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An experiment investigating the links among online dating profile attractiveness, ideal endorsement, and romantic media

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ABSTRACT

This study was the first-ever experiment to test how ideal expressions in hypothetical online dating profiles and exposure to romantic media are related to profile attractiveness, romantic beliefs, and endorsement of ideal partner characteristics. The sample contained 249 undergraduate students from a small, southwestern university. The study is a one-way experiment, with five manipulations and one control group. Results revealed that exposure to the conditions featuring any ideal content produced stronger endorsement of romantic beliefs, but not ideal partner characteristics. Consuming romantic media predicted stronger endorsement of romantic beliefs and higher ratings of profile attractiveness. Results support the heuristic processing model of cultivation.

1. Introduction

People find love in a variety of places and contexts. In our increasingly digital world, there is a continued escalation in the number of individuals seeking romance via the Internet. Online dating allows people to be proactive in their search for romance. The number of online dating sites has proliferated, providing people with an enlarged pool of prospective partners existing outside of their immediate social networks. There are currently 54 million single people in the United States and 40 million of them have tried online dating (Statistics Brain, 2012). Popular online dating sites, such as *Match.com*, *eHarmony*, and *PerfectMatch.com*, have over 50 million users combined: *Match.com* has over 29 million members, *eHarmony* has over 20 million members, and *PerfectMatch* has over 4 million active profiles (Consumer Rankings., 2012). These sites provide people with an expansive and diverse "pool" of potential partners. The number of men and women who use online dating sites is about the same, with roughly 52% of users being male and 48% of users being female (Statistics Brain, 2012). Men and women advertise themselves in strategic ways to find desired romantic partners. Research has shown that 38% of women prefer nice guys, while 42% of men prefer working, ambitious women and 34% prefer the "girl next door" (Statistics Brain,

2012). Online dating allows people to be more selective, which in turn could afford them more success in their search for the perfect romantic partner. According to a study conducted by consumer group *Which?*, one in five people who have used dating sites have gone on to marry someone they met online (Hwang, 2009). As more people meet partners online, it is important to understand how this process works and what implication it may have. More specifically, what are the factors that influence how individuals choose which partner to pursue in an online dating environment? What makes a prospective partner attractive in the digital world?

One factor that might impact these choices could be previous media exposure to romantic themes. It could be that individuals who consume romantic-oriented media (e.g., romantic comedy films, reality dating television programs, soap operas, romance novels, etc.) are more open to the notion of romance and may prioritize love and relationships more than those people who do not consume these media. This could have implications on what they find attractive in prospective romantic partners.

Several scholars have tested whether romantic media in particular can cultivate certain types of social beliefs among viewers (e.g., Perse, 1986; Woo & Dominick, 2001). For example, researchers found that heavy exposure to daytime talk shows was associated with a tendency to overestimate the percentage of Americans who participate in certain relational behaviors, such as premarital sex and infidelity (Woo & Dominick, 2001). Rivadeneyra and Lebo (2008) surveyed high school students and found that heavy viewers of romantic reality television were more likely than light viewers to hold traditional dating role attitudes.

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Thus, we know that romantic media exposure is associated with relationship beliefs and behaviors, but we have no experimental data that confirms the direction of causality. Do individuals who have romantic beliefs seek out romantic media, or is exposure to romantic media causing greater endorsement of relational ideals?

Clearly, there is evidence that screen media can contribute to people's normative beliefs about relationships. Several studies also indicate that the media may cultivate *idealistic* beliefs about relationships and love, often termed "romantic ideals." In one survey, researchers found that heavy exposure to romantic media, such as novels and films, was associated with unrealistic beliefs about intimate relationships, such as the idea that "mindreading is expected" and that "disagreement is destructive" (Shapiro & Kroeger, 1991). Similarly, Segrin and Nabi (2002) surveyed 285 unmarried undergraduates and found that heavy viewers of relationship genre media were more likely than light viewers to agree with statements such as "you should know each other's inner feelings" and partners "should be able to talk open and freely about everything." This pattern held even when controlling for age and sex. More recently, Holmes (2007) surveyed undergraduates and reported that a preference for romance-oriented media was linked to an idealistic belief in the existence of predestined soul mates. Hefner and Wilson (2013) found that romantic comedy viewing was associated with stronger endorsement of idealistic beliefs when participants were watching to learn.

However, all of this research was based on survey research and was correlational in nature. We could locate no existing experiments that have tested the influence of direct exposure to these idealistic beliefs in a media context. Our study fills this gap in the literature by exploring whether exposure to hypothetical online dating profiles containing ideal expressions is related to stronger endorsement of those beliefs. Whereas past research has established an association between media exposure and endorsement of romantic beliefs (Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Holmes, 2007; Segrin & Nabi, 2002), an experiment is a necessary step because it can establish the direction of causality in the relationship between romantic media and idealistic beliefs about romance. It also extends work in the area of digital media. Past research has documented that digital media use can influence perceptions, such as incoming college freshmen's use of social media and their perceptions of social support in college (DeAndrea, Ellison, LaRose, Steinfield, & Fiore, 2012). We add to this by investigating how digital media might also influence perceptions within the context of romance.

