10

Romantic Relationships and Traditional Media

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Many have contemplated the role media play in romantic relationships, from poets and lovesick teens to therapists and divorce lawyers. In this chapter, we will explore scholarship on traditional media, whereas the next chapter explores digital media (McEwan & Lefebvre, this volume). Although separating "old media" and "new media" helps break this massive topic into manageable chapters, we advise reading these chapters together regardless of your research interests. As we will soon explain, this division can be counterproductive.

In this chapter, we will first establish our scope of traditional media and provide a framework for studying all media. Our literature review will begin by delving into the use of traditional media to seek partners and initiate romantic relationships. Then, we will consider how people use media to communicate within and about their romantic relationships. Next, we will consider how media consumption and media content can affect our relational beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Finally, we will consider how people can experience romantic relationships *with* media. In each section, we will synthesize topical research, introduce relevant theories, highlight key elements of media, and consider how media have shaped our scholarly understanding of romantic relationships.

MEDIA: A (RE)INTRODUCTION

In the twentieth century, media such as newspapers, radio, telephone, and television became embedded in the fabric of our daily lives. Yet, a skim of contemporary journal articles and academic books on romantic relationships reveals a dearth of research focused on the role of media. Most romantic relationships under study, however, have qualified as *mixed media relationships*, transpiring through and affected by multiple channels (Parks, 2017). Given the growing pervasiveness of media in modern life, it is essential for

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relationship researchers to consider why media are important and how they can best be studied.

For the purposes of this chapter, we use the term *traditional media* to refer to channels that require material means for communication and precede the Internet age. This conceptualization excludes face-to-face and computer-mediated communication, yet includes media that have more recently shifted to digital transmission (e.g., television, telephone calls). Specifically, we consider written or text-based messages (e.g., letters, cards, notes); literature and recorded folklore (e.g., poetry, novels, mythological/religious texts, comic books, graphic novels, manga); newspapers, magazines, and other print media; radio (broadcast as well as shortwave, citizens' band [CB], and amateur radio); audio-based exchanges (e.g., telephone calls, party lines, answering machines, voicemail, recordings); transmitted messages (e.g., telegraph, telegrams, teletype, facsimile); music recordings and artwork; television, film, and videos; and other methods (e.g., billboards, graffiti, bumper stickers). These channels entail interpersonal, group, mass (one-to-many), and masspersonal (interpersonal or group that is visible to many) communication.

Categorizing "old" and "new" media is relative, however; not too long ago, these designations separated letters from the telegraph, or newspapers from television. Although an emergent medium may seem novel, chances are it is far more similar than dissimilar to existing media. Instead of focusing on a particular medium, device, platform, or app, it is critical to determine what properties of media are significant.

An affordance-based approach is a useful lens for understanding why media are important and how they are distinct. *Affordances* are the inherent attributes of an object that emerge when a user interacts with it (Gibson, 1979). The affordances that enable or shape human interactions are known as *social affordances* (Fox & McEwan, 2017) and are critical for understanding how media function in relationship contexts.

Several affordances are presented and defined in Table 10.1 with examples of how they have been discussed or studied in relevant literature. Importantly, individual perceptions of affordances vary, and context is a critical factor in shaping perceptions (Fox & McEwan, 2017). Let's consider Sheila and Johnny, a dating couple. Sheila may perceive a phone call private when she's at home, but not at work. Johnny may also consider a phone call at home private, except when his eavesdropping roommate is around. Each partner's perception of privacy is likely to shape what they feel comfortable saying and how intimate the conversation will become, which in turn could influence relationship development and satisfaction in one or both partners. As this example illustrates, affordances allow people to understand why a particular channel may be selected and how it may affect romantic interactions and relationships.

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TABLE 10.1 Key media affordances and applications to romantic relationship contexts

Affordance	Definition	Application
Accessibility	Ability to use a channel regardless of time, place, structural limitations, or other constraints	Many people could not afford to send telegrams when geographically separated (Standage, 1998)
Social presence	Feelings of togetherness and sharing the same experience with another person	Media create social presence in long-distance couples (Stafford, 2004)
Physical co-presence	Two parties are co-located in the same space	Couples talk while watching television together (Alberts et al., 2005)
Visibility/privacy	The extent to which communication can be observed by others	Communication between prisoners and their spouses is monitored and may be censored (Black, 2010)
Anonymity/ identifiability	How easily a communicator can be recognized or tied to their real name or identity	CB radio operators use handles that convey relationship status or interest (Dannefer & Kasen, 1981)
Bandwidth	Number of cues that can be transmitted through a channel, contingent on modality	Video dating provides richer information than photographs or written profiles (Woll, 1986)
Synchronicity	Timing of message exchange	A marriage made by telegraph was deemed legal as vows were exchanged in real time (Marvin, 1988)
Editability	The capacity to change or revise a message	Letters can be revised before sending (Janning, 2018)
Personalization/ addressivity	Tailoring a message to an individual recipient	Sentiments on mass-produced greeting cards can feel impersonal (West, 2004)
Conversational control	Managing the mechanics of an interaction (e.g., turn taking, starting or ending a dialogue)	Military spouses can initiate letters but not phone calls to their deployed mates (Carter & Renshaw, 2016)
Persistence/ ephemerality	Duration of a message	Love letters are valued because they can be kept and revisited by the recipient (Janning, 2018)
Tangibility	Having a physical materiality that can be touched and manipulated	Photographs of couples are often displayed for visitors in the home (Lohmann et al., 2003)
Recordability/ replicability	How easily a message can be copied or duplicated	Meaningful songs can be copied to create a mixtape for a romantic partner – and the mix duplicated for a new partner (Drew, 2016)
Scalability	How easily a message can be shared with a wider audience	Matchmaking radio shows help singles broadcast their availability to a large pool (Griffen-Foley, 2020)

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MEDIATED RELATIONSHIP INITIATION: MATE SEEKING AND FINDING

Research on the communicative power and effects of media grew rapidly in the mid-twentieth century (e.g., Lazarsfeld, 1940). The predominant theoretical paradigm suggested that media were monolithic and unidirectional, and people were passive consumers. The uses and gratifications approach reframed people as active consumers who select media for specific reasons, such as information seeking, entertainment, and social purposes (Katz et al., 1973). It emphasized that researchers should examine not only what needs drive media use, but also whether media succeed in gratifying those needs.

