Should Action be Taken to Limit The Influence of the Portrayal of Romantic Behaviour Through Television Media on Those of American Teenagers?
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Context

Television has become one of the most popular mass mediums in American culture and has enormous power to affect how people think and behave, according to Dallas College's social science researcher, Amber Raley, and psychologist Jennifer Lucas (Raley and Lucas, 2008). As stated by the same researchers, this is attributed to the "Cultivation Theory," introduced by sociologist George Gerbner. The Cultivation Theory states that "the more viewing an individual does, the more that individual will think that what they see on television is what is true in real life" (Lamb, 2018), implying that people who watch the most television are the most prone to having skewed perceptions of reality. According to Julia Stoll, a research expert specializing in the global TV and video streaming industry, Americans consumed the most television compared to other countries in 2018 –which, as referred to by the Cultivation Theory, would mean that Americans are the most prone to having skewed perceptions of the world (Stoll, 2018). Focusing on the consumption of television media by teenagers, A study conducted by Jingjing Jiang through the Pew Research Center found that teenagers on average spent 22% more time on television than the adults in their families. One of the largest skewed elements of life that are portrayed through television media is romantic relationships. As supported by the Cultivation Theory, since an increased consumption of media results in an increased distortion in the perception of romantic relationships, and since American teenagers are consuming the most television media, they are the most impacted by the distortion of perceptions of relationships being imposed by the media they are consuming. Some of these impacts include unsatisfying relationships, increased pressure to appeal to societal expectations, and premature engagement in sexual behavior.

Impact of Expectations Conveyed Through Media on Relationships

Teenage relationships conveyed through American television media are creating unrealistic expectations of romantic relationships, which is ultimately having negative effects on teenage romantic relationships, as television media often showcases idealized images of relationships. Defined by University of Nevada professors Galloway, Engstrom, and Emmers-Sommer, the influence of television shows and movies "engender unrealistic expectations in those who are exposed to them" by displaying happy relationships as those that involve no arguments/conflicts (Galloway, Engstrom & Emmers-Sommer, 2015). Since teenagers tend to "turn to television in order to educate themselves" (Tukachinsky and Dorros, 2018) about things like romantic relationships, and romantic relationships are being portrayed unrealistically, teens are starting to "believe that is how all romantic relationships either work or should work" (Taba et al., 2020). Therefore, the effects of media exposure demonstrate that media consumption has a measurable influence on teenagers' perceptions of the world and the behavior they should be modeling in order to achieve relationships like those displayed on television. Having expectations that are too high is damaging to relationships because "people whose relationships are incongruent with their expectations are going to feel dissatisfied" (Teddar, 2011). Therefore, the higher expectations being conveyed through television media and

absorbed by teenagers is making teenagers have overly-high expectations of their romantic relationships, and in turn causing dissatisfaction and unhappiness in their social lives.

Vulnerability Caused by Psychological Development

This issue is especially prevalent amongst teenagers from the ages of thirteen to nineteen due to their psychological development at this age. As shown by research done by psychologist Emily Loeb, teenagers are shown to conform to societal expectations more than other age groups, especially when it comes to their social functioning (Loeb et.al., 2015). This conformity, according to sociologist and psychologist Klaus Hurrelman, is often driven by the desire for peer acceptance and recognition (Hurrelman, 1992). The issue of feeling forced to conform to societal expectations has been prevalent for a long time, as demonstrated through "The Story of an Hour" by Kate Chopin, an American novelist recognized by scholars for her short stories and feminist works. The short story was written in 1894. At the time, women were legally subordinate to their husbands, expected to not speak up for their own needs and preferences, and had such limited freedom that they could not even do things such as own property or keep their own wages (Mantl, 1999). In the story when Mrs. Mallard's found out her husband had passed away, she repeated the words "Free! Body and Soul Free!," implying that she felt a large sense of freedom return to her at the news of her husband's passing. Her reaction to finding out her husband was still alive differed greatly; she had passed away from heart disease (Chopin, 1894). The woman's positive reaction to her husband's death and negative reaction to finding out her husband's death was not real demonstrates that she was in an unhappy marriage due to the happiness she displayed at the thought of never having to see him again and the freedom she envisioned that she never had before. However, because of the societal norms and expectations of marriage at the time, which included a lack of freedom, Mrs. Mallard would have felt pressured to stay in her unideal relationship, which is what caused her to stay in it until the day her husband died. In "The Story of an Hour," societal expectations are likely what forced Mrs. Mallard to stay in her unhappy relationship. The societal expectations in the story resemble today's forms of media influence, representative of the cultural norms and expectations regarding relationships prevalent during that time period. Today, "television has both reflected and nurtured cultural mores and values," being a large form of how societal expectations are pushed on audiences (University of Minnesota). A large part of these societal expectations that are pushed through television include romantic behavior. A directed content analysis of romantic relationships shown in popular TV shows done by Sarah Valoise Lamb shows that on average, 96% of all teenage characters in these shows either displayed romantic behavior such as flirting, or were blatantly in a romantic relationship with another character (Lamb, 2018). Similarly, 98% of popular blockbuster films that came out in the year 2021 contained at least one ideal romantic expression, according to a study done by author Veronica Hefter (Hefter, 2022). Since teenagers are very likely to conform to societal expectations, which are being pushed through television, it can be concluded that television impacts teenagers' individuality and their capacity to pursue their own desires independently of media influence, due to their psychological tendencies that contrast those of other age demographics.

