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How Real is Reality? : An Examination of Perceived Realism and Permissive Sexual Attitudes in Relation to Reality Dating Shows

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How Real is Reality? : An Examination of Perceived Realism and Permissive Sexual
Attitudes in Relation to Reality Dating Shows

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B.A., Communication, Truman State University, 2013

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Abstract

This study investigated whether exposure to reality dating shows shaped participants'
perceptions of reality and permissive sexual attitudes, with the incorporation of more
recent reality dating shows. A sample of 156 college-aged students participated in an
online survey. Gender predicted the amount of exposure to reality dating shows, with
females watching more than males. Heavy exposure was not a predictor of permissive
sexual attitudes. Heavy exposure did predict how realistic the viewers perceived the
reality dating shows to be. However, perceived realism was not related to permissive
sexual attitudes. Perceived realism also did not play a moderating or mediating role in
the relationship between permissive sexual attitudes and exposure to reality dating shows.
This study provided limited support for Cultivation Theory and challenged previous
research in this area.

        Keywords: Reality dating shows, reality programming, reality dating programs,
permissive sexual attitudes, Cultivation Theory, Social Cognitive Theory, perceived
realism

How Real is Reality? : An Examination of Perceived Realism and Permissive Sexual Attitudes in Relation to Reality Dating Shows

Watching television has been a large part of most Americans' daily life since its introduction. By the late 1940s, nearly one million homes had a television, and the number escalated from there. With the emergence of television came a surge in mass media theories that attempted to explain the effects that this new invention had on viewers. Many theories, including the magic bullet theory, or the hypodermic needle theory, suggested that viewers were passive, and that media messages were powerful and heavily influenced individuals (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). Others, including the two-step flow, suggested that media messages had minimal effects on viewers and that it took interpersonal communication from opinion leaders to influence other people's attitudes and beliefs (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). Even today, media effects researchers are trying to discover what kind of impact television has on its viewers and how consumption of television, as well as certain genres and subgenres of television, can influence viewers' actions, beliefs, and attitudes.

Prevalence of Sexual Content

Sexual content has been on television since its debut but has increased in how explicitly it is portrayed. *I Love Lucy*, an iconic show of the 1950s, was loaded with sexual innuendos. Main character Lucy became pregnant without even sleeping in the same bed as her husband Ricky and despite the fact that the term 'pregnant' was never used in the episode since it was considered a taboo word. Sexual content on television has clearly become more explicit since these early days. There is, however, some debate over whether sexual explicitness is still continuing to increase, level off, or even decrease. Hestroni (2007) conducted a meta-analysis of content analyses of television

programs that aired from the 1970s until the early 2000s to determine how the levels of

sexual content have fluctuated over this time period. He concluded that since the late

1970s, heteronormative sexual content has actually declined on TV. However, there has

been a small increase in the amount of explicit intercourse featured and a large increase

in the presence of homosexuality and homosexual behaviors. Yet some of the latest

content analyses would suggest that sexual content is still very prevalent in television

programming, with recent figures regarding the proportion of programs containing some

type of sexual content ranging from 64% to 82% (Fisher, Hill, Grube, & Gruber, 2004;

Kunkel, Eyal, Donnerstein, Farrar, Biely, & Rideout, 2007). The most common

messages contained by television programs with sexual content are that "…sex is casual

(e.g. "Sex is fine anytime, anywhere, for any purpose" and "Sex from one-night stands

are kind of common"), common (e.g. "Everybody is having sex"), and positive (e.g. "Sex

is typically glorified on TV" and "Sex is popular/cool")" (Epstein & Ward, 2007).

Less common is the lack of consequences shown for risky sexual behavior. Eyal,

Kunkel, Biely, and Finnerty (2007) examined television shows popular among teens and

found that "only 4% of scenes with sexual content from in 2001-2002 and 5% in 2004-

2005 addressed risk and responsibility" (p.327); however, most (80%) of the characters

that were engaging in sexual intercourse were presented as being over the age of 25 and

about 66% of characters were in an established relationship. Aubrey's (2004) study

looked for portrayals of both emotional and physical consequences of sexual behavior

and found that in scenes that contained sexual references, only 32.5% portrayed a

negative consequence. When the negative consequence was present, 65.7% of the time

the female character either received the brunt of it or shared the responsibility with the

male character. Without the presentation of consequences, viewers may not be able to fully grasp and comprehend what happens when engaging in some types of sexual behaviors. Eyal and Kunkel (2008) found that when negative consequences were portrayed, participants were more likely to have negative attitudes toward sex and to judge the characters that engaged in the behavior as having low morals. Therefore, when there is a lack of negative consequences portrayed, viewers do not always receive a message that sexual behavior can be risky or have negative consequences.

Many people have voiced concern about the overabundance of sexual content coupled with the lack of consequences and the effect that they believe it has on adolescents and young adults. Researchers have shown that their concerns are justified (Aubrey, Harrison, Kramer, & Yellin, 2003; Collins, Elliott, Berry, Kanouse, Kunkel, Hunter, & Miu, 2004). One of the most significant studies in this field of research was a longitudinal study conducted by Collins et al. (2004) that showed heavy viewers of sexual content on TV had sexual intercourse and participated in other sexual activities sooner than those who viewed less sexual content. The researchers state "…the likelihood of intercourse initiation is approximately double for the high exposure group, across all ages studied" (Collins et al, 2004, p.285). With new genres and subgenres of television emerging and young viewers continuing to consume large amounts of media, the prevalence of sexual content continues to be a topic of interest.

Here Comes Reality Television

As television programming has grown and evolved throughout the decades, the variety of shows has expanded greatly. The development of niche markets and genres has been a focus of many television executives and producers. One genre that has been

around since the creation of television is reality programming. Reality television refers to programs that portray real events, are unscripted, and feature real people, as opposed to actors. Nabi, Biely, Morgan, and Stitt (2003) define it as "…programs that film real people as they live out events (contrived or otherwise) in their lives, as these events occur" (p. 304). The elements that Nabi et al (2003) consider to be most important to defining the genre of reality programming are that there are no scripts, actors, or artificial sets. The events take place as part of a storyline, and the purpose is to entertain the viewers. A similar definition of reality programming comes from Hall (2009), who defines a reality program as a "show intended primarily for entertainment that features real people whose words and behavior are not predetermined by a script" (p. 520).

This genre of television has recently emerged as one of the most popular genres of television. According to Nielsen Media Research, "reality first made an appearance in the top 10 rankings in 2000, and since the 2002-2003 seasons has consistently captured the largest percentage of the audience watching the top 10 broadcast programs. In the 2007-2008 season, reality programming captured 77 percent of the total audience viewing those top 10 programs" (2011, para. 2). With such large audiences tuning in to these shows every week, researchers have started a more in-depth investigation of this type of programming to see what kind of impact it is having on viewers. Reality television programs' unique aspect of portraying non-actors in an unscripted and relatively natural setting, making them appear to viewers as more realistic than their fictional counterparts that appear in genres such as comedy or drama, makes them interesting to examine.

The Subgenre of Reality Dating Shows

The increasing popularity of reality programming has led to the creation of subgenres of reality programming, based on what type of real life event the show portrays. For example, some programs focus on a type of competition, others highlight a specific talent, and others seek to entertain by just following around a wealthy individual living a glamorous life. One subgenre of reality programming is the reality dating show, which focuses on development of romantic relationships. The reality dating subgenre is those "….numerous and diverse programs, which range from those that follow couples on light-hearted sexually-driven blind dates to semiserious competitions for marriage proposal" (Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006, p. 2), and that "portray non-actors in dating situations with the camera acting as an observer of real-time events" (Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007). This subgenre includes shows such as *The Bachelor, Blind Date, Dating Naked, Temptation Island, Date My Mom*, *Rock of Love with Bret Michaels,* and *Flavor of Love*. These programs are notoriously heavy in portraying sex and gender stereotypes (Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006).