Although romantic relationship research rarely employs the uses and gratifications framework, it often works from the same assumption that people make deliberate choices about media use and develop strategies to gratify their needs (e.g., Woll & Cozby, 1987). As Adelman and Ahuvia (1991) noted, relationship initiation "is shaped, in part, by the ways the channel facilitates the searching for, matching with, and interacting with a potential partner" (p. 274). Face-to-face, people may encounter or actively seek out mates when socializing in informal group settings (e.g., a bar, playing volleyball), events (e.g., dinner parties), or organizations (e.g., work, religious community). Alternatively, they may seek out designated social spaces designed for relationship goals (e.g., a speed dating event, singles meetup, or swingers club). Mediated opportunities for relationship initiation are similar, but offer distinct affordances. Here, we consider mate seeking and relationship initiation in four contexts: mediated socializing, personal advertising, media-based matchmaking services, and broadcast matchmaking programs.

Mediated Socializing

Compared to the extensive research on finding romance in online social settings such as chatrooms and social networking sites (see McEwan & Lefebvre, this volume), research on socializing via traditional media is limited. One possible explanation is that fewer traditional media afford group settings that allow people to encounter new potential mates.

One channel that meets this criterion is citizens' band (CB) radio, which offered everyday consumers an easily accessible masspersonal channel and mobile social connectivity before the internet and mobile phones. Arguably, CB radio is the closest ancestor to online chatrooms: people adopt a pseudonymous handle and join live, ephemeral, limited bandwidth conversations with faceless strangers whenever they wish. Romantic or sexual communication is not uncommon; some CB users even signal their relationship status or interest through handles such as Playmate, Two-Timer, and Super Stud (Dannefer & Kasen, 1981). A content analysis found that 43 percent of exchanges between

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men and women were sexual. Heterosexual flirtation was common, but women were also frequently subject to unsolicited date requests and sexual invitations (Dannefer & Kasen, 1981). Similar affordances may explain why findings on CB use portend later findings on online interactions.

Mediated socializing can also occur at work. In some jobs, coworkers who have never met face-to-face are in constant communication, and workplace romances have taken root. Intimate long-distance relationships developed among telegraph operators despite the limited bandwidth of tapped messages (Standage, 1998). Similarly, romantic relationships have been sparked through the constant exchanges between police officers and dispatchers over the radio.

Although designated social spaces in traditional media are rare, one notable example has been described as "adult chat," "fantasy lines," "telesex," or "dial-a-porn," which peaked in the 1990s before the internet (Hall, 1995). Many of these fee-driven telephone services advertised as private, anonymous ways to meet and chat with attractive, sexually interested women, although studies revealed these services were often deceptive (Borna et al., 1993). The women were not available singles, but paid operators. Some male patrons, however, perceived ongoing interactions with the same operator as a developing relationship (Hall, 1995). These telesex operators presaged the "cam girls" and online sex workers (e.g., Onlyfans) of today.

Personal Advertising

Perhaps the most common use of mass and masspersonal media is to advertise one's availability for a relationship. Newspapers and magazines have hosted classified advertisements with romantic goals (e.g., personals, "lonely hearts" ads, matrimonial ads) for centuries. Personal ads typically feature brief, text-based descriptions of the seeker and whom they are seeking; the low bandwidth also provides more anonymity than other channels. Several content analyses of personal ads have been conducted across several countries, examining expressed and desired characteristics (e.g., Andersen, 1958; de Sousa Campos et al., 2002), gender role expectations (Ramasubramanian & Jain, 2009), and cultural values (Zhou et al., 1997).

On singles voicemail services, users record a message describing themselves, listen to others' recorded ads, and demonstrate interest by leaving a voicemail reply (Woll & Cozby, 1987). Whereas these systems afford relative anonymity and privacy, television advertising offers a tradeoff: seekers willing to publicly broadcast their lack of success can access a larger, more diverse pool of possible mates. In China, the show *Television Red Bride* (1988) gave men (and later women) who had been unsuccessful in finding a mate locally the opportunity to advertise themselves to a broader audience (Wang, 2017). US cable company Comcast offered *Dating on Demand* wherein singles were

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invited to record video advertisements that were then broadcast to the metropolitan area market. One study selected three videos from this service and created an audio version and a transcript to test whether bandwidth affected viewers' attributions about the featured women. Men's perceptions that women wanted to have fun, reduce uncertainty, or develop a friendship did not differ across modalities; however, they were more likely to perceive that women wanted sex in the video and audio conditions than in the transcript condition (Henningsen et al., 2011).

Although there is limited research, it is worth noting that some individuals choose to advertise via less conventional channels, such as bumper stickers (Woll & Cozby, 1987). Romantic and sexual graffiti was found in the ruins of Pompeii (79 CE), and in the modern era, several intrepid scholars have studied its prevalence in bathroom stalls. *Latrinalia* advertisements may include self-descriptions with phone numbers or invitations with instructions (e.g., "tap your foot for…"; Matthews et al., 2012). Their success rate remains unknown.

Media-Based Matchmaking Services

A third method of identifying a romantic partner through media is via matchmaking services. Mail-based introductory services (e.g., pen pal clubs for singles) require seekers to generate a self-description or complete a questionnaire that the service uses to identify potential partners (Wallace, 1959). Some services facilitate *correspondence marriage* or *transnational marriage migration*, introducing people from different countries with complementary needs (Constable, 2003). Although many couples report positive experiences (Constable, 2003), some services disempower and commodify women. As the paying customers, men are given the power to choose among options and initiate relationships (e.g., "mail order bride" catalogs), control the channel and nature of communication during long-distance relationship development, and even govern the terms of migration and marriage (Wang & Chang, 2002).

In the 1970s, a matchmaking service offering higher bandwidth emerged: video dating. Modern scholars may be surprised to learn how similar the video dating process is to online dating (and, perhaps, that video dating still exists). First, participants provide photographs and complete a survey to generate a profile. Then, they record a video, usually an interview five to ten minutes in length. The higher bandwidth of video allows daters to observe a candidate's dynamic nonverbal expressiveness (e.g., smiling, eye contact), which Riggio and Woll (1984) identified as a predictor of videodaters' popularity. Videodaters report taking time to craft and revise their profiles and videos (Woll & Young, 1989). This process, enabled by the affordances of asynchronicity and editability, was later conceptualized as *selective self-presentation* in the online context and theorized as part of the hyperpersonal model (Walther, 1992).

