

## Who Gets the Unreality Check? A Preliminary Investigation<sup>1</sup>

Amanda Allen  
*Robert Morris University*

The current study examined possible effects of romantically-themed television on self-reported relationship satisfaction among students. Four television pilot scripts were created: Two depicted romantically themed series, and two depicted dramatically themed series. Within each theme, one series was intended to represent an unrealistic or unlikely plot, while the other was intended to reflect a realistic plot. Each participant read a pilot and completed a survey measuring relationship satisfaction and their opinions about the series. Results showed that the reality manipulation was effective. However, despite this, effects on relationship satisfaction were minimal. These results were interpreted in terms of the possible influence of unrealistic depictions of romantic relationships on TV.

### Introduction

Intimate relationships are important to the happiness and well-being of many individuals. Many individuals form intimate relationships with others and eventually get married. With divorce rates on the rise, relationship researchers and marital therapists have examined possible explanations for decreases in relationship satisfaction, particularly unrealistic relationship beliefs and ideals (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982).

Eidelson and Epstein (1982) asked marriage counselors to report 20 dysfunctional beliefs the counselors frequently heard during sessions with clients. They found that five core dysfunctional beliefs can weaken intimate relationships: (a) disagreement is destructive, (b) mindreading is expected, (c) partners cannot change, (d) sexual perfectionism is expected, and (e) the sexes are different (Eidelson & Epstein). Situations in which one or both partners accept these unrealistic beliefs can lead to marital distress or low relationship satisfaction (Bass, Drake, & Linney, 2007).

The findings of Eidelson and Epstein (1982) demonstrate common irrational beliefs among married couples that seem to cause the most marital complications. A more recent study used these findings to examine the relationship between dysfunctional relationship beliefs and conflict behavior in married women and men (Hamamci,

2005). A sample of nonclinical married individuals were given three questionnaires; Interpersonal Cognitive Distortions Scale (ICDS), Married Life Questionnaire (MLQ), and a demographic questionnaire. The ICDS is designed to measure dysfunctional beliefs related to interpersonal relationships (Hamamci). The MLQ is designed to measure conflict behavior between married individuals (Hamamci). The demographic data questionnaire contained information related to age, duration of marriage, and number of children (Hamamci). Results of the study demonstrate a positive relationship between dysfunctional relationship beliefs and marital conflict.

Researchers have tried to take this further by investigating possible sources of these unrealistic relationship beliefs. For example, Haferkamp (1999) studied relationship beliefs and television viewing, particularly soap opera viewing. Undergraduate students completed a survey that examined television and soap opera viewing habits. The participants then completed the Relationship Beliefs Inventory (RBI) (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982). The RBI contains forty items and is designed to measure common dysfunctional relationship beliefs (Eidelson & Epstein). Results of the study indicated a positive relationship between television and soap opera viewing and acceptance of dysfunctional beliefs. In particular, the beliefs that the sexes are different, sexual

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<sup>1</sup> Address correspondence to: Stephen T. Paul, Ph.D., 6001 University Blvd., Moon Township, PA 15108-1189, or via email at: paul@rmu.edu.

perfectionism is expected, and partners cannot change were all positively related to amount of television watched (Haferkamp).

A more recent study examined the relationship between television viewing and partner expectations in adolescents (Eggermont, 2004). A sample of fifteen and sixteen year old adolescents was asked to complete a survey in class (Eggermont). The survey contained items regarding television viewing habits, types of romantically themed television watched, preferred features of a romantic partner, quality of relationship with parents, personal romantic experiences, and similarity of televised and real-life romantic relationships (Eggermont). Results suggested that physical attractiveness in a romantic partner is important to boys and this idea is encouraged by heavy television viewing (Eggermont). This finding also holds true for girls although physical attractiveness is not as important (Eggermont). Eggermont also suggests that heavy television viewing girls and boys find that a pleasant personality in a romantic partner is important, but is more important for the girls. Eggermont's findings suggest that unrealistic relationship ideals are learned at a young age.

