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From Bridgerton to Love is Blind: Romantic Relationship Expectations Based on Consumption  
of Original Streaming Television

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Requirements for Departmental Honors in Marketing

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## **From Bridgerton to Love is Blind: Romantic Relationship Expectations Based on Consumption of Original Streaming Television**

### **Abstract**

This study examines how relationship expectations differ when a user consumes traditional television in comparison to original streaming TV. The findings of this study are consistent with previous studies that found that those with lower perceptions of trust and commitment in relationships tend to watch more romantic television. In addition, those who watch more original streaming television of all kinds, tend to have a more romanticized view of relationships. In addition to replicating previous studies, this study found that while young people may be reticent to define their relationships, those who do have higher levels of trust and commitment than those who avoid defining their relationships.

### **Introduction**

Is the “Happily Ever After” real? Think back to all the classics: Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White and others. For them it was real, but what about in real life? Perceptions and expectations of love and romantic love are developed long before the actual romance is experienced (Bachen, & Illouz, 1996). Media in general and television in particular are common modes of communicating emotional stories leading viewers to unrealistic portrayals of real life (Livingstone, 1987; Reizer & Hetsroni, 2014; Eyal & Finnerty, 2007, 2009). These unrealistic portrayals can be detrimental to relationships. Exposure to media has been noted as a key factor in divorce and marital dissatisfaction as it can create unrealistic expectations (Larson, 1988; Demo & Ganong, 1994).

Every day we see the reruns of how society has constructed romance: essentially someone gets the someone else of their dreams. However, streaming platforms have been persistent in changing the narrative. Netflix along with other streaming services are not dictated by traditional Television executives, but rather user drive, where audiences determine what shows and characters are created and represented. This allows streaming platforms the ability to reflect and appeal to the growing audience unlike traditional cable television where it has shaped society instead of letting society shape it (Corfield, 2017).

In previous years, research has been done on gender roles in TV and movie media, specifically looking at male and female dynamics in character portrayals and how they continue to influence society (Wood, 1994; Ottosson & Cheng, 2012). Research has also looked at romantic portrayals within TV and film and how it contributes to romantic relationship expectations (Lemay Jr. & Venaglia, 2016; Segrin & Nabi, 2002 and Banjo, O., 2002). While traditional television and film may demonstrate more rigid societal expectations, streaming platforms have more flexibility in their offerings and may showcase more modern relationships. Streaming platforms often operate on an algorithm that tracks what genres the audience members like along with details like when you pause, rewind or rewatch any piece of content. This allows streaming platforms more information about what the audience wants to see in terms of content. This is in comparison to traditional TV that solely rely on Nielsen ratings that can only incorporate a fraction of those details into their metrics (Burroughs, B. 2019). Despite this key difference in shows made for streaming platforms, little research has been done on romantic expectations based on these shows.

According to statistics taken in March 2021, Fluent Pulse found that compared to other generations, millennials and Gen X are most likely to spend 3 or more hours per day streaming

video content and Gen Z spends two or more hours per day. Despite access to many types of technology, young people still spend more time watching television than using any other type of mass media (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005). With society evolving and understanding new forms of diversity, we see that Gen Z struggles the most in being able to identify who they are through the traditional labels of race, class, religion, gender and sexual orientation, leaving them to rely heavily on media and its portrayals (Sladek & Grabinger, 2014).

This research aims to specifically look at relationship expectations within original TV shows produced by Streaming platforms. Specifically, how the portrayal of relationships on streaming platforms such as Netflix impacts Gen Z's expectations of romantic relationships. Traditional TV viewing has decreased, especially due to the pandemic. Now 68% percent of people are strictly streaming while only 28% are currently watching traditional TV (Bloom, 2022). With its significant growth and popularity, it is essential to understand the impacts of romantic relationship portrayals on streaming platforms, especially as it relates to young people.

This paper begins with a review of the relevant literature, followed by the hypotheses development. Next an explanation of methodology is included. Then the results are explained, followed by limitations and directions for future research. Implications for consumers and for streaming platforms are discussed in conclusion.

## **Literature Review**

Research states that social cognition and relational beliefs are important for having relationships that continue to thrive (Berscheid, 1994; Fletcher & Fincham, 1991; Fletcher & Fitness, 1993). However, beliefs about romantic relationships are not systematic from formal training but rather develop from observation and exposure to relevant images especially ones

from the media (Galician, 2004). Children at a young age are exposed to the mass media representation of romance, and as we age we are aware of the impact media has in shaping our relationship views (Bachen & Illouz, 1996; Illouz, 1998).

Prior research has found that excessive television consumption was related to overly optimistic expectations in romantic relationships (Segrin & Nabi, 2002). This has led viewers to search for partners with an extremely attractive physical appearance, and pleasing personality (Eggermont, 2004; Segrin & Nabi, 2002). Due to the abundance of conflict on television, many viewers expect to be in a relationship with significant conflict (De Souza & Sherry, 2006). Another expectation that has been discovered is “mind reading” (Haferkamp, 1999; Segrin & Nabi, 2002). Mind reading in terms of a relational expectation is the ability to read other ones thoughts and feelings and is considered necessary for successful relationships (Levenson & Ruef, 1992). Several studies have also found that portrayals of sexuality on television impacts romantic relationship expectations (Aubrey, Harrison, Kramer, & Yellin, 2003; Brown & Newcomer, 1991; Collins et al., 2004; Pardun, L'Engle, & Brown, 2005).

