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Ryan's Roses and Media Exposure through the Lens of Cultivation

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Abstract
This paper undertakes an extensive analysis of the Los Angeles radio program, Ryan's Roses*.* Ryan's Roses *showcases adultery and toxic relationships in an entertaining fashion. Little research exists regarding the extent to which radio talk shows affect an individual's engagement in romantic relationships. Studies from cultivation theory, media exposure, and radio were engaged to develop a framework for gauging negative behavioral effects in consistent listeners of the show. The subsequent analysis provides structural support for the claim that heavy listening exposure to* Ryan's Roses *perpetuates distorted views of romantic relationships.*

Within the field of communication studies, research on cultivation effects has successfully been conducted in various parts of the world (Hetsroni & Tukachinsky, 2006). However, there exists very little research that examines the effects radio programs on people's perception of romantic relationships. In this regard, a particular radio program that is worthwhile to explore is Ryan's Roses. Hosted by internationally known celebrity Ryan Seacrest, Ryan's Roses presents interpersonal conflicts among heterosexual couples whereby the girlfriend, or wife, believes that her romantic partner is secretly engaging in intimate behaviors with another woman (Seacrest, 2015). Given that a substantial amount of men commit adultery, the thematic aim of the show is to deceive, shame, and publicly embarrass such men on live radio.

Ryan's Roses follows a specific routine that consistently leads to the same dramatic conclusion, that is, a male individual having to explain his immoral and adulterating actions to his romantic partner. The program garners a lot of attention because often the romantic partners' initial argument escalates into a heated discussion, which usually provokes the male partner to correct his wrongdoing or justify his actions. But before this particular discussion comes to fruition, Ryan's Roses lays out the same effective plan that draws these men on live radio, eventually getting them to disclose the truth. It begins when Seacrest's personal assistant, Patty Rodriguez, disguises herself as a flower shop owner and

makes a telephone call to the partner of the concerned woman to offer him a dozen free roses. She also allows him to send them to any individual of his choosing (Seacrest, 2015). Usually, the male partner sends the roses to another woman, who is merely a platonic friend, or someone with whom he is having an affair (2015). Immediately afterwards, Seacrest intervenes, bombarding the boyfriend/husband with a series of questions in order to prod him to confess his actions (2015). Men who appear on Ryan's Roses often deny committing adultery, and usually are nervous and uncoordinated in their attempts to conjure fruitful and valid excuses (2015). Usually Seacrest's extensive questioning leads the couple into an argument, which escalates and leads them to disengage their relationship on live radio (2015).

It is uncertain as to whether heavy exposure to Ryan's Roses by listeners produces negative effects. In order to better understand how contemporary forms of media frame relationships, it is worthwhile to explore if and how exposure to the show shapes audience members' perception of romantic relationships and of their own relationships. Stated in more general terms, it is important to focus on the ways in which media content shapes people's behaviors and views of reality. In order to conduct a study that primarily focuses on media exposure to Ryan's Roses, a review of research regarding cultivation theory is undertaken. Media exposure, radio, and parasocial relationships serve as key variables that further guide the literature review, as each contributes to an explanation of how media shapes people's social realities. It is in this light that the following research question is proposed:

> RQ 1: How is the frequency of exposure to Ryan's Roses associated with perceptions of romantic relationships?

Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theory posits that the consumption of television is related to construction of social reality (Gerbner, 1969). Therefore, people's perceptions of how social behaviors work in the real world are heavily influenced by depictions on television (Gerbner, 1969). Gerbner and Gross (1976) found that television has been established as a social norm that influences people's behaviors. They also establish that television contains basic human elements such as action, science, storytelling, and art, all of which have been cultivated in people's lives. Television, for Gerbner and Gross, is essentially a substitute for comfort and company if there is no one else to rely on for social interaction.

While watching television, cultivation emerges because viewers are either intentionally or unintentionally encoding the information offered by the

television (Reizer & Hetsroni, 2014). After the encoding process, this information is retained in long-term memory and translates into evaluations and views of reality (Reizer & Hetsroni, 2014). According to the criteria of Gerbner et al. (2002), two assumptions underlie cultivation theory. First, media-influenced perceptions of reality develop over time. Second, these perceptions of reality are the result of the unified, homogenized view of reality where television presents a reality that communicates mainstream values of society. Cultivation theory suggests that television offers a "centralized system of story-telling," the impact of which cuts across programming content and genres (Gerbner, 1998, p. 177). Thus, it is the *amount* of television consumed, rather than the *type* of television consumed, that predicts cultivation effects (Gerbner, 1998).