With individuals spending more time watching television and relationship-related themes becoming more important in the storylines of television programs, researchers continue to study the relationship between what one watches and what one believes (Haferkamp, 1999). Although researchers have attempted to find relationships between television viewing and anything from obesity (Zimmerman & Bell, 2010) to sexual attitudes (Ward & Friedman, 2006), few studies have examined the relationship between television viewing and relationship satisfaction. Researchers that have studied this relationship (Eggermont, 2004; Haferkamp, 1999; Hamamci, 2005) used only correlation techniques to find positive relationships. The present study represents an initial step in examining television viewing and changes in relationship satisfaction among college students using an experimental manipulation. Based on the findings of Haferkamp and Eggermont, it is predicted that college students will experience low relationship satisfaction when exposed to an idealistic television-based romantic relationship as opposed to a more realistic

romantic relationship. Similarly, college students will experience either no change or an increase in relationship satisfaction when exposed to a realistic television-based romantic relationship. Possible gender differences will also be examined.

## Method

### Participants

The participants were 112 students (67 men, 45 women), aged 18-35 ( $M = 20.1$  years) enrolled in various undergraduate psychology classes at a small private university in western Pennsylvania. The students completed the study anonymously for course credit.

### Design

A 2 (Plot of show: Realistic or Unrealistic) X 2 (Type of show: Romantic or Police) between-subjects design was used in which each group received texts describing one of four potential television pilots: Two depicted romantically themed series, and two depicted dramatically themed series. Within each theme, one series was intended to represent an unrealistic or unlikely plot, while the other was intended to reflect a realistic plot. The dependent variable was relationship satisfaction. Participants were asked to rate their current relationship satisfaction on a 10 point rating scale ranging from 1 (not at all satisfied) to 10 (very satisfied).

### Materials

Four television pilot descriptions ("pitches") were created; a romantic drama, non-romantic drama, police drama, and reality police show. The pilots were written descriptions of the television shows, giving a brief description of the characters and a synopsis of the show. The romantic drama (see Appendix A) included a story line involving an idealistic and exaggerated intimate relationship between individuals, while the non-romantic drama (see Appendix B) involved the same couple from the romantic drama, only manipulations were made to depict a more realistic storyline (no "happy ending"). The police drama (see Appendix C) and police reality show (see Appendix D) acted as neutral stimuli and involved no intimate or romantic relationships; however, each included a reality manipulation. All were equated in terms of length and readability.

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In addition, a survey was created to measure relationship satisfaction (see Appendix E). The survey also contained items regarding demographic information, television viewing habits, and opinions of the television pilot being pitched. These items served mainly as distractors for the research question of interest. However, some questions served as a manipulation check. Specifically, items one through three in the “Pilot Opinion” portion of the survey. For these items, participants responded using a Likert scale which ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

### Procedure

Participants were told that they were participating in a “television study”. Students in the classes were randomly given one of the four television pitches to read. The participants were told they were about to read about a potential pilot for an upcoming television series and they would be asked to complete a survey immediately after reading it. When the students were finished reading the pilot pitch description that they had received, they continued on to complete the survey. The task took students about 10 minutes to complete.

### Results

The data were analyzed using a 2 (Plot of Show: Realistic or Unrealistic) X 2 (Type of Show: Romantic or Police) between-subjects Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to evaluate the relationship between relationship satisfaction and plots of television shows. Similar analyses were performed on the manipulation-check questions as well (i.e., the watchability, reality, and enjoyment items). An alpha level of .05 was used for all statistical analyses.

With regard to the main ANOVA of interest, no statistically significant main effects or interactions were identified (all  $F$ 's < 2.8). Participants' self-reported relationship satisfaction did not appear to be influenced by the independent variables. The means for each condition (for all analyses) are presented in Table 1.

However, the manipulation-check question dealing with participants' perceptions of the realistic nature of the pilot (“Pilot Opinion, Question Two”) did result in a significant outcome. Specifically, a main effect of Plot of Show

(realistic vs. unrealistic) was found,  $F(1, 108) = 17.9, p < .01$ , in which the “real” pilot was rated as significantly more realistic ( $M = 3.9$ ) than the “unrealistic” pilot ( $M = 3.2$ ). No other effects in this analysis were significant.