Researchers have found that the type of show being watched matters (Segrin & Nabi, 2002; Signorielli, 1991). Watching romantic television has been found to lead to traditional gender role attitudes, and lower commitment in marriage, viewing marriage as more costly, and finding alternatives to current relationships more favorable (Osborn, 2012; Riyadeneyra & Lebo, 2008). Watching non-romantic dramas and feeling they were realistic led to having less traditional dating role attitudes. Watching soap operas specifically led to dating at a younger age and having more partners (Riyadeneyra & Lebo, 2008). Research on reality television found that those who watched more frequently reported drinking and using hot tubs early in relationships (Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007).

While it is clear that watching television can impact relationship expectations, researchers have not explored the complex and diverse relationships portrayed on streaming platforms and how that impacts today's young viewers. Due to the popularity of platforms like Netflix, AmazonPrime and Disney+, it is important to understand if the relationships portrayed are impacting young people similarly to traditional TV, and specifically how the modern content impacts relationship expectations.

### **Hypotheses Development**

While researchers have not explored the impact of watching streaming on relationship expectations, research has found that watching romantic television can lead to lower commitment in marriage and finding alternatives to current relationships more favorable (Osborn, 2012; Riyadeneyra & Lebo, 2008). Therefore, it is expected that those who score lower on commitment and trust watch more romantic original streaming television.

*H1: Those who score lower on the commitment scale watch more romantic original streaming content than those who score higher.*

*H2: Those who score lower on the trust scale watch more romantic original streaming content than those who score higher.*

According to Knopp, K., Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (2020) "Defining the relationship" (DTR) conversations are a topic of interest, but have been the focus of little empirical research, leaving a gap in the psychological literature on romantic relationship development. They found that planning for the future and resolving ambiguity were common motivations for DTR talks, though many teens also reported more spontaneous motivations; further, DTR talks often, but not always, resulted in positive changes in the relationship, including increased clarity, intimacy, and commitment. Therefore, it is expected that those who

value trust and commitment more would be more willing to have DTR discussions than those who value them less.

*H3: Those who find “defining the relationship” conversations important are more likely to score higher on commitment and trust than those who do not.*

Though there is no specific research on how streaming original content effects one’s expectations of trust or commitment, research does state that in every interpersonal relationship, a social exchange takes place whereby people tend to balance their emotional investment in the relationship by constantly comparing their current relationship to their perceptions of what they deserve. Cultivation theory suggests that heavy consumption of media might create false schemas about ideal relationships, thereby creating false perceptions of what we deserve (Banjo, 2002). This may lead to those who consume more original streaming television to have romanticized expectations for relationships.

*H4: Those who consume more original streaming content are more likely to have romanticized expectations about “true love” than those who consume less original streaming content.*

Research suggests that at a young age children form schemas on romance that are heavily influenced by the media they watch. What young children think of as “typical” romance is infused into the schemata they form if it is widely shared by society (Bachen & Illouz, 1996). Females may value trust and commitment more than men because socially that is what women are expected to care about. Many main female character’s sole purpose is to attain “true love” which means a lifelong partner who you trust and is committed to you. Existing research has also emphasized that women are generally thought to be more interested in and willing to express love and commitment than are men ( Balswick, 1988; Pellegrini, 1978).



*H5: Females will be more likely to value trust and commitment and defining the relationship when compared to males.*

## **Methodology**

Participants were recruited using social media. The survey was taken on Qualtrics and included questions based on similar studies conducted on television and its impact on relationship expectations (Segrin and Nabi, 2002; Banjo, 2002). Questions were modified to focus specifically on shows created for streaming services (not traditional television shows now airing on streaming (i.e.. *Friends, The Office, Law and Order*). Participants first answered questions pertaining to how often they watch streaming services and on platforms they use and watch most.

Similar to Segrin and Nabi (2002), participants were asked what types of shows they watched as well as their favorite shows. Next, they were asked a series of romantic relationship questions. First, Tornstam's (1992) Expectations for Intimacy scale, a 5-item Likert scale that measures idealized expectations for intimacy in a close relationship was used. Participants stated their level of agreement with statements that included "You should be able to trust each other completely" and "You should be able to talk openly about everything." This was followed by the eros subscale from Hendrick and Hendrick's (1986) love attitudes scale. Questions were again asked using a 5-item Likert scale. Statements included "My lover and I were attracted to each other immediately after we first met" and "my lover and I really understand each other."

