

Let's stay home and watch TV: The benefits of shared media use for close relationships

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Abstract

Sharing a social identity is a key component of interdependence in romantic relationships. In particular, sharing a social network of friends and family members with a romantic partner enhances relationship quality, but maintaining an integrated social network is not always possible. When people lack a shared circle of friends with their partners, sharing media like TV shows, books, and movies with partners may compensate for this deficit and restore closeness. Two studies examined the influence of sharing real and fictional social worlds on relationship outcomes. Our findings showed that when people lack shared friends with their romantic partners, sharing media predicts greater relationship quality and people become motivated to share media with their partners. These studies show that shared media can enhance interdependence and allow people to compensate for lacking a shared social network in the real-world.

Keywords

Close relationships, media, relationship quality, social networks, social psychology

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Promise me you're not watching *Mad Men* without me . . . that when I get out of here, we're going to binge watch it, together, in bed, with take out.—Piper, *Orange Is the New Black*.

Of all the hardships she endures while incarcerated in federal prison, Piper, a character from the Netflix series *Orange Is the New Black*, seems especially disturbed that she could not watch a television show, *Mad Men*, with her fiancé, Larry. Why would Piper long to “binge watch” *Mad Men* with Larry? Creating a shared identity is critical to interdependent relationships (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991), and an important part of fostering this shared identity involves sharing a social world of mutual friends, family members, and other social connections (Kearns & Leonard, 2004). Unfortunately, Piper's separation from Larry limits her access to the social connections she and her fiancé once shared. Thus, part of Piper's longing to binge watch *Mad Men* with Larry may stem from a desire to restore this shared social identity. In particular, we propose that sharing media like TV shows and movies with romantic partners can provide a shared social world and that this sense of sharing a social world is highly important to relationship maintenance. Moreover, we argue that the fictional social worlds provided by TV shows and movies can allow partners to compensate for lacking a shared social reality in the “real-world.”

The importance of shared social worlds

One of the cornerstones of close relationships is interdependence (Kelley, 1978, 1979). As intimacy deepens, couples increasingly share aspects of their lives. These shared experiences allow people to incorporate aspects of their partners into their sense of self, effectively expanding the boundaries of their identities to include their partner's traits, skills, and resources, a process known as “self-expansion” (Aron & Aron, 1986). Self-expansion, in turn, fosters closeness and feelings of love (Aron, Paris, & Aron, 1995).

A key aspect of self-expansion is that couples merge their social networks and create a shared social identity (Kearns & Leonard, 2004). Support from these networks positively contributes to relationship satisfaction and stability (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992; Taylor, Brown, Chatters, & Lincoln, 2012) and improves physical and mental health and well-being (Blair & Holmberg, 2008). Romantic couples who share more friends report greater satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, and optimism about their relationship's future than couples who share fewer friends (Kim & Stiff, 1991; Parks, Stan, & Eggert, 1983). Couples who share social contacts are also less likely to terminate their relationships (Hogerbrugge, Komter, & Scheepers, 2013). Furthermore, prospective data indicate that newly married couples who share a greater number of social connections report greater relationship quality a year later (Kearns & Leonard, 2004), and experimental evidence shows that engaging in a self-disclosing conversation with another couple leads couples to feel closer to their partners (Slatcher, 2010), suggesting that sharing a social network plays a causal role in enhancing relationship quality. A shared social network can also improve relationships by providing role models of successful relationships (Jackson, Kennedy, Bradbury, & Karney, 2014) and representing investments that could be lost if the relationship were to end (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998).

Taken together, these findings suggest that sharing a social network with a romantic partner strongly contributes to relationship quality and stability.

Like other forms of self-expansion with a partner, sharing an integrated social network with a partner fosters interdependence by providing a shared identity. Sharing a *social* identity in particular is important because humans are strongly motivated to share their social worlds with others (Hardin & Higgins, 1996). Shared social worlds increase people's sense of social connection and belonging (Levine & Higgins, 2001). Indeed, an increase in the desire for social connection is strongly related to an increased desire to pursue shared social worlds (Sinclair, Lowery, Hardin, & Colangelo, 2005). Conversely, lacking a shared social reality with others can lead to feelings of uncertainty, discomfort, and agitation (Echterhoff, Higgins, & Levine, 2009). Sharing social worlds with others also provides other benefits to relationships (Pinel, Long, Landau, Alexander, & Pyszczynski, 2006) such as allowing partners to confirm norms and increase their sense of connection (Clark & Kashima, 2007).

Unfortunately, sharing an integrated social network with a partner is not always possible. For example, couples in long distance relationships or couples who have recently moved away from friends and family may lack access to an integrated social network. We propose that when shared social networks are not available in the real-world, sharing media like TV shows or movies with a partner may provide an alternate pathway to fostering a shared social world and maintaining closeness. In other words, sharing media with a partner can expand couples' shared social identity by allowing them to integrate social connections with media characters and narratives into their social worlds.