Premature Physical Engagement

Another detrimental influence of television on teenagers and their romantic relationships is that teenagers are being led to engage in sexual behavior earlier than they would have otherwise because that is what they believe is normal. An increasing amount of television media

teenagers are exposed to includes sexual content. A social science researcher at the University of Texas, Austin, studied ten of the most popular television shows amongst teenagers in 2020. He hypothesized that "of the 1,276 episodes, more than half of the episodes contained sexual content," with a higher number of episodes with this content than without (Fisher et. al, 2004). This, according to a study done by Monique Ward, a psychologist at the University of Michigan, had a huge impact on the thought processes of teenagers as the more frequently viewers watched TV and were exposed to sexual behaviors portrayed on screen, the 'greater expectations [they had] of peer sexual experience, lending support to the notion that 'everyone is doing it'", therefore leading to the expectation that teenagers were "behind" if not engaged in sexual activity (Ward, 2002). The high amount of exposure teenagers are getting to sexual activity from the TV they are consuming demonstrates the point that "television has become a prominent role in educating American youth about sex, however it sends distorted, stereotypical, and potentially harmful sexual messages" (Ward, 2002).

Solutions

A possible solution to this problem is implementing education on how to distinguish between realistic versus unrealistic representations of relationships on television. This can be done through media literacy classes for all teenagers with a focus on relationships promoted through television. These classes would begin in the sixth grade, when most Americans are eleven or twelve years old, and continue through high school so that teenagers would be exposed to this information from the ages 11/12 to 17/18. This would ensure that as teens start to develop and start thinking about romantic relationships, they are well prepared to make informed desires rather than imitate the behavior they see on television. A main component of what would take place in these classes are that students would analyze content that depicts romantic behavior and determine whether or not the situation is realistic in the context of an American teenager. In a study done by psychologist Lori Irving, forty eight high school sophomores took part in a teacher-administered television literacy program and completed an exam afterwards to determine how their viewpoints on what should be taken away from the media they consumed changed. Participants watched and discussed excerpts from the ten most popular TV shows among teenagers during the year the program took place, after which they were taught skills for challenging the media internally, by questioning internal wants for relationships in response to the media, and externally, by asking critical questions about the media and engaging in activism. Compared to 30 high school students who did not participate in the program but took the same exam, Irving concluded that the students who took the program did not feel as pressured to model the romantic behavior displayed on television as they had learnt to question the media portrayed rather than try to mirror it (Irving 2007). Although some of the limitations of this study include the specific age range of its participants and the fact that its subjects are all from the same school, the study does give a comprehensive understanding of the effects of media literacy education on students.

A possible limitation of this solution is that media literacy education as a whole is very limited in the United States. Not only is it limited, but the media literacy education that does exist is "not as advanced" as it should be, according to philosopher and professor of media literacy at the University of California Douglass Kellner (Kellner and Share, 2018). As media literacy is the foundation for analyzing the media students consume, it would be difficult to implement these more specific television and relationship related programs at schools if "basic media education in kindergarten to Year 12 (K/12) schooling in the USA has never really been established and

developed," with media literacy curriculums only existing in a small percentage of schools (Kellner and Share, 2018). The lack of these classes results in individuals who are more vulnerable to harmful media messages and are less equipped to assess and evaluate these messages. Furthermore, it would be expensive to implement not only media literacy programs but also television and romantic behavior central programs at middle and high schools as the teachers would need to have credentials and certification proving that they are capable of teaching media literacy to students - as media literacy is not a standard part of schools, many places would need to hire new teachers to do the job, which would pose a large expense on school district boards (Goetze et al.,), especially in low-income communities.

Conclusion

Despite the limitations, the influence television has on teenagers' relationships and perceptions of relationships needs to substantially decrease. Romantic relationships are being portrayed more and more through television shows and movies whose biggest consumers are teenagers. These romantic relationships are often incredibly unrealistic to expect from an American teenager, but teenagers perceive those relationships to be the "standard" for their own interpersonal relationships. These heightened and unrealistic expectations are causing problems in their romantic activities, and ultimately leading to unhappiness in the social lives of teenagers. As trying to change the standards of the media industry is too unrealistic, television literacy classes at schools would educate teenagers to be better prepared to comprehend what they see on television as it would teach them to differentiate realistic versus unrealistic portrayals of relationships and decrease their tendency to set their standards and model their behaviors based on the television they consume.

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