

Interest and Investment in Fictional Romances

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Shipping, which refers to emotional investment in fictional relationships, has been occurring for decades yet has not received much theoretical or any empirical attention. In light of it becoming more recognized in mainstream culture, we wanted to establish whether interest in fictional relationships is a relevant, intriguing, and meaningful form of media engagement. To do this we ran one exploratory study, one preregistered confirmatory replication, and one preregistered extension. Together, these three studies answered several questions: (a) Are people interested in fictional relationships?; (b) Who is likely to be interested?; (c) Why are individuals interested?; and (d) Is interest in fictional relationships a distinct form of media engagement? We found that emotional investment in fictional couples is somewhat common and occurs across a number of media platforms. Being more inclined to think about relationships and have more romantic beliefs was linked to interest in fictional relationships, which reflects a general inclination to focus on relationships. We were also able to demonstrate moderate correlations between relationship interest and other media engagement variables—namely parasocial relationships, narrative transportation, character identification, and celebrity worship—in addition to showing that interest in fictional relationships provides incremental prediction after controlling for these other types of media engagement. These three studies support the notion that relationship interest is a unique and important form of media engagement that is related to individuals' romantic cognition.

Keywords: fictional romances, media engagement, parasocial relationships, romantic beliefs, shipping

People engage with fictional narratives in a variety of different ways. They can become deeply absorbed or “transported” into stories (Gerrig, 1993; Green & Brock, 2000), as well as identify with (Cohen, 2001) or even form close parasocial bonds with characters (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Another aspect of narrative engagement that has yet to receive any empirical attention is individuals' interest in fictional relationships. The following studies investigate this newly identified form of media engagement, establishing that interest in fictional couples is distinct and important. An exploratory study, preregistered close replication, and preregistered extension establish whether individuals are interested in fictional couples, who is likely to be interested and why, and whether it is a distinct construct.

Media Engagement

Researchers have identified four primary ways in which individuals become involved with and affected by media: (a) transportation, (b) character identification, (c) parasocial interaction, and (d) worship (Brown, 2015). Transportation refers to a narrative's ability to draw people away from their own realities and transport them into fictional worlds, during which they

become emotionally and psychologically involved with the characters and the narrative world itself (Gerrig, 1993; Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004). Transportation facilitates the related phenomenon of character identification. People identify with characters when their own self-awareness decreases in favor of an emotional and cognitive connection with a character, resulting in an adoption of that character's identity, perspective, and goals (Cohen, 2001). In contrast to character identification, parasocial interaction occurs when individuals feel as though they are actually interacting with and forming close bonds with characters (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Parasocial interaction mimics interpersonal interaction, with individuals responding to characters as if they are real-life acquaintances, for instance, making judgments about their behaviors and motivations (Giles, 2002). Parasocial relationships are similar, but can transcend the immediate context, resulting in a cross-situational relationship between an individual and a fictional character or media persona (Dibble, Hartmann, & Rosaen, 2016; Schramm & Hartmann, 2008). In comparison, the fourth mode of engagement, celebrity worship, constitutes a more intense form of media involvement (Maltby, Giles, Barber, & McCutcheon, 2005). This can range from low-level worship, in which individuals closely follow a celebrity's life, to high-level worship, at which point the person is willing to do almost anything for the celebrity (Maltby, Houran, & McCutcheon, 2003; McCutcheon, Ashe, Houran, & Maltby, 2003). Encouraged by modern celebrity culture, celebrity cults are surprisingly common (Giles, 2000) and various degrees of celebrity worship are in many ways becoming normalized (Maltby et al., 2003, 2004).

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Although certainly distinct (Brown, 2015), these four forms of media engagement are also necessarily related (Brown, 2015). Research on these constructs has provided useful, yet somewhat incomplete, information about how individuals engage with narratives and media. In particular, interest in fictional couples appears to be another way in which we engage with media, but this has attracted considerably less theoretical and empirical attention. To better understand the totality of media engagement, we need to develop a better understanding of this phenomenon.

Shipping and Interest in Fictional Couples

Romantic relationships are an integral part of most people's lives, whether a part of their everyday experience or simply everyday awareness. Most people prefer to be in a relationship than to be single (Blakemore, Lawton, & Vartanian, 2005; Frazier, Arikian, Benson, Losoff, & Maurer, 1996; Poortman & Liefbroer, 2010), even to the point of settling for less desirable mates (Spielmann et al., 2013). The importance of romance in our lives is also reflected in its prominent role in our narratives, with romance being the most popular genre in contemporary publishing (Tapper, 2014) and one of the main themes in stories worldwide (Hogan, 2003). Recently, a form of narrative engagement directly focused on relationships has emerged in public awareness: shipping.

Shipping, derived from "relationshiping," refers to deep emotional investment in fictional couples, often expressed as a media consumer's strong desire for two characters to be in a relationship with one another (Scodari & Felder, 2000). Shipping has recently entered mainstream awareness, such that popular media outlets have published articles on the topic, such as the *New York Times Magazine* (Wortham, 2015). The BBC and other news outlets have also recently covered shipping, reporting on the fact that Chinese fans of the show *Sherlock* tend to become highly involved in shipping the central characters (China Blog Staff, 2014; Denham, 2014; McAlpine, 2013). This also illustrates how shipping is a cross-cultural phenomenon, not tied to North America. Shipping has recently made its way into media award shows, with MTV's Fandom Awards including a category for "Ship of the Year," in which fans can vote for their favorite fictional relationships (Magaldi, 2016). This increasing recognition of shipping by popular media suggests that the phenomenon may be becoming more prevalent, or at least more widely acknowledged.

Despite mainstream media only recently beginning to recognize shipping, it has quite a long history that can be traced back at least a century. In 1914, a novel was published entitled *Old Friends and New Fancies: An Imaginary Sequel to the Novels of Jane Austen* (Brinton, 1914). In this book, the author wrote Jane Austen's characters from different novels into the same universe. Importantly, she focused largely on hypothetical romantic pairings between them. This same form of writing with its relational focus occurs in the present day in the form of so-called "fan fiction," which allows fans to write their own version of a narrative, often focusing on fictional romantic pairings (Barnes, 2015; Davies, 2005; Day, 2014; Hanmer, 2014; Kustritz, 2015; Leavenworth, 2015; Thomas, 2011; Tosenberger, 2008; Yékú, 2017). Shipping is also reflected in fan artwork, in which individuals edit or create their own digital images, drawings, paintings, or music videos portraying fictional couples (Brennan, 2013a; Russo, 2009; Scott,

2015). Creating this art can even become an important part of one's identity (Brennan, 2013b). For instance, some gay men engage in these practices online, indulging in imagined homosexual pairings of fictional characters, as a way of forging an anonymous identity for themselves (Brennan, 2013a).

Although the term "shipping" has only entered the common vernacular in recent years, fans of the TV show *The X-Files* first coined the term in the mid-1990s. These fans were obsessed with either supporting or opposing a romance between the show's two main characters: Agent Fox Mulder and Dr. Dana Scully (Catalia, 2001; Scodari & Felder, 2000). In fact, early research within this community examined how shippers reacted when their desires to see Mulder and Scully become romantically or sexually involved were thwarted by the show's actual narrative (Scodari & Felder, 2000). Certain shippers were okay clinging onto subtextual hints that there was something more going on between the two characters, whereas others were outraged that the writers of the show would incorporate romantic undertones that never culminated. Similar tensions can be found in the *Doctor Who* fandom in light of its recent remake (Hadas, 2013). Steadfast fans of the original series have been resistant to elements introduced to make the show more palatable for mainstream audiences, such as romance. Conversely, some new viewers watch the show primarily for the Doctor's romantic encounters. In online communities, there has been considerable animosity between these groups and traditional fans who are more ambivalent about the Doctor's personal life (Hadas, 2013).

Because individuals become so emotionally invested in fictional couples, ongoing tension within fandoms is not at all uncommon. Moreover, it is not always the case that people are rooting for or against a relationship between characters. For instance, there are conflicts whereby fans of one "ship" (i.e., one particular couple that is shipped) pit themselves against fans of a competing ship, as is often the case with love triangles. One famous fictional love triangle that brought the phenomenon of shipping to the fore of public awareness appeared in the book and film series *Twilight*, with the protagonist Bella struggling to choose between two suitors: Jacob or Edward (Kokkola, 2011). Another example in which fans avidly ship one couple or another comes from the Harry Potter fandom. Elaborating on this particular example may help to highlight the level of emotional investment some individuals have in fictional couples, and help flesh out the phenomenon of shipping. (Warning: Spoilers ahead!)

Throughout the course of the *Harry Potter* series, shippers have been divided into many camps, two of which focus on the three main characters: Harry, Ron, and Hermione. Many fans ship the canon couple (i.e., true to the originally written story), Ron and Hermione, who ended the series happily married. Others ship an alternate couple, Harry and Hermione, whose romantic potential was never explored in the novels or movies. Although the last novel was published in 2007, the author, J. K. Rowling, made some controversial statements regarding these pairings in 2014. Rowling challenged her past decision to pair Ron and Hermione, indicating that she thought Harry and Hermione were potentially better suited (Sims, 2014). Major news outlets like CNN reported on these revelations and the strong reactions from fans (Ahmed, 2014). There were seemingly equal expressions of outrage and vindication, depending on which couple fans supported, even seven years after the publication of the last novel (Kyle, 2014;

Sims, 2014). On Twitter, one user tweeted “I can’t help it. I am devastated by JK Rowling’s confession that Ron and Hermione never belonged together. Devastated.” Conversely, in response to an article highlighting the positive aspects of Harry and Hermione’s potential relationship (Scott, 2014), another user tweeted “This article about Harry and Hermione’s relationship is so powerful and exactly how I feel. I cried reading it.” These are a couple of sample tweets among the thousands out there that showcase how important fictional relationships can become to fans. When considered in the context of media engagement, examples of such strong investment in fictional couples highlight the need for research to examine this phenomenon, as well as explore its relation to the better-known media engagement variables of transportation, character identification, parasocial relationships, and celebrity worship.

Current Research

In recent years, research on media engagement has proliferated. It is therefore surprising that shipping has received very little theoretical and no empirical attention. To rectify this situation, we decided to investigate individuals’ general interest in fictional relationships, which we believe to be a necessary precondition of shipping. This interest is also likely to be more prevalent than shipping, making this research more broadly applicable. Our aim was to (a) empirically investigate whether people are interested in fictional relationships, (b) examine who is more or less inclined to be interested, (c) determine reasons why they might be interested, and (d) distinguish interest in fictional relationships from other forms of media engagement.

Are People Interested in Fictional Relationships?

With the increase in media coverage surrounding certain media consumers’ focus on fictional couples, one important factor that needs to be determined is how common it is. Growing visibility in mainstream media implies that it is a commonplace occurrence, but the examples cited above could simply reflect the emotional reactions of a few extreme fans. To disentangle this, we first wanted to establish how common interest in fictional relationships is.