This paper has two goals. First, we seek to understand more about the process that leads to people's choice of attraction in the digital dating environment. In particular, what is the role of prior romantic media use in the decisions about what ideals are considered attractive? That is, how does long-term exposure to romantic media influence judgments? Second, we use hypothetical online dating profiles as the experimental media stimulus to test for the direction of causality between romantic media exposure and endorsement of ideal beliefs. Online dating is the vehicle used to accomplish these two research aims. A practical benefit of this study is that it provides information about how online behaviors and judgments may be influenced by prior media exposure, as well as what type of content is most attractive online. It also demonstrates any causal associations that may exist between romantic media exposure and relational beliefs.

1.1. Previous research with online dating

In recent years the number of online dating sites has expanded, providing online daters with an extensive array of options and prospective romantic partners. Many studies have attempted to investigate the characteristics of online dating to better understand the behaviors, perceptions, demographics, expectations, and processes involved in forming and maintaining relationships online (e.g., Anderson, 2005; Anderson & Emmers-Sommer, 2006). For example, Brand, Bonatsos, D'Orazio, and DeShong (2011) conducted a study to investigate the correlation between physical appearance and other characteristics in order to determine whether or not attractive individuals are viewed more positive online. After surveying 50 female psychology students, they found that ratings for physical attractiveness (i.e., overall, for sex, for a date, and for a long-term relationship) were highly intercorrelated (Brand, Bonatsos, D'Orazio, & DeShong, 2011). Furthermore, physical attractiveness was correlated with other features and characteristics of the individual, such as confidence, masculinity, kindness, etc. They found that physically attractive individuals are perceived to have additional positive traits and qualities. Because of these findings, we chose to not include photographs with the hypothetical dating profiles, because we did not want physical attraction to play a significant role in ratings of romantic attraction. We are more interested in isolating the variables of romantic ideals and romantic media.

In fact, at least one study has investigated whether users of online dating have unrealistic expectations of finding a "perfect" partner. Houran and Lange (2004) surveyed 222 individuals and found no evidence of an association between intention to use online dating and distorted expectations. However, they did not measure whether those participants consumed other types of romantic media. To expand on their findings, our study investigates whether exposure to romantic media shapes people's endorsement of certain romantic ideals, and how use of those media may influence ratings of the profiles.

1.2. Relational messages

Some scholars have argued that the one consistent feature of romantic stories in both literature and film is the presence of a romantic ideal (e.g., Galician, 2004). Indeed, the very term "romance" is often defined in idealist terms in today's lexicon. For example, the Oxford English Dictionary (1989) defines *romance* with descriptions such as, "that class of literature which consists of love stories" and "idealistic character or quality in a love affair." This suggests that the very essence of romance includes an element of fantastical invention or unrealistic love.

There are two predominant ways that researchers have approached the study of the romantic ideal. According to one conceptualization, romantic ideals refer to the types of traits that exemplify what constitutes the perfect partner and relationship (e.g., Markey & Markey, 2007). Here, the definition of a romantically ideal partner or relationship is unique to each individual. This conceptualization pertains only to issues related to specific partners and relationships instead of to love, romance, and the relationship process more broadly. For this definition, there are three categories of ideal descriptors: warmth, vitality, and status (Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, 2001). Warmth refers to characteristics of being kind, trustworthy, or understanding; vitality refers to characteristics of attractiveness, activeness, and being outgoing; and status refers to characteristics of being resourceful, successful, and financially secure (Campbell et al., 2001). Past research indicates that people are relationally happier when their romantic partners match their preferences on each of these ideal characteristics (Campbell et al., 2001). We refer to this definition as *ideal partner characteristics*.

The second way in which scholars have defined romantic ideals is a collection of expectations about relationships and love that extends beyond individual partners. Here, the romantic ideal refers to a set of beliefs about what constitutes a perfect relationship (Knox & Sporakowski, 1968; Lantz, Schmitt, Britton, & Snyder,

1968; Sprecher & Metts, 1989). Instead of using descriptors to characterize a partner, the romantic ideal in this sense is a set of beliefs about the power of love and the perfection of romance. More specifically, it is a set of expectations for how a model relationship should form, develop, function, and be maintained. Examples of such beliefs include the following: love can overlook flaws; love can seek out that one perfect mate; love can happen instantaneously; and love can overcome all obstacles (Bell, 1975; Lantz et al., 1968; Sprecher & Metts, 1989). We refer to this as *romantic idealistic beliefs*.

These two characterizations of romantic ideals are vastly different, but they are not the only way in which individuals characterize love and relationships. Another conceptualization is a practical approach, in which relationships are characterized with realistic or anti-ideal messages. In a content analysis of relational messages in romantic comedies, Hefner and Wilson (2013) defined these types of messages as challenges, which are messages containing a realistic, pragmatic expression about relationships, or statements that directly contradicts a romantic ideal theme (e.g., "There are plenty of fish in the sea for you to love").

In our first research question, we asked which type of relational message was most attractive to individuals. We embedded the messages into separate conditions of the hypothetical dating profiles, and then asked individuals to rate how attractive they believed each profile to be. Is it warmth, vitality, status, romantic ideals, or challenge messages that are most attractive?

