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Media Portrayals of Romantic Relationship Maintenance: A Content Analysis of Relational Maintenance Behaviors on Prime-Time Television

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Maintenance behaviors play an important role in sustaining relational states, especially within committed romantic relationships. Limited research, however, has considered media portrayals of these behaviors. From the framework of social cognitive theory, this content analysis examined relational maintenance behaviors portrayed by committed romantic couples (heterosexual, gay, and lesbian) on prime-time network television. The frequency of maintenance behaviors (positivity, understanding, self-disclosure, assurances, relationships talks, tasks, and networks) varied by type, valence, program genre, and couple type (married/civil union or cohabiting). Results indicated that comedies featured more frequent relationship maintenance behaviors than dramas. In addition, comedies exhibited more frequent negative maintenance

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behaviors than dramas. Differences also existed between couple regarding the types of maintenance behavior exhibited. No sex differences in maintenance behaviors were observed between male and female characters.

INTRODUCTION

Romantic partners rely on maintenance behaviors to sustain their relationship. These behaviors, which include demonstrating positivity toward one's partner or helping with household responsibilities, allow couples to develop their bond and maintain the relationship (Canary & Dainton, 2006; Stafford, 2011). Although considerable research has been conducted regarding the interpersonal use of maintenance behaviors (see Dindia, 2003), few studies have examined how media depict maintenance in romantic relationships.

This study investigates how relational maintenance behaviors are portrayed on prime-time television. Social cognitive theory (SCT) asserts that individuals learn behaviors as a result of viewing mediated models (Bandura, 1977, 2001). Observers may then enact these learned behaviors in their own relationships. Previous studies have challenged the accuracy of televised depictions of relationships, however (e.g., Eyal & Finnerty, 2007, 2009), and several studies have noted deleterious outcomes from consumption of these relational portrayals (Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007; Osborn, 2012; Segrin & Nabi, 2002). Thus, this study employed content analysis to ascertain the nature of romantic relationship maintenance on prime time television and identify the type of behaviors being modeled for viewers.

RELATIONSHIP MAINTENANCE

Relationship maintenance entails actions or behaviors that individuals engage in to sustain a specified relational state (Canary & Dainton, 2006). For example, two long-distance friends may engage in weekly phone calls to keep their friendship alive or spouses may visit a therapist to revitalize their marriage. Canary and Stafford (1994) noted that maintenance is an ongoing process; without it, relationships will naturally deteriorate. Maintenance behaviors vary by relationship type, the stage of the relationship, individual differences, and relational idiosyncrasies.

Several typologies have been developed to examine how maintenance behaviors differ between individuals and across relationship types. Stafford's (2011) relational maintenance behavior measure (RMBM), an expansion of Canary and Stafford's (1992) original conceptualization, elaborates seven

factors: positivity, understanding, assurances, self-disclosure, relationship talks, tasks, and networks. *Positivity* refers to using a cheerful or optimistic tone when interacting. *Understanding* refers to instances of apologizing, not being judgmental, or showing forgiveness to another. *Assurances* include any indication that an individual would like to remain in the relationship such as talk about the future (e.g., plans, events, anniversaries, or decisions) and expressions of liking or love. *Self-disclosure* refers to an offer or an encouragement of talk about thoughts, feelings, or fears. *Relationship talks* entail dialogue about the quality of the relationship and individual partners' feelings toward the relationship. *Tasks* refer to engaging in defined responsibilities or sharing in joint responsibilities of the relationship. This factor also relates to the motivation or intention one has to engage in the tasks expected of them. Tasks specifically look at measures of equity in the relationship. Last, the factor of *networks* examines instances where the couple engages with family members or mutual friends, including spending time with others and seeking advice from their respective networks.

These maintenance behaviors have been studied by interpersonal scholars but have yet to be examined in terms of mediated portrayals. The impact of these portrayals on perceptions of relationships is particularly important considering Bandura's (1977, 2001) SCT. If and when these behaviors learned from television are applied to interpersonal relationships, they may be advantageous or detrimental to keeping a relationship intact.