Although the classics such as *The Bachelor* are still around, new reality dating shows are constantly being developed to try and keep audiences coming back for more. MTV's *Are You The One?* asks, "If your perfect match was standing right in front of you, would you even know it?" (Bibel, 2014). Airing in January 2014, this show claims to use a complex dating algorithm to help match 10 females and 10 males with their perfectly compatible match. However, the contestants do not know who their perfect match is and must spend the whole season guessing by using a "truth booth", which two people must enter to determine if they are a match or not, and by participating in matching

ceremonies. These rituals are not only used to assist in finding their true love but also to help everyone win one million dollars to split if they all can find their true match. With new reality dating shows premiering on a frequent basis, research is ongoing to examine these particular shows.

Through a theoretical framework of cultivation theory and social cognitive theory as well as previous literature, this current study seeks to expand the limited previous research on reality dating shows. This study also seeks to strengthen the evidence that links exposure to reality dating shows and permissive sexual attitudes, which will be discussed in depth later into the literature review. Since reality dating shows are part of the reality programming genre, this study will also examine the variable of perceived realism and determine its role in the relationship between exposure to reality dating shows and permissive sexual attitudes.

This study is different from previous research in a few key ways. First, it examines new and current reality dating shows that have not been included in previous studies due to their novelty, such as *Are You the One?* and *Dating Naked*. This is an important inclusion since these shows differ slightly from previous reality dating shows analyzed. *Dating Naked*, for example, depicts couples going on dates with naked, which has never been the case in other reality dating shows. Additionally, this study measures perceived realism using a multidimensional scale that has not been used before in the reality dating show context. This multidimensional measure is important because it allows different types of realism to be distinguished, and provides a more detailed measure of realism than the previous scale.

Theoretical Framework

Cultivation Theory

A theory that focuses on effects related to the amount of television one consumes is Cultivation Theory. This theory was developed by George Gerbner (1969) and focuses on the long-term effect that exposure to media, specifically television, might have on viewers. Initially, Gerbner focused on violence in the media, and how heavy exposure might lead to what he termed "mean world syndrome", which refers to the outlook that heavy viewers develop over time (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). One assumption of the theory is that content follows an overall pattern and heavy exposure to television, in general, can contribute to first and second-order effects. (It must be noted that Gerbner was not the first to use or identify these terms, which were initially termed by Hawkins and Pingree (1982) and picked up by Potter (1991; 1993) as well.) First-order effects are what a person's factual understanding of the world is and occur when heavy viewers are more likely to believe that the world is similar to what they see on television.   Second-order effects are what affect a viewer's attitudes or behaviors and occur when heavy viewers' attitudes are shaped by the attitudes presented on television.

The theory also proposes the idea of mainstreaming, which suggests that heavy viewers develop a similar outlook on life after heavy exposure to television content, such that "…differences found in the responses of different groups of viewers, differences that usually are associated with the varied cultural, social, and political characteristics of these groups, are diminished in the response of heavy viewers of these groups" (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli, 2002, p. 28). If this theory is correct, heavy television viewers, in general, would hold similar attitudes toward sexual behavior since content

analyses of television shows (as mentioned above) reveal that sexual content is common in all types of programming. This might also lead viewers to believe that more people are engaging in sexual behaviors than the amount of people who are truly engaging in sexual behaviors. Then that leads to the researchers' question of whether viewers' attitudes are more influenced by the consistent exposure to sexual content or by the idea that their peers are engaging in sexual behavior more frequently since media has the potential to shape normative expectations.

Redefining Cultivation Theory

Gerbner et al (2002) acknowledged the importance of specific genres in determining media effects but still chose to concentrate on the impact of television programming in general because of the overall pattern that can be seen across genres. Critics of the theory suggest that the theory is too broad and may no longer apply in the exact same way it once did since television has become so expansive and segmented in the types of audiences that each genre and subgenre attract. Therefore, scholars have suggested that genre-specific effects might also fit into to the cultivation theory approach (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). In this new adaptation, it is proposed that repeated exposure to one specific genre of television might produce the same effects that were originally proposed by Gerbner.

Research has been done using a genre-specific framework for a variety of genres and subgenres, including reality crime shows (Hammond, Farrar, & Jalette, 2009), socially aggressive reality shows (Ward & Carlson, 2013), and reality dating shows (Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007). With application of the genre-specific framework to reality dating shows, it can be suggested that a viewer who watches ample

amounts of reality dating shows could integrate those themes into their development of how they perceive the world to be. In terms of mainstreaming, this study maintains that these effects will be amplified when focusing specifically on reality dating shows that tout themes that are sexual.

Social Cognitive Theory

Social Cognitive Theory was developed by Albert Bandura (1986) as an expansion on his social learning theory. The theory posits that people learn through observation, modeling, and others (Bandura, 1986). "Through abstract modeling, people acquire, among other things, standards for categorizing and judging events, linguistic rules of communication, thinking skills on how to gain and use knowledge, and personal standards for regulating one's motivation and conduct" (Bandura, 2001, p. 275).

The theory suggests four major components that contribute to the development of a behavior that has been observed: attention, retention, production, and motivation. First is attention, meaning the viewer has to notice the person that they are modeling the behavior from. Different people select different behaviors and different models to pay attention to and this depends upon a variety of factors such as general preferences or interests and cognitive abilities. Second is retention, indicating that the viewer pulls the necessary information from the model's behavior and commits it to memory. Bandura (2001) states that this "…involves a process of reconstruction rather than simply retrieval of registered events" (p. 272). Third is production, meaning that the viewer develops the behavior based on their memory of the necessary information obtained in the preceding step. This involves matching up the behavior to the specific situation that the viewer wishes to apply it to. Depending upon the viewer's already existing skill set, this can be

a fairly simple task or a more complex and drawn out task. Last is motivation, suggesting that incentives or punishments for performing the behavior determine whether or not the behavior is actually carried out.

There is an important distinction between production and motivation in social cognitive theory because people do not act out everything that they develop. The deciding factors or consequences may come in the form of social sanctions, approval or disapproval from society or a peer group, or self-sanctions, deciding whether or not the behavior fits into one's moral code. These two types of factors often work together, meaning that if one displays a positive consequence, the other one will also often a positive consequence. However, this is not always the case, which suggests internal conflict. When conflict occurs, it is resolved by whatever the particular individual values most, either societal or personal standards.

Vicarious Learning and Modeling

Bandura (2001) also suggests that media plays an important role by providing models when it comes to constructing and interpreting reality. He states that "virtually all behavioral, cognitive, and affective learning from direct experience can be achieved vicariously by observing people's actions and its consequences from them…in observational learning a single model can transmit new ways of thinking and behaving simultaneously to countless people in widely dispersed locals" (Bandura, 2001, p. 271). This indicates that people can learn from experiences that they themselves have not personally engaged in. A factor that contributes to whether or not a viewer will notice or learn from the model is the model's characteristics. The most persuasive model characteristics encompass popular themes of the time, or consistently attractive themes,

and achieving similarity between the viewer and the model (Bandura, 2001). With reality dating shows, portrayal of real people or non-actors influence the viewer to perceive these people are more similar to themselves. One consistently appealing theme is the idea of physical attractiveness. Reality dating programs often recruit people who are in their early to mid-20s, who are physically fit, and who possess physical qualities that people find universally attractive such as large breasts for females and high muscle definition for males. In line with the theory, the model characteristics portrayed in reality dating programs make the persuasiveness of the models high and the likelihood of viewers' modeling them high as well.

Bandura (1986; 2001) also theorizes that the more realistic the portrayal is, the more likely this specific model will contribute to how a viewer constructs their reality and what behaviors becomes part of their reality. Consistent with cultivation theory, he states that "heavy exposure to this symbolic world may eventually make the televised images appear to be the authentic state of human affairs" (Bandura, 2001, p. 281). Also following the idea of mainstreaming from cultivation theory, Bandura (2001) additionally suggests that "indeed, many shared misconceptions about occupational pursuits, ethnic groups, minorities, the elderly, social and sex roles, and other aspects of life are at least partly cultivated through symbolic meaning of stereotypes" (p. 282).

