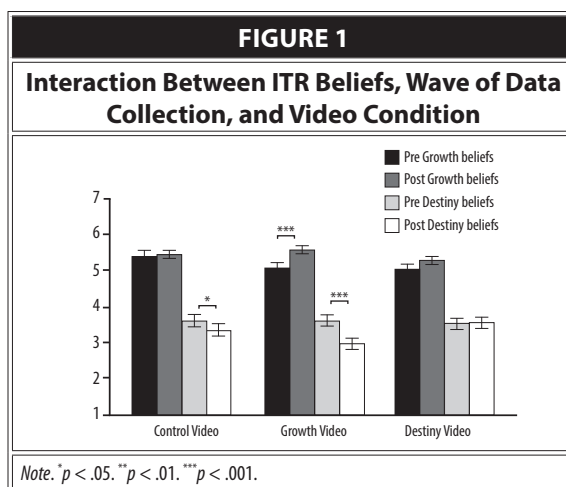
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of data collection, and video condition, which was significant (see Figure 1). Follow-up paired-sample *t* tests were conducted to identify where change in ITR beliefs had occurred. After watching the growth video, there was a significant increase in growth beliefs, $t(24) = 6.07, p < .001$, and a significant decrease in destiny beliefs, $t(24) = -4.10, p < .001$. After watching the destiny video, there was no significant change in either growth or destiny beliefs, $t(27) = 1.47, p = .154$ and $t(27) = 0.21, p = .838$, respectively. Furthermore, after watching the nonromantic media, there was no significant change in growth beliefs, $t(23) = 0.16, p = .876$, but there was a significant decrease in destiny beliefs, $t(23) = -2.56, p = .017$. As such, although significant change was found, especially for the growth video, it was not in the direction posited by the hypothesis.

TABLE 3					
ANOVA Examining Change in Implicit Theories of Relationships					
	Wilks's λ	df	F	p	η_p^2
ITR	0.19	1, 74	325.71	< .001	.82
Wave	1.00	1, 74	0.25	.618	.00
ITR x Video	0.96	2, 74	1.45	.241	.04
Wave x Video	0.95	2, 74	1.89	.159	.05
ITR x Wave	0.71	1, 74	29.80	< .001	.29
ITR x Wave x Video	0.80	2, 74	9.38	< .001	.20

Note. ITR = implicit theories of relationships (i.e., growth and destiny); Wave = point of data collection (i.e., pre- or postvideo); Video = experimental condition (i.e., growth, destiny, nonromantic).



¹ This analysis was also conducted controlling for participants' frequency of romantic media consumption, as reported on the postvideo, and the results were essentially the same. As such, the reported results are based on the ANOVA described in the text, not the ANCOVA with romantic media consumption.

Discussion

A regular leisure activity of young adults is the consumption of visual media, and the viewing of romantic and reality media is quite common (Tiley, 2016; Watson, 2018). As such, the present study assessed whether watching romantic reality media impacted individuals' growth and destiny beliefs. Contrary to expectations, participants' reported consumption of romantic media was not associated with their ITRs. Prior research had revealed that participants' reported consumption of romantic media impacted their relationship/marital expectations and beliefs in both scripted (Hefner, 2016; Hefner et al., 2017; Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Galloway, 2013; Holmes, 2007; Holmes & Johnson, 2009; Lippman et al., 2014; National Institute of Mental Health, 1982; Segrin & Nabi, 2002; Tonn, 2008;) and unscripted romantic media (Kretz, 2019; Lippman et al., 2014; Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006). However, in this sample, a similar association was not extended to participants' ITRs.

Supported by cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 1986), showing a video stimulus high in growth or destiny beliefs was implemented to test if its viewing might change participants' views of their own ITR beliefs on the postvideo survey, when compared to their ITR beliefs on the prevideo survey. This study demonstrated that, after viewing a single hour of a romantic reality video, that growth and destiny beliefs were altered. Specifically, those who watched the growth romantic reality video had a significant increase in their growth beliefs and a significant decrease in their destiny beliefs. This finding relates to cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 1986) in that the exposure of a romantic reality video emphasizing growth beliefs successfully changed individuals' prior growth and destiny beliefs. However, watching the destiny romantic reality video did not change participants' ITR beliefs. Because the growth romantic reality video was more influential than the destiny romantic reality video, it may reflect that showing a couple whose interest in each other grows across time and who work through differences may be particularly meaningful to young adults. This may be particularly impactful as a preponderance of romantic reality media tends to focus on couples with instant attractions, in conflict, and/or making the decision to break-up or divorce.

Ultimately, this study used extreme combinations of ITR beliefs and demonstrated that the manipulation of ITRs can occur using relatively short video stimuli which enhances upon the prior research (Knee et al., 2003; Franiuk et al.,

2004; Walton, 2014; Wickham et al., 2010). We recognize, though, that the structure of the study did not permit examining how long the belief change persisted for those who watched the growth video and encourage similar projects to include additional questionnaires days or weeks after the experimental manipulation.