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Participants have identified several advantages of video dating. First, it increases accessibility and provides a much larger pool than daters have access to face-to-face (Woll & Young, 1989). Second, the amount and richness of information enables videodaters to prescreen candidates and evaluate them on a deeper level before wasting time on a date (Woll & Young, 1989). Finally, video makes it more difficult to conceal or misrepresent characteristics such as age, weight, or attractiveness, so it is perceived as a more authentic portrayal (Woll & Cozby, 1987). Studies indicate that video daters do not necessarily benefit from these advantages, however; in fact, they may backfire. Woll (1986) identified drawbacks to an abundance of choice, which many video daters found overwhelming. Although photographs are deliberately situated on the back of profiles to encourage getting to know someone before evaluating their looks, many videodaters adopted the strategy of starting with photographs and appearance judgments. Generally, videodaters made decisions based on quickly discernible characteristics such as physical attractiveness, age, and occupation, which Woll (1986) attributed to cognitive overload. Woll and Cozby (1987) also argued that the amount of information provided about a candidate may be problematic because "it produces only the *illusion* of knowledge or validity rather than actual increases in accuracy" (p. 96). They also found, however, that videodaters' judgments were more accurate when they watched a candidate's video compared to just the profile or the profile and photographs.

A final advantage cited by video daters is conversational control through mutual consent: both individuals must indicate romantic interest before the service distributes contact information (Woll & Cozby, 1987). This matching procedure is akin to the gatekeeping on dating apps like Tinder and Bumble, where both partners must express interest for communication to be enabled. Regardless of these perceived advantages over other initiation methods, Woll and Cozby (1987) estimated the success rate of video dating services as 10 percent–15 percent, which they deemed "unimpressive."

Broadcast Matchmaking Programs

A final, curious intersection of romantic relationship initiation and media is broadcast matchmaking programs. These shows play an active role in the relationship initiation process by identifying, screening, testing, or selecting potential mates. One format is the *participatory dating show*, exemplified by call in radio shows. These shows are largely unscripted, and matchmaking is not only visible to, but requires active participation from, a live audience. For example, on the Australian radio show *Midnight Matchmaker* (1982), the host would interview a caller, eliciting a personal advertisement, desired partner traits, and often personal narratives; interested listeners would call in and the host would try to facilitate a match (Griffen-Foley, 2020). Other listeners called in to offer support, advice, or criticism to mate seekers.

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Dating game shows first appeared on the radio, and their formats were eventually replicated on television. These shows involve singles selected by producers, feature mate competition, and vary in how scripted they are. For example, on the Australian radio show *Blind Date* (1946), two candidates competed over the phone for a date with an unseen woman; on *Boy Meets Girl* (1947), a comedian wrangled a small group of men and women hoping to find a match (Griffen-Foley, 2020). *The Dating Game* debuted on US television in 1965 and different versions popped up around the globe. The 1990s–2000s reality television boom presented an onslaught of both episodic (e.g., *Singled Out*) and serial (e.g., *The Bachelor*, *Temptation Island*) competitive dating shows. One study of episodic dating shows in Israel and the United States examined the categories participants chose to screen a large group of suitors in the first round of competition (e.g., relationship goals, age, lifestyle, personality). The two most common categories selected by both men and women were sexual characteristics (e.g., bedroom behavior, breast or penis size) and physical appearance (Hetsroni & Bloch, 1999).

A final type of broadcast matchmaking is the *dating setup show*, exemplified by *Blind Date*, *Dating Naked*, and *Married at First Sight*. Seekers apply to the show and producers match two applicants. Cameras then capture the pair's introduction and relational development, usually with intervening "confessionals" where each partner speaks to the camera independently about their feelings or reflections. The show's presentation invites viewers to judge the relationship's potential for success or failure and often the participants themselves.

It is unclear why couples would want to publicly broadcast the private and often awkward initial stages of a romantic relationship, which may explain why a handful of studies have explored motivations for participating in dating shows. Stuart (1962) studied applicants to the United States television show, *A Chance for Romance*, and found they were primarily driven by a perceived lack of options through traditional methods such as singles clubs or meeting people through work. Women also noted that there was a greater sense of safety knowing that the television show would conduct background checks. A study by Syvertsen (2001), however, found that applicants to the Norwegian TV dating show *Reisesjekken* reported seeking publicity more than love. Given the different goals and foci of broadcast matchmaking programs, more research is warranted on participant motivations and matchmaking success.

Contributions to Romantic Relationship Research

In 1987, Woll and Cozby argued that interpersonal theorizing had largely overlooked potential differences in how mate seeking and relationship initiation transpires in mediated contexts compared to face-to-face. For example, research on initial interactions has often assumed that when two people meet,

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it is a face-to-face interaction between strangers who know nothing about each other. The implications are that people have access to a wide range of nonverbal cues (given high bandwidth), that the initial availability of personal information is relatively equal between partners (as they are physically co-present), and there is limited opportunity to carefully craft or revise messages (as synchronicity and co-presence limit editability). Social norms that govern face-to-face interaction, such as politeness and turn-taking, are assumed. As the research reviewed here demonstrates, these assumptions do not necessarily hold across mediated contexts, yet theoretical progress at this intersection remains torpid (for a notable exception, see Tong et al., 2016).

Why people select and avoid different channels to seek mates has also enlightened our understanding of relationship initiation. For example, Woll and Cozby (1987) argued that research too often assumes that all relationship seekers have equal access to mates and thus concludes a lack of success indicates an interpersonal deficit. Research on mediated mate-seeking has drawn attention to many obstacles to relationship initiation, such as having a concealed, stigmatized identity (e.g., LGBTQ+ individuals), constraints on time (e.g., single mothers with young children), and geographical or cultural isolation (e.g., immigrants). Collectively, research on mediated mate-seeking suggests that individual and contextual factors that shape potential mate pools and initiation possibilities warrant more attention. Further, more longitudinal research is needed on dating efforts, successes, and failures over time to interpret channel choice and decision-making in the early stages of romantic relationships.

USING MEDIA TO COMMUNICATE WITHIN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

Studies have revealed the multitude of roles that media play within romantic relationships. One relevant theory for understanding these roles is *the theory of the niche*, an offshoot of the uses and gratifications framework, which argues that people consider what channels are available to them and employ different channels to meet different, specific needs (Dimmick et al., 2000). For example, a couple may choose the phone for some relationship maintenance behaviors (e.g., tasks) but rely on face-to-face for others (e.g., relationship talk). Here, we consider how and why people employ different media during relationship escalation, maintenance, disruption, and dissolution.

Developing Relationships

From papyrus to notebook paper, written messages have fostered relationship development throughout history. In some cases, such as personal advertisements and pen pals, relationships are developed through written exchanges before face-to-face-meetings. In other cases, a couple that has met face-to-face

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may escalate the relationship through textual communication. Cultural customs may necessitate such formalities (Su, 2016); for example, calling cards were instrumental in arranging Victorian era courtship (Bailey, 1988). Geographical separation may also force couples to rely on written exchanges (Wyss, 2008).