Both of the theories outlined above appear to work together to assist in explaining the relationship that viewers have with reality dating shows and the influence that the amount of watching these shows have on their perceptions of how realistic the shows are and on their endorsements of the permissive sexual attitudes that are prevalent in this particular subgenre of shows.

Literature Review

Gender Differences in Reality Dating Show Viewership

Males and females often have different interests in what they choose to watch on television. Reality programming has an appeal to many types of viewers, including viewers of both genders. In terms of reality programming as a genre, there is little support for a gender difference in viewership, meaning that a similar number of males and females watch reality programming. This has been supported by a couple of findings that show there is no significant gender differences in who is more likely to watch these programs (Nabi et al, 2003; Patino et al, 2011) or who consumes more of one specific reality programming genre (Ward & Carlson, 2013).

Although there have only been a few studies conducted specifically on reality dating programs, there has not been a strong sense of consistency in the findings about gender differences. Zurbriggen and Morgan (2006) found no difference between genders for reality dating programs or overall television viewing. However, other studies (Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007; Segrin & Nabi, 2002; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2011) support an emphasis on female viewership and female interest.

Reality dating shows are specifically aimed at women ages 18-35 (Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007) and many studies indicate that females are the primary viewers of this subgenre. In a longitudinal study conducted on high school students in Belgium, Vandenbosch and Eggermont (2011) found that adolescent girls were frequent viewers of this particular subgenre, and Eggermont (2004) also found this to be true for romantically themed programming in general. Additionally, Segrin and Nabi (2002) found that college-aged females reported watching more programs with romantic themes

than college-aged males did. Even females in their late 20s hold a great interest in watching reality dating programs and actually watched more reality dating shows than males of the same general age range (Roberti, 2007). Roberti (2007) also found that females believed reality dating shows resembled relationships that occur in real life more than males. Although the results seem to be mixed in whether there is a gender difference in the amount of viewing of reality dating shows, the supportive research for females being heavier viewers seems to be more abundant. Following the logic of these findings, I propose the following:

H1: Females will be heavier viewers of reality dating shows than males.

Defining Permissive Sexual Attitudes

As seen through previously mentioned content analyses, sexual themes are common in all types of programming. Frequent and heavy exposure to television that is heavy in sexual content has been seen to have an effect on viewers' attitudes toward sex (Lou, Cheng, Gao, Zuo, Emerson, & Zabin, 2012; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999; Zhang, Miller, & Harrison, 2008). In a study of prime-time programming, Ward and Rivadeneyra (1999) found a relationship between watching large amount of prime time television, specifically soap operas, comedies, and dramas, and endorsement of permissive sexual attitudes. A study conducted by Zhang, Miller, and Harrison (2008) discovered that participants who watched more music videos with sexual themes held more permissive sexual attitudes than the participants who watched fewer music videos. The heavier viewers also were more likely to think of sex as "recreational and inconsequential" (p. 380).

Permissive sexual attitudes have been defined as "acceptance of endorsement of sexual behaviors within relationships characterized by relatively lower levels of commitment" (Taylor, 2005, p.131) and as an endorsement of "the notion of sex as a primarily physical, casual game in which one's own sexual pleasure is more important than affectionate or relational aspects" (Peter & Valkenberg, 2010). Some studies have also called these attitudes "recreational" (Chock, 2011; Riddle & Simone, 2013; Ward & Rivandeneyra, 1999) or "instrumental" (Peter & Valkenburg, 2010). Peter and Valkenburg (2010) explain, "Instrumental attitudes toward sex are conceptually similar to other sexual attitudes recently studied in the field, such as permissive sexual attitudes and recreational attitudes toward sex…" (p. 377). Young adults with permissive sexual attitudes are a concern because of what this means in regards to their sexual behaviors. Chia (2006) states from her findings that "when an adolescent's sexual attitudes are more permissive, he or she is more likely to engage in premarital sex, and to engage in it at earlier dating stages; moreover, he or she is more likely to engage in casual sex" (p. 596).

Reality Dating Shows and Permissive Sexual Attitudes

Focusing on reality programming, Cato and Carpentier (2010) were interested in sexual empowerment, a term that was used to refer to women using their sexuality to get what they want or where they want to be in life. These researchers found that viewers who were interested in reality programs often endorsed this idea of sexual empowerment, which in turn lead to an endorsement of sexual promiscuity. This finding suggests that "…women who share their views of female roles with enjoyable television portrayals would merely accept characters that reinforce their current views, thus strengthening their belief in that view" (Cato & Carpentier, 2010, p. 284). Ultimately, this finding indicates

that viewers can obtain these attitudes from watching reality programming as well as seek

to reinforce them by watching more reality programming. To add support to Cato and

Carpentier's (2010) findings, Marron and Collins (2009) found that heavy viewers of

reality programming were more likely to hold views on sex that were similar to the

programs, meaning more endorsement of risky sexual behaviors. The researchers found

no support for overall cultivation effects but found support for genre-specific effects.

Both of these sets of findings speak to what cultivation theory posits since it focuses on

television's role to reinforce and shape beliefs and attitudes of heavy viewers, with a

focus on genre-specific content.

Another subgenre of reality shows is the surveillance subgenre. Surveillance

reality shows are similar to reality dating shows in that they focus on people's daily lives,

which often include their romantic relationships (e.g. *The Real World* & *Keeping Up with*

The Kardashians). Researchers have reported that heavy viewing of surveillance reality

shows predicted exaggerated perceptions on the emphasis of recreational sexual

behaviors in regards to romantic relationships (Riddle & Simone, 2013). This finding

adds support to the findings from Ferris et al (2007), which suggest that viewing reality

television is correlated with viewers holding certain attitudes that reflect what is

portrayed within the programming.

With a focus on romantic relationships and dating, sexual themes are one of the

main elements included in the subgenre of reality dating shows. Ferris, Smith, Greenberg,

and Smith (2007) found that, specifically, reality dating shows tend to emphasize overt

sexual stereotypes such as women as sex objects, men as sex driven, and viewing dating

as a game. They define women as sex objects as "…the attitude that women should

concentrate on physical attributes in order to attract others and that women/men should expect sexual advances", men as sex-driven as "…the attitude that a man always wants sex and is incapable of controlling sexual urges", and dating as a game as "…dating as a recreational sport that should be 'played'" (pp. 497-498).

In line with cultivation theory, the researchers also found that more exposure to these shows led to more endorsement of these sexual themes, particularly for male viewers (Ferris et al, 2007). Even for heavy female viewers of various genres of programming, Ward's (2002) findings supported that they were more likely to endorse these sexual stereotypes than lesser female viewers, particularly after being exposed to a clip containing one of the sexual stereotype messages. For one specific stereotype, women as sex objects, Ward and Friedman (2006) found that participants exposed to a television clip containing this stereotype endorsed it more than participants who were not exposed to the clip containing this stereotype.

Similar findings were discovered in a study conducted by Zurbriggen and Morgan (2006), where reality dating shows were examined to see which shows were watched and how often people watched them. The authors identified four of the top programs at the time: *Elimidate*, *Blind Date*, *Dismissed*, and *Joe Millionaire*, with most of the participants (76.6%) being frequent or occasional watchers. The essential finding was that there was a significant, positive correlation between viewing of the reality dating shows and endorsement of sexual stereotypes as mentioned above, with the effect happening for both males and females. They found stronger statistical correlations for the relationship of watching reality dating shows and attitudes than for the relationship of attitudes and

general television viewing, which lends support for the genre-specific effects approach of cultivation theory and to the idea of second-order effects.

