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Love on Television: College Students' Perceptions

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Over the years, research has shown that males and females react differently to media. For instance, Oliver, Weaver, and Sargent (2000) discovered that females enjoy sad movies more than males. In addition, Gardos and Mosher (1999) discovered that males compared to females find pornography more satisfying to watch. It is evident that males and females prefer different types of media. Nevertheless, it is important to understand how media affects males and females perceptions. Oliver et al. (1998) suggested that viewer's sex affects their perceptions of media. The authors also illustrated that males and females respond differently to media. Yet, research dealing with perceptions of love on television and sex differences is lacking. Most research dealing with love in the media has mainly focused specifically on the area of sex (i.e., Buerkel-Rothfuss & Strause, 1993; Greenberg, Stanley, Siemicki, Heeter, Soderman, & Linsangan, 1993).

In the past, mass media researchers have focused on media's influence on perceptions dealing with the general public. There is practical need for studies to see how love on television affects college students. One cannot assume that college students have similar perceptions of love portrayed by the media as the general public. Moreover, one cannot assume that college men and women will share similar perceptions about love on television. Hence, the purpose of this study is to discern differences between college men and women on their perceptions about love in the media.

Review of the Literature

In 1922, Lipmann originated the concept of perceived realism as the accuracy in depicting fiction. He believed that individuals' reality depends on indirect experiences, such as the images presented in the media. Obviously, the media is a huge influence on what we perceive as real and what we perceive as false.

In order to assess perceived realism, Greenberg (1974) created a three-item scale that asked viewers how realistic the images they saw on television were. Greenberg's scale was positively worded. Later, Rubin (1981) augmented Greenberg's scale and incorporated negatively worded items. The negatively worded items were: "If I see something on TV, I can't be sure it really is that way" and "TV does not show life as it really is." These items were to be reverse-coded before data analyses are performed.

Regardless, the PRS has been used in other studies that do not focus on cultivation (e.g., Perse & Rubin, 1990; Rubin & Perse, 1987; Rubin, Perse, & Taylor, 1988). For instance, Rubin (1983) found that perceived realism influences television viewing information and entertainment motivations.

PRS scores tend to vary depending on the topic of the research (Perse, 1994). For instance, Perse (1986) found very low realism scores concerning soap operas. However, Perse (1990) found high realism scores concerning new programs. Hence, it is important to note that perceived realism is something within individuals, not necessarily what television depicts.

Concerning the reliability of the scale, the perceived realism scale has been consistent. Using a five-item scale, Rubin, Perse, and Taylor (1988) reported an alpha of .85. Similarly, Rubin and Perse (1987) noted an alpha of .87. Regarding different samples, Perse (1986) found that the scale was reliable with college students.

Perse (1994) noted that, "Although perceived TV realism has some evidence of construct validity, content-specific adaptations of the scale might be more valid measures of the construct" (p. 284). Moreover, Potter (1988) argued that, "the construction validation process requires that the important elements in the construct be clearly defined and that the relationships among these elements be discussed logically to establish face and content validity" (p. 23). Also, Kerlinger (1992) asserted that items must be written unambiguously.

For that reason, only concepts relating to love and romance were used. In order to increase validity, the abstract word "things" was replaced with more concrete words like "love" and "kissing". Individuals may vary in the types of programs they watch on television. Hence, I chose to specifically narrow the topic of television to concepts of love. I came up with concepts related to love: romance, kissing, dating, sex, attraction, intimacy, and courtship. I wanted to select concepts that were related to each other to see if being specific was constant over the experimental condition.

For the questionnaire, I randomly placed the concepts of love into the original scale in place of "television". Then, I arranged the questionnaire with the original PRS and my adapted versions of the PRS. Thereupon, I mixed the items on the questionnaire, so that the participants would not answer in a consistent manner.

Still, Potter (1988) summarized past research on perceived reality and found three main areas: (1) reality is defined in regards to the message, (2) perceived reality is mainly linked to the receiver; and (3) defining perceived reality. First, he indicated that past literature on the subject has shown that reality and perceptions of reality are treated in the same fashion. Secondly, media accuracy is often synonymously with perceived reality (Potter, 1988). Third, Potter stated that most perceived reality measures are performed in a "global, unidimensional manner" (p. 24).

This study attempts to address the issues summarized by Potter (1988). In order to address the differences of reality and perceived reality, a factor analysis will be conducted to see if the items cluster together. Kerlinger (1992) averred that, "Factor analysis is a powerful and indispensable method of construct validation" (p. 427). Because perceived reality is mainly linked with the receiver, subjects will be asked a variety of demographic questions concerning the amount of television they watch and how much they enjoy watching romance.

