

The Effect of Parasocial Relationship Status with Fictional Couples
on Romantic Relationship Evaluations

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Abstract

The purpose of the proposed study is to examine the effect of exposure to the fictional couples in romantic narratives on one's own relationship evaluations. Approximately 211 participants recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk were asked to write about a favorite fictional couple vs. a non-favorite couple vs. a control condition. Following, they indicated their current relationship evaluations (relationship satisfaction, closeness, commitment, etc.). Consistent with previous correlational work, I predicted that participants exposed to a non-favorite fictional couple would report lower relationship evaluations than those in the control condition. However, consistent with previous work demonstrating the benefits of parasocial relationships, I expected that participants who were exposed to a favorite fictional couple would report higher relationship evaluations than those in the control condition. This study is an important first step in better understanding the overall impact that romantic narratives – and the parasocial relationships that individuals experience with the fictional couples within those narratives – have on people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in their own relationships.

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The Effect of Parasocial Relationship Status with Fictional Couples
on Romantic Relationship Evaluations

For centuries, one of the most common and universal themes in literature is love. Across all cultures today there are books, movies, and television shows featuring the romantic narratives of a perfect couple and their love affair - a genre known as romance media. In book sales, the romance genre sums an estimated \$1.08 billion dollars a year (Romance Writers of America, n.d.). The top 10 grossing movies worldwide, such as Avatar, Titanic, and even Star Wars: The Force Awakens, all include a romantic element (Box Office Mojo, n.d.). The love affairs of fictional couples are intertwined into the plots of today's most popular television shows across all genres including science fiction in series like Stranger Things and action adventure in shows such as Game of Thrones. With their prevalence and popularity in our society, it is important to understand the psychological impact that exposure to these romantic narratives has on viewers. It is possible that people's Netflix binge-watching sessions or movie nights with friends have a greater impact on individuals than just a way to spend free time. It may actually affect how one thinks and feels about their own romantic relationships.

Romantic Narratives

Past research supports that media portrayals of love and romance have an impact on what viewers believe love is and what to expect in a relationship. Two theories in particular help explain this phenomenon and why people have a tendency to adopt media's portrayal of relationships and love into their own beliefs. First, Cultivation Theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002) posits that long-term exposure to media leads to the belief that its portrayal of

reality is accurate and true. This causes viewers to adopt the media's depiction of the world into their reality. For instance, after constant exposure to news stories reporting violence and crimes, viewers begin perceiving their community as a more dangerous place than it really is (Romer, Jamieson, & Aday, 2003). In the case of romantic narratives, it is proposed that repeated exposure to movies' and television shows' depictions of love and the perfect couple will lead viewers to believe that is what to expect in a relationship. Second, Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1986; 2002) states that people learn from others by observation, imitation, and modeling. One example is the way an individual expresses anger and aggression. In Bandura's classic Bobo Doll Experiment (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961), children learned the behavior of abusing a doll in frustration after they observed the aggressive behavior by an adult. As for romantic narratives, the featured couple serves as the model in which we learn and adopt our own relationship behaviors.

Both theories argue that people tend to look to media to understand how one thinks and feels about love and relationships. It gives viewers an idea of what is realistic and expected. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that if people are continuously exposed to these media ideals, they start to adopt these beliefs for themselves. In support of this idea, Lippman, Ward, and Seabrook (2014) measured exposure to different types of romance media, romantic beliefs, and perceived realism (i.e., the extent to which people believe what is portrayed on TV to be true). Results revealed that increased exposure to romance media (including marriage-themed reality TV and romantic comedy movies) was associated with a stronger tendency to believe in love clichés such as "love conquers all" and "love at first sight."

Similarly, another study (Hefner & Wilson, 2013) assessed whether exposure to romantic comedies is associated with the endorsement of the romantic ideology through the Romantic Beliefs Scale, which measures the beliefs that love always finds a way, there is one and only one partner for each person, love is always perfect, and love occurs at first sight. Through a large-scale survey assessing romantic beliefs, exposure to romantic comedies, overall movie viewing, and the extent to which participants watch movies to learn, the researchers found that there was a positive correlation between watching romantic comedies with the motivation to learn and romantic belief endorsement.

Some people go as far as trusting the media more than real life examples of love and romance. Galloway, Engstrom, and Emmers-Sommer (2015) investigated the relationship between exposure to romantic movies and young people's unrealistic expectations about love and marriage. In a survey of young adults, they found that young people were more likely to seek examples of love and how to act in a relationship from movies and TV shows rather than their own parents.

In addition to people's constructs of love and relationships, research shows that increased media consumption is also associated with lower relationship satisfaction and lower commitment to a relationship. One study in particular surveyed television and soap opera viewing habits in undergraduate students (Haferkamp, 1999). Participants were asked to take a questionnaire that measured dysfunctional relationship beliefs. They found that there was a positive correlation between watching television and dysfunctional relationship beliefs such as "the sexes are different," "partners cannot change," and "mindreading is expected" - all quite unrealistic beliefs that are potentially harmful in

relationships. More recently, a study by Reizer and Hetsroni (2014) focused on television viewing and its association with relationship quality. A survey of 188 students found that television viewing was negatively correlated with both relationship satisfaction and relationship commitment, as well as positively correlated with intensity of conflicts in the relationship.

One thing to note is that all of the aforementioned studies were correlational. Due to the nature of the design, it is impossible to make inferences about the causal impact of romantic narratives on relationship evaluations. However, there is one study that has employed an experimental research design to examine the causal relationship between these variables. Specifically, Johnson and Holmes (2009) had both single and romantically involved participants watch either a romantic comedy (*Serendipity*) or a control movie. Following, participants completed a questionnaire that measured their relationship satisfaction. Romantically involved participants reported their current relationship satisfaction, whereas single participants indicated their relationship satisfaction from a *previous* relationship. Results revealed that single participants reported lower relationship satisfaction after they watched the romantic comedy compared to the control movie. However, participants who were currently involved in a relationship did not experience a decline in their relationship satisfaction. Based on these results, the researchers concluded that the romantic narrative had a negative impact on relationship satisfaction.

Unfortunately, the researchers' conclusions were somewhat overstated. The researchers argued that the romantic narrative led people to feel dissatisfied in their relationships. However, participants who were actually in relationships did *not*

experience a decline in relationship satisfaction. It was only the single participants who reported feeling worse about their previous relationships. Thus, there was a disconnect between the data and their claim. Despite this criticism, the work should be commended for its use of an experimental design. To my knowledge, this is the only study that has ever attempted to manipulate exposure to romantic narratives to examine its causal effect on relationship outcomes.

Social Comparison

As past research recognizes the adverse relationship evaluations associated with media exposure, we must then examine the underlying mechanisms that may be causing it. One explanation is through the Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954; Wood, 1989), which states that humans have an innate drive to evaluate their abilities and performance and that when there is no objective standard present to compare to, people tend to compare themselves and their abilities to others. This is done in two ways. Downward comparison refers to when one looks at someone who is worse off. This type of comparison tends to make one feel better about themselves and their situation. For example, one study had students with low self-esteem become aware that other students at their university were having a hard time coping with the stress, which then led to an increase in self-esteem (Gibbons & Gerrard, 1989). Upward comparison is when one compares themselves to a person who is better off. This often leads that person to experience a lower self-evaluation (feel worse about themselves). A common example of this is when a woman looks at thin models and celebrities. In a correlational study by Maltby, Giles, Barber, and McCutcheon (2005) found a positive relationship between celebrity worship and poorer body image amongst female adolescents.

When Festinger proposed Social Comparison Theory, he referred generally to the comparison of an individual's traits to the traits of another individual. Over the years, this theory has also been applied to comparing one's relationship to other relationships. As one evaluates their relationship, they consider their experience of relationship satisfaction, intimacy, trust, and commitment (Rusbult, 1980). It is these same aspects of a relationship that individuals notice in other couples and consequently compare to their own intimate relationship.

Buunk and colleagues have looked specifically at how the upward and downward comparisons between couples is associated with relationship and marriage satisfaction. Results from one study suggested that perceived superiority to another couple can serve as a predictor of marital satisfaction (Buunk & Van Yperen, 1991). He replicated these results again in 1997 and expanded on his hypothesis. He found correlational evidence that people hold a positive global view of other relationships, assuming the majority of other couples are happy in their intimate relationship. One reason for this, he proposed, is that happy couples who perceive themselves as superior may project their own situation onto other couples (Buunk & van der Eijnden, 1997). Each of these findings corresponds to the downward comparison effect of the Social Comparison Theory - looking down on other couples increases one's own relationship satisfaction.

On the other hand, people are susceptible to upward comparison between one's relationship to another relationship which, according to the literature, tends to have negative consequences. A three-part study by Smith LeBeau and Buckingham (2008) investigated the associations between relationship social comparison, insecurity, and

perceived relationship quality. Their results support that upward social comparison to other couples can lead to increased relationship insecurity and decreased perceived relationship quality.