SOCIAL COGNITIVE THEORY

SCT argues that individuals can learn by observing behaviors of others (Bandura, 1977, 2001). Television offers ample opportunities for individuals to observe the behavior of others. Researchers have found that viewers of romantic programming are more likely to hold idealistic expectations of marriage (Segrin & Nabi, 2002) and have lower marital commitment (Osborn, 2012). In addition, heavy viewers of reality dating television shows are more likely to support the attitudes toward dating exhibited by the characters, such as "Men are sex driven," "Women are sexual objects," and "Dating is a game" (Ferris et al., 2007). These findings suggest that television portrayals can influence the way that individuals view romantic relationships. As a result, many researchers have argued that it is important to understand the kinds of behaviors television programs are modeling for viewers (Eyal & Finnerty, 2007, 2009; Holz Ivory, Gibson, & Ivory, 2009; Hust, Brown, & L'Engle, 2008; Nabi & Clark, 2008).

Replication of these learned behaviors depends on four factors: identification, vicarious reinforcement, outcome expectancies, and self-efficacy.

Identification is a process by which an observer experiences a psychological connection with a model due to perceptions of similarity in demographics, experiences, or goals (Bandura, 1977). This factor has been shown to increase the likelihood of an individual enacting a learned behavior even when that behavior is negative. As a result, it is vital that we understand not only what behaviors are being exhibited on television but also *who* is modeling these behaviors. In our study, this examination would include analyses of whether sex and relationship type (i.e., married/civil union or cohabitating couples) play a role in the type or frequency of behaviors modeled.

A second factor of SCT, *vicarious reinforcement,* proposes that individuals can observe the positive or negative outcomes experienced by models and evaluate the likelihood that these outcomes would happen to them should they perform the behavior (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963). For example, if television viewers see a relational maintenance act of self-disclosure that is rewarded with reciprocity and reassurances, viewers may be more likely to imitate the behavior. This vicarious reinforcement leads to the development of *outcome expectancies*, or beliefs of what would happen were the observer to encounter a similar situation. In terms of relational maintenance, viewers could be exposed to situations where engaging in relationship talk results in nothing but pain and frustration, thus discouraging a viewer from enacting a behavior that could have benefited their current relationship. The final factor, *self-efficacy*, refers to the extent to which an individual believes that he or she can reproduce a behavior and experience similar outcomes (Bandura, 1977). For example, if a woman identifies with a TV character that unclogs a sink drain for an appreciative spouse, the woman might feel like she, too, could perform this task and fix a household problem for her partner. Seeing a variety of characters perform similar maintenance behaviors on television may bolster viewers' levels of efficacy for those behaviors and encourage imitation. Given the predictions of SCT, it is important to assess how relationship maintenance is enacted on television.

MEDIA PORTRAYALS OF ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

Several studies have examined the types of romantic relationships portrayed on television and the effects of those portrayals on the viewing population (e.g., Osborn, 2012; Segrin & Nabi, 2002; Signorielli, 1991). These studies suggest that images of romantic relationships on television often produce conflicting portrayals. Sitcoms often depict romantic relationships as happy and satisfied, whereas dramas seem to focus on negative aspects, including divorce and adultery (Signorielli, 1991). Signorielli (1991) analyzed the

effects of these portrayals on adolescent viewers' perceptions of marriage. She found that adolescents who viewed idealized portrayals of marriage were more likely to say that they wanted to get married, have children, and stay with their partner than those who were not exposed to these portrayals. However, because of the conflicting portrayals presented on television, adolescents also questioned whether the idealized portrayals were accurate representations of reality.

A later look at television portrayals of marriage by Segrin and Nabi (2002) sought to determine how these portrayals influenced idealistic expectations of marriage. They found that although television viewing in general was not associated with romanticized portrayals of marriage, consuming certain genres of programming (e.g., romantic comedies and soap operas) was. Genre-specific programming is creating outcome expectancies, often leaving viewers with idealized and romanticized views of marriage.

