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Beware of What You Watch:
Television Viewing and Dating Behavior in Young Adults

Michael Milmine

Abstract: People of all ages are spending significant portions of their day watching television. Television shows themed around romantic relationships are very common and popular among young adults. This study examined relationships between television viewing and dating behavior in a sample of students at a small religious university in southeast Tennessee. Forty-seven participants completed the *Milmine Social Interaction and Media Instrument (MSIAMI)* which measures television viewing. Results show statistically weak relationships between television viewing and lower expectations, less physical touch, lower satisfaction, and shorter dating relationships. Television viewing was related to a slightly higher frequency of kissing within the dating relationship. More studies are needed with the same variables using different research methodology.

American adults are exposed to and consume an average of 2.7 hours of television every day (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011). The variety of media and programming available on television is vast, ranging from news, to documentaries/informational programming, to movies, to TV shows, to sports, and commercials and advertisements. A 2002 study found that teens ranked television in the top four for getting dating information (Wood, Senn, Desmarais, Park, & Verberg). The following research literature describes the current knowledge base on the relationship that television media has with young adults dating behavior.

The search strategy employed for retrieving research studies for this literature review consisted of online academic search engines and databases: PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, and Sage Premier. The review focuses on including television as a source of information, sexual behavior and attitudes toward it, perceptions of dating and reality, aggression, violence, abuse, celebrities, relational tendencies, body image, and therapeutic effects of television viewing.

Television as a Source of Information

Young adults are actively seeking accurate information about dating and relationships (Wood et al., 2002). When naming the places that they receive their dating information from, young adults list television, dating partners, parents, friends, and sex educators as the largest sources (Wood et al., 2002; Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006). It is interesting to note that as common as gaining information from television is, young adults list this information as not being very accurate and having little effect on them (Wood et al., 2002).

However, Zurbriggen and Morgan (2006) discovered that the more young adults connect with a particular character, the more likely they are to be affected by what they are viewing. A study by Bilandzic (2006) takes this further by stating that as people watch television, they slowly begin to absorb the ideas, views, and morals presented. She calls the television the best universal vehicle for passing on views and standards. Studies have also shown that stories can influence people to adapt their beliefs (Bilandzic, 2006). These stories may be absorbed through television viewing.

Sexual Behavior Attitudes

Researchers' views on how television media affects sexual behavior and attitudes in young adults vary tremendously. According to Martino et al. (2005), television media brings about sexual behaviors, specifically coital, earlier than they would occur without this influence. Martino and associates argue that young adults learn sexual behaviors by watching television. After viewing sexual behavior on television, adolescents become more confident and are not as afraid or shy to experiment sexually (Martino et al., 2005).

Other researchers hold the opposing view to Martino and his colleagues. For example, Laurence Steinberg and his colleague Kathryn Monahan (2011) concluded from their study that there is absolutely no evidence that points to television media bringing about earlier sexual behaviors in young adults. They say that it is easy to blame Hollywood for young people's sexual behavior but it is more likely that parents and peers have the largest impact in this area.

Reality dating shows have become popular and increased in numbers dramatically since the late 1990s (Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006). Because these shows claim to use regular people instead of actors, the information regarding sex and dating is much more likely to be thought of as accurate. These shows portray men as mostly looking for sex and dating is not taken seriously. This is dangerous as it leads young men to accept these beliefs and view women as objects (Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006).

Perceptions of Dating and Reality

Young adults beginning to date and even those who have dating experience need something to guide their anticipations and beliefs regarding the dating experience (Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007). Television programs are full of dating behaviors and rewards for these behaviors. When young adults see certain behaviors being rewarded, they are much more likely to behave similarly (Ferris et al., 2007). The way television media presents dating relationships may lead young adults to feel that their relationship is inadequate and have other unhealthy perceptions. An example could be that their relationship is not as exciting as the ones portrayed on television. These kinds of messages may even lead to the discontinuation of dating relationships (Punyanunt-Carter, 2006).