To measure willingness to define the relationship, a modified form of the topic avoidance scale by Baxter and Wilmot (1985) was used. Participants were asked questions about how often they avoid discussing important aspects of their relationship including “To what extent do you avoid talking about how much time you should spend together when in a relationship?” and “To what extent do you avoid defining your romantic relationships?” This was followed by questions related to trust and commitment. A modified version of the Commitment Inventory Scale by Stanley & Markman (1992) was used, as Banjo (2002) used in a similar study on media consumption. Questions were asked using a 7-item Likert scale with statements on commitment including “Except when a spouse dies, marriage should be a once in a lifetime commitment” and “I do not believe in having a committed relationship.” Statements on trust included “I trust my partner completely” and “I would be extremely surprised if my partner was having an affair.”

To assess how realistic participants find romantic relationships conveyed on streaming platforms the Perceived Realism Scale (Rubin, 1994) was modified to discuss streaming services. Questions were asked using a 5-item Likert scale with statements including “Original streaming television presents things as they really are in life” and “If I see something on Original streaming television, I can’t be really sure it really is that way.” Lastly, demographic variables were collected including time spent on social media, sexual orientation, current relationship status, gender, age and ethnicity.

## **Results**

A total of 66 participants completed the survey. Seventy-two percent of participants were female, 77% were white and ages ranged from 18-34. The majority of participants were single (36%) or in a dating relationship of more than a year (30%). Seventy-eight percent of

participants identify as straight, with 15% identifying as bisexual. On average, participants spent 3-4 hours on social media per day (46%).

*H1: Those who score higher on the commitment scale watch more romantic original streaming content than those who score lower.*

H1 was supported. There was not a significant difference between those who watched more original streaming content and perceptions of commitment ( $p=.576$ ). However, an ANOVA showed those who perceived commitment as less important consumed more romantic streaming content ( $F(1)=7.746, p=.007$ ). Those who scored lower on commitment watched more romantic original content ( $m=7.06$ ) than those who scored higher ( $m=5.66$ ). There was no significant difference for participants who watched any other type of original content (reality tv, comedy, action etc.).

*H2: Those who score lower on the trust scale watch more romantic original streaming content than those who score higher.*

H2 was supported ( $F(1)=5.254, p=.025$ ). Those who scored lower on trust watched more original content ( $m=6.68$ ) than those who scored higher ( $m=5.84$ ).

*H3: Those who find “defining the relationship” conversations important are more likely to score higher on commitment and trust than those who do not.*

H3 was supported for both commitment ( $F(9)=3.127, p=.005$ ) and trust ( $F(9)=7.016, p=.001$ ). Those who were more likely to define their relationship, scored higher on commitment ( $m=80.6$ ) than those who did not ( $m=56$ ). Those who were more likely to define their

relationship were also more likely to score higher on trust ( $m=26.5$ ) compared to those who did not ( $m=16$ ).

H4: Those who consume more original streaming content are more likely to have romanticized expectations about “true love” than those who consume less original streaming content.

H4 was supported ( $F(13)=1.976$ ,  $p=.044$ ). Those who watch more original streaming content were more likely to have romanticized expectations of true love ( $m=6.2$ ) compared to those who watch less ( $m=5.7$ ).

H5: Females will be more likely to value trust and commitment and defining the relationship when compared to males.

H5 was partially supported. An ANOVA for both commitment ( $F(2)=4.942$ ,  $p=.011$ ) and trust ( $F(2)=4.950$ ,  $p=.010$ ) found significant differences. Males scored lower on commitment ( $m=64.67$ ) when compared to females ( $m=75.35$ ). They also scored lower on trust ( $m=21.7$ ) when compared to females ( $m=25.07$ ). When it came to defining the relationship, males also scored lower ( $m=12.2$ ) compared to females ( $m=13.79$ ), however this difference was not significant ( $p=.07$ ).

### **Discussion, limitations, and directions for future research**

The results of this study replicate findings from previous research on television and its impact on relationship expectations. There is a clear relationship between commitment and trust and watching romantic original streaming television. Future research should investigate this relationship further to understand why romantic content would diminish trust and commitment and in turn its impact on actual romantic relationships. This study also found that DTR

conversations are especially important to those who value trust and commitment. More research should be done to investigate DTR with Gen Z as there may be a tendency to avoid labels or definition in a relationship. This study also found that females were more likely to value trust and commitment more than men, consistent with previous research. It is important to note there are limitations to these findings. One being that the sample size was less than 100 participants and was only conducted in the New England area. Another being that the sample mainly consisted of women. For future research, a larger sample should be done across a wider geographic area, as well as incorporate a more diverse pool of participants that identify across the wide spectrum of identity.

## **Conclusion**

The results of this study demonstrate that original streaming content impacts the relationship expectations of Gen z similar to the way traditional television viewing has impacted participants in previous studies. This demonstrates that although streaming platforms use more modern algorithms to decide what content to run, the content itself may be similar to traditional television. Understanding more about media exposure and its impact on relationship expectations will allow users to see how their perception of commitment and trust has developed, as well as lead to a better understanding of what “true love” might be. Having expectations that more clearly resemble reality is important not only for users to feel satisfied while watching a show, but also in their personal relationships.

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