In addition, Osborn (2012) found that married television viewers who believed romantic relationships are accurately depicted on television had lower levels of commitment to their partners and deemed relationship alternatives as more attractive than viewers who did not perceive television to accurately portray romantic relationships. Those who believed television is accurate also reported that marriage had greater costs and fewer benefits than those who were skeptical of television depictions.

Although a content analysis has not yet been conducted on relational maintenance behaviors, several content analyses have examined other aspects of relationships. For instance, Eyal and Finnerty (2009) found that portrayals of sexual intercourse on television tend to have emotional consequences for the characters but also tend to be positive. In addition, Holz Ivory et al. (2009) looked at heterosexual and homosexual couples on television and found evidence that both couple types are portrayed as gendered. A third content analysis by Pardun, L'Engle, and Brown (2005) examined the media consumed by teenagers and found that 11% included sexual content. Similarly, a content analysis conducted by The Kaiser Family Foundation from 2004 to 2005 found that the amount of sexual scenes on television has increased by 96% since their 1997–1998 analysis (Kunkel, Eyal, Finnerty, Biely, & Donnerstein, 2005). These studies suggest that romantic relationships are being portrayed on television and that the various aspects of these relationships should be identified.

CURRENT STUDY

Although scholars agree that individuals can learn behaviors from mediated models, additional research is needed to examine this process within the

context of relationship maintenance depictions. The first step is to determine what modeled behaviors are prevalent on television. To our knowledge, a content analysis has not yet been conducted on the portrayal of relational maintenance behaviors on television. Thus, this study seeks to determine how behaviors outlined by the RMBM (Stafford, 2011) are reflected in television portrayals of romantic relationships. Based on these concepts, we propose the following exploratory question:

> RQ1: How frequently is each type of relational maintenance behavior (positivity, understanding, assurances, self-disclosure, relationship talks, tasks, networks) portrayed on prime-time television?

In addition to examining the frequency of these behaviors, it is important to assess the valence of these behaviors to account for negative maintenance behaviors or interactions with mixed messages (e.g., a compliment given in a sarcastic tone; Ayers, 1983; Dainton & Gross, 2008; Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Dindia & Baxter, 1987). Even though negative maintenance behaviors are usually connected with low-quality relationships (Goodboy, Myers, & Members of Investigating Communication, 2010), the fictional and comedic nature of various television shows may provide different contexts for the portrayal and interpretation of these behaviors. Therefore, we ask the following:

> RQ2: How frequently are positive and negative relational maintenance behaviors portrayed?

Early research regarding relational maintenance suggested that there were few differences between the behaviors exhibited by married and dating couples (Dainton & Stafford, 1993). However, long-term relationships featured on TV are growing more diverse in that gay and lesbian couples are making an appearance on prime-time television (Holz Ivory et al., 2009). In addition, television tropes or stereotypes about relationships (e.g., the nagging wife and the inept husband, the volatile on-again-off-again dating couple) may exaggerate differences, perhaps for comedic or dramatic effect on television (Galician, 2004). Due to this variation, we propose the following research question:

> RQ3: How do portrayals of maintenance behaviors vary by relationship type (i.e., married/civil union and cohabiting couples)?

Previous research has indicated that men and women engage in some types of maintenance behavior at different frequencies (Canary & Emmers-Sommer, 1998). For example, Dainton and Stafford (1993) found that men

reported using positivity and openness less frequently than women. In contrast, Sprecher and Hendrick (2004) found that men and women are similar in their use of self-disclosure. Given that television often depicts men and women in stereotypical manners (Scharrer, Kim, Lin, & Liu, 2006; Stern & Mastro, 2004) it is possible that television will reflect or perhaps magnify observed differences. Contrarily, it could be that, given the structural needs of television (e.g., reciprocal dialogue, the need to maintain relationships to fulfill plot lines or appease fans), these differences will be washed out. Thus:

RQ4: Are there differences in the types of maintenance behaviors portrayed by men and women?