Who Is Interested in Fictional Relationships?

In addition to determining whether it is a common phenomenon, it is important to know who is likely to be interested in fictional relationships. In terms of gender, women generally tend to be more focused on relationships and interconnection than men (Kirsch & Kuiper, 2002). Although there are some differences in why men and women engage in parasocial relationships, their likelihood of doing so does not differ (Gleason, Theran, & Newberg, 2017; Wang, Fink, & Cai, 2008). As a result, we expect both genders to express interest in fictional relationships, but that it might be somewhat more common for women to do so.

Because there has been no empirical research on interest in fictional couples or its potential correlates, we also wanted to examine what characteristics might explain why certain individuals are more interested than others. One set of factors we focused on was beliefs about love and relationships. Past research has

linked attachment anxiety to parasocial relationships (Cole & Leets, 1999; Theran, Newberg, & Gleason, 2010) and narrative transportation (Greenwood, 2008; Rain, Cilento, MacDonald, & Mar, 2017), therefore we expected that it would also be linked to interest in fictional couples. This is in part because attachment anxiety reflects a preoccupation with relationships that may translate into how one consumes media. Similarly, having strong romantic beliefs and love attitudes should reflect an inclination to focus on relationships during media consumption. We did not make specific predictions about how relationship interest would relate to the different love attitudes, but we had a weak expectation that preferring melodramatic expressions of love would be associated with general interest in fictional relationships because fictional romances are themselves often quite dramatic.

In addition to relationship-oriented variables, we wanted to examine basic personality traits and how they might be associated with relationship interest, to help better establish its nomological network. We did not make specific predictions, but we reasoned that associations between broad personality traits and relationship interest might mimic the patterns observed for other media engagement variables. For instance, parasocial relationships have been linked to less emotional stability (Tsay & Bodine, 2012).

Why Do People Develop an Interest in Fictional Couples?

Knowing why individuals are interested in fictional couples is also important for understanding the construct. As individuals develop, psychological maturation triggers various crises (Erikson, 1963). Two closely linked crises that co-occur in adolescence and young adulthood are identity versus role confusion and intimacy versus isolation (e.g., Dyk & Adams, 1987; Galliher & Kerpelman, 2012; Kerpelman et al., 2012). Identity refers to developing a consistent sense of self and committing to self-defined goals (Pittman, Keiley, Kerpelman, & Vaughn, 2011); identity formation has also been linked to parasocial processes (Gleason et al., 2017). Intimacy is reflected in commitment to intimate others despite self-compromise (Pittman et al., 2011). Focusing on fictional relationships might be one way to help establish a romantic identity, or it might provide an alternative source of intimacy when individuals are unwilling or unable to commit to others in a romantic capacity.

Most individuals have positive expectations of romantic relationships, reflected by their desire to be in them (Blakemore et al., 2005; Frazier et al., 1996; Poortman & Liefbroer, 2010). In addition to personal experience, media help shape beliefs about love and romance (Bachen & Illouz, 1996; Barbatsis, 1983; Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007; Segrin & Nabi, 2002). In young adults, watching romance movies is linked to greater endorsement of beliefs in passionate love, expecting high levels of intimacy in relationships, and believing that true love conquers all (Galloway, Engstrom, & Emmers-Sommer, 2015). Moreover, watching these films with the intention of learning about romance was associated with more idealism than watching for other reasons (Hefner & Wilson, 2013). In light of these findings, observing and becoming emotionally invested in fictional romances could be a way to learn about and experience different types of relationships, whether intentionally or incidentally. In this sense, fictional romances could provide an avenue for exploring and ultimately informing

individuals' romantic identity. Focusing on fictional relationships may help individuals decide which aspects of a relationship are important to them without opening themselves up to the risks that accompany forming and maintaining actual relationships. Indeed, reality exploration is one reason why college students report watching soap operas (Rubin, 1985).

In addition to contributing to how one thinks and feels about relationships, relationship interest provides a window into the romantic lives of others and, despite the fact that the relationships are purely fictional, this may be one way to cope with a lack of real-world relationship experience. In particular, social disconnection attributable to improper resolution of the intimacy versus isolation crisis may prompt individuals to fulfill their unmet intimacy needs elsewhere, perhaps vicariously through entertainment media, as has been previously established with parasocial relationships (Derrick, Gabriel, & Hugenberg, 2009; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Levy, 1978; Tsao, 1996). Along these lines, we expected that participants' own relationship history might be linked to their interest in fictional couples, with individuals in more casual relationships being more likely to be interested in fictional couples than those in longer and more committed relationships.

Overall, we expected relationship interest to positively predict romantic identity achievement and exploration because exposure to and investment in different types of fictional relationships could promote indirect and risk-free exploration of romantic ideals. We also expected relationship interest to be linked to low levels of intimacy achievement, life satisfaction, relationship satisfaction, and perceived social support. Lastly, based on the premise that deep engagement with fictional couples could represent an alternative to actual intimacy in one's own life, relationship interest should be positively associated with loneliness.

Is Interest in Fictional Couples a Distinct Form of Media Engagement?

Although emotional investment in fictional relationships seems to be different from other forms of media engagement, it is essential to determine whether it is actually distinct from these more established constructs to avoid "reinventing the wheel." To do this we compared participants' investment in their favorite fictional couple with their investment in the individual characters that make up that couple. Any observed differences would suggest that relationship interest is driven by the couple itself rather than the characters. To expand on this, we also compared relationship interest with parasocial relationships, because parasocial relationships have received the most empirical attention of all the media engagement variables. In addition, in our final study, we simultaneously compared relationship interest with all four types of media engagement. Overall, we expected that relationship interest would be positively correlated with all four variables, but that these correlations would only be moderate in magnitude.

The Present Studies

To answer the above questions, we conducted three studies: an exploratory study (Study 1), a preregistered confirmatory replication study (Study 2), and a preregistered extension (Study 3). Because there has been no empirical research on this topic, all of the above predictions were somewhat speculative. With this set of

studies we hope to greatly advance our understanding of narrative consumption by examining the prevalence of interest in fictional couples, assessing what characteristics determine level of interest and why, and establishing whether interest in fictional relationships is its own type of media engagement.

Study 1

To answer our research questions, we ran an exploratory study incorporating a variety of intra- and interpersonal variables that we surmised would be related to relationship interest. In this way, we set out to identify whether it is a common phenomenon, what makes someone more or less interested and why, and whether it is distinct from the predominant media engagement variable of parasocial relationships.

Method

Participants. We initially collected data from 352 participants, recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (mTurk). We removed a total of 85 individuals before analysis, including those who did not consent to participate ($n = 7$) or failed to respond correctly to our attention check items ($n = 68$), those who completed the study on a mobile device against our instructions ($n = 4$), and participants missing four or more data points ($n = 6$). This resulted in a final sample of 267 participants, with a mean age of 34.58 ($SD = 10.64$), including 128 females and 138 males who had a mean age of 34.58 ($SD = 10.64$). The great majority of participants identified as heterosexual (91%) and about two thirds (67%) were currently in a romantic relationship.

Measures. We measured interest in fictional couples in several different ways. Because there has been no empirical research, there were no preexisting measures available. We therefore endeavored to be as broad as possible, relying on multiple approaches. All reported items were rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) unless otherwise specified.

Are people interested in fictional relationships? All participants reported their general investment and involvement with fictional couples. Four items measured the extent to which individuals approach entertainment media with a focus on the relationships portrayed ($\alpha = .80$; see Table 1 for a list of items). This measure of general relationship interest was the primary measure used for the majority of our subsequent analyses.

Interest in a specific couple. In addition to general relationship interest, we also asked about interest in participants' favorite fictional couple. First, we asked them to identify their favorite fictional romantic relationship. We specified that the couple should be from a piece of fiction they feel strongly about, and that the couple could (a) currently be in a relationship, (b) have previously been in a relationship, (c) be in the process of developing a relationship, or (d) have the potential of forming a relationship.¹ Those who were able to identify such a couple were asked a series of follow-up questions. We also inquired whether or not participants wanted a relationship like their favorite couple, and for those

¹ We also asked two open-ended questions: "How do you feel about this couple's relationship?" and "Why did you become invested in this relationship?" The answers to these questions were used to expand our measure of general relationship interest for Study 3.

Table 1
Relationship Interest Items

Relationship interest items
1. I enjoy entertainment media because of the romantic couples depicted.
2. I am more concerned with relationship aspects of a story than the plot aspects.
3. My liking of characters is determined by their romantic relationships within the narrative.
4. I sometimes like characters when they are in romantic relationships with each other, but dislike or feel neutral toward them in other contexts.
5. I enjoy narratives about fictional relationships.
6. I seek out certain books, TV shows, or movies because of the romantic relationships portrayed.
7. I am intrigued by fictional relationships.
8. I enjoy observing how fictional relationships evolve.
9. I often imagine myself as being in a relationship with one of my favorite fictional characters.

Note. Items 5–9 only included in Study 3.

currently in a relationship we asked whether they wanted their own relationship to be more like their favorite couple's.

Emotional investment. Participants responded to two items regarding how emotionally invested they are in their favorite fictional couple: "Their relationship is close to my ideal relationship" and "I am emotionally invested in their relationship."

Shipping behavior. Participants were also asked four questions to gauge how often they engage in specific behaviors that reflect shipping. The items were, "How often do you talk to others about this relationship/couple?," "How often do you read or talk about this relationship online?," "How often do you seek out fan art centered on this relationship?," and "How often do you create fan art centered on this relationship?" The response options were 1 (*daily*), 2 (*2–3 times per week*), 3 (*once a week*), 4 (*2–3 times a month*), 5 (*once a month*), 6 (*less than once a month*), and 7 (*never*; $\alpha = .77$). This measure was used to explore the criterion validity of our measure of general relationship interest, allowing us to examine how interest in fictional relationships relates to more concrete shipping behaviors.

Who is interested in fictional relationships? To determine who is more likely to be interested in fictional relationships, we looked at participants' relationship history, as well as a host of stable, dispositional individual differences.

Relationship items. Participants who were not in a relationship responded to an item asking them how interested they were in being in a romantic relationship. Those who reported being in a relationship were asked how long they had been in the relationship and how long they expected it to last. All participants were asked how many relationships they had been in the past (including their current relationship). They also rated how much relationship experience they feel they have, indicated how long their longest relationship has been, how short their shortest relationship has been, and how long their average relationships tend to last.

Adult attachment. We measured adult attachment with the Attachment Styles Questionnaire (ASQ; Feeney, Noller, & Hanrahan, 1994), a 29-item questionnaire that accounts for attachment anxiety and avoidance. The anxiety subscale has 15 items ($\alpha = .91$), rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). A sample item is "I wonder why other people would want to be involved with me." A sample item from the 14-item avoidance subscale ($\alpha = .88$) is, "I prefer to depend on myself rather than other people" rated on the same 6-point scale.