Buunk and Ybema (2003) also examined the effect of upward comparison to another couple on relationship satisfaction. In their experimental study, they assessed marital quality in 135 married women. Following the questionnaire, they presented them with social comparison information, inducing either an upward or downward comparison. The results showed that individuals with low marital quality experienced negative effects after making upward comparisons.

Taken together, these studies find that people may compare their own relationships with other relationships. If they are comparing their relationship to one they perceive as better, this may cause them to feel less satisfied, close, or committed to their own partner. Given people tend to compare their relationship to real life couples, it is reasonable to assume people may engage in similar comparison processes with fictional couples. Because many of the fictional couples seen in romantic narratives are idealized, this may be setting people up for an upward comparison that have been associated with unfavorable effects. However, a growing body of research demonstrates that in order to fully understand the impact of exposure to romantic narratives, one's parasocial relationship status with the media figure should also be considered.

Parasocial Relationships

A parasocial relationship, or PSR, is a one-sided relationship that a person has with a media figure (Horton & Wohl, 1956). In other words, it is a connection that one feels towards a real-life celebrity or fictional character from a book, movie, or TV show.

Research shows that people perceive PSRs as real relationships that can fill the human need for social connection. In a study by Greenwood and Long (2009), over 200 students were given a questionnaire measuring solitude (negative and positive), the need to belong, parasocial interaction, and transportation (i.e., how mentally and emotionally absorbed they tend to become with movies, TV shows, and their characters). They found that positive and negative solitude experiences were predictive of both parasocial interaction and transportation. This demonstrates that without the presence of others, people can still fulfill the basic need for connection through PSRs.

A four-part study by Derrick, Gabriel, and Hugenberg (2009) examined how a parasocial relationship formed with a character in a favorite TV show can provide a sense of belonging. The first part of the study assessed loneliness activities and the likelihood of feeling lonely. They found that when people feel lonely, they prefer watching their favorite TV show, where a PSR is present, rather than turning to other stimuli. The second study manipulated belongingness needs and found that participants spent more time writing about a favorite TV show when belongingness needs were activated. The third study asked participants to describe a fight with a friend (i.e., a social threat) and then write about a favorite TV show. The results revealed that when one's social connections were threatened, thinking about a PSR served as a buffer against the typically harmful effects to self-esteem and loneliness. The final study had participants write about their favorite TV show and then complete a word completion task assessing exclusion, positive mood, and negative mood. The results revealed that exposure to PSRs decreased the sense of exclusion. Taken together, these studies provide support for the view that PSRs can be extremely beneficial in that they act as normal social relationships

that can satisfy our basic needs of social connection.

PSRs can also affect how people feel about themselves through social comparison. Specifically, the Parasocial Relationship-Moderation Hypothesis (Young, Gabriel, & Hollar, 2013; Young, Gabriel, & Sechrist, 2012) argues that PSR status with a media figure will determine the outcome of social comparison processes (whether it be an upward or downward comparison). When a person does not have a bond with a media figure (no PSR), contrast will occur such that the person perceives themselves as being dissimilar. However, when a person does have a bond (PSR), assimilation is much more likely to occur such that a person will see themselves as more similar to that media figure.

Initial support for this hypothesis came from research within the domain of body image. A series of studies by Young et al. (2012) were the first to examine how PSR status moderates the effect of idealized media figures on women's body image. In Study 1, participants were led to believe they shared vs. did not share a birthday (a method of manipulating the psychological connection) with a thin female model. Participants were then asked to complete a questionnaire measuring their current body satisfaction. The results demonstrated that women who experienced a psychological connection with the media figure (similar to that of a PSR) had a more positive body image and appearance evaluation than those who did not experience a connection. In Study 2, participants were asked to write about their favorite celebrity or a control, non-favorite celebrity prior to reporting their current body satisfaction. The results revealed that body satisfaction decreased after exposure to a thin non-PSR media figure, but increased after exposure to a thin PSR media figure. Furthermore, in Study 3 they looked at the underlying mechanism of increased body satisfaction following exposure to a thin PSR. After

writing about their favorite celebrity, participants completed a questionnaire measuring their overall personality similarity, body similarity, and body satisfaction. The results demonstrated that the process of assimilation – seeing oneself as more similar to the media figure – occurred following exposure to thin PSRs, which led to increased body satisfaction.

Young et al. (2013) continued their investigation as they wanted to see if PSR status could also moderate the effect of comparisons with muscular media figures on men's body image. In another experimental design, participants were exposed to a muscular vs. non-muscular superhero with whom they had a PSR vs. no PSR. Following, participants indicated their current body satisfaction and provided a measure of their physical strength. They found that when there was no PSR, exposure to a muscular superhero made men feel less satisfied with their bodies. However, having a PSR with the muscular superhero protected against the negative effects to body image and led men to demonstrate greater physical strength.

In summary, research shows that PSR status moderates the effect of media figures on self-evaluation, determining whether contrast or assimilation will occur in response to social comparison. Although the Parasocial Relationship-Moderation Hypothesis has only been examined in the body image domain, it is reasonable to expect that similar processes would emerge in when engaging in other types of social comparisons, such as comparing one's relationship to that of a fictional couple.

Current Study and Hypotheses

The purpose of this research was to examine the effect of exposure to fictional couples from romantic narratives on one's own relationship evaluations, including

relationship satisfaction, closeness, and commitment. In addition, this research examined the moderating role of PSR status with the fictional couple. This study was the first in hopefully a series of studies examining the effects of romantic narratives and PSRs on relationship evaluations.

The ideal test of moderation would employ a 2x2 factorial design, with romantic narrative exposure (exposure vs. no exposure) and PSR status with the fictional couple from that narrative (PSR vs. no PSR) as the independent variables. This would require identifying a well-known romantic narrative and assessing PSR status with the fictional couple during a prescreening session. Romantically involved participants would then come into a lab and watch the romantic narrative. Given time and resource restrictions, I opted to employ a simplified design for this initial investigation. If the results revealed the predicted pattern of results, I would have followed up with additional experiments that employ more complicated designs.

The present study utilized a single-factor experimental design. Specifically, participants were exposed to their favorite fictional (PSR) couple vs. non-favorite (non-PSR) fictional couple vs. a control condition. Following, they were asked to indicate their current relationship evaluations (i.e., relationship satisfaction, closeness, and commitment). Consistent with previous correlational work, I predicted that participants who were exposed to a non-favorite fictional couple would report lower relationship evaluations than those in the control condition (a contrast effect). However, consistent with previous work demonstrating the benefits of PSRs, I expected participants who were exposed to a favorite fictional couple would report higher relationship evaluations than those in the control condition (an assimilation effect). To the best of my knowledge, no

other study has used an experimental design when investigating the impact of romantic narratives on relationship evaluations while taking PSR status into consideration.

Method

Participants

Two hundred and eleven participants (107 men, 103 women, 1 non-binary) were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). The average age of participants was 35.85 years ($SD = 11.46$). In addition, 58.3% of the sample identified as White/Caucasian, 3.3% as Black/African American, 30.3% as Asian/Asian American, 5.2% as Hispanic/Latino/Chicano, 1.4% as Native American/American Indian, and 1.4% as Other. In regard to sexual orientation, 89.6% identified as straight, 2.8% as gay/lesbian, and 7.6% as bisexual. Furthermore, all participants were currently involved in a romantic relationship to some extent. Specifically, 7.1% were casually dating, 22.3% were exclusively dating, 8.5% were engaged, and 62.1% were married. The average length of participants' relationship was 8.93 years ($SD = 10.06$). Participants were compensated \$0.35 for their time and effort.

Design

This study employed a single-factor experimental design. The independent variable was fictional couple exposure (PSR couple vs. non-PSR couple vs. control). The dependent variables were the participants' relationship evaluations (e.g., satisfaction, closeness, commitment, etc.).

Materials and Procedure

Participants read a description of the study on MTurk, which indicated that they must be 18 years or older and currently involved in a relationship to participate. Those

who met the criteria and wished to participate were directed to Qualtrics where they first completed some basic demographic questions (see Appendix A). Following, participants were asked to write for five minutes about a topic in one of three conditions: their favorite fictional couple (PSR couple condition), a non-favorite fictional couple (non-PSR couple condition), or an unrelated topic (control condition). See Appendix B for the complete instructions of each writing task conditions.

In order to determine the fictional couple for the non-PSR condition, I conducted a pre-test on MTurk in which 83 participants were asked to rate their familiarity (i.e., "How familiar are you with this fictional couple?"; 1 = *not at all*; 5 = *extremely*) and liking (i.e., "How much do you like this fictional couple?"; 1 = *not at all*; 5 = *extremely*) of 28 popular fictional couples. See Appendix I for the full list of fictional couples from the pre-test. The goal of this pre-test was to identify a fictional couple with whom participants were familiar, but did not necessarily like. The results concluded that Romeo and Juliet would serve as a suitable non-favorite fictional couple for the non-PSR condition. Specifically, this couple was relatively higher in familiarity ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 1.15$; the second most familiar couple) and relatively lower in liking ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.42$; of the top five most familiar couples, they were second to the least liked couple).