Although this study looked at growth and destiny beliefs separately, individuals actually possess a combination of these ITR beliefs. Some people may hold strong growth beliefs when it comes to maintaining the relationship, and at the same time, strong destiny beliefs when it comes to the fruition of the relationship (Knee, 1998; Knee et al., 2003). Therefore, the utility of ITRs is apparent in their combination. Recognizing the utility of growth and destiny beliefs is not only valuable in individual relationships, but also, the professional world. Specifically, understanding an individual's ITR beliefs is beneficial for couples/marital counseling. To begin, those who hold stronger growth beliefs are more likely to seek professional help in their relationship than those with higher destiny beliefs (Knee & Petty, 2013). However, if those with stronger destiny beliefs do seek help, it is more often to ask the professional if the relationship should be terminated or not (Knee & Petty, 2013). While in counseling, those with stronger growth beliefs are more likely to be open about their feelings and be nondefensive toward one another (Knee & Petty, 2013). Furthermore, having a higher willingness to compromise as a couple, more motivation to implement new coping strategies, and having fewer avoidant behaviors, which demonstrate stronger growth beliefs (Knee & Petty, 2013), often leads to a higher success rate in couples/marital counseling. As such, possessing strong growth beliefs can facilitate a positive outcome for couples in counseling. On the other hand, a professional working with couples who possess strong destiny beliefs may have a more difficult time facilitating the couple to compromise, especially on deal breakers, to change their avoidant patterns, be more open with their partner, and find areas for growth in themselves (Knee & Petty, 2013). Furthermore, the utility of growth beliefs is often taught and encouraged during couples/marital counseling. For example, growth beliefs can be found in marriage counseling by the therapists' intentions to support communication between the couple, elicit problem solving tactics, and encourage the discussion and acceptance of differences (Shanmugavelu & Arumugam, 2020).

Limitations and Future Directions

The current study combatted previous limitations by including an experimental manipulation via video, rather than solely asking participants about their television viewing habits and associating their self-reported viewing with their relationship beliefs. The pre/post design enhanced the literature by allowing the examination of change in participants' ITRs (i.e., growth and destiny). The incorporation of romantic reality videos that were of the same concept but demonstrated different ITR beliefs, as well as a nonromantic video on objects for comparison, enhanced the quality of the study by focusing on a specific genre of romantic media that may have stronger or weaker influences on ITR beliefs. However, the study has limitations that must be recognized.

First, focusing on the media used for the romantic reality conditions, which was derived from the show *Married at First Sight* (Kinetic Content, 2014), there are some limitations. A major limitation concerning the videos is that the two romantic films had different conclusions. The couple in the growth video stayed married, whereas the couple in the destiny video got divorced. This is a confounding variable. The ending could have impacted how the participants viewed their film, and thus influenced the change in their beliefs and expectations. In the future, the videos could be stopped before the ending is revealed. The participants could then be asked their opinion about whether they think the couples stay together or get divorced. They could also be asked about the quality of the couples' relationship satisfaction and extent to which the couples possess certain relationship beliefs. Moreover, scholars could compare the participants' responses based on the video condition and to their own relationship beliefs. Another option might be to randomly assign participants to an ending such that the romantic reality videos result in four different experimental conditions: destiny/stay married, destiny/divorced, growth/stay married, growth/divorced. Researchers could then evaluate if the ending of the films have an influence on the participants.

Furthermore, *Married at First Sight* (Kinetic Content, 2014) is an unscripted, romantic reality TV show. The unscripted design is contradictory to what most may assume when thinking about the genre of romantic media. Common romantic movies, like Disney films and Hallmark movies, tend to portray the romantic theme that, despite all odds, the couple is meant to be and live happily ever after (Hefner et

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al., 2017; Hefner & Wilson, 2013). Therefore, *Married at First Sight* (Kinetic Content, 2014) is not completely representative of all romantic media genres, but romantic reality media is commonly viewed by college-aged individuals (Nielsen, 2011; Watson, 2018, 2019) and is more likely to have couples that portray heavier destiny themes (Kretz, 2019; Lippman et al., 2014). Additionally, we acknowledge that the romantic reality videos were not pilot tested before showing them to the participants; rather, decisions of their appropriateness for each ITR condition were made by the research team.

Another limitation is that the participants only watched one film, a romantic reality video (i.e., growth or destiny) or a nonromantic video. Cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 1986) refers to the repeated exposure of media on an individual. Therefore, future studies could be more longitudinal in design, in which many romantic videos are shown across a period of time and participants are assessed throughout their exposure. Furthermore, we did not ask participants on the postvideo survey if they were familiar with the media they watched in their video condition (i.e., *Married at First Sight* or *Everyday Miracles*). Future projects that use media in their experimental paradigm should explore whether participants are familiar with the chosen media and if it influences the impact of the experiment.