Significantly, there is a wide range of research that has used cultivation theory to identify the ways in which television distorts social realities (Hetsroni & Tukachinsky, 2006). These studies include distortions regarding estimates of the rate of crime and violence, personal victimization, life risks posed by environmental factors, and the number of women in professional occupations (Hetsroni & Tukachinsky, 2006). A wide variety of cultivation theory studies have indicated that there are certain distortions of various topics; therefore, it can be inferred that topics dealing with romantic relationships can also be distorted. Cultivation theorists have looked extensively into the effects of television; however, it is uncertain if cultivation can also be applicable to radio. Currently, there is no research that addresses this relationship. Radio is similar to television because it promotes societal messages for the masses. Since radio is a popular media outlet, supporting the claim that radio can affect people's social realities and prompt them to behave in a particular way is indeed an argument that needs further investigation. In the remaining sections of this literature review, I address several gaps in the existing scholarly research of both cultivation theory and radio. Immediately following, I conclude with a research proposal to move my project forward in order to discover the relationship between radio and romantic relationships. More specifically, I intend to explore what influence *Ryan's Roses* has on its listeners.

Cultivation Effects of Television

In examining studies that have applied cultivation theory, some of its limitations become evident. Perse (1986) found significant effects of heavy viewing from soap operas. Perse explained that heavy television viewing distorts reality in a such way that viewers begin to internalize character portrayals on television and perceive them as the equivalent of real life representations. Similar to Perse,

Bond and Drogos (2014) conducted a study on the show *Jersey Shore* using cultivation theory, in which they found that heavy *Jersey Shore* viewers adapted the sexual behaviors of the cast members. For Bond and Drogos, it is not simply exposure to television that leads to permissive sexual attitudes, but rather, exposure to *Jersey Shore* specifically.

Another significant study looked at the medical drama *Grey's Anatomy*, examining how viewers perceive the courage of real-world doctors and how this perception is associated with patient satisfaction (Quick, 2009). By utilizing cultivation theory, Quick found that the number of *Grey's Anatomy* episodes viewed was positively associated with the perceived credibility of the show. To elaborate, the more that people watched the show, the more realistic they perceived the program to be (Quick, 2009). Often, multiple storylines within *Grey's Anatomy* represent doctors performing heroic acts to save or significantly improve a patient's life (Quick, 2009). As a result, participants within Quick's study perceived doctors to be courageous. From this, it can be inferred that particular shows have the ability to produce particular behavioral outcomes. Through the lens of cultivation theory, it is evident that television shows present distinct ways of prompting viewers to behave. In regard to *Ryan's Roses*, it calls attention to the concepts of romance, infidelity, and commitment (Seacrest, 2015). Since *Ryan's Roses* has a substantial amount of consistent listeners (Seacrest, 2015), it is likely that these frequent listeners internalize the narratives of infidelity that can produce certain cultivation effects. More specifically, it is logical to assume that there are effects from heavy listening to *Ryan's Roses* that can potentially prompt listeners to have their perceptions of romantic relationships altered. Looking at romance in various types of media will shed light on how *Ryan's Roses* can profoundly alter the viewpoints of listeners. The next section explores the cultivation effects that manifest from television shows that revolve around the context of romance.

Cultivation in Romantic Relationships

De Souza and Sherry (2006) found that one of the consequences of watching television saturated with romantic conflict is that viewers might develop negative expectations of real life romantic relationships, viewing them as inevitably conflict ridden. According to Arnett (2000), this is likely to be the case among young adult viewers who are testing the waters with serious romantic relationships in their own lives. Although De Souza and Sherry (2006) and Arnett (2000) share similar views about relational conflict, their ideas are limited solely to television. *Ryan's Roses* compels listeners to consistently tune in to the

spectacle of a romantic couple's heated arguments. Therefore, it has the potential to provoke listeners to internalize relational conflicts and produce certain behavioral outcomes. However, further research is needed in order to support this claim.

Aubrey et al. (2013) assert that when control over the environment in a romantic relationship is threatened, one partner will react by controlling the other partner to regain a sense of mastery. When combining the work from romantic conflict and relational control with cultivation theory, Aubrey et al. state that the more exposure there is to representations of romantic conflict on television, the more television viewers might be cultivated to accept that conflict is an acceptable way to reestablish relational control and mastery in romantic relationships. Thus, repeated exposure to television that is high in interpersonal conflict might coincide with the use of controlling behaviors and expectations in a romantic relationship (Aubrey et al., 2013).