Following the writing task, participants were asked to complete a series of questionnaires assessing their current mood and relationship evaluations (e.g., relationship satisfaction, closeness, commitment, etc.). Next, participants in the PSR and non-PSR conditions answered some questions about the fictional couple they wrote about during the writing task. Finally, participants were debriefed and thanked for participation.

Mood. Participants completed Watson, Clark, and Tellegen's (1988) Positive and

Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) to indicate their current positive and negative mood (see Appendix C). The PANAS is a 20-item questionnaire consisting of 10 positive mood words (e.g., excited, inspired) and 10 negative mood words (e.g., distressed, upset).

Participants reported their current mood on a 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*) scale. Both scales for positive and negative mood were reliable ($\alpha_{\text{pos}} = .89$ and $\alpha_{\text{neg}} = .91$).

Relationship satisfaction. Participants' current relationship satisfaction was assessed on a 4-item measure ($\alpha = .81$); Murray et al., 2009; Murray, Holmes, Bellavia, Griffin, & Dolderman, 2002). On a 7-point scale (1 = *not true at all*, 7 = *completely true*), participants responded to items such as "I am extremely happy in my current romantic relationship" and "I have a very strong relationship with my partner". See Appendix D for all items on this scale.

Relationship closeness. To measure relationship closeness, participants were asked to respond to five items on a 1 (*not true at all*) to 7 (*completely true*) scale (Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes, & Kusche, 2002; Murray et al., 2011). Sample items include "I am closer to my partner than any other person in my life" and "I feel extremely attached to my partner". This scale was reliable ($\alpha = .95$). In addition, the Inclusion of Other in Self scale (IOS; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992) was used as another measure of closeness. Participants were asked to indicate how close they felt to their partner by selecting a pair of circles that best described their relationship. The seven sets of circles varied from not touching at all (i.e., not very close) to practically overlapping (i.e., very close). See Appendix E for both of these measures.

Relationship commitment. Commitment was assessed using a 3-item measure (Murray et al., 2011; Rusbult, Martz & Agnew, 1998) including statements such as "I

want my relationship to last a very long time" (see Appendix F). Participants were asked to respond to each item on a 1 (*not true at all*) to 7 (*completely true*) scale. This scale was reliable ($\alpha = .85$).

Perceived Relationship Quality Component (PRQC) Inventory. Participants were asked to complete Fletcher, Simpson, and Thomas's (2000) PRQC scale, which evaluated six aspects of relationship quality. These six subscales included relationship satisfaction (3 items, $\alpha = .94$; sample item: "How content are you with your relationship?"), commitment (3 items, $\alpha = .93$; sample item: "How devoted are you to your relationship?"), intimacy (3 items, $\alpha = .92$; sample item: "How connected are you to your partner?"), trust (3 items, $\alpha = .92$; sample item: "How dependable is your partner?"), passion (3 items, $\alpha = .91$; sample item: "How passionate is your relationship?"), and love (3 items, $\alpha = .92$; sample item: "How much do you cherish your partner?"). All responses were made on a 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*completely true*) scale. See Appendix G for the complete questionnaire.

Manipulation checks. As a manipulation check, participants indicated their PSR status with the fictional couple from the writing task (Young et al., 2012; 2013). Specifically, they responded to a brief questionnaire (6 items; $\alpha = .93$) including questions such as "How much do you care about this fictional couple?" and "To what extent do you feel like you 'know' this fictional couple?" on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). As another manipulation check, participants indicated their idealization of the fictional couple (2 items; $\alpha = .90$). The items included "I view this couple to have a positive relationship" and "I consider this couple to have an ideal relationship."

Responses were reported on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). See Appendix H for both manipulation checks.

Results

Primary Analyses

I predicted that participants who wrote about a non-favorite fictional couple, and therefore did not experience a PSR, would report lower relationship evaluations than those in the control condition. However, I expected that participants who wrote about a favorite fictional couple, and thus had a PSR, would report higher relationship evaluations than those in the control condition. To test this hypothesis, I conducted a one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) examining the effect of fictional couple exposure on the following romantic relationship evaluation dependent variables: (1) relationship satisfaction, (2) closeness, (3) IOS closeness, (4) commitment, (5) PRQC satisfaction, (6) PRQC commitment, (7) PRQC intimacy, (8) PRQC trust, (9) PRQC passion, (10) PRQC love. I also conducted this analysis to examine the impact of fictional couple exposure on (1) positive mood and (2) negative mood. Please note that none of the omnibus tests were significant. Therefore, I did not subsequently conduct Tukey's Honest Significant Difference (HSD) post hoc tests.

Relationship satisfaction. Results revealed that there was no significant effect of fictional couple exposure on relationship satisfaction, $F(2, 206) = .10, p = .905$ (see Figure 1). Participants who were exposed to their favorite fictional couple ($M = 5.71, SD = 1.41$) reported similar relationship satisfaction as those exposed to a non-favorite fictional couple ($M = 5.64, SD = 1.18$) and a control topic ($M = 5.61, SD = 1.27$).

Relationship closeness. Results revealed that there was no significant effect of fictional couple exposure on relationship closeness, $F(2, 206) = .41, p = .661$ (see Figure 2). Participants who were exposed to their favorite fictional couple ($M = 5.70, SD = 1.54$) reported similar relationship closeness as those exposed to a non-favorite fictional couple ($M = 5.91, SD = 1.41$) and a control topic ($M = 5.72, SD = 1.37$).

Relationship closeness (IOS measure). Results revealed that there was no significant effect of fictional couple exposure on participants' inclusion of their partner in the self (i.e., overlap on the IOS closeness measure), $F(2, 206) = .04, p = .958$ (see Figure 3). Participants who were exposed to their favorite fictional couple ($M = 5.63, SD = 1.65$) reported similar relationship closeness IOS as those exposed to a non-favorite fictional couple ($M = 5.69, SD = 1.52$) and a control topic ($M = 5.62, SD = 1.46$).

Relationship commitment. Results revealed that there was no significant effect of fictional couple exposure on relationship commitment, $F(2, 206) = .41, p = .662$ (see Figure 4). Participants who were exposed to their favorite fictional couple ($M = 5.98, SD = 1.46$) reported similar relationship commitment as those exposed to a non-favorite fictional couple ($M = 6.12, SD = 1.14$) and a control topic ($M = 5.92, SD = 1.15$).

PRQC satisfaction. Results revealed that there was no effect of fictional couple exposure on relationship satisfaction, $F(2, 205) = .11, p = .895$ (see Figure 5). Participants who were exposed to their favorite fictional couple ($M = 5.84, SD = 1.43$) reported similar relationship satisfaction as those exposed to a non-favorite fictional couple ($M = 5.84, SD = 1.24$) and a control topic ($M = 5.75, SD = 1.45$).

PRQC commitment. Results revealed that there was no significant effect of fictional couple exposure on relationship commitment, $F(2, 206) = .22, p = .801$ (see

Figure 6). Participants who were exposed to their favorite fictional couple ($M = 6.09$, $SD = 1.31$) reported similar relationship commitment as those exposed to a non-favorite fictional couple ($M = 6.23$, $SD = 1.10$) and a control topic ($M = 6.18$, $SD = 1.09$).

PRQC intimacy. Results revealed that there was no significant effect of fictional couple exposure on relationship intimacy, $F(2, 206) = .28$, $p = .766$ (see Figure 7).

Participants who were exposed to their favorite fictional couple ($M = 5.81$, $SD = 1.37$) reported similar relationship intimacy as those exposed to a non-favorite fictional couple ($M = 5.94$, $SD = 1.26$) and a control topic ($M = 5.78$, $SD = 1.33$).

PRQC trust. Results revealed that there was no significant effect of fictional couple exposure on relationship trust, $F(2, 205) = .99$, $p = .372$ (see Figure 8).

Participants who were exposed to their favorite fictional couple ($M = 5.98$, $SD = 1.29$) reported similar relationship trust as those exposed to a non-favorite fictional couple ($M = 6.19$, $SD = 1.02$) and a control topic ($M = 5.90$, $SD = 1.31$).

PRQC passion. Results revealed that there was no significant effect of fictional couple exposure relationship passion, $F(2, 206) = .22$, $p = .806$ (see Figure 9).

Participants who were exposed to their favorite fictional couple ($M = 5.21$, $SD = 1.62$) reported similar relationship passion as those exposed to a non-favorite fictional couple ($M = 5.04$, $SD = 1.54$) and a control topic ($M = 5.17$, $SD = 1.64$).

PRQC love. Results revealed that there was no significant effect of fictional couple exposure on relationship love, $F(2, 206) = .60$, $p = .548$ (see Figure 10).