Romantic beliefs. To examine how relationship interest relates to beliefs about romance, we included the Romantic Beliefs

Scale (RBS), which measures romanticism with four subscales (Sprecher & Metts, 1989; $\alpha = .89$). The Love Finds a Way (LFAW) subscale contains six items that evaluate how strongly participants believe that love conquers all ($\alpha = .85$), a sample item being "If I love someone, I know I can make the relationship work, despite any obstacles." The One and Only (OAO) subscale measures participants' belief that there is only one person out there for them, and includes three items (e.g., "There will be only one real love for me"; $\alpha = .85$). The Love at First Sight (LAFS) subscale also consists of three items and it evaluates whether participants think they will immediately know when they have met the person for them (e.g., "When I find my 'true love,' I will probably know it soon after we meet"; $\alpha = .62$). Finally, the Idealization subscale measures how much participants idealize their love, with three items (e.g., "The relationship I have with my 'true love' will be nearly perfect"; $\alpha = .83$).

Love attitudes. To diversify our measurement of beliefs about romance we also included a measure of how individuals' feel about love, and the different facets of love they prioritize, using a short form of The Love Attitudes Scale (LAS-SF; Hendrick, Hendrick, & Dicke, 1998). Participants rated six aspects of love with respect to how they wanted their relationship with their ideal partner to be: passionate love, game-playing love, friendship love, practical love, possessive love, and altruistic love. There was one item for each facet, including: "My ideal partner and I would really understand each other" (passionate), "I would enjoy 'playing games' with my partner" (game-playing), "Our love would be based on a really deep friendship, not a mysterious, mystical emotion" (friendship), "It would be important to me how compatible my partner's cultural background is with my own in case we were to ever have children" (practical), "I would have trouble concentrating on anything other than being in love with my partner" (possessive), and "I would endure all things for the sake of my partner" (altruistic). All items were rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

We were also curious whether participants' self-reported love attitudes regarding their ideal relationship would match up with their reports of how much their favorite fictional couple embodies these same love attitudes. To test this, participants respond to a longer version of the LAS (Hendrick et al., 1998) on behalf of their favorite fictional couple. For instance, for passionate love, participants responded to additional items such as "They really understand each other." This enabled us to determine how closely their perceptions of their favorite couple aligns with what they desire in

a relationship. For all subscales, we expected positive correlations between personal attitudes and those embodied by the couple (i.e., those scoring high on passionate love would report that their favorite couple also scores high on passionate love). We excluded one item from the practical love subscale because it seemed difficult to determine given the fictional context of the relationship. The item was: "Before getting very involved with one another, they tried to figure out how compatible their hereditary backgrounds were in case they ever had children." We also combined two of the items (one for family and one for career) into a single item: "A main consideration in choosing each other as a relationship partner was how they would reflect on each other's families and careers." The internal consistency for this measure varied and for some subscales was rather low, likely a function of participants responding on behalf of fictional characters: passionate, $\alpha = .61$; game-playing, $\alpha = .74$; friendship, $\alpha = .88$; practical, $r = .47$; possessive, $\alpha = .68$; altruistic, $\alpha = .85$.

Big Five Personality Traits. Big Five Personality Traits were assessed with the Ten Item Personality Measure (TIPI; Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003). The TIPI measures extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness, and emotional stability. Each trait is evaluated with two items, one of which is reverse-scored.

Why are people interested in fictional relationships? We also wanted to test whether relationship interest is related to romantic identity and whether individuals are more interested in fictional couples when they are unhappy with their current relationships or relationship status. We figured that one indication of this would be whether participants felt as though their past relationships tended to be casual or committed, as well as how successful they feel they are at developing and maintaining relationships.

Romantic identity. We developed four items to measure participants' thoughts and certainty about what they want from their own romantic relationships. The thought items were "I spend a lot of time thinking about romantic relationships" and "I don't give much thought to my romantic future" (reverse scored; $r = .66$). The certainty items were "I know what I want out of romantic relationships" and "I'm unsure of what I want out of a romantic partner" (reverse scored; $r = .63$). We expected relationship interest to be linked to both greater thought and certainty about what one wants out of romantic relationships.

Intimacy achievement. Along with beliefs about romance and love, we expected that people lower in intimacy achievement would be more interested in fictional couples. We measured this using the Intimacy subscale of Erikson's Psychosocial Stage Inventory (EPSI; Rosenthal, Gurney, & Moore, 1981). It consists of 12 items that inquire about participants' general experience and comfort with intimate relationships ($\alpha = .84$). Each item was rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (*hardly ever true*) to 5 (*almost always true*). Sample items include "I'm warm and friendly" and "I prefer not to show too much of myself to others" (reverse scored).

Relationship satisfaction. For individuals who reported currently being in a romantic relationship, we inquired about how satisfied they were with their relationship using three items ($\alpha = .95$). The items were "I am satisfied with this relationship," "I am fulfilled by this relationship," and "My relationship is close to ideal." We expected less satisfied participants to be more interested in fictional couples.

Life satisfaction. Life satisfaction was evaluated with the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). The SWLS measures individuals' general satisfaction with their lives. It consists of five items ($\alpha = .93$). A sample item is "If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing." Similarly, we expected less satisfied people to be more interested in fictional couples.

Social support. The Interpersonal Support Evaluation List (ISEL; Cohen & Hoberman, 1983) evaluated participants' perceptions of how readily they could obtain social support if required. It comprises 12 items ($\alpha = .92$) rated from 1 (*definitely true*) to 4 (*definitely false*). Sample items are "I feel that there is no one I can share my most private worries and fears with" and "There is someone I can turn to for advice about handling problems with my family." Because of the rating scale, lower scores are counterintuitively indicative of greater perceived support. Those with lower levels of social support were thought to be more interested in fictional couples as a form of compensation.

Loneliness. We measured loneliness using a 6-item version (Neto, 2014) of the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, Peplau, & Ferguson, 1978). Participants rated how often they feel or think certain things that reflect loneliness ($\alpha = .89$) from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*always*). A sample item is "How often do you feel left out?" We expected individuals higher in loneliness to be more interested in fictional couples.

Is interest in fictional couples a distinct form of media engagement? One way we set out to test whether relationship interest is distinct was by comparing participants' emotional investment in their favorite couple as a unit versus emotional investment in its characters independent of the relationship. We also examined how relationship interest relates to parasocial relationships, the most researched form of media engagement.

Couple versus characters. Participants reported on the intensity of their emotional engagement with their favorite fictional couple, along with the two characters that form the couple. We administered seven items initially developed by Theran and colleagues (2010) to measure parasocial relationships. The items were applied to each individual character within the couple and then to the couple itself. Participants rated their agreement from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), with statements such as "I feel as though he/she is perfect." and "I feel connected to him/her." ($\alpha = .91$). When considering the characters' relationship, the items were modified so that "he/she" and "him/her" were changed to "their relationship" ($\alpha = .84$). These items were employed to explore whether emotional engagement with fictional couples is separable from engagement with the individual characters that form the couple.

Participants also responded to the Inclusion of Other in the Self scale (IOS; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992), which was adapted to reflect how much they felt the individual characters versus the couple were incorporated into their own sense of self. We also included a version adapted to measure how much their favorite couple overlapped with their ideal relationship. Participants were presented with seven overlapping circles, the first representing a complete disconnection and the seventh depicting almost complete overlap, between the self and the various targets. We also asked how much participants liked each character (rated from -50 , indicating extreme dislike, to $+50$, indicating extreme liking), as

well as how much they want each character to succeed versus that character's relationship to succeed.

Parasocial relationships. Finally, we also wanted to establish that interest in fictional relationships is distinct from the most widely studied form of media engagement: parasocial relationships. To do so, we examined the association between the two constructs, and also controlled for parasocial relationships in our analyses to establish that any associations observed are actually the result of being interested in fictional relationships, rather than simply developing parasocial relationships with characters. We employed the Parasocial Interaction Inventory (PSI; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985), which evaluates individuals' longer-term relationship with a self-selected media figure or fictional character beyond immediate engagement with him or her (Dibble et al., 2016). The PSI has 20 statements and participants indicate how strongly they agree or disagree with each, rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Sample items include "I like to compare my ideas to what [character] says" and "I think [character] is like an old friend" ($\alpha = .93$).

Procedure. Participants were given a link to an online survey hosted on Qualtrics. After providing informed consent they completed the questionnaires, which were randomized to control for potential order-effects. Participants were then debriefed and compensated. All materials and procedures were approved by York University's Human Participants Review Committee.

Results and Discussion

Are people interested in fictional relationships? On average, participants reported being slightly interested in fictional couples, reflected by the mean being just above the midpoint of our relationship interest scale (see Table 2 for means and standard deviations). This difference from the midpoint was statistically significant, $t(266) = 2.96, p < .01, 95\%$ confidence interval (95% CI) [3.58, 3.88].

Although not necessarily reflecting a deep interest in fictional couples, most participants identified a favorite fictional couple (239 of 267; 90%), and reported being emotionally invested in the outcome of this couple ($M = 5.27, SD = 1.34$). Participants also reported thinking that the relationship was close to their ideal relationship ($M = 4.55, SD = 1.74$), and the couple's relationship also showed moderate overlap with their ideal relationship (as indicated by the IOS; $M = 4.32, SD = 1.95$). Most of these couples came from TV shows (112; 47%), followed by movies (73; 31%) and books (46; 19%), with the remainder appearing in videogames (5; 2%) and other media (3; 1%). In terms of relationship status, 158 (66%) participants reported that their favorite couple was in an established relationship, 24 (10%) mentioned they were prerelationship, 42 (18%) said the couple was postrelationship, and 15 (6%) said the couple had no established relationship in the narrative. In sum, 29% of people reported that their favorite fictional couple was not currently a couple as depicted in the narrative. This suggests that individuals are not necessarily interested in fictional couples simply because a certain relationship is being presented to them, but that investment can occur before characters ever get together and persist even after they have broken up.

Actual shipping behavior (e.g., creating fan art or writing fan fiction) was infrequent, corresponding to less than once a month on

average. To examine how these behaviors relate to general interest in fictional relationships, we dichotomized the behaviors into "yes" (engaging in the behavior at all) and "no" (never engaging in the behavior), then correlated this with our measure of relationship interest. Talking about one's favorite couple was positively correlated with general relationship interest ($r = .27, p < .01, 95\%$ CI [.15, .38]) as well as investment in the specific couple ($r = .33, p < .01, 95\%$ CI [.21, .44]). Talking and reading about the couple online was also positively correlated with general relationship interest ($r = .21, p < .01, 95\%$ CI [.08, .33]) as well as investment in the specific couple ($r = .35, p < .01, 95\%$ CI [.23, .46]). Seeking out fan art exhibited the same pattern: relationship interest: $r = .26, p < .01, 95\%$ CI [.13, .37]; emotional investment: $r = .35, p < .01, 95\%$ CI [.23, .46]. Interestingly, creating fan art was the least strongly correlated with both general interest in fictional relationships ($r = .13, p = .04, 95\%$ CI [.01, .26]) and emotional investment in one's favorite couple ($r = .12, p = .08, 95\%$ CI [-.01, .24]).

