

Does Television Viewing Cultivate Unrealistic Expectations About Marriage?

By Chris Segrin and Robin L. Nabi

One explanation for the high divorce rate in our society focuses on the idealistic expectations with which many people enter into marriage. The media have been cited as the source of or major contributor to these expectations; however, no empirical evidence exists to support that claim. Based on a survey of 285 never-married university students, this study sought to examine the relationship between television viewing, holding idealistic expectations about marriage, and intentions to marry. Results from regression and path analyses indicate that, although overall television viewing has a negative association with idealistic marriage expectations, viewing of romantic genre programming (e.g., romantic comedies, soap operas) was positively associated with idealistic expectations about marriage. Further, a strong and positive association between these expectations and marital intentions was evidenced. These findings are discussed in terms of both cultivation theory and the uses and gratifications perspective of media influence.

The fact that the majority of marriages in the United States end in divorce is widely known. In 1997, over 1.16 million divorces were granted in the United States—a rate of 4.3 per 1000 (National Center for Health Statistics, 1998). From the 1960s to the 1980s, the divorce rate increased by well over 200%. Although this increase leveled off in the 1990s, the failure of marriages in U.S. society continues to be a pervasive social problem (e.g., Hoffman & Duncan, 1988). This phenomenon has sparked what is sure to be a lengthy quest to discover the causes of divorce and the factors that contribute to its prevalence (e.g., Gottman, 1994).

Like any pervasive problem, no single cause of divorce can be isolated. However, one of the more powerful contributing factors appears to be the unrealistic expectations that accompany, if not propel, people into marriage (Larson, 1988). Recently, Demo and Ganong (1994) argued that “one of the most insidious factors undermining marital satisfaction and longevity is that individuals enter into marriage with unrealistic, idealistic, and romanticized notions about marriage”

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(p. 199). Evidence of the destructiveness of unrealistic expectations can be found in the literature on cognition and marriage. For example, people who feel that their relationship standards (e.g., how alike they believe they should be, the degree to which they should engage in acts of caring and concern for each other) are unmet are more inclined to report more negative cognitive and affective reactions to marital problems (Baucom et al., 1996). Further, research on relationship beliefs indicates that idealistic and unrealistic beliefs, like "mind reading is expected" (partners who truly care about and know one another should be able to sense each other's needs and preferences without overt communication), "sexual perfectionism" (one must be a "perfect" sexual partner), and "disagreement is destructive" (disagreements in marriage are a sign of impending doom) are positively associated with marital distress (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982; Epstein & Eidelson, 1981) and negatively associated with the desire to maintain the relationship (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982).

It is clear that unrealistic beliefs are deleterious to marital satisfaction and stability, but it is less clear where these beliefs originated. Like divorce itself, these beliefs are likely the result of an amalgamation of experiences and stimuli, both interpersonal and mediated. Although marital expectations are likely shaped greatly by interpersonal experiences, numerous authors have, in fact, pointed to mass media influences as a significant source of romanticized and idealized views of marriage. For example, Jones and Nelson (1996) suggested that in the absence of salient role models, people "would be more vulnerable to accept the romanticized view of marriage put forth by society and the media" (p. 173). Signorielli (1991) argued more specifically that "television may be the single most common and pervasive source of conceptions and action related to marriage and intimate personal relationships for large segments of the population" (p. 121). For example, American teens appear to embrace idealized cultural models of romance and romantic relationships that closely mirror images presented in the media (Bachen & Illouz, 1996). In a series of case studies on media and romance, Illouz (1998) noted that subjects themselves often claimed that media representations were responsible for their views of romance.

Although no direct evidence links media exposure and unrealistic marriage beliefs, extant theories of media effects certainly provide for such a possibility. Most notable is cultivation theory, which addresses the relationship between television content and viewers' beliefs about social reality (Gerbner, 1969). Specifically, cultivation theory asserts that common conceptions of reality are cultivated by the overall pattern of television programming to which communities are exposed regularly over long periods of time (Gerbner, 1969; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994). Gerbner and his colleagues further propose that compared to light television viewers, heavy television viewers are more likely to perceive the world in ways that more closely mirror reality as presented on television than more objective measures of social reality, regardless of the specific programs or genres viewed (Gerbner & Gross, 1976).