Participants who were exposed to their favorite fictional couple ($M = 5.86$, $SD = 1.37$) reported similar relationship love as those exposed to a non-favorite fictional couple ($M = 6.09$, $SD = 1.15$) and a control topic ($M = 6.00$, $SD = 1.22$).

Positive mood. Results revealed that there was no significant effect of fictional couple exposure on positive mood, $F(2, 207) = 1.66, p = .192$ (see Figure 11).

Participants who were exposed to their favorite fictional couple ($M = 4.61, SD = 1.51$) reported a similar current mood as those exposed to a non-favorite fictional couple ($M = 4.50, SD = 1.42$) and a control topic ($M = 4.19, SD = 1.44$).

Negative mood. Results revealed that there was no significant effect of fictional couple exposure on negative mood, $F(2, 207) = .492, p = .612$ (see Figure 12).

Participants who were exposed to their favorite fictional couple ($M = 1.97, SD = 1.17$) reported a similar current mood as those exposed to a non-favorite fictional couple ($M = 2.20, SD = 1.49$) and a control topic ($M = 2.13, SD = 1.37$).

Manipulation Checks

There were two aspects of my manipulation that I wanted to confirm. First was that participants in the PSR condition had a stronger bond with the fictional couple than those in the non-PSR condition. To test this, I conducted an independent samples *t*-test comparing the means of my PSR status measure (i.e., bond with the fictional couple) in the PSR vs. non-PSR couple conditions. Results revealed there was a significant effect of the writing task manipulation on participants' reported PSR status with the fictional couple, $t(128) = 6.16, p < .001$ (see Figure 13). Specifically, participants in the PSR condition ($M = 4.01, SD = .76$) had a stronger bond with the fictional couple than those in the non-PSR condition ($M = 2.94, SD = .15$). Thus, this aspect of my manipulation was successful. The second aspect of my manipulation that I wanted to check was whether participants viewed the fictional couple in both conditions as having positive qualities (since the writing task instructions encouraged an upward social comparison in both

conditions). To test this, I conducted another independent samples *t*-test comparing the idealization of the couples in the PSR vs. non-PSR couple conditions. Although I would predict no significant effect, results revealed that there was a significant effect of the writing task manipulation on their idealization of the couple, $t(128) = 6.20, p < .001$ (see Figure 14). In other words, participants in the PSR condition had a more positive/idealized view of the couple ($M = 6.03, SD = .89$) than those in the non-PSR condition ($M = 4.30, SD = 2.08$). However, this is not surprising given people may simply have more positive views of their favorite fictional couple. Also, there was a small subset of participants who disagreed with my portrayal of Romeo and Juliet as having a positive relationship and opted to write about the couple's negative qualities in their essay thus engaging in a downward comparison.

Discussion

The results of this study did not provide any support for the hypothesis that PSR status with a fictional couple has a moderating effect on relationship evaluations after exposure to a romantic narrative. None of the analyses yielded significant effects. These results are inconsistencies with previous literature on this topic. Specifically, in past studies on PSRs, they found that when a person does have a bond, assimilation is much more likely to occur such that a person will see themselves as more similar to that media figure, and as a result, PSR status tends to have positive effects on self-evaluations (Young et al., 2012; Young et al., 2013). In the current study, exposure to a fictional couple had no effect on relationship evaluations in the PSR couple condition.

This research is also inconsistent with past research on upward social comparisons and relationship quality (Smith LeBeau & Buckingham, 2008; Buunk &

Ybema, 2003). The results of these past studies support the perspective that upward social comparisons to other couples, or seeing other couples as better or more ideal than one's own relationship, lead to increased relationship insecurity and decreased relationship quality. The current study attempted to incite an upward comparison with the fictional couple in both conditions. However, the results revealed that exposure to a fictional couple in both the PSR couple and non-PSR couple condition did not have any effect on relationship insecurity or relationship quality.

Furthermore, the results are inconsistent with past studies that found exposure to romantic narratives is associated with negative relationship evaluations. (Haferkamp, 1999; Reizer & Hetsroni, 2014). Though exposure to a fictional couple did not lead to higher relationship evaluations, at the same time, my results do not necessarily lead to lower relationship evaluations. In other words, exposure to a romantic narrative did not make participants feel worse about their relationship. This is, however, consistent with findings of the study by Johnson and Holmes (2009). Their results revealed that single participants reported lower relationship satisfaction after they were exposed to a romantic narrative. However, similar to the current study, participants who were currently involved in a relationship did not experience a decline in their relationship satisfaction.

Limitations

It is important to note some limitations of the current study. As previously mentioned, given time and resource constraints, I used a single-factor experimental design. A true test of moderation would necessitate a 2x2 factorial design. To do this, an ideal study would require romantic narrative exposure (exposure vs. no exposure) and PSR status with the fictional couple from that narrative (PSR vs. no PSR) as the

independent variables. Specifically, participants would watch either a movie that features a fictional couple within a romantic narrative, or a control movie that does not include a love story. Following, participants would be asked to complete a series of questionnaires assessing their relationship evaluations. However, I could not do this because: (1) there were not enough participants currently involved in romantic relationships in the Psychology Subject Pool at Cal Lutheran, and (2) such a design would require a controlled laboratory setting, which is impossible to achieve in an online study.

As a result, I opted to employ a simplified design for this initial investigation, which allowed me to conduct this study through Mturk. Although there were clear benefits to using MTurk (e.g., facilitated recruitment of participants in romantic relationships), there were some limitations. Notably, as a study administered online and accessible to anyone above the age of 18, there were several factors I could not control for such as level of education, English as a main language, and a guarantee that the study was taken seriously and without distractions. Length of exposure to the romantic narrative, which in this case was the length of time spent writing about the favorite fictional couple or non-favorite fictional couple, could not be controlled either. In my data, I observed that some participants wrote full paragraphs while some wrote only one sentence. This calls to question if variation in their engagement in the task and experience with the fictional couple elicited different effects. Also in the data, there were a handful of participants who did not follow the writing task instructions properly (i.e., writing about their own relationship or a real-life couple). However, even with the exclusion of these participants in separate analyses, there were still no significant effects of fictional couple exposure on relationship evaluations.

In addition, there may also have been an issue with the fictional couple used in the non-PSR couple condition. As some participants pointed out in their responses, Romeo and Juliet was written as a tragedy, not meant to be viewed simply as a great love story. In addition, it was difficult for some to find positive aspects about their relationship, pointing out that they were too young, hormonally-driven, not in real love, etc. Though I attempted to determine the most suitable fictional couple to use for the non-PSR couple condition through a pre-test, there are aspects of Romeo and Juliet's love story that I did realize were not ideal, however I did not anticipate these aspects to overshadow the many positive aspects about their relationship. Nonetheless, the negative aspects of Romeo and Juliet may have provoked a downward comparison which is the opposite direction of social comparison that I predicted in my hypothesis.

One question I included at the end of the study asked participants what they thought was the purpose of this study. As it turned out, many participants in the PSR couple condition and the non-PSR couple condition were able to guess the general purpose of why the study was being conducted. Taking this into account, there were certain demand characteristics that could have cued the participants on the intended purpose and consequently a hypothesis of the study. If an assumption of the hypothesis was made, it is possible participants answered questions in a biased manner as opposed to their natural and honest answers.

One last point to consider is the length of participants' relationships. A majority of the participants had been in a relationship for over five years, with over a quarter of participants married for over 10 years. It could be that individuals who have been in such longstanding committed relationships cannot be easily altered in their relationship

evaluations after a brief exposure to a fictional couple.

Future Directions

For a future direction of the current study, I propose conducting a 2x2 factorial design to more adequately test a moderating effect, as previously mentioned. Another benefit to this proposed future study would be participant's length of exposure to a fictional couple. By asking participants to watch an entire movie, as opposed to a five-minute writing task done so in the current study, exposure to a fictional couple would be approximately two hours. In addition, to address the issue of demand characteristics, I would suggest including subtle and implicit measures of relationship satisfaction, closeness, and commitment. For example, future studies could utilize the partner implicit association test (IAT) that assesses implicit appraisals of romantic partners (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). Also, DeWall, Stillman and Finkel's (under review) drawing task could be utilized, in which participants are asked to draw a picture of themselves and their romantic partner. The distance between each individual (in millimeters) serves as an implicit measure of desired closeness. Indeed, these types of measures are both subtle and less susceptible to response bias.

Additionally, a future study could focus on a college age sample (or even high school age). Essentially, a non-married population could be considered for investigating the effect of fictional couple exposure. People in that age range tend to not be as firmly committed to their partners as opposed to a couple that have been married for years. It may be that as people are in the phase in their life where they are dating and engaging in romantic relationships, they may feel like they still have potential alternative options other than their current partner. Therefore, their perspectives on relationships and their

current partner may be effected by exposure to fictional couples in romantic narratives, more so than individuals who have been with and have solidified their views about their partner for years.