Beyond character-level differences, behaviors may vary by television genre. Previous content analyses have noted differences across genres in how often characters portrayed physical aggression (S. L. Smith, Nathanson, & Wilson, 2002), the representation of altruistic acts (S. W. Smith et al., 2006), and the frequency of the portrayal of family conflict situations (Comstock & Strzyzewski, 1990). In addition, researchers have found that various genres differentially influence the way individuals feel toward romantic relationships (Segrin & Nabi, 20002). This suggests that there may be differences between the genres in how romantic relationships are portrayed. As a result, we ask the following:

RQ5: Are there differences according to television show genre in which specific relationship maintenance behaviors are portrayed on television?

METHOD

Sample

Following the procedures of other content analyses on prime-time network television (Eyal & Finnerty, 2009; Kaye & Sapolsky, 2004; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000; Signorielli, 2009), a sample week of programming across five major American networks (ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox, and The CW) was constructed. Prime-time television was defined as programming that aired between 8 p.m. and 11 p.m., Monday through Sunday. To construct the sample week, 1 week from each half of the 2011–2012 viewing season was randomly selected and the viewing week constructed. By sampling 2 weeks from different points within the viewing season, we were more likely to account for all shows airing on the network, including shows that were canceled after a few episodes or midseason replacements. From the 2 constructed weeks, we randomly sampled one show from each time slot to

form a composite week from which to draw our sample. Following the procedures of previous content analyses (Garner, Kinsky, Duta, & Danker, 2012; Glascock, 2001; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000; Signorielli & Bacue, 1999), content such as news programming and sporting events were not included. In all, 76 shows were selected from across the five networks and coded (ABC = 17, NBC = 16, FOX = 12, CBS = 21, CW = 10). There were 22 half-hour shows, 50 one-hour shows, and 4 two-hour shows. The sample included two animated shows (i.e., *Bob's Burgers, The Simpsons*), 21 comedies (e.g., *Two & a Half Men, Cougar Town*), 40 dramas (e.g., *Private Practice, Nikita*), and 13 reality shows (e.g., *The Amazing Race, Dancing with the Stars*).

Before coders began watching sample episodes, they were trained to identify romantic couples where (a) at least one member of the couple was a main character (Signorielli, McLeod, & Healy, 1994) and (b) the couple was involved in a legal union or cohabitating. We focused on main characters because their ongoing presence enabled the examination of maintenance behaviors. It also ensured the ability to verify the couple's status as married, in a civil union, or cohabitating, which can be difficult or impossible to determine for background or nonrecurring characters. These relationships were selected because Stafford's (2011) measurement was developed based on committed relationships. Also, some televised relationships (e.g., on-again-off-again dating, relationships based on casual sex, or "friends with benefits") are ambiguous in whether they are intended to be or are perceived as romantic relationships. Thus, only legally united (i.e., married or in a civil union) and cohabitating relationships were selected.

Within the sample, 53 couples consisting of 52 women and 54 men were featured across 36 shows. These couples appeared across all networks (ABC = 12, NBC = 9, FOX = 5, CBS = 7, CW = 3) and genres (animated = 2, comedy = 16, drama = 16, reality = 2). There were 18 half-hour shows and 18 one-hour shows in the sample. Coded relationships included 34 couples who were married or in a civil union (e.g., Andy Dwyer and April Ludgate on *Parks & Recreation* or Arizona Robbins and Callie Torres on *Grey's Anatomy*), and 19 couples who were cohabitating (e.g., Chef Alan and Mr. Wolfe on *Suburgatory* or Mike Biggs and Molly Flynn on *Mike & Molly*).

Coding Scheme

We chose to use speaking turns as our unit of analysis, following the methodology set forth by previous content analyses (Ferris et al., 2007; Greenberg, Eastin, Hofschire, Lachlan, & Brownell, 2003). Analyzing individual speaking turns instead of individual sentences allowed us to achieve a better picture of overall maintenance behavior. Speaking turns

were coded for every maintenance category based on Canary and Stafford's (1992) assertion that maintenance behaviors can co-occur.

