

# The Bridget Jones Effect: The Relationship Between Exposure to Romantic Media Contents and Fear of Being Single Among Emerging Adults

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Based on cultivation theory, this study examines whether an individual's exposure to romantic media contents would be significantly related to their fear of being single. Analyses on a cross-sectional sample of 18- to 25-year olds ( $N = 821$ ) did not show a significant overall relationship between exposure to romantic media contents and fear of being single, but moderation results indicated that this relationship did exist for women who were single themselves. Suggesting that romantic media contents might contribute to the fear of being single only for specific members of this genre's audience, these findings could have general implications for theorizing on cultivation-type media effects.

## Public Policy Relevance Statement

The fear of being single holds implications for people's well-being and relationship choices. Because single women, in particular, are often portrayed as needy and unsuccessful in popular romantic-themed TV shows, our study shows that especially single female emerging adults are susceptible to an increased fear of being single after exposure to such content.

*Keywords:* fear of being single, romantic TV, romantic movies, cultivation, singles

*Bridget Jones:* "Tom has a theory that homosexuals and single women in their thirties have natural bonding: both being accustomed to disappointing their parents and being treated as freaks by society."  
(Fielding, 1996, p. 20)

We live in a time characterized by romantic crises, with high rates of marriage postponement or renouncement and marital dissolution (Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010). As a result, more and more adults are spending a significant part of their life being single. The World Marriage Data of 2012, for instance, confirm a sharp decline in the number of married people in 2009 compared with that in 1970 in several Western countries such as the United States and Belgium—especially among the 18–25 age cohort, typically referred to as "emerging adults" (United Nations, 2013). Although in Belgium, approximately 35% of men and 60% of women aged 20 to 24 were married in 1970, and these numbers fell to 3.3% for men and 10.3% for women in 2009 (United Nations, 2013).

Emerging adulthood is a developmentally unique period in which individuals have to make important choices that will help shape their future lives in fundamental areas such as their education, careers, job opportunities, and romantic relationships (Nelson & Luster, 2015). Emerging adults often experience this life stage as a time to take risks, a time of stress, confusion, and uncertainty, and a time to explore their sexual identity (Morgan, 2013; Nelson, Willoughby, Rogers, & Padilla-Walker, 2015), as recent economic and societal developments carry increased risks and uncertainties that make it harder for emerging adults to commit and settle down (Shulman & Connolly, 2013).

Despite the growing number of singles in the society, intimate relationships remain of great psychological importance to emerging adults (Arnett, 2000; Carroll et al., 2007) and are often perceived as being more important than work, hobbies, or friendships (Barry, Madsen, Nelson, Carroll, & Badger, 2009). The majority of the singles express the desire to eventually be involved in a long-term committed relationship (Robinson, 2011; White, 2003), and studies have shown that singles often experience negative stereotyping (DePaulo & Morris, 2005) and discrimination (Morris, Sinclair, & DePaulo, 2007). As a result, Spielmann and colleagues (2013, p. 1049) wondered whether there exists such a thing as a fear of being single, which they define as the "concern, anxiety, or distress regarding the current or prospective experience of being without a romantic partner." The fear of being single is associated with lowering relationship standards in unsatisfying relationships, less selective partner selection, and mental health difficulties. Because the concept was introduced only recently, the

This article was published Online First December 7, 2017.

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This research was funded by a grant from the Flemish Fund for Scientific Research (FWO; FWO.G.0814.13.N).

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literature on the fear of being single is still limited and not much is known about factors predicting this fear.

In this manuscript, we propose exposure to romantic TV shows and films as a potential contributor to the fear of being single. This logic is rooted in the long-standing cultivation effects tradition, which conceptualized TV as a socializing agent teaching people what to expect from society and what society expects from them (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002). With regard to romantic relationships, several studies have already suggested that media contents form a crucial source for learning about romantic norms and expectations (Haferkamp, 1999; Lippman, Ward, & Seabrook, 2014). Media users may therefore also learn what to expect in the *absence* of such relationships—that is, what it is like to be single and how this is socially perceived. This has never been investigated before, but content analyses have already shown that TV programs often attach a negative connotation to single life. The current study will therefore test if those negative portrayals also generate the fear of being single among viewers (Busch, 2009; Johnson & Holmes, 2009).

### Singles in Society

In general, people view singles as more lonely and less mature, secure, happy, warm, and caring than married people (Hertel, Schütz, DePaulo, Morris, & Stucke, 2007). These stereotypes based on relationship status are common in Western cultures (Greitemeyer, 2009), especially among singles younger than 25 years (Morris et al., 2007). However, such negative views on single life may not be warranted. Over the years, studies have shown that singles report greater involvement with the broader community (i.e., they have more friends, are more likely to socialize, and more often exchange help; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2016), are healthier (White, 1992), and score higher on personality characteristics associated with better psychological well-being (Marks, 1996) compared with married couples. Moreover, unmarried people do not significantly differ from married people in terms of psychological well-being (DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Greitemeyer, 2009). In fact, both men and women experience benefits from being single. Single men, for instance, feel less financial pressure and work fewer hours compared with their married counterparts (Gerstel & Clawson, 2014; Moen & Sweet, 2006). Ever-single women in their 60s and 70s expressed satisfaction with their marital status and experienced several benefits centered around their independence (e.g., control over financial and social activities; Baumbusch, 2004). For women, marriage can have an “entrapping” effect, given that married women spend the majority of their leisure time on their husbands and children (DePaulo, 2006; Trimberger, 2006) and feel more separated from their parents (Laditka & Laditka, 2001).