To further this idea, a study design that focuses on participants who are single should be explored as well. Single participants' exposure to romantic narratives could have an impact on their romantic relationship beliefs, qualities they look for in a partner, or even initiating and maintaining romantic relationships. Questionnaires such as the Romantic Beliefs Scale (Hefner & Wilson, 2013) and the Mate Values Inventory (Kirsner, Figueredo, & Jacobs, 2003) can be used in this potential study as an attempt to understand how exposure to romantic narratives can be affecting how single people view love and relationships.

Conclusion

In our society, individuals are constantly bombarded with romantic narratives in their everyday lives in all genres and forms of media. A majority of the previous literature takes the standpoint that exposure to all these romantic narratives tend to negatively impact how people feel about their own relationships. Therefore, I believe it is still important to understand how having a parasocial bond with the couple can counter this potentially harmful effect. If future experimental studies continue to fail to show an effect of romantic narrative exposure on relationship evaluations, one must also start to call into question the conclusions being drawn from the correlational literature. Indeed, it is possible that there is no direct causal relationship between exposure and romantic outcomes and that this relationship is more complicated than previously perceived.

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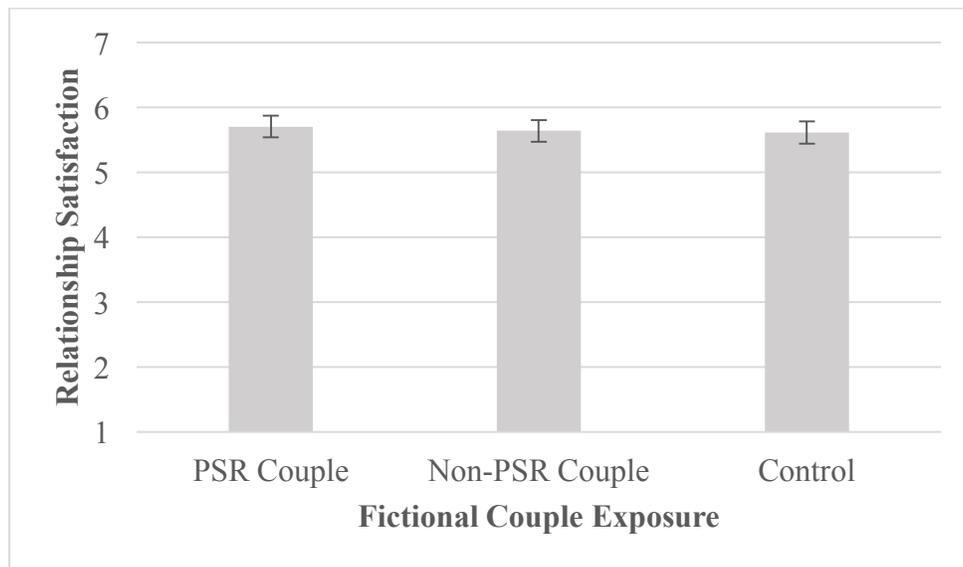


Figure 1. The effect of fictional couple exposure on relationship satisfaction, with standard error bars.

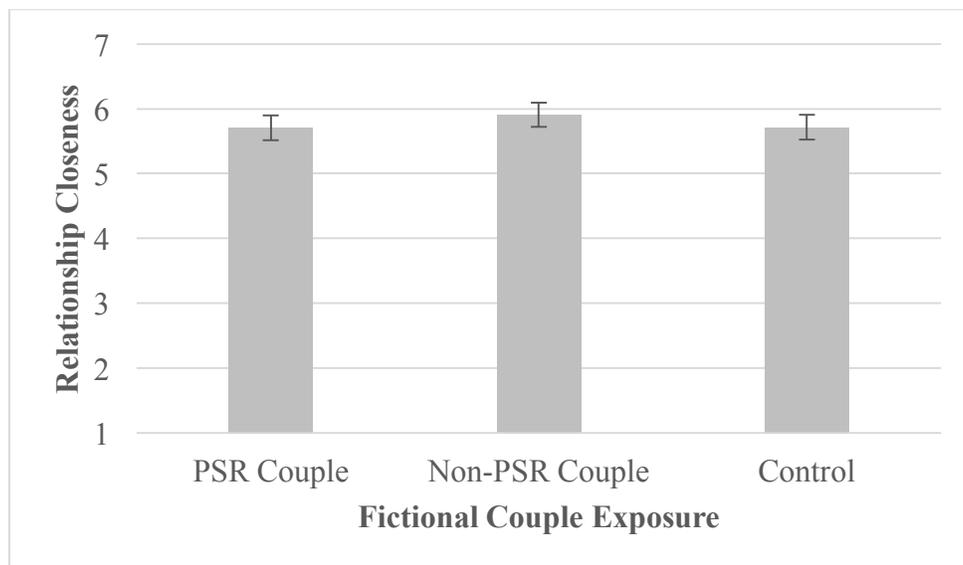


Figure 2. The effect of fictional couple exposure on relationship closeness, with standard error bars.

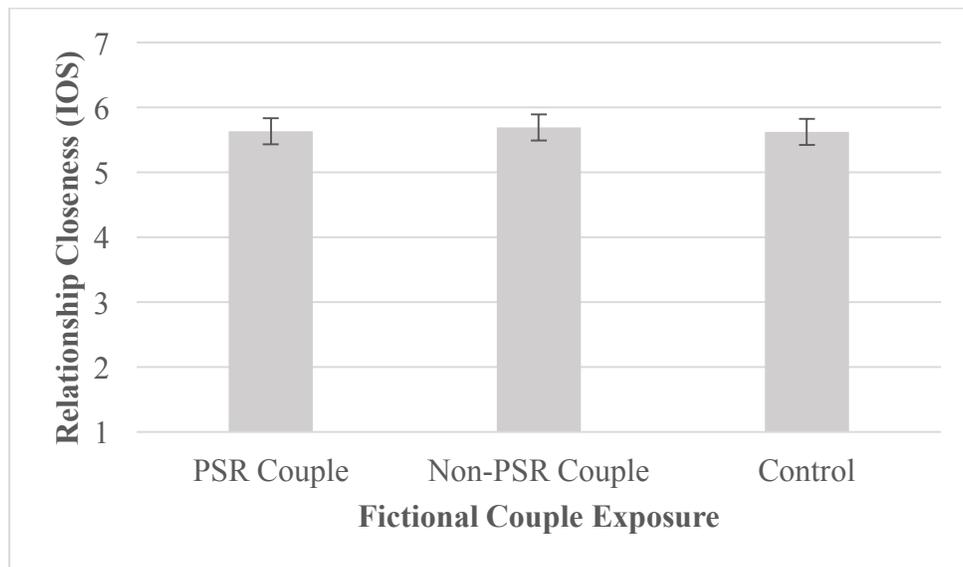


Figure 3. The effect of fictional couple exposure on relationship closeness (IOS measure), with standard error bars.

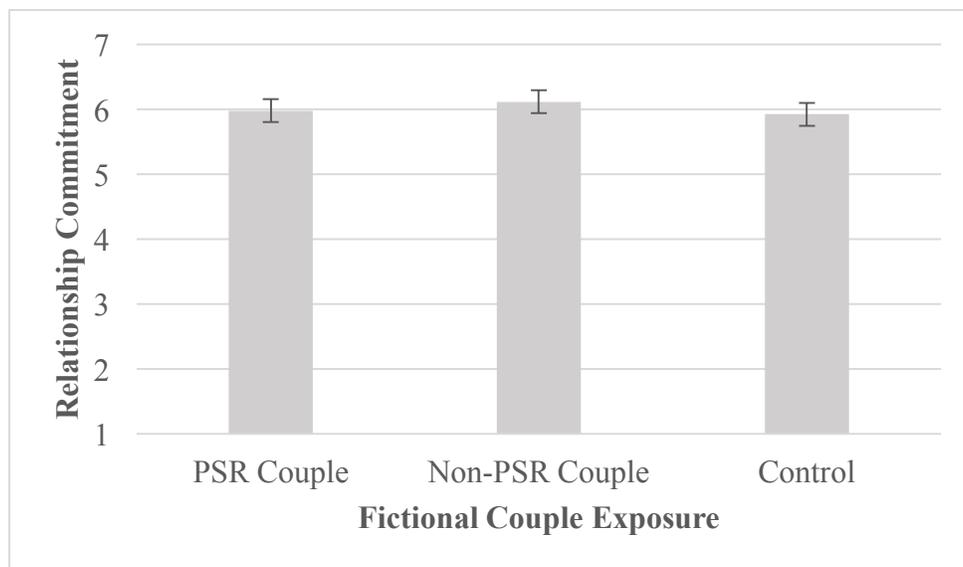


Figure 4. The effect of fictional couple exposure on relationship commitment, with standard error bars.

