

The Influences of Family, Peers and Media on Young Women's Romantic Relationship Expectations

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Abstract

The current research aimed to assess the origins of young women's romantic relationship expectations, notably those surrounding cohabitation, marriage and gender roles. A review of previous literature demonstrated that the family, peers and media were highly influential in terms of these expectations, so these were incorporated as the main themes of study. The research followed a qualitative approach, interviewing eight young women between the ages of 18 and 22 who were in a romantic relationship at the time of the research. The interview data was analysed through thematic analysis to uncover any similarities and differences between participants' answers, with family being cited as the most influential, followed by peers and then media.

Keywords:

Romantic relationships; detraditionalisation; family influences; peer influences; media influences

Introduction

Romantic love is something that everybody strives for. As declared by Stone (1997, p. 282): 'love is the most important thing in the world, to which all other considerations, particularly material ones, should be sacrificed'. This view of the great importance of love is one that many individuals are socialised into, with messages of romantic relationships bombarding them from a variety of directions within everyday life.

However, as Illouz (1997) states, romantic love often seems irrational. It is 'gratuitous rather than profit-oriented, organic rather than utilitarian, private rather than public,' (Illouz, 1997, p. 2). This leaves us with the following question: why is it so important to us? Approaching this question from a feminist perspective, Illouz (2012) refers to the expectations put forward by wider society; 'when a society and culture promote both the intense passion of romantic love and heterosexual marriage as models for adult life, they shape not only our behaviour but also our aspirations, hopes and dreams for happiness' (Illouz, 2012, p. 13). It is because of this societal influence that individuals can feel so pressured to achieve the 'perfect relationship' that society portrays, and this is one reason I have decided to delve into this subject.

In order to meet the aims of the project, this article will firstly outline previous literature on the topic and relevant theoretical perspectives, giving context to the research at hand. Next, the research methods will be described before the findings are discussed and analysed through thematic analysis.

Literature Review

In reviewing previous literature, three primary sources regarding the development of romantic relationship expectations stood out: the family, peers, and media. By focusing on these three primary factors, this research will aid in understanding the origins of young women's expectations.

With regards to theoretical perspectives, Giddens' (1992) detraditionalisation thesis prevails. This thesis outlines the changes that society has endured in its development to modernity (May, 2011). Traditional social structures have lost much of their influence as modernity allows for greater freedom and choice for the individual (Best & Kellner, 1997). With this, intimate relationships have experienced an important transformation: 'detraditionalisation involved the abandonment or reconfiguration of sociocultural traditions that had previously been in place', resulting in increased divorce rates, cohabitation and non-marital pregnancy being accepted in ways earlier societies would never have condoned (Gross, 2005, p. 286).

Further to this change in intimate relationship values is Giddens' (1992) idea of the 'pure relationship'. While traditional narratives of romantic love stressed the obligations of lifetime commitment, the modern relationship is one based on mutual consent and on wanting to be in the relationship. Without the strict boundaries of earlier societal expectations, individuals have more flexibility in their relationship and do not have the necessity of staying together if they feel that the relationship is no longer working (Giddens, 1992). Some feminist theorists, such as Jamieson (1999) have stated that the

'pure relationship' is not as it is theorised to be, and that instead gender inequalities still exist within romantic relationships. The research at hand will help to discover to what extent this 'pure relationship' exists.

The first theme of this literature review to be explored is the family. The traditional nuclear family structure is the most common – reinstating the norms of traditional gender roles by consisting of two heterosexual parents and their children. Bell & Vogel (1968) note that stability is encouraged through this nuclear structure by marriage of the parents and biological bonds to their children. With the family being an important factor of primary socialisation, this is presented to and internalised by children as the ideal family structure (Parsons & Bales, 1956). Almost half of young adults stated their parents as the most influential sources of information regarding their sexual and romantic behaviours (Wisniewski, Sieving & Garwick, 2015), with Molborn & Everett (2010) finding that children's romantic aspirations often mirrored those of their parents.