Despite these positive experiences of single adults, young adults who are single themselves value being in a committed relationship more than being single (Poortman & Liefbroer, 2010). Women under 35, in particular, are most likely to express ambiguity and dissatisfaction with their single status (Dalton, 1992; Davies, 2003). They regularly report to fall victim to being judged negatively when they are single but sexually active (Sakaluk, Todd, Milhausen, & Lachowsky (2014)), and they often feel that others expect them to be in a committed relationship (Sharp & Ganong, 2011). Single men, on the other hand, are less likely confronted

with judgment or stigmatization of singlehood (McKeown, 2015). In reality, however, men are more likely to become socially disengaged when being single as compared with women (Nock, 2005), suggesting that they experience more discomfort when actually being single as compared with women. The stigmatization of singlehood thus does not correspond with singles’ experiences in reality, and researchers argue that policy should acknowledge the social constraints associated with marriage and more often support single individuals (Cherlin, 2009; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2016).

Based on these studies, then, it appears that being single need not be detrimental to people’s lives. Yet, Spielmann and colleagues (2013) concluded that young adults commonly report the fear of being single. Individuals reporting higher levels of this fear are more likely to lower their relationship standards in ongoing relationships (i.e., they experience more relationship dependency and are less likely to initiate the dissolution of an unsatisfying relationship) and tend to choose less responsive and less physically attractive partners compared with those with lower scores on fear of being single. Moreover, the fear of being single is strongly associated with depression and loneliness (Spielmann et al., 2013).

When it comes to explaining the origins of the fear of being single, several researchers refer to the role of social stigma. Society does not put much effort into challenging stereotypes surrounding single life, and young adults still experience pressure from their social environment to commit to long-lasting relationships (DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2016). It thus appears that, even in a century characterized by individualism, the idealization of marriage and parenting remains “strong, pervasive, and largely unquestioned” (Sharp & Ganong, 2011, p. 956). But why? Sociologist Christian Smith (2003) argues that our perceptions of “what is real and significant, . . . who we are, what we should do and why” are largely embedded in the stories about reality we share (p. 65). Following this reasoning, it may be important to trace back and examine common sources of stories about singlehood in modern Western societies.

### Singles in Romantic Media Contents

During the late 1960s and 1970s, George Gerbner developed a theory of mediated socialization largely rooted in the notion of storytelling. According to his cultivation theory, mass media, and especially TV, serve as a “common symbolic environment” for all members of society. By repeatedly showing the same constructed reality portrayals on screen, TV creates a common “mental world in which characters, situations, and events unfold to convey some truth about human existence” (Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, Morgan, & Jackson-Beeck, 1979; Roskos-Ewoldsen, Davies, & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2004, p. 349). Over time, these stories about reality may shape viewers’ perceptions of the real world, with heavy viewers being more likely to perceive it as possessing characteristics of the TV world (Gerbner et al., 2002). Originally, cultivation analysts argued that the power of TV lies in its so-called “metanarrative”—the ubiquitous storytelling elements cutting across programs and genres (e.g., violence). For this reason, cultivation research focused not on the effects of specific programs or contents but on assessing accumulated exposure to TV in general (Gerbner, 1998).

Of course, compared with the time when cultivation theory was developed, there are more channels and programs now (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2012), and the Internet (e.g., TV OnDemand and Netflix) has offered viewers more tools to selectively decide what to watch and when. Consequently, TV messages are not equally spread over all genres or channels but only occur in some while being absent in others (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2012; Shrum, 2002). For instance, exposure to surveillance programs, a subgenre of reality TV that often provides audiences with dramatic tension (Rose & Wood, 2005), is positively associated with beliefs about the prevalence of relationship discord in reality (Riddle & De Simone, 2013). Several scholars have thus advocated a genre-specific approach to cultivation research (Potter & Chang, 1990). In the context of romantic relationships, for example, it has already been found that repeated exposure to romantic TV, but not exposure to nonromantic genres, is associated with romance-related judgments (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2012; Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Lippman et al., 2014).

In general, romance is a quite prominent vehicle of televised storytelling. In the late 90s, popular movies and shows targeted at adolescents and young adults focused strongly on the quest for romantic experiences (Signorielli, 1997) and the significance of marriage (Pardun, 2002). Over the years, romantic ideals (e.g., love at first sight and love conquers all) remained persistent in several genres such as marriage-themed reality shows (Glebatis, 2007; McClanahan, 2007), romantic movies (Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Johnson, 2007; Johnson & Holmes, 2009), and G-rated films (Martin & Kazyak, 2009). Even animated movies appear to promote romantic relationships in the form of the “happily ever after” couple (Tanner, Haddock, Zimmerman, & Lund, 2003). Yet, it is important to note that major animation studios, such as Disney, have started to make some efforts to portray intelligent female characters who work hard and do not define themselves in terms of men, such as *Brave*, *Frozen*, and *Maleficent* (Justice, 2014).