Although the complete range of cultivation indicators has not yet been specified (Potter, 1993), individual researchers have tested the cultivation hypothesis in a variety of contexts, including racism (e.g., Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli,

1982; Morgan, 1986), alienation (e.g., Morgan, 1986), and gender stereotypes (Gross & Jeffries-Fox, 1978). However, the most studied issue in the extant cultivation literature is the prevalence of violence on television and its effects on perceptions of real-world incidence of crime and victimization (see review in Potter, 1993). Numerous content analyses of network television programs have demonstrated that the number of violent acts on U.S. television greatly exceeds the amount of real-world violence (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner et al., 1977). In turn, research by Gerbner and his colleagues has shown that heavy television viewers: (a) overestimate the incidence of serious crime in our society, and (b) are more likely to believe that the world is a mean place where people cannot be trusted (i.e., the “mean world” syndrome; e.g., Gerbner et al., 1994).

In the context of marital expectations, cultivation theory suggests that in portraying idealized images of marriage, the media may be cultivating unrealistic beliefs about what marriage should be. By “idealized images of marriage” we mean portrayals that include, for example, a great deal of romance, physical intimacy, passion, celebration, happiness, “love at first sight,” physical beauty, empathy, and open communication. At the same time, media portrayals that exclude or minimize conflict and mundane marital behaviors and interaction could also contribute to idealized views of marriage. Although there are no current content analyses of portrayals of marriage on American television, a review of content analyses of British television revealed that “family roles in general are portrayed as largely conflict-free relationships, with an emphasis on affection and altruism . . . and a minimum of negative or rejecting interactions” (Livingstone, 1987 p. 253). Ultimately, Livingstone (1987) concluded that “television provides a highly distorted representation of personal relationships” (p. 253).

Interestingly, the one published study in the area of cultivation and marriage seems to suggest the media are *not* cultivating idealized views of marriage. In her sample of high school seniors, Signorielli (1991) found that TV viewing maintained small, though positive and significant, associations with negative beliefs about marriage (i.e., questioning marriage as a way of life, preferring to live together before marriage, and believing that monogamous relationships are too restrictive). Yet, Signorielli also found a small, positive, and significant relationship between TV viewing and future marital-related behavior (i.e., getting and staying married). Collectively these findings suggest that, at the very least, television is sending a mixed message about marriage; that is, marriage should be a part of one’s life, even though it may pose difficulties. Although these findings are relevant to the idea that television viewing may relate positively to desire to marry, the measurement of negative beliefs, but not idealistic beliefs, about marriage makes the study’s use in examining the potential link between idealistic views of marriage and media exposure tenuous.

To explore the potential existence of such a link, understanding the composition of idealistic marital beliefs is of central concern. The conceptualization of idealistic marital expectations has been informed by the literature on unrealistic or dysfunctional beliefs and schemas that contribute to marital distress (e.g., Eidelson & Epstein, 1982; Epstein & Eidelson, 1981). Two dominant themes emerged from this research: (a) the expectation that partners who really care about each other

should have complete understanding of the partner's needs and preferences, and (b) the expectation that sexual relations will be "perfect." Related to this latter theme, Jones and Nelson (1996) classified respondents as pessimistic, realistic, and idealistic, based on descriptions of their marital expectations. They discovered a linear association between respondents' sense of idealism and their tendency to endorse an "eros" love style that entails a very romanticized view of love and emphasizes perfection and idyllic physical compatibility. In conceptualizing idealistic marital expectations, we also drew on the concept of "romantic imagination" from Bachen and Illouz's (1996) work on culture and media. They stated that "romantic imagination incorporates meanings that are socially produced and culturally patterned" (p. 280). They further noted that "the pervasive nature of romance in popular media and its association with central cultural themes and practices like fulfillment and marriage have made it a potent cultural symbol" (p. 285).

In accord with the pattern of findings from these past studies, we employed multiple indicators of idealized marital expectations in the present study. These included the eros love style with its focus on unusually passionate and compatible physical intimacy, a measure of idealistic intimacy expectations that stresses complete and in-depth understanding and trust between partners, and a measure of fantasy rumination developed for this investigation. This latter instrument was designed to reflect the concept of romantic imagination and assesses blissful contemplation of a wedding and imagination of a happy marriage.

In this study, we sought to address two research questions about media consumption, idealistic beliefs about marriage, and marital intentions. Derived from work on cultivation theory, the first research question focused on the relationship between television viewing and holding idealistic expectations about marriage:

RQ1: Is greater television viewing associated with more idealistic expectations about marriage?

A second research question was driven largely by ideas about the relationship between attitudes and behaviors as captured in the theory of reasoned action (TRA; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). According to the TRA, the most proximal predictor of behavior is one's behavioral intention, which is largely the product of one's relevant attitude and its underlying beliefs. Applied to the issue of marital expectations, one might predict that those who hold idealized views of marriage might have more immediate intentions to marry. These intentions are, then, likely to predict actual marriage behavior, thus generating a population of marriages from which future divorces will come. If a link between television exposure, idealized attitudes toward marriage, and intentions to marry can be established, we will have empirical evidence that is consistent with the as yet unsupported claims that the media are contributing to the high rate of divorce in this country. Thus, the second research question focused on the association between holding idealistic expectations about marriage and the desire to enter into a marriage:

RQ2: Is there an association between holding idealistic expectations about marriage and more immediate and idealistic marital intentions?