Even though there is much support for the correlation of reality dating shows and sexual attitudes, one longitudinal study conducted by Vandenbosch and Eggermont (2011) found an inconsistency. These researchers did not find the same results as previous studies (Ferris et al, 2007; Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006), but instead they found little influence from reality dating shows on sexual attitudes when measured a year later. Vandenbosch and Eggermont (2011) propose some explanations as to why they might have not found an influence like the previous studies did. One reason they suggest is due to the novelty of the subgenre and therefore, the amount of exposure over time had not built up enough to yield any effects on the viewers. Another reason might be because they controlled for previous sexual attitude variables when other studies might have not been as rigorous about this aspect. The real reason for the lack of findings is unknown but it is important to report their results since they suggest a finding that goes against the other findings presented.

What can be agreed upon is the prevalence of sexual themes and stereotyping that are in reality dating programs. The stereotypes all include the theme of a lack of commitment needed to engage in sexual behavior. It has been specifically pointed out that the stereotype of men as sex driven might be linked to the endorsement of casual sex (Zubriggen & Morgan, 2006). Although endorsement of casual sex has been suggested as being linked to the endorsement of sexual stereotypes, no study has specifically tested that variable. Additionally, a factor that plays into of endorsing casual sex is holding permissive sexual attitudes. The newer programs that are included in this study

exaggerate these sexual themes. As mentioned above, *Dating Naked* follows the same

patterns but adds the overtly sexual aspect of the contestants going on dates in the nude.

Therefore, I propose this:

> H2: Heavier viewers of reality dating shows will hold more permissive sexual
>
> attitudes than lighter viewers of reality dating shows.

Defining Perceived Realism

When people are consuming heavy amounts of reality dating programming,

another aspect that should be considered is how realistic these shows appear to be to the

viewers. The term 'reality programming' suggests that it could be a portrayal of real life

events, but often this is not the case. There is a debate in the literature about realism, not

only on how to define perceived realism accurately but also whether the realism lies

within the text itself or within the viewer's perception of the text.

Perceived realism has been defined in numerous ways and has varied depending

upon the audience members as well as the context. Perceived realism has been most

commonly defined by the magic window dimension developed by Hawkins (1977). The

magic window dimension "is concerned with the degree to which a viewer believes

television content is an unaltered, accurate representation of actual life" (Potter, 1988, p.

26). Although the "magic window" concept is a valid way to define perceived realism,

studies using this concept as their definition tend to focus more on younger audiences

(Dorr, 1983; Hawkins, 1977; Nikken & Peeters, 1988). Emerging adult audiences are

more complex in their way of thinking and perceiving reality and Hall (2003) captures a

more sophisticated picture of what perceived realism consists of.

Hall (2003) identifies seven dimensions of perceived realism: plausibility, typicality, factuality, involvement, narrative consistency, and perceptual persuasiveness. Plausibility indicates the extent to which the event could happen in the real world. Typicality indicates the extent to how often the event would happen and/or how typical this situation would be in the real world. Factuality, in terms of reality programming, refers to the altering of a text with either editing or other production elements, with less indicating more realism perceived. Involvement refers to the relationship that develops between the viewer and character, whether that be an identifying or sympathizing one. Narrative consistency indicates whether or not the story being told is cohesive. Perceptual pervasiveness refers to how well an event is portrayed visually. These elements may play more or less important roles in determining perceived realism depending on what the text is and depending on what the viewer considers when trying to decide how realistic it is.

Hall's (2003) definition of perceived realism indicates that determining if a text is realistic or not is based on the viewer and how they assess as well as how important each of these dimensions are in order to come to a final decision. Therefore, one text could be perceived as realistic to one viewer and just as easily be perceived as unrealistic or less realistic to another viewer, and these opinions could vary from text to text as well as from scene to scene if there are new introductions of people or situations.

Busselle and Bilandzic (2008) discuss how perceived realism is processed by viewers, whether that is one of the two ways presented or both ways. A viewer can process the elements of a portrayal during the time they are viewing the text, which is called an online judgment. A viewer can process the elements after they have viewed the

text, which is called reflective judgment. Viewers typically process realism both ways.

When conducting surveys or even experiments, researchers ask for reflective judgments

about viewers' experiences with texts that have already been watched or read. It would

prove difficult to measure online judgments since these judgments are occurring in

viewers' minds while they are watching or reading a text. Measuring online judgment

could yield different results.

Perceived Realism of Fictional Programming to Reality Programming

Researchers have examined how perceived realism might differ depending on the

context that the material is presented in and how it is labeled as fictional or reality.

Shapiro and Chock (2004) found that the element of typicality was positively related to

perceived realism, in that the more the participants perceived the story to be typical, the

more they believed it to be realistic or "like real life" (Shapiro & Chock, 2004, p. 685).

The researchers also discovered that context played an important role in how typical the

participants viewed the story to be as well as how real it was. Nabi, Biely, Morgan and

Stitt (2003) showed that viewers only perceive reality programs to be somewhat realistic.

However, when compared to fictional programming, reality shows were perceived to be

more realistic than fictional ones (Nabi et al, 2003). Nabi et al's (2003) study addresses

an idea similar to Hall's (2003) factuality piece, in which most people believed that the

people on reality shows behaved a certain way due to the presence of the camera and film

crew.

Hall (2006) also looked at how viewers' perceive reality programming. She

found that when asked about reality television, participants often gave examples of

particular shows that they considered to fit within the genre. The most important concept

that came up while discussing elements of a reality show was how closely the show

related to real life, which plays into the elements Nabi et al (2003) discussed when

defining what a reality show consisted of. Hall (2006) states, "The ideal reality show

seemed to be an unscripted presentation of real people's experience. The greater the

perception that cast members could determine their own actions and speak their own

minds, the more like a reality program a particular show was seen to be" (p. 198).

However, she mentions that when asked directly about realism, participants did not

identify reality programs as being real. Both Nabi et al (2003) and Hall (2006) had

interesting findings that suggest that perceived realism is a unique concept to study,

especially in regards to reality programming.

Reality Dating Shows and Perceived Realism

To tie perceived realism into reality programming, the theoretical framework of

cultivation theory could help aid in finding what effects might emerge from heavy

viewing of this genre as well as subgenres like reality dating programs. Following the

assumptions of cultivation theory, the more television that a viewer consumes should

predict how much television will play a part in developing a viewer's sense of the real

world. When reality dating shows are what a viewer is basing their knowledge of the

world off of, it would be logical to think that they would perceive those shows as being

realistic since watching these shows can shape a viewer's perception of reality. Realistic,

meaning that viewers who see the shows as having the elements of plausibility, typicality,

factuality, involvement, narrative consistency, and perceptual persuasiveness or a

combination of whichever elements that viewer sees as being most important, would see

the shows as more realistic and similar to their world view. If a viewer was heavily

exposed to reality dating shows, it could be suggested that this would cultivate a sense of realism since their world would be based in part off of the themes and scenarios that are reoccurring in these types of shows.

There have been multiple studies that investigated various genres that support the above suggested effects (Hammond, Farrar, & Jalette, 2009; Peter & Valkenburg, 2010; Segrin & Nabi, 2002; Ward & Carlson, 2013) Peter and Valkenburg (2010) examined sexually explicit material online and its perceived realism to the viewers and found that the heavier viewers tended to perceive the material as more realistic than the lighter viewers. For viewing of reality programming, Ward and Carlson (2013) found a positive association between viewing of this genre and levels of perceived realism. For the specific subgenre of crime reality programming, Hammond, Farrar, and Jalette (2009) found that "…perceptions of realism mediated the relationship between viewing of fictional crime programs and fear of crime" (p.20). For shows with romantic themes, Segrin and Nabi (2002) found that females, who are heavy viewers of romantic television programming, tend to perceive television to be more realistic but did not find this to play a role in expectations in romantic relationships.

Even though there has been research into romantic programming and reality programming, there has been little investigation into the perceived realism of reality dating shows specifically. Another flaw of previously conducted studies is that they have used scales consisting of only five to six items to measure perceived realism (Segrin & Nabi, 2002; Ward & Carlson, 2013). There is little support for the specific genre. However, through the assumptions of cultivation theory and support for similar

programming (general reality programming and romantically themed programming), I propose the following:

H3: Heavier viewers of reality dating shows will perceive the reality dating shows to be more realistic than lighter viewers.