In contrast to this maintenance of traditional norms and values is the decision to deviate from them. Looking into cohabitation, Manning, Longmore & Giordano (2007) found that, again, parents were significantly influential: individuals living with single or cohabitating parents had lower marital expectations than those living with their biological, married parents. The former was also more likely to cohabit themselves. Despite this, Manning et al. (2007) emphasise that cohabitation is not replacing marriage as the norm, supporting Gross's view that, despite changes to romantic relationships in recent times, they 'remain geared to traditional expectations' (Gross,

2005, p. 287). Berrington, Perelli-Harris & Trevena (2015) also support this in recognising that contemporary relationships have not abandoned the values of traditional relationships. Instead, cohabitating relationships have demonstrated an equally high level of commitment, taking on many functions of marriage such as maintaining a home and raising children. Collating these literatures, we can see the shift that contemporary relationships have endured in recent years.

With regards to peer influences, it has been found that peer socialisation is significantly important in forming attitudes about, and behaviours towards, potential romantic partners (Manning et al. 2011). With age, peers become more influential on an individual's behavioural decisions (Li, Feigelman & Stanton, 2000) and can replace the family as the primary source of information regarding romantic relationships (Kinsfogel & Grynych, 2004). Adolescents' peers are critical in the initiation of romantic relationships (Connolly, Furman and Konarski (2000), and research has demonstrated that approval from peers regarding these relationships results in heightened relationship stability and quality (Manning, Cohen & Smock, 2011). The lack of previous literature on peer influences, in comparison to the other factors of family and media, demonstrates a paucity of research in this area for this particular age group. It reveals a gap in the literature that the current research aims to fill.

The final theme is media. According to Illouz (1997), the notion of love has become a significant part of popular culture. The manner in which the media presents images of love cultivates individuals to accept the unrealistic portrayals of romance as realistic

(Tukachinsky, 2008). In particular, those without personal experiences or relationship role models to observe are more vulnerable to internalising this romanticised view given by the media and using it to construct their personal expectations (Jones & Nelson, 1996). As put by Illouz, 'it is commonplace that the media shapes our notions of love. Love stories have penetrated the fabric of our everyday life so deeply that we suspect they have altered, even transformed, our experience of love' (Illouz, 1997, p. 154).

With regards to social media, Ellison, Heino and Gibbs (2006) state that the surge in online dating represents the wider change in social norms surrounding romantic relationships. They also note that social media allows individuals to portray themselves in idealistic ways, contributing to the unrealistic expectations given by the media. This can be linked to Giddens' (1992) detraditionalisation thesis as he states media and developments in technology have changed the norms and values of romantic relationships in contemporary society. Despite this shift from conventional ways of meeting romantic partners, Hobbs, Owen and Gerber (2016, p. 276) state that the 'traditional views on dating, relationships and monogamy are still largely prevalent'.

Overall, previous literature has demonstrated both the detraditionalisation of relationships as Giddens (1992) theorised, and the links to traditional norms and values that have been maintained. It has also demonstrated that the factors above work in conjunction to form our romantic relationship expectations: family is often stated as the primary agent of socialisation until adolescence when peers become increasingly influential (Li et al., 2000; Kinsfogel & Grynych, 2004). Media is also highly influential at

this time as many adolescents lack personal experience in romantic relationships and so are likely to internalise the portrayals put forward by the media as realistic (Jones & Nelson, 1996). The connections between these factors will be further explored in the findings and analysis part of this work. Firstly, the methodological approaches of this study will be described.

Methodology

Throughout this research the epistemological approach of interpretivism was followed. This requires the researcher to focus on the 'subjective meaning of social action' to develop an introspective understanding of the social world around them (Bryman, 2016, p. 26). With this interpretivist approach, a qualitative methodology is often chosen. Qualitative approaches emphasise words as data over numbers, in contrast to the statistical basis of quantitative research, searching for the meanings and motives in individuals' behaviours (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

The research involved eight young women aged between 18 and 22 years old, all of whom were in a heterosexual romantic relationship at the time of the research. The participants were purposively sampled because choosing female participants close to the age of the researcher made it easier to build a rapport between the two, and focusing on heterosexual women only allowed for a more detailed analysis of the data. Steinberg, Devila and Fincham (2005) found that female participants are more open in speaking about personal experiences and feelings than males are. While it would have been interesting to explore the expectations across varying sexualities, the current

research limited its focus to female, heterosexual women to allow for a more in-depth study. Looking at male expectations and the variations across sexualities would be better explored as a future research endeavour.

The research took a semi-structured approach to the interviews, which lasted between 22 and 59 minutes. Each interview was digitally recorded with the participants' permission given for transcription purposes. Participants were encouraged to reflect on the ways their answers – for example, the age at which their parents married – might influence the expectations they have of their own relationship.