Relationship development through a low bandwidth, asynchronous channel presents advantages and disadvantages. Although the slow rate of exchanged letters may frustrate some, others find the pacing and conversational control appealing (Janning, 2018). Low bandwidth and physical separation may encourage more intimate disclosures, particularly if couples' face-to-face time is chaperoned or otherwise regulated (Bailey, 1988). The tangible, persistent nature of letters also enables the recipient to keep and revisit these messages as desired (Janning, 2018).

If other channels are available, however, letters are seen as less appropriate than phone or face-to-face for attempting to escalate a relationship (Westmyer et al., 1998). The dearth of cues and communicative control also makes deception easier. Newspapers in the 1800s regularly reported incidents wherein hopeful lovers were deceived and defrauded through personal ads, letters, and telegraphs (Marvin, 1988), what is now known as *catfishing* in the digital age. One notorious catfishing case is the serial killer Belle Gunness, who placed personal ads seeking a husband in the early 1900s, luring men to her farm through love letters before robbing, murdering, and dismembering them.

The telephone has also played a significant role in romantic relationship development over the past few decades. Romantic interest is often conveyed by requesting or offering a phone number, as the telephone increases accessibility. The telephone has emerged as an important medium in the development of adolescent romantic relationships as it enables regular access and more private dyadic interaction than interactions at school or with peers. Feiring (1996) reported that adolescents talked with their partners on the phone nearly every day, and that their conversations averaged an hour. Although interactions have shifted from calling to texting, the phone still affords accessibility and privacy for adolescent couples today.

Given the diminished bandwidth, synchronous conversations on the phone present some interesting challenges for partners just getting to know each other. Women in heterosexual dating relationships reported the phone was less warm and personal than face-to-face conversation, and the reduction in nonverbal cues such as facial expressions often heightened their uncertainty about their partner's feelings (Sarch, 1993). Some felt there were benefits to lower bandwidth, however, such as not having to regulate their own nonverbals and feeling emboldened to make disclosures (Sarch, 1993). In our current, media-rich interactions, studying the role of different affordances and their gratifications would clarify how couples use and experience different channels in modern developing relationships.

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Maintaining Long-Distance Relationships

Many circumstances can force couples into geographical separation: relocating for college or work, military deployment, imprisonment, hospitalization, or, as many have now experienced, quarantine. Media become a vital means of sustaining long-distance and otherwise separated relationships (Dainton & Aylor, 2002). Mediated maintenance is first determined by what channels are accessible to both partners. For example, prisoners are typically restricted in what channels they can access, and phone calls can be cost-prohibitive (Black, 2010). During Desert Storm, US soldiers could call, fax, email, record videotapes, or even videoconference; yet over a decade later in Somalia, a lack of infrastructure limited communication to email (Schumm et al., 2004). Disabilities and literacies can also limit what modalities are practicable for a couple (Wyss, 2008). When channel choice is constrained, partners may have to forge new ways of communicating. For example, couples can employ idiosyncratic linguistic codes in their letters to conceal their exchanges from their guardians or censors (e.g., in prison; Black, 2010)

Consistent with Parks's (2017) conceptualization of mixed media relationships, several studies have examined the use of multiple channels by couples. Stafford and Reske (1990) found that letters were associated with more relationship satisfaction, stronger feelings of love, and increased idealization of the relationship than communicating face-to-face or by phone. The authors hypothesized that the asynchronicity and low bandwidth of letters promoted idealization. A second possibility may be related to the symbolic nature of letters, as couples may perceive them as more meaningful than other forms of communication (Janning, 2018). A third possibility may be that letters help avoid stress or negativity. Carter and Renshaw (2016) found that for service members with lower levels of family stress, more use of synchronous channels (e.g., phone) was associated with increased relationship satisfaction, but for those with higher stress, synchronous channel use was associated with decreased satisfaction. The opposite pattern was observed for asynchronous channels such as letters, which may provide stressed couples more opportunity for regulation and stress mitigation than synchronous interpersonal channels.

Managing Relationship Disruption

Romantic relationships often face disruptions such as transitions, conflict, or turbulence. When facing a difficult conversation, partners may employ mass media content as a proxy for communicating their feelings. For instance, women use music to convey sexual desire to a disinterested partner (O'Sullivan & Byers, 1993). Likewise, greeting cards help express sentiments when the sender feels awkward or stymied (West, 2004), and dissatisfied

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partners use relevant television content to prompt relationship talk with their partner (Fallis et al., 1985).

One noteworthy example of mass media being repurposed for interpersonal communication is the music mixtape (Drew, 2016). A mixtape is an effortful undertaking; the creator must devote hours to find the perfect songs before recording and sequencing them just so. The personalization of mixtapes is meaningful to the recipient, but also the sender as a form of self-expression (Jansen, 2009); even naming the mix or designing the playlist insert can be a symbolic gesture of devotion (Drew, 2016). Creators report giving mixtapes to initiate, escalate, maintain, repair, and terminate romantic relationships (Drew, 2016). Mixes are also used by creators and recipients to make sense of their feelings, cope with a breakup, or ruminate over lost love. A final use is that, due to their tangibility and persistence, mixtapes are treasured as relationship artifacts that evoke memories and nostalgia (Jansen, 2009).

Terminating Relationships

Paul Simon once observed, "There must be fifty ways to leave your lover." Media have provided many storied forms for relationship dissolution, from the "Dear John" letter to breaking up with the answering machine to battling an ex-spouse on the television show *Divorce Court*. Although research on media as a breakup tool is limited, one study of college undergraduates found that although face-to-face was the most frequent channel (45.5 percent), one-fifth reported breaking up by phone call (Carter et al., 2018). In dating couples, no longer returning phone calls is understood as a passive, if impolite, method of ending the relationship (Sarch, 1993). Most adults perceive the use of media to terminate a relationship as gauche, but Gershon (2010) argued this perception is contingent on the couple's *media ecology* (media use within the relationship) and individual *media ideologies*, beliefs, and attitudes about how a medium should be used.

Practicality may also govern the use of media for relationship dissolution. Long-distance couples may lack the opportunity to break up face-to-face. Couples in the early stages of dating may not want to arrange a face-to-face date solely to end the relationship; a phone call may be perceived as merciful rather than discourteous in its efficiency (Sarch, 1993). It is also worth noting that channels lacking synchronicity and physical co-presence afford greater safety. Although more direct inquiry is needed, it appears breakup initiators are likely to consider affordances when deciding how to terminate a relationship.

Contributions to Romantic Relationship Research

This body of research demonstrates three critical points. First, media are regular, and sometimes necessary, means for enacting romantic relationships.