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were 285 undergraduate students enrolled in communication courses at a large university in the southwestern U.S.; the students participated in exchange for extra credit toward their course grade. Participants' mean age was 20.87 years ($SD = 2.50$, range: 18–46) with 40% males and 60% females. The racial composition of the sample was 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 5% Asian/Pacific Islander, 4% Black, 11% Hispanic, 78% White, and 1% Other/Unknown. To be eligible, participants were required to have never been married so as to eliminate potential respondents with attitudes and beliefs based on direct experience with marriage. Because there are no clear boundaries to indirect experience, we did not attempt to control for it by measuring, for example, exposure to the marriage or divorce of parents, other relatives, or friends. Approximately 45% of the sample indicated that they were not currently dating, 27% indicated that they have been dating a boy/girlfriend for less than 1 year, and 27% indicated that they have been dating a boy/girlfriend for over 1 year.

Procedure

Participants completed a questionnaire with measures described below. The vast majority of these questionnaires were completed in class, though in some cases, participants completed them in a smaller laboratory setting.

Measures

Participants' generalized marital expectations were assessed with open-ended essays describing their hypothetical marriages. Participants' idealized expectations about marriage were then assessed with three scales that each capture important aspects of such expectations: fantasy rumination about marriage; idealized expectations for intimacy within the marriage; and a passionate, romanticized love style (i.e., eros). In addition, the survey included measures of behavioral intentions, television viewing, genre-specific television viewing, and perceived television reality.

Generalized marital expectations. To assess participants' marital expectations in terms of issues that were most important to them, they were asked to respond to the following open-ended instruction: "Imagine that you were married and were describing your marriage to a close friend. Describe what you think your marriage would be like, using any concepts and terms that are important to you." The questionnaire provided participants with a full page on which to write an answer. This question was positioned first on the questionnaire to avoid any potential influence of subsequent questions.

Based on an examination of a random sample of approximately 100 cases, a coding scheme was developed by the first author to classify responses to this question. This examination revealed 13 different "fantasy themes" that were evident in the responses. Two independent coders were then trained to identify these fantasy themes in the responses and coded all 285 cases, coding 25% of the sample in common as a basis for assessing intercoder reliability. Because the

categories in the coding scheme were not mutually exclusive, coders made a dichotomous judgment about the presence or absence of each of the 13 themes in each participant's response. These dichotomous judgments were totaled over the 13 themes, resulting in a scale range of 0–13, where high scores indicate a greater number of different fantasy themes in the response. Participants had, on average, 4.11 ($SD = 1.71$) out of a possible 13 fantasy themes in their responses to this question. To evaluate whether high scores could be the result of just writing long answers, word counts were tabulated for each response and correlated with the total fantasy theme score. Total word count and total number of fantasy themes in the responses were significantly correlated, $r(280) = .39, p < .001$; however, the response length, as indexed by word count, explains only approximately 15% of the variance in total fantasy theme scores. Fantasy theme categories, reliabilities, and sample responses appear in Table 1.

Fantasy rumination. A 4-item measure was created to assess the extent to which participants think or fantasize about marriage. Items included, "I think my wedding day will be the happiest day of my life," "I often catch myself thinking about how nice it would be to be married," "I have put a lot of thought into what kind of wedding I would like to have," and "I often find myself talking about romantic relationships." Questions were answered on 5-point Likert scales. The four items formed a single factor with an internal consistency of $\alpha = .79$.

Idealistic expectations about marriage. Tornstam's (1992) Expectations for Intimacy scale is a 5-item index that measures idealized expectations for intimacy in a close relationship. Sample items include "you should know each other's innermost feelings" and "you should be able to talk openly about everything." Items were measured with 5-point Likert scales and had an internal consistency of $\alpha = .82$.

Eros love style. The eros subscale from Hendrick and Hendrick's (1986) love attitudes scale was administered as an additional index of idealized relational expectations. This 7-item scale measures a romantic, passionate love style. Items from the original scale were edited slightly so that they were stated as expectations. Sample items from this scale include "my partner would fit my ideal standards of physical beauty/handsomeness" and "my partner and I would be attracted to each other immediately after we first met." Questions were answered on 5-point Likert scales and had an internal consistency of $\alpha = .73$.