Aggression, Violence, and Abuse in Dating

A study by Connolly, Friedlander, Pepler, Craig, and Laporte (2010) found that in a sample of three high schools, about 72% of the 627 adolescents reported committing violent acts against their partner and/or had acts of violence committed against themselves. These participants admitted that the media they consume is somewhat aggressive and that this media somewhat agreed with their personal ideas on dating relationships.

Mangello's (2008) research shows similarly high numbers reporting to being the victim of violence within dating. It is also interesting to note that within dating relationships, similar numbers of men and women claim to be the victims of abuse. Besides physical violence, sexual violence and psychological abuse are also commonly reported among teens in dating relationships.

Violent music videos, movies, and television shows have been linked to violent behaviors in youth (Mangello, 2008). Young women who were exposed to violent rap music videos had a higher likelihood of believing that violence within a dating relationship was acceptable. Another study showed that young people who viewed professional wrestling engaged in violent behaviors towards their dating partner at higher rates than those who did not (Mangello, 2008). Connolly's 2010 study found similar results. Higher levels of aggression were associated with viewing aggressive television programs and other media. Men reportedly consumed more aggressive media than women yet both genders were affected by it. For an unknown reason, minorities seem to be more influenced by aggressive media (Connolly et al., 2010). Other studies have found links between television programming and relational tendencies and body image.

Celebrities, Relational Tendencies, and Body Image

Studies in the area of young adults' imagined attachment with television celebrities are consistently finding similar results. Young adults are likely to feel attachments to television celebrities in either an extension of or in replacement for their relationships or lack thereof (Greenwood, Pietromonaco, & Long, 2008). Relationships imagined with opposite sex television celebrities were used by young adults in place of actual relationships (Greenwood & Long, 2010). In other words, because the young adult did not have a romantic relationship, he/she imagined a relationship with a celebrity in place of the real thing. Young women who experienced anxiety in relationships with other young women as well as their social life were more likely to imagine themselves in a relationship with a television star of the opposite sex (Greenwood & Long, 2010).

Young women showed a much higher level of attachment to television celebrities of their own gender than did men. This may be because young men are less likely to admit to being interested in the lives of other men (Greenwood & Long, 2010). Women were found to attach themselves to same gender celebrities who had what the young adult considered a more optimal body type than their own. Men were more likely to look up to male television celebrities who were perceived to be intelligent (Greenwood et al., 2008). Both young men and young women

are negatively influenced by viewing celebrities who are very muscular or very attractive as they become dissatisfied by their own bodies (Nikkelen, Anschutz, Ha, & Engels, 2011).

Therapeutic Effects of Television Viewing

Television viewing may have some helpful influences on young people after they have experienced a regret or loss within a dating relationship (Nabi, Finnerty, Domschke, & Hull, 2006). Viewing programming that deals with similar themes and situations that they themselves are going through may help young adults to work through and heal from those situations because the young people are forced to think about the event or events. Television programs may also be used as a form of escapism (Nabi et al., 2006). Programs that are more likely to end the state of unhappiness (temporarily) will be viewed at a higher rate than those programs that will remind the young adult of their own situation (Nabi et al., 2006). Whether this escape is positive or negative remains uncertain.

The research done in the area of television, dating behavior, and young adults covers a wide range of topics. Television viewing and dating behavior are linked because young adults appear to be using television as a source of information about dating. While not all researchers agree, television viewing appears to influence sexual behavior, aggression, violence, body image, perceptions, and coping strategies. Although these studies have found evidence for the influence of television on young adults, there has been very little research on television's influence on the expectations, physical touch, and satisfaction with dating relationships. Therefore more research is needed on this subject so that a connection may or may not be established.

Purpose of the Study

There is a paucity of recent research on television viewing and dating behavior. The purpose of this study was to measure the relationship between television viewing and the dating behavior of young adults.

Definition of Terms

The following terms were operationally defined for this study:

1. *Television viewing* was measured by item number 7 in the *Milmine Social Interaction and Media Instrument (MSIAMI)*. Item 7 measured the amount of television viewed that has a romantic or male-female relationship focus.
2. *Age* was assessed by self-report on item number 3 in the *Milmine Social Interaction and Media Instrument (MSIAMI)*. Item 3 asked the participants to indicate their age.
3. *Expectations* was measured by item number 12, 13, 14, and 15 in the *Milmine Social Interaction and Media Instrument (MSIAMI)*. Items 12, 13, 14, and 15 asked the participants about the importance they place on attractiveness, kissing skill, spending time with, and receiving gifts within dating relationships.