The manipulation-check question dealing with participants' enjoyment of the pilots (“Pilot Opinion, Question One”) resulted in significant outcomes. Specifically, a main effect of Plot of Show (realistic vs. unrealistic) was found,  $F(1, 108) = 9.1, p < .01$ , in which the “real” pilot was rated as significantly more enjoyable ( $M = 3.4$ ) than the “unrealistic” show ( $M = 2.8$ ). In addition, the main effect of Type of Show (romantic vs. police) was found,  $F(1, 108) = 5.9, p < .02$ , in which the “police” pilot was rated as significantly more enjoyable ( $M = 3.3$ ) than the “romantic” pilot ( $M = 2.8$ ). The interaction was not significant.

Finally, the manipulation-check question dealing with participants' likelihood of watching the pilots (“Pilot Opinion, Question Three”) resulted in nothing interesting. All outcomes were found to be non-significant (all  $F$ 's < 2.4).

**Table 1.** Means for all conditions for all variables.

Analysis	Romantic		Police	
	Real	Unreal	Real	Unreal
<b>Relationship Satisfaction</b>	<b>8.9</b>	<b>8.7</b>	<b>7.9</b>	<b>9.1</b>
<b>Enjoy?</b>	<b>3.0</b>	<b>2.7</b>	<b>3.7</b>	<b>2.9</b>
<b>Real?</b>	<b>3.8</b>	<b>3.0</b>	<b>3.9</b>	<b>3.3</b>
<b>Watch?</b>	<b>3.0</b>	<b>2.8</b>	<b>3.3</b>	<b>2.8</b>

### Discussion

This study examined possible relationships between unrealistic, idealized romantic relationships portrayed on television and possible effects on relationship satisfaction of viewers. Results showed that the reality manipulation was, indeed, effective. Despite these findings, overall effects on relationship satisfaction were minimal. Also, no statistically significant differences between gender of participants were observed.

There are a few possible reasons for failing to find support for the expected outcomes. Specifically, the results may have been affected by two factors: the written television pilots and the

relationship satisfaction scale used. First, because the participants were asked to read the television pilots rather than watch an acted-out version of the pilot, the participants could have different perceptions of the characters, situation, and so forth. If the participants were all exposed to a visual representation of the pilot, perhaps ambiguity would be minimized, if not, eliminated. Also, Bandura (2001) suggests that people learn through observing others' behavior and the outcome of those behaviors. In other words, watching relationships and outcomes could be more effective than simply reading about them. Second, the measure of relationship satisfaction could have influenced the results. The scale used was developed to measure relationship satisfaction of those in a committed relationship. The word "committed" could have also produced some ambiguity. For example, a participant could have been in a relationship but not considered it to be a committed relationship or the relationship could be fairly new.

Although the results did not support the original hypothesis, the reality manipulation was effective. That is, the study showed that participants were sensitive to realism. This fact alone continues to support the possibility that unrealistic television programming could affect viewers' relationship or life satisfaction. An examination of the open-ended responses further supports what the data revealed. For example, when asked if one thing about the storyline of the unrealistic, romantic pilot could be changed, one male participant noted "The fact that the male character shows up with earrings. That's very unrealistic." Similar responses included statements such as "That the characters fall in love so quickly" or "Too much romance -- not very realistic." As for the police shows, students responded similarly. The participants noted they did not like how the unrealistic, dramatic police show was too much like the fictional police shows currently on television. On the contrary, the participants enjoyed the "real crimes" and reality-show essence of the realistic police show.

Interestingly, the participants enjoyed the realistic shows, particularly the reality police show, more than the unrealistic shows. In fact, results show the participants enjoyed the unrealistic romantic show and the unrealistic police show the

least. Perhaps this reflects a change in preference of types of television shows (Reality vs. Fictional).

