



Intuition: The BYU Undergraduate Journal of Psychology

Volume 15
Issue 1 *The Sex Issue*

Article 3

2020

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Recommended Citation

Burnham, Emily J. (2020) "First Fictional Crush: Effects of Parasocial Attachments on Female Adolescent Relationships," *Intuition: The BYU Undergraduate Journal of Psychology*. Vol. 15 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/intuition/vol15/iss1/3>

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First Fictional Crush: Effects of Parasocial Attachments on Female Adolescent Relationships

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Abstract

Romantic movies, TV shows, and mature novels are endorsed and consumed by many individuals in society—particularly women. However, media may not always portray reality accurately, which might mislead adolescent females who are still developing socially, sexually, emotionally, and cognitively. Studies have indicated that young women may naturally turn to parasocial romantic relationships (PSRRs)—one-sided emotional attachments to fictional characters in media—to explore their developing romantic expectations and sexuality in a way that appears to be harmless and free of consequence (Erickson et al., 2018). However, several effects of PSRRs may have a detrimental impact on adolescent females whose emotions become extremely invested in fictional characters; they may become susceptible to adopting unrealistic expectations and acting on unhealthy sexual behaviors portrayed in the romantic media (Galloway et al., 2015; Gamble, 2018). Additionally, these expectations and behaviors that begin in adolescence may carry into adult life, having the potential to affect not only current relationships but also long-term future relationships (Aubrey et al., 2018). Thus, future research should focus on methods of avoiding excessive PSRRs and discovering other negative effects that this one-sided attachment can have on adolescents.

Keywords: parasocial, attachments, romantic relationships, media, adolescent females

Lindsey thoroughly enjoys watching the latest romantic “chick flicks” on Netflix. As she engages in her favorite pastime, she lets out a wistful sigh when the male figure, Antonio, sweeps his romantic love interest off her feet. Lindsey studies his bulging muscles with appreciation, and her heart flutters at how gently Antonio caresses the woman on screen. Lindsey jolts back into reality when her husband, Jon, walks into the room. “I wish you were more like that,” Lindsey says casually, gesturing to the television screen that portrays the couple having a romantic picnic on the beach. She again notices how attentive and passionate Antonio is to his lover. Jon rolls his eyes, but Lindsey doesn’t notice, because she is once again engrossed in the movie—or more specifically, in Antonio. Jon walks over to her with a half-hearted smile and asks, “Do you want to go on a walk with me outside?” Without taking her eyes off the rugged and ripped Antonio, Lindsey waves a dismissive hand at her husband. “No thanks, I would prefer to watch the ending of this movie.” Feeling wounded that a fictional figure has won over his wife’s affection, Jon walks out of the room, leaving Lindsey to her romantic fantasies. She is unaware that she is stepping down a path leading to heartache, disappointment, and displeasure. Lindsey is exhibiting signs of a developing parasocial romantic relationship (PSRR) with Antonio. Her emotional attachment to Antonio may be contributing to romantic expectations that are not being met in her life, decreasing her satisfaction with her husband, Jon. She may benefit from being made aware of the possible negative effects that romantic media has had on her adolescent self and may currently have within her marriage.

Lindsey is not alone in her love for romantic movies; the abundance of material readily available to meet viewer demand through television or the Internet is evidence that individuals in society commonly consume and endorse romantic media. Although research indicates that men can also be influenced by romantic media, females more often absorb romantic movies, novels, and TV shows and tend to place more value in relationships (Driesmans et al., 2016). Thirty-eight percent more women than men reported a favorable opinion towards romantic movies in a study done in 2018 (Morning Consult, 2018), illustrating romantic media is more popular among women

First Fictional Crush

than men. Perhaps this type of media is popular because it can serve as a way for women to escape from stress or disappointments they experience in reality (Anderton, 2009). Adolescent females are often susceptible to endorsing and learning from the media they encounter because they are still developing mentally and emotionally (Erickson et al., 2018). While studies have found that family, peers, and first-hand experience typically play a role in developing romantic beliefs and ideals (Erickson et al., 2018; Erickson & Dal Cin, 2018), romantic movies and other media may have a substantial influence on female adolescents' developing perception of romance. These young girls are in the beginning stages of developing relationship expectations and may formulate opinions based on what they view.