Above all, substantial data supports the notion that audiences' realities are influenced by heavy viewing of television programs (Hetsroni & Tukachinsky, 2006). It is likely, then, that other mediated content such as Ryan's Roses holds the same weight in provoking particular behaviors in those who are highly exposed to it. Bond and Drogos (2014) and Perse (1986) reinforce the argument that cultivation effects may manifest from continued exposure to one television program rather than television specifically. Using this idea of "continued exposure" is the governing factor that will uncover beliefs and values among the consistent listeners of *Ryan's Roses*. Although there are findings from continued exposure of television, there are no studies that emphasize continued exposure of radio talk shows involving romantic relationships. For that reason, I propose that there should be further investigation to see if cultivation theory is applicable to other media content. There are various contexts that have been explored through the lens of cultivation theory, but applying this theory to radio and romantic relationships is likely to garner rich findings.

Media Exposure

In order to build the rationale for the research: (heavy listening of *Ryan's Roses* has the ability to influence social behaviors and perceptions of romantic relationships), it is important to note the existing literature on media exposure. In the majority of media use studies, media exposure is most often measured by asking respondents how many times (usually in a week) they make use of a specific medium (Hollander, 2006). Hollander (2006) states that audiences are active rather than passive because media users prefer to deliberately choose

certain messages over others, and retain certain messages while forgetting others. Hollander continues by asserting that audiences prefer selecting messages in accordance with their preexisting attitudes to protect the integrity of their belief structures. On the other hand, audiences also preferentially choose certain media and disregard others in order to obtain the information in which they are interested (2006).

Hoffmann's (2006) findings reveal that people enjoy repeated exposure to different media content. Significantly, repeated exposure can occur with every medium. In addition, Hoffmann (2006) states that repeated exposure is frequent with media that is permanent (books, CDs, DVDs) and easily recordable or repetitive (TV). Furthermore, radio, plays, and comics were also mentioned as suitable media for repeated exposure. Since radio fits under the criteria of "repeated exposure," and provided that repeated exposure to media content produces cultivation effects, it can be argued that consistent listeners of *Ryan's Roses* are experiencing a sort of cultivation effect. In essence, applying cultivation theory will be substantial in terms of extending our understanding of how people view romantic relationships after repeated exposure to radio talk shows.

A study conducted by Slater and Tiggerman (2015), found that exposure to magazines and social networking sites are each independently associated with self-objectification in female adolescents. Slater and Tiggerman's findings revealed that television exposure and time spent on the internet in general were both shown to correlate with self-objectification. Those who listen to *Ryan's Roses* are mainly women, ranging from teens to college-age adolescents (Seacrest, 2015). Drawing from Slater and Tiggerman's conclusions, self-objectification might manifest from *Ryan's Roses* listeners as well, considering that the show targets women's insecurities and emphasizes repeated acts of infidelity. Listeners might self-objectify by scrutinizing their own romantic relationships, questioning whether their partners are remaining faithful or committing adultery. When examining adolescent girls, Vandenbosch and Eggermont (2012) found that cognitive processes of internalization, body surveillance, and self-objectification are related to exposure of sexually objectifying music television, fashion magazines, and social networking sites. Thus, it is evident that repeated exposure imparts negative effects on women.

Hoffmann (2006) argues that audiences subject themselves to repeated media exposure mainly because it provides a relaxing experience. Depending on the content and its complexity, repeated viewers can thus notice hidden jokes, look for early clues in the plot's development, search for mistakes or mishaps, concentrate on certain characters, analyze dialogues, or focus on stylistic

elements such as setting, music, color, and editing (Hoffman, 2006). Similarly, it is likely that frequent listeners of *Ryan's Roses* focus on the woman's emotional response to the boyfriend/husband's infidelity. In addition, frequent listeners probably concentrate on men's reactions to the intrusion of Seacrest, look at how the arguments escalate, and analyze the reasoning men use for sending another woman roses. Cultivation theory would be useful to my study since it can highlight the common themes of *Ryan's Roses* to further understand how listeners perceive romantic relationships.