In addition, we coded only characters that were on screen together due to the nature of the measures used. By Stafford's definitions and the nature of television presentation, it is unlikely that maintenance would be identifiable when only one character is on screen. Even when a possible maintenance behavior is happening (e.g., a husband is alone, weeding the garden) it would be difficult to assess if this task was completed for the purpose of relational maintenance (because his partner asked him to) or other reasons (because gardening is his hobby). Coding instances when the couple was not onscreen together would require inferences that could be incorrect or extrapolation outside of the content of the specific episode viewed. Thus, actions were coded when both characters were on screen together or when both sides of the conversation were perceptible to the viewer (e.g., talking on the phone when both sides of the conversation were audible).

RMBM. Stafford's (2011) measure was adapted as a coding scheme. For this analysis, each type of maintenance behavior was coded for within each speaking turn as present or not present. If a speaking turn did not exhibit any maintenance behaviors at all, the speaking turn was coded as not being on the measurement scale. Categories and examples from the sample can be viewed in Table 1.

Behavior valence. Each maintenance behavior was coded as positive or negative. A negatively valenced maintenance behavior referred to an oppositional behavior of that category (e.g., negative understanding might refer to a character judging his or her partner).[1] Due to the nature of coding speaking turns instead of sentences, there were times when both positive and negative behaviors were exhibited during one speaking turn. In this instance, the behavior within the speaking turn was coded as both positive and negative.[2]

Reliability

Approximately 10% of the total sample (eight shows) was randomly selected for independent reliability coding. Krippendorff's alpha was computed for each coding category and for the overall sample. Within the first round

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[1]The category of positivity was reserved for instances in which positive (or negative) behavior did not overlap with another maintenance behavior on the RMBM.

[2]Sarcasm appeared frequently on some shows. Because sarcasm suggests the presence of both positive and negative elements and may be interpreted multiple ways, coders were instructed to code both positive and negative valence for that behavior.

TABLE 1
Relational Maintenance Behavior Measure Items by Factor (Stafford, 2011)
With Examples From Sampled Shows

Positivity (e.g., in *The Office*, married couple Pam and Jim are cheerful together)
  Acts positively with me.
  Is upbeat when we are together.
  Acts cheerfully with me.
  Acts optimistically when he/she is with me.
Understanding (e.g., in *Smash*, Karen apologizes for being selfish to her boyfriend, Dev)
  Is understanding
  Is forgiving of me.
  Apologizes when he/she is wrong.
  Does not judge me.
Self-Disclosure (e.g., in *CSI: NY*, Danny opens up to his wife, Lindsay, after a hard day)
  Talks about his/her fears.
  Is open about his/her feelings.
  Encourages me to share my thoughts with him/her.
  Encourages me to share my feelings with him/her.
Relationship Talks (e.g., in *The Middle*, Mike starts a conversation with his wife, Frankie, by saying, "If you don't want to have sex tonight, just say it!")
  Discusses the quality of our relationship.
  Tells me how he/she feels about the relationship.
  Has talks about our relationship.
Assurances (e.g., in the show *Bones*, Booth assures his live-in girlfriend, Bones, that he is still attracted to her after she's had a baby)
  Talks about future events (e.g., having children, or anniversaries, or retirement, etc.).
  Talks about our plans for the future.
  Tells me how much I mean to him/her.
  Shows me how much I mean to him/her.
Tasks (e.g., in *Desperate Housewives*, Susan brings groceries home to her husband, Mike)
  Shares in the joint responsibilities that face us.
  Performs his/her household responsibilities.
  Helps with the tasks that need to be done.
  Does not shirk his/her duties.
Networks (e.g., in *How I Met Your Mother*, live-in couple Barney and Quinn have a couples' night with their married friends, Mike and Lily)
  Includes our friends in our activities.
  Does things with our friends.
  Spends time with our families.
  Asks a family member for help.
  Turns to a family member for advice.

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of reliability coding, an acceptable level of reliability was not achieved. Therefore, the coders (the first and second authors) discussed all discrepancies and worked with the third author to resolve disagreements and clarify codes.