Furthermore, Perse (1994) explained that perceived realism can also be seen a multidimensional construct. For that reason, questions regarding perceived realism will be several concepts that are synonymous to love, such as romance, dating, courtship, and kissing. By incorporating similar concepts into the scale, I hope to increase both reliability and validity. After all, Kerlinger (1992) recommend that to increase reliability similar kinds of concepts should be added to create a more accurate measurement of the construct.

In light of these concerns, the following research question is posed:

RQ1: What are college students' perceptions of love on television as assessed via the perceived realism scale?

Method

Sample

Participants in the present study were 412 students, enrolled in a basic communication course, from a large Midwestern university. Of the 412 subjects, 164 (39.8%) were male, 225 (54.6%) were female, and 25 (5.6 %) failed to accurately indicate their gender; 38 (9%) were ages eighteen or below, 320 (77%) were between 19 to 24, 30 (7%) were 25-30, and 24 (6%) were over 30. 145 (34%) were freshman, 160 (38%) were sophomore, 85 (20%) were juniors, 23 (6%) were seniors, and 1 classified themselves as "other". 347 (85%) were Caucasian, 24 (6%) were African-American, 36 (9%) were of other ethnic origin. 179 (43%) watch at least thirty minutes to an hour of television, 152 (37%) watch around an hour and a half to three hours, 52 (13%) watch three to five hours, 25 (5.9%) watch less than thirty minutes, and only 4 (1%) watched more than five hours of television a day. The scale was given in a mass testing format. All participants received credit for their participation.

Procedures

After consenting to take part in the study, participants completed the adapted version of the television perceived realism scale. Responses were solicited using a five-point, Likert-type scale that ranges from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree, (1). In addition, three questions asked participants demographic questions (i.e., age, classification, sex) as well as two questions relating to the amount and enjoyment they seek from watching television.

Results

The research question focused on what perceptions of college students have of perceived realism concerning television romance. Reverse-scored items were recoded prior to data analysis. Perse (1994) noted that PRS scores are generally added and then averaged to come up with a composite score. When all the items were combined together, the mean score was 2.75 ($SD_i = .4612$, $N = 409$). The scores ranged from 1.6 - 4.6. Cronbach's alpha for the composite adapted scale was .93.

An exploratory factor analysis was conducted. The factor loadings are presented in Table 1. The scree plot and varimax rotation revealed that there were 2 distinct factors. Factor one accounted for 29.49 % of the variance (Eigenvalue = 13.27) and consisted of specifically phrased items. As indicated in Table 1, 11 of the items met the 50/30 criteria. Factor two accounted for 11.52% of the variance (Eigenvalue = 5.23) and consisted of negatively worded items. 6 items met the 50/30 criteria. All other items were discarded, because the items did not load heavily on one factor or the items did not meet the 50/30 requirement.

Table 1: Factor Loadings for the Adapted Television Perceived Realism Scale		
Perceived Realism Statements	Really see /presents	Can't be Sure
Television presents intimate couples as they are in real life.	.823	
Television lets me really see how other people have sex.	.817	
Television lets me really see what romance is.	.777	
Television lets me really see how other people live.	.715	
Television lets me see love in other places as if I were really there.	.709	
Television lets me really see what love is.	.683	
Television lets me see romance in other places as if I were really there.	.677	
Television lets me see kissing in other places as if I were really there.	.592	
Television lets me really see how other people are attracted to each other.	.534	
Television presents sex as it is in real life.	.531	
Television lets me really see how other intimate couples behave.	.520	
If I see how people are attracted to each other on TV, I can't be sure attraction is really that way.		.869
If I see dating on TV, I can't be sure dating is really that way.		.763
If I see love on TV, I can't be sure that love is really that way.		.727
If I see sex on television, I can't be sure that sex is really that way.		.717
If I see something on television, I can't be sure it is really that way.		.660
If I see courtship on television, I can't be sure that courtship is really that way.		.574
Eigenvalue	13.27	5.23
Cumulative Variance Explained	29.49	11.62

After factor analyses were conducted, Cronbach's alphas were performed for the two factors of the adapted PRS. The results of the reliability analysis are presented in Table 2. The Cronbach's alpha for the first factor (positively worded items) was .8927. The Cronbach's alpha for the second factor (negatively worded items) was .8462. Both were considered to be acceptable levels of reliability.