4. *Physical touch amount* was measured by item numbers 9, 10, and 11 in the *Milmine Social Interaction and Media Instrument (MSIAMI)*. Items 9, 10, and 11 asked the participants how many times a day they: hug/hold hands with their boyfriend/girlfriend, kiss their boyfriend/girlfriend, and how often they have physical contact with their girlfriend/boyfriend other than hugging, holding hands, and kissing.
5. *Kissing frequency* was measured by item number 10 in the *Milmine Social Interaction and Media Instrument (MSIAMI)*. Item 10 asked the participants to indicate how many times a day they kiss their boyfriend/girlfriend.
6. *Satisfaction level* was measured by item number 16 in the *Milmine Social Interaction and Media Instrument (MSIAMI)*. Item #16 asked the participants to indicate how satisfied there are with their current relationship.
7. *Length of current relationship* is measured by item number 17 in the *Milmine Social Interaction and Media Instrument (MSIAMI)*. Item #17 asked the participants to indicate how long they have been in their current dating relationship.

Hypotheses

Five research hypotheses guided this study.

1. There is a positive correlation between television viewing and the level of expectations; as television viewing increases, the level of expectations will increase.
2. There is a positive correlation between television viewing and the amount of physical touch within the dating relationship. As television viewing increases, the amount of physical touch will increase.
3. There is a positive correlation between television viewing and kissing frequency reported within the dating relationship. As television viewing increases, kissing frequency will increase.
4. There is an inverse correlation between television viewing and the level of satisfaction with the dating relationship reported. As television viewing increases, the level of satisfaction with the dating relationship decreases.
5. There is an inverse correlation between television viewing and the length of the dating relationship reported. As television viewing increases, the length of the current dating relationship decreases.

Each of these hypotheses was tested in its null form.

Method

Participants

A sample of convenience consisting of 21 male and 25 female university students attending Southern Adventist University in southeast Tennessee. Participants providing data for this study included eight Hispanics, two Asians, 26 Whites, and 10 Mixed Race individuals. The

average participant age was 20.48 and the average GPA was 3.39. As incentive participants were entered in a raffle for a chance to win a 20 dollar gift card to the Olive Garden restaurant upon completion of their role in the study. All participants were treated in accordance with the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct of the American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association, 2010).

Materials

The instrument used was the *Milmine Social Interaction and Media Instrument* (MSIAMI) which was developed by this researcher for the purpose of this study. The MSIAMI is a self-report questionnaire to collect data on the number of hours of television viewed with a focus on young adult relationships and social interaction, expectations within dating relationship, physical touch within dating relationship, satisfaction within dating relationship, and length of current dating relationship. The instrument consists of 17 questions with five fill-in-the-blank items, five 7-point Likert-type items, and six select-the-best-answer questions that were coded for input into SPSS, and one filler item that was not measured by this study. The fill-in-the-blank items measure age, cumulative GPA, and physical touch. The Likert-type items address expectations and satisfaction within the dating relationship. The select-the-best-answer questions address gender, ethnicity, amount of television viewed, amount of movies watched, and length of current dating relationship. Reliability and validity data on the MSIAMI were run with Cronbach's Alpha. Internal consistency was measured using Cronbach's alpha and ranges from .56 to .64.

Design and Procedure

The design of this study was non-experimental and correlational using survey methodology. Students in the cafeteria were asked if they would be willing to take part in this study. The study was conducted in the Cafeteria at Southern Adventist University. Data was collected over a three day period. Each prospective participant was greeted and then given an informed consent form before completing the MSIAMI. Participants took about 15 minutes to complete the survey.

Data Analysis

The MSIAMI consists of 17 questions with five fill-in-the-blank items, five 7-point Likert-type items, and six select-the-best-answer questions. After the surveys were coded, scored, and entered into PASW 18.0 for data analysis. Descriptive analyses were done and the hypotheses were tested using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients.