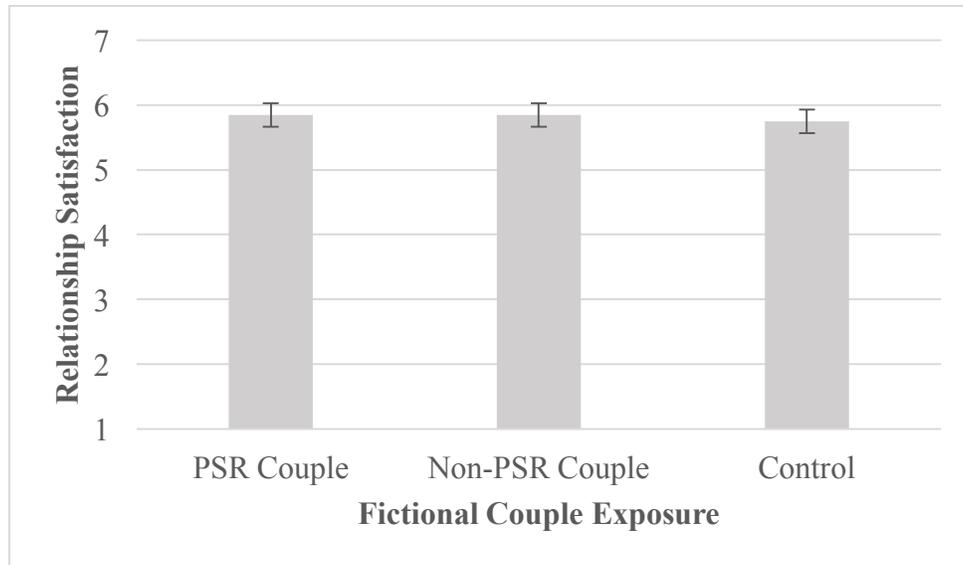


Figure 5. The effect of fictional couple exposure on PRQC relationship satisfaction, with standard error bars.

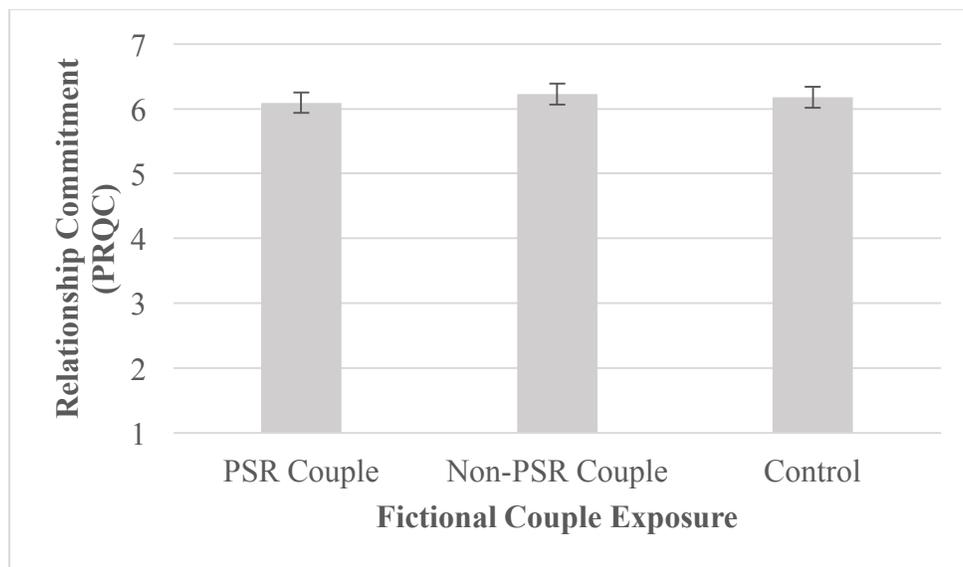


Figure 6. The effect of fictional couple exposure on PRQC relationship commitment, with standard error bars.

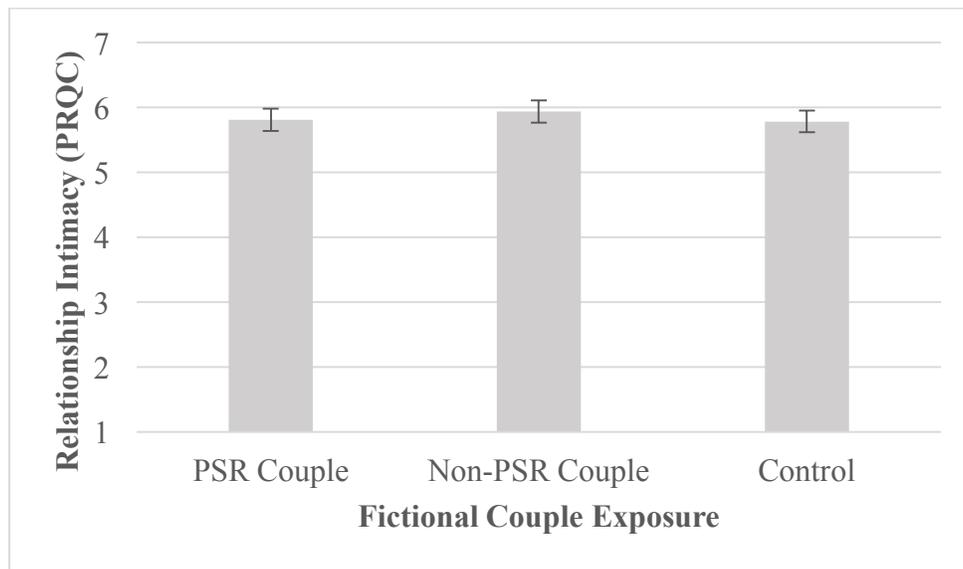


Figure 7. The effect of fictional couple exposure on PRQC relationship intimacy, with standard error bars.

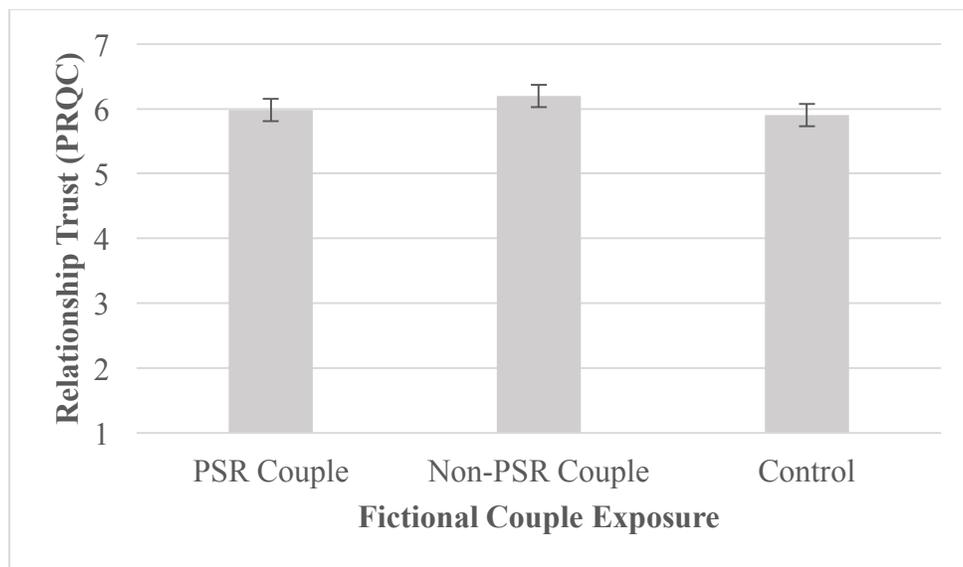


Figure 8. The effect of fictional couple exposure on PRQC relationship trust, with standard error bars.

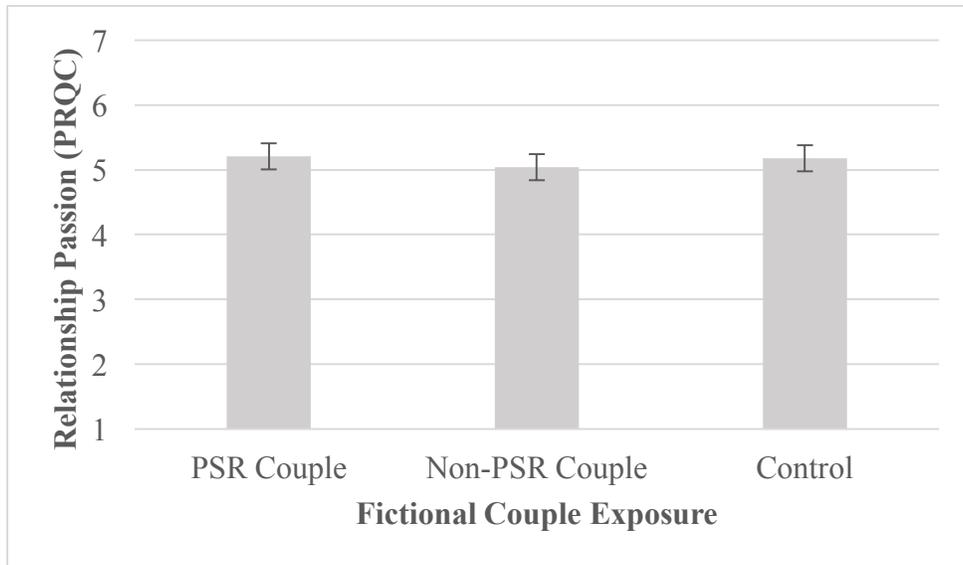


Figure 9. The effect of fictional couple exposure on PRQC relationship passion, with standard error bars.