The benefits of fictional social worlds

Humans are extremely resourceful at meeting their psychological needs. When they feel deprived of social connections, people find outlets to meet their needs for connection in remarkably creative ways (Jonason, Webster, & Lindsey, 2008). In the current paper, we propose that people in romantic relationships are equally resourceful in meeting their needs to share a social identity with their partners. In particular, although TV shows and movies cannot reciprocate our affection, humans' strong and flexible need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) leads people to develop psychologically meaningful connections to fictional social worlds. Indeed people are predisposed to adopt memberships in social groups readily and automatically (Tajfel, 1970), will quickly incorporate groups they do not belong to into their self-concepts (Gabriel, Kawakami, Bartak, Kang, & Mann, 2010; Kawakami et al., 2012), and need group memberships for a sense of well-being (Brewer & Caporael, 2006). Thus, the psychologically rich experience of being drawn into a narrative through a book, movie, or TV show is a perfect vehicle for psychological expansion of one's social world to include the groups contained within the narrative (Derrick, Gabriel, & Hugenberg, 2009). For example, reading the Harry Potter books may lead to immersion in the narrative such that people feel like they are a part of the wizarding world, attending Hogwarts and learning magic. Indeed, reading passages from Harry Potter leads participants to feel more like wizards on both implicit and explicit measures of identity (Gabriel & Young, 2011).

Furthermore, this immersion in a social world creates a sense of well-being and social connection that provides similar benefits as relationships with real close others, and social surrogates in the media can provide a similar sense of security as real-world attachment figures (Keefer, Landau, & Sullivan, 2014). Attachments to media figures are characterized by the same dimensions of commitment as close bonds with humans, including satisfaction, investment size, and quality of alternatives (Branch, Wilson, & Agnew, 2013). As such, the social world provided by media like TV shows and movies can buffer people from rejection (Derrick et al., 2009), restore depleted self-control (Derrick, 2013), and allow people to move closer to their desired self-image (Derrick, Gabriel, & Tippin, 2008; Young, Gabriel, & Hollar, 2013; Young, Gabriel, & Sechrist, 2012). In sum, media can provide a fictional social world and fulfill similar needs as close others in the real-world.

Overview of the present studies

Based on these findings, we argue that media may enable people to create a shared social world with romantic partners that provides many of the benefits of sharing a social network in the real-world. Activities that allow couples to expand their sense of shared identity are crucial to fostering love and intimacy between partners at all stages of relationship development (Aron, Norman, Aron, McKenna, & Heyman, 2000). Likewise, sharing a fictional social world in media, in turn, may enhance relationship quality. The suggestion that shared media use can benefit relationships is not without precedent. For example, Rogge and colleagues found that an intervention in which couples watched and discussed relationship-themed movies was as effective as skills-based interventions in preventing relationship dissolution across 3 years (Rogge, Cobb, Lawrence, Johnson, & Bradbury, 2013). Drawing on concepts from self-expansion theory (Aron & Aron, 1986), the current paper proposes that these benefits occur at least in part because of the self-expanding nature of sharing media with a partner, such that sharing media allows people to construct a shared social identity with their partners. Critically, sharing media may be especially beneficial for people who lack a shared social network with their partners, because forging mutual connections to the fictional social worlds in TV shows and movies may allow them to compensate for lacking a shared social identity with their partners in the real-world. In particular, we predict that the shared social identity that viewing media with a partner creates can enhance closeness and commitment to partners, which should be especially beneficial to people who lack a shared real-world social network with their partners.

In two studies, we used correlational and experimental methods to examine the influence of sharing real and fictional social worlds on relationship outcomes. Study 1 tested the hypothesis that sharing media would predict greater relationship quality when romantic partners lacked a shared social network. Study 2 experimentally tested the hypothesis that perceiving a lack of shared friends with a partner would motivate people to share media with their partners, which would in turn promote greater relationship quality.

Study 1

The first, correlational study examined whether sharing media with a partner would promote greater relationship quality among participants who lacked shared friends with their partners. We also sought to rule out the possibility that sharing media promotes relationship quality simply because it allows couples to spend more time together. In this initial test of our hypothesis, we used G*Power (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009) to estimate an appropriate sample size of 250–300 participants to achieve adequate power ($\beta = .80$) to detect a small effect ($\eta^2 = .03$).

Method

Participants

In total, 259 students (97 men and 162 women) in exclusive romantic relationships at least 4 months in length participated in the study. Participants were recruited from the introductory psychology participant pool at a public university in the Northeastern United States. Participants were involved in their relationships for 16.73 months on average ($SD = 20.95$) and were 19.23 years old on average ($SD = 2.61$). Participants were predominately White (54.4%) or Asian American (30.1%), with the remainder identifying as African American (6%), Hispanic (5.2%), or another ethnicity (2%). Participants were compensated with partial course credit.