Results

On average, participants in this study viewed about one hour and fifteen minutes of television per day which is about eight and a half hours per week (513.59 minutes). Almost two hours (about 112 minutes) of this television viewing per week emphasized romantic and sexual

themes. Actual means and standard deviations of television viewing can be found in Table 1. In addition to this television viewing, participants watched about one movie per week ($M = 1.17$, $SD = .93$).

Expectations and Television Viewing

This research hypothesis stated that there would be a positive relationship between the level of expectations one has for their dating partner and the amount of television viewed that focused on romantic relationships and social interaction viewed by the individual (See Figure 1).

Physical attractiveness. On average participants' expectations of physical attractiveness in their dating partner was only slightly over four on the seven point Likert-type scale where one was listed as not important and seven was listed as very important ($M = 4.76$, $SD = 1.16$). A Pearson product-moment correlation analysis revealed that the more romantic/sexually themed television viewed the less participants tended to expect in terms of physical attractiveness in their dating partner. However, this negative relationship was not statistically significant ($r_{(46)} = -.16$, $p = .281$, $r^2 = 2.6\%$). Only about two and a half percent of the data can be explained using this relationship. These results are therefore inconclusive.

Kissing skill. Participant's expectations of kissing skill in their dating partner was about half on the seven point Likert-type scale where one was listed as not important and seven was listed as very important ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.51$). The results indicated that the more romantic/sexually themed television the participant viewed the less kissing skill they expected from their dating partner. However, there was only a weak, not statistically significant inverse relationship between these two variables ($r_{(46)} = -.19$, $p = .200$, $r^2 = 3.7\%$). Just over three and a half percent of the data can be explained by this relationship. The results are inconclusive, although it appears that higher amounts of television viewed may relate to slightly lower expectations of kissing skill in a dating partner.

Daily time together. Participant's expectations of their dating partner taking time for them daily was relatively high compared to the other expectations measured on the seven point Likert-type scale where one was listed as not important and seven was listed as very important ($M = 5.61$, $SD = 1.11$). The results indicated that the more romantic/sexually themed television the participant viewed the less time they expected their dating partner to set aside for them daily. These findings were not statistically significant ($r_{(46)} = -.03$, $p = .831$). Less than one percent of the data can be explained by this relationship.

Receiving gifts. Participant's expectations of receiving gifts from their dating partner was below the half-way point (about three) on the seven point Likert-type scale where one was listed as not important and seven was listed as very important ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.64$). Pearson's correlational analysis revealed that the more romantic/sexually themed television the participant viewed the lower their expectations were for receiving gifts from their partner. However, there was only a weak, not statistically significant inverse relationship between these two variables ($r_{(46)} = -.15$, $p = .328$, $r^2 = 2.2\%$). About two percent of the data can be explained by this relationship. Although the results are not statistically significant, it appears that higher amounts

of television viewed may relate to slightly lower expectations of receiving gifts from their dating partner.

Physical Touch and Television Viewing

This research hypothesis stated that there would be a positive relationship between the amount of physical touch and the amount of television viewed that focused on romantic relationships and social interaction viewed by the individual. Table 2 shows the results.

Hugging and hand-holding. The data showed the average participant's amount of hugging and hand-holding per day with their dating partner was around eleven with a standard deviation of almost nine ($M = 10.87, SD = 8.93$). These results indicated that the more romantic/sexually themed television the participant viewed the fewer times they hugged and/or held hands with their partner each day. However, there was only a very weak, not statistically significant relationship between these two variables ($r_{(45)} = -.05, p = .762$).

Other physical touch. Participant's average amount of other kinds of physical touch (excluding kissing) with their dating partner each day was four which is less than half of what they reported for hugging and hand holding and also had a much lower standard deviation ($M = 4.00, SD = 4.97$). The findings indicated that there was a very slight tendency for the more romantic/sexually themed television the participant viewed the fewer times they had other physical contact with their partner each day. This small correlation was not statistically significant ($r_{(45)} = -.06, p = .689$).