Still, across romantic TV contents, singles mainly remain depicted as either lonely and miserable or frustrated and insecure about themselves (Johnson & Holmes, 2009). Women, in particular, seemed to be portrayed as deficient when not having a boyfriend or husband (Kim et al., 2007). Busch (2009) argues that popular shows and movies such as *Ally McBeal*, *Sex and the City*, and *Bridget Jones's Diary* contain one clear message: “single women are distressed, lonely, and miserable” (Busch, 2009, p. 87). Even *Sex and the City*—despite claiming to celebrate the single woman—contradicts this endeavor, as all women managed to end up with their soulmate by the end of the series (Akass & McCabe, 2004).

Moreover, romance narratives in the media portray women as needing men to be complete and successful (Alemán, 2005). A career and independence will rarely bring happiness and fulfillment to the single woman—only a good man will succeed in doing so (Moseley & Read, 2002). Women on the screen often need to turn to their male counterparts for advice (Strasburger & Wilson, 2002), and explicitly choosing to be single even has a negative influence on women’s career (Johnson & Holmes, 2009). This is in line with Atkin’s (1991) finding that only a small proportion of female singles is allowed to appear unconcerned about relationships on the screen. In general, women are portrayed as having a stronger preference for familial and romantic roles (Lauzen, Dozier, & Horan, 2008), and their conversations were often centered

on their romantic and sexual experiences (Gerhard, 2005; Signorielli, 1997).

Yet, Negra (2006) has observed a TV trend in which the new single man is presented as having desires that might previously have been deemed to be the preserve of women. One such example is Ted in the popular TV show *How I Met Your Mother*, as he is constantly anxious of a future in which he is ageing and single (Thompson, 2015). Negra (2006) also refers to several movies released in the 2005–2006 period (e.g., *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, *Failure to Launch*, and *You, Me and Dupree*) about the uncoupled 30- or 40-something male and his failure to take up his proper role in the social order. Importantly, however, there is generally only one (negative) storyline for the female single, whereas male singles can be portrayed in several ways (e.g., the excessive bachelor [Barney] vs. the anxious male spinster [Ted] in *How I Met Your Mother*; Thompson, 2015).

Keeping in mind these glorified portrayals of romantic relationships and the negative portrayals of single life, it may not be surprising that people in a relationship report being more satisfied with their current partner after viewing a romantic film compared with those in a relationship that were exposed to a film without any romantic narrative. For singles, the opposite effect occurred, with singles exposed to a romantic film being less satisfied with their previous partner compared with singles exposed to a film without any romantic narrative (Holmes & Johnson, 2009). Likewise, exposure to romantic TV has been found to be related to cognitions about dating (Ward, 2002; Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007), relationships (Bachen & Illouz, 1996; Haferkamp, 1999; Lippman et al., 2014), and marriage (Segrin & Nabi, 2002). Following this reasoning, we suspect that they may also cultivate the fear of being single:

*Hypothesis 1:* Consumption of romantic media contents will be positively linearly associated with self-reported fear of being single.

Traditional cultivation hypotheses like this one have met with mixed evidence throughout the years. On average, cultivation effects are found to be significant but also very small and sensitive to the inclusion of controls (Dossche & Van den Bulck, 2010; Potter, 1994; Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). A reason for this could be that the overall cultivation effect is just a very noisy estimate because it does not account for individual differences in the susceptibility to media messages (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013): If some people are likely to be affected by a message but others are not, the overall relationship will underestimate the impact of the message. Evidently, messages about single life are most relevant for people who are single themselves. Because personal relevance is known to positively affect the depth of message processing (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), singles should encode more information about the potential, mostly negative, consequences associated with singlehood. For people in a committed relationship, on the other hand, messages about single life are less relevant and presumably processed to a lesser extent. As a result, we can formulate the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 2:* The association between exposure to romantic contents and self-reported fear of being single will be moderated by relationship status such that it is stronger among singles than among people in a relationship.

In a similar vein, our literature review showed that negative portrayals of single life in romantic media contents are heavily focused on women (Busch, 2009). Because of this female bias, we suspect (a) negative messages about singlehood to be processed to a greater extent by women (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and (b) women to identify more strongly with the (mostly female) characters experiencing adverse consequences of their single status (Cohen, 2006). Because both of these elements are known to amplify media effects (Cohen, 2006; Shrum & Lee, 2012), we expect as follows:

*Hypothesis 3:* The association between exposure to romantic contents and self-reported fear of being single will be moderated by sex such that it is stronger among women as compared with men.