A limitation within the pre- and postvideo questionnaires is that the term “romantic media” was not defined for the participants. Participants were instead allowed to use their implicit definition for the term. It was assumed by the researchers that college-aged students could interpret the term “romantic media” across multiple genres and understand the aspects of such a term. However, this was an assumption made by the researchers and therefore is a limitation within the questionnaires. In the future, the term “romantic media” could be defined for the participants to narrow the scope of the definition. Another limitation within the postvideo questionnaire is that the returning participants were not assessed to see if their own love life had changed within the period that they filled out the pre-video questionnaire and when they participated in the second part of the study. Future studies could add assessment questions in the postvideo questionnaire to check if the participants fell in love, had a breakup, and so forth within the time gap. In doing so, potential confounding variables, such as self-selection due to interest in learning more about love and a change in participants’ ideas about love for outside reasons rather than the video stimuli, could be accounted for. In

regard to ITRs, given that Knee (1998) proposed that growth and destiny beliefs are situational in nature, it would be interesting for future research to test the situational nature of growth and destiny beliefs; specifically, there may be certain perceptions (e.g., importance of initial attraction, utility of working through conflicts, acceptable methods of relationship dissolution) that are more or less modifiable by romantic media influences.

Lastly, another limitation was attrition. The high attrition rate between the pre- and postvideo surveys (33.06%) led to a small postvideo sample to analyze, which limited our power in conducting the planned analyses that examined ITR belief change. Therefore, future studies should consider altered incentives or other practices to reduce attrition. One way to reduce attrition could be to structure the study so that the prevideo questionnaire, experimentally-manipulated video condition, and postvideo questionnaire all occur in one sitting. Or, scholars may choose to offset attrition concerns by recruiting a larger of participants by recruiting from subject pools at multiple institutions or recruiting from online platforms such as Prolific.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study successfully illustrated the influence of romantic reality media, specifically on ITR beliefs, using an experimental paradigm in which participants viewed videos designed to emphasize aspects of growth or destiny beliefs. The findings are in congruence with cultivation theory. Furthermore, the study also found romantic reality media that emphasizes growth beliefs to be influential on individuals’ ITR beliefs, whereas romantic reality media that emphasizes destiny beliefs did not change their established beliefs.

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Author Note. Darcey N. Powell  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6076-9741>

Taylor graduated with her bachelor's degree from Roanoke College in spring 2018 and earned a master's degree in Couples, Marriage, and Family Counseling from The College of William and Mary in spring 2020. Taylor is now a Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselor Associate in Charlotte, NC.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Darcey N. Powell, Department of Psychology, Roanoke College, 221 College Lane, Salem, VA 24153. Email: DPowell@roanoke.edu

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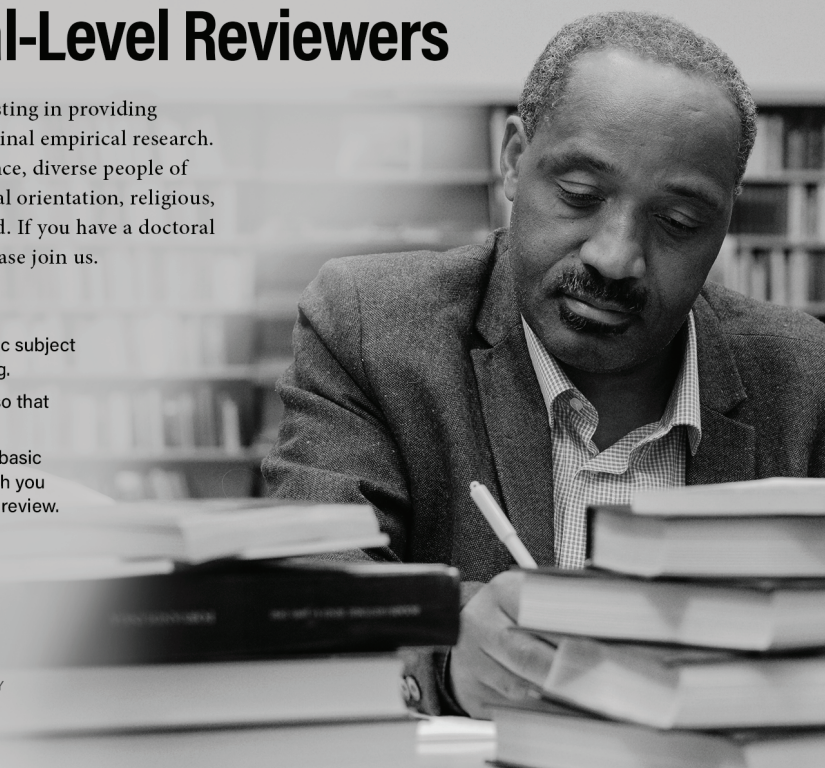
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