RQ1. Which type of relational message was rated as most attractive in the profiles?

One reason to pay attention to these relational messages is because they may produce idealism among media consumers; yet, despite such potential idealism, we have a tremendous number of relational failures in our society. According to the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), there is a 20% chance that a first marriage will end in divorce or separation within 5 years (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). Approximately 52% of women's and 56% of men's first marriages survive the 20-year mark, according to a *USA Today* expert analysis of the most recent NCHS report on marriage and divorce (Jayson, 2012).

If exposure to these relational messages is associated with endorsement of romantic ideal beliefs (e.g., Hefner & Wilson, 2013), it is important to note how those ideals may influence relationships. Previous research suggests that the beliefs people hold about relationships do have some connection to relational development and maintenance (Montgomery, 2005; Sprecher & Metts, 1989; Sprecher & Metts, 1999). Although the results are mixed, most research indicates a positive impact. For example, one study found that single adolescents who believed strongly in the romantic ideal construct also reported a greater openness to the idea of developing closeness and intimacy in their future romantic relationships (Montgomery, 2005). Thus, romantic ideals may help teens prepare and plan for relational life. Young adults also seem positively influenced by these beliefs. In a longitudinal study of 100 dating couples, researchers found that endorsement of beliefs was associated with several positive outcome variables. For example, at Time 1, beliefs consistent with the romantic ideal construct were positively correlated with feelings of satisfaction, love, and commitment in the relationship (Sprecher & Metts, 1999). Finally, for older individuals, this positive influence has also been demonstrated. For example, Murray, Holmes, and Griffin (1996) surveyed married and partnered people, and found that positive idealization in romantic relationships was associated with higher levels of relational satisfaction, in part because individuals often projected their idealistic beliefs onto their current relationships. Therefore, past research illustrates that endorsement of romantic idealization

has a number of positive implications. However, our study extends this past work to determine whether media exposure to romantic ideals (i.e., in this case, hypothetical online dating profiles) is associated with participants' endorsement of those ideals. Past work has substantiated the correlation between exposure and beliefs (Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Holmes, 2007; Segrin & Nabi, 2002), but here we test the causal association.

H1a. Participants exposed to hypothetical online dating profiles will report stronger endorsement of ideal partner characteristics than will participants who are not exposed to the profiles.

H1b. Participants exposed to hypothetical online dating profiles will report stronger endorsement of romantic beliefs than will participants who are not exposed to the profiles.

1.3. Cultivation: the role of other romantic media

Cultivation theory asserts that heavy viewers of television are more likely to see the "real world" as more similar to the one depicted on television than lighter viewers (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002). Most of the research that supports cultivation theory has focused on media violence (see Potter, 1993, for a review). However, research suggests that media can cultivate young people's beliefs about topics other than violence, such as sexual beliefs and attitudes (Ward & Friedman, 2006), beliefs about body image and size (Gentles & Harrison, 2006), and relational perceptions (Segrin & Nabi, 2002; Woo & Dominick, 2001). Most recently, Hefner and Wilson (2013) documented that viewing romantic comedies is associated with cultivating stronger endorsement of the belief that a partner can be perfect and flawless. We expand this finding by investigating whether romantic media in general are associated with endorsement of romantic beliefs and ideal partner characteristics. In this study, we asked participants to indicate the degree to which they liked various forms of romantic media (i.e., reality dating TV, romantic comedies, soap operas, romance novels, etc.). Liking may be better than mere exposure, because liking suggests that individuals may seek out and pay more attention to these media. Stronger liking should also correlate with heavier viewing, as previous media research has demonstrated that there is a statistically significant correlation between liking a genre of media and the amount of exposure to those media (Greene & Krcmar, 2005). For example, Unger, Schuster, Zogg, Dent, and Stacy (2003) argued that liking is a good proxy for media exposure, and found that liking of alcohol-related advertisements was positively correlated with exposure to these advertisements, thus providing substantiation of their claim. More recently, Nabi and Riddle (2008) used liking of violent media as a key correlate in their cultivation study about violent television and associated perceptions. Thus, we predict:

H2a. Romantic media liking will be associated with stronger endorsement of romantic beliefs.

H2b. Romantic media liking will be associated with stronger endorsement of ideal partner characteristics.

Despite the growing body of evidence in support of cultivation (e.g., Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008; Roskos-Ewoldsen & Monahan, 2007), scholars have lodged criticisms of the theory. One concern is that the theory is too simplistic and does not explain *how* cultivation occurs (Hirsch, 1981). In response to this critique, several scholars have attempted to specify the psychological or cognitive processes involved in cultivation (e.g., Hawkins & Pingree, 1990). Most notably, Shrum (2001) has offered a heuristic processing

model of cultivation effects. He posits that heavy viewers of television will develop and store cognitive exemplars related to television portrayals. The more they watch television, the more accessible these exemplars become. Consequently, heavy viewers routinely use these TV-based exemplars to interpret and make decisions about related issues in real life. According to this perspective, young people who watch a lot of romantic comedy films will be exposed to certain themes about romantic relationships. When these young people are faced with real-life romantic situations, they will access these movie relationship examples to help them process information and make decisions. Through this pattern of heuristic processing, heavy consumers should cultivate perceptions of love and relationships that are correlated with how romantic relationships are portrayed in romantic media, and use those perceptions when evaluating the hypothetical online dating profiles. Consuming romantic media may mean that the individual is more open to romance in general than those people who do not consume romantic media. Thus, these individuals may be less critical when evaluating the profiles.