Combining the logic behind Hypotheses 2 and 3, we also expect that there will be differences with regard to relationship status such that the moderating role of gender will be more pronounced among singles than among people in a committed relationship. That is, although we expect women to be more vulnerable, we believe this vulnerability could wane if they are in a committed relationship.

*Hypothesis 4:* The relationship between romantic media content exposure and fear of being single will be moderated by gender to a greater extent among singles than among people in a committed relationship.

All of these hypotheses will be tested in a sample of emerging adults. This population is of particular interest for our purposes because (a) young adults often report having the fear of being single (Spielmann et al., 2013) and (b) fictional media contents favor young characters in their 20s and 30s (Lauzen & Dozier, 2005). To maximize the validity of our results we will also partial out variance in the fear of being single measure that might not be attributable to the fear of being single itself but rather reflects other constructs such as need to belong, neuroticism, and social avoidance goals (Spielmann et al., 2013). To assure that our results were actually attributable to romantic genre contents rather than overall viewing patterns, we also controlled for total TV viewing in all models.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

We used a convenience sampling technique to collect data. To reach the relevant age cohort (18–25), a standardized online questionnaire was spread through several social media channels (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Noxa). A total of two graduate students assisted in data collection and spread the survey through their own social media networks. Other users were encouraged to share the survey links as well to extend the reach of the survey. In addition, a link to the survey was posted in several (closed) Facebook groups (e.g., *singles in* [name city], *Dare to ask*, and *Freecycle*) and administrators of several successful Facebook pages (e.g., Confessions pages and popular magazines) agreed to share the survey link to attract the population of interest (i.e., emerging adults aged 18–25). Previous studies have shown that Facebook offers an efficient way to collect good quality self-

reported data (Baltar & Brunet, 2012; Kosinski, Matz, Gosling, Popov, & Stillwell, 2015).

According to a power analysis using G\*Power (2015), we needed 779 participants to have a reasonable 80% probability of refuting the null, given a population effect of  $R^2 = .01$ —which is a typical estimate reported in cultivation meta-analysis (Dossche & Van den Bulck, 2010; Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). In total, 839 participants (72.5% women,  $M_{\text{age}} = 21.89$ ,  $SD = 1.81$ ) completed the survey (achieved power = .82). The majority of the participants were university students (57%) or students enrolled at a community college equivalent (18%). Yet, 19% of emerging adults were employed, and a small minority (3%) was unemployed. Participation was voluntary, and participants did not receive any incentive for their participation. These procedures were in line with the host university's ethics guidelines.

### Measures

**Relationship variables.** Respondents were asked about their sexual orientation, relationship status, and the current length of their relationship status. Participants also reported the marital status of their parents. The large majority of the participants (93.1%) described themselves as heterosexual. Almost two thirds of them were in a committed relationship (61.3%). The large majority had married (67.3%) or cohabiting (5.1%) parents. Around one fourth of the participants had divorced parents (21.8%) or parents who were never married and currently not living together (1.9%).

**Fear of being single.** Participants completed the six-item Fear of Being Single Scale developed by Spielmann et al. (2013). Example items are “If I end up alone in life, I will probably feel like there is something wrong with me” and “As I get older, it will get harder and harder to find someone.” Answer categories ranged from (1) *strongly disagree* to (5) *strongly agree*. These items were averaged to form an index ( $\alpha = .82$ ,  $M = 2.77$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ).

**Neuroticism.** John and Srivastava's (1999) Neuroticism subscale of the Big Five Inventory consisted of eight items with answer categories that ranged from (1) *strongly disagree* to (5) *strongly agree*. A total of two items were reverse-coded. Reliability analysis revealed that the scale was reliable ( $\alpha = .83$ ,  $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ ).

**Need to belong.** To assess general feelings of belongingness, participants completed the Need to Belong Scale (Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, & Schreindorfer, 2013). Participants responded to 10 items such as “I do not like being alone” and “I need to feel that there are people I can turn to in times of need” on a 5-point scale ranging from (1) *not at all* to (5) *extremely*. After three items were reverse-coded, all items were aggregated to form the Need to Belong index ( $\alpha = .78$ ,  $M = 3.47$ ,  $SD = 0.58$ ).

**Social avoidance goals.** Social avoidance goals are one component of the Friendship Goals Questionnaire (Elliot, Gable, & Mapes, 2006) and consist of four items. On a scale from (1) *not at all true of me* to (7) *very true of me*, participants indicated their social avoidance goals (e.g., “I am trying to make sure that nothing bad happens to my close relationships”). Reliability analysis indicated that this scale was reliable ( $\alpha = .74$ ,  $M = 5.46$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ).

**Overall TV viewing.** Respondents were asked how often they watch TV (a) on an average weekday and (b) on an average weekend day. Answer categories ranged from (1) *0 hr* to (11) *more*

than 6 hr (Van den Bulck, 1995). Respondents were told that watching TV included watching TV on other media (e.g., computer and iPad) and delayed TV viewing (e.g., TV OnDemand). Items addressing different parts of the week were weighted to generate a measure of weekly TV viewing. On average, participants watched approximately 2 hr of TV per day ( $M = 1.85, SD = 1.05$ ). Although the focus of this study is on exposure to romantic media contents, it is important to control for overall TV viewing, as associations between the two exist (Potter & Chang, 1990).