Procedure

Participants first reported demographic information and descriptive information about their relationships (e.g., relationship length, the average number of hours spent with their partners on a typical day). Next, they completed measures of relationship quality. Participants also completed a measure assessing the extent to which they shared friends with their partners and a measure of shared media use (which were counterbalanced). Participants also completed other measures not relevant to the study's hypotheses (e.g., measures of attachment style, need to belong, self-esteem,¹ and open-ended descriptive measures of their social networks).

Measures

Relationship quality. Participants completed a 5-item measure ($\alpha = .92$) of their feelings of closeness to their partners and a 5-item measure ($\alpha = .92$) of their perceptions of their partner's feelings of closeness (e.g., "I feel [My partner feels] extremely attached to my partner [me]," Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes, & Kusche, 2002). Participants rated each item on a 9-point scale (1 = *not at all true*, 9 = *completely true*). Participants also completed 3 items assessing ($\alpha = .94$) commitment to their partners and 3 items assessing ($\alpha = .93$) their perceptions of their partner's commitment to them (e.g., "I am [My partner is] committed to maintaining our relationship," Rusbult et al., 1998). Participants rated their agreement with each item on a 9-point scale (1 = *do not agree at all*, 9 = *agree completely*). Finally, participants completed 4 items ($\alpha = .87$) assessing the

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations for variables in Study 1.

	Mean	SD	Correlations							
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Shared media	3.52	0.84	—	.22***	.29***	.24***	.35***	.13*	.32***	.18**
2. Shared friends	4.94	1.28		—	.30***	.38***	.34***	.43***	.34***	.09
3. Centrality	5.34	1.14			—	.77***	.81***	.50***	.56***	.12 [†]
4. Own commitment	7.67	1.97				—	.85***	.66***	.55	.04
5. Own closeness	6.62	2.03					—	.59***	.73***	.07
6. Partner commitment	7.93	1.63						—	.73***	.08
7. Partner closeness	6.97	1.86							—	.20***
8. Time spent with partner	16.73	18.20								—

Note. SD = standard deviation.

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

centrality of their partner to their lives (e.g., “Among the things that give your life meaning, how important is your relationship?” Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). Participants answered each question on 7-point scales (e.g., 1 = *the least important*; 7 = *the most important*).

Shared friends. Participants rated the extent to which they shared friends with their partner on 3 items ($\alpha = .74$; e.g., “To what extent would you say that you and your partner are in the same social circles?”). Participants answered each question on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).

Shared media use. Participants completed an 18-item measure ($\alpha = .90$) of sharing media with partners. Participants rated how frequently they watched movies/TV shows and read books with their partners, how much they enjoyed sharing movies/TV shows/books with their partners, and the importance of sharing movies/TV shows/books with their partners. All items were assessed on 7-point scales.

Results and discussion

Because we were interested in the relationship between shared social worlds and global relationship quality, we standardized and averaged the measures of own and perceived partner closeness, own and perceived partner commitment, and partner centrality into a composite ($\alpha = .91$, $r_s = .50-.85$). Table 1 presents descriptive information and correlations between the predictors and each component of the relationship quality composite. We regressed this composite on the standardized measures of shared friends, shared media, and their interaction. Table 2 presents the model coefficients. As expected, sharing a greater number of friends and sharing a greater amount of media both independently predicted greater relationship quality. In other words, sharing a social world—either real or fictional—is associated with better relationship functioning. These main

Table 2. Regression coefficients for model predicting relationship quality in Study 1.

Predictor	B	t	95% CI	f^2
Adjusted R^2	.24***			
Intercept	.02	0.62	[-.07, .12]	
Shared friends	.31	6.35**	[.21, .40]	.16
Shared media	.22	4.55**	[.12, .32]	.09
Shared Friends \times Shared Media	-.10	-2.26*	[-.18, -.01]	.02

Note. CI = confidence interval.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

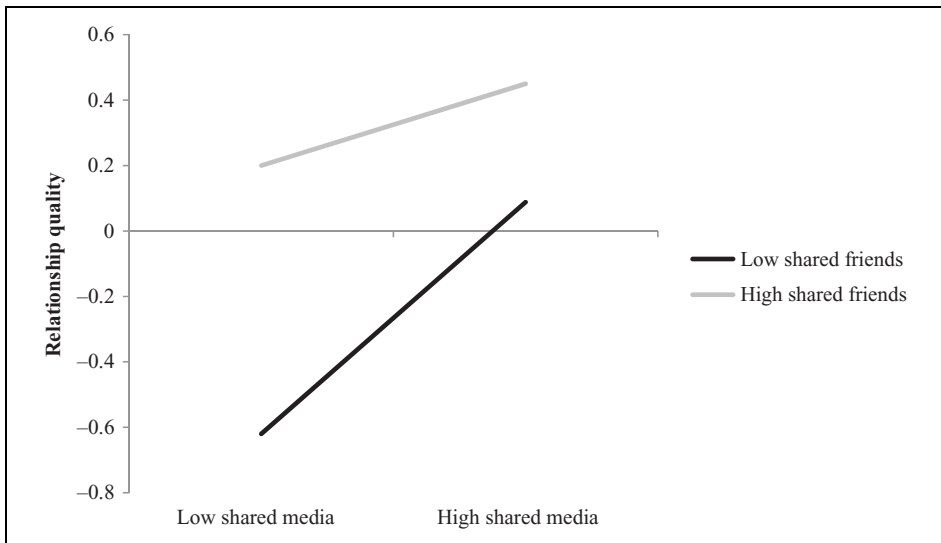


Figure 1. Predicted relationship quality scores for the shared friends by shared media interaction in Study 1. Scores on the Y-axis are predicted values for the composite of standardized measures of partner centrality, own and partner closeness, and own and partner commitment.