It is also notable that current events regarding the powerful influence of viewed media on life satisfaction fall in line with the current research. The recent movie, *Avatar*, by James Cameron apparently resulted in what has been called "Post-*Avatar* Depression Syndrome" (PADS) occurring among some dedicated fans (Piazza, 2010). A *Google* search of the phrase "Avatar Depression Syndrome" results in over 12,000 hits! The "disorder" appears to result when people who see the movie experience a deep depression following their exit from the movie theater. The depression seems to be caused by the fans' comparing "real life" to the fictionalized world of *Pandora* depicted in the film. For these fans, real life comes up disturbingly short in that comparison. Whether PADS will have lasting effects on the movie-goer has yet to be established. However, the comparison with the present study seems obvious.

In conclusion, the present study serves as a starting point for future research regarding possible influence of unrealistic relationships portrayed in the media on relationship satisfaction of viewers. Although it has been speculated that unrealistic relationship ideals could be adopted from television shows and other types of media, a causal relationship has yet to be determined. Using an effective reality manipulation, the present study could be replicated with brief live action television pilot previews that would convey the basic research elements, rather than written descriptions, to further explore possible effects on relationship satisfaction.

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## Appendices

### A: Unrealistic Romantic Pilot Stimulus

#### *Love Wanted*

*Love Wanted* follows Sarah Matthews, a twenty-something college graduate who has never had luck, or time, for dating. In the series pilot, Sarah's friends decide to throw a party and invite some single men to help Sarah out. Before the party, Sarah and her best friend Anna go to the store to get some things for the party. While at the store, Sarah expresses to Anna that she is having second thoughts about the party and dating in general. Just then, Sarah is distracted by an attractive man wearing an expensive suit with a thick Australian accent. The man walks over to her and introduces himself as the store owner, Brody. They feel a mutual attraction. After some small talk and flirting, Sarah invites Brody to the party. He enthusiastically accepts.

Later at the party, Sarah's friends push her to talk to the men there. She reluctantly begins to talk to the men, one by one. Sarah finds herself bored and thinking about Brody the entire time. Periodically, she checks the door, waiting for him to arrive. As the night goes on and people begin to leave, Brody has yet to appear. Sarah begins to rant that the party was a mistake and she will never have luck with men. Her friends, however, are not looking at her, but behind her with grinning faces. Sarah turns to find Brody standing with flowers, and diamond earrings in his hand. He apologizes for being late. Shocked and embarrassed, Sarah accepts his apology.

The rest of the series follows Sarah and Brody, two young lovers who found each other...and love...exactly what they wanted.

### B: Realistic Romantic Pilot Stimulus

#### *Love Wanted*

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at the store, Sarah expresses to Anna that she is having second thoughts about the party and dating in general. Just then, Sarah is distracted by a handsome man in an expensive suit. Moments later, a woman appears and takes his hand. Frustrated, Sarah is greeted by an attractive cashier named Brody. They feel a mutual attraction. After some small talk and flirting, Sarah invites Brody to the party. He enthusiastically accepts.

Later at the party, Sarah's friends push her to talk to the men there. She reluctantly begins to talk to the men, one by one. Sarah finds herself bored and thinking about Brody the entire time. Periodically, she checks the door, waiting for him to arrive. As the night goes on and people begin to leave, Brody has yet to appear. Sarah begins to rant that the party was a mistake and she will never have luck with men. Her friends, however, are not looking at her, but behind her with grinning faces. Sarah turns to see her mother who explains that her lease ran out and she needs to move in with Sarah.

The rest of the series follows Sarah as she faces real life, her mother, and continues her search for love... not exactly what she wanted.

### C: Unrealistic Police Pilot Stimulus

#### *No Room for Rookies*

*No Room for Rookies* is a drama series revolving around South West 101, an inner-city police station and its new breed of detectives—Sarah, Matthew, Anna, and Brody—who are all in their twenties, but that is where their similarities end. Sarah has a chip on her shoulder because she believes the police force is mostly corrupt, therefore she distrusts all her partners. Matthew, however, is fresh out of the academy and a true rookie if ever there was one. He is gullible and trusting; sometimes too trusting. Anna is a cop returning from a six month suspension. Although no charges were ever formally made, and internal affairs never found hard evidence, almost everyone in the department thinks she is a “dirty cop.” In fact, the only partner willing to work with her is “Pistol” a three-year old drug-sniffing police

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dog. Finally, there is Brody, a police officer new to the force, who has been given command of the team. However, behind this shining example of a fine police officer hides a secret that may shock the department, should it ever be revealed... and someone already knows it.