**Romantic media contents.** Respondents were asked how often they watched (a) romantic comedy series such as *New Girl, Friends, How I Met Your Mother . . .* ( $M = 3.18, SD = 1.40$ ), (b) romantic drama series such as *Grey's Anatomy, Gossip Girl, Sex and the City, Girls, Desperate Housewives . . .* ( $M = 2.60, SD = 1.44$ ), (c) romantic comedy films ( $M = 2.41, SD = 0.83$ ), and (d) romantic drama films ( $M = 2.29, SD = 0.87$ ). Such programs often feature love affairs and include lengthy dialogues about love and romance. Answer categories were *almost never* (1), *several times a year* (2), *several times a month* (3), *several times a week* (4), *almost daily* (5), and *multiple times per day* (6). These romantic categories were summed to form a combined measure of daily exposure to romantic media contents. On average, respondents were in between several times a year and several times a month exposed to romantic media contents ( $M = 2.47, SD = 0.95$ ).

As cultivation effects have proven to be sensitive to question order, the survey was designed in such a manner that questions related to TV exposure were presented to the respondents at the end of the survey. In the informed consent, participants were informed that they could expect questions related to their experiences with being single and their leisure time.

**Results**

**Preliminary Analyses**

Descriptive statistics for the study variables, by relationship status and sex, are presented in Table 1. The pattern of results revealed that women reported a stronger fear of being single ( $M = 2.82, SD = .86$ ) than men ( $M = 2.64, SD = .80$ ),  $t(837) = -2.840, p < .01$ . Although there was no significant difference in the total viewing time between men ( $M = 1.82, SD = 1.11$ ) and women ( $M = 1.86, SD = 1.03$ ), women are significantly more

often exposed to romantic media contents ( $M = 2.75, SD = .86$ ) than men ( $M = 1.75, SD = .78$ ),  $t(836) = -15.342, p < .001$ . Furthermore, women scored higher on neuroticism ( $M = 3.12, SD = .61$ ), need to belong ( $M = 3.56, SD = .54$ ), and social avoidance goals ( $M = 5.59, SD = .95$ ) compared with men ( $M_{Neuroticism} = 2.69, SD_{Neuroticism} = .65, M_{Need to Belong} = 3.23, SD_{Need to Belong} = .59, M_{Social Avoidance Goals} = 5.14, SD_{Social Avoidance Goals} = 1.18$ ). Regarding relationship status, singles and those in a committed relationship only significantly differed on scores for fear of being single,  $t(837) = 6.227; p < .001$ . Singles ( $M = 3.00, SD = .82$ ) thus scored higher on the Fear of Being Single Scale than their counterparts in a committed relationship ( $M = 2.63, SD = .83$ ).

**Main Analyses**

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a hierarchical linear regression analysis (Table 2). In the first step, we included all control variables: age, length of the relationship, overall TV viewing, and all relevant personality variables (i.e., neuroticism, need to belong, and social avoidance goals). In step two, we tested the first hypothesis that romantic media content viewing frequency would be related to higher levels of self-reported fear of being single. As can be derived from Table 2, the regression coefficient for frequency of exposure to romantic media contents did not significantly deviate from zero. Hypothesis 1 could not be supported.

In step three, our two hypotheses regarding the moderating roles of relationship status and gender were tested by adding their interactions with frequency of exposure to romantic media contents to the model. In contrast to our second hypothesis, relationship status did not moderate the relationship between frequency of exposure to romantic media contents and self-reported fear of being single. In line with our third hypothesis, however, the regression coefficient for the interaction term between gender and frequency of exposure to romantic media contents did attain conventional significance levels. The analysis showed that the relationship between frequency of exposure to romantic media contents and self-reported fear of being single was greater for women than for men. More specifically, the relationship only occurred for women ( $b_{women} = 0.145, t_{women} = 2.90, p_{women} < .01$ ), but not for men ( $b_{men} = -0.004, t_{men} = -0.05, p_{men} > .05$ ). This finding was in line with Hypothesis 3.

Table 1  
Means, Standard Deviations, and Independent Samples T-Test Results Comparing Sex and Relationship Differences on Main Survey Variables

Variables	Men (N = 231)		Women (N = 608)		t (df)	d	Single (N = 325)		Relationship (N = 514)		t (df)	d
	M	SD	M	SD			M	SD	M	SD		
Fear of being single	2.64	0.80	2.82	0.86	-2.840** (837)	0.20	3.00	0.82	2.63	0.83	6.227*** (837)	0.43
Neuroticism	2.69	0.65	3.12	0.61	-8.962*** (837)	0.62	2.95	0.64	3.04	0.65	-1.821 (837)	0.13
Need to Belong	3.23	0.59	3.56	0.54	-7.785*** (837)	0.54	3.43	0.57	3.50	0.58	-1.834 (837)	0.13
Social Avoidance Goals	5.14	1.18	5.59	0.95	-5.172*** (349.029)	0.55	5.41	1.00	5.50	1.06	-1.196 (835)	0.08
Overall TV	1.82	1.11	1.86	1.03	-.488 (837)	0.03	1.78	1.03	1.89	1.06	-1.407 (837)	0.10
Romantic TV	1.75	0.78	2.75	0.86	-15.342 (836)	1.06	2.47	1.00	2.48	0.92	-0.172 (652.316)	0.01