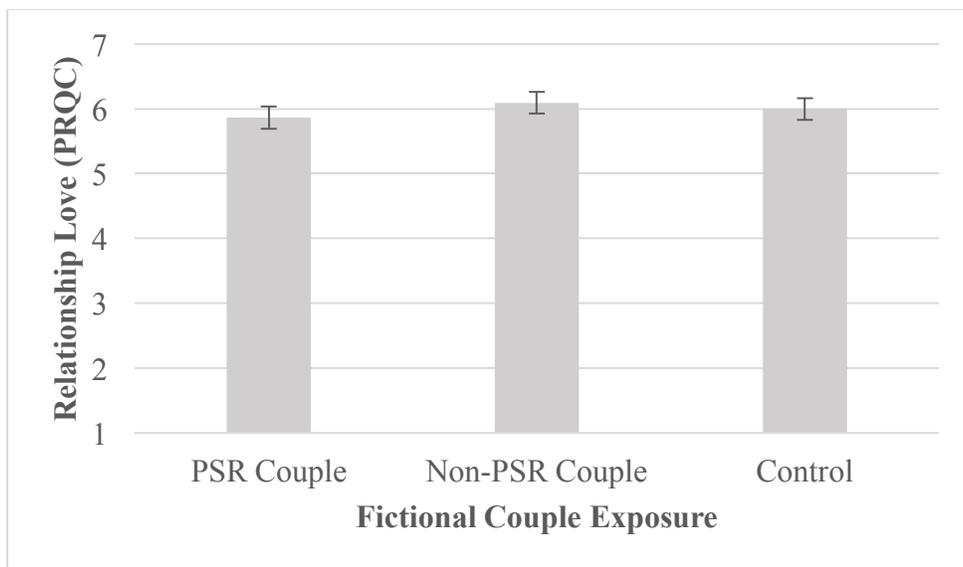


Figure 10. The effect of fictional couple exposure on PRQC relationship love, with standard error bars.

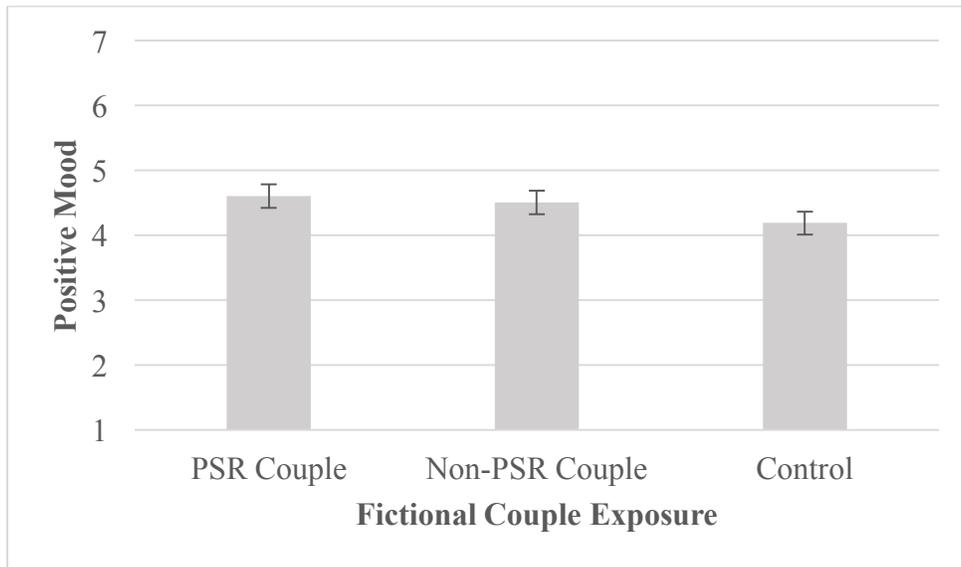


Figure 11. The effect of fictional couple exposure on positive mood, with standard error bars.

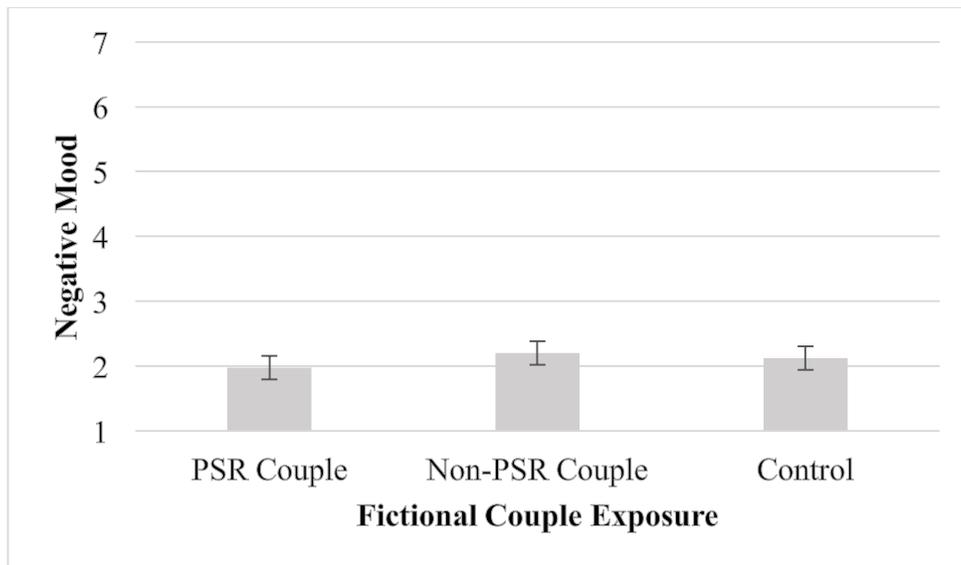


Figure 12. The effect of fictional couple exposure on negative mood, with standard error bars.

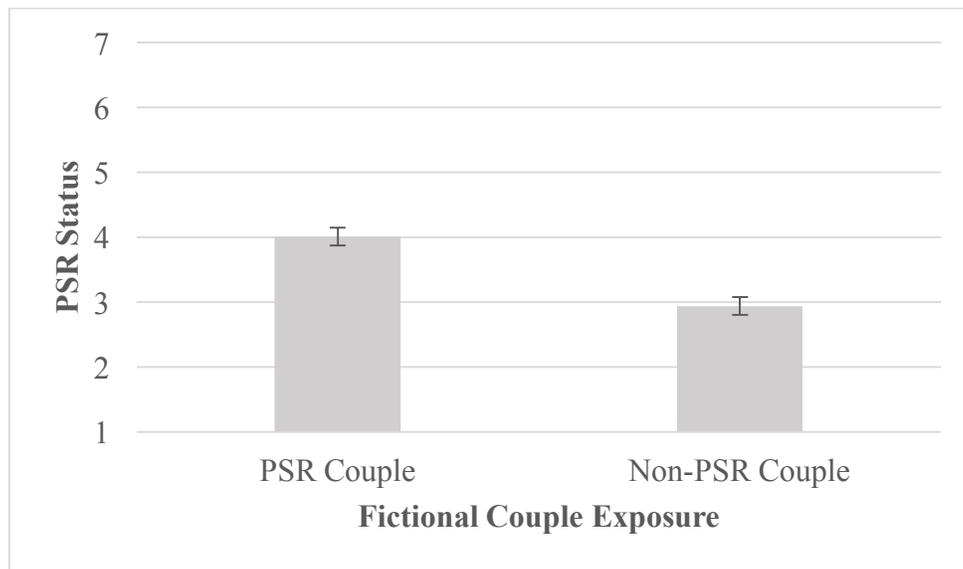


Figure 13. The effect of the writing task manipulation on participants' reported PSR status with the fictional couple, with standard error bars.