Marital intentions. To measure respondents' behavioral intentions to get married and stay married, we constructed a 7-item instrument using Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) notion that attitude and behavior measures correspond in terms of action, target, context, and time as a conceptual guide. Items expected to be related to an idealized marriage attitude focused on expectations to marry, conditions under which the marriage would occur, and expectations for preserving the marriage. Items included, "I expect to be engaged or married within the next five years," "I would not get married unless I was in love," "When I get married, I intend to stay married until I or my spouse dies," and "When married, I expect to spend a lot of time with my spouse." Questions were answered on 5-point Likert scales, and the seven items formed a univariate factor with an internal consistency of $\alpha = .71$. This measure was significantly correlated with related constructs as-

Table 1. Frequency, Coder Reliability, and Examples of Fantasy Themes From Marriage Essays

Fantasy theme	Prevalence	Kappa	Example
Positive affect	65%	.79	"I have never been so happy and felt so complete"
Successful conflict resolution	59%	.83	"we resolve all arguments after cooling down"
Time together	47%	.72	"we would spend as much time as possible with each other"
Physical intimacy	39%	.94	"we should be physically intimate every night"
Positive relations with in-laws	35%	.94	"my family loves him and I love his family"
Disclosure	33%	.77	"we would be able to tell each other everything"
Friendship/Partnership	27%	.86	"my spouse and I are best friends"
Understanding	27%	.74	"we would understand each other's needs"
Honesty/Trust	26%	.87	"we trust each other completely & are always honest with one another"
Permanence	18%	.72	"I know that we'll spend the rest of our lives together"
Sharing/Giving	17%	.48 ^a	"we will each do and give what we can"
Respect	13%	.95	"I expect him to . . . respect me and I in turn will do the same"
Good parent	8%	.36 ^a	"my husband and I will share the same love for children"

^aLow kappa reliability was due to infrequent occurrence, but the variables were retained as coders exhibited over 90% agreement.

sessed in this study ($r = .29$ with the eros love style, $r = .40$ with idealistic expectations about marriage, and $r = .53$ with marital fantasy rumination).

TV viewing. Following Shrum, Wyer, and O'Guinn's (1998) procedures, respondents were asked to indicate how many hours of television they watched during each of four time periods during the average weekday (6am–noon, noon–6pm, 6pm–midnight, midnight–6am), the average Saturday, and the average Sunday. These data were combined (weighting the "average week day" questions by a factor of five compared to the "Saturday" or "Sunday" items) and averaged to create an "average TV viewing hours/day" variable.

Genre-specific TV viewing. A "genre-specific" measure was created to determine the extent to which respondents regularly watched each of four types of television programming on 5-point scales: "romantic comedies," "soap operas," "daytime talk shows," and "reality-based shows about relationships (e.g., *A Wedding Story*)."

Responses to these four items were combined to form a one-factor, composite index with reliability of $\alpha = .68$.

Perceived TV reality. To assess the extent to which participants felt that television presented truthful portrayals, we administered Rubin's (1981) perceived realism of television content scale. This 5-item scale included items such as "television shows life as it really is" and "television lets me see how other people live" and had a reliability of $\alpha = .82$.

Results

Preliminary Demographic Analyses

We conducted a series of preliminary analyses to explore the potential effect of sex and age on the central variables considered in this investigation, comparing males and females with a series of *t*-tests on each of the attitude, expectation, and TV viewing variables measured in this study. Results indicated that females produced more fantasy themes in their essays, $t(275) = 3.57, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04$, and scored higher on the measures of fantasy rumination, $t(282) = -5.12, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$; idealism, $t(281) = -2.43, p < .05, \eta^2 = .02$; intentions to marry, $t(281) = -4.06, p < .001, \eta^2 = .06$; and romance-genre TV viewing, $t(279) = -9.12, p < .001, \eta^2 = .23$, than males. On the other hand, males watched more hours of television per day than females, $t(282) = 4.44, p < .001, \eta^2 = .07$. There were no significant male-female differences in scores on the eros love style, $t(281) = -1.56, ns$, or perceived TV reality, $t(278) = 1.40, ns$. These tests had power = .99 to detect a medium-sized effect of $d = .50$ (Cohen, 1988).

Results of the analyses of age revealed significant and negative correlations between age and idealistic expectations, $r(281) = -.22, p < .001$, and fantasy rumination $r(282) = -.14, p < .05$. The remaining correlations between age and hours per day of TV viewing, viewing the relationship genre, perceived TV realism, the eros love style, and marital intentions were all nonsignificant (all r s $< .09$). These correlation tests had power $> .99$ to detect a medium-sized effect of $r = .30$ (Cohen, 1988). Because sex and age proved to be significantly related to some of the variables under investigation, their effects were controlled in subsequent analyses.