Effects of Perceived Realism on Attitudes and Beliefs

The impact, or lack thereof, that perceived realism has when it comes to media effects has yielded inconsistent findings. Pouliot and Cowen (2007) sought to test whether viewers of documentaries or fiction films would have a more emotional response, with their original predictions suggesting that since documentaries were more realistic that they would elicit a greater emotional connection. The researchers found the exact opposite effect with viewers who watched the fiction films being more emotional than those who watched the documentaries. However, when examining themes that elicited the most emotional response, Pouliot and Cowen (2007) found that one of the higher emotional themes was "love and marriage" (p. 254). When it comes to more romantic programming, perceived realism has shown to be a significant influence on attitudes and beliefs. Segrin and Nabi (2002) found that the viewers who thought television romances were more realistic were less likely to endorse marriage, which was consistent with the type of content the participants watched. Related to endorsement of marriage, Ward and Rivadeneyra (1999) found that viewers who perceived prime time programming content to be more realistic tended to endorse less traditional dating practices. These findings could be interpreted that since television romances often focus on non-committed relationships that viewers are less likely to desire a committed

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relationship if they believe that non-committed relationships are the norm, an attitude that could be learned from television portrayals.

Specifically looking at sexual attitudes, Peter and Valkenberg (2010) found that perceived realism influenced sexual attitudes in the context of sexually explicit material online, with greater levels of perceived realism leading to greater endorsement of permissive sexual attitudes. However, the researchers also found the reverse to be true with greater endorsement of permissive sexual attitudes leading to greater levels of perceived realism of the sexual content. This indicates a reciprocal relationship. Although not all of these findings specifically address reality programming, one could infer that these effects could apply to this genre as well as the subgenre of reality dating shows. With such prevalent non-committal sexual themes, if a viewer perceived these shows to be more realistic, they would be more likely to embrace these themes. Therefore, I propose:

H4: The more realistic viewers of reality dating shows perceive the shows to be, the more permissive their sexual attitudes will be.

Mediating or Moderating Role of Perceived Realism

Although perceived realism has been shown to be important in influencing attitudes and behaviors, its exact role in doing so is still uncertain. Perceived realism has been examined as playing a mediating or moderating role in media effects. Evidence of it playing a mediating role comes from Chock (2011), who discovered that perceived realism and endorsement of recreational sexual attitudes had a positive relationship. The viewers who watched more entertainment television were more likely to perceive it as realistic and the more realistic it was perceived to be, the more likely their recreational

attitudes increased. "Perceived realism significantly mediated the relationship between exposure and personal agreement with recreational attitudes" (Chock, 2011, p. 374). In addition, Quick (2009) examined the relationship between *Grey's Anatomy* viewing and perceptions of doctors as courageous. Although he did not find a direct link between the two, he found that viewers who perceived the show to be more credible were more likely to have courageous perceptions of their doctors. "In other words, the more people watched the show, the more realistic they perceived the program" (Quick, 2009, p.50). Therefore, this also provides evidence that perceived realism may have a mediating effect between exposure and attitudes or perceptions.

In support for a moderating role, Stevens et al (2007) examined perceived realism as a moderator between exposure to interpersonal-conflict television and perceived control in a relationship. This upheld the assumptions of the Social Cognitive Theory in that people who perceived the television shows to be more realistic were more likely to model these behaviors and apply them to their own relationships. Taylor (2005) also examined perceived realism between exposure to sexual content and endorsement of permissive sexual attitudes. A moderating effect was found in that viewers who are exposed to sexual content and perceive it to be realistic are more likely to endorse permissive sexual attitudes than those who view the content and don't perceive it be as realistic.

Both sides of the research presented legitimate and well-supported findings for both mediating and moderating effects. Since there is no definite side that presented better findings than the other and the findings are mixed, I propose these research questions to test for both mediation and moderation effects:

RQ1: Will perceived realism mediate the relationships between the exposure to

reality dating shows and permissive sexual attitudes?

RQ2: Will perceived realism moderate the relationship between exposure to

reality dating shows and permissive sexual attitudes?

Methods

Study Design

A survey was conducted to see if there are correlations between the variables of

exposure to reality dating shows, perceived realism, and permissive sexual attitudes. A

survey was chosen due to the nature of the topic and the measures. Since the topic is

sensitive, a survey offers more anonymity and, ideally, more truthful answers. The

measures also lend themselves to being measured, as opposed to manipulated, as in an

experiment.

Sampling Design

Although it would have been ideal to have a random sample, time and resource

constraints forced a convenience sample due to the availability of students and

availability of reward resources (extra credit). Additional reasoning for choosing this

population includes the sensitive nature of the topic and previous literature. Since this

topic is of a sensitive nature, ideally young adult participants are better able to handle

themselves in a more mature fashion than teenagers would when answering this survey.

Also, the literature suggests an interest in young adults since Eyal and Finnerty (2009)

found that 83% of characters who engage in sexual activity are over 25 years old and

11% are young adults. With the particular sample that is included in the study, most of

the participants are in this general age range and therefore are able to relate more directly

to the characters and the activities they are engaging in. Also, Grello, Welsh, and Harper (2006) found that of their sample of college students, over half had engaged in casual sex. Since this study aims to measure participants' endorsement of permissive sexual attitudes, which includes casual sex, this population would be most likely to have experienced and know what is being asked about on the survey. This was measured in this study with a question about one-night stands (see Appendix D). About 49.7% of participants stated that they had engaged in a one-night stand, close to the half mentioned in Grello, Welsh, and Harper (2006).

Participants

Participants were recruited from a public Midwestern university from undergraduate Communication courses. Participants were offered extra credit in exchange for their participation in the online survey. One hundred and ninety one students attempted to take the survey with 185 actually completing the survey. After analyzing the confirmation question to ensure that participants were consciously taking the survey, 169 participants remained. Finally, the question regarding how much television the participant watched on an average weekday (Appendix A) was analyzed to eliminate participants who either misinterpreted the question or mistyped and entered over 17 hours per day. The final number of participants included in this analysis was 156.

Consistent with most Communication departments, 68.6% of participants were female and 29.6% were male. One participant answered "Other" and two participants did not answer at all. In terms of race, 23.7% of participants were African American, 69.8% were Caucasian, 3.6% were Latino, 2.4% were Asian American, and 3% selected

"Other". Participants were able to check multiple races, therefore, the percentage totals over 100%. The mean age of participants was 25.43 (*SD*= 6.30) and the median age was 23.

Procedure

Participants were notified by the Communication department professors that an online survey was available for them to take in exchange for a small amount of extra credit. They were given a two week window to complete the survey. Once participants accessed the online survey link, they were instructed that this was an online survey asking about their television viewing habits and their sexual attitudes and behaviors. After completing the survey, they were directed to another page to enter their class and name to receive their extra credit. They were assured that their name was not connected to their answers and were thanked for their participation.

Measures

Overall Television Viewing. Participants were asked how many hours of television they watch on an average weekday, an average Saturday, and an average Sunday. The participants were asked to think about their television viewing habits and include "viewing" as watching in real time, on-demand, or through online streaming such as Netflix, Hulu, or a channel's website. This was measured as a point of comparison to how many hours of reality dating shows a participant watches. Kim et al. (2006) found that heavy general television viewing is associated with heavy viewing of sexual content, so measuring this variable helps to get a general, overall picture of how important a role television plays in a participant's life (Appendix A).

For overall television viewing on an average weekday, the mean number of hours was 6.40 (*SD*= 11.08). The average Saturday viewing amount was 2.72 hours (*SD*= 2.14) and the average Sunday viewing amount was 3.38 (*SD*=2.15). These measures were combined by multiplying the average weekday by five and then adding in the two weekend days for the amount of overall TV viewing in an average week. The mean number of hours of TV viewing per week was 26.52 hours (*SD*=21.41). While evaluating this variable, it became apparent that participants may have mistyped or misinterpreted the question of how many hours they view per day. Therefore, participants who answered that they viewed over 17 hours a day were not included due to the constraints of the 24 hour day. The means above reflect the exclusion of these outliers.

