

Sophie Garcia

Kasim Husain

ASTU 100 M02

April 9, 2018

The Romanticization of Unhealthy Relationships in Media and its Influence on Expectations

In the discipline of media studies, there is limited information surrounding the effects of media on romantic expectations. I will be attempting to textually analyze articles I have gathered that discuss a positive correlation, a correlation between two variables where they both move either up or down together, between media exposure and romantic expectancy, in order to propose a possible correlation between unhealthy romantic media representation and romantic expectations.

In order to begin looking at the effects of media and romantic expectations, we must first take a look at ideology, the “images, concepts and premises which provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand and ‘make sense’ of some aspect of social existence” (Hall 81). This is an important starting point “since the media’s main sphere of operations is the production and transformation of ideologies” (Hall 81). In particular, there is a prevalent sense of visibility in media. Scholar Nicholas Mirzoeff, describes the “practice” of visibility as “imaginary rather than perceptual, because what is being visualized is too substantial for any one person to see and is created from information, images, and ideas” (474), in other words, ideologies. The “ability to assemble a visualization manifests the authority of the visualizer” (Mirzoeff 474), meaning, in the case of media consumption, what the viewer perceives, depends greatly on what their unconscious ideology constructs. The unconsciousness

of ideology is what “formulate[s] our intentions” (Hall 81), so what we perceive in the media is absorbed unconsciously for us to use later as a conceptualization of how to behave or think, without our conscious awareness of it. The relationship between ideology, visuality, and media is particularly relevant in regards to the study of media exposure and its effects on our romantic expectations since they are at the base of conceptualization and expectancy.

A study by Timothy Levine et al. investigates the correlation between media exposure and the tendency for persistent unrequited love, or “romantic, passionate love that is felt by one person toward another person who feels substantially less attraction toward the lover” (4). On media platforms such as movies, books, or television, “cultural scripts... made up of a set of sequential step-by-step instructions for how to act in a given situation... tell would-be lovers not to give up” (Levine et al. 5) when love is not returned. Levine states that “there is some evidence... that suggests that the media does affect people’s beliefs about love and romance” (5), in reference to a study that found “viewing romantic genre television programs such as romantic comedies and soap operas” to be “positively associated with idealistic expectations about marriage” (6). Levine et al. came to a set of similar findings that the study they referenced mentioned. They discovered a positive association between dimensions of romanticism and watching certain soap operas. The results, however, are only correlative, meaning we cannot infer causation or determine what direction the causation moves in. So, “media exposure may shape people’s beliefs about love and romance, but it is also possible that once these beliefs are formed the beliefs can influence people’s decisions about what to watch and read” (Levine et al. 20).

Scholar, Steven Eggermont, examines how, or if, youth expectations are influenced by television. In Eggermont's research, he references attachment theory, where "individuals enter relationships with certain expectations" that "may then be altered or reinforced" (245), as a possible factor that aids in the formulation of youths' conceptual ideas of romance. From my analysis of Levine and Eggermont, I believe that the expectations mentioned in attachment theory can be largely influenced by media due to the reference of another phenomenon, "the cultivation hypothesis," that "proposes that over time, heavy viewers of television develop views of the world similar to what they see on television" (Eggermont 248). I believe that youth adjust their expectations of romance based on conceptions that have been fed through media. Eggermont and other scholars he has referenced "have pointed out that television highlights empathy, open communication, intimacy, and passion in romantic relationships" (248), which I consider an idealized concept of a "perfect" romance. So what happens when television emphasizes perfect relationships that are, in actuality, discreetly unhealthy and moreover, violent?

To explore my previous question, I will delved into an article by scholars Renae Franiuk and Samantha Scherr, who look into two examples of unhealthy relationships in fictional media: *Twilight* and *The Vampire Diaries*. These particular cases surround vampires, whom Franiuk and Scherr compose a working definition for, describing the "concept-defining constant" as the "need for animal, preferably human, blood to survive" (16). In vampire fantasy, the plot is usually along the lines of there being "a constant struggle between the vampire's desire to kill his romantic interest and his 'love' for her" so "the lines between his desire to kill his romantic interest and his sexual attraction to her are blurred" (Franiuk and Scherr 14, 15). In *Twilight*,

although Edward, the vampire, is not outwardly violent to his love interest, Bella, the plot moves along the risk of him hurting her. Edward is constantly torn between abandoning Bella for the sake of her safety and staying for the sake of their love, yet Bella, while knowing about his dangerousness, requests that he stay. The danger surrounding the nature of vampires being incredibly strong, beautiful, fast, intelligent, and calculating, is severely romanticized throughout the film. Although Bella, and the viewers, for that matter, know that Edward is a very possible threat, he is depicted as honest since he outwardly admits his dangerousness, even though he refuses to purposefully hurt humans. So, in a sense, “this portrayal of the male lead vampire as averse to harming humans is intentional to make this character appealing and to accept the lead female human’s attraction to him” (Franiuk and Sherr 16), which the audience also accepts.

“Similar to romance novels, contemporary vampire fiction eroticizes male aggression muddling the association between sex and violence for the viewer” (Franiuk and Sherr 22), thus creating new conceptual ideas of romantic relationships. When the viewers surrender to the representation of unhealthy relationships and the attraction of inconspicuously violent characters, such as Edward, they are reconceptualizing a new idea for romance. In the case of *Twilight*, the viewers know what Edward is capable of, and so does Bella, yet he does not act violently towards her even though he is perceived as a continual possible threat. The audience may believe the harmful relations they are seeing are normal or perhaps even desirable, when in reality, the relationships being portrayed are unreasonable and glorified. Eventually, “the repeated pairing of violence during erotic scenes may cultivate a reality where violence is viewed as sexy” (Franiuk and Sherr 22) which means the conception has possibly become an expectancy for romance.

When conceptual ideas become expectations, we return to the theory of ideology. These

expectations now become a part of our ideologies which will, in turn, become a feedback loop. When our ideology surrounds the conceptualization of unhealthy yet glorified romance, we expect it, and when this happens, we digest more and more of it into our ideologies, which continues to feed our conceptions and then expectancies again and so on. A loop occurs that consists of ideology, to conceptualization, to expectancy, repeat. It is quite a vicious cycle, yet it becomes even more vicious when our expectancies become reality.

We have now analyzed the contents of studies that have displayed a positive relationship between media exposure and expectations. So, to return to my previous question, how are viewers' expectations for romance affected after repeatedly viewing content revolving around unhealthy relationships? I propose that there is a positive correlation between unhealthy relationships represented in media and unhealthy expectations for romance. I do believe it is worth clarifying, however, that I am not claiming causation. I am only suggesting a correlative relationship, where the direction of causation is unclear and requires additional study. Unhealthy relationships in media may cause unhealthy expectations, but perhaps it is vice versa, regardless, a claim would require further research. If correlation is confirmed, the next step would possibly be to prove causation, which would open up the field of study further in regards to romantic expectations. Eventually, we may be able to fully understand how media truly influences romance expectancy and make changes to how we portray certain relations in media.

Works Cited

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