Overall these results provide evidence that many individuals can identify a favorite fictional couple they feel emotionally invested in, across a variety of types of media, and that general interest in fictional relationships does exist. However, there are considerable individual differences in the degree of interest in fictional relationships, with stronger interest predicting concrete shipping behavior.

Who is interested in fictional relationships? In addition to determining whether interest in fictional relationships is a noteworthy phenomenon, we wanted to find out who is more likely to express this interest. In our sample, 96% of women versus 84% of men were able to identify a favorite couple, suggesting relative gender parity. Additionally, participants currently in a romantic relationship were more interested in fictional relationships ($M = 3.90, SD = 1.29$) than single participants ($M = 3.37, SD = 1.18$); $t(183.58) = 3.34, p < .01, d = .42, 95\%$ CI [.16, .68]. Relationship interest did not differ based on the actual or expected length of participants' current relationships (see Table 2 for means and Table 3 for correlations). It also did not differ based on the number of past relationships participants had, nor their perceived level of experience with relationships. However, even though the average length of their relationships and the average length of their shortest relationship were not linked to relationship interest, how long participants' longest relationships had lasted was related, $p = .15, p = .01, BCa 95\%$ CI [.03, .26].

These results suggest that being interested in fictional relationships is more closely associated with current relationship status than it is to relationship history, with participants currently in a relationship expressing more interest in fictional relationships than single participants. It is unclear whether being in a relationship makes romance more salient and thus promotes focusing on fictional couples, or whether interest in fictional couples encourages individuals to seek out relationships. This is an important distinction that should be made in future studies.

We also looked at adult attachment, beliefs about romance, attitudes toward love, and personality traits to get an idea of what factors would relate to interest in fictional relationships. Attachment anxiety was associated with greater relationship interest ($r = .11, p = .08, 95\%$ CI [.08, -.01]), whereas attachment avoidance was linked to less relationship interest ($r = -.11, p = .06, 95\%$ CI [.06, -.23]), although both correlations were weak and not statistically significant. See Table 3 for all correlations.

Table 2
Means and Standard Deviations for All Studies

Measure	Study 1		Study 2		Study 3	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Relationship interest ^a	3.73	1.27	4.06	1.33	4.00	1.36
Shipping behavior ^a	6.28	0.82	6.00	1.05	—	—
EI – Characters ^c	3.19	0.69	3.09	0.66	—	—
EI – Couple ^c	3.47	0.66	3.31	0.64	—	—
Attachment anxiety ^b	3.02	0.95	3.54	0.81	3.41	0.95
Attachment avoidance ^b	3.43	0.78	3.67	0.67	3.78	0.78
LAS – Passionate ^c	4.60	0.53	4.51	0.64	3.89	0.86
LAS – Passionate (Couple) ^c	4.45	0.52	—	—	—	—
LAS – Game-playing ^c	2.66	1.34	3.36	1.24	2.12	0.87
LAS – Game-playing (Couple) ^c	2.83	1.11	—	—	—	—
LAS – Friendship ^c	4.31	0.73	4.34	0.75	3.61	1.12
LAS – Friendship (Couple) ^c	3.81	1.09	—	—	—	—
LAS – Practical ^c	3.22	1.17	3.52	1.25	2.39	1.02
LAS – Practical (Couple) ^c	3.04	1.34	—	—	—	—
LAS – Possessive ^c	2.61	1.06	2.57	1.06	2.61	0.94
LAS – Possessive (Couple) ^c	3.51	1.02	—	—	—	—
LAS – Altruistic ^c	3.74	1.02	3.37	1.07	3.44	1.02
LAS – Altruistic (Couple) ^c	4.18	0.80	—	—	—	—
RBS ^a	4.52	0.96	4.58	0.94	—	—
RBS – Idealization ^a	4.10	1.48	4.47	1.36	—	—
RBS – LAFS ^a	3.56	1.14	3.37	1.11	—	—
RBS – OAO ^a	4.25	1.55	4.38	1.54	—	—
RBS – LFAW ^a	5.34	1.00	5.34	1.02	—	—
TIPI – Extraversion ^a	3.54	1.83	—	—	—	—
TIPI – Conscientiousness ^a	5.41	1.34	—	—	—	—
TIPI – Agreeableness ^a	5.51	1.21	—	—	—	—
TIPI – Openness ^a	5.14	1.40	—	—	—	—
TIPI – Emotional stability ^a	5.12	1.62	—	—	—	—
Intimacy achievement ^b	4.52	0.65	4.41	0.53	—	—
RI commitment ^a	5.42	1.34	5.19	1.35	—	—
RI thought ^a	4.28	1.60	4.71	1.38	—	—
SWLS ^a	4.37	1.55	4.31	1.28	—	—
ISEL ^d	1.90	0.65	—	—	—	—
Loneliness ^d	2.16	0.70	—	—	—	—
Relationship satisfaction ^a	5.95	0.99	6.42	0.79	—	—
Relationship length (Actual)	4.16 (1–2 years)	1.40	—	—	—	—
Relationship length (Expected)	6.54 (6–10 years)	1.26	—	—	—	—
Number of past relationships	4.11 (3 relationships)	2.54	4.93 (3 relationships)	4.19	—	—
Average relationship duration	4.01 (1–2 years)	1.51	3.06 (7–11 months)	1.53	—	—
Longest relationship	4.16 (4–5 years)	1.40	2.73 (7–11 months)	1.50	—	—
Shortest relationship	2.18 (4–6 months)	1.48	—	—	—	—
Perceived experience ^a	4.28	1.73	—	—	—	—
Casual relationships ^a	3.26	1.68	3.86	1.78	—	—
Committed relationships ^a	5.59	1.42	5.78	1.45	—	—
Relationship desire ^a	4.75	1.67	5.08	1.32	—	—
Relationship success ^a	4.74	1.61	5.14	1.46	—	—
Parasocial relationship ^c	3.61	0.68	3.53	0.63	3.51	0.63
Celebrity worship ^a	—	—	—	—	3.69	1.08
Narrative transportation ^a	—	—	—	—	4.95	0.68
Character identification ^a	—	—	—	—	5.63	0.82

^a 7-point scale. ^b 6-point scale. ^c 5-point scale. ^d 4-point scale.

Relationship interest was moderately positively correlated with general romantic beliefs ($r = .34, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI } [.23, .44]$) and all four RBS subscales: (a) Love Finds a Way ($r = .23, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI } [.12, .34]$), (b) One and Only ($r = .29, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI } [.18, .40]$), (c) Love at First Sight ($r = .27, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI } [.15, .38]$), and (d) Idealization, $r = .28, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI } [.17, .39]$. It makes sense that individuals with stronger beliefs about romance, love, and relationships would also be more likely to focus on romantic aspects of entertainment media. Similarly, relationship interest was also corre-

lated with various different attitudes toward love. Practical love was the most strongly related ($\rho = .26, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI } [.12, .36]$), followed by altruistic ($\rho = .23, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI } [.11, .35]$), then game-playing ($\rho = .19, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI } [.06, .30]$), and possessive love ($\rho = .18, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI } [.06, .30]$). Relationship interest was not related to passionate or friendship love. It was also not related to any of the Big Five personality traits.

Why are people interested in fictional relationships? Next, we tested whether interest in fictional relationships occurs as

Table 3
Relationship Interest Correlations and Confidence Intervals for Studies 1 and 2

Measure	Study 1			Study 2		
	<i>r</i>	CI	<i>r</i> (PSR) ^b	<i>r</i>	CI	<i>r</i> (PSR)
Shipping behavior	-.33 ^a	[-.43, -.21]	-.28*	.24 ^a	[-.34, -.14]	.18*
EI – Characters	.38*	[.27, .48]	.30*	.28*	[.18, .37]	.19*
EI – Couple	.44*	[.33, .54]	.39*	.33*	[.24, .42]	.26*
Attachment anxiety	.11	[-.01, .23]	.13*	.27*	[.18, .35]	.24*
Attachment avoidance	-.11	[-.23, .06]	-.07	-.02	[-.12, .07]	-.02
LAS – Passionate	-.01 ^a	[-.12, .12]	-.03	-.03 ^a	[-.13, .06]	-.05
LAS – Game-playing	.19 ^a	[.06, .30]	.15*	.22 ^a	[.13, .32]	.18*
LAS – Friendship	.06 ^a	[-.06, .19]	.04	-.04 ^a	[-.14, .06]	-.06
LAS – Practical	.26 ^a	[.14, .37]	.24*	.19 ^a	[.09, .28]	.17*
LAS – Possessive	.18 ^a	[.05, .30]	.18*	.16 ^a	[.06, .26]	.15*
LAS – Altruistic	.23 ^a	[.11, .34]	.17*	.01 ^a	[-.09, .11]	-.00
RBS	.34*	[.23, .44]	.27*	.18*	[.09, .27]	.15*
RBS – Idealization	.28*	[.17, .39]	.22*	.20*	[.11, .29]	.17*
RBS – LAFS	.27*	[.15, .38]	.26*	.08	[-.01, .17]	.08
RBS – OAO	.29*	[.18, .40]	.24*	.18*	[.09, .27]	.16*
RBS – LFAW	.23*	[.12, .34]	.15*	.11*	[.02, .20]	.09
TIPI – Extraversion	.11 ^a	[-.01, .22]	.08	—	—	—
TIPI – Conscientiousness	.06 ^a	[-.07, .18]	.06	—	—	—
TIPI – Agreeableness	.08 ^a	[-.05, .20]	.02	—	—	—
TIPI – Openness	-.03 ^a	[-.15, .10]	-.11	—	—	—
TIPI – Emotional Stability	-.11 ^a	[-.22, .02]	-.17*	—	—	—
Intimacy achievement	.15*	[.03, .27]	.10	-.01	[-.10, .08]	-.02
RI commitment	.17 ^a	[.04, .28]	.13*	.04 ^a	[-.05, .14]	.05
RI thought	.30 ^a	[.17, .40]	.26*	.29*	[.20, .37]	.27*
SWLS	.17 ^a	[.03, .29]	.12*	-.01	[-.11, .08]	-.03
ISEL	-.07 ^a	[-.19, .05]	-.03	—	—	—
Loneliness	.01 ^a	[-.11, .12]	.03	—	—	—
Relationship satisfaction	.03 ^a	[-.12, .18]	-.02	-.03 ^a	[-.18, .12]	-.01
Relationship length (Actual)	.06 ^a	[-.08, .21]	.08	—	—	—
Relationship length (Expected)	-.01 ^a	[-.16, .17]	-.09	—	—	—
Number of past relationships	-.07 ^a	[-.20, .05]	-.11	-.08 ^a	[-.17, .02]	-.08
Perceived experience	.07 ^a	[-.06, .20]	.02	—	—	—
Average relationship duration	.11 ^a	[-.01, .24]	.11	.09 ^a	[-.02, .20]	.04
Longest relationship	.15 ^a	[.04, .27]	.16*	.08 ^a	[-.03, .20]	.03
Shortest relationship	.04 ^a	[-.08, .18]	.07	—	—	—
Casual relationships	-.11 ^a	[.24, .01]	-.10	.11 ^a	[-.01, .25]	.12
Committed relationships	.16 ^a	[.03, .28]	.12	.07 ^a	[-.05, .18]	.04
Relationship desire	-.11 ^a	[-.32, .10]	-.12	.13*	[.01, .24]	.15*
Relationship success	.23 ^a	[.11, .35]	.19*	.09 ^a	[-.03, .20]	-.00
Parasocial relationship	.31*	[.20, .41]	—	.28*	[.19, .36]	—

Note. *r* (PSR) = partial correlations controlling for PSR.