Amount of Reality Dating Show Viewing. Participants were asked how often they watch each of eight specific programs on a list of eight reality dating shows derived from IMDB's list of top 200 of the most popular reality TV shows. There was also a spot to list any other reality dating shows that the participants watched, defined for them as "an unscripted show with non-actors portraying life events that center on dating, falling in love, finding the perfect match or with a main focus on romantic relationships" and indicate how often they have watched them. The categories for the frequency of viewing were adapted from Zubriggen and Morgan (2006) (Appendix A), which included never watch, seen it once or twice, once a month, every other week, pretty regularly, almost every week, every week, and binge watch.

Ultimately, the data that was entered by the participants as other reality dating shows was thrown out due to the large number of answers that did not fit the category or the definition provided. The last two answer choices of "watch it every week" and

"binge watch" were combined since the amount of exposure for the two would be approximately equivalent. Responses regarding exposure to the eight reality dating shows listed in the questionnaire was summed. Then, eight was subtracted from the total to provide an overall reality dating show exposure variable with a range of 0 to 40, with higher numbers indicating heavier viewership. The mean was 4.51 (SD=4.97) with the minimum number as 0 and the maximum number as 30.

Perceived Realism. Perceived realism was assessed with a version of the 21-items of the Perceived Realism Scale created by Cho, Shen, and Wilson (2014). The original scale was divided into five sub-scales measuring five dimensions of realism: plausibility, typicality, factuality, narrative consistency, and perceptual quality. It was adapted by replacing the word "ad" with "reality dating shows" and small modifications with the tenses and verbs. For example, the verb "show," which often appeared right after the word "ad" in the original scale, was replaced with "portray." An item designed to measure the perceptual quality factor, item 19, was listed as "The acting in the ad was realistic" which was changed to "Reality dating shows portray people who are playing themselves realistically." This was to accommodate the fact that reality programs do not portray actors or people acting. The items are rated on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1(strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This scale was modified from a 7-point Likert scale to a 5-point Likert scale to match up with the following permissive sexual attitudes measurement to ensure less confusion by having the same number of answer choices. Examples of the items are "Reality dating shows display something that could really happen" and "Reality dating shows portray events that happen to a lot of people" (Appendix B).

To determine if participants in this study perceived realism to be one factor or to be multidimensional, a factor analysis was conducted on the scale. To determine whether the scale was multi-dimensional or not, the eigenvalues, the scree plot and an un-rotated matrix were considered. However, the scree plot indicated that the first factor accounted for the largest amount of the variance (40.56%), by a substantive margin with the second factor only accounting for 7.96% of variance. Then, factors were rotated obliquely and it was found that most (16) items loaded onto the first factor, with all four of the reversed items on the second and one of the other items alone on the third factor. This suggests that much of the additional variance in responding to the scale items can be accounted for by agreement bias rather than different realism factors. In the context of reality dating shows, there seemed to be one main factor rather than perceived realism being multidimensional. Therefore, a single global measure of perceived realism was created by averaging the scores, which yielded a scale of 1 to 5 with higher numbers indicating more perceived realism (*M*=2.55, *SD*=.63). The minimum number was 1.05 and the maximum number was 3.90. The final scale had a Cronbach's alpha of .92.

Permissive Sexual Attitudes. Permissive sexual attitudes were measured with the 10-item permissiveness category of Brief Sexual Attitudes Scale (Hendrick, Hendrick, & Reich, 2006). The items are assessed by a Likert-type scale ranging from 1(strongly disagree) to 5(strongly agree). Examples of items are "Casual sex is acceptable" and "It is possible to enjoy sex with a person and not like that person very much". Consistent with Hendrick, Hendrick, and Reich (2006), this scale yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .90 (Appendix C). To measure overall sexual attitudes, the answers were summed and then 10 was subtracted. The resulting scale measured from 0 to 40,

with higher numbers indicating more permissive sexual attitudes. The mean was 15.99 (SD=8.68) with the minimum number as 0 and the maximum number as 34.

Sexual Experience. To measure sexual experience, an adaptation of the 5-item questionnaire from Zubriggen and Morgan's (2006) study was used. The items measured experience, satisfaction, intercourse, one-night stand, and contraception. A small modification was made to make the questions sexual orientation neutral. Additionally, questions were added to get a numerical value on how experienced the individual was. For example, item 4 asks "Have you ever had a 'one-night' stand (i.e., had sex with someone you just met and didn't date after that)?" This modification adds an additional question of how many times has this occurred since an individual who engages in this behavior more often is likely to be different than an individual who has only engaged in this behavior once in their lifetime. After the additional items, this scale includes 7-items to assess sexual experience (Appendix D).

Although the above mentioned scale was used in the survey, the question that determined the factor of sexual experience was simply "How would you describe your current level of experience with dating and sexual relationships?" The minimum number was 0, indicating no experience, and the maximum number was 10, indicating having several sexual relationships (M=7.11, SD=2.78). The mean indicates that most of the participants had one to two sexual relationships.

Demographic Variables. Participants were asked their age, gender, and race. The participants were asked to fill in their age (18-100). They were asked to select their gender from the following categories: male, female, transgender, or other. They were asked to select their race from the following categories: African American/Black,

Caucasian/White, Hispanic/Latino, Asian American, One or more race, or other (Appendix E). They could select more than one race as mentioned above in the participants' report. To measure relationship status, the participants were asked about their current relationship status. Using all but one of the categories from Aubrey (2007), they selected one of the following choices: not dating, casually dating one or more people, dating one person exclusively, engaged to marry, married, or divorced. The decision to eliminate the category of "living with a romantic partner" was made to make the categories mutually exclusive (Appendix E). 24.6% of the participants were single, 9.9% were casually dating one or more people, 35.1% were dating one person exclusively, 12.6% were engaged, 13.6% were married, and 1 participant was divorced. This measure was not ultimately used for any analysis since the sexual experience question seemed more relevant to the study's analysis. To measure sexual orientation, the participants were asked to choose from the following categories: heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, other, or prefer not to say. Sexual orientation was asked since the questions for sexual experience were made sexual orientation neutral (Appendix E). Since a majority of the participants were heterosexual (86.4%), this measure was not ultimately used for any analysis.

Results

Preliminary Analysis

Initial analyses were run to see if there were any significant relationships between variables that were not laid out in the hypotheses or research questions and to know what variables to control for in the future analyses.

Age. This variable was run through several bivariate correlations to determine if there were any significant relationships. There was no significant relationship found between age and any of the following variables: permissive sexual attitudes, perceived realism, reality dating show exposure, or overall TV viewing. There was a significant, positive relationship between age and sexual experience, $r = .34$, p < .001.

Gender. This variable was run through several t-tests to determine if there were any significant correlations to be found. There were no significant differences between gender and overall TV watching, sexual experience, or perceived realism. There was a significant relationship between permissive sexual attitudes and gender, with males ($M=$ 20.20; $SD =8.07$) reporting more permissive sexual attitudes than females ($M=14.22$; $SD =8.41$) with $t (149.00) = -4.02$; $p<.001$. Reality television exposure will be discussed in the analysis of H1.