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Second, media affordances shape our dyadic interactions through these channels and, in turn, our romantic relationships. They determine what communication is possible and influence how it is perceived. Yet, many studies of romantic relationship interactions or processes adopt a media-agnostic approach, which may overlook critical factors. Consider a romantic conflict: would you expect the conflict to transpire the same face-to-face compared to texting? Would it last the same amount of time? Would partners say the same things? Would the emotional experience be the same? Would it end the same? If the answer to any of these questions is no, would you then expect the effect on the relationship to be the same?

Another question is whether the couple only argues through a particular channel, if the couple argues across all channels, or if an argument starts in one channel and carries over to another. The *communication interdependence perspective* suggests that it is important to consider how communication across both face-to-face and mediated channels transpires within a close relationship (Caughlin & Sharabi, 2013). Our final point is that in mixed media relationships, relationship functions, and processes may be occurring across multiple channels, or they may be confined to a particular channel (e.g., due to accessibility or media ideologies). Focusing on a single channel when studying a relationship phenomenon, particularly without consideration of media perceptions and attributes (e.g., affordances), greatly limits what we can generalize to our understanding of the phenomenon, the channel, or media more broadly.

USING PUBLIC CHANNELS TO COMMUNICATE ABOUT ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

In addition to using media to communicate within romantic relationships, we also use media to communicate about them. Using private channels is common, whether asking friends for relationship advice on a phone call, providing status updates in holiday cards, or sending wedding invitations. We also communicate about our relationships to public audiences, such as through tie signs like matching hoodies or wedding rings (Goffman, 1971). Here, we cover a less studied area: the use of mass and masspersonal traditional media to communicate with others about our romantic relationships.

Help Seeking

Songwriter John Prine once satirized the letter writers seeking help from advice columnists: "Dear Abby, Dear Abby, my fountain pen leaks. My wife hollers at me and my kids are all freaks …. Signed, Unhappy." Advice columns offer readers the opportunity to share their problems and seek help pseudonymously (Golia, 2021). Common romantic relationship topics mentioned by advice seekers include commitment (e.g., relationship ambivalence, infidelity), communication problems (e.g., conflict, intimacy issues), beliefs

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(regarding culture, gender, religion, etc.), socioeconomic stressors, and aggression (e.g., domestic violence, abuse; Barnett et al., 2020).

The content of advice columns is an artifact of the era and contemporaneous cultural norms, but studies have also demonstrated differences based on venue and columnist. Thus, some findings suggest advice columns endorse traditional cultural beliefs, gender roles, and relationship myths, whereas others find evidence that they defy oppressive norms and refute marital myths (e.g., Golia, 2021). In one illustrative study, Johnson and Holmes (2019) analyzed Abigail Van Buren's (*Dear Abby*) and Ann Landers's discussion of homosexuality from 1967 to 1982, demonstrating how historical events (e.g., Stonewall, the AIDS crisis) and shifting scientific opinions were reflected in columnists' coverage, language, and advice to readers over time. Further, Van Buren consistently demonstrated greater compassion and acceptance of homosexuality than Landers (and even criticized Landers, her twin sister, in a 1973 column).

In contrast to static print media, call in radio shows provided an opportunity for an interactive conversation with a licensed therapist. One study found that the most common reason people called into *Loveline* was seeking expert advice (Borzutzky et al., 2008). Many radio advice shows, however, involve synchronous interaction not just between the caller and the therapist, but also a host, audience members, or additional guest experts, which can impede the help-seeking process.

Daytime television talk shows were a natural progression for this genre, but they also represent a critical shift in affordances. In televised *audience participation talk shows*, help seekers are no longer nameless or faceless, and they disclose their relationship problems in front of a physically present audience that offers real-time verbal and nonverbal feedback (Timberg, 2002). *The Phil Donahue Show* and *The Oprah Winfrey Show* were early pioneers in this genre, but soon tabloid talk shows emerged. *Jerry Springer Show*, *Geraldo*, *The Montel Williams Show*, *Ricki Lake*, and *Maury* were labeled "trash TV" as they ratcheted up the sensationalism, revealing marital affairs to unwitting partners and conducting paternity tests to determine "Who's the daddy?" among a woman's sexual partners (Timberg, 2002).

Marriage, dating, sexual activity, and infidelity are common themes on talk shows, but they do not always provide experts to help (Johnson et al., 1999). A content analysis revealed that when relationship experts do appear, they provide specific advice and concrete solutions to problems more than 90 percent of the time; however, these "experts" vary considerably in their qualifications, including Ph.D.s, formally trained therapists, book authors, media personalities, and matchmakers (Johnson et al., 1999). Although anecdotal evidence exists (such as lawsuits against *The Jenny Jones Show* and *Dr. Phil*), systematic research is needed to assess how helpful (or harmful) proffered advice is for mediated help-seekers and whether the media experience itself affects participants or their relationships.

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Public Declarations

Public declarations about romantic relationships are best described as masspersonal communication wherein a personalized message to one's partner is deliberately conveyed in a highly visible channel to reach a large audience. For example, radio shows like *Love Songs with Delilah* allow callers to dedicate songs to express love, gratitude, or contrition to their partner or ex-partner (Griffen-Foley, 2020). A now-common trope is the *broadcast marriage proposal*, wherein one partner uses media to propose in front of a large audience, whether over a JumboTron at a sporting event or on live television. Public declarations of love may be perceived as having greater relational significance given the additional effort and risk of public humiliation.

Status Announcements

When romantic relationships undergo certain changes, mass mediated announcements may be made for celebratory, commemorative, informative, or legal reasons. For centuries, newspapers have been a source of information about others' romantic relationships through society pages, gossip columns, and community member updates, and even now it is common practice for people to announce engagements, weddings, and anniversaries in their local newspaper. These announcements also serve a normative function. *The New York Times*'s weddings section, for example, has been perceived as a cultural hallmark (e.g., Hatch & Hatch, 1947). When the *NYT* began publishing announcements of same-sex civil unions alongside heterosexual marriages in 2002, it was viewed as a milestone in the battle for marriage equality (Donovan, 2002).

Status announcements about romantic relationships may also address disengagement, however. Couples may choose to make a public announcement about a breakup or divorce through a newspaper notice, press release, or mass mailing (e.g., Lewis, 1983). When a partner dies, newspaper obituaries may represent a status announcement for the newly widowed. In some cases, however, stigmatized romantic relationships may be omitted or concealed. During the AIDS crisis, gay men's obituaries rarely explicitly identified a partner, although some mentioned a "roommate" or "friend" alongside surviving family (Williams, 1997). In this way, public announcements can be used to confirm or deny one's relationship status or romantic partner.

