

A brief analysis of the study on the inclusion effect of love variety Show on the current standards of young people's choice of spouse (Postprint)

Authors: Xu Lubei

Date: 2023-07-23T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

In recent years, love variety shows have become increasingly popular. While fulfilling audiences' entertainment needs, these programs also convey specific romantic ideologies, becoming a prominent topic of discussion among young people. Simultaneously, individuals' criteria for selecting a spouse are undergoing transformation. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of the inclusion effect and third-person effect, this study employs questionnaire surveys and data analysis to investigate young viewers of love variety shows, aiming to examine the correlation between exposure to such programs and mate selection criteria, as well as to elucidate the underlying psychological mechanisms of the audience. The research findings indicate that viewing love variety shows indeed exerts a significant influence on individuals' mate selection standards. Specifically, greater frequency of viewing romantic variety shows corresponds to higher mate selection criteria; increased immersion in love variety shows predicts elevated standards for choosing a spouse; and stronger endorsement of the romantic values portrayed in these programs correlates with more stringent mate selection criteria.

Full Text

Preamble

The Cultivation Effect of Dating Variety Shows on Contemporary Youth's Mate Selection Standards: An Empirical Study

Xu Lubei

School of Information Management and Systems, Hebei University, China

Corresponding author E-mail: xulubei2021@163.com

Abstract: In recent years, dating variety shows have gained immense popularity, becoming a hot topic among young people while satisfying entertainment needs and conveying particular perspectives on romantic relationships. Concurrently, people's criteria for selecting partners have undergone significant changes. Grounded in cultivation theory and the third-person effect, this study employs questionnaire surveys and data analysis to investigate young viewers of dating variety shows, exploring the correlation between exposure to such programs and mate selection standards while examining the underlying psychological mechanisms. The findings demonstrate that watching dating variety shows indeed influences mate selection criteria: increased viewing frequency correlates with higher standards, greater immersion in the shows predicts elevated mate selection criteria, and stronger endorsement of the romantic values portrayed leads to more stringent partner requirements.

Keywords: dating variety shows, cultivation effect, third-person effect, empathic psychology

1 Introduction

In 2022, China's single population exceeded 240 million, representing approximately 17 percent of the total population, with an increasing number of individuals choosing to remain unmarried. Under the influence of diverse cultural, economic, and social factors, contemporary perspectives on romantic relationships have become increasingly multi-layered and diversified, accompanied by a remarkable elevation in standards for potential partners. What accounts for this rise in mate selection criteria among today's youth? We posit that media plays a significant role in this phenomenon, particularly the idealized romantic partners constructed by dating variety shows, which may contribute to heightened expectations. This raises important questions: Do dating variety shows elevate our standards for romantic partners? What psychological mechanisms underlie this influence?

2 Literature Review

2.1 Measurement of Mate Selection Criteria

Mate selection criteria have attracted scholarly attention from multiple disciplinary perspectives. Since the 1960s, factors influencing mate preferences have constituted a central topic in Western mate selection research. Foreign scholars Kostic Bogdan and Scofield John E examined non-heterosexual mate selection standards through the lens of "sex and sexual orientation," finding that differences between bisexual and heterosexual respondents were more pronounced than those between gay and heterosexual respondents.

In contrast, domestic scholars Wang Yan et al. (2020) investigated mate selection standards from the perspective of sex ratio differentials and resource acquisition capacity, noting that men with strong resource acquisition abilities develop

a “luxury demand” for women’s “good resources” when faced with abundant partner choices. In 2021, domestic scholars Hou Juan et al. explored the influence of “money and time concepts” on mate selection standards, demonstrating that activation of money concepts elevates individuals’ standards regarding socioeconomic status and physical attractiveness, while activation of time concepts increases emphasis on family management abilities. Notably, men appear more susceptible to time concepts, whereas women are more influenced by money concepts.

Despite these valuable contributions examining mate selection through “sex ratio and resource acquisition ability” and “money and time concepts,” these studies have largely neglected the influence of external media.

2.2 The Elevation of Mate Selection Standards

Since Gerbner systematically proposed cultivation theory in 1967, extensive research has generated substantial empirical support. In 2017, Chinese scholar Zhang Xiao integrated Chinese partner preference phenomena with cultivation theory, suggesting that viewing Korean and American dramas produces differential cultivation effects on men and women. In 2019, Chinese scholar Zhang Rui examined the cultivation impact of short videos on “left-behind children in urbanization contexts,” arguing that the low threshold and randomness of short video platforms facilitate vulgar content, which particularly influences left-behind children due to their limited self-regulation capacity. Guo Jin investigated how female narratives in Korean dramas affect Chinese university students’ marital and romantic views, concluding that such dramas influence college students’ mate selection criteria. Foreign scholars Pollock Wendi et al. (2022) explored why American police officers commonly resort to lethal force when interacting with Black individuals, finding that media combined with social cognition concepts may produce implicit biases that contribute to this phenomenon.