Note. Two-tailed significance levels.  
\*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 2  
 Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analyses for Variables Predicting Fear of Being Single

Variables	Model 1 (controls)		Model 2 (H1)		Model 3 (H2 + H3)		Model 4 (H4)	
	<i>B</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	$\beta$	<i>B</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	$\beta$	<i>B</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	$\beta$	<i>B</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	$\beta$
Gender	.05 (.06)	-.06	-.1 (.07)	-.12	-.40 (.16)	-.04*	-.96 (.26)	.08***
Age	-.01 (.02)	-.01	.00 (.02)	-.01	-.00 (.02)	-.00	.00 (.02)	-.01
Neuroticism	.18 (.05)	.14***	.18 (.05)	.13***	.18 (.05)	.14***	.18 (.05)	.14***
Need to Belong	.49 (.05)	.34***	.49 (.05)	.34***	.49 (.05)	.34***	.49 (.085)	.33***
Rel. Stat.	-.40 (.06)	-.47***	-.40 (.06)	-.47***	-.12 (.15)	-.46	.71 (.25)	-.21**
Rel. Duration	.01 (.01)	.06	.01 (.01)	.06	.01 (.01)	.07*	.01 (.01)	.07*
SAG	.00 (.03)	.00	.00 (.03)	.00	.00 (.03)	.00	.00 (.03)	.00
TV	.03 (.03)	.04	.02 (.03)	.02	.03 (.03)	.03	.02 (.03)	.02
Rom.			.05 (.03)	.05	.00 (.07)	.00	-.20 (.10)	-.22
Rom. * Rel. Stat.					-.11 (.06)	-.12	.21 (.13)	.24
Rom. * Gender					.15 (.08)	.17*	.42 (.12)	.47***
Gender * Rel. Stat.							.94 (.33)	-.19**
Rom. * Gender * Rel. Stat.							-.44 (.15)	-.50**
$R^2$	.22		.22		.23		.24	
<i>F</i> for $R^2$ change	28.22***		2.08		3.73*		4.41*	

Note. Missing values are deleted list wise. For all models,  $N = 821$ . *B*'s are unstandardized regression coefficients,  $\beta$ 's are regression coefficients for models in which all continuous variables are standardized. Standard errors (*SE*) are shown between brackets. Significance tests are based on unstandardized coefficients. Rel.Stat. = Relationship status; Rel. Duration = Relationship duration; SAG = Social Avoidance Goals; Rom. = Romantic media contents exposure frequency; H1 = Hypothesis 1; H2 = Hypothesis 2; H3 = Hypothesis 3; H4 = Hypothesis 4.

\*  $p \leq .05$ . \*\*  $p \leq .01$ . \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ .

To test our fourth hypothesis suggesting a three-way-interaction between frequency of exposure to romantic media contents, gender, and relationship status, we added two additional variables to the model in step 4: the three-way-interaction term of interest and a control variable for the lower-level interaction between relationship status and gender. The analysis results were in line with Hypothesis 4: Gender moderated the relationship between frequency of exposure to romantic media contents and self-reported fear of being single, and this interaction was stronger for people who were *not* in a committed relationship. Moreover, the interaction between gender and frequency of exposure to romantic media contents only predicted fear of being single among singles ( $b = 0.42$ ,  $t = 3.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Among people in a relationship, men and women did not differ in their susceptibility to the effect ( $b = -0.03$ ,  $t = -0.29$ ,  $p > .05$ ).

Figure 1 visualizes the specific conditional relationship between frequency of exposure to romantic media contents and self-reported fear of being single for all four combinations between gender and relationship status: In line with our expectations, the relationship was positive and significant *only* for female singles ( $b = 0.22$ ,  $t = 3.79$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The regression coefficients for male singles ( $b = -0.19$ ,  $t = -1.88$ ,  $p > .05$ ), males in a relationship ( $b = 0.02$ ,  $t = 0.23$ ,  $p > .05$ ), and females with a romantic partner ( $b = -0.01$ ,  $t = -0.17$ ,  $p > .05$ ) did not systematically deviate from zero.

To make sure that our results were no artifact of the specific constellation of variables in our model, we also reran all hypothesis tests without controls. These parsimonious models yielded nearly identical results for the regression coefficients. Not one significance test required a different interpretation compared with the full model results reported previously.