^a Spearman correlations. ^b We also ran these partial correlations controlling for age, gender, and parasocial relationships simultaneously. For Study 1 the average change in magnitude for all the correlations (calculated based on absolute value) was .02, and for Study 2 it was .03.

* $p < .05$.

compensation for a dearth of intimacy achievement or whether it arises from dissatisfaction with life, one's relationships, and level of social contact (Finn & Gorr, 1988; Rubin & Rubin, 1985). Our results, however, were not consistent with this idea. Single participants' reported desire to be in a relationship was not correlated with how interested they were in fictional relationships. In contrast, relationship interest was positively associated with participants' perceptions of their own success at developing and maintaining romantic relationships, $\rho = .23, p < .01, \text{BCa } 95\% \text{ CI } [.10, .35]$. In terms of type of relationships, perceiving oneself as tending to have casual relationships was not correlated with relationship interest, whereas perceiving oneself as tending to have committed relationships was linked to greater relationship interest, $\rho = .16, p < .01, \text{BCa } 95\% \text{ CI } [.04, .29]$. These results suggest that being interested in fictional relationships is actually linked to

perceived relationship proficiency and tendency to have more, not less, committed relationships. We also expected that low levels of intimacy achievement would be associated with lower relationship interest, but instead found that it was linked to greater intimacy achievement, $r = .15, p = .01, 95\% \text{ CI } [.03, .27]$. These results provide evidence that lacking intimacy does not promote focusing on fictional couples as a form of compensation. Rather, something quite different appears to be going on, whereby greater experience with intimacy and relationships is actually reflected in more interest and emotional investment in fictional relationships. Similarly, our other variables provided no evidence that focusing on fictional relationships is a form of compensation for dissatisfaction. Relationship interest was associated with greater life satisfaction ($r = .17, p = .01, 95\% \text{ CI } [.03, .29]$), and was unrelated to perceptions of social support, loneliness, or relationship satisfaction.

We also expected that more interest in fictional relationships would positively predict exploration of different romantic identities, because it enables individuals to vicariously engage with a variety of types of romantic relationships. This was supported, with individuals who report spending more time thinking about what they want out of romantic relationships also reporting more interest in fictional relationships, $\rho = .30, p < .01$, BCa 95% CI [.18, .40]. Our expectation that it would be associated with a more defined and coherent idea of what one wants for one's own relationships was also supported, with interest in fictional relationships being positively correlated with romantic certainty, $\rho = .17, p = .01$, BCa 95% CI [.04, .29]. Together these results indicate that interest in fictional relationships may be a way to safely explore different types of romantic relationships and help cultivate individuals' personal romantic identities.

We were also curious whether certain love attitudes would make individuals more likely to focus on certain types of couples. We found that participants' self-reported love attitudes were all positively related to the perceived corresponding love attitude of their favorite fictional couple, passionate: $\rho = .17, p = .01$, BCa 95% CI [.04, .30]; game-playing: $\rho = .26, p < .01$, BCa 95% CI [.12, .38]; friendship: $\rho = .14, p = .03$, BCa 95% CI [.00, .27]; practical: $\rho = .18, p < .01$, BCa 95% CI [.06, .31]; possessive: $\rho = .35, p < .01$, BCa 95% CI [.24, .46]; altruistic: $\rho = .21, p < .01$, BCa 95% CI [.07, .33]. The strongest relationship was for possessive, followed by game-playing, and altruistic love attitudes. Passionate, friendship, and practical attitudes exhibited weaker, but statistically significant, correlations. Participants also indicated that they wanted a relationship like that of their favorite couple ($M = 68.41, SD = 28.47$), and those currently in a relationship reported that they wanted their own relationship to be more like that of their favorite couple ($M = 4.32, SD = 1.91$). It may therefore be the case that favoring couples who exhibit certain love attitudes makes individuals more likely to want the same characteristics in their own relationships. However, these results cannot determine causality, and it may instead be that those who possess certain attitudes toward love become invested in couples that affirm these attitudes.

Overall, it appears as though interest in fictional couples is not a means of compensating for lacking intimacy and support. In contrast, it seems that those who are more satisfied with life and more experienced with intimacy are also more interested in fictional relationships. Additionally, relationship interest may stimulate thought about what one wants out of romantic relationships and, to a lesser extent, help individuals commit to a cohesive romantic identity.

Is interest in fictional couples a distinct form of media engagement? Establishing these relationships paints a picture of who is interested in fictional couples and why, but it does not account for the possibility that these associations are due to broader media engagement rather than specific interest in fictional relationships. To test this, we compared emotional investment in couples to that of characters. We also ran partial correlations to determine whether the above relationships would hold after controlling for the effect of parasocial relationships.

We first established that there was no difference in how emotionally invested participants were in either character from their favorite couple, $t(473.54) = 0.39, p = .71, d = .03, 95\% \text{ CI} [-.15, .21]$. In light of this, we decided to average across both characters

to create one variable. Overall, participants were emotionally invested in both the couple and its individual characters, and both were strongly correlated with general interest in fictional couples ($r = .44, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI} [.33, .54]$ and $r = .38, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI} [.20, .41]$, respectively). However, participants were more invested in the couple than the characters, $t(471.85) = 4.24, p < .001, d = .39, 95\% \text{ CI} [.21, .57]$, which is consistent with the idea that we are measuring relationship interest and that it is more than just investment in individual characters. Participants also indicated that, although they were somewhat likely to incorporate both the characters ($M = 3.22, SD = 1.58$) and the couple ($M = 3.54, SD = 1.89$) into their sense of self, they were more likely to report their favorite couple as being a part of themselves than the characters, $t(461.59) = 2.00, p = .05, d = .18, 95\% \text{ CI} [.00, .36]$.

Overall, participants reported really liking the characters ($M = 38.46, SD = 12.47$), but this was only moderately correlated with how emotionally invested they reported being in the couple, $\rho = .34, p < .01$, BCa 95% CI [.22, .46]. In contrast, participants reported both wanting the characters ($M = 5.94, SD = 0.93$) and the relationship ($M = 6.08, SD = 1.02$) to succeed to approximately the same degree, $t(471.04) = 1.62, p = .11, d = .15, 95\% \text{ CI} [-0.03, 0.32]$. From this, it can be surmised that individuals interact with fictional couples in a different way than they interact with specific characters, indicating that relationship investment is a separate phenomenon. We also found a correlation between interest in fictional couples and parasocial relationships ($r = .31, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI} [.20, .41]$), but it was moderate in magnitude and not high enough to suggest identity, providing further support for the two being distinct yet related constructs.

Next, we ran partial correlations controlling for parasocial relationships to investigate whether the effects were being driven by construct overlap. In general, controlling for parasocial relationships reduced the strength of the observed relationships, but only slightly (see Table 3). The only relationship that fell below threshold for statistical significance was between relationship interest and intimacy achievement. Interestingly enough, the association between relationship interest and emotional stability was actually strengthened by controlling for parasocial relationships. The fact that including parasocial relationships in these analyses did not have much of an effect on the strength of the associations increases our confidence that it is its own distinct form of media engagement.

Summary. In this study we demonstrated that interest in fictional couples is a somewhat common occurrence for both men and women. It is more common among those who have stronger romantic beliefs, as well as those who prioritize game-playing, pragmatic, possessive, and altruistic love. Being interested in fictional relationships does not seem to be compensatory, and in fact may be a reflection of positive interpersonal relationships and relationship experience. Finally, although related, relationship interest is distinct from parasocial relationships.

Study 2

To build on our exploratory Study 1 and increase our confidence in its results, we ran a close replication using a different recruitment procedure and sample. We also examined only the subset of variables that resulted in our main findings for Study 1. This study was preregistered, with our intended materials, methods, and anal-

ysis plan submitted prior to any data collection on aspredicted.org: <https://aspredicted.org/ti5cn.pdf>

Method

Participants. We collected data from 835 participants, recruited from the York University Undergraduate Research Participant Pool. A sizable portion of this sample was removed ($n = 395$) before analysis for the following preregistered reasons: 131 were removed because they failed to answer our attention check items correctly and 13 were removed because they completed the study on a mobile device in violation of our instructions. We also excluded 48 participants who did not provide consent to participate, 10 duplicate responses, and 193 cases with four or more missing data points, because this is further evidence of inattentive responding. The final sample was 440 participants (122 males, 316 females) with an average age of 20.49 ($SD = 5.21$). As in Study 1, the majority of participants identified as heterosexual (87.5%), and 40% were currently in a romantic relationship.

Measures and procedure. We included only the most notable variables from Study 1. Specifically, we measured intimacy achievement, romantic identity, romantic beliefs, adult attachment, life satisfaction, parasocial relationships, general interest in fictional relationships, relationship satisfaction, emotional investment in a specific couple and its characters, shipping behavior, and participants' love attitudes. We chose not to measure personality, perceived social support, or loneliness in Study 2 because these constructs were not strongly correlated with relationship interest in Study 1. In terms of relationship history, we did not ask participants the length of their current or shortest relationship, nor how long they expected their current relationship to last or their perceived relationship experience. The procedure was the same as in Study 1, as were all incorporated measures.

Results and Discussion

Are people interested in fictional couples? On average, participants reported being somewhat interested in fictional couples generally, indicating slightly higher interest than Study 1's participants (see Table 2 for all means and standard deviations). With regard to interest in a specific couple, as in Study 1 most of the sample was able to identify a favorite fictional couple ($n = 358$; 81.4%). The majority of these couples came from TV shows ($n = 209$; 47.5%), followed by movies ($n = 78$; 17.7%), books ($n = 51$; 11.6%), videogames ($n = 8$; 1.8%), and other media ($n = 12$; 2.7%). Participants also reported that their favorite fictional couple's relationship is somewhat close to their ideal relationship ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 1.70$) and that they are emotionally invested in the couple ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 1.55$), replicating the results of Study 1.