In the second round of reliability coding, another 10% of the total sample (eight shows) was randomly selected. Krippendorff's alpha was computed

for each coding category (positivity, $\alpha = 0.86$; understanding, $\alpha = 0.82$; self-disclosure, $\alpha = 0.95$; relationship talks, $\alpha = 0.88$; assurances, $\alpha = 1.00$; tasks, $\alpha = 0.67$; and networks, $\alpha = 0.95$) and for all coding categories combined ($\alpha = 0.92$); reliability was achieved. Each coder was then assigned a random sample of half of the remaining television shows.

RESULTS

RQ1: Frequencies of Maintenance Behaviors

There were a total of 2,227 speaking turns featuring 2,669 behaviors across all shows in the sample. The number of total times each maintenance factor was exhibited within the sample is as follows: networks (1,029), self-disclosure (555), tasks (511), understanding (269), positivity (124), relationship talks (107), and assurances (74).

Because programs differed in terms of viewing length, all data were weighted to reflect 1-hour programming, which reflects the length of the longest coded television show in our sample; all means refer to the number of observed behaviors per hour. A typical hour of prime-time programming features the following maintenance behaviors, in order from most to least frequent: networks ($M = 21.84$, $SD = 36.05$), self-disclosure ($M = 11.42$, $SD = 19.72$), tasks ($M = 8.33$, $SD = 31.46$), understanding ($M = 5.95$, $SD = 11.79$), positivity ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 8.41$), relationship talks ($M = 2.31$, $SD = 6.16$), and assurances ($M = 1.47$, $SD = 4.23$).

The average number of times a given individual in the sample exhibited a maintenance behavior (i.e., the number of behaviors demonstrated per character per hour) are as follows: networks ($M = 15.70$, $SD = 17.83$), self-disclosure ($M = 8.22$, $SD = 9.27$), tasks ($M = 5.97$, $SD = 10.14$), understanding ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 5.96$), positivity ($M = 1.92$, $SD = 4.92$), relationship talks ($M = 1.66$, $SD = 3.51$), and assurances ($M = 1.06$, $SD = 2.60$).

RQ2: Valence of Maintenance Behaviors

Positive ($N = 2,163$), negative ($N = 353$), and mixed-valence ($N = 153$) maintenance behaviors were all depicted on prime-time television. Mixed-valence maintenance behaviors refer to behaviors that exhibited both positive and negative traits within the same speaking turn. On average, prime-time television featured the following positive maintenance behaviors each hour: networks ($M = 13.79$, $SD = 14.42$), self-disclosure ($M = 7.75$, $SD = 9.13$), tasks ($M = 5.86$, $SD = 10.08$), understanding ($M = 1.85$, $SD = 3.45$), relationship talks ($M = 1.23$, $SD = 3.81$), and assurances ($M = 1.01$, $SD = 2.60$). An hour of

programming also featured the following negative maintenance behaviors: understanding ($M = 2.93$, $SD = 4.60$), networks ($M = 2.76$, $SD = 7.24$), self-disclosure ($M = 1.02$, $SD = 2.81$), relationship talks ($M = 0.93$, $SD = 2.61$), assurances ($M = 0.36$, $SD = 2.35$), and tasks ($M = 0.19$, $SD = 0.65$).

One-way chi-square analyses were run to examine the frequency of positive and negative behaviors within each of these categories. Examining individual behaviors, we found that behaviors were skewed positively for networks, $\chi^2(1) = 778.67$, $p < .0001$; tasks, $\chi^2(1) = 563.50$, $p < .0001$; self-disclosure, $\chi^2(1) = 548.17$, $p < .0001$; assurances, $\chi^2(1) = 32.83$, $p < .0001$; and relationship talks, $\chi^2(1) = 4.20$, $p < .05$. However, individuals displayed higher levels of negative behavior than expected in understanding, $\chi^2(1) = 26.09$, $p < .0001$.

RQ3: Frequencies of Maintenance Behaviors by Relationship Type

An independent-samples t test revealed that the average number of speaking turns exhibited among married/civil union individuals ($M = 31.24$, $SD = 34.66$) and cohabitating individuals ($M = 35.21$, $SD = 25.83$) were not significantly different ($p > .05$).