effects, however, were qualified by the predicted interaction between shared media and shared friends.²

We decomposed this interaction at high and low values of shared friends (1 *SD* above/below the mean; see Figure 1). When participants shared many friends with their partners, sharing media weakly but positively predicted relationship quality, $b = .12$, $t(252) = 1.95$, $p = .054$, 95% CI [-.002, .254], $f^2 = .01$. However, as predicted, when participants shared few friends with partners, sharing media strongly predicted greater relationship quality, $b = .32$, $t(252) = 4.85$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.19, .44], $f^2 = .09$. In other words, among people who reported sharing fewer mutual friends with partners, sharing media more frequently was associated with greater interdependence, closeness, and confidence in the relationship.

In sum, our findings support our hypothesis that sharing media can promote relationship quality, especially among people who share few friends with their partners in the real-world. However, one potential alternative explanation of our findings is that sharing media might bolster relationship quality merely because it allows people to spend more time with their partners, not because it leads people to feel a shared connection to the social world in media, as we suggest. To rule out this possibility, we included the average time participants spent with their partners each day and its interactions with shared friends and shared media in the regression analysis. As expected, the magnitude of the predicted interaction was not changed by the inclusion of these variables, $b = -.09$, $t(248) = -2.11$, $p = .036$, 95% CI $[-.18, -.01]$, $f^2 = .02$, nor did any of these variables significantly moderate the reported effects (all $f^2 < .01$).

Study 2

Study 1 suggested that sharing media with romantic partners may allow people who lack an integrated social network to enhance closeness and intimacy. In particular, sharing media with a partner may allow people to compensate for lacking a shared group of friends with their partners. In other words, sharing media may allow people who lack a shared social network to foster a shared social identity with partners that deepens interdependence and promotes closeness. If sharing media can compensate for lacking shared friends in the real-world, then people should be motivated to share media with their partners when their shared social connections with partners are diminished. Study 2 tested this hypothesis experimentally by investigating whether manipulating perceived real-world social connections would influence people's motivation to share media with their romantic partners.

Specifically, participants were led to think about the friends they shared (high shared friends) versus did not share (low shared friends) with their partners and then completed measures assessing their desire to share media with their partners and to promote their relationships by increasing closeness, commitment, and confidence in the partner's caring. We expected that reminding participants of the friends they did not share with their partners would motivate them to share media with their partners. We also expected that imagining sharing media with a partner and enhancing perceptions of mutual enjoyment of media might allow participants to mentally simulate the experience of sharing media with their partners, which may in turn enhance closeness and intimacy. Based on this logic, we reasoned that in the low shared friends condition, striving to share media with partners and thereby restoring the sense of sharing a social world with a partner might in turn increase closeness, commitment, and so on. In other words, we expected an indirect effect of the shared friends manipulation on relationship quality, such that the effect of the shared friends manipulation on perceived relationship quality would be mediated by increases in motivation to share media with a partner.

Although we primarily hypothesized a main effect of shared friends on desire to share media and its indirect effect on relationship quality, we also explored the possibility that these processes might be moderated by the degree to which participants were generally interested in media. People who are generally interested in media may be especially likely to pursue sharing media with their partners when their sense of sharing a social

world is threatened. Although people who are not generally interested in media may still benefit from entering a social world with their partners, as Study 1 suggests, these individuals may be less likely to think of seeking out shared media when threatened. Furthermore, these individuals may be especially likely to experience greater relationship closeness and commitment after seeking out shared media with their partners. We tested this hypothesis in our mediational analyses.

Method

Participants

We recruited 131 participants from the introductory psychology participant pool at a large university in the Northeastern United States. Three participants were dropped because they were not in romantic relationships, leaving 128 (57 men and 71 women). Participants had been involved in their relationships 19.22 months on average ($SD = 15.09$). Most participants were White (65.6%), with the remainder identifying as Asian American (18.9%), African American (9%), Hispanic (4.9%), or another ethnicity (4.5%). Participants were compensated with partial course credit.