Passionate and ambitious, these new detectives will have their professional relationships tested by competition and conflict as they cope with coming of age in a profession that deals out experiences far beyond their years. Set against a contemporary backdrop of major crime stories, *Rookies* will focus on the professional lives of these four detectives. In the pilot episode, the new detectives must work together in order to solve a crime involving the kidnapping of an 11-year-old girl, daughter of a local drug-lord.

### D: Realistic Police Pilot Stimulus

#### *No Room for Rookies*

*No Room for Rookies* is a reality series that follows four young police officers – Sarah, Matthew, Anna, and Brody – who are all in their twenties. These young police officers have recently graduated from the academy and have all been stationed in very different parts of the country. Sarah is a deputy officer in Los Angeles

California, a city known for its large amount of gang activity. She is exposed to gang violence and also has to deal with ridicule from her male coworkers. Matthew is brand new to the police force in Burlington, a college town in Vermont. Matthew will experience his fair share of underage drinking citations and out-of-control house parties. Anna has just been hired by the Calhan Police Department. Calhan is a small, quiet town in Colorado. With a population of less than 1,000, Anna finds herself dealing with “small” crimes like shoplifting teenagers and parking violations, as well as the annoyances of wealthy tourists expecting “above the law” treatment. Finally, there is Brody, the newest officer of the Florida State Police Department. Brody will mainly patrol some of the interstate highways in the area. His biggest challenges range from armed drug-runners to alligators in bathtubs.

Passionate and ambitious, these new officers will have their professional relationships tested by competition and conflict as they begin to work in a profession that deals out experiences far beyond their years. *Rookies* will focus on the professional lives of these four brand new police officers and real-life crimes. In the pilot episode of the series, the cameras will follow the young officers and capture their first days on the job.

### E: Survey

#### **Background Information**

- Age: \_\_\_\_\_
- Gender (Circle one):     Male     Female
- College Rank (Circle one):  
Freshman   Sophomore   Junior   Senior
- Major: \_\_\_\_\_
- Living Arrangement (Circle one):  
On Campus  
Off Campus with Parents  
Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_
- Are you in a committed relationship? Yes/No  
If yes, how satisfied are you with your relationship?  
1----2----3----4----5----6----7----8----9----10  
Not at all satisfied                                 Very satisfied

- Are you currently employed?                   Yes/No  
If yes, about how many hours do you work in a week on average? \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Television Viewing Habits**

Please circle/fill-in responses for the following items.

- About how many hours do you spend watching TV on a weekday? \_\_\_\_\_
- About how many hours do you spend watching TV on a weekend? \_\_\_\_\_
- How many televisions are in your household? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you have a digital video recorder (DVR) or TiVo?    Yes/No/Don't Know
- What types of TV shows do you like to watch? (Circle all that apply)  
Animated   Music Program  
Talk Show   Science Fiction

ALLEN

- |                    |               |
|--------------------|---------------|
| Comedy Series      | Soap Opera    |
| News Program       | Drama Series  |
| Competition Show   | Reality Show  |
| Police Series      | Game Show     |
| Documentary        | Sports Events |
| Cooking Program    | Mystery       |
| Entertainment News | Other _____   |

6. What is your favorite current TV show?

***Pilot Opinion***

Please answer the following questions about the pilot you have just read.

1. I think that I would enjoy watching the television pilot.

1-----2-----3-----4-----5  
Disagree Agree

2. I think that the series represents a realistic story/approach.

1-----2-----3-----4-----5  
Disagree Agree

3. I would watch the series if it were produced for TV.

1-----2-----3-----4-----5  
Disagree Agree

4. If you could **CHANGE ONE THING** about the storyline/series, what would it be?

5. **ONE THING** that should be **KEPT FOR SURE** about the storyline/series would be?