In alignment with Hoffman's findings, Yanshu and Guo (2014) found that young people's fashion clothing involvement is closely connected to fashion media exposure. It was also found that individuals who are avid readers of fashion magazines are also likely to be regular browsers of fashion websites. Hoffmann (2006) and Yanshu and Guo (2014) offer strong evidence that can build on the argument that other types of media content, including radio talk shows, promote certain behaviors among those who are repeatedly exposed to it.

In addition, Pardun (2005) reasoned that adolescents live in a sexualized media world, meaning that the more sexual media a teen sees, the more likely he or she is to be sexually active and anticipate future sexual activity. Pardun's study demonstrated that an individual's sexual media consumption is significantly related to their sexual experience and intentions to be sexually active. Evidently, media exposure is the governing reason why certain repetitive social behaviors manifest. Cultivation theory has been repetitively proven to produce behavioral responses among those who are consistently exposed to media. Using the argument that repeated exposure to sexual media provoke women to be sexually active (Pardun, 2015), it is probable that *Ryan's Roses* is producing cultivation effects of uncertainty and insecurity among consistent female listeners. More specifically, heavy listeners of *Ryan's Roses* are exposing themselves to the harsh reality that Seacrest illustrates, that is, men consistently committing infidelity (Seacrest, 2015). In turn, these female listeners are likely to engage in uncertainty within their own and others' romantic relationships, adopting the mentality that adultery is a profound and common element within the realm of romantic relationships. In order to guage the existence of such viewpoints from repeated exposure to *Ryan's Roses*, it is important to look further into cultivation effects and the notion of perceived realism.

Perceived Realism and Media

Perceived realism is the idea that frequent exposure to television content may promote beliefs about the real world only when the television content is perceived to be real (Reeves, 1978). On the other hand, when the television content is deemed to be staged, frequent exposure may not promote corresponding beliefs about the real world (Reeves, 1978). When examining perceived realism, Cho et al.'s (2011) study reviewed television medical dramas and how they affect a person's perceptions about real life physicians. This research reveals that when narratives of these shows are deemed to constitute a good story, that same evaluation is given to physicians in real life. More specifically, medical dramas that display physicians in episodes with appealing stories will in turn influence a person's perception of a real physician, leading to a higher state of perceived realism.

Just like Cho et al.'s (2011) study whereby individuals have perceived realism because of good storylines from medical dramas, *Ryan's Roses* has consistently delivered entertaining and compelling stories. Cultivation theory has strong potential to demonstrate that there is a certain extent of perceived realism influencing the minds of *Ryan's Roses* listeners. Since listeners are being exposed to the compelling storylines of infidelity and hostile arguments, the type of perceived realism that is likely to manifest within listeners is giving the same evaluation of infidelity to their own and others' romantic relationships. In other words, *Ryan's Roses* listeners are likely to perceive infidelity as a common narrative among males, which in turn may affect listeners' perceptions of commitment in romantic relationships.

In regards to real life roles, Maeder and Corbett (2015) found that crime television also produced perceived realism. The authors argue that higher frequency of crime television viewing is associated with increased expectations of evidence, different attitudes toward evidence types, and varying self-reported levels of understanding of scientific evidence. Additionally, flawed verdicts are likely to manifest because of the amount of crime television viewing (Maeder & Corbett, 2015). In sum, perceived realism holds potential in affecting viewpoints of credibility and crime, both of which can support the likelihood of perceived realism affecting viewpoints of romantic relationships as well. Essentially, a cultivation effect emerges because of frequent exposure to particular media, therefore perceived realism and cultivation theory are remarkably similar.

The research by Cho et al. (2011) and Maeder and Corbett (2015) highlight an important finding. Owing to the appealing nature of certain shows, viewers tend to make comparisons between the shows' characters and real life people. As a

result, viewpoints are shifted. The same idea can be applied to *Ryan's Roses*. More specifically, viewers who listen to the vivid arguments that are deemed to be valid will likely make assumptions that romantic couples not publicly displayed on *Ryan's Roses* have the same potential to become embroiled in such arguments. On this show, a man is caught cheating with another woman, and because of that, viewers will likely make comparisons with other romantic relationships in which they will make assumptions including: 1) substantial amount of men cheat; 2) every couple should be suspicious of each other; and 3) men are compulsive liars. For these reasons, perceived realism can be highly applicable to *Ryan's Roses*.