Thematic analysis was implemented for the evaluation of this data, which involves deriving themes from the qualitative data that represents patterns within it (Boyatzis, 1998). This method of analysis was chosen as it allows for both the similarities and differences between participants to be uncovered (Glesne, 2011). Through the thematic analysis the following themes were uncovered: the meaning of romantic relationships, family influences, peer influences, media influences, and the importance of these factors. These will be further expanded on later in this work.

With all research it is highly important to remain ethical throughout the study. The current study followed the British Sociological Association guidelines to ethical research to ensure all procedures were ethically sound. Within these ethical guidelines are five main components: informed consent, confidentiality, participants' right to withdraw their data at any time, the researchers' responsibility to avoid harm to both themselves and

their participants, and the avoidance of deception (BSA, 2017). Participants were given an information sheet entailing the details and purpose of the study and stating their rights to withdraw their data at any time. Following this they were given an informed consent sheet to sign, stating they were happy to take part and for the interview to be digitally recorded. The participants' confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms to replace their real names.

Findings and analysis

This section will discuss the results of the study at hand. Thematic analysis was used to establish patterns between the participants' interview answers and gives clarity within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

The table below shows the personal information of the eight participants. By keeping this information in mind when looking at the findings, the participants' responses can be considered contextually and the influence of lifestyle factors can be considered.

Table 1: Participant Profiles

Participant	Age	Ethnicity	Religion	Length of Relationship	Parents' Relationship
Eleanor	18	British	None	<1 year	New partner
Ella	20	British	None	2-3 years	Single
Emily	22	British	Christian	>3 years	Single
Freya	20	British	None	1-2 years	Married
Hannah	21	Kurdish	Muslim	>3 years	Married
Lucy	19	British	None	<1 year	New marriage
Poppy	19	British	None	<1 year	Married
Sophie	19	Pakistani	Muslim	<1 year	Married

From the interviews, five key themes were established: the meaning of romantic relationships, family influences, peer influences, media influences, and the importance of these factors. These themes and the findings supporting them will be outlined and analysed with the application of previous literature.

The meaning of romantic relationships

The first theme uncovered from the research relates to the meaning of romantic relationships. When speaking about this, the most common reference made was to being 'in love':

I think romantic relationships and boyfriends are like, different things. If I'd been with him for like a month I'd be like, oh yeah he's my boyfriend and I'm in a relationship, but I think romantic relationship is when you love them. [Freya].

You are in love with that person and you see them as someone you want to spend the rest of your life with, they're more than just friends or family. [Poppy]

Freya and Poppy's comments demonstrate the high expectations and importance they place on romantic relationships. As stated by Illouz (2012, p. 13), this is due to the encouragement by wider society of romantic love and marriage as 'models for adult life' which shape our behaviours and plans for the future. Poppy demonstrated this in stating she sees her boyfriend 'as someone you want to spend the rest of your life with,' implying she has thought about the future with her partner and how it will 'shape her aspirations, hopes and dreams for happiness' as theorised by Illouz (2012, p. 13).

Only three of the participants mentioned sexual attraction and physical intimacy with regard to their partner, suggesting that emotional aspects of romantic relationships are of a higher importance – as demonstrated by Ella: 'For me it's a lot of close proximity. I'm quite needy as a person ... romance to me is you have to be there emotionally and you have to connect with each other in that case'.

This priority can be linked to the recent changes in values of romantic relationships as outlined in Giddens' detraditionalisation of intimacy (Giddens, 1992). Santore (2008)

states that contemporary relationships – or the ‘pure relationship’ as Giddens (1992) defines it – place a ‘heightened emphasis on knowing the other and on reciprocal consideration in the relationship’ (Santore, 2008, p. 1203). Ella’s reference to emotional connection can be strongly linked to this idea, thereby demonstrating how individual expectations on romantic relationships change with the development of wider society.

The term individuals use to describe their partners were also explored, with the general consensus being that the term ‘partner’ is more serious than ‘boyfriend’: ‘Well he’s my boyfriend, but I’ve recently started calling him my partner which is a bit weird ... partner is more serious than boyfriend isn’t it? Like oh, this is an established thing’ [Freya].