RQ1: Television Viewing and Idealistic Expectations About Marriage

To assess the relationship between television viewing and idealistic expectations about marriage, three hierarchical regression analyses were performed, one for each of the three indicators of idealistic expectations. For each analysis, sex and age were entered in a first block as covariates because preliminary analyses indicated that sex is significantly associated with relationship-genre viewing (more for females), total TV viewing hours per day (more for males), and some of the idealistic attitudes and intentions (higher for females), and because age is negatively associated with idealistic marital expectations. For the second block, TV viewing (hours per day) and relationship genre viewing were entered simultaneously, followed by perceived TV reality, entered separately on the third block. We repeated this procedure for each of the indicators of idealistic expectations assessed in this study: fantasy rumination, expectations for intimacy, and eros.

Table 2. Demographic and Media Viewing Predictors of Idealistic Expectations and Marital Intentions

Predictor variable	Eros		Expectations for intimacy		Fantasy rumination		Marital intentions	
	β	R^2	β	R^2	β	R^2	β	R^2
Block 1		.01		.07***		.10***		.06***
Sex (0 = M, 1 = F)	.00		-.03		.08		.07	
Age	-.04		-.21***		-.11		-.07	
Block 2		.01		.04***		.11***		.04***
TV viewing	-.01		-.13*		-.07		-.09	
Relationship genre	.15*	.23**	.39***	.26***				
Block 3		.02*		.02***		.00		.02*
Perceived TV reality	-.15*		-.14*		-.02		-.13*	
Total model		.04*		.12***		.21***		.12***

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Each of these regression analyses has power $> .99$ to detect a medium-sized effect of $R^2 = .13$ (Cohen, 1988). Results of these analyses appear in Table 2.

Results for the score on the eros scale indicate no significant effect for sex and age. However, there was a significant, positive association between watching the relationship-genre and eros, $\beta = .15$, $p < .05$, suggesting those who watch romantically themed programming are more likely to endorse the eros love style. There was also a significant, negative effect for perceived TV reality, $\beta = -.15$, $p < .05$, indicating that the more people feel that TV contains realistic portrayals, the less they endorse the eros style of love.

Results pertinent to expectations for intimacy indicate that there was no effect for sex, but there was a significantly negative association with age and expectations for intimacy, $\beta = -.21$, $p < .001$. Both of the TV viewing variables were significantly associated with expectations for intimacy. However, whereas TV viewing hours per day was negatively associated with expectations for intimacy, $\beta = -.13$, $p < .05$, watching the relationship genre was positively associated with such expectations, $\beta = .23$, $p < .01$. Perceived TV reality also proved to be a significant predictor of expectations for intimacy, $\beta = -.14$, $p < .05$. Here again, the more people feel that TV contains realistic portrayals, the less they endorse the expectations for intimacy.

The final indicator of idealistic expectations, fantasy rumination, was not significantly associated with either sex or age individually; however, these two vari-

ables collectively explained a significant degree of variance in fantasy rumination, $R^2 = .10$, $p < .001$. Although TV viewing hours per day was not significantly associated with fantasy rumination, $\beta = -.07$, *ns*, there was a strong effect for viewing the relationship genre, $\beta = .39$, $p < .001$. That is, those who reported greater relationship-genre viewing also indicated that they spent time ruminating and fantasizing about marriage and getting married. Finally, there was no significant association between perceived TV reality and fantasy rumination, $\beta = -.02$, *ns*.

As an ancillary test of the impact of television viewing on idealistic attitudes toward and beliefs about marriage, the association between the fantasy themes from the free response questions and television viewing was examined. We first totaled the number of fantasy themes evident in each participant's response, thus creating a variable with a potential range of 0–13, where high scores indicated a greater number of different fantasy themes evident in the written response. To examine the construct validity of this total fantasy theme variable, it was correlated with the fantasy rumination variable. These two variables were significantly and positively correlated, $r(278) = .20$, $p < .001$, providing at least minimal evidence of the validity of this variable. Finally, the total number of fantasy themes was correlated with total number of hours of television viewing per week, and with exposure to romance genre-specific television. The correlation with total hours per week of television viewing was not significant, $r(277) = .03$, *ns*. However, watching the romance specific genre of television was significantly and positively correlated with the total number of fantasy themes evident in the essay response, $r(274) = .19$, $p < .01$. This correlation remained significant even after controlling for the length of the written response (i.e., word count), $r_{\text{genre-fantasy.length}} = .20$, $p < .01$. Each of these correlation analyses has power $> .99$ to detect a medium-sized effect of $r = .30$ (Cohen, 1988).