Kissing Frequency and Television Viewing

This research hypothesis stated that there would be a positive correlation between the number of kisses per day with one's dating partner and the amount of television viewed that focused on romantic relationships and social interaction viewed by the individual. The MSIAMI showed the average participant's kissing amount with their dating partner per day was about eight with a standard deviation of about nine ($M = 7.98, SD = 9.11$). The results showed that the more romantic/sexually themed television the participant viewed the greater the amount of time the participant kissed their partner each day. However, there was only a weak, not statistically significant relationship between these two variables ($r_{(45)} = .30, p = .046, r^2 = 8.9\%$). About nine percent of the data can be explained by this relationship. The results are inconclusive although it appears that higher quantities of television viewed may relate to slightly more kissing within a dating relationship.

Satisfaction and Television Viewing

This research hypothesis stated that there would be an inverse correlation between the level of satisfaction with the current dating relationship and the amount of television viewed that focused on romantic relationships and social interaction viewed by the individual. The MSIAMI showed the average participant's satisfaction with their current dating relationship was very high at almost six and a half on the seven point Likert-type scale where one was listed as very

dissatisfied and seven was listed as very satisfied ($M = 6.35, SD = 0.948$). The results showed negligibly that the more romantic/sexually themed television the participant viewed the less satisfied the participant was with their dating relationship. However, there was a near zero inverse relationship between these two variables ($r_{(46)} = -.01, p = .970$). The null hypothesis could not be rejected. The results are therefore inconclusive.

Length of Dating Relationship and Television Viewing

This research hypothesis stated that there would be an inverse correlation between the length of the current dating relationship and the amount of television viewed that focused on romantic relationships and social interaction viewed by the individual. The MSIAMI showed the average participant's length of current dating relationship was just over one year and four months ($M = 16.57, SD = 15.53$). The results showed that the more romantic/sexually themed television the participant viewed the shorter their current dating relationship with their partner. However, there was only a very weak, not statistically significant relationship between these two variables ($r_{(46)} = -.05, p = .751$). The results are inconclusive although it appears that higher quantities of television viewed may relate to slightly shorter dating relationships.

Other Interesting Findings

Some other interesting relationships were found in the data using an independent sample *t*-test. The variables were gender and the importance of receiving gifts from one's dating partner. On a seven-point Likert-type scale, the twenty-one men surveyed indicated a mean importance of slightly over two ($M = 2.10, SD = 1.14$). Women on the other hand indicated a mean of about three and a half ($M = 3.56, SD = 1.71$). This means that women in this sample might put a higher value on gifts than men do.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to measure the relationship between television viewing and the dating behavior of young adults. The results from both expectations and physical touch were weak as there was not enough evidence to make any definitive conclusions. The data also indicated that the more romantic and sexually themed television the young adult viewed, the more frequently they kissed their dating partner. There was almost no relationship between television viewing and satisfaction as well as the length of the dating relationship.

There were some other conclusions that were also suggested by the data. One finding was that the young women that participated in this survey valued receiving gifts significantly more than the male participants. Whether this began because women truly valued these gifts or because women have been taught to want these gifts is uncertain.

There are some tentative explanations for the findings of this study. It is possible that the individuals who watched more television had lower expectations and less physical touch with their dating partner because they spent more time watching television and therefore spent less time with their partner. Because television viewing did not influence expectations, the length of

the dating relationships may not be influenced as people who view more television do not expect anything more than individuals who watch less television. Also, behaviors in relationships on television are often highly physical it was not surprising that there was a relationship between higher television viewing and higher kissing frequency.

There could be a variety of reasons for the results in this study. It may be that other forms of media need to be considered as well as television to fully measure the effect of media on dating behavior. It could also be argued that the questions were not specific enough. In other words, some of the questions could have gathered more specific data which would have allowed for a better analysis of the data. Another explanation could also be that the selected sample was different from the general population and therefore if a sample was more representative of the population the results may be different.