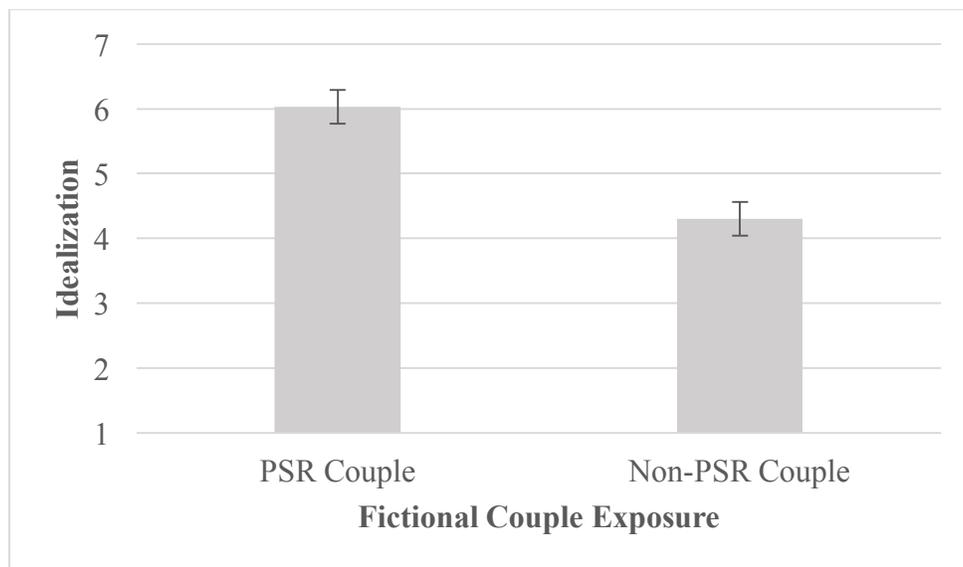


Figure 14. The effect of the writing task manipulation on participants' reported idealization of the fictional couple, with standard error bars.

Appendix A

Demographics

INSTRUCTIONS: Please answer the following questions about yourself.

What is your age? _____

What is your gender?

Male

Female

Non-binary

Other _____

What is your ethnicity?

White/Caucasian

Black/African American

Asian/Asian American

Hispanic/Latino/Chicano

Native American/American Indian

Middle Eastern

Multi-Ethnic

Other _____

What is your sexual orientation?

Straight (interested in the opposite sex)

Gay/Lesbian (interested in the same sex)

Bisexual (interested in either sex)

Other _____

What is your current relationship status?

Single

Casually Dating

Exclusively Dating

Engaged

Married

How long have you and your partner been together? Enter the total number of years/months.

How satisfied are you in your relationship?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not At All Satisfied			Moderately Satisfied			Extremely Satisfied

How committed are you to your current romantic partner?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not At All Committed			Moderately Committed			Extremely Committed

How close do you feel to your current romantic partner?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not At All Close			Moderately Close			Extremely Close

Appendix B

Writing Task InstructionsFavorite Fictional Couple

Please write about your favorite fictional couple. You should select a fictional couple that you admire and view as having an ideal relationship. This couple can be from a television show, movie, or book. If you currently do not have a favorite fictional couple, pick a fictional couple you have liked a lot in the past. In your response, please describe the couple, their love story, and all the positive characteristics of their relationship in as much detail as possible. Please write for the entire 5 minutes!

Non-Favorite Fictional Couple

Please write about the fictional couple Romeo and Juliet. This is a fictional couple that many people admire and view as having a positive relationship. In your response, please describe the couple, their love story, and all the positive characteristics of their relationship in as much detail as possible. Please write for the entire 5 minutes!

Control Condition

Please write about your typical experience at the grocery store. In your response, please describe everything you do while you are at the store, including what aisles you walk through, what you typically purchase, and the check-out process. Provide as much detail as possible. Please write for the entire 5 minutes!

Appendix C

Positive and Negative Affective Schedule

INSTRUCTIONS: Please indicate how much you feel each of the following emotions right now.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not At All			Moderately			Extremely

Interested
Distressed
Excited
Upset
Strong
Guilty
Scared
Hostile
Enthusiastic
Proud
Irritable
Alert
Ashamed
Inspired
Nervous
Determined
Attentive
Jittery
Active
Afraid

Appendix D

Relationship Satisfaction

INSTRUCTIONS: Please respond to the following statements about your relationship.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not At All			Somewhat			Completely
True			True			True

I have a very strong relationship with my partner.

I do not feel that my current relationship is successful.

My relationship with my partner is very rewarding (i.e., gratifying, fulfilling).

I am extremely happy with my current romantic relationship.

Appendix E

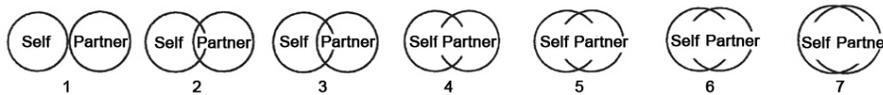
Relationship Closeness

INSTRUCTIONS: Please respond to the following statements about your relationship.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not At All			Somewhat			Completely
True			True			True

- I am closer to my partner than any other person in my life.
- I feel extremely attached to my partner.
- I am very much in love with my partner.
- I would choose to spend time with my partner over anyone else in my life.
- I am extremely satisfied with my current romantic relationship.

Select the picture that best describes how close or connected you feel to your partner.



Appendix F

Relationship Commitment

INSTRUCTIONS: Please respond to the following statements about your relationship.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not At All			Somewhat			Completely
True			True			True

I want our relationship to last a very long time.

I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner.

I would feel very upset if our relationship were to end in the near future.

Appendix G

Perceived Relationship Quality Component (PRQC) Inventory

INSTRUCTIONS: Please respond to the following statements about your relationship.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not At All			Moderately			Extremely

Relationship Satisfaction

How satisfied are you with your relationship?
 How content are you with your relationship?
 How happy are you with your relationship?

Commitment

How committed are you to your relationship?
 How dedicated are you to your relationship?
 How devoted are you to your relationship?

Intimacy

How intimate is your relationship?
 How close is your relationship?
 How connected are you to your partner?

Trust

How much do you trust your partner?
 How much can you count on your partner?
 How dependable is your partner?

Passion

How passionate is your relationship?
 How lustful is your relationship?
 How sexually intense is your relationship?

Love

How much do you love your partner?
 How much do you adore your partner?
 How much do you cherish your partner?

Appendix H

Manipulation and Suspicion Checks

What were the names of the fictional couple you wrote about during this study?

What book, movie, TV show , etc. is this fictional couple from?

INSTRUCTIONS: Please answer the following questions about the fictional couple you wrote about earlier in this study.

1	2	3	4	5
Not At All				Extremely

How familiar are you with (know about/ have heard about) this fictional couple?

How much do you like this fictional couple?

How much do you care about this fictional couple?

How much do you relate to this fictional couple?

How much do you identify with this fictional couple?

To what extent do you feel like you "know this fictional couple?"

How much would you like to be friends with this fictional couple in real life?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not At All	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Moderately	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Extremely

I view this couple as having a positive relationship.

I consider this couple to have an ideal relationship.

What do you think was the purpose of this study?

This study required that you be involved in a romantic relationship in order to participate.

Are you actually in a romantic relationship? Please answer this question honestly. Your response will not affect whether or not you receive payment. You will receive payment either way.

Yes, I am in a relationship

No, I am not in a relationship

Appendix I

Pre-Test Study Materials

INSTRUCTIONS: In a moment, you will be presented with various fictional couples. Please rate your familiarity and liking of each fictional couple.

How familiar are you with this fictional couple?

1	2	3	4	5
Not At All Familiar	Slightly Familiar	Moderately Familiar	Very Familiar	Extremely Familiar

How much do you like this fictional couple?

1	2	3	4	5
Not At All	A Little	Moderately	A Lot	Very Much

Andy and April -- from the TV show Parks and Recreation
 Ben and Leslie -- from the TV show Parks and Recreation
 Chandler and Monica -- from the TV show Friends
 Cory and Topanga -- from the TV show Boy Meets World
 Danny and Sandy -- from the movie Grease
 Derek and Meredith -- from the TV show Greys Anatomy
 Edward and Bella from the Twilight trilogy
 Gatsby and Daisy from the book The Great Gatsby
 Han Solo and Princess Leia from the Star Wars trilogy
 Jack and Rose from the movie Titanic
 Jay and Gloria from the TV show Modern Family
 Jessie and Rebecca from the TV show Full House
 Jim and Pam from the TV show The Office
 Leonard and Penny from the TV show Big Bang Theory
 Marshal and Lily from the TV show How I Met your Mother
 Mr. Big and Carrie from the TV show Sex and the City
 Mr. Grey and Anastasia the 50 Shades of Grey trilogy
 Noah and Allie from the movie The Notebook
 Peta and Katniss the Hunger Games trilogy
 Phil and Claire from the TV show Modern Family
 Rhett Butler and Scarlett O'Hara the movie Gone with the Wind
 Ricky and Lucy from the TV show I Love Lucy
 Romeo and Juliet the play Romeo and Juliet
 Ron and Hermione the Harry Potter series
 Ross and Rachel from the TV show Friends
 Sheldon and Amy from the TV show Big Bang Theory
 Tony Stark and Pepper from the movie Iron Man
 Zack and Kelly from the TV show Saved by the Bell