Other Analysis. There was no significant relationship found between overall television viewing and dating show exposure in this study. There was a positive, significant relationship between permissive sexual attitudes and sexual experience, $r = .20$, $p=.02$.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

H1. The first hypothesis stated that females will be heavier viewers of reality dating shows than males. An independent samples t-test, found a significant relationship found between gender and amount of reality dating show exposure, $t (149.97) = 5.63$, $p<.001$. Therefore, **H1 is supported.**

H2. The second hypothesis stated that heavier viewers of reality dating shows will hold more permissive sexual attitudes than lighter viewers of reality dating shows. A

regression analysis was run, controlling for gender and sexual experience. No significant relationship was found between amount of reality dating show exposure and permissive sexual attitudes, as reported in Table 1. Therefore, **H2 is not supported.**

H3. The third hypothesis stated that heavier viewers of reality dating shows will perceive the reality dating shows to be more realistic than lighter viewers. A correlation analysis was run and a significant, positive relationship was found between amount of reality dating show exposure and level of perceived realism, $r = .28$, p $<$ .001. Therefore, **H3 is supported.**

H4. The fourth hypothesis stated that the more realistic viewers of reality dating shows perceive them to be, the more likely they will be to hold permissive sexual attitudes. A regression analysis was run, controlling for gender, sexual experience, and exposure to reality dating programs. No significant relationship was found between level of perceived realism and permissive sexual attitudes, as reported in Table 1. A correlation analysis was also run without the control variables previously used in the regression analysis and no significant relationship was found, r= -.01, p=.93. **Therefore, H4 was not supported.**

RQ1 and RQ2. Research Question 1 and 2 asked whether perceived realism either mediated or moderated a relationship between exposure and permissive sexual attitudes. **RQ1 and RQ2 were answered, both negatively**. Mediation was not a possibility since perceived realism was not significantly related to sexual attitudes as explained in H4; therefore, there was no evidence of a mediation effect. To test for moderation, a Hayes' ModProbe Macro for SPSS was used. The interaction p-value was p=.92, which is not significant. An additional test was conducted testing the mean level

(p=.85) of perceived realism as well as one standard deviation below (p=.86) and one

standard deviation above (p=.95). No significant values were found at any level;

therefore, there was no evidence to support a moderation effect either.

Follow-up Analysis

After reflecting on the results from the hypotheses and research questions, I

decided to categorize the reality dating show exposure variable differently to see if this

change would reflect in the outcome variables of perceived realism and permissive sexual

attitudes. I separated the eight reality dating shows into two categories: reality dating

shows with a focus on dating and reality dating shows with a focus on marriage. The

reality dating shows with a focus on dating were Catfish: The TV Show, Dating Naked,

and Are You the One. The reality dating shows with a focus on marriage were 90 Day

Fiancé, The Bachelor, The Bachelorette, Millionaire Matchmaker, and Married at First

Sight. Although some of the marriage focused reality dating shows only display couples

going on dates, their overall goal is marriage, which is not the case with the dating

themed reality dating shows.

H1 retest. The first hypothesis stated that females will be heavier viewers of

reality dating shows than males. An independent samples *t*-test, found a significant

relationship found between gender and amount of marriage focused reality dating show

exposure, t (149.92) = 4.74, $p<.001$. An additional independent samples *t*-test, found a

significant relationship found between gender and amount of dating focused reality

dating show exposure, t (149.96) = 5.63, $p<.001$.

H2 retest. The second hypothesis stated that heavier viewers of reality dating

shows will hold more permissive sexual attitudes than lighter viewers of reality dating

shows. A regression analysis was run, controlling for gender and sexual experience, for both marriage focused and dating focused reality dating shows. No significant relationship was found between amount of marriage focused reality dating show exposure and permissive sexual attitudes, as reported in Table 2. No significant relationship was found between amount of dating focused reality dating show exposure and permissive sexual attitudes, as reported in Table 3.

      H3 retest. The third hypothesis stated that heavier viewers of reality dating shows will perceive the reality dating shows to be more realistic than lighter viewers. A correlation analysis was run and a significant, positive relationship was found between amount of marriage focused reality dating show exposure and level of perceived realism, $r = .20$, p $< .05$. A correlation analysis was run and a significant, positive relationship was found between amount of dating focused reality dating show exposure and level of perceived realism, $r = .28$, p $< .001$.

      H4 retest. The fourth hypothesis stated that the more realistic viewers of reality dating shows perceive them to be, the more likely they will be to hold permissive sexual attitudes. A regression analysis was run, controlling for gender, sexual experience, and exposure to marriage focused reality dating programs. No significant relationship was found between level of perceived realism and permissive sexual attitudes, as reported in Table 2. A regression analysis was run, controlling for gender, sexual experience, and exposure to dating focused reality dating programs. No significant relationship was found between level of perceived realism and permissive sexual attitudes, as reported in Table 3. In addition, a correlation analysis was run without the control variables

previously used in the regression analysis and no significant relationship was found, r= -.01, p=.93.

RQ1 and RQ2 retest. Research Question 1 and 2 asked whether perceived realism either mediated or moderated a relationship between exposure and permissive sexual attitudes. Even with the new categorization of the reality dating shows, mediation was still not a possibility since perceived realism was not significantly related to sexual attitudes as explained in H4; therefore, there was no evidence of a mediation effect. To test for moderation, a Hayes' ModProbe Macro for SPSS was used. First, the marriage focused dating show exposure variable was tested. The interaction p-value was p=.47, which is not significant. An additional test was conducted testing the relationship at the mean level (p=.18) of perceived realism as well as one standard deviation below (p=.21) and one standard deviation above (p=.68). No significant values were found at any level; therefore, there was no evidence to support a moderation effect for the marriage focused reality dating shows. Second, the dating focused dating show exposure variable was tested. The interaction p-value was p=.10, which is not significant. Therefore, there is no support for a moderation effect for the dating focused reality dating shows. An additional test was conducted testing the relationship at the mean level (p=.02) of perceived realism as well as one standard deviation below (p=.02), which are both significant. However, one standard deviation above (p=.39) was not significant. Although the relationship at the mean level value and the one standard deviation below value was significant, it is difficult to interpret these values as meaningful. Since the interaction value was not significant, these significant values could have occurred by chance. These significant

values also seem to indicate that the effect is in the opposite direction than predicted previously in this study.

Discussion

Summary of Findings

This study found that females were heavier viewers of reality dating programs than males. This finding supports the previous research and adds that this trend of heavy female viewership is continuing, even with the introduction of more recent programs.

The two hypotheses (H2 and H4) associated with sexual attitudes were found to have no significant correlations. Heavier viewers did not have more permissive sexual attitudes, which is a challenge to Cultivation Theory. Specifically, it seemed that no second order effects were found since attitudes were not affected by exposure to reality dating programs. Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) was shown no support since attitudes were not influenced by the perceived realism that the viewers' held. However, there was a significant relationship between heavier viewers and how realistic they perceived reality dating shows to be. This is of interest since it seems to support Cultivation Theory's first order effects, which suggest that with repeated exposure comes a sense of reality being similar to television.

The results of this study do not support previous research that indicated that heavier viewers of reality dating programs were more likely to have more permissive sexual attitudes. Some previous studies focused on other genres such as soap operas, dramas, and comedies (Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999) and music videos (Zhang, Miller, & Harrison, 2008). These genres might contain different plot elements that may be more influential to viewers than reality dating shows such as more direct sexual themes.

Another reason that sexual attitudes could have not been influenced by heavy viewing could be that sexual attitudes were already high and established among this sample. Being in college, most attitudes about sex are formed and therefore, the reality dating programs might simply reinforce the sexual attitudes instead of shaping them. This study used an updated version of reality dating programs that had not been previously used in many of the other popular studies of this genre. These newer programs could have different highlights of sexual behavior and may not be as influential on sexual attitudes. Also, since this type of programming has now been popular for several years, the novelty may have worn off. For example, *The Bachelor* just wrapped up season 19 so many viewers have been exposed to this type of programming for some time. This study does confirm the findings of Vandenbosch and Eggermont (2011) who did not find much influence on sexual attitudes from exposure to reality dating shows when they conducted a longitudinal study. They suggested that it was possible that the shows were too novel at the time of the study, whereas now, there could be an argument made that they are too common place.