H2c. Romantic media liking will be associated with higher ratings of profile attractiveness.

2. Method

2.1. Design & procedure

This study is a post-test only control group design, in which a single independent variable (relational messages in hypothetical online dating profiles) was manipulated in five ways (warmth, vitality, status, ideal, & challenge). The dependent variables included ratings of attractiveness, endorsement of romantic idealistic beliefs, and endorsement of ideal partner characteristics (warmth, vitality, and status). We also investigated whether overall romantic media use was associated with any of these dependent variables.

After securing IRB approval, members of the research team visited classrooms at a small, private southwestern university and recruited participants. Interested students provided their names and email and were later contacted by a member of the research team. We sent these interested participants a link to the consent form and questionnaire, which confidentially identified each participant with a code. Participants were randomly assigned to one of six conditions (five manipulations and one control group). In each condition, the participants were asked to rate 10 hypothetical online dating profiles. Following the ratings, participants answered questions about endorsement of romantic beliefs, what characteristics they find important in their ideal partner, media-use questions, and demographics. There was also a manipulation check for the five manipulation conditions. The control group only responded to the questions about beliefs, partner, media, and demographics – those participants did not rate any hypothetical online dating profiles.

2.2. Sample

The sample consisted of 249 undergraduate students. Of these participants, 21% were male ($n = 47$) and 70% were female ($n = 161$). They ranged in age from 18 to 25 years ($M = 19.95$, $SD = 1.44$). A majority of the participants self-identified as Caucasian (67%). Other ethnic groups that were represented included Latino (11%), Asian (7%), African American (2%), and other (4%). For sexual orientation, roughly 85% identified as heterosexual, whereas 4% were bisexual, 1% were gay, and 1% were lesbian. About 56% of the participants were not currently in a relationship,

whereas 35% reported being in an existing romantic relationship lasting at least one month. Roughly 9% of the sample did not report any demographic information.

2.3. Independent variable

The independent variable was the relational message content of the hypothetical dating profiles. Each condition contained 10 profiles that were manipulated to reflect one of the five categories (warmth, vitality, status, ideal, & challenge) of the variable. There were a total of 50 profiles. This practice of using multiple messages within each category of the variable reflects conventional wisdom in communication effects research (Jackson & Jacobs, 1983). The profiles had a blue background and a fixed-format section containing demographic information, such as "Want kids," "Ethnicity," and "Favorite Hot Spots." We varied each of these responses so that a variety of demographics would be represented and created a group of 10 divergent profiles. We then included a section entitled "About me and what I'm looking for." This section contained the manipulated messages and varied for each condition. Each participant, regardless of condition, saw the same 10 profiles with only the "About Me" section being different.

To aid in the validity of the relational messages in the profiles, we consulted previous research and preexisting conceptualizations of each category of the independent variable. We composed the warmth, vitality, and status conditions by using the adjectives found in the Ideal Standards measure (Campbell et al., 2001). The warmth condition contained messages about being trustworthy and kind (i.e., "I am communicative, friendly, and generous"). The vitality condition contained sentences about being active and good looking (i.e., "I am attracted to confidence, independence, and sexiness"). The status condition included messages about wealth and religion (i.e., "I am financially secure and successful, and looking for the same in a man"). To create the ideal condition, we composed descriptive sentences using messages from the Romantic Beliefs Scale (Sprecher & Metts, 1989). For example, "I believe in finding my soul mate – is it you?" The challenge condition included messages that rejected an ideal outlook and painted relationships in a realistic light (i.e., "It takes hard work to make a relationship work, but I'm willing to try"), as conceptualized by Hefner and Wilson's (2013) content analysis of films. Thus, we included 5 manipulations of the independent variable that are representative of previous research related to relational messages in order to determine which type of message is more influential on ratings of attractiveness and endorsement of romantic beliefs.

2.4. Dependent variables

2.4.1. Ratings of attractiveness for profiles
Participants were presented with 10 different hypothetical dating profiles (5 male, 5 female). After viewing each profile, participants answered questions related to attraction (e.g., "Please rate the attractiveness of this profile;" "Please rate how suitable you are to the person in this profile"). These items were adapted from a mate selection measure (McGee & Shevlin, 2009). Participants were instructed: "If the person's sex is not compatible with your sexual orientation, please answer the questions in consideration of friendship rather than romance." Participants rated their degree of romantic attraction on a 7-point scale, and the mean of the three items for the five opposite sex profiles comprised the ratings of romantic attraction ($M = 3.77$, $SD = .86$, range: 1.11–5.93, $\alpha = .84$).