The difference between married/civil union ($M = 36.13$, $SD = 35.57$) and cohabitating ($M = 49.29$, $SD = 41.50$) individuals on the overall number of maintenance behaviors was not significant, $t(104) = 1.72$, $p = .09$, $d = 0.34$. Considering the maintenance behavior types individually, cohabitating couples demonstrated significantly more relationship talks (cohabitating, $M = 2.66$, $SD = 4.59$; married/civil union, $M = 1.10$, $SD = 2.60$), $t(104) = 2.23$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.42$; positivity (cohabitating, $M = 3.42$, $SD = 7.73$; married/civil union, $M = 1.07$, $SD = 1.74$), $t(104) = 2.41$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.42$; and tasks (cohabitating, $M = 8.76$, $SD = 11.62$; married/civil union, $M = 4.41$, $SD = 8.93$), $t(104) = 2.15$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.42$.

RQ4: Frequencies of Maintenance Behaviors by Sex

T-test results indicated no significant differences between number of speaking turns for men and women ($p > .05$). There were also no significant differences between male and female characters for any of the seven maintenance behaviors (all $ps > .05$).

RQ5: Frequencies of Maintenance Behaviors by Program Genre

Consistent with literature citing genre-specific portrayals, a one-way analysis of variance revealed that maintenance behaviors exhibited in

TABLE 2
Differences in Relational Maintenance Behavior Measure Factors Across Genres

	Animated	*Reality*	*Comedy*	*Drama*
Positivity	4.50 (4.12)	0.20 (0.42)	2.92 (6.87)	0.98 (1.80)
Understanding	9.00 (1.15)$_{a,b}$	0.10 (0.32)$_b$	6.88 (7.62)$_a$	1.93 (2.00)$_{b,c}$
Self-disclosure	16.50 (12.26)$_{a,b}$	0.30 (0.48)$_b$	11.67 (11.31)$_{a,c}$	5.50 (4.24)$_{b,c}$
Relationship talks	2.00 (1.63)	0.00 (0.00)	2.71 (4.85)	0.86 (1.25)
Assurances	2.00 (1.63)	0.10 (0.32)	1.42 (3.55)	0.80 (1.44)
Tasks	1.00 (1.15)$_a$	25.20 (13.76)$_b$	5.00 (7.85)$_a$	3.11 (6.82)$_a$
Networks	42.00 (52.69)$_a$	4.60 (2.80)$_{b,c}$	22.79 (17.43)$_{a,c}$	8.11 (6.39)$_b$

Note. Means and standard deviations within each row with no subscript in common significantly differ statistically. A Bonferroni correction was applied to the standard p value (.05); thus, all differences noted here are significant at the $p < .002$ level.

animated ($M = 83.50$, $SD = 70.79$), comedy ($M = 56.71$, $SD = 43.07$), reality ($M = 31.10$, $SD = 16.24$), and dramas ($M = 21.89$, $SD = 16.71$) were significantly different, $F(3, 102) = 10.53$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.24$. Post hoc t tests with a Bonferroni correction revealed significant differences between dramas and animated programming, $t(46) = 4.86$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.43$, and dramas and comedy, $t(90) = 5.03$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.06$.

Significant differences were cited between genres for the following maintenance behaviors: networks, $F(3, 102) = 12.45$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.27$; understanding, $F(3, 102) = 9.71$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.22$; self-disclosure, $F(3, 102) = 8.44$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.20$; and relationship talks, $F(3, 102) = 3.12$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = 0.08$. Post hoc t tests with a Bonferroni correction revealed significant differences between genres. Means, standard deviations, and significant differences across genres are shown in Table 2.

DISCUSSION

The survival of romantic relationships depends upon partners' use of relational maintenance behaviors, which may be learned from mediated models. This exploratory study examined prime-time television portrayals of relationships to determine what maintenance behaviors are demonstrated on television. All of the maintenance behaviors delineated by the RMBM (positivity, understanding, self-disclosure, assurances, relationship talks, tasks, and networks) appeared on prime-time television, but some of these maintenance behaviors differed by genre, couple type (married/civil union or cohabitating), and valence. From the results of this preliminary examination of relationship maintenance on television, it is clear that future research should investigate the effects of these depictions on audience members.

