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An experiment investigating the links among online dating profile attractiveness, ideal endorsement, and romantic media

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ABSTRACT

This study was the first-ever experiment to test how ideal expressions in hypothetical online dating profiles and exposure to romantic media are related to profile attractiveness, romantic beliefs, and endorsement of ideal partner characteristics. The sample contained 249 undergraduate students from a small, southwestern university. The study is a one-way experiment, with five manipulations and one control group. Results revealed that exposure to the conditions featuring any ideal content produced stronger endorsement of romantic beliefs, but not ideal partner characteristics. Consuming romantic media predicted stronger endorsement of romantic beliefs and higher ratings of profile attractiveness. Results support the heuristic processing model of cultivation.

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1. Introduction

People find love in a variety of places and contexts. In our increasingly digital world, there is a continued escalation in the number of individuals seeking romance via the Internet. Online dating allows people to be proactive in their search for romance. The number of online dating sites has proliferated, providing people with an enlarged pool of prospective partners existing outside of their immediate social networks. There are currently 54 million single people in the United States and 40 million of them have tried online dating (Statistics Brain, 2012). Popular online dating sites, such as *Match.com*, *eHarmony*, and *PerfectMatch.com*, have over 50 million users combined: *Match.com* has over 29 million members, *eHarmony* has over 20 million members, and *PerfectMatch* has over 4 million active profiles (Consumer Rankings, 2012). These sites provide people with an expansive and diverse “pool” of potential partners. The number of men and women who use online dating sites is about the same, with roughly 52% of users being male and 48% of users being female (Statistics Brain, 2012). Men and women advertise themselves in strategic ways to find desired romantic partners. Research has shown that 38% of women prefer nice guys, while 42% of men prefer working, ambitious women and 34% prefer the “girl next door” (Statistics Brain,

2012). Online dating allows people to be more selective, which in turn could afford them more success in their search for the perfect romantic partner. According to a study conducted by consumer group *Which?*, one in five people who have used dating sites have gone on to marry someone they met online (Hwang, 2009). As more people meet partners online, it is important to understand how this process works and what implication it may have. More specifically, what are the factors that influence how individuals choose which partner to pursue in an online dating environment? What makes a prospective partner attractive in the digital world?

One factor that might impact these choices could be previous media exposure to romantic themes. It could be that individuals who consume romantic-oriented media (e.g., romantic comedy films, reality dating television programs, soap operas, romance novels, etc.) are more open to the notion of romance and may prioritize love and relationships more than those people who do not consume these media. This could have implications on what they find attractive in prospective romantic partners.

Several scholars have tested whether romantic media in particular can cultivate certain types of social beliefs among viewers (e.g., Perse, 1986; Woo & Dominick, 2001). For example, researchers found that heavy exposure to daytime talk shows was associated with a tendency to overestimate the percentage of Americans who participate in certain relational behaviors, such as premarital sex and infidelity (Woo & Dominick, 2001). Rivadeneyra and Lebo (2008) surveyed high school students and found that heavy viewers of romantic reality television were more likely than light viewers to hold traditional dating role attitudes.

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Thus, we know that romantic media exposure is associated with relationship beliefs and behaviors, but we have no experimental data that confirms the direction of causality. Do individuals who have romantic beliefs seek out romantic media, or is exposure to romantic media causing greater endorsement of relational ideals?

Clearly, there is evidence that screen media can contribute to people's normative beliefs about relationships. Several studies also indicate that the media may cultivate *idealistic* beliefs about relationships and love, often termed "romantic ideals." In one survey, researchers found that heavy exposure to romantic media, such as novels and films, was associated with unrealistic beliefs about intimate relationships, such as the idea that "mindreading is expected" and that "disagreement is destructive" (Shapiro & Kroeger, 1991). Similarly, Segrin and Nabi (2002) surveyed 285 unmarried undergraduates and found that heavy viewers of relationship genre media were more likely than light viewers to agree with statements such as "you should know each other's inner feelings" and partners "should be able to talk open and freely about everything." This pattern held even when controlling for age and sex. More recently, Holmes (2007) surveyed undergraduates and reported that a preference for romance-oriented media was linked to an idealistic belief in the existence of predestined soul mates. Hefner and Wilson (2013) found that romantic comedy viewing was associated with stronger endorsement of idealistic beliefs when participants were watching to learn.