These four analyses indicate that media consumption is associated with idealistic expectations about marital relations, provided that one focuses on genre-specific viewing. For each of the three indicators of idealistic expectations about marriage (eros, expectations for intimacy, and fantasy rumination) and for the free response data, there were positive and significant associations with genre-specific viewing (e.g., romantic comedies, soap operas).

RQ2: TV Viewing and Intentions to Marry

The second research question asked whether TV viewing was associated with intentions to marry. This analysis has an identical architecture as that described above but with the marital intentions scale as the dependent variable. Again, this regression analysis had power $> .99$ to detect a medium-sized effect of $R^2 = .13$. Although neither sex nor age were individually associated with marital intention, collectively they explained a significant degree of variance in marital intentions, $R^2 = .06$, $p < .001$ (see Table 2). There was no significant association between TV viewing hours per day and marital intentions, $\beta = -.09$, *ns*; however, there was a strong and significant effect for watching the relationship-genre programming, $\beta = .26$, $p < .001$. Those who indicated a greater exposure to the relationship genre scored higher on the marital intentions scale. Finally, there was a negative and significant association between perceived TV reality and marital intentions,

Table 3. Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations Among Variables in the Path Model

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
TV viewing (hrs/day)	—								
Relationship genre ^a	.11	—							
Sex (0 = M, 1 = F)	-.26***	.48***	—						
Age	.08	-.05	-.07	—					
TV realism ^a	.24***	.13*	-.08	-.06	—				
Eros ^a	-.05	.13*	.09	-.04	-.13*	—			
Idealism ^a	-.15*	.20**	.14*	-.22***	-.13*	.49***	—		
Fantasy rumination ^a	-.06	.42***	.29***	-.14*	.01	.21***	.35***	—	
Marital intentions ^a	-.11	.27***	.24***	-.09	-.12*	.29***	.40***	.53***	—
<i>M</i>	4.07	2.42	—	20.87	2.18	3.90	4.50	3.53	4.25
<i>SD</i>	2.76	0.83	—	2.50	0.76	0.59	0.53	0.88	0.57

^aThe scale range for this variable is 1–5.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

$\beta = -.13, p < .05$, with those who felt that television contains realistic portrayals indicating lesser marital intentions. Collectively, these results indicate that media exposure is associated with marital intentions, provided that one considers the effect of genre-specific TV viewing. Even controlling for sex and age, those who watched more of the relationship-specific genre expressed more immediate and idealistic marital intentions.

As a further examination of the two research questions about TV viewing and idealistic expectations, and TV viewing and marital intentions, a path analysis was conducted to model the associations among these variables. For this analysis, television viewing, perceptions of television realism, and the demographic variables of sex and age were treated as exogenous variables. The demographic variables were included because sex exhibited a significant association with watching relationship genre-specific programming (females watching more) and age being negatively associated with idealistic expectations about marriage. Similarly, we included perceptions of television realism because of its negative association with idealistic expectations and marital intentions. Idealistic expectations about marriage was conceptualized as a latent variable marked by three indicators measured in this study: the eros love scale, the expectations for intimacy scale, and the fantasy rumination scale. Finally, marital intentions was conceptualized as the final variable in the path. Correlations among the variables appear in Table 3 and

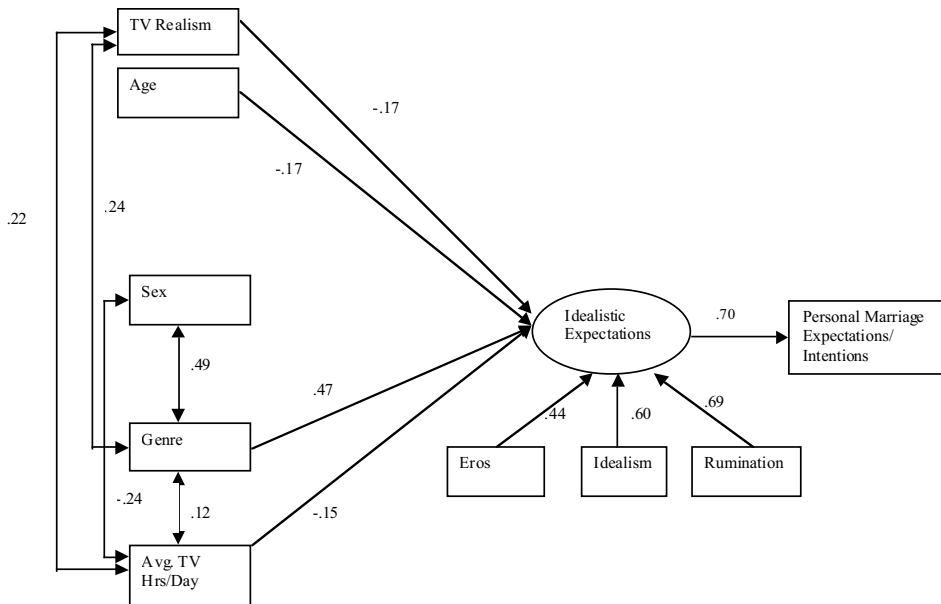


Figure 1. Path analysis of relationships among amount of television viewing, genre, idealistic expectations of marriage, and personal marriage expectations/intentions.