Hannah – who has been in a long-distance relationship for around seven years – uses the term ‘other half’ to describe her partner. With the duration of her relationship being the longest, this can be interpreted as a further development on the use of ‘partner’: ‘I’d call him my other half – he literally completes me as a person and I can actually say the person I am right now is because of him.’ [Hannah].

Overall, this demonstrated that a number of factors contribute to an individual’s choice of term to describe their partner. While this section of the study uncovered some interesting findings regarding this – notably the differences in terms used to describe one’s partner in relation to the duration of the relationship – it is an area which lacks previous literature. Hopefully, the findings of this study can spark further research into this topic.

Family influences

The second theme explores the influence of the family. Participants discussed the relationships of their parents and other family members as both positive and negative examples of the aspirations they have for their own relationships. There was more frequent discussion of what the participants would like to do differently than of what they hoped would be similar. Several mentioned that they would like to progress through their own relationship at a slower speed, as illustrated by Ella, Lucy and Poppy:

I don't want to repeat the same thing my mum and did and I know she was only 22, so I'm a bit more hesitant because of my age I guess? [Ella]

I guess if anything it's made me think I don't want to rush it. I don't think they knew each other fully, and personally I want to be with someone a while before getting married. [Lucy]

Not really, because my mum and dad weren't together for very long before I was born, so I wouldn't base what I want off them. I'm not saying how they did it was wrong, but I do think I'd do things differently. I'd want to wait longer and get married before I had children. [Poppy]

These responses were relatively surprising: research by Molborn & Everett (2010) suggested that individuals' romantic aspirations often mirrored those of their parents due to primary socialisation having a significant influence on their expectations.

However, this was not found in the study at hand. This difference in findings may be due to age – Molborn & Everett's (2010) participants were aged 12 to 18, while those in the current study were aged 18 to 22. As Molborn & Everett's (2010) participants were younger they were less likely to have any personal experience of romantic relationships and, therefore, family was likely to be more influential for these participants than it was for those in the current study. This is supported by Jones & Nelson (1996) with regards to the influence of media being higher for individuals without personal experience, which will be further explored within the media influences theme.

Another explanation for these changes in aspirations can again be related to detraditionalisation (Giddens, 1992). As mentioned by Ella, her mother was only 22 when she was married. While this was a common age for marriage in previous times, the age of marriage has been slowly increasing: in 1960, the average age for women to marry was 20.3, however by 1998 this average was 25 (Xu, Hudspeth & Bartowski, 2005).

On the other hand, Freya – whose parents had been married for 25 years – expressed her admiration of their relationship and how she uses it as an ideal model for her own:

Some people might think two years is too soon to get married, but because that's how long my parents had been together I think it's ok. And like, I'd define myself as quite a relationship-y person, and I do think that's because I've

always been around my parents and I've always been around an established relationship, like a happy relationship, and so that's what I want.

Living with her two biological parents, Freya has been socialised in the traditional nuclear family structure. As Bell & Vogel (1968) theorise, this nuclear family structure promotes stability through the marriage of parents and biological bonds to their children, encouraging this as the ideal family structure. Freya's comment also supports Molborn and Everett's (2010) hypothesis that individuals' romantic expectations tend to mirror those of their parents. As well as this, Freya's opinion of herself as a 'relationship-y person' can be linked to Manning et al's (2007) findings that individuals living with married parents have higher expectations of marriage than those living with single, cohabitating, divorced, or step-parents.

Alternatively, Poppy expresses mixed opinions on her parent's relationship: 'When I look at their relationship there's things I wouldn't want in my relationship, but then there's dynamics that I do want and can see with my boyfriend – which reassures me for my future.'

To Poppy, the similarity between her parents' relationship and her own are viewed positively as they suggest that she too will have a successful relationship with her partner. This demonstrates the use of positive relationships to set expectations for how their own can be positive and successful and can be linked to Molborn and Everett's

(2010) idea of the self-fulfilling prophecy between a child's and parent's expectations of romantic relationships.

The importance of family opinions is another aspect which was mentioned frequently: 'I think them really liking him makes me think like oh, I've picked a good one. If your family approve you know it's good ... if my family didn't like him, I wouldn't feel comfortable bringing him round and stuff and then that could lead to a strain on the relationship' [Eleanor]. 'My parents' perception of him is really important and if they like him is really important to me' [Sophie].

These comments work to reject Parson and Bales' (1956) theory of a loss of function of the family as they demonstrate that the family is still highly important to young women.