During and after puberty, adolescent females tend to view romantic movies or TV shows as a natural process to discover and explore their arising sexuality and romantic feelings (Theran et al., 2010). As these feelings emerge, adolescent females often find that developing a one-sided crush on a fictional character is appealing, because there is no fear of rejection and it seems emotionally and physically safer than becoming involved in a real-life relationship (Erickson et al., 2018; Erickson & Dal Cin, 2018). As adolescent females form these attachments, they begin to formulate expectations for romantic relationships (Erickson & Dal Cin, 2018). These psychological attachments to fictional media characters are often the first romantic involvement that adolescents experience (Erickson et al., 2018). However, because media does not always accurately portray reality, adolescents may form relationships to media figures that would not otherwise be possible in real-life scenarios.

Many of the effects of PSRRs can be detrimental for adolescent females. For instance, Tukachinsky and Dorros (2018) stated that while PSRRs may be natural, they could have lasting negative effects on future relationships. For example, Lippman et al., (2014) described how many romantic movies directed at adolescents portray two individuals developing their first relationship, yet the traits exhibited were often found only in married couples. Thus, adolescents may not receive accurate information regarding what first relationships

look like, which can misdirect future development of healthy relationships. Unreal romantic ideals in media, which are accepted unconditionally by young girls who are emotionally affected and physically aroused by PSRRs, can be unhealthy in shaping romantic beliefs and behaviors (Driesmans et al., 2016). Although romantic movies, TV shows, and mature novels have historically been popular and are widely recognized as a natural part of cultivating romantic ideologies, adolescent females should be educated on the possible detrimental effects of developing a one-sided romantic relationship; otherwise, this parasocial attachment may create unrealistic expectations of romantic relationships, promote unhealthy sexual behaviors, and decrease satisfaction or commitment in current and future relationships.

Unrealistic Expectations of Romantic Relationships

Females who develop strong PSRRs with media figures may be not only emotionally connected to the character but also influenced by the ideals, beliefs, and opinions that are promoted by the author or producer. Patterns of unrealistic ideals contained in romantic media often include the notion of loving someone at first sight, having a soul mate, expecting one's partner to know their needs without expressing them, overcoming every hardship through love, experiencing instant and never-ending chemistry, and having intense and perfect sexual intimacy every time (K. Brooks, personal communication, February 26, 2019; Galloway et al., 2015; Vaterlaus et al., 2018). In addition, Theran et al. (2010) discovered that greater emotional involvement may contribute to higher levels of PSRRs, and Driesmans et al. (2016) later found that adolescent females with a greater parasocial attachment to the media figure may become more accepting of the romantic ideals presented in the media. Thus, an adolescent female's excessive emotional attachment to a fictional character within a romance novel, movie, or TV show may lead them to adopt the romanticized messages presented, many of which are unrealistic and harmful to an individual forming natural romantic expectations in relationships.

Influential Age

While the developing adolescent female is cognitively learning about relationships by observing others around her, the media she watches can strongly influence her perception of romantic expectations and feelings. Driesmans et al. (2016) discovered that age appeared to be an indication of the depth and intensity of romantic interaction and attachment. They found that pre-teen adolescent females expressed greater romantic involvement with the fictional characters in the romantic movie than older adolescent females (Driesmans et al., 2016). Thus, younger adolescents appear to be more emotionally involved in PSRRs than older females and seem more likely to endorse unrealistic expectations that they encounter in media.