Next, it is important to explore further studies of perceived realism in order to illustrate the cultivation effects that have been identified. Westman et al. (2013) explored the ways in which adolescents used mass media for ideas about romantic relationships. Westman et al. believed that if sitcoms, dramas, magazine articles, or books were seen as realistic or presenting an ideal for which to strive for in real life, adolescents would then use ideas about romantic relationships more frequently. In other similar studies, adolescent girls have been reported to use information observed on television about relationships between people (Granello, 1997), but magazines were more influential than television when considering desired thinness and overall attractiveness portrayed by models (Harrison & Cantor, 1997). Having noted the close relation between romantic relationships and perceived realism, it is at this point useful to examine how certain aspects of radio are lacking.

Talk Radio Exposure

Lacey (2009) reveals that radio is a type of media that is marginalized. The author indicates that it is relatively simple for listeners to forget about certain things (Lacey, 2009). For that reason, scholars often perceive media such as radio to be irrelevant. An interesting observation that Lacey makes is that television was formerly called "image radio," while today radios are called cell phones or mobiles. Arguably, when original names are morphed, the significance of the original name fades away and becomes irrelevant. For this reason, radio has become a neglected medium. In conjunction with this argument, Rubin and Step (2000) assert that there has been little empirical research on radio talk shows and the effects they have on listeners. Provided that television has the ability to encourage negative behaviors in viewers, it is therefore significant to examine the effects of radio to see if it presents the same effects on listeners.

Due to the radio losing its relevance, only a few researchers have focused on the outcomes of listening to radio (Rubin & Step, 2000). Herzog's (1940, 1954) research found that listening to soap operas on radio was perceived as an escape from mundane daily household duties as well as an information source for helping to solve the daily problems in life for many women, the primary demographic for soap opera focus groups. Similarly, Mendelsohn (1964) identified utilitarian/news, active mood accompaniment, psychological release, and friendly companionship as the functions of radio listening. Regarding politics, it was found that political talk radio exerts greater political participation among listeners than non-listeners, and it has a substantial influence on voters' perceptions of presidential candidates (Pfau et al., 1997; Hofstetter & Gianos, 1997).

Radio and Parasocial Relationships

The following section looks at the correlation between radio and parasocial relationships. A *parasocial* relationship describes a situation whereby an individual has a one-way relationship with a media character (i.e., a radio host, a television actor) through media outlets such as television, the internet, and radio (Horton & Wahl, 1956). People who develop this particular bond decide for themselves what level of intimacy they devote to media characters (Horton & Wahl, 1956). Savage and Spence (2014), for example, found that people who have a high parasocial relationship with radio hosts will continue listening to them. Thus, it can be argued that a number of *Ryan's Roses* listeners are likely to develop a parasocial relationship with Ryan Seacrest because of how he embodies a compelling character. In other words, Seacrest presents himself as a confident facilitator through the arguments that emerge amongst the romantic partners presented on his talk show. Seacrest displays morals, ethics, and a strong devotion to anti-infidelity. This in turn likely attracts viewers to perceive his actions as engaging and riveting, compelling audiences to continue to listen to him.

Similar to the findings of Savage and Spence, Rubin and Step (2000) revealed that radio audiences continue tuning in to radio hosts because of the entertaining format they provide and the certain societal issues they address that are relevant to listeners. Interestingly, this in turn enables listeners to perceive the host as being attractive, as well as construing the information presented by the host to be reliable and credible (Rubin & Step, 2000). Additionally, Rubin and Step (2000) concluded that the higher radio listeners' parasocial involvement was with the radio host, the more their attitudes were in line with those of the host. Although

cultivation theory was not applied to Rubin and Step's (2000) research, their findings still embody the characteristics of cultivation effects simply because of the ways in which listeners' attitudes are being shaped through exposure, which essentially coincides with the criteria of cultivation theory.

Conclusion

The purpose of this literature review is to call attention to the lack of research that focuses on radio studies. More specifically, it is evident there is limited research that focuses on radio talk shows discussing romantic relationships and the cultivation effects it has on listeners' perceptions of romantic relationships. *Ryan's Roses*, while not a television program, is a media program that can likely harbor the ability to draw a parallel between heavy radio media exposure and audiences adopting the behaviors portrayed on the show. Cultivation and perceived realism are rather similar. Therefore, it is highly relevant to incorporate the two concepts, as they will together uncover some hidden truths that are likely embedded in *Ryan's Roses*. Since the relation between radio exposure and romantic relationship behaviors is lacking, a logical next step is to investigate how exposure to conflicts on radio programs is related to viewers' perceptions of their actual romantic relationships.

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