2.4.2. Romantic idealistic beliefs
To assess students' beliefs about intimate relationships, we used Sprecher and Metts' (1989) Romantic Beliefs Scale (RBS). The RBS is designed to assess endorsement of four types of beliefs

that are part of the romantic ideal construct: love conquers all, soul mate/one and only, idealization of partner, and love at first sight. Sample items include: "I believe if another person and I love each other we can overcome any differences and problems that may arise" (love conquers all), "There will be only one real love for me" (soul mate/one and only), "The person I love will make a perfect romantic partner; for example, he/she will be completely accepting, loving, and understanding" (idealization of other), and "I am likely to fall in love almost immediately if I meet the right person" (love at first sight). Mean scores for the composite 15-item 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) ranged from 1.33 to 7.00 ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.02$, $\alpha = .90$).

2.4.3. Ideal partner characteristics

This measure of ideal standards is designed to assess three dimensions of characteristics associated with a person's ideal partner: warmth, vitality, and status (Campbell et al., 2001). Participants rated 43 characteristics of their ideal romantic partner in level of importance, with 1 being not at all important and 7 being "very important." Sample items included: "This person is understanding," "This person is sexy," and "This person dresses well." Higher mean scores indicated a greater degree of importance for that ideal partner characteristic. We submitted the 43 items to a principal components analysis with varimax rotation. Eigenvalues and interpretability indicated that the best solution was three factors: warmth (19 items, $M = 6.08$, $SD = .78$, $\alpha = .95$), vitality (16 items, $M = 5.68$, $SD = .80$, $\alpha = .92$), and status (8 items, $M = 4.75$, $SD = 1.11$, $\alpha = .85$). The eigenvalues for the three factors were 16.14, 4.85, and 2.55, respectively.

2.5. Media variables

2.5.1. Romantic media liking

To assess exposure to romantic media, we asked participants to indicate how strongly they liked consuming a variety of different romantic-themed media. Previous media research has demonstrated that there is a statistically significant correlation between liking genres of media and the amount of exposure to those media (Greene & Krcmar, 2005). Participants rated how much they liked each of the nine media activities on a 7-point scale ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.03$, range: 1.00–6.33, $\alpha = .74$). Sample items included: "read romance novels;" "watch romantic comedies;" and "watch reality-based TV shows about relationships."

2.5.2. Overall movie viewing

We assessed overall movie and television viewing to control for the possibility that heavy exposure to romantic media might reflect a tendency to watch lots of screen media (i.e., film buffs) rather than this particular type of programming. Using an adaptation of an already-established scale (Shrum, Wyer, & O'Guinn, 1998), participants were asked to specify the number of movies watched per week in four categories: movies at the theater, movies airing on television, movies on DVD/VHS/On Demand, and movies watched on IPod or phone. The scores for the four types were summed to create an overall movie exposure variable ($M = 5.37$, SD = 2.90, range: 1–20).

2.5.3. Overall television viewing

Using a similar version to the overall movie viewing scale described above (Shrum, Wyer, & O'Guinn, 1998), participants were asked to specify the number of hours of television watched per week in three categories: average weekday, average Saturday, and average Sunday. The weekly viewing scores were computed by summing the hours for each day, and then adding the weekday hours (multiplied by 5) to the weekend hours. Scores ranged from 1.00 to 57.00 h per week ($M = 16.43$, $SD = 8.54$).

2.6. Manipulation check

For those participants not in the control group, we asked a series of Likert-type questions to make sure that the manipulations of the profiles were successful. Participants were asked to think about all of the profiles that they had seen and indicate the degree of agreement with a series of statements. For example, "In general, the people featured in these profiles believed in romantic ideals like soul mates." We conducted a one-way ANOVA to test the manipulation by comparing means for the responses to each of these questions for each of the different experimental conditions, and it was statistically successful for all of the conditions except for the status condition, $F(4, 166) = 1.42$, $p = .23$. That condition was dropped from further analyses. Please see Table 1.

3. Results

See Table 2 for a correlation matrix of all continuous variables.

3.1. Research Question 1

The first research question asked about which group of hypothetical dating profiles was rated as most attractive. Results revealed that the profiles in the Warmth condition were rated as most attractive ($M = 4.08$, $SD = .74$), whereas the Challenge condition ($M = 3.68$, $SD = .85$) was rated as least attractive. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) for participants' ratings of profiles was not significant, $F(3, 146) = 2.08$, $p = .105$.

3.2. Hypothesis 1

We predicted that participants in the treatment conditions would report stronger endorsement of ideal partner characteristics than would participants in the control condition. An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the means of each of the ideal treatment groups (Warmth, Vitality, and Ideal) with the control condition for the variable of ideal partner characteristics (Warmth and Vitality). For endorsement of the ideal partner characteristics of Warmth and Vitality, none of the t-tests were statistically significant. We also tested to see if there were differences between the mean of the control group and the mean of all ideal treatment groups to determine if exposure to any hypothetical profile containing a type of ideal influenced endorsement of ideal partner characteristics. We then checked to see if the mean of the challenge condition differed from the ideal conditions. Finally, we separated the file by sex, but none of these tests were statistically significant. Hypothesis 1a was not supported.