The final aspect of the family that the interview explored was religion. Three of the eight participants identified themselves as being religious. First was Hannah, who follows the religion of Islam. She felt that her religion does not greatly influence her relationship:

'I think if it had an influence we wouldn't be together. It's just not allowed so we couldn't be together, or straight away get into marriage'.

This suggests that Hannah and her family do not follow the religion strictly, but still share the beliefs given by the faith. Sophie also follows the religion of Islam and feels that it influences her relationship more than Hannah expressed: 'I feel like it does restrict it, and I have to be careful because you can get in a lot of trouble'.

Sophie is more cautious in relationships than other individuals who are non-religious might be, only pursuing a romantic relationship if she believes it could be serious. This relates to Xu et al's (2005) theory of religion emphasising the traditional values of relationships as Sophie's goal of marriage is more prominent than others' might be. To further support this idea, Sophie speaks about the religion of her partner, who follows Islam more strictly than she does:

He actually goes to the faith centre and prays, but I don't pray... I feel like he takes it more seriously because he prays and doesn't want to waste my time. You can tell he genuinely wants to be with me and he always talks about the future, so to me that does show something and that he's serious.

Another religious participant was Emily, who follows the religion of Christianity. Again, her interview revealed how being religious means she takes romantic relationships more seriously than non-religious individuals might: ' I come from a religious background and I am religious, so marriage is important to me... I think marriage is a sign of lifelong commitment, I wouldn't be with *partner* if I didn't want to marry him'.

Ellison, Burdette and Glenn (2011) found that the importance of marriage is positively associated with religiosity, and Emily and Sophie's comments both support this. Despite holding strong views about marriage as a result of her own religious views, Emily does mention some aspects of religion that she rejects in her own relationship: 'I know a lot of

it is very old-fashioned - like the man being the head of the household, that doesn't have to be the case and things don't always work that way'.

Therefore, while Emily's religion has an important influence on her views and expectations of romantic relationships, it seems the influence of wider society is stronger as her opinions fall in line with those of the 'pure relationship'. Through detraditionalisation, traditional values have lost much of their significance in society, but they are still prominent in religion (Best & Kellner, 1997). Emily's conformity to the contemporary relationship challenges Xu et al's (2005) theory, which states that some religions – including Christianity – emphasise traditional romantic relationship values. However, this may be due to the relationship of her parents; as stated by Ellison, Burdette and Glenn (2011), the importance of marriage is positively associated with religiosity, and this association is higher for individuals from a two-parent family. As Emily's parents separated when she was young this influence would have been weakened, leaving wider society and the contemporary values of romantic relationships with a higher influence.

Peer influences

The third theme derived from this research was the influence of peer groups.

Admittedly, this section obtained the least data as participants did not have much to say – suggesting the influence of peers is relatively weak.

Conolly et al. (2000) state that peers are critical in the initiation of romantic relationships. When asked if disapproval from her peers regarding her relationship would influence her opinions, Freya stated: 'I'd probably change my friends! Yeah, they have to like him'.

This supports Manning et al's (2011) idea that approval from peers is highly important and results in heightened relationship stability and quality. In Freya's case, if her current peers did not approve of her relationship she would seek a new group of peers who did.

The main value of peers was through advice giving, which many of the participants mentioned was helpful in phases of their relationship which were negative as it gave them an outsider perspective:

I think my best friend's opinion would influence mine a lot. She's very different to me in the way she thinks about things, so I think if we had an argument and I told her about it she'd be able to give me a different perspective that I hadn't thought of before, so that would influence me quite a lot. [Poppy]

Stating that her best friends' opinions would influence her own significantly, Poppy supports the findings of Manning et al. (2011) who suggest that peer socialisation is highly important in forming attitudes about romantic partners. As well as this, Manning et al's (2011) idea that approval from peers resulted in heightened relationship stability and quality was demonstrated by Ella: 'As long as I'm happy, they're happy, so when I

talk about that stuff and I get really happy they're like yeah if that's what you want then go for it'.

From another perspective, a few of the participants mentioned incidences of how their peers' opinions influenced their attitudes towards their own relationships in a negative manner.