Contributions to Romantic Relationship Research

These examples demonstrate how people have publicized their romantic relationships and romantic struggles, but the effects of visibility on relationships remain understudied in traditional media contexts. Arguably, our romantic relationships are more visible than ever before. Studies in social media contexts have begun exploring how greater visibility affects romantic

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relationships, such as making the dissolution process more stressful (Fox et al., 2021), but the effects of publicity and mass audiences remains undertheorized. Notably, the affordances of masspersonal and mass media challenge theorizing about public disclosures and audiences in some relationship models. For example, Knapp's (1978) staircase model suggests that the final stage of relationship escalation is bonding through a broadly visible, public announcement about the relationship, because it assumed it was only when a couple was engaged or married that they would make an effort at mass notification. The research reviewed here suggests that publicization of the relationship can happen much earlier, perhaps before the couple is on solid ground, or can weather the attention.

A second consideration is what it means to see everyday people like ourselves in the media. People still hold reverence for mass media, and we attribute importance to those who appear in it. Seeing common people likely affects us differently than seeing celebrities, public figures, or fictional characters. We may feel more similar to these models, and thus their problems may seem more real, their experiences more relevant, and their accomplishments more attainable (Bandura, 1986). As we will discuss in the next section, there is considerable research about romantic portrayals in movies and television shows, but it is less clear if regular people's publicized romantic experiences influence beliefs, norms, attitudes, or behaviors differently.

MASS MEDIA CONSUMPTION BY ROMANTIC PARTNERS

Throughout relationship processes, mass media consumption can serve several functions. When mate seeking, media tastes can signal attractiveness or compatibility (Zillmann & Bhatia, 1989). Media co-use allows couples to spend time together and share experiences (Ledbetter, 2013). Alternatively, differences in media consumption can become a source of relational conflict and even dissolution (Bergner & Bridges, 2002).

Mass Media and Attraction

Music is an important marker of personality and romantic compatibility, especially in adolescence (North & Hargreaves, 2008). Music is strategically used to communicate information about one's identity to others (North & Hargreaves, 2008) and to judge others' personalities during initial interactions (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2006). Genre preferences and similarity in musical tastes can influence the attractiveness of a potential partner (Zillmann & Bhatia, 1989). Music is also used as a marker of relational identity (Harris et al., 2020). Having a "couple-defining song" has been associated with higher intimacy levels, likely because listening to the song elicits positive emotions and evokes memories of happy moments in the relationship (Harris et al., 2020).

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Shared and Divergent Mass Media Consumption

Media co-use can serve as a shared activity or ritual within romantic relationships. Many couples listen to music, watch television, or go to the movies together. Such media-based relational maintenance is positively associated with relationship quality (Ledbetter, 2013), particularly among couples who do not share friends (Gomillon et al., 2017). Partners may use media as a basis for conversation, and shared media experiences can help partners develop shared perspectives on life (Ledbetter et al., 2010).

On the other hand, media consumption may be a direct contributor to conflict and discord (e.g., Bergner & Bridges, 2002). Excessive media consumption has been linked to increased conflict and lower relationship satisfaction in several studies (e.g., Spencer et al., 2017), as have discrepancies in media use between partners (Dew & Tulane, 2015). For example, spouses report feeling frustrated or upset when their partner pays less attention to them or outright ignores them in favor of watching television (Morgan et al., 2017).

Several studies have examined pornography use by romantic partners. People report greater dissatisfaction when a partner's use is excessive, secretive, or detracts from a couple's interaction time (Pyle & Bridges, 2012). Heterosexual women report feeling upset by their partner's pornography use because it challenged the women's beliefs about their relationship with their partner, their view of their own self-worth and desirability, and their understanding of their partners' character and morality (Bergner & Bridges, 2002). One study of married or cohabiting heterosexual couples found that men's pornography use was associated with diminished sexual quality for both men and women, but women's pornography use was associated with women's sexual quality (Poulsen et al., 2013). Joint pornography use has also been associated with increased sexual satisfaction (Willoughby & Leonhardt, 2020).

Coping and Remembering with Mass Media

Individuals may seek out certain media to manage their mood, whether they want to wallow in sadness, engage in escapism, or cheer up. As such, media can play an important role in helping people cope with relationship dissolution (Garrido & Davidson, 2019). Media also have strong associations in our relational memory. Hearing certain songs can make us feel nostalgic about poignant romantic experiences and past loves (Garrido & Davidson, 2019).

Contributions to Romantic Relationship Research

These studies demonstrate that there are several mass media uses relevant to romantic relationships. Media co-use presents an interesting case study for the debate regarding what does and does not constitute relationship

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maintenance. Does merely staring at the screen together benefit relationships? Disentangling affordances may offer some insight. Is physical co-presence necessary, or does sharing a mediated experience virtually suffice? A second angle may be whether the media experience is enjoyable for both partners. A pleasant shared experience may create happy memories for both parties. Otherwise, one partner may enjoy watching spaghetti westerns whereas the other may endure the tedium as a maintenance labor of love.

A second question that arises from media consumption is its role in presumed – and actual – compatibility. Media tastes are often visible on dating profiles or part of small talk between couples getting to know each other. The research here suggests people believe these tastes to be relatively reliable cues to a target's personality and the couple's compatibility, although how strong a role these attributions play in relationship initiation and development remains understudied.

MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

Mass media have depicted themes of love and romance since ancient times, such as Greek romance novels from the first through third centuries (Ricquier, 2019), marriage guides from the eighth to fourteenth centuries in China (De Pee, 2007), and religious texts such as the Bible and Quran that are still cited to authorize, proscribe, and criminalize relationships today. In modern times, researchers analyzed romantic and sexual content across books and other media including radio (Lazarsfeld, 1940), comics (Saenger, 1955), magazines (Carpenter, 1998), music (Smiler et al., 2017), television (Anderegg et al., 2014), manga (Ito, 2002), and movies (Frampton & Linvill, 2017).

Studies emerging from the uses and gratifications tradition (Katz et al., 1973) have found that people consume romantic media for purposes such as to learn about sex (Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006) or to relieve a sense of loneliness (Greenwood & Long, 2011). Some selective exposure theories focus on affective motivations (e.g., mood management theory, Zillmann & Bryant, 1985). Generally, these theories suggest people choose media content that helps them either maintain or change to a desired mood. Scholars have explored how people might select or avoid romantic content based on their mood (e.g., Knobloch & Zillmann, 2003). For example, one study found that people who regretted cheating on their romantic partner expressed desire to watch infidelity-related storylines (Nabi et al., 2006).