In terms of the associations between shipping behavior (e.g., creating fan art) and interest in fictional couples, talking about one's favorite couple was positively correlated with general relationship interest ($r = .21$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [.11, .30]) as well as investment in the specific couple ($r = .29$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [.19, .38]). Talking and reading about the couple online was also positively correlated with general relationship interest ($r = .16$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [.05, .26]) as well as investment in the specific couple ($r = .28$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [.17, .37]). Seeking out fan art showed

the same pattern: relationship interest: $r = .12$, $p = .02$, 95% CI [.02, .22]; emotional investment: $r = .30$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [.20, .39]. Creating fan art was again the least strongly correlated with both general interest in fictional relationships ($r = .14$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [.04, .24]) and emotional investment in one's favorite couple, $r = .21$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [.10, .30]. This replicates the associations found in Study 1, although the relationships between shipping behavior and general interest in fictional relationships were weaker.

Who is interested in fictional relationships? With regard to gender differences, 67% of men were able to identify a favorite fictional couple versus 87% of women. This indicates that, although a majority of men had a favorite couple (about two thirds), the percentage of women with a favorite couple was larger (by 20%), suggesting that, in this sample of undergraduates, women were more likely to become invested in specific fictional couples than men. Participants currently in a romantic relationship were slightly more interested in fictional relationships ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 1.31$) than single participants ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.36$), but this difference just failed to reach threshold for statistical significance; $t(377.7) = 1.92$, $p = .06$, $d = -.18$, 95% CI [-.38, .01]. As in Study 1, relationship interest did not differ based on the number of past relationships participants had, the average duration of participants' longest relationship, or the average length of their relationships. Together these results indicate that being interested in fictional relationships is not related to individuals' relationship status or relationship history.

We found a moderate positive correlation between relationship interest and attachment anxiety ($r = .27$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [.18, .35]) (in Study 1, this was weaker and not statistically significant; see Table 3) and no association with attachment avoidance (replicating Study 1). In terms of romantic beliefs, relationship interest was positively correlated with overall romanticism ($r = .18$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [.09, .27]) and the belief that love conquers all ($r = .11$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [.02, .20]), belief in one true love ($r = .18$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [.09, .27]), and idealizing one's romantic partner, $r = .20$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [.11, .29], but it was not much correlated with love at first sight. Interest in fictional relationships was also positively correlated with endorsing game playing in relationships ($r = .22$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [.13, .31]), relationship pragmatism ($r = .18$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [.09, .28]), and being possessive of one's partner ($r = .16$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [.06, .26]), but uncorrelated with passionate, friendship, or altruistic love attitudes.

In Study 2, the observed correlations were weaker overall than in Study 1, but with few major discrepancies. The only differences were that believing in love at first sight and altruistic love were unrelated to relationship interest in Study 2, unlike in Study 1. We were surprised that these associations were not replicated, because love at first sight is one of the most common romantic tropes, with unconditional love also a prominent theme in fictional romances. However, replicating Study 1, we found that relationship interest was positively linked to general romantic beliefs, believing that there is one true love for everyone, that true love conquers all, and idealizing one's romantic partners. We also replicated the positive associations between relationship interest and game-playing, practical and possessive love attitudes.

Why are people interested in fictional relationships? In this study, interest in fictional relationships was not related to intimacy achievement, life satisfaction, or tending to have more committed

relationships, which fails to replicate the positive associations observed in Study 1. As in Study 1, however, relationship interest was not linked to relationship satisfaction or tending to have more casual relationships. Overall, this remains consistent with the idea that there is very little evidence that interest in fictional couples acts as some kind of compensation for unhappiness or lack of intimacy experience. Nevertheless, in contrast to Study 1, we did find that desire to be in a relationship was positively correlated with interest in fictional relationships in this sample ($r = .13$, $p = .04$, 95% CI [.01, .24]), and relationship interest was not correlated with perceived success at maintaining and developing relationships.

Interest in fictional couples was not associated with certainty about what one wants out of romantic relationships, but it was moderately correlated with how much thought individuals reported putting into what they want out of relationships, $r = .29$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [.20, .37]. This supports our previous finding that interest in fictional couples might be a way of exploring aspects of romantic relationships and that it might promote or be promoted by thinking about the kind of relationships people want for themselves. However, interest in fictional relationships does not seem to be linked to a definitive idea of what one wants.

Is interest in fictional couples a distinct form of media engagement? As expected, participants who reported being more interested in fictional couples also reported greater emotional investment in their favorite fictional couple as well as its characters. Like Study 1, because there was no difference in emotional investment between characters, $t(708.8) = 0.69$, $p = .49$, $d = .05$, 95% CI [-.10, .20], we aggregated the two and found that investment in the couple was greater than investment in its characters, $t(493.43) = 2.29$, $p = .01$, $d = .31$, 95% CI [.16, .46]. We also replicated the correlation between relationship interest and parasocial relationships ($r = .28$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [.19, .36]). When partial correlations were conducted controlling for parasocial relationships to examine whether interest in fictional relationships is distinct, we found similar results to Study 1. The strength of the observed correlations was slightly attenuated, but all the statistically significant correlations from the previous analysis remained so. These findings support the results from Study 1, demonstrating that relationship interest and parasocial relationships are related yet distinct.

Discussion

The purpose of Study 1 was to examine four key research questions: (a) Are people interested in fictional relationships?; (b) Who is interested in fictional relationships?; (c) Why are people interested in fictional relationships?; and (d) Is interest in fictional relationships a distinct form of media engagement? Study 2 was a preregistered close replication of Study 1 intended to determine the robustness of our results using a larger, and slightly different, sample of participants. There was a great deal of consistency between the two studies with regards to the results. That said, the magnitude of associations observed was generally weaker in Study 2 than in Study 1.

Both studies supported the idea that interest in fictional relationships is somewhat common. Participants' favorite fictional couples were most likely to come from TV shows, followed by movies, then books, and to a much lesser degree videogames and other sources of

media. However, more specific behaviors, such as writing fanfiction or creating fan art, were infrequent across both studies. Both men and women express interest in fictional couples, however more women were able to identify a favorite fictional couple.

Across studies we found consistent positive relationships between interest in fictional relationships and romanticism, supporting the link between romantic beliefs and consuming romantic media (Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Lippman, Ward, & Seabrook, 2014; Song & Fox, 2016). Our results expand on this past finding by showing that a focus on fictional couples is also linked to romantic beliefs, regardless of whether the media form itself is romantic in nature. In particular, we found that romanticism and specific beliefs about love and romance were consistently associated with general interest in fictional relationships. Participants who reported idealizing romantic partners, believing that there is one true love for everyone, and that love conquers all, tended to report more relationship interest. The same goes for those who endorsed game-playing, pragmatic, and possessive love attitudes.

We also examined participants' relational orientation via adult attachment. Study 2 replicated the lack of relationship between relationship interest and attachment avoidance from Study 1. Conversely, although attachment anxiety was weakly positively correlated with relationship interest in Study 1, it was moderately positively correlated in Study 2. These results from Study 2 are more aligned with past research demonstrating a link between attachment anxiety and parasocial relationships, and a lack of a relationship between attachment avoidance and parasocial relationships (Cole & Leets, 1999; Greenwood, 2008). The fact that there was no association between relationship interest and attachment avoidance supports the notion that interest in fictional couples is not actually a means of compensation for lacking relationships in one's own life. In fact, greater interest in fictional couples was also not associated with lower life satisfaction, relationship satisfaction, or intimacy achievement, providing further evidence that relationship interest does not appear to play a compensatory role.

So, if interest in fictional couples is not compensatory, what does it reflect? In light of the fact that it is linked to romanticism and various love attitudes, interest in fictional relationships might reflect the tendency to focus on interpersonal relationships more generally. In support of this, Study 2 replicated Study 1's finding that greater relationship interest is linked to more time spent thinking about, but not necessarily committing to, what one wants out of romantic relationships. Together these results indicate that relationship interest is linked to how, and to what extent, individuals think about love and romance. It makes sense that those who think more about their own relationships would also contemplate and attend more to fictional couples.

Across both studies we also demonstrated that interest in fictional couples is related to, but separate from, parasocial relationships. The two constructs were only moderately correlated, and the associations between relationship interest and the other dependent variables were only minimally influenced when accounting for parasocial relationships. Participants were also more invested in their favorite couple than its characters, and incorporated the couple into their sense of self more so than the component characters. This provides evidence that interest in fictional relationships and parasocial relationships are distinct. Nevertheless, forming parasocial relationships is only one form of media engagement. As stated in the introduction, relationship interest could possibly have concept overlap with the other three

forms of media engagement: narrative transportation, character identification, and celebrity worship. To examine this possibility, we conducted a third study to better test whether being interested in fictional couples is distinct or simply an amalgam of other forms of media engagement.

Study 3

To better answer the question of whether interest in fictional relationships is different from other forms of media engagement, we compared it with three additional constructs along with parasocial relationships: narrative transportation, character identification, and celebrity worship. More specifically, we tested whether relationship interest would incrementally predict adult attachment and love attitudes above and beyond the other forms of media engagement. We chose attachment because it is such a well-studied construct, reflecting individual differences that are essential to relationships, and it has been previously linked to media engagement (Cheung & Yue, 2012; Greenwood, Pietromonaco, & Long, 2008; Rain et al., 2017; Theran et al., 2010). We selected love attitudes because these varied ways of approaching love seem highly relevant in this context, and we chose this over romantic beliefs because the former is more multifaceted.

If interest in fictional relationships predicts these constructs above and beyond more established media engagement variables, it will help to establish the construct's utility for future media research. All study materials, methods, and analyses were preregistered on aspredicted.org: <https://aspredicted.org/6nq5j.pdf>.

Method

Participants. A total of 317 participants were recruited through Prolific Academic, an online crowd-sourcing platform akin to mTurk. As preregistered, before analysis we removed 46 participants because they responded incorrectly to our attention check items, 12 participants who did not provide consent to participate, participants who were missing three or more data points ($n = 6$), and one person who responded twice (both responses were removed), leaving a final sample of 253 participants. There were 108 females and 143 males, with a mean age of 32.64 ($SD = 12.73$). A large majority reported being heterosexual (83.8%), and approximately half reported currently being in a romantic relationship (53.6%).

Measures. All items from the following scales were rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) unless otherwise specified. All materials and procedures were approved by York University's Human Participants Review Committee.

General interest in fictional relationships. In addition to the four items used in our previous studies, we expanded our measure of relationship interest to nine items based on participants' responses to open-ended questions included in Study 1 (see Table 1). Together these nine items had good internal consistency ($\alpha = .92$).

Narrative transportation. We measured narrative transportation with Green and Brock's (2000) 11-item Narrative Transportation Scale. Although the internal consistency of items was lower than desired as estimated by our particular sample ($\alpha = .59$), the construct itself is multifaceted. Participants identified their favorite fictional story and indicated their agreement with the items, for instance "I can picture myself in [the narrative]" and "I find myself thinking of different ways [the narrative] could turn out."