This study did not find that the more realistic viewers thought the reality dating shows to be that the more permissive sexual attitudes they had. This lends some support the findings of Pouliot and Cowen (2007), who found that people were more emotional when watching fiction films than they were when watching documentaries. Although documentaries and reality dating shows are often very different, they both have the element of being real or at least attempting to portray reality, in the case of reality dating shows. It might be that the elements of reality are not as persuasive as what someone can create in terms of fiction. Fiction films and television might be able to make a more

compelling case that may be seen as more insidious or persuasive since people often get caught up in the storyline.

Limitations and Future Research

This survey was conducted using Communication undergraduate students, a convenience sample in this case. An additional limitation of this study was that it only provided proof of some significant correlations but was unable to prove causation. Although we can make assumptions based on these correlations, it would be interesting for future research to see if causation could be established between these variables. Another limitation of studies of sensitive nature is the social desirability factor. It could be possible that participants believed that if they answered truthfully that they could be judged for their sexual attitudes and behaviors. A survey should minimize this but it is still a possibility to consider.

In terms of future research, there are several avenues that present themselves to further these findings. Although there was not a significant relationship found in this study between age and permissive sexual attitudes, perceived realism, reality dating show watching, or general television watching, it would be of interest to study a much younger population such as pre-teenagers and early teenagers around ages 12-14. One thing to consider is how other societal factors might play a role in how realistic a person perceives reality dating shows to be and how permissive their sexual attitudes are. This study did not measure peers' exposure to reality dating shows, permissive sexual attitudes, or level of perceived realism. These factors have the potential to influence participants so for future research, it would be useful to measure these as well. Another avenue to further these findings would be conduct a focus group or open-ended survey to look into why

females seem to gravitate toward reality dating programs more than males do. Future

research could measure the perceived realism in both reality dating shows and

romantically themed fictional programs to see how the two compare.

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Tables

Table 1: *Regression Analysis Predicting Permissive Sexual Attitudes*

	β
Gender	.294**
Sexual Experience	.167*
Reality Dating Show Exposure	-.015
Perceived Realism	-.030

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$

Table 2: *Regression Analysis Predicting Permissive Sexual Attitudes (Marriage Focused)*

	B
Gender	.267**
Sexual Experience	.179*
Marriage Focused Reality Dating Show Exposure	-.106
Perceived Realism	-.010

*$p < .05$; **$p < .003$

Table 3: *Regression Analysis Predicting Permissive Sexual Attitudes (Dating Focused)*

	B
Gender	.335[**]
Sexual Experience	.175[*]
Dating Focused Reality Dating Show Exposure	.151
Perceived Realism	-.075

[*] $p < .05$; [**] $p < .001$

Appendices

Appendix A

Overall Viewing and Reality Dating Show Viewing Measurement

1. How many hours of television do you watch on an average weekday?

   a. _____

2. How many hours of television do you watch on an average Saturday?

   a. _____

3. How many hours of television do you watch on an average Sunday?

   a. _____

4. Please indicate which of the following programs you have seen and how often

   you watch them with 1= never watch, 2= seen it once or twice, 3= once a month,

   4= every other week, 5= pretty regularly, almost every week, 6= every week,

   7=binge watch (watch more than one episode in a row)

   a. Catfish: The TV Show

      - _____

   b. 90 Day Fiancé

      - _____

   c. The Bachelor

      - _____

   d. Dating Naked

      - _____

   e. Are You the One

      - _____

    f.   The Bachelorette

        -    _____

    g. Millionaire Matchmaker

        -    _____

    h. Married at First Sight

        -    _____

    i. Using the definition of reality dating shows as "an unscripted show with non-actors portraying life events that center on dating, falling in love, finding the perfect match or with a main focus on romantic relationships", please list any other shows you watch and how often you watch them using the same scale from above:

    j. _____

Appendix B
Perceived Realism Measurement

For each of the following statements, fill in the response that indicates how much you agree or disagree with that statement with 5 = Strongly agree with statement, 4 = Moderately agree with the statement, 3 = Neutral - neither agree nor disagree, 2 = Moderately disagree with the statement, and 1 = Strongly disagree with the statement:

1. Reality dating shows portray something that could possibly happen in real life.

2. The event(s) in reality dating shows portray possible real-life situations.

3. The story lines of reality dating shows could actually happen in real life.

4. Never in real life would what is shown in reality dating shows happen.

5. Real people would not do the things that are shown on reality dating shows.

6. Not many people are likely to experience the event(s) portrayed in reality dating shows.

7. Reality dating shows portray an event(s) that happens to a lot of people.

8. What happens to people in reality dating shows is what happens to people in the real world.

9. Reality dating shows are based on facts.

10. Reality dating shows depict something that is really happening.

11. What is shown in reality dating shows has actually happened.

12. Reality dating shows present a coherent story.

13. The story portrayed in reality dating shows is consistent.

14. Parts of reality dating shows contradict each other.

15. The story portrayed in reality dating shows makes sense.

16. The event(s) in reality dating shows have a logical flow.

17. The visual elements of reality dating shows are realistic.

18. The audio elements of reality dating shows are realistic.

19. Reality dating shows portray people who are playing themselves realistically.

20. The scenes in reality dating shows are realistic.

21. I feel that the overall production elements of reality dating shows are realistic.

Appendix C

Permissive Sexual Attitudes Measurement

For each of the following statements, fill in the response that indicates how much you agree or disagree with that statement with 5 = Strongly agree with statement, 4 = Moderately agree with the statement, 3 = Neutral - neither agree nor disagree, 2 = Moderately disagree with the statement, and 1 = Strongly disagree with the statement. Some of the items refer to a specific sexual relationship, while others refer to general attitudes and beliefs about sex. Whenever possible, answer the questions with your current partner in mind. If you are not currently dating anyone, answer the questions with your most recent partner in mind. If you have never had a sexual relationship, answer in terms of what you think your responses would most likely be.

1.   I do not need to be committed to a person to have sex with him/her.

2.   Casual sex is acceptable.

3.   I would like to have sex with many partners.

4.   One-night stands are sometimes very enjoyable.

5.   It is okay to have ongoing sexual relationships with more than one person at a time.

6.   Sex as a simple exchange of favors is okay if both people agree to it.

7.   The best sex is with no strings attached.

8.   Life would have fewer problems if people could have sex more freely.

9.   It is possible to enjoy sex with a person and not like that person very much.

10.   It is okay for sex to be just good physical release.

Appendix D

Sexual Experience Measurement

1. How would you describe your current level of experience with dating and sexual

   relationships?

   a. _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

      i.   1= just starting out

      ii. 3-4= some dating

      iii. 6-8= 1-2 sexual relationships

      iv. 9-11= have had several sexual relationships

2. How satisfied are you with your current level of experience with dating and

   sexual relationships?

   a. 1= very unsatisfied

   b. 2= unsatisfied

   c. 3= have no feelings either way

   d. 4= satisfied

   e. 5= very satisfied

Consider your past experiences when answering the following questions:

3. Have you ever had sexual intercourse?

   a. Yes

   b. No

4. If yes, approximately how many partners have you been with?

   a. _____

5. Have you ever had a one-night stand (i.e., had sex with someone you just met and didn't date after that)?

    a. Yes

    b. No

6. If yes, approximately how many times have you engaged in one-night stands?

    a. _____

7. How frequently do you have sexual intercourse without using any form of protection or contraception?

    a. 1= never

    b. 2= only once

    c. 3= occasionally

    d. 4= about half the time

    e. 5= frequently

Appendix E

Relationship Status, Sexual Orientation, and Other Demographic Variable Measurement

1. What is your current relationship status?

    a. not dating

    b. casually dating one or more people

    c. dating one person exclusively

    d. engaged to marry

    e. married

    f. divorced

2. What is your sexual orientation?

    a. Heterosexual

    b. Homosexual

    c. Bisexual

    d. Other

    e. Prefer not to say

3. What is your current age?

    a. _____

4. What is your race/ethnicity? (Please check all that apply)

    a. African American/Black

    b. Caucasian/White

    c. Hispanic/Latino

    d. Asian American

    e. Other

5. What is your gender?

   a. Male

   b. Female

   c. Transgender

   d. Other