The third-person effect, proposed by Columbia University professor Davidson in 1983, has attracted considerable scholarly attention. In 2016, Chinese scholar Zhang Ruoxi examined whether smoking images in films and television produce a third-person effect among non-smoking groups, confirming its existence. This suggests that third-person effects may characterize media communication more broadly. Foreign scholar Corbu Nicoleta et al. (2019) explored people’s self-perception regarding fake news detection versus their perception of others’ abilities, revealing a significant third-person effect that intensifies when comparing oneself with distant others rather than close others.

However, existing research has not examined the elevation of mate selection standards through the combined lens of “cultivation theory” and “third-person effect,” nor has it specifically addressed whether dating variety shows elevate romantic standards.

2.3 Research Questions

Building upon cultivation theory and the third-person effect, this study employs quantitative methods to address two key questions: Do dating variety shows elevate mate selection standards? What psychological mechanisms mediate this relationship?

3 Research Methods

This study utilizes questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews to investigate these research questions.

3.1.1 Hypothesis Development

Based on the research questions, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: Increased viewing of dating variety shows correlates with higher mate selection standards.

H2: Greater immersion in dating variety shows predicts elevated mate selection standards.

H3: Stronger endorsement of romantic values portrayed in dating variety shows leads to higher mate selection standards.

To test these hypotheses, this study employs questionnaire surveys for population sampling.

3.1.2 Sampling and Data Collection

The target population comprises individuals who have watched dating variety shows. Data collection, collation, and analysis were completed on February 24, 2023. The survey instrument addresses: (1) basic demographic information including age and gender; (2) frequency of viewing dating variety shows; (3) viewing duration; (4) number of shows watched; and (5) dependent variables measured through a mate selection standards scale. The questionnaire contains 11 items: 8 single-choice questions, 1 multiple-choice question, and 2 matrix questions. Distribution employed both online and offline methods, utilizing WeChat Moments, QZone, Questionnaire Star sample banks, and in-person administration.

3.2 Sample Characteristics

A total of 217 valid questionnaires were collected. The majority of respondents held bachelor's degrees, with approximately 30% male and 70% female participants, and over 80% aged 18-24. Descriptive analysis reveals relatively low viewing frequency: 63% watch only one show or less than once per week. Analysis of mate selection criteria dimensions shows highest requirements for partner personality (mean = 4.05) and appearance (mean = 3.71), and lowest

requirements for household registration and occupation. The mean score for identification with romantic values in dating variety shows is 3.23, while mean immersion during viewing is 3.16. Overall, respondents who have watched dating variety shows demonstrate high identification with the romantic concepts conveyed and report substantial immersion during viewing.

4 Findings

4.1 Cultivation Effects on Mate Selection Standards

Pearson correlation analysis reveals that increased viewing of dating variety shows significantly correlates with higher mate selection standards ($r = 0.477$, $p < 0.01$), supporting hypothesis H1. As a cultural product, dating variety shows construct idealized romantic scenarios that establish emotional identification and satisfy spiritual and cultural needs. These programs gratify viewers' voyeuristic desires and curiosity about others' romantic lives. Audiences adopt a "God's perspective," participating and commenting from an observer's standpoint, while the seemingly authentic, surveillance-like format reveals participants' genuine lives and relationships, profoundly satisfying audience curiosity and voyeurism (Li, 2021).

The demand for dating variety shows represents a psychological need. Fundamentally, these programs construct a "symbolic reality" that mediates audience formation of a "subjective reality" regarding social romance. Through these shows, viewers obtain emotional comfort and learn about romantic relationships. However, due to production biases, a gap exists between this "symbolic reality" and "objective reality," which audiences often cannot distinguish (Jahng, 2019). This "symbolic recognition" profoundly impacts viewers through a long-term, unconscious process that shapes their expectations (Xu, 2022). Exposure to high-quality participants in dating variety shows consequently elevates viewers' mate selection standards.

4.2 Third-Person Effect and Immersion

Increased immersion in dating variety shows significantly correlates with higher mate selection standards ($r = 0.665$, $p < 0.01$), supporting hypothesis H2. Viewers experience empathic psychology while watching these programs—feeling the inner mental states of participants and resonating with their experiences. Dating variety shows provide space for empathy, allowing audiences to obtain virtual feelings through characters and plots, thereby achieving psychological compensation. This process also represents a projection of viewers' own ideas onto others, substantially satisfying emotional needs (Hu, 2022).