Many adolescents have not had personal experiences with romantic relationships that would enable them to compare what they encounter in media with reality; however, even those who do have real-life experience may still be strongly influenced by PSRRs. Although many adolescents in Vaterlaus et al.'s (2018) study claimed that there was a noticeable difference between romantic relationships portrayed on television and real-life relationships, the adolescents still reported that romantic movies increased their current relationship expectations, which were often not met. Adolescents' age may contribute to their susceptibility of PSRRs, which in turn may influence their romantic emotions and expectations. Furthermore, Osborn (2012) found that an individual's acceptance of a romanticized ideal presented on TV tended to be more influential in affecting their beliefs about relationships than the time spent watching the media or their real-life experiences. Thus, instilled beliefs in adolescents caused by excessive parasocial romantic interactions may have a greater influence on formulating romantic expectations than other influential factors. Educating adolescent females about the role media figures have in influencing their emotions can help make them aware of their susceptibility to the unrealistic romantic ideals portrayed in movies or books.

Cultivation Theory

The cultivation theory proposes that repeated exposure to a message forms a belief of that message in the receiver (Coyne et al., 2019), which may explain how PSRRs are associated with unrealistic romantic ideals. Reizer and Hetsroni (2014) further described this theory as the long-lasting effect movies and TV shows can have on others; they found that messages portrayed on screen tended to be adopted by viewers as a representation of real life, though the message often did not match up with reality. Galloway et al. (2015) also found that people may copy behaviors and mindsets that are portrayed on screen, considering them to be the norm. An adolescent female experiencing an intense PSRR may dwell on the fictional world of her crush more frequently than others who are not parasocially attached, and as a result, she may interpret the presented ideologies to be representative of reality (Reizer & Hetsroni, 2014). Therefore, it appears that after adopting the unrealistic expectations into her belief system, an adolescent female may be disappointed when situations that occur in reality fall short of her assumptions due to her unrealistic ideals.

Moreover, PSRRs can have long-term detrimental effects on adolescent females because romantic novels, movies, and TV shows appear to create an alternate reality for the viewer. Osborn (2012) noted that people often surrounded themselves with specific types of media that were in accordance with their beliefs, creating a single viewpoint through which they interpret the actions of others. Adolescents whose ideologies are shaped by romantic movies or adult romance novels may continue to seek out entertainment in that genre (Osborn, 2012). Repeatedly consuming romantic genres may enable unrealistic ideals to develop in adolescents' minds, shaping the way they view the world (Coyne et al., 2019). Hence, adolescents should recognize the harm in developing obsessive PSRRs to media figures, because this behavior may cultivate an unrealistic perception of romantic relationships.

Promotion of Unhealthy Sexual Behaviors

Sexual conduct is present in many platforms of media in America (Coyne et al., 2019), including movies, TV shows, and mature novels.

First Fictional Crush

Coyne et al. (2019) reported that 81% of prominent movies and TV shows contain sexual content. In addition, several studies have found that adolescents who consume a large number of romantic movies, TV shows, or novels may be affected by the messages presented (Anderton, 2009; Erickson et al., 2018; Galloway et al., 2015). With a high probability of sexuality being a part of the romantic media teenagers consume, adolescent females may be influenced by the sexual viewpoints presented, many of which describe risky sexual behavior. Additionally, because sexual content can draw out powerful emotions, young women who connect to a fictional character or media message through PSRRs may be more prone to endorse the risky sexual conduct they encounter (Scull et al., 2018). As a result, the media adolescents consume may not only impact their ideals of romantic relationships but also encourage dangerous and unhealthy sexual behaviors.

Imitating Sexual Practices

By experiencing excessive PSRRs with media figures, adolescents may also endorse and copy the sexual practices and behaviors they are exposed to. Young women transitioning from adolescence to adulthood often have a hard time refusing unwanted sexual encounters because of the messages found in media (Gamble, 2018). Media frequently portrays sexual behaviors, so the females influenced by such messages may hesitate in refusing unwanted advances for sex because they believe they should have sex as often as media portrays. Not only may adolescents feel pressure to engage in sex, but they may also feel pressure to imitate new sexual acts they come across in media. Anderton (2009) surveyed a group of 53 adult women who read sexually explicit romantic novels and asked them about the effects it had on their sexual behaviors. She found that reading romance novels influenced the women to experiment with new sexual activities they read about. Thus, it appears that adolescent females who are beginning to explore their sexuality may desire to experiment with new information they come across in romantic media. Their PSRRs may enhance this desire to copy sexual behaviors they read about or watch, so they can experience the intense feelings described or portrayed in media.