Character identification. Character identification was assessed with Cohen's (2001) 10-item Character Identification Scale. Individuals identified the fictional character with whom they most strongly identify, then indicated how much they agreed with 10 statements ($\alpha = .88$). Sample items include "I think I have a good understanding of [character]" and "At key moments, I feel I know exactly what [character] is going through."

Celebrity worship. We used the 17-item Celebrity Worship Scale (McCutcheon, Lange, & Houran, 2002) to evaluate the degree to which individuals engage in celebrity worship, which includes both a Normal and a Pathological subscale. Participants identified their favorite celebrity and indicated the extent to which they agree with 17 statements ($\alpha = .93$). The Normal subscale consists of 7 items, including "My friends and I like to discuss what [celebrity] has done." The Pathological subscale consists of 10 items, including "I am obsessed with details of [celebrity]'s life."

Love attitudes. In this study we used the short form of the Love Attitudes Scale (Hendrick et al., 1998). This questionnaire measures each love attitude with four items rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). All subscales had acceptable internal consistency: passionate, $\alpha = .82$; game-playing, $\alpha = .71$; friendship, $\alpha = .91$; practical, $\alpha = .79$; possessive, $\alpha = .73$; altruistic, $\alpha = .89$.

Results

As expected, all the media engagement variables (see Table 2 for means and standard deviations) were moderately correlated with one another (see Table 4). Interest in fictional relationships was associated with parasocial relationships, character identification, and celebrity worship, to approximately the same degree, but was less strongly correlated with narrative transportation.

Table 4
Media Engagement Variables Correlation Matrix

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Relationship interest	—	.43* CI [.32, .53]	.33* CI [.21, .43]	.44* CI [.33, .53]	.45* CI [.35, .55]
2. Parasocial relationship		—	.52* CI [.42, .60]	.59* CI [.50, .66]	.59* CI [.50, .66]
3. Narrative transportation			—	.55* CI [.45, .63]	.28* CI [.16, .40]
4. Character identification				—	.34* CI [.23, .45]
5. Celebrity worship					—

* $p < .001$.

Next, we used hierarchical regressions to examine whether relationship interest could predict adult attachment and love attitudes, even after accounting for the other four types of media engagement (see Table 5). In Step 1, the four established media engagement variables were all entered simultaneously: parasocial relationships, transportation, character identification, and celebrity worship. In Step 2, relationship interest was added as an additional predictor. Separate regression models were constructed for each adult attachment dimension and for each love attitude. In building our regression models, we were careful to ensure that all assumptions of these models, including multicollinearity, were met, adopting robust regression approaches when they were violated.

Interest in fictional relationships did not predict attachment anxiety after controlling for all the other media engagement variables. Moreover, the overall fit of the model was poor, suggesting that relationship interest specifically, and media engagement generally, does not account for much of the variance in attachment anxiety. Conversely, relationship interest did predict attachment avoidance after controlling for other forms of media engagement, although the model fit was similarly poor. This indicates that a greater interest in fictional relationships predicts less attachment avoidance, above and beyond the contribution of the other media engagement variables. This provides important evidence that relationship interest is both unique from other forms of media engagement and has predictive utility in a research context. However, it does not seem like media engagement in general has a strong association with attachment orientation.

We also regressed the media engagement variables onto each love attitude using a parallel approach. Interest in fictional relationships predicted passionate and practical love above and beyond what was explained by the other four media engagement variables, again affirming that relationship interest is both a unique construct and has meaningfully unique associations with related variables. Relationship interest did not uniquely predict game-playing, friendship, possessive, or altruistic love attitudes.

General associations between media engagement, attachment, and love attitudes all fall outside of our specific research question, but results are presented in Table 5 for those interested. That said, it is worth noting that in these regressions, greater narrative transportation uniquely predicted more attachment anxiety. Celebrity worship also uniquely predicted game-playing and practical love, controlling for all other media engagement variables. Lastly, parasocial relationships uniquely predicted practical love, in addition to friendship, and possessive love. Together this suggests that these media engagement variables, although moderately related to one another, relate differently to how individuals approach relationships and think about love.

Discussion

The purpose of Study 3 was to more fully answer the question of whether interest in fictional relationships is a distinct form of media engagement. We did this by testing whether our general measure of interest in fictional relationships could explain additional variance in adult attachment and love attitudes above and beyond what is explained by the other four types of media engagement, thereby demonstrating that it is distinct and informative.

We found that relationship interest was moderately correlated with the other media engagement variables, establishing convergent validity. All these constructs are theoretically related, reflecting how deeply individuals engage with the mass media they

Table 5
Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analyses

Measure	Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>
Attachment anxiety ^a				
Parasocial relationship	.13	.15	.13	.15
Narrative transportation	.26*	.11	.26*	.12
Character identification	-.04	.10	-.06	.10
Celebrity worship	-.05	.07	-.07	.07
Relationship interest	—	—	.04	.06
<i>R</i> ²		.02		.02
<i>F</i> for change in <i>R</i> ²	0.51			
Attachment avoidance ^b				
Parasocial relationship	.13	.12	.17 ^b	.13
Narrative transportation	.15	.10	.14 ^b	.10
Character identification	<.00	.09	.06 ^b	.09
Celebrity worship	-.11	.06	-.06 ^b	.06
Relationship interest	—	—	-.13 ^{ba}	.05
<i>R</i> ²		.02		.05
<i>F</i> for change in <i>R</i> ²	5.87*			
LAS – Passionate ^{bcd}				
Parasocial relationship	.18	.12	.16	.12
Narrative transportation	.03	.09	.03	.09
Character identification	.16*	.08	.11	.08
Celebrity worship	.02	.06	.02	.06
Relationship interest	—	—	.11*	.04
<i>R</i> ²		.09		.11
<i>F</i> for change in <i>R</i> ²	6.69*			
LAS – Game-playing ^{acd}				
Parasocial relationship	-.07	.13	-.08	.14
Narrative transportation	-.02	.10	-.02	.11
Character identification	-.15	.09	-.16	.10
Celebrity worship	.29*	.06	.28*	.07
Relationship interest	—	—	.02	.05
<i>R</i> ²		.09		.09
<i>F</i> for change in <i>R</i> ²	0.17			
LAS – Friendship ^{bc}				
Parasocial relationship	.35*	.16	.14*	.16
Narrative transportation	-.18	.12	.16	.13
Character identification	-.09	.11	-.01	.12
Celebrity worship	-.08	.08	-.12	.08
Relationship interest	—	—	.09	.06
<i>R</i> ²		.06		.06
<i>F</i> for change in <i>R</i> ²	1.54			
LAS – Practical ^{bd}				
Parasocial relationship	.35*	.16	.33*	.16
Narrative transportation	-.18	.12	-.18	.12
Character identification	-.09	.11	-.17	.11
Celebrity worship	.25*	.07	.19*	.08
Relationship interest	—	—	.17*	.06
<i>R</i> ²		.12		.16
<i>F</i> for change in <i>R</i> ²	8.20*			
LAS – Possessive ^a				
Parasocial relationship	.34*	.14	.33*	.14
Narrative transportation	.03	.11	.03	.11
Character identification	-.03	.11	-.06	.10
Celebrity worship	.15*	.07	.12	.07
Relationship interest	—	—	.07	.05
<i>R</i> ²		.11		.11
<i>F</i> for change in <i>R</i> ²	1.42			
LAS – Altruistic ^{bc}				
Parasocial relationship	.19	.15	.17	.15
Narrative transportation	.07	.12	.05	.11
Character identification	.19	.10	.16	.10
Celebrity worship	.05	.07	.01	.07
Relationship interest	—	—	.11	.05
<i>R</i> ²		.09		.10
<i>F</i> for change in <i>R</i> ²	2.20			

^a Two high-leverage cases removed. ^b Three high-leverage cases removed. ^c Robust regression attributable to nonnormality. ^d Robust regression attributable to unequal variance.

* Significant at the $p < .05$ level.

consume. However, the correlations observed were only moderate in magnitude, providing further evidence that, although related, relationship interest is likely a distinct construct.

To more firmly establish that interest in fictional relationships is an influential and distinct construct, we examined whether our measure of interest could provide incremental prediction of adult attachment and love attitudes beyond the other media engagement variables. Relationship interest predicted attachment avoidance in these regressions, such that greater interest in fictional relationships was linked to less avoidance. Although it makes sense that people who are lower in avoidance would be more emotionally invested in fictional relationships, from another perspective this was a somewhat unexpected result. In truth, past research has consistently had difficulty finding a relationship between attachment avoidance and media engagement (Cohen, 2004; Cole & Leets, 1999; Greenwood, 2008; Greenwood et al., 2008; Rain et al., 2017); this extends to the results of our first two studies. As a result, this finding should be interpreted cautiously and replicated.

In terms of love attitudes, relationship interest demonstrated incremental predictive validity for passionate and practical love attitudes, above and beyond the variance predicted by the other media engagement variables. Having a passionate approach to love is characterized by ardor, chemistry, and intensity, and it therefore makes sense that being interested in fictional relationships would be positively related to this attitude. Media portrayals of romance are often highly dramatized and based on physical attraction, thereby depicting intense passion and chemistry. It could be the case that interest in fictional couples fosters this attitude, or perhaps individuals with this attitude are more inclined to get swept up in fictional romances. In light of all this, however, it seems strange that relationship interest is also linked to a more practical approach to love, which is seemingly the opposite of a passionate approach. Pragmatism entails taking a laundry list approach to romance, carefully choosing one's partner based on anticipated compatibilities. The fact that this is associated with relationship interest might mean that having a logical approach to love could be a reaction to viewing and becoming invested in the tumultuous relationships depicted in media. Individuals may essentially learn "what not to do" from becoming invested in these dramatized relationships. Conversely, a practical approach to love might make the turbulence of fictional relationships seem all the more alluring, leading to a greater emotional investment in dramatic fictional relationships. Becoming invested in these fictional passionate relationships also means no risk of personal emotional fallout, unlike taking a passionate approach to one's real relationships. It is also possible that people who are more interested in fictional relationships simply like to think more about relationships in general, and that this means quite different things for different people.

The overall results of this study provide evidence that interest in fictional relationships is an important and distinct form of media engagement. Relationship interest demonstrated incremental prediction of attachment avoidance, passionate love, and pragmatic love, above and beyond the other, more established, media engagement variables of parasocial relationships, narrative transportation, character identification, and celebrity worship. Additionally, adding interest in fictional relationships to our regression models had very little effect on the predictive ability of the other constructs (see Table 5). This indicates that, even when it did not predict an outcome variable, relationship interest did not account

for the contributions of the other predictor variables, lending further support to it being different from these other constructs.