The second part of Hypothesis 1 predicted that participants in the treatment conditions would report stronger endorsement of romantic idealistic beliefs than would participants in the control condition. We repeated this process for comparing the means of each of the ideal treatment groups (Warmth, Vitality, and Ideal) with the control condition, but substituted endorsement of romantic idealistic beliefs as the outcome variable. The test comparing the means of the Warmth group with the Control group was significant, $t(76) = -2.40$, $p = .019$, $d = .55$. That is, participants in the Warmth condition endorsed romantic idealistic beliefs more strongly than did participants in the Control condition. The test comparing the means of the Vitality group with the Control group was significant, $t(72) = -2.22$, $p = .030$, $d = .51$. The test comparing Ideal and Control was not significant, $t(68) = 1.23$, $p = .22$. We also tested to see if there were differences between the mean of Control group and the mean of all ideal treatment groups to determine if exposure to any hypothetical profile containing a type of ideal influenced endorsement of ideal beliefs. This test was significant,

Table 1
One-way analysis of variance for the manipulation check.

Manipulation check	Experimental condition	M
Warmth[***]	Warmth	4.85$_a$
	Vitality	3.47$_b$
	Status	3.42$_b$
	Ideal	4.53$_a$
	Practical	3.89$_b$
Vitality[***]	Warmth	4.60$_b$
	Vitality	5.56$_a$
	Status	3.92$_b$
	Ideal	4.53$_b$
	Practical	4.30$_b$
Status	Warmth	4.65$_a$
	Vitality	4.22$_b$
	Status	4.47$_a$
	Ideal	4.16$_a$
	Practical	3.96$_b$
Ideal[***]	Warmth	4.82$_b$
	Vitality	3.50$_b$
	Status	3.50$_b$
	Ideal	5.59$_a$
	Practical	3.04$_b$
Practical[***]	Warmth	3.88$_b$
	Vitality	3.06$_b$
	Status	3.44$_b$
	Ideal	3.63$_b$
	Practical	4.41$_a$

Note: Post-hoc tests were conducted to compare the five treatment means for each manipulation.
Means in the same box that do not share a common subscript differ at $p < .05$ by the Tukey procedure.
Results of the ANOVA test are represented by the following: [***] $p < .001$.

$t(144) = -2.50$, $p = .015$, $d = .46$. The participants in the ideal-related treatment conditions endorsed the idealistic beliefs more strongly ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 1.06$) than did the participants in the control condition ($M = 3.82$, $SD = .98$). This effect was particularly enhanced for female participants, $t(105) = -2.79$, $p = .006$, $d = .61$. Because exposure to the treatment groups resulted in stronger endorsement of romantic beliefs in all of the conditions except for Ideal, we concluded that Hypothesis 1b was mostly supported.

3.3. Hypothesis 2

The first part of our second hypothesis predicted that romantic media liking would be associated with stronger endorsement of romantic beliefs. Results from the regression test indicated that liking romantic media predicted stronger endorsement of romantic beliefs, even after controlling for sex, relational status, overall movie exposure, and overall TV exposure, $R^2 = .08$, $\Delta R^2 = .05$, $F(1, 192) = 10.79$, $p = .001$, $f^2 = .10$. Hypothesis 2a was supported. We controlled for sex because past research has indicated that lik-

romantic media is more often consumed by females than males (Segrin & Nabi, 2002), whereas males are more likely to endorse romantic beliefs (Sprecher & Metts, 1989). We controlled for relational status because it is a commonly used control in romantic media literature (e.g., Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Segrin & Nabi, 2002), and we controlled for overall screen media exposure to ensure that the results were due to liking romantic media specifically and not exposure to media generally.

We also predicted that romantic media liking would be associated with stronger endorsement of ideal partner characteristics. Three regression analyses were conducted to test for the relationships between consumption of romantic-oriented media and endorsement of ideal partner characteristics of Warmth, Vitality, and Status. None of these tests were statistically significant. Hypothesis 2b was not supported.

Finally, we expected that romantic media liking would be associated with higher ratings of profile attractiveness. The results of the regression test indicated that romantic media liking predicted higher ratings of profile attractiveness, even after controlling for sex, relational status, overall movie exposure, and overall television exposure, $R^2 = .08$, $\Delta R^2 = .04$, $F(1, 156) = 6.87$, $p = .010$, $f^2 = .16$. Hypothesis 2c was supported. Please see Table 3 for all of the regression tests.

4. Discussion

This study was the first-ever experiment to test how ideal expressions in hypothetical online dating profiles are related to profile attractiveness, and ideal endorsement. Experimental research is important because previous work has substantiated that ideal content is associated with endorsement of romantic beliefs (e.g., Hefner & Wilson, 2013), but the causal link was missing. Experimental work can show that what is thought to be true is actually true (Berger, 2013), and this study supports that aim. We also explored the influence of romantic media liking on profile attractiveness and endorsement of ideal partner characteristics and romantic idealistic beliefs. In general, we found three major results. First, profiles featuring elements of Warmth were rated as most attractive, whereas profiles with a realistic slant, or representative of the Challenge relational message, were rated as least attractive. Second, exposure to the conditions featuring any ideal content resulted in stronger endorsement of romantic beliefs, but not ideal partner characteristics. Finally, liking romantic media predicted stronger endorsement of ideals and higher ratings profile attractiveness.