Several scholars have suggested that relational schema or knowledge structures are formed in part by observing relationships, sexual encounters, and cultural romantic norms depicted in mass media (e.g., Andersen, 1993). *Prototypes* are cognitive structures that represent "the clearest cases or best examples of category" (Fehr, 1993, p. 89). *Relational* or *sexual prototypes* comprise the features a typical marriage, partner, or sexual experience should

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have. People may develop *relational scripts* for routine sequences of behavior such as going on a first date, escalating a relationship, or ending a relationship (Honeycutt & Sheldon, 2018). People also develop *sexual scripts* for physical intimacy (Simon & Gagnon, 1986).

Cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 1986) and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) both explain how people might learn about relationships from media. Cultivation theory suggests frequent television viewing leads people to develop beliefs and attitudes more consistent with the televised world than the real world. For example, Segrin and Nabi (2002) found that consumption of romantic TV shows was associated with idealistic beliefs about marriage, which in turn predicted marital intentions. Similarly, Vu and Lee (2013) found that Vietnamese women's consumption of South Korean soap operas was associated with their willingness to marry a South Korean man and intentions to contact a transnational matchmaking service.

Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) suggests that people learn by observing others. To learn from mass media, people must first identify and pay attention to a socially attractive model performing the behavior (Bandura, 1986). Next, they retain the behavior in memory, incorporated in a knowledge structure. People must also believe they can execute the behavior (i.e., self-efficacy). Lastly, people must be motivated to perform the behavior. Motivation is determined in part by vicarious reinforcement: when models are punished for certain behaviors, there is an inhibitory effect, but if they are rewarded, there is a disinhibitory effect. These effects occur because people come to expect the same outcomes the models received if they also perform the behavior (Bandura, 1986). However, Nabi and Clark (2008) found that people may imitate the sexual behaviors they see in mass media regardless of whether models are rewarded or punished. The researchers speculated that people develop "happily-ever-after" scripts for media content that prevent them from interpreting punishments as severe or long-lasting. Thus, media effects may be further complicated by existing media schema.

Regardless of theoretical approach, studies on the representation of romantic relationships in media and their effects have been concentrated in three areas. First, a heavy focus by scholars on violent media and aggression has yielded several studies on romantic conflict and relational aggression. A second major focus has been sexual behavior, including consent, safe sex, and consequences. A final area is idealized romantic portrayals and their effects on romantic beliefs and expectations.

Conflict and Relational Aggression

Media frequently depict interpersonal conflict and *relational aggression*, defined as "using or manipulating the relationship to harm one's romantic partner" (Coyne et al., 2011, p. 57). Exposure to interpersonal conflict on

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television is positively related to viewers' attempts to control their romantic partner, especially if the television content is perceived as real (Aubrey et al., 2013).

One cause of conflict often depicted in media is infidelity. Some research shows that when suspicious partners are exposed to media depictions of infidelity, they exhibit a stronger intention to end the relationship if a partner is unfaithful (Alexopoulos & Taylor, 2020). However, other research demonstrated that effects of exposure to media content depicting infidelity depend in part on whether positive or negative consequences of infidelity were also portrayed (Alexopoulos & Taylor, 2021). It is possible media that depict negative consequences of infidelity activate a script for punishing unfaithful partners. Punishment of an unfaithful partner in the form of physical abuse, verbal aggression, or counter-jealousy induction is a common theme in romantic media (Frampton & Linvill, 2017). These same media depictions often show a "happily-ever-after" ending for the on-screen couple despite the destructive response to infidelity (Johnson & Holmes, 2009), making such behaviors more likely to be imitated according to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986).

Media also depict domestic violence beyond the context of infidelity (e.g., Joyce & Martinez, 2017). Exposure to media depictions of domestic abuse are not only positively related to acceptance and minimization of the abuse, but also perpetration of it (Rodenhizer & Edwards, 2019). The relationship between exposure to physical violence in media and physical aggression toward romantic partners may be particularly strong for men (Coyne et al., 2011). Indeed, Moss et al. (2022) found that exposure to popular television shows and music videos is associated with the acceptance of men's use of violence toward women and that this relationship is mediated by several variables such as the endorsement of sexual objectification of women.

Zillmann and Bryant (1982) similarly found that exposure to large amounts of pornography resulted in less compassion toward rape victims and toward women in general. Pornographic content frequently depicts aggressive acts such as slapping and choking, and these actions are disproportionately targeted toward women and particularly Black women (Fritz et al., 2020). Importantly, pornography rarely shows negative consequences stemming from the aggression, as targets typically respond neutrally or positively (Fritz et al., 2020).

Sex

Since the turn of the century, sexual content has proliferated and become increasingly explicit in some countries such as the United States (e.g., Kunkel et al., 2007; Smiler et al., 2017). In more restrictive countries like China, sexual media content remains less explicit (Brown et al., 2013). In some countries,

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sexual media content is outlawed. In Iran, this ban extends to any media featuring relationships not approved by sharia law (e.g., cohabitation or homosexuality). Numerous studies have examined sexual media content (see Coyne et al., 2019), particularly in the United States where there is notable variation in both media regulation and sexual attitudes.

Most content analyses have focused on television programming given its accessibility to a broad audience. Sex is frequently portrayed; one study reported sexual talk or behavior in 20 percent of coded episodes (Dillman Carpentier et al., 2017) and another reported two acts of sexual intercourse per episode (Eyal & Finnerty, 2009). Content analyses of television shows have identified problematic depictions such as sexual activity without explicit consent (Jozkowski et al., 2019) or sexual assault not characterized as such (Eyal & Finnerty, 2009). Although it is increasingly common to include messages of sexual responsibility (e.g., condom use), topics related to sexual risks or responsibilities remain infrequent (Dillman Carpentier et al., 2017). Problematic depictions include sexual activity without clear consent (Jozkowski et al., 2019). Several studies have examined outcomes of sex. Positive consequences are more likely to be portrayed than negative consequences (Eyal & Finnerty, 2009). When negative consequences are depicted, they are usually emotional and social consequences rather than physical consequences such as a sexually transmitted infection (Dillman Carpentier et al., 2017). Negative consequences are usually suffered by women rather than men (Aubrey, 2004) and are more common among heterosexual characters than lesbian, gay, or bisexual characters (Bond et al., 2019).

Many people learn about sex from media, especially adolescents and emerging adults (Ward et al., 2019). Exposure to sexual media content has been linked to more permissive attitudes toward sex (Dillman Carpentier & Stevens, 2018), perceptions that peers engage in frequent sex (Ward et al., 2019), and endorsement of traditional gender roles (Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006). Exposure to sexual content has also been linked to sexual behavior (Coyne et al., 2019). There are concerns about young adults mimicking problematic or risky sexual behaviors they see in media such as unprotected sex and sex without consent (Ward et al., 2019). For example, exposure to more sexual content on television is associated with the experience of teen pregnancy (Chandra et al., 2008), indicating adolescents may be imitating the risky sexual behaviors they see on screen.