There was a moment at the Christmas meal we had at my house. So my course mates came over and *Emily's partner* and I had a little spat which got me upset, so then one of my friends said why is he being such a douche, and her and another friend had to pick me up and put me back together again, so that lowered their opinion of him ... I think if I had been on my own when we had that little spat I would have just been upset for a little while but then I would have pulled myself together and just got on with the evening, whereas them acknowledging what he did and that it was a bit douchey made me think yeah, maybe it is and maybe he's not perfect and what he did wasn't right. [Emily]

This example given by Emily demonstrates how her peers' opinion of her partner made her re-evaluate her own opinion of the situation. This again supports Manning et al's (2011) findings in a different way because peer disapproval reduced Emily's perceived relationship stability and quality.

The participants also discussed whether they would ask their friends or family for advice first. Kinsfogel & Grynych (2004) theorise that the influence of peers on an individual's attitudes and opinions increases with age, often replacing family as the primary source of information regarding romantic relationships. Therefore, with peers being an important source of information, they are likely to also be considered an important source of advice. This replacement of the family is supported by most participants stating they would ask their peers for advice before asking their family, however this was mostly due to the opinions of their family being more important:

There are some things I don't necessarily talk to my mum about, like if he's done something that's really offended me, because mums never forget anything. [Ella]

There's one of these sayings that you shouldn't talk about bad things your partner has done to your parents, because you might forgive them but your parents never will. [Emily]

I wouldn't like to think that after all this time I'd go to my mum and start complaining about him and then she'd start complaining back, because mums always go along with what you say. [Freya]

Similarly, Emily mentioned an incident with her mother in which she did not think she approved of her partner – which left her doubting the relationship: 'I got really worried

after she's been getting into my head about that. I've always taken her opinion as gospel ... So yes, it did affect what I thought of him, and for a few weeks I was really thinking well have I made the right choice?'

These examples challenge Kinsfogel & Grynych's (2004) thesis, as well as Parsons and Bales' (1956) idea regarding a loss of function in the family. Despite this, the results do support Suleiman and Deardoff's (2015) view that peers are influential because each participant mentioned the impact their peers have on them in some way, for example: 'I don't like one of my friend's boyfriend ... it's really awkward, so I wouldn't want anyone to not like *partner*' [Eleanor].

Therefore, the research at hand is important as it demonstrates the maintained importance of family opinions throughout adolescence and adulthood despite differing academic views (e.g. Parsons & Bales, 1956).

Media influences

The fourth theme uncovered from the interviews was the influence of media. Although the main focus for this was social media, many of the participants also mentioned television as an influence.

The first question regarding media asked if the participants thought it gave a realistic portrayal of romantic relationships – to which *all* participants said no. For example:

I don't think it's necessarily an accurate picture ... they fluff it up a little bit, I think they show things in a different way to what it actually is ... I don't think it's really reflective of true romance, and like I said it makes out that you have to be completely drop dead in love with someone and spend all of your time with them, and they have to make you feel special all the time – which isn't a bad thing, but it's not very realistic.' [Ella]

I think it's the most unrealistic ... I think they're extremely idealised forms, or they're the other extreme of terrible relationships that are really toxic, but when you compare it to real people it's so different. Relationships aren't amazing all the time and they're not awful all the time, they're more consistent. [Lucy]

Most of it now is just about this perfect relationship and it all seems perfect and it does make you feel a bit low, and it does make you have really high expectations, and sometimes they might be unrealistic expectations. [Sophie]

Despite this, many of the participants admitted that media has the ability to influence their expectations subconsciously:

I think as much as I can say I know it's not realistic, I do sometimes think oh, I wish my boyfriend would do that grand gesture for me ... I do think it makes you question it a little bit, when your relationship isn't exactly how they say it is. [Ella]

Media is everywhere, isn't it? You always see stuff about relationships, like you can't go a day without seeing something bad about the perfect relationship or a really bad relationship, you just can't. It's everywhere and always there in the back of your mind influencing everything. [Freya]

Sometimes it can without you realising, you might read something about how perfect their relationship is ... I try to forget but when you read it all the time it's difficult to do that. It's everywhere now, like the portrayal of the perfect relationship is everywhere so it's hard and sometimes it gets to me but I just try and brush it off and remember that everyone is different, and I don't know what's happening behind their screens. [Sophie]

This subconscious influence is supported by Segrin & Nabi (2002), who state that media has a profound ability to idealise our views on romantic relationships. Similarly, Illouz (1997) argues that the notion of love has become such a significant part of popular culture and media that is difficult to ignore the messages that it delivers. With this discussion on media, Freya made an interesting point on 'soulmates': 'You do kind of think sometimes what if he's not my soulmate or what if I never find my soulmate, and is it even a real thing or just like something made up by the media?'