## Discussion

Recent developments in research on exposure to romantic media contents and romantic relationships have suggested that (a) single

life is often negatively portrayed on screen and (b) young adults report being fearful of single life. The purpose of this study therefore was to examine if these two phenomena are empirically related. Based on the abundant literature dealing with genre-specific cultivation effects, we hypothesized that individuals' frequency of exposure to romantic media contents would be positively related to their self-reported fear of being single. In contrast with our hypothesis, however, the regression coefficient for romantic media content exposure did not differ from zero. Although apparently conflicting with typical findings in cultivation studies, this null result might not be very surprising for three reasons.

First, it could be that recent efforts of film studios to include positive and/or more realistic portrayals of single characters (Justice, 2014; Thompson, 2015) have resulted in a more nuanced view of singlehood. Second, statistically, cultivation relationships tend to be very small on average, with correlations typically falling around values of 0.07 to 0.10 (see meta-analyses by Dossche & Van den Bulck, 2010; Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). Although genre-specific relations reported in the literature are usually somewhat greater (95% confidence intervals [CI]: [.09, .17]), adequately powered studies with sample sizes over 600 and studies investigating second-order dependents such as fear typically report very small relationships (for highly powered studies, 95% CI: [.02, .08]; for second-order studies, 95% CI: [.05, .10]; Dossche & Van den Bulck, 2010). Although our study was designed to be powered highly enough to detect small effects of around  $r = .10$  with a probability of 80%, we still needed to cope with a one-in-five probability of a Type-II error. This might explain the absence of significance for the overall relationship.

A third reason why the absence of an overall cultivation relationship makes sense is theoretical in nature. Traditionally, cultivation theorists argued that the relevance of TV effects lies in the overall, long-term impact of all TV messages on society as a whole—or, as they said, the effect lies in “the bucket, not the drops” (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). Others argued against this

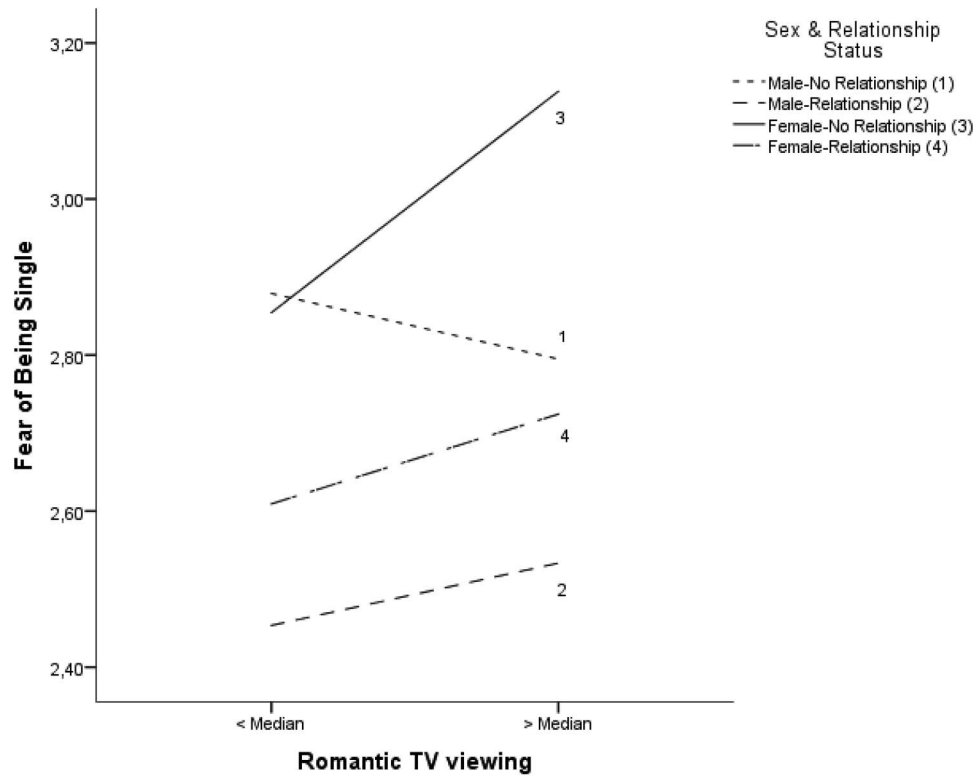


Figure 1. Three-way interaction between romantic media content exposure, gender, and relationship status.

overarching perspective, however, and noted that only “some genres have some effects on some viewers” (Cohen & Weimann, 2000). The latter approach is reminiscent of many psychological processing models of media contents, with researchers theorizing on the ways in which and conditions under which those contents affect viewers. For instance, scholars have found that the effects of messages are greater if people are actually similar to protagonists, identify with them, are heavily ‘transported’ into a story, or have a tendency to think thoroughly about information they encounter (Cohen, 2006; Green & Brock, 2000; Shrum, Lee, Burroughs, & Rindfleisch, 2011). Although these types of models were initially formulated in the context of experimental exposure effects, they have come to be used to understand findings in cross-sectional research settings as well (Perse, 1986; Shrum, Burroughs, & Rindfleisch, 2005). The important point here is that if cultivation relationships are contingent on such boundary conditions, overall empirical relationships might well be distorted if those conditions are not explicitly modeled in a study.