Table 2: Reliability Analysis of The Adapted Television Perceived Realism Scale			
Perceived Realism Statements	Corrected Item Total Correlation	Squared Multiple Correlation Item	Alpha If Deleted
Positively worded items			
Television presents intimate couples as they are in real life.	.6327	.4132	.8809
Television lets me really see how other people have sex.	.6477	.4483	.8793
Television lets me really see what romance is.	.6306	.4293	.8804
Television lets me really see how other people live.	.5915	.3810	.8827
Television lets me see love in other places as if I were really there.	.7068	.5601	.8760
Television lets me really see what love is.	.6051	.4301	.8820
Television lets me see romance in other places as if I were really there.	.7210	.5707	.8752
Television lets me see kissing in other places as if I were really there.	.5903	.3768	.8828
Television lets me really see how other people are attracted to each other.	.6029	.3757	.8820
Television presents sex as it is in real life.	.4592	.2252	.8918
Television lets me really see how intimate couples behave.	.6040	.4027	.8820
Negatively worded items			
If I see how people are attracted to each other on TV, I can't be sure attraction is really that way.	.6369	.4237	.8189
If I see dating on TV, I can't be sure dating is really that way.	.6683	.4663	.8135
If I see love on TV, I can't be sure that love is really that way.	.6386	.4281	.8186
If I see sex on television, I can't be sure that sex is really that way.	.6562	.4676	.8151
If I see something on television, I can't be sure it is really that way.	.6086	.3771	.8244
If I see courtship on television, I can't be sure that courtship is really that way.	.5558	.3338	.8342
	Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha	
Positively worded items	.8910	.8927	
Negatively worded items	.8462	.8465	

Next, I ran descriptive statistics to see the differences between the means of the PRS and the subcategories (love, romance, kissing, dating, sex, attraction, intimacy, and courtship) of the adapted PRS. The mean differences are reported on Table 3. The highest mean reported was for love, which was 2.766 (SD = .466) and lowest mean was sex, which was 2.4973 (SD = .6233). The lowest standard deviation occurred for courtship (M = 2.729, SD = .4440). This suggests that people do not vary on their perceptions of perceived realism of courtship behaviors on television. Furthermore, the highest standard deviation was for sex (M = 2.4973, SD = .6233). Moreover, the second highest standard deviation was for the PRS (M = 2.55, SD = .6021). This suggests that individuals vary greatly on their perceptions of televised realism concerning sex and things in general. Obviously, the differences in means suggest that different topics that are measured influence the outcome of the scores.

Scales	Means	Std. Deviations	N
Love	2.7666	.4661	410
Romance	2.5269	.5591	412
Kissing	2.7498	.4561	412
Dating	2.6053	.5839	410
Sex	2.4973	.6233	407
Attraction	2.6446	.5703	392
Intimacy	2.5525	.5993	410
Courtship	2.7293	.4440	412

In addition, I ran a correlation among the subcategories, because many individuals may have believed that my concepts of love were very similar to each other. Also, I wanted to see if what I was measuring was consistent throughout my scale. The correlations are presented on Table 4. All of the correlations were significant ($p < .001$). However, most of the correlations were between .40 - .60. The highest correlation occurred between romance and attraction ($r = .752, p < .001$). The two lowest correlations occurred between love and kissing ($r = .318, p < .001$) as well as love and courtship ($r = .378, p < .001$). Based on these findings, it is clear that all the concepts of love are not perceived in the same manner.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to provide information on college students' perceptions of perceived realism concerning television romance. Based on my results, two separate factors appeared: one factor contained positively worded items, while the other factor contained

negatively worded items. This suggests that the PRS is measuring two different things: what things people perceive as real on television and what things people perceive as not real on television.

PRS	Love	Romance	Kissing	Dating	Sex	Attraction	Intimacy	Courtship
PRS	.497	.699	.519	.691	.669	.677	.646	.509
Love		.498	.318	.496	.525	.477	.508	.378
Romance			.561	.662	.678	.752	.675	.525
Kissing				.512	.460	.521	.518	.547
Dating					.651	.663	.618	.528
Sex						.668	.661	.466
Attraction							.624	.540
Intimacy								.503
Courtship								

Note: All correlations were significant ($p < .001$).

The first factor had items that were specific and positively worded and the second factor had items that were negatively worded. A majority of the negatively worded items had the words "can't be sure if it is really that way". This suggests that certain television programs may use special effects or overdramatic illusions to depict a certain image. Further, it is evident that subjects view things on television in two distinct dimensions: what is real and what they can't be sure of.

By understanding individuals' perceived realism of television portrayals of love, communication scholars can better examine associations between the media and its possible effects on romantic relationships. Based on my results, future research should investigate what concepts people think are related to love. The findings indicated fairly moderate correlations between my concepts of love. Further analyses should distinguish any differences between sex, ethnicity, total TV viewing time, and enjoyment of romance on television.

Although this study provides some information about college students' perceptions of perceived realism concerning television romance, a few limitations must be mentioned. First, this study was conducted in a mass testing format. An experimental research design might have produced different results. Secondly, subjects were not asked specific questions about why they answered the way they did. It would be more beneficial to conduct follow-up interviews to gain more information about possible extraneous variables. Third, previous studies have used the PRS as a subscale rather than just a main scale. Perhaps, more questions concerning love and romance

should have been asked. Nevertheless, it is evident that viewers do perceive real and unreal things on television differently. The findings suggest that future studies integrate specific concepts and distinguish what people may perceive as real on television and what they may perceive as not real.

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