Our findings for research question one were not statistically significant, but the pattern still provides some meaningful implications. For romantic attraction, the condition of Warmth was rated most attractive (e.g., "I'm looking for someone understanding and supportive;" "I want an affectionate person who knows how to listen") and Challenge was rated as least attractive (e.g., "I'm a

Table 2
Correlation matrix for all continuous variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Romantic attraction	1.00							
Endorsement of romantic idealistic beliefs	.12	1.00						
Endorsement of warmth ideal partner characteristic	.01	.23[**]	1.00					
Endorsement of vitality ideal partner characteristics	.06	.23[**]	.66[**]	1.00				
Endorsement of status ideal partner characteristic	−.07	.22[*]	.35[**]	.49[**]	1.00			
Romantic media liking	.20[**]	.23[**]	.09	.04	.17[*]	1.00		
Overall movie exposure	.07	.14[*]	−.12	.02	.09	.21[**]	1.00	
Overall TV exposure	.09	.07	−.21[**]	−.12	−.05	.16[*]	.55[**]	1.00

[**] Correlations are significant at the level of $p < .01$.
[*] Correlations are significant at the level of $p < .05$.

Table 3
Summary of hierarchical regression analysis for romantic media liking predicting endorsement of romantic beliefs, profile attractiveness, and endorsement of ideal partner characteristics of warmth, vitality, and status.

Predictor	Romantic beliefs		Warmth		Vitality		Status		Profile attractiveness	
	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β
Step 1	.03		.09***		.03		.04		.03	
Sex		−.15*		.18*		−.05		.23		−.01
Relational Status		.06		−.11		−.09		−.04		−.15
Overall Movie Exposure		.09		−.01		.12		.15		−.01
Overall TV Exposure		−.03		−.19*		−.19*		−.10		.04
Step 2	.05**		.01		.00		.01		.04**	
Liking of Romantic Media		.25**		.07		.03		.09		.22*
Total R^2	.08		.09		.03		.05		.08	
N	197		197		197		197		161	

Note: All coefficients are from the final block. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Sex is coded as male/female (1/2). Relational status is coded as single/partnered (1/2). Overall movie and television exposure are continuous variables.

normal guy looking for a normal relationship;" "I want someone be my partner as we navigate the ups and downs of a relationship"). In previous studies, warmth has been cited as the most important feature in romantic relationships, so this pattern is consistent with earlier work (i.e., Campbell et al., 2001). A larger sample size may have made these results statistically significant, and future research should explore that possibility.

Our first hypothesis predicted that participants in the treatment conditions would report stronger endorsement of ideal partner characteristics than would participants in the control condition. We were testing the causal association between exposure and effects. However, we found no statistically significant differences among conditions. It could be that one exposure session was not potent enough to influence individuals to endorse these ideal partner characteristics. Instead, as cultivation argues, exposure needs to be repeated and long term (Gerbner, 1998).

The second part of our first hypothesis slightly challenges this supposition. Here, we found evidence that exposure to any of the treatment conditions featuring ideal content (both ideal partner characteristics and romantic beliefs) resulted in stronger endorsement of romantic beliefs. The difference in effects could be because ideal partner characteristics are not as prevalent in media as are the romantic beliefs. In fact, Hefner and Wilson (2013) conducted a content analysis of romantic comedy films and found that a fair amount of those ideal expressions exist in these movies. If these ideals are prevalent in media—and potentially more prevalent than the ideal partner characteristics—it could be that exposure to any ideal-related content activates endorsement of those pervasive romantic beliefs. Thus, endorsement of romantic beliefs is not linked with exposure to those particular ideals, but rather to exposure of *any* ideal-related content (i.e., partner characteristic or romantic belief). This makes sense because we found empirical evidence that endorsement of all of the partner ideal characteristics was significantly correlated with endorsement of romantic beliefs ($r = .23$, $p < .01$).

Furthermore, this is consistent with previous research. Edison (2006) asked 140 undergraduates about their romantic comedy exposure as well as their perceptions of romantic relationships. She found that compared to light viewers, heavy viewers of these films were less likely to believe they would ever get divorced and more likely to believe they would find love and be happily married. However, this pattern held true *only* if these heavy consumers of romantic comedies also viewed a segment of a romantic comedy film immediately prior to answering this battery of questions about normative beliefs. In other words, the cultivation effect was only present among heavy viewers who had been primed or activated by exposure to a romantic film. Similarly, we found that endorsement of ideals was stronger for those participants who had

been exposed to any type of ideal condition prior to indicating their level of endorsement for the beliefs. It could be that people are more comfortable reporting their endorsement of idealistic beliefs if they believe other people also share similar views. The stimuli consisted of online dating profiles which ostensibly represent actual people and their real beliefs, so participants who already held these idealistic beliefs may have been more forthcoming with their endorsement when they were exposed to profiles of people who shared those beliefs. Previous research supports this notion that online communication can help young people feel a sense of belonging (e.g., Davis, 2012). If individuals feel that their beliefs are shared by others, they may be more likely to acknowledge those opinions.