As Freya acknowledges, soulmates are a concept largely constructed by the media which have become commonplace, relating to Illouz's (1997) statement above. Illouz

(1997) also states that 'love stories have penetrated the fabric of our everyday life so deeply that we suspect they have altered, even transformed, our experience of love' – meaning we now accept the idea of soulmates as a legitimate phenomenon even though it is not.

During this discussion on media influences, many of the participants mentioned that it influenced them a lot more when they were younger and lacked personal experience of romantic relationships.

Media is going to influence you more when you're younger, and so films and stuff are going to influence you from a young age, and I think getting into a relationship and knowing what it's really like is completely different to what it looks like on the tv ... I think the expectations I had might have been based off the media, but now I've been in a relationship I know what I want and can be more independent in thinking of what I want. [Poppy]

This was demonstrated by Jones and Nelson (1996), who state that individuals without personal experience are more vulnerable to internalising the idealised portrayals of romance given by the media. One of the participants made a comparison between television and social media – stating that television is better, but is still unrealistic:

I think perhaps tv is slightly better because it shows not just a snapshot of the relationship, but an entire storyline. So even though the actions and the things

the actors say might not be very realistic, at least you know they've had the struggles and you've been on the journey with them and you know it's not all plain-sailing. [Emily]

With regards to this, Ellison et al. (2006) state that with the recent surge in online dating and social media, portrayals of potential romantic partners have become even more unrealistic as media allows individuals to portray themselves in an idealistic way which may not be representative of their true self. Emily's statement supports this: the 'snapshot of the relationship' is chosen by the individual or couple to show the idealised view of their relationship and, as she acknowledges, this can be seen as worse than other forms of media, like television, because individuals are more likely to perceive social media as realistic.

Most/least influential

The final theme established from the research looks at the importance of each factor discussed above. After speaking about each of these factors, the participants were asked which they thought was the most influential – family, peers or media. To this, *all* of the participants answered family, as demonstrated by Emily and Hannah:

For me personally, family. I've got two immediate influences of what can go well, in my grandma and grandpa, and what can go wrong, in my mum. I think they're the most important. [Emily]

I would say my family ... if you're happy with your family and the idea of your parents you try and do the same thing because that's what you've seen.

[Hannah]

This rejects Parsons and Bales' (1956) theory on a loss of the family, supporting other research conducted by Wisniewski et al. (2015) that the majority of adults view the family as the most important source of information regarding romantic relationships. Hannah's statement also supports Molborn & Everett's (2010) idea of a self-fulfilling prophecy as children mirror the actions of their parents in romantic relationships.

Following this, each participant was asked which factor they thought was the least influential. Again, all of the participants gave the same answer: media. This is demonstrated by Eleanor and Poppy:

I don't think I'm particularly influenced by media. I'm not too fussed at looking at what other people are doing and comparing it to me, I just do what I want to do.

[Eleanor]

Media like tv and books is the least influential to me because I know what I want, I don't have to go with it just because it's on tv. [Poppy]

These views challenge Segrin & Nabi's (2002) thesis that media is highly influential in idealising our views on romantic relationships. However, as mentioned earlier, many of

the participants acknowledged the effect media had on their views when they were younger and had no personal experience (Jones & Nelson, 1996) – and said that it still has the ability to be influential today (Illouz, 1997).

General discussion

Overall, the results from the present study provide both support for and challenges to the previous literature on romantic relationship expectations. This will be discussed, before linking back to theoretical perspectives.

Firstly, with regards to previous literature, the finding of family as the most important factor rejects Parsons & Bales' (1956) idea of a loss of function of the family, demonstrating it is still highly influential in contemporary society. This finding is supported by Wisniewski et al's (2015) research. Looking at peer influences, both previous literature and the research at hand show few results regarding this area. The strongest supported research was that conducted by Manning et al. (2011), who found that approval from peers resulted in heightened relationship stability and quality, demonstrated in the current research from the perspectives of both approval and disapproval. The results regarding media supports the majority of previous literature, with participants agreeing that the portrayals of romantic relationships are unrealistic (Segrin & Nabi, 2000) but are still highly influential. This was discussed by Illouz (1997) and Tukachinsky (2008) as due to the extensive presentations of romantic relationships in the media.