the relations tested in the final path model are depicted in Figure 1. We arrived at this final model by initially including relationships among variables based on significant correlations and systematically removing any paths that did not evidence significant coefficients at $p < .05$.

The goodness of fit of the path model was assessed by considering the chi-square value, the Bentler-Bonett normed fit index (NFI), Bollen's (1986) relative fit index (RFI), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). The goodness of a path model's fit to the sample data can be judged using four criteria: (a) a χ^2/df ratio of 5 or less (Marsh & Hocevar, 1985), (b) an NFI of .90 or greater (Bentler & Bonett, 1980), (c) an RFI close to 1 (Bollen, 1986), and (d) an RMSEA less than or equal to .08 (Browne & Cudeck, 1993).

This model had a $\chi^2 = 78.95$, $df = 23$, $p < .001$. The χ^2/df ratio for this model was 3.43, indicating an acceptable fit to the sample data. Other fit indexes were similarly suggestive with the NFI = .99 and the RFI = .98. The RMSEA = .09 suggests a marginally acceptable fit, though there is some room for improvement in the specification of this model. Individual path coefficients suggest that idealistic expectations about marriage are influenced to some extent by age, with young people expressing more idealistic expectations about marriage than their older counterparts ($\beta = -.17$). Although females watch less television overall, enjoy greater consumption of the relationship-specific genre, and perceive television program-

ming to be more realistic compared to males, no significant relationship between sex and idealistic expectations was evidenced in the model. Overall TV viewing hours per day proved to be negatively associated with idealistic expectations ($\beta = -.15$). However, watching the relationship-specific genre of television proved to be a robust predictor of idealistic marital expectations ($\beta = .47$). Collectively, the variables above accounted for 27% of the variance in idealistic expectations about marriage, 19% of the variance being uniquely attributable to genre-specific viewing. Finally, the path from idealistic expectations to marital intentions appeared extremely robust, $\beta = .70$. The variables in this model explained 49% of the variance in the marital intentions variable.

Discussion

This study sought to explore the association among television viewing and holding idealistic expectations about marriage, as well as holding marital intentions that were immediate (i.e., “I plan to get married soon”) and idealized (i.e., “my marriage will last forever”). The results of several different analyses converge to suggest that, whereas overall television viewing is not a good predictor of either idealistic expectations of marriage or marital intentions, particular television genre viewing is. That is, viewing television programming that focuses on marriage and close relationships (e.g., romantic comedies and soap operas) is associated with each of these constructs. Results of the path model highlight the seemingly powerful role of idealistic expectations about marriage in shaping intentions to marry.

Demo and Ganong (1994) argued that many people enter into marriage with idealized and romanticized expectations. Data from this study are consistent with that argument. For example, on the three measures of idealized expectations, the means, expressed on a 5-point scale, were 4.50 for expectations for intimacy, 3.90 for the eros love attitude, and 3.53 for fantasy rumination. Further, despite common knowledge of the high divorce rate in U.S. society, most participants remained confident that they would never be divorced. Two relevant items on the marital intentions scale, “When I get married, I intend to stay married until I die or my spouse dies” and “I will have one and only one marriage in my lifetime,” had means of 4.29 and 4.13, respectively, on a 5-point scale. Collectively, these data suggest at best a strong sense of optimism on the part of our participants and at worst a failure to recognize a pressing reality. Our data indicate that, consistent with conjectures in the literature, maintenance of idealized expectations is clearly associated with watching a genre of television that focuses heavily on romantic and marital relationships.