Procedure

Participants first reported demographic and descriptive information about their relationships. Next, participants completed the critical shared friends manipulation.³ In the *high shared friends* condition, participants were asked to write for 4 min about the friends they share with their partners, including the activities they engaged in with mutual friends and friends of their partner with whom they had grown close. In the *low shared friends* condition, participants were asked to write for 4 min about the friends they did *not* share with their partners, including the activities they engaged in with their friends and new friends they had made since meeting their partners.⁴ Next, participants reported their desire to share media with their partners. Participants then completed measures of relationship quality, including the measures of closeness, commitment, and partner centrality from Study 1 and measures of inclusion of other in the self and relationship satisfaction as well as some filler measures (i.e., ratings of their own and their partners' personal characteristics). Finally, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Measures

Motivation to share media. Participants completed a 7-item measure of their desire to share media with their partners (e.g., "Watch one of my favorite movies with my partner"). Participants rated how appealing each activity was at that moment on a 7-point scale (1 = *does not sound appealing at all*, 7 = *sounds extremely appealing*). Participants also completed a 12-item measure of their perceptions of different media. Participants were asked to name their own favorite movie, their favorite TV show, their partner's favorite movie, and their partner's favorite TV show. Participants rated how often they and their partner watched each movie/show, how much they and their partner enjoyed the movie/

show, and how entertaining they and their partner found the movie/show on 7-point scales. These items were averaged into composites representing participants' enjoyment of their partner's favorite movies/shows ($\alpha = .80$) and perceptions of the partner's enjoyment of the participant's favorite movies/shows ($\alpha = .73$). We created a composite of participants' desire to share media with partners, enjoyment of partners' favorite media, and perceptions of partners' enjoyment of participants' favorite media by standardizing and averaging these variables ($\alpha = .60$, $r_s = .21-.43$).

General interest in media. Participants also completed 6 items rating the extent to which they were generally interested in media on 7-point scales (e.g. "How often do you watch your favorite movie?"). These items were averaged into a composite representing general interest in media ($\alpha = .69$).

Motivation to engage in other activities. Eight items ($\alpha = .66$) assessed participants' desire to spend time doing other activities with their partners that were unrelated to sharing media (e.g., "Have dinner with my partner at a restaurant"). Participants rated these items on the 7-point scale used for the desire to share media items.

Inclusion of other in the self. Participants completed a 1-item measure assessing the degree to which they included their partners in their sense of self (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). Participants were asked to choose which of the seven progressively overlapping circles best represented how close or connected they felt to their partners at that time. The pairs of circles ranged from completely separate to almost completely overlapping.

Relationship satisfaction. Participants completed a 4-item measure of satisfaction with their relationship from Murray, Holmes, and Griffin (1996). This scale included items such as "I am extremely happy with my current romantic relationship," to which participants responded on an 8-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 8 = *completely true*).

Results

Motivation to share media

The motivation to share media composite was regressed on the effects codes representing the shared friends manipulation (1 = *high shared friends*, -1 = *low shared friends*), participants' general interest in media (centered),⁵ and their two-way interaction. Table 3 presents the model coefficients. There was a significant main effect of participants' media interest, such that people who were more interested in media in general also reported a greater desire to share media with their partners. Although there was no main effect of the shared friends manipulation, there was a significant interaction between media interest and shared friends (see Figure 2).

We examined the simple effects of shared friends at high and low levels of media interest (1 *SD* above/below the mean). When participants were more interested in media, the shared friends manipulation significantly influenced their desire to share media with their partners, $b = -.24$, $t(124) = -3.06$, $p = .003$, 95% CI $[-.385, -.084]$, $f^2 = .07$. As

Table 3. Regression coefficients predicting motivation to share media in Study 2.

Predictor	B	t	95% CI	f ²
Adjusted R ²	.31***			
Intercept	-0.03	-0.58	[-.14, .08]	
Media interest	0.51	6.96**	[.37, .66]	.39
Shared friends	-0.06	-1.01	[-.17, .05]	.008
Media Interest × Shared Friends	-0.24	-3.28**	[-.39, -.10]	.08

Note. CI = confidence interval.

** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

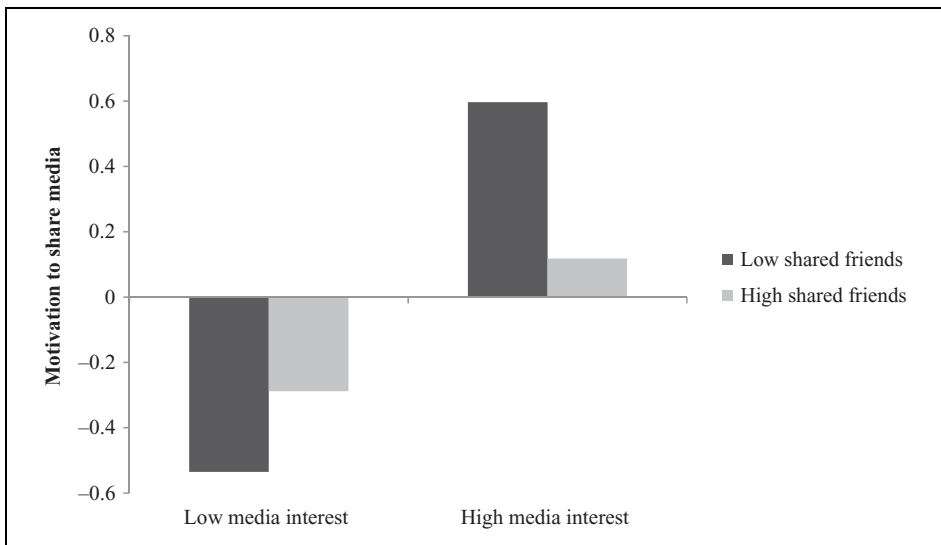


Figure 2. Predicted motivation to share media scores for the general media interest by shared friends interaction in Study 2. Scores on the Y-axis are predicted values for the composite of standardized measures of desire to share media with partners, liking of partners' favorite media, and partners' perceived liking of participants' favorite media. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

predicted, participants who were reminded of friends they did *not* share with their partners were more motivated to share media with partners than participants who were reminded of friends they did share with their partners. When participants were generally less interested in media, perceptions of the degree to which participants shared friends with their partners did not affect their motivation to share media with partners, $b = .12$, $t(124) = 1.58$, $p = .117$, 95% CI [-.031, .277], $f^2 = .02$.

Mediational analyses predicting relationship quality

We next examined whether the shared friends manipulation also enhanced relationship quality via its effect on participants' desire to share media with their partners. To index

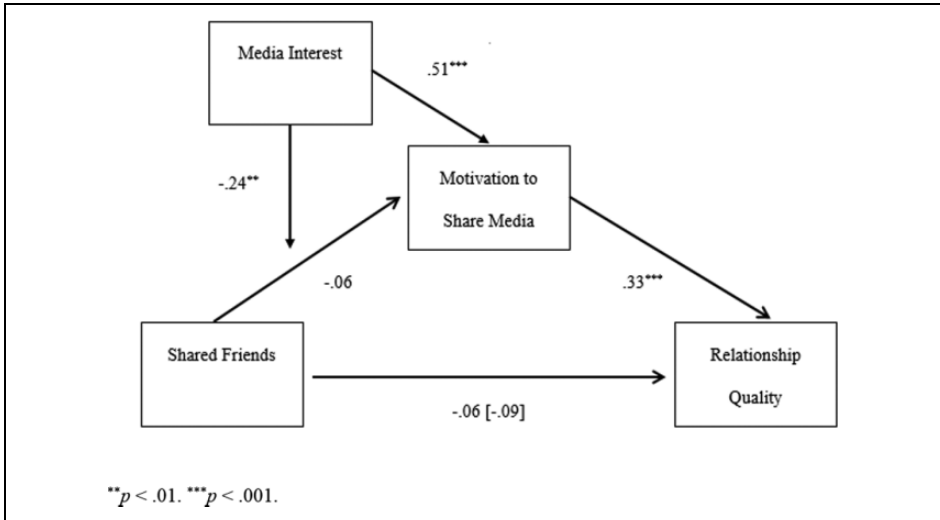


Figure 3. Unstandardized estimates for the moderated mediation model predicting relationship quality in Study 2. The estimate in brackets represents the direct effect of the shared friends manipulation on relationship quality.

relationship quality, we created a composite of participants' own feelings of closeness, commitment, partner centrality, and satisfaction and their ratings of their partner's closeness and commitment by standardizing and averaging these variables ($\alpha = .91$, $r_s = .29-.74$). Conceptually, we expected that undermining people's sense of sharing a social network with partners would motivate them to share media with partners, and contemplating sharing media with partners would in turn promote more positive sentiments about the relationship. Given the moderating role of general media interest on participants' desire to share media, we also predicted that this mediational pathway may only be evident among people who were generally more interested in consuming media. A regression analysis showed that the direct effect of the shared friends manipulation was not a significant predictor of relationship quality, although it was in the expected direction, $b = -.092$, $t(127) = -1.34$, $p = .18$, 95% CI $[-.23, .04]$, $f^2 = .01$. Although this direct effect was not significant, our predictions primarily concerned the indirect effect of shared friends on relationship quality via participants' increased desire to share media with their partners. Thus, we next tested whether the interaction exerted an indirect effect on relationship quality through desire to share media (see Rucker, Preacher, Tormala, & Petty, 2011 for arguments in favor of testing hypothesized indirect effects when no direct effect is present). We used the PROCESS macro in SPSS to test this moderated mediation model (Model 7; Hayes, 2013; see Figure 3). As in our regression analysis, general media interest and shared friends interacted to predict the proposed mediator, motivation to share media. Moreover, consistent with mediation, the indirect effect of shared friends on relationship promotion through increased motivation to share media was significant, $b = -.08$, 95% bootstrap CI $[-.18, -.024]$. Inconsistent

with reverse mediation, the indirect effect of the media enjoyment by shared friends interaction through relationship quality did not significantly predict motivation to share media, $b = -.05$, 95% bootstrap CI $[-.13, .005]$.