When the results from the interviews are considered in terms of theoretical perspectives, the detraditionalisation of intimacy was supported in a number of ways. Firstly, in looking at the meaning of romantic relationships, many of the participants suggested that the emotional aspects of relationships were of the highest importance. This supports Giddens' (1992) idea that the 'pure relationship' signals a shift away from relationships bound by law and towards relationships based on mutual happiness and consent. With regard to the influence of the family, many of the participants mentioned that they would like to get married at a later age than their parents did and follow the contemporary route to marriage which incorporates cohabitation. This demonstrates a shift in the norms and values regarding marriage and its importance. The 'pure relationship' was also supported by this: Hannah mentioned that she places a higher importance on education and employment than her mother did, wanting to focus on these before marriage, therefore supporting the abandonment of sociocultural traditions described by Gross (2005). The detraditionalisation thesis was neither supported nor challenged in the peer influences theme. With regards to media, this can be linked to detraditionalisation as the contemporary values encompassed in this are portrayed through the media in such a way that they can change our personal views on the route romantic relationships should take; namely, a shift from the traditional route of marriage to the contemporary route including cohabitation (Illouz, 1997).

Despite this evidential support of the detraditionalisation thesis, it was also challenged. With regards to the family, it was theorised that those socialised in the traditional nuclear structure were likely to aspire to have a relationship like their parents'. This was

clearly demonstrated by Freya, for example, and can be used as support for Molborn & Everett's (2010) thesis that children mirror their parents' relationships through self-fulfilling prophecy. Their research, however, was not supported throughout: individuals who were not socialised in the nuclear family structure expressed aims for a different type of relationship from that of their parents. Therefore, when paired with Bell & Vogel's (1968) thesis that the traditional family structure reinforces the nuclear family, Molborn & Everett's (2010) thesis is supported. The results support Gross's (2005, p. 287) view that, despite developments in society, contemporary relationships 'remain geared to traditional expectations'. This is demonstrated through the majority of participants expressing an intent to marry following cohabitation, showing marriage still holds a high level of importance.

Conclusion

In summary, the research at hand adds critically to previous research on the subject of romantic relationship expectations. With this, future research could help to fill the gaps in areas such as the choice of term to describe one's partner, and the influence of peers in late adolescence and early adulthood.

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, this research project has aimed to understand and respond to the influence of the family, peers and media on young women's romantic relationship expectations. Through interviews with a group of eight young women, it was discovered that the family is the most influential in building these expectations, with this view being a consensus across all of the participants. Most

spoke about the influence of their peers, although this was mainly with regards to advice giving rather than building their expectations. Finally, the media was described as being subconsciously influential on an individual's expectations due to its profound presence in contemporary society. Despite this, media was described as the least influential factor because the participant's personal experience enabled them to notice the lack of reality in its portrayals and therefore reject it.

From a feminist perspective, the support for the 'pure relationship' demonstrated during the interviews suggests this is a positive step for young women. Several participants mentioned the importance of their studies, saying their partners helped them succeed in academia and that they wanted to delay marriage until their time at university was finished. This demonstrates a shift from the traditional gender roles of females as housewives, towards the contemporary 'pure relationship' which focuses on the success and happiness of each individual, rejecting Jamieson's (1999) critiques.

Looking at future research on the present topic, a number of progressions could be made. While the current research focused on a very small, specific sample in order to collect in-depth data, this did provide limitations in regards to generalisability. It would be interesting for future research to extend the focus of this project to alternative age groups, men, and those who were not in a romantic relationship. While the majority of previous researchers have looked at the influence of family, peers and media in adolescence, few have explored the influences of individuals in late adolescence and early twenties in the way that this project has. It would be interesting to see if some of

the findings from the current research could be applied to later generations. As briefly mentioned it would be interesting to study how expectations vary across differing sexualities, looking into how these expectations have changed as society has become increasingly accepting of individual choice within relationships.

To conclude, this research project has contributed to the exploration of society's influence on individual's romantic relationship expectations, detailing the profound effect of the family, peers and media in moulding our views on this. It has related to previous literature regarding this topic in both support and challenge of the influences explored, and has paved the way for future research on romantic relationship expectations.

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