Interestingly, these data also support a recurrent criticism of cultivation theory regarding the effects of genre-specific programming. Gerbner and his associates have argued that because conventions of storytelling cut across all genres, the beliefs and attitudes cultivated by the media should be the same, regardless of the type of programming viewed. Yet, critics have suggested that exposure to different genre types (i.e., content-specific programming; Hawkins & Pingree, 1982) should have differential cultivation effects, and evidence supporting this notion

has been documented in the context of crime- versus non-crime-related programming (e.g., Weaver & Wakshlag, 1986). In this study, we found that, although overall television viewing was negatively associated with idealistic expectations of marriage, those whose television viewing patterns included a large quantity of romantically themed programming were more likely to hold idealistic views of marriage. Combined, these findings suggest that, consistent with Signorielli (1991), if television contains any systematic themes across genres, those themes present a conflicted view of marriage. However, within certain types of programming, a more idealized image of marriage may be portrayed. Not only does this support the media's role in cultivating unrealistic expectations of marriage, but it also offers further evidence that cultivation researchers would be well advised to assess genre-specific media viewing.

An alternative interpretation of these results can be offered. Given the cross-sectional nature of our data, it is entirely possible that those with idealized views of marriage are selectively exposing themselves to romanticized media content because it is consistent with their already established beliefs. This possibility is consistent with uses and gratifications theory, which suggests that audiences choose to expose themselves to particular mass media because they expect such exposure to satisfy or fulfill their various social or psychological needs or interests (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). If it is the case that those watching programming that romanticizes marriage are doing so because those representations are consistent with already held beliefs, the question of where those beliefs originated remains.

We offer two possibilities. First, though current television viewing may be the result of selective exposure, prior media exposure (e.g., exposure as a child) may have helped to develop those now well-established beliefs. That is, perhaps the presentation of marriage in children's media (e.g., Disney movies, fairy tales) cultivates a "happily ever after" schema that continues to grow and develop such that it then guides media exposure in later years.

A second possibility is that expectations about marriage develop based primarily on personal familial experience. Although conflict may be present in a majority of marriages, some parents may nevertheless engage in positive parenting behaviors and inhibit their negative affect, thus buffering the child against the ill effects of marital conflict (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1997). Furthermore, there is a general societal norm in America to celebrate the happiness and positivity associated with marriage through such rituals as engagement parties, wedding ceremonies, anniversary celebrations, and baby showers. In many families, the joint influence of hiding conflict and celebrating love is likely to contribute to people's idealized expectations about marriage, apart from any contributions from the media.

Although we cannot answer this question with certainty, we do recognize that it is likely that socialization, both interpersonal and mediated, contributes to marital expectations development. Even if the impact of current television viewing on marriage beliefs is largely to reinforce currently held beliefs through processes of selective exposure or selective perception, the power of this function should not be underestimated. In fact, were we to consider the full role of the media in shaping these expectations, we may have observed a stronger effect on marital

expectations. For example, the contribution of movies, video rentals, novels, and music were not assessed in our study. Yet, as with television, there is good reason to suspect that these other forms of media may contribute to a person's expectations about romance and marriage and his or her intentions to marry (e.g., Radway, 1983).

One particularly interesting pattern of findings to emerge from this study was the negative associations between age and holding idealistic expectations about marriage. Why might older participants hold less idealistic expectations about marriage than their younger counterparts? One possibility is greater exposure to long-term personal relationships. A post hoc analysis showed that people who indicated that they were currently in a dating relationship of over 1 year were on average 21.8 years of age. On the other hand, those who were currently in a dating relationship of less than 1 year, or not dating at all were significantly younger (as determined by an LSD post hoc test) at 20.7 and 20.4 years, respectively. Unfortunately, this "dating status" variable is an imperfect indicator of relational experience, as someone who recently broke up from a 5-year relationship could still be categorized as "single and not dating" despite their extensive experience. Furthermore, this dating status variable, on its own, did not explain significant variation in marital attitudes and expectations. These issues notwithstanding, older participants may be more likely to be in or have been in cohabitating or other very well-developed relationships, again giving them more relational experience. Aside from direct experience with relationships, age may be accompanied by greater indirect experience with relationships. Older participants may have had more opportunities to learn about and be aware of marital and relational problems from friends, other family members, and coworkers. This may also explain the negative associations between age and idealistic attitudes about marriage.

Finally, we note that, consistent with the TRA, positive attitudes about marriage in the form of idealized expectations were related to marital intentions (i.e., intentions to marry once and soon, until death parts). Although our sample may not have the opportunity to act on their intentions for months or, more likely, years, and thus the intention measure may ultimately prove to have a limited association with actual behavior, the fact that those with more idealized views are more likely to intend to enter into marriage soon (i.e., at an earlier age) suggests that they are not only more at risk for being disillusioned and ultimately unhappy in their marriages but also more at risk to have their marriages end in divorce.

To conclude, we offer evidence that there is a relationship among genre-specific television viewing, idealized expectations of marriage, and intentions to marry. Although we cannot assume causality, we are confident that the media do play a role in developing and reinforcing beliefs about marriage.

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