Most current dating variety show participants possess relatively high quality attributes—advanced education, high appearance ratings, and high income—easily influencing audiences to elevate their mate selection standards. According to third-person effect theory, individuals tend to generate self-esteem or

a sense of control by perceiving themselves as more competent or intelligent than others, with some audiences believing they remain unaffected (Benjamin, 2018). However, immersion in dating variety shows strengthens empathy, subtly influencing mate selection criteria (Dewberry, 2019).

4.3 Endorsement of Romantic Values

Stronger endorsement of romantic values portrayed in dating variety shows significantly correlates with higher mate selection standards ($r = 0.646$, $p < 0.01$), supporting hypothesis H3. Social psychologist Katz's attitude function theory proposes that audience media content selection relates to integration needs—individuals require enhanced self-confidence, security, and self-worth. When viewers recognize that their romantic troubles and dissatisfaction mirror those depicted in dating variety shows, they realize these challenges are common rather than personal, fostering identification with the portrayed romantic values (Gerbner, 1980). Under such psychological comfort, viewers continuously adjust their expectations and requirements.

Endorsement of romantic values in dating variety shows also reflects audience safety needs. These programs create a “mimicry environment” that provides emotional sustenance, connecting the real world with symbolic reality and gradually generating psychological identification (Tian, 2023). Through viewing, audiences relieve emotional stress, gain security, obtain psychological protection, and satisfy safety needs. Consequently, media content produces both cultivation and third-person effects, with increased viewing frequency, immersion, and value endorsement all predicting higher mate selection standards.

5 Conclusion and Reflection

Through questionnaire surveys, this study theoretically examined the phenomenon of elevated mate selection standards, integrating cultivation theory and third-person effect to address whether dating entertainment elevates romantic expectations. The findings confirm that increased viewing of dating variety shows, greater immersion, and stronger endorsement of portrayed romantic values all correlate with higher mate selection standards, supporting hypotheses H1, H2, and H3. These effects primarily occur because dating variety show content produces cultivation and third-person effects on audiences, thereby elevating their mate selection standards.

This study highlights how dating variety shows influence mate selection standards, reflecting contemporary society's emphasis on romantic relationships and non-compromising attitudes toward partnership. Simultaneously, it provides theoretical support for understanding elevated mate selection standards in modern Chinese contexts. However, the study also reveals negative effects: elevation of mate selection standards may decrease relationship formation rates (Wu, 2021), and the scripted, entertainment-oriented nature of these programs warrants vigilance and reflection. Dating variety shows should incorporate more

ordinary participants, and producers should maintain authenticity during filming (Meng, 2020).

Methodological limitations include the rigidity of questionnaire surveys and potential reluctance among respondents to express genuine attitudes. Theoretically, reliance primarily on cultivation and third-person effect theories limits persuasive power due to the narrow theoretical scope. Future research should employ diverse methods and theoretical frameworks, focusing on production processes, content strategies, audience needs, and expanding scholarship and practice regarding dating variety shows.

References

- [1] Dewberry David R. (2019). The false dichotomy of message desirability in third-person effect scholarship. *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*, (01), 1-8.
- [2] Mi Rosie Jahng. (2019). Watching the rich and famous: the cultivation effect of reality television shows and the mediating role of parasocial experiences. *Media Practice and Education*, (04).
- [3] George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan & Nancy Signorielli. (1980). The “Mainstreaming” of America: Violence Profile No. 11. *Journal of Communication*, (03).
- [4] Sonny Rosenthal, Benjamin Hill Detenber & Hernando Rojas. (2018). Efficacy Beliefs in Third-Person Effects. *Communication Research*, (4).
- [5] Hu Yacong. (2022). The Dilemma and Breakthrough of domestic Love Observation Variety Shows. *China Television*, (02), 38-44. (in Chinese)
- [6] Tian Xueqing, Wang Yuchuan & Zhang Chenming. (2023). The Logic and influence of Urban Single Young People’s Love Relationship with “the Top”. *Contemporary Youth Studies*, (01), 66-75. (in Chinese)
- [7] Wu Yuling. (2021). Research on the Influence and Countermeasures of Emotional Observation Programs on College students’ Views on Love and Marriage. Fujian Normal University. (in Chinese)
- [8] Xu Yusi. (2022). The Influence of Music Online Variety Show on Teenagers’ Values – A Case Study of Rap New Generation. *News Research Guide* (08), 64-66. (in Chinese)
- [9] Meng Shuqi. (2020). Research on Audience Psychology and Social Influence of Love Observation Variety Shows. Central China Normal University. (in Chinese)
- [10] Li Lu. (2021). Research on the Success Factors of Female Variety Shows from the perspective of Culture Theory. *News Research Guide*, (06), 154-155. (in Chinese)

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

Source: ChinaXiv — Machine translation. Verify with original.