We did not find a direct relationship between the Ideal condition and endorsement, but this could be because the Ideal condition was too unrealistic or too blatant. Participants' willingness to report endorsement of romantic beliefs may be tempered by the obvious priming of the Ideal condition, and may be best activated through exposure to more subtle forms of ideal romance, such as the Warmth (e.g., "I'm looking for someone who is supportive") and Status conditions (e.g., "I'm looking for someone who shows me something I don't know how to do").

The second hypothesis predicted that romantic media liking, which is a good indicator of exposure, would be related to higher ratings of profile attractiveness and stronger endorsement of ideal partner characteristics and romantic beliefs. Liking romantic media predicted stronger endorsement of ideals, and also predicted higher ratings of romantic attraction to the profiles. This demonstrates a pragmatic effect of liking romantic media. That is, romantic media liking, which is an acceptable proxy for romantic media exposure (e.g., Unger et al., 2003), seems to promote romance and make potential partners appear more attractive and appealing. Previous work has documented how viewing romantic media can influence beliefs (e.g., Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007; Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Segrin & Nabi, 2002), but our study expands on this and demonstrates how romantic media can influence successive behaviors (i.e., ratings of attractiveness). These participants who reported liking romantic media are the individuals who have had the most experience with romantic ideals. This could make them more open to romance, and subsequently explains why their ratings of the profiles were more positive, regardless of condition. An example might illustrate. If a young person watches a number of films like Knocked Up (2007), which features an improbable but ultimately successful romance between a beautiful, businesswoman and a mildly attractive stoner, this person may be more inclined to give a wider range of individuals a chance when considering potential dating partners. Thus, this person may rate the profiles as more attractive.

Furthermore, at least one content analysis of romantic media identified the relational messages as more realistic than idealistic at a ratio of 2:1 (Hefner & Wilson, 2013), possibly explaining why liking romantic media is associated with dating profile attractiveness, even when the content is realistic in nature.

These findings also make theoretical sense. Mass media and television are our most centralized storytelling system (Gerbner, 1998). It transmits a coherent and integrated system of images and messages to total populations. Mass media cultivate values, attitudes, perceptions, and predispositions at an early age that become the basis for broader perceptual sets (Gerbner et al., 2002). Cultivation theory suggests that the more people watch television and the more people are exposed to mass media, the more their perceptions of reality will mirror a media portrayal of reality (Gerbner, 1969); that is, perceived reality will become more aligned with symbolic reality (Gerbner, 1998). People who watch romantic movies and consume other romantic media have been exposed to romantic ideals (Hefner & Wilson, 2013). Over time, these individuals may be cultivated to endorse those ideals, which in turn affect how they evaluate prospective romantic partners. Priming is an effect of increased availability as a result of exposure to a stimulus (Bryant & Thompson, 2002). Media tell viewers which characteristics are important and which ones deserve increased attention. That information and those qualities are then stored in viewers' memories. Exposure to additional related media later activates those archived thoughts and concepts (e.g., Shrum, 2001). Thus, exposure to the online dating profiles primed and activated those ideal-related thoughts that had been learned and stored from previous experience with romantic media, and subsequently influenced how they rated the romantic attractiveness of the hypothetical online dating profiles. Whereas Pynta et al. (2014) used experimental methodology to show that social media use can enhance traditional media viewing, our results demonstrate that traditional media liking can influence new media behaviors.

There are certainly some limitations to our study, most of which pertain to our sample. First, our manipulation of the Status condition failed. This could be because our sample contained more women than men. Future work should incorporate more equal sample sizes of both sexes. Second, our sample did not include an equal number of single and partnered participants. Third, our sample contained only college-aged participants, which may also have skewed the results. Stephure, Boon, MacKinnen, and Deveau (2009) conducted a study to investigate the association and correlation between age and online dating. After administering a survey to 175 participants, they found that a positive correlation between age and participation in online dating sites; as people's age increased, so did their involvement in online dating activities. Furthermore, they found a negative correlation between age and satisfaction, in that as people's age increased, they became more dissatisfied with offline ways of meeting potential romantic partners. Employing an older sample in an experimental setting could reveal new findings.

The results of this study provide some key implications, both theoretically and practically. Although our results provide little evidence that attraction to a media model can influence endorsement of beliefs after a one-time viewing, our findings do suggest that cultivation is the process at play and that repeated exposure is necessary to cultivate these longstanding beliefs. In fact, our findings provide some evidence for cultivation theory, particularly in that liking of romantic media is associated with higher ratings of profile attractiveness and stronger endorsement of romantic beliefs – a pattern that provides some support for the heuristic processing model of cultivation effects (Shrum, 2001). Our results demonstrate that people who routinely view romantic screen media develop attraction to these ideal traits. Future work should test the role of uses and gratifications theory within the context of online dating and ideal endorsement, to determine whether motivation to peruse the profiles changes the influence of that exposure. As the first experiment to test how ideal expressions in hypothetical online dating profiles are related to profile attractiveness and ideal endorsement, it provides valuable insight for the fields of media effects and interpersonal relationships. Our findings provide implications for how individuals may navigate the digital world of online dating, as well as offers evidence for how media exposure can influence relational beliefs and behaviors. Future research should continue to investigate this line of research and unpack the association between media consumption and use and its role in developing and influencing cognitions, attitudes, and actions, particularly within the context of romance.

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