Media also help viewers learn sexual scripts and prototypes for a "good" sexual experience, which can impact their expectations for sexual activity (Ward et al., 2019). However, sexual experiences depicted in mass media are often idealized, and real-life experiences may not live up to their on-screen counterparts, sometimes leading to regret regarding the sexual encounter (Martino et al., 2009). A meta-analysis found that pornography consumption

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is associated with less satisfaction with sexual partners and relationships (Wright et al., 2017). One possible explanation is contrast effects: people in pornography videos often appear more attractive, sexually adventurous, and sexually competent than one's current sexual partner. Thus, relationship alternatives become more attractive to people who view a lot of pornography (Rasmussen, 2016).

Romantic Themes and Idealized Representations

Media not only portray idealized versions of sex, they also portray idealized versions of relationships and romance (Hefner & Wilson, 2013). Television and movies frequently feature mythic ideas such as everyone has a soulmate, love can happen "at first sight," love will conquer all, and true love will last forever (Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Johnson & Holmes, 2009).

Exposure to romantic ideals in media is associated with increased endorsement of those ideals (Hefner & Wilson, 2013). Young people are especially likely to endorse romantic beliefs and ideals depicted in media if they watch for learning purposes (Hefner & Wilson, 2013). Even when adolescents acknowledge that portrayals are idealized, they still consider these portrayals to be relationship goals (Len-Ríos et al., 2016). Unfortunately, it is unlikely that a romantic partner or relationship can live up to the high standards set in romantic media. Although some media representations of relationships recognize relationships face challenges, those representations often trivialize negative consequences of problems or relational transgressions (Johnson & Holmes, 2009). Yet, in reality, unmet expectations of ideal relationships can lead to lower levels of commitment and higher perceived costs of the relationship (Osborn, 2012). In some cases, however, exposure to idealistic content may lead to greater life satisfaction than more realistic content (Kretz, 2019), presumably because the content encourages viewers to idealize their own relationship.

Contributions to Romantic Relationship Research

Media effects research has demonstrated that it is not just cultural values or interpersonal sources such as family and peers that influence our romantic beliefs and relationships. Although we readily acknowledge that much of our formal education comes through media such as textbooks, we often lose sight of the educational potential of other media, particularly entertainment media. The same things that attract consumers to certain media, such as attractive stars or a desire to learn, may increase the likelihood that content will affect relationship beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Future research should adopt a holistic perspective and examine media among other sources of information and influence.

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In the real world, relationship models are limited by what is possible: what is normative and often most influential is what we see every day. Media can provide us with more attractive or desirable versions of what we have experienced, or offer portrayals of what we have not. Moreover, media often depict a hyperreality with impossibly impeccable partners and unattainable relationship goals. These idealized representations can shape our schema and formulate expectations that can only be disappointed – unless, perhaps, we seek a relationship with a media figure.

ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS WITH MEDIA FIGURES

A final intersection occurs when consumers develop romantic relationships with media. According to Horton and Wohl (1956), media like television simulate interpersonal interactions. As a result, people may develop feelings for celebrities, characters, and media figures over time that can be characterized as *parasocial relationships.* Crucially, Horton and Wohl (1956) distinguished these illusory experiences from social experiences, noting they are "one-sided, nondialetical, controlled by the performer, and not susceptible of mutual development" (p. 252).

Parasocial romantic relationships (PSRRs) occur when a person perceives intimacy with a media figure or feels like they have a strong "crush" on them (Tukachinsky Forster, 2021). Romantic attraction towards a media figure that entails idealization and intense fantasies has also been described as *obsessive fandom* or *celebrity worship*. PSRRs are characterized by an affective attachment to the figure and often include behaviors such as information seeking and repeatedly consuming media in which they are featured.

People react to PSRRs similarly to how they would react in social relationships. For example, PSRRs develop over time just like more interdependent relationships, and people engage in parasocial relational maintenance (Tukachinsky Forster, 2021). Likewise, people experience jealousy in PSRRs when the media figure becomes romantically involved with someone else (Tukachinsky Forster, 2021). People experience distress from parasocial breakups, particularly if they are lonely (Eyal & Cohen, 2006).

PSRRs are especially impactful for adolescents and may influence their development of romantic beliefs and relational scripts (Erickson & Dal Cin, 2018). Tukachinsky Forster (2021) describes two models for understanding PSRRs in adolescence: as practice for a real relationship or as compensation for a lack of one. Although many teen infatuations fade over time, one concern is how experiences in PSRRs may affect real relationships. For example, Tukachinsky and Dorros (2018) found that emotional involvement in a PSRR during adolescence was related to lower relationship satisfaction and less favorable attitudes toward subsequent romantic partners. It is possible

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that fantasy relationships may set unreasonably high expectations for a future partner, and their one-sided nature may belie the effort required to develop and maintain a satisfying relationship.

Contributions to Romantic Relationship Research

Although research on PSRRs is rarely cited in research on real romantic relationships, it has the potential to offer insights into several phenomena. PSRRs may be an important contributor to relationship schema and idealized romantic beliefs among media consumers, particularly among those with less romantic experience. Strong or enduring parasocial relationships may foster the development of romantic prototypes and expectations that real partners may never fulfill. Given that children develop PSRs at a very young age, PSRRs may also represent a possible step in understanding how attachment models from infancy transfer to romantic relationships.

PSRRs are inherently one-sided and require imagination and fantasy to be sustained. Understanding how people develop and maintain PSRRs may lend additional insights into unwanted relational pursuit and stalking behavior. Due to their one-sidedness, PSRRs also present an interesting context for examining perceptions of equity, power, and control within romantic relationships.

CONCLUSION

In the modern world, media are woven into the fabric of our romantic relationships as means, models, megaphones, memories, and even mates. Unquestionably, they have played a critical role in shaping, initiating, escalating, maintaining, disrupting, and dissolving romantic relationships since the emergence of mediated communication. Thus, media warrant more consideration by relationship researchers.

A second takeaway that affordances are crucial for understanding how media differ, why people choose media, and how media affect our relationships. Although many technologies undergo radical changes or become obsolete, affordances and the ways humans experience media evolve more slowly, if at all (cf., Reeves & Nass, 1996). Centering affordances and features of media instead of adopting a narrow, channel-focused approach will help researchers identify relevant findings and make theoretical contributions that will be more enduring than teletext personals.

A final, crucial lesson is that mediated relational experiences are not a novelty born of the digital age. Many phenomena scholars have erroneously described as "new" or "unique to" modern relationships were identified and studied in "old" media decades ago. To understand the future of media and romantic relationships, we must first know the past.

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