However, all of this research was based on survey research and was correlational in nature. We could locate no existing experiments that have tested the influence of direct exposure to these idealistic beliefs in a media context. Our study fills this gap in the literature by exploring whether exposure to hypothetical online dating profiles containing ideal expressions is related to stronger endorsement of those beliefs. Whereas past research has established an association between media exposure and endorsement of romantic beliefs (Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Holmes, 2007; Segrin & Nabi, 2002), an experiment is a necessary step because it can establish the direction of causality in the relationship between romantic media and idealistic beliefs about romance. It also extends work in the area of digital media. Past research has documented that digital media use can influence perceptions, such as incoming college freshmen's use of social media and their perceptions of social support in college (DeAndrea, Ellison, LaRose, Steinfield, & Fiore, 2012). We add to this by investigating how digital media might also influence perceptions within the context of romance.

This paper has two goals. First, we seek to understand more about the process that leads to people's choice of attraction in the digital dating environment. In particular, what is the role of prior romantic media use in the decisions about what ideals are considered attractive? That is, how does long-term exposure to romantic media influence judgments? Second, we use hypothetical online dating profiles as the experimental media stimulus to test for the direction of causality between romantic media exposure and endorsement of ideal beliefs. Online dating is the vehicle used to accomplish these two research aims. A practical benefit of this study is that it provides information about how online behaviors and judgments may be influenced by prior media exposure, as well as what type of content is most attractive online. It also demonstrates any causal associations that may exist between romantic media exposure and relational beliefs.

1.1. Previous research with online dating

In recent years the number of online dating sites has expanded, providing online daters with an extensive array of options and prospective romantic partners. Many studies have attempted to investigate the characteristics of online dating to better understand the

behaviors, perceptions, demographics, expectations, and processes involved in forming and maintaining relationships online (e.g., Anderson, 2005; Anderson & Emmers-Sommer, 2006). For example, Brand, Bonatsos, D'Orazio, and DeShong (2011) conducted a study to investigate the correlation between physical appearance and other characteristics in order to determine whether or not attractive individuals are viewed more positive online. After surveying 50 female psychology students, they found that ratings for physical attractiveness (i.e., overall, for sex, for a date, and for a long-term relationship) were highly intercorrelated (Brand, Bonatsos, D'Orazio, & DeShong, 2011). Furthermore, physical attractiveness was correlated with other features and characteristics of the individual, such as confidence, masculinity, kindness, etc. They found that physically attractive individuals are perceived to have additional positive traits and qualities. Because of these findings, we chose to not include photographs with the hypothetical dating profiles, because we did not want physical attraction to play a significant role in ratings of romantic attraction. We are more interested in isolating the variables of romantic ideals and romantic media.

In fact, at least one study has investigated whether users of online dating have unrealistic expectations of finding a "perfect" partner. Houran and Lange (2004) surveyed 222 individuals and found no evidence of an association between intention to use online dating and distorted expectations. However, they did not measure whether those participants consumed other types of romantic media. To expand on their findings, our study investigates whether exposure to romantic media shapes people's endorsement of certain romantic ideals, and how use of those media may influence ratings of the profiles.

1.2. Relational messages

Some scholars have argued that the one consistent feature of romantic stories in both literature and film is the presence of a romantic ideal (e.g., Galician, 2004). Indeed, the very term "romance" is often defined in idealist terms in today's lexicon. For example, the Oxford English Dictionary (1989) defines *romance* with descriptions such as, "that class of literature which consists of love stories" and "idealistic character or quality in a love affair." This suggests that the very essence of romance includes an element of fantastical invention or unrealistic love.

There are two predominant ways that researchers have approached the study of the romantic ideal. According to one conceptualization, romantic ideals refer to the types of traits that exemplify what constitutes the perfect partner and relationship (e.g., Markey & Markey, 2007). Here, the definition of a romantically ideal partner or relationship is unique to each individual. This conceptualization pertains only to issues related to specific partners and relationships instead of to love, romance, and the relationship process more broadly. For this definition, there are three categories of ideal descriptors: warmth, vitality, and status (Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, 2001). Warmth refers to characteristics of being kind, trustworthy, or understanding; vitality refers to characteristics of attractiveness, activeness, and being outgoing; and status refers to characteristics of being resourceful, successful, and financially secure (Campbell et al., 2001). Past research indicates that people are relationally happier when their romantic partners match their preferences on each of these ideal characteristics (Campbell et al., 2001). We refer to this definition as *ideal partner characteristics*.

The second way in which scholars have defined romantic ideals is a collection of expectations about relationships and love that extends beyond individual partners. Here, the romantic ideal refers to a set of beliefs about what constitutes a perfect relationship (Knox & Sporakowski, 1968; Lantz, Schmitt, Britton, & Snyder,

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