Unhealthy Sexual Notions

Many of the sexual practices that adolescents endorse from romantic media should not be copied, because they can be hazardous and unhealthy. Multiple women in Anderton's (2009) study said that many of the sex scenes they encountered were unsafe or incorrect. Other studies found that media promoted the expectations that women should (a) have sex frequently, because that is what men desire; (b) be reluctant in declining unwanted sexual encounters; and (c) engage in casual sex without commitment, because there are no consequences (Gamble, 2018; Gamble & Nelson, 2016; Scull et al., 2018). Additionally, information that could help make sexual intercourse safer is left out of most movies or books (Scull et al., 2018); this omission can be harmful for adolescent females to perceive when the sexual content they encounter is inaccurate or risky. Without understanding the full consequences of their actions, adolescents can contract sexually transmitted diseases, become pregnant, or experience emotional scarring (Scull et al., 2018). Therefore, guardians should teach healthy sexuality principles to their adolescent wards and discourage any unhealthy sexual behaviors that their loved ones observe in media.

Decreased Satisfaction or Commitment

Adolescents who are extremely involved in PSRRs may experience decreased satisfaction or commitment in their current and future romantic relationships. Lippman et al. (2014) observed that one's overall happiness was affected by romantic relationships. When unrealistic relationship expectations are not met or harmful consequences arise from risky sex, people may experience major disappointment and dissatisfaction. Erickson et al. (2018) found that serious relationships, including one-sided PSRRs, could shape and project satisfaction and happiness in future relationships because adolescent girls are still developing cognitively, emotionally, and sexually. This finding indicates that the negative relationship experiences females have in adolescent years may be carried into adulthood, affecting their long-term relationships.

First Fictional Crush

Researchers have found evidence that young females seem to endorse romantic notions and sexual behaviors portrayed in media when they are emotionally invested in a character (Galloway et al., 2015). Their strong emotional connection to a fictional character is associated with decreased satisfaction in current relationships (Tuckachinsky & Dorros, 2018). In a study comparing physical and emotional aspects of PSRRs, physical attraction did not appear to have a negative impact on the satisfaction of an adolescent females' current relationship. Rather, the researchers found that as an adolescent female's emotional investment in a fictional character increased, the satisfaction in her current romantic partner tended to decrease. This correlation may exist because adolescent-female relationships are framed by their previous experiences (Tuckachinsky & Dorros, 2018). Also, Reizer and Hetsroni (2014) found that the comparison of fiction to reality may have created a sense of loss and decreased satisfaction in their subjects when expectation did not match reality. Like adolescent females, adult women are just as capable of experiencing the effects of PSRRs. Aubrey et al. (2018) conducted a correlational study on moms who had a deep infatuation for the romantic *Twilight* saga and found that a deeper emotional connection to the characters correlated with decreased satisfaction in their partners. Thus, not only can an adolescent's current relationship satisfaction decrease due to a PSRR, but if they continue their habit of developing emotional ties to fictional characters into adulthood, their satisfaction levels in these future relationships may also diminish.