In addition, this mediational pathway depended on participants' level of interest in consuming media. In particular, examining the conditional indirect effects of shared friends at different levels of media interest also revealed that at high (but not low) levels of media interest (1 *SD* above the mean), contemplating sharing media with a partner significantly mediated the effect of the shared friends manipulation on relationship quality, $b = -.08$, 95% bootstrap CI $[-.19, -.020]$. In other words, when participants were more interested in media in general, undermining participants' sense of sharing friends with their partners appeared to enable people to view their relationships more positively in part *because* it led them to contemplate sharing media with their partners. Although it is not possible to determine causality because these two constructs were measured rather than manipulated, this mediational finding suggests that simply imagining sharing media with a partner might allow people to restore closeness when their shared social worlds are diminished.

Alternative explanations

Our findings revealed that when participants who were more interested in media in general contemplated their lack of mutual social connections with their partners, they became motivated to share media with their partners. In turn, contemplating sharing media with partners increased these participants' positive feelings toward their relationships. However, our effects may also have arisen because reminders of limited shared social connections with partners increased participants' desire to simply spend time with their partners. To rule out this possibility, we regressed participants' desire to engage in other activities with their partners onto shared friends, general media interest, and their interactions. Inconsistent with this explanation, the shared friends manipulation did not significantly affect participants' desire to spend time with their partners doing nonmedia activities, $b = -.04$, $t(124) = -0.88$, $p = .378$, 95% CI $[-.146, .056]$, $f^2 = .006$, nor did the media interest by shared friends interaction, $b = -.10$, $t(124) = -1.48$, $p = .142$, 95% CI $[-.235, .034]$, $f^2 = .02$. Finally, desire to spend time with partners did not mediate the effect of the shared friends by media interest interaction on relationship quality when it was added as a parallel mediator to the moderated mediation model depicted in Figure 3 (indirect effect: $b = -.04$, 95% bootstrap CI $[-.16, .001]$). Therefore, it appears that undermining participants' shared social identity with partners led to a specific motivation to share media, not to simply spend more time with partners.

In sum, Study 2 showed that perceiving a lack of shared social connections with a partner motivated participants to share media with their partners, which in turn promoted more positive perceptions of their relationships. Thus, this study suggests that people may actively compensate for lacking a shared social network with partners by seeking out shared media. Unlike Study 1, the effects in Study 2 were moderated by participants' general interest in media. In other words, although Study 1 suggested that anyone who does not share actual social worlds with their partners may benefit from sharing media,

Study 2 suggests that those who are generally drawn to media may be particularly motivated to turn to media when their shared social worlds are undermined.

General discussion

Sharing experiences with a romantic partner is critical to deepening interdependence and promoting love and intimacy in close relationships. This process is most frequently conceptualized as sharing experiences as dyad, like trying a new hobby or revealing private thoughts to a partner (Reissman, Aron, & Bergen, 1993), but gaining a complete understanding of close relationships requires looking beyond the dyad and examining how relationships function within a broader social context (Gomillion, Gabriel, & Murray, 2014). The current research adds to evidence demonstrating the importance of engaging in activities with one's partner that expand the boundaries of the self and allow couples to turn two separate individuals into an interdependent "we." Building on self-expansion theory (Aron & Aron, 1986) and evidence that humans are flexible in meeting their needs to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Gardner, Pickett, & Knowles, 2005), our studies show that sharing the social connections provided by TV shows and movies can deepen intimacy and closeness. Furthermore, these experiences may provide couples who lack access to a shared social network of real-world friends and family members with an alternate means of establishing this shared social identity: watching TV shows and movies together.

Study 1 demonstrated that sharing media with partners predicted greater relationship quality, particularly when participants shared few friends with their partners. Extending these findings, Study 2 found experimental evidence that undermining people's sense of sharing a social network with partners increases their motivation to share media with partners. This finding suggests that perceiving limited shared social connections with partners may motivate people to share media with their partners as a means of maintaining a shared social world and restoring relationship quality. Consistent with this idea, undermining people's sense of sharing friends with partners also indirectly increased participants' positive sentiments toward their relationships through participants' increased motivation to share media with partners, such that people were able to promote their relationships because they contemplated sharing media with their partners.

Implications, directions for future research, and limitations

Previously, sharing a social world with a partner has been conceptualized in terms of sharing real-world social experiences (Kearns & Leonard, 2004). However, creating these experiences may not always be possible. Fortunately, humans are remarkably flexible in finding ways to fulfill their social needs (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). When people's need for social connections are undermined, they turn to a variety of social surrogates that provide alternate pathways to meet this need, including comfort food (Troisi & Gabriel, 2011), photos of loved ones (Gardner et al., 2005), pets (McConnell, Brown, Shoda, Stayton, & Martin, 2011), and media like TV shows and movies (Derrick et al., 2009). The current studies extend these findings to reveal how people in intimate

relationships might also strategically use alternate means of social connection to deepen intimacy with romantic partners.