The main weakness of this study is that participants may have been able to guess the hypothesis. This is due to the fact that participants knew that the survey required individuals in dating relationships and when they saw the questions asking about television consumption and different dating behaviors they could have easily linked these two subjects.

The results only partially match past findings. Past studies have linked television viewing to the increase and onset of certain behaviors within the dating relationship. This study found weak or very weak relationships between television viewing and kissing amount, lower satisfaction, and shorter dating relationships. These relationships agree with past findings and therefore were not surprising. Higher quantities of television viewing have not been linked to less physical touch and lower expectations in past studies. This study may open the door for more research into this area to further examine the findings of this study that disagrees with past research.

Knowledge regarding the relationship between television viewing and dating behavior may be useful in understanding cultural trends and treating problems within the context of dating. The scientific community, mental health professionals, parents, and young adults can benefit from the results of this study. Although previous studies have found evidence for the influence of television on young adults, there has been very little research on television's influence on the expectations, physical touch, and satisfaction with dating relationships. This study is important because it begins to fill in the gap of knowledge in this area and does offer interesting findings and suggest a growing need for further research.

Future research into television viewing and dating behavior should use different instruments and different designs to increase the range, reliability, and validity of knowledge on this subject. Instruments used should ask even more specific questions regarding television and dating behavior. Data on other factors including sexual behavior, time spent with dating partner, number of dating relationships, and other expectations could be gathered. It may be important to test the hypotheses with experimental rather than mere correlational design. Qualitative studies may also be helpful in identifying behaviors and television shows that are acted or viewed at the highest frequency. It may be beneficial in the future to assign scores (regarding dating behavior and expectations) to the television shows which would allow the research to assign individuals

scores on what they were watching and compare those scores to other responses. Researchers must take advantage of opportunities to learn more about the influence media has on human behavior because of its ubiquitous use.

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Table 1.

Television Viewing Amounts in Hours per Day

	Men		Women	
	M	SD	M	SD
Total TV Viewed	70.00	88.53	76.20	69.14
Romantic TV Viewed	14.80	17.07	16.89	18.20

Note. Men ($n = 21$), Women ($n = 25$).

Table 2.

Frequency of Touch

Touch Type	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Hugging and Hand Holding	10.87	8.93
Other Touch	4.00	4.97
Kissing	7.89	9.11

Note. ($N = 45$). Actual reported numbers used.

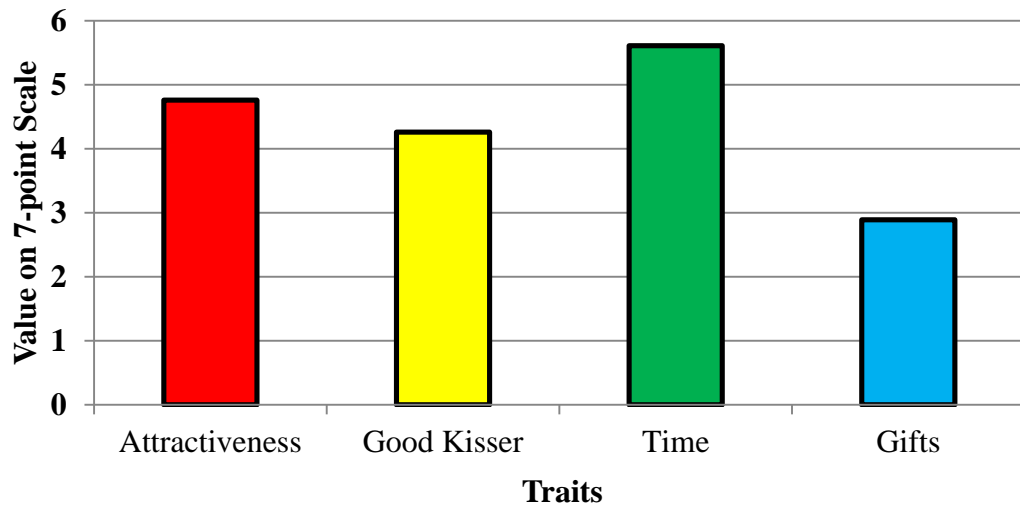


Figure 1. Traits valued within dating relationships.