Fiction does not always measure up to reality because movies and novels often perpetuate the idea of two people meeting by random chance, falling quickly and effortlessly in love, and living blissfully together (K. Brooks, personal communication, February 26, 2019). The sacrifice and hardships in a relationship or marriage are seldom portrayed in media, and this unrealistic depiction of romantic relationships may create false expectations, dissatisfaction, and cynical attitudes in the viewers (K. Brooks, personal communication, February 26, 2019). As a result, adolescent females can misunderstand the large amount of effort and commitment that is involved in building a lasting relationship. Additionally, media perpetuates the idea that

cheating and divorce is common and that individuals can move in and out of relationships frequently to find someone more attractive and convenient (K. Brooks, personal communication, February 26, 2019; Osborn, 2012). Adolescents may adopt this view, becoming more loyal to the message of infidelity in media than to their partner. For instance, married individuals who watched more romantic television and endorsed its portrayal of romantic relationships were more likely to have decreased commitment to their spouse and more benevolent opinions of alternative romantic partners (Osborn, 2012). Media often consists of exciting and extravagant stories meant to entertain, and adolescents experiencing PSRRs may feel dissatisfaction and decreased commitment in their current relationships, which can also negatively influence their later adult relationships. Consequently, adolescent females should be made aware of these outcomes so they can be mindful of the potential consequences of forming PSRRs.

Conclusion

The consumption of romantic movies, TV shows, and mature novels is fairly common among females. While some women report that they engage in romantic novels for pleasure or to escape from reality (Anderton, 2009), the romantic ideals in the book may influence their own romantic beliefs (K. Brooks, personal communication, February 26, 2019; Vaterlaus et al., 2018). A seemingly natural way that adolescent females explore their sexual feelings is by developing a one-sided romantic relationship with fictional characters in media (Erickson et al., 2018; Theran et al., 2010). Despite evidence that this one-sided emotional attachment is natural in maturing adolescents, PSRRs can have detrimental effects on adolescent females, because media does not always accurately portray reality (Lippman et al., 2014; Scull et al., 2018).

Adolescent females who experience strong PSRRs may form unrealistic expectations and conceptions about relationships. In a study, Driesmans et al. (2016) found that young females who claimed to have higher attachments to fictional media figures appeared to be more willing to endorse the romanticized ideologies presented in the movies they watched. Researchers have noted many of these romantic ideals to be unrealistic, such as physical intimacy always being perfect and individuals constantly feeling intense and all-consuming

First Fictional Crush

chemistry for their significant other (Galloway et al., 2015). When reality does not measure up to these ideals, the comparison of fiction to reality may create disappointment and discontentment in adolescents' current romantic relationships (Reizer & Hetsroni, 2014). Thus, emotional attachment in PSRRs can be harmful when unrealistic ideals are formed.

Moreover, adolescents who experience an intense emotional connection in a PSRR may want to experience those emotions in real life and may imitate the behaviors they read about or view. Coyne et al. (2019) revealed that sexual content is highly prevalent in the media adolescents view, and this may influence adolescent females to experiment with potentially unhealthy sexual behaviors. Females in one study reported that the sexual content they came across was often misleading or incorrect (Anderton, 2009). Adolescent females may be more likely to accept unrealistic and unhealthy sexual behaviors when experiencing strong emotional PSRRs, potentially leading to disappointment in current relationships and decreased satisfaction or commitment in later relationships.

However, the negative consequences associated with female adolescent PSRRs are not well-known. PSRRs may increase the likelihood of adolescents forming unrealistic expectations, engaging in unhealthy sexual behaviors, and experiencing decreased commitment and satisfaction in current and future relationships. Thus, guardians of adolescents should inform their wards of these possible negative outcomes in order for teens to understand and potentially avoid or overcome them. Further research should examine ways to decrease excessive PSRRs in adolescents so as to help them avoid these potential negative outcomes. Researchers might discover differing thresholds of PSRRs and test if the degree of emotional attachment correlates with the strength of negative relationship effects in an adolescent's current and future relationships. They could also explore other detrimental effects of intense PSRRs, such as assessing whether attachments with media figures can contribute to moodiness in adolescents or unhealthy perceptions of abuse. Additional studies should explore how healthy romantic ideals can be fostered within adolescent females, such as by the promotion of sex education or documentaries on couples' courtship and long-term relationships.

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First Fictional Crush

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