The latter perspective exemplifies the importance of our logic regarding the moderating roles of relationship status and gender. We expected that these variables would interact with romantic media content exposure in predicting self-reported fear of being single because they are able to identify audience members to whom the romantic contents and protagonist characters are especially tailored (i.e., women), and to whom information about the status of singlehood in society is particularly relevant (i.e., singles). The results indeed indicated that gender served as a moderator. Also in line with our reasoning, subsequent conditional analyses showed that the relation between romantic media content

exposure and the fear of being single achieved statistical significance only for women. Previous studies related to exposure to romantic media contents also confirm that women are more susceptible to these romantic media messages compared with men. In a study by Galloway, Engstrom, and Emmers-Sommer (2015), for instance, after exposure to romantic media contents, women were more likely to expect intimate romantic relationships, to imagine being married and daydream about their weddings, and to anticipate getting married and staying married compared with their male counterparts.

Our hypothesis regarding the moderating role of relationship status was not met by the data. For singles, the frequency of exposure to romantic media contents was not more likely related to an increased fear of being single compared with those in a committed relationship. One reason for this insignificant finding could be that singles’ real-life experience is quite different from the experiences they witness on the screen. Consequently, having more positive experiences with being single themselves, they might not be more alarmed after seeing negative portrayals of being single on the screen. Another study found that singles were less likely to desire marriage and a wedding compared with those in a committed relationship (Galloway et al., 2015), indicating that singles might be relatively content with their single status. Despite this insignificant finding, it may still be valuable to note that (a) the sign of the interaction coefficient for the interaction term of romantic media content exposure and relationship status was in line with our expectation that cultivation relationships should be greater among singles and (b) the probability of a null value for the

“true” interaction, given its sample coefficient and standard error, was relatively small ( $p = .06$ ).

In addition to theorizing on and testing the two two-way interactions, we also combined the logic behind them to hypothesize a three-way interaction: We expected the moderating role of gender to hold more strongly among singles. After all, the negative portrayals of female singlehood in romantic media contents may lose its relevance for women in a committed relationship. Our data indeed suggested a statistically significant three-way interaction, with the conditional analyses showing the relationship between romantic media content exposure and fear of being single to hold only for single women. Put differently, being in a relationship appeared to “protect” women from being more vulnerable than men to cultivation effects of romantic media content exposure on self-reported fear of being single. Even more, being exposed to such negative portrayals of female singles might in part explain why women in a relationship would feel better about their romantic relationship after exposure to romantic media contents, as shown in a study by Holmes and Johnson (2009).

The moderation results reported in this study appear to make sense from the perspective of psychological processing approaches to cultivation research: the relationships are greatest for those people who are likely to identify with single characters and process information about singlehood to a greater extent because of its personal relevance. This is in line with the ‘resonance’ or ‘double dose’ hypothesis in cultivation research (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986), and it indicates how important it can be to investigate the antecedents of different ways of processing in media effects studies—even if the study purpose lies in investigating overall effects rather than those microlevel processes themselves.

Notably, this study is not without limitations. In addition to the aforementioned reasoning on our insignificant main effect, another limitation lies in the measurement used. As participants reported merely on their average exposure to romantic media contents, not much is known about which particular contents they were exposed to and whether these contents could potentially hold conflicting messages. Given that the content analyses we built our hypotheses on did not have in-depth information related to singlehood (Johnson & Holmes, 2009; Tanner et al., 2003) and researchers started to note the film industry’s maturation on gender messaging (Justice, 2014; Thompson, 2015), content analyses exploring singlehood in contemporary TV shows and movies are warranted. Another limitation to our study is its reliance on a cross-sectional design to test an effect-oriented theoretical approach. Because our results may be partly explained by the fact that individuals with a stronger fear of being single are more likely to select romantic media contents as a form of consolation, longitudinal studies are certainly needed. Moreover, being focused on emerging adults, this study is not informative on how older adults experience a fear of being single and whether it can be associated with exposure to romantic TV contents in an older age group as well. Popular media, for instance, argue that single male adults, in particular, yearn for something more (Pappu, 2016). Future research could thus examine whether exposure to romantic media contents is related to an increased fear of being single, for both an older and a younger age group. Finally, with regard to the convenience sampling technique, our results cannot be considered as representative. However, this may be rather unnecessary as our goal was to

test moderation hypotheses rooted in psychological principles (Meltzer, Naab, & Daschmann, 2012).

## Conclusion

In summary, the present article examined whether emerging adults’ frequency of exposure to romantic media contents would be positively related to their self-reported fear of being single. At the very least, our results indicate that romantic media contents are influential only in certain contexts. It appears that for single female emerging adults, in particular, the frequency of exposure to romantic media contents is significantly associated with an increased fear of being single. Such findings stress the need for more positive portrayals of single women within romantic media contents.

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Received May 20, 2017

Revision received August 25, 2017

Accepted November 2, 2017 ■