Regarding the frequency of behaviors, some behaviors were observed in different proportion on television than real-life relational maintenance studies would indicate. For instance, networks appeared more frequently than any other behavior, whereas assurances were rarely shown. These findings are inconsistent with Stafford (2011), where partners reported roughly equal frequencies across RMBM factors.

In contrast, networks were shown at a much higher rate. This difference may be due to the nature of ensemble television programming wherein couples are generally embedded in a complex community of characters. *Grey's Anatomy*, for instance, shows several couples who work together and regularly interact with shared coworkers along with their romantic partners. This group interaction situation where friends and family were consistently involved in interactions between partners was observed across all genres. Although this structure makes for a more compelling storyline, it could be a false depiction of reality for some audience members.

Although self-disclosure and tasks were shown only half as many times as networks, they were still portrayed much more frequently than the remaining maintenance behaviors. This may be due to the fact that self-disclosure is a relatively easy way for writers to move the plot forward and inform the audience as to a character's feelings or history. For example, in *90210*, Navid tells his girlfriend, Erin, about repaying a debt owed from his past. This information could have been revealed through a flashback; however, by using self-disclosure, the writers simultaneously informed both Erin and the audience about Navid's debt.

In addition, tasks may be portrayed frequently due to the fact that characters are regularly shown engaging in activities. These tasks can also easily be combined with other behaviors, both those related to relationship maintenance and those related to the plot. For instance, in *Parenthood*, heterosexual married couple Julia and Joel bring the groceries in together as a way to discuss circumstances concerning a guest in their house. In this instance, the task serves as a vehicle to get the couple out of the house so that they may speak in private. SCT suggests that viewers may believe that involvement in these behaviors is normative or necessary for maintaining a successful relationship when this may not actually be true.

Overwhelmingly, maintenance behaviors were used positively by characters on television. This is unsurprising because scholars tend to characterize successful maintenance behaviors as positive even though negative maintenance behaviors exist (Dainton & Gross, 2008; Goodboy et al., 2010). Although the majority of our data suggest that characters are more positive than negative in their maintenance behaviors, understanding was more negatively valenced in the sample (e.g., judging a partner for an action or not apologizing when recognizing fault). The prevalence of negative

understanding on television may be due to formal features of genre-specific programming. This kind of behavior was commonly employed in comedies for comedic effect. For instance, in *Whitney*, the characters regularly judged and mocked each other for their views on romance; however, the narrative ended with the couple feeling closer by engaging in negative understanding. Although we did not code for behavioral outcomes, the live audience's laughter may have indicated that they found the situation humorous.

In addition, characters exhibited mixed valence maintenance behaviors (i.e., both positive and negative behaviors) within a speaking turn or exhibited sarcasm (i.e., one behavior that is both positive and negative in nature). An example of sarcastic behavior can be seen in *Whitney* where Whitney and her live-in boyfriend, Alex, are talking about romance. Alex exclaims that he does not think romance is nonsense; he thinks it is nice. Whitney tries to turn the tables and responds by saying, "You do? No, you don't. You're with me on this!" These instances may also reinforce negative maintenance behaviors, because they are intertwined with behaviors seen as positive. Because Whitney and Alex are portrayed as joking with each other (positive behavior), viewers may overlook the fact that she has been manipulative (negative behavior). In our study, mixed valence and sarcastic behaviors were coded for in a similar manner and are unable to be parsed out. Future research should denote these concepts differently to ascertain their role in television couples' communication.

In regards to relationship type, our findings indicate that cohabiting individuals were more likely to exhibit behaviors of positivity, relationship talks, and tasks than individuals who are married or in a civil union, which is contrary to research on real couples. Although previous studies mostly focused on comparing maintenance behaviors between married and dating couples, several found no differences by relationship type (Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Shea & Pearson, 1986). We argue that engagement in various maintenance behaviors, such as relationship talks, could vary between these married and cohabiting couples due to differences in perceived relationship stability. In addition, the prevalence of performing tasks may favor cohabiting individuals. One reason for this may be that individuals who live together may be engaging