General Discussion

With the expansion of entertainment media, it is crucial to understand how fans interact with the content they are consuming. Past research on media engagement has been highly successful and informative, but also somewhat incomplete in its examination of how fans relate to fiction. Becoming emotionally invested in fictional couples is an important aspect of media engagement that has heretofore been rather neglected, having not received any empirical attention. The purpose of these studies was to answer four research questions: (a) Are people interested in fictional relationships?; (b) Who is interested in fictional relationships?; (c) Why are people interested in fictional relationships?; and (d) Is interest in fictional relationships a distinct form of media engagement?

Does Interest in Fictional Relationships Exist?

These three studies have demonstrated that interest in fictional relationships exists and is somewhat common across samples drawn from mTurk, Prolific Academic, and a university undergraduate population. We also determined that relationship interest is not limited to scripted romances, discovering that fans can also become invested in and remain invested in couples who have no current romantic connection in the narrative as it is portrayed (i.e., no relationship in the canon). TV also seems to be a major source of inspiration, with almost 50% of participants' favorite couples drawn from TV shows. This might be because TV narratives play out over long periods of time (e.g., in some cases, many years). If a fictional relationship unfolds over the course of years, there is plenty of opportunity for media consumers to become highly invested in the outcomes of these relationships. It may also reflect the popularity of TV over other media.

Who Is Interested in Fictional Relationships?

Establishing that interest in fictional relationships exists does not take into account the nuances that contribute to whether certain individuals are more or less interested. Therefore, we were also curious what makes people more or less likely to be interested in fictional relationships. Perhaps the most obvious place to look for differences is with respect to gender. However, rates of relationship interest were relatively similar across gender, with women only somewhat more likely to report being emotionally invested in fictional couples. We also determined that individuals who more strongly believe that love conquers all, that there is only one true love for everyone, and who tend to idealize their partners, are all more interested in fictional relationships than those who do not. Similarly, people who possessed certain attitudes toward love, specifically highly practical attitudes, were more likely to report interest in fictional relationships than those who did not.

We were admittedly somewhat surprised by the consistent, yet somewhat counterintuitive, link between interest in fictional relationships and practical love attitudes across all three studies. Fictional romances often thrive on bucking practicalities and so it would seem that being attracted to these portrayals would be antithetical to holding pragmatic attitudes toward love and romance. However, thinking about long-term compatibility by prioritizing common values, culture, or religion potentially

suggests an expectation that relationships will be enduring rather than fleeting, seeing as how such factors often only come into play when relationships are more serious. Thus, respondents might have different attitudes toward love depending on whether they are considering real-world, long-term relationships or the kinds of relationships they find engrossing within fiction. Another explanation for this association is that individuals who observe and become invested in fictional relationships, which might be more volatile in nature, are more likely to want to avoid this kind of turmoil in their own lives. Investment in the ups and downs of fictional couples might highlight the need to focus on practicalities when evaluating a romantic partner's potential and desirability.

Why Are People Interested in Fictional Relationships?

A number of past researchers have theorized that engaging with media may be a means of compensating for the negative things in one's own life (Cheung & Yue, 2012; Johnson, Slater, Silver, & Ewoldsen, 2016; Maltby, Day, McCutcheon, Martin, & Cayanus, 2004; Slater, Johnson, Cohen, Comello, & Ewoldsen, 2014; Tsay & Bodine, 2012; Wang et al., 2008). For this reason, we predicted that being interested in fictional relationships might be another form of engagement that compensates for unhappiness with one's relationships or relationship status. However, we actually found the opposite. Relationship interest was not associated with lesser intimacy achievement, relationship satisfaction, life satisfaction, or social support; nor was it linked to greater loneliness. On the contrary, we found that greater relationship interest was correlated with how much thought participants put into what they want out of romantic relationships. When this pattern of results is considered alongside the fact that romantic individuals express more interest in fictional couples, a very different portrait emerges. People do not become deeply engaged with fictional relationships to compensate for unhappiness with their own relationships, but rather possess a deep interest in relationships and romance. This is very much in line with past research demonstrating that media engagement is not always compensatory and can actually be beneficial (Giles & Maltby, 2004; Shedlosky-Shoemaker, Costabile, & Arkin, 2014; Tsao, 1996; Tsay-Vogel & Sanders, 2017; van der Goot, Beentjes, & van Selm, 2015; Westenberg, 2017).

Is Interest in Fictional Couples a Distinct Form of Media Engagement?

Across our three studies, we accumulated evidence that relationship interest is a distinct construct, different from other forms of media engagement and simply liking characters. Participants consistently reported being more emotionally invested in their favorite fictional couple than the couple's individual characters. We also found support that it is distinct in terms of its strength of correlation with other forms of media engagement. Moreover, relationship interest uniquely accounts for variability in certain types of romantic cognition, controlling for these other forms of engagement. In sum, although interest in fictional relationships is clearly related to other forms of media engagement, it also appears to be a distinct construct and one that is useful to study.

Limitations

This study had a number of limitations. Foremost is the fact that our measure of general interest in fictional relationships is fairly basic and may not have captured all of the construct's nuances. Having now demonstrated that interest in fictional couples is real, prevalent, unique, and useful, it is important to refine this measure. It might also be fruitful to conduct a qualitative study to develop a richer understanding of what is involved, perhaps as part of the development of this measure, following our use of open-ended questions here.

The current studies also employed samples that were not pre-selected for fandom. This means that they likely included many casual fans, who may be less inclined toward actively engaging with fictional couples, or engaging in concrete shipping behaviors. To better understand shipping among ardent fans, future studies should target specific populations who self-identify as fans or as shippers. This could yield insight that is more comprehensive, by examining more extreme instantiations of interest and investment in fictional relationships. On the other hand, it would also be beneficial to extend these findings to an even broader population than those represented by the current samples. Our samples here were fairly young (averaging around 34 years of age in Study 1, 20 in Study 2, and 32 in Study 3). Age is an important factor in how and why individuals engage with different forms of media (Rahtz, Sirgy, & Meadow, 1989; Stephens, 1981), and so it makes sense that age would also be a factor in relationship interest. Another important limitation is that these studies were all correlational and therefore it is impossible to determine the causal direction of the associations observed.

Future Directions

The studies reported here provide a valuable starting point, but there are copious different avenues for future research on interest in fictional couples. First, some of the associations were not observed consistently, and so further replication would be helpful. Another important factor that requires more research is the content of the media consumed. A large body of research has shown that media content affects the thoughts, emotions, and behavior of consumers in different ways. For instance, exposure to prosocial media, such as certain forms of music, can increase individuals' benevolence, whereas exposure to antisocial media, like violent video games, increases aggression (Adachi & Willoughby, 2016; Greitemeyer, 2011). Watching more TV romance and believing it is an accurate portrayal of relationships has been linked to being less committed to one's spouse, believing that marriage can be costly, and that one has more attractive alternative mates (Osborn, 2012). Consequently, it stands to reason that relationship schemas invoked in unfolding fictional relationships could influence the content of an individual's romantic identity depending on how invested he or she is in the relationship. This has a number of implications given that the relationships portrayed in narratives are often highly dramatized. Although they provide good entertainment value, dramatic and tumultuous relationships do not necessarily set healthy examples, which could model and reinforce detrimental relationship schemas, as noted in one study comparing fictional romances to a form of marketing (Johnson, 2010). In contrast, entertainment media also depict some very positive relationships that can challenge existing prejudices. For instance,

exposure to the prosaic details of homosexual relationships may be beneficial for countering homophobic attitudes. Much like how parasocial contact with outgroup characters can reduce prejudice (Bond & Compton, 2015; Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2006), the same effects may be observed for parasocial investment in outgroup relationships, or between ingroup and outgroup members. Generally speaking, understanding the nature of our interactions with fictional couples could provide valuable insight into how we think about romance.

Another interesting question is whether these results are attributable specifically to interest in fictional relationships or whether they also extend to general interest in others' romantic lives. For instance, some people are strongly invested in celebrity couples. This is evidenced by the fact that there are *still* rumors circulating among gossip magazines about the drama that occurred between Jennifer Aniston, Brad Pitt, and Angelina Jolie (Johnson, 2018; Shuster, 2018). Almost 15 years later, some people are still talking about what went wrong and whether Brad will reconcile with either actress. This interest in others' relationships is not relegated to the realm of celebrities, and many people can become invested in relationships of people they know. For instance, friends can become overly wrapped up in one another's relationships. This can include monitoring social media accounts or remaining upset about a relationship transgression even after the friend in question has moved on (D'Oyley, 2016). Future research should determine whether the same factors that drive this type of secondary relationship engagement also predict investment in fictional relationships.

Another possible avenue for inquiry is whether these findings are more broadly applicable to interest in any type of fictional relationship, not just those that are romantic in nature. Many individuals express interest in fictional friendships or familial bonds. Given that romantic beliefs were linked to greater interest in fictional couples, understanding what factors are related to interest in fictional bonds that are nonromantic would be informative. Similarly, distinctions should be made between interest in fictional relationships and interest in romantic media more generally.

Conclusion

Emotional investment and interest in fictional relationships has been present for a long time, even if it has not always been explicitly acknowledged. But, unlike other forms of media engagement, it has received no empirical attention to date. These three studies establish the existence of investment and interest in fictional relationships, and determine that it is distinct from other types of media engagement. Additionally, this research establishes a link between interest in fictional relationships and individuals' relationship cognition, and demonstrates that relationship interest is not more likely to occur when individuals feel socially isolated or dissatisfied with their lives, thus providing support for the notion that relationship interest does not originate from feeling romantically unfulfilled. Hopefully these studies motivate future research on this fascinating aspect of how we engage with mass media fiction.

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Correction to van Monsjou and Mar (2019)

In the article “Interest and Investment in Fictional Romances,” by Elizabeth van Monsjou and Raymond A. Mar (*Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 2019, Vol. 13, No. 4, pp. 431–449, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/aca0000191>), the mean level of investment in fictional relationships was incorrectly compared to a midpoint of 3.5, rather than the actual midpoint of 4, in Study 1 and Study 2. Thus, the first paragraph of Results and Discussion for Study 1 and the first sentence of the first paragraph of Results and Discussion for Study 2 were amended to clarify that the correct interpretation of these means is that they fall just below the midpoint (Study 1) and at the midpoint (Study 2) of neither agree nor disagree. In addition, in Table 3, incorrect signs were reported for correlations with “Shipping behavior” (with CI values also presented in an incorrect order), and errors appear in the CI for “Attachment avoidance” (Study 1 only), the r (PSR) for “LAS—Altruistic” (Study 2 only), and correlations and CIs for “Relationship length (Expected),” “Number of past relationships” and “Shortest relationship” (Study 1 only). Finally, in Table 5, erroneous values appear for the F for change in R^2 for all models except LAS – Possessive, for B for LAS—Friendship (Models 1 and 2), and for $SE B$ for LAS—Friendship and LAS – Possessive (Model 1). The updated values differ slightly from what was reported, and none of the conclusions have changed. The online version of this article has been corrected.

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