Although some scholars and public figures warn that media undermines social ties (Green & Brock, 1998), media like TV shows and movies are a contemporary manifestation of humans' fundamental need to engage in shared social experiences (Shteynberg, 2015). Moreover, humans have created shared social experiences through narrative and performance long before the advent of modern media. Our findings support the growing evidence that like other forms of narrative, contemporary media benefits people by providing a rich, psychologically meaningful social world (Derrick et al., 2008, 2009; Gabriel & Young, 2011; Young et al., 2012, 2013). The current research extends these findings to show that fictional social worlds can also bring relationship partners closer together. In particular, sharing media may help maintain a sense of sharing a social world with partners, which can particularly benefit relationships that lack an integrated social network.

The current research primarily focused on the benefits of watching media with a partner present. However, it is possible that partners who share a mutually beloved TV show or movie may still be able to benefit from its social world even when they are separated. In turn, separately catching up with mutual "friends" in TV shows and movies may allow partners to feel more connected across distances, just as eating comfort food can remind people of distant family members and bolster their sense of belonging (Troisi & Gabriel, 2011). This means of connection may especially benefit romantic couples in long distance relationships by allowing them to maintain a shared social world even if they lack access to an integrated social network.

The current research focused on how sharing media benefits relationships by providing a shared social world. However, it seems likely that sharing media can benefit relationships in other ways as well. For example, like real-world social networks, media may affirm relationships and provide positive role models of successful relationships. Such benefits may be especially important for people in nontraditional or marginalized relationships, such as same-sex couples, who may lack such role models in their actual social networks (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011). A critical next step for future research is to explore the potential benefits of media for relationships by directly manipulating sharing media with a partner.

The current studies only measured one partner's perspective on the benefits of sharing media. Additional research should also take a dyadic perspective on the benefits of sharing media for couples. Such a perspective may provide new insights into how couples utilize media. In addition, future research may reveal limits to the amount of shared media that is beneficial to romantic relationships. In other words, sharing a moderate amount of media with a partner may be beneficial to relationships, as we found, but excessively sharing media may actually undermine relationships by isolating partners from their real-world social networks and limiting opportunities to share other types of social experiences. Consistent with the idea that there may be limits to sharing media as a strategy for relationship maintenance, Study 2 revealed a potential boundary condition for the benefits of sharing media for relationships. Specifically, this study found that only people who were more interested in media in general were motivated to

share media with partners. People who are not particularly interested in media may instead use other kinds of social surrogates to foster a shared social world with partners when their social networks are less integrated, including reminders of loved ones like photographs or comfort food.

Conclusion

Although Piper's longing to watch *Mad Men* with her fiancé Larry in *Orange Is the New Black* might at first seem shallow, the experience that Piper desired may actually have profound benefits for her relationship. Our research suggests that watching beloved media together may strengthen relationships when partners lack a shared circle of friends and family members. In this way, the current studies highlight the remarkable flexibility with which close relationship partners maintain their shared social worlds and promote satisfying, lasting relationships.

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Notes

1. When these personality variables were included in the model predicting relationship quality, all predicted main effects and interactions remained significant.
2. The predicted interaction was also significant for most of the individual scales in the composite, including participants' own feelings of closeness and commitment, perceived partner commitment, and partner centrality (f^2 s = .02–.04). However, the interaction did not significantly predict perceived partner closeness (f^2 = .01).
3. Study 2 also manipulated perceived similarity as a possible alternative explanation for the expected findings. Specifically, thinking about deficits in shared social connections might motivate people to share media with partners because it makes them feel less similar to their partners as individuals. However, we argue that sharing media with a partner fulfills fundamentally *social* needs that go beyond mere similarity. We manipulated similarity prior to the shared friends manipulation by asking participants to complete several measures that assessed "social surgency," a fictional personality dimension. Participants in the *high-similarity* condition were informed that their social surgency scores were more similar to their partner's scores than the average couple. Participants in the *low-similarity* condition were informed that their social surgency scores were less similar than the average couple. As expected, this variable did not moderate the effects of shared friends or have any significant effects on our outcome measures.
4. In a pilot study, 54 participants completed the same essays, then reported on their mood, their shared social connections with partners, and closeness to their own friends. As expected,

- participants reported that they shared fewer friends with partners in the low shared friends ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.34$) condition than in the high shared friends condition ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 1.38$), $t(52) = 2.03$, $p = .047$, $r = .27$. Also as expected, the shared friends manipulation did not affect participants' mood or feelings of closeness to their own friends, $t_s < 1$. These findings suggest that the shared friends manipulation effectively altered participants' perceptions of their shared friends with partners.
5. Although this moderator was measured after the two manipulations, an analysis of variance confirmed that it was not affected by the similarity manipulation, the shared friends manipulation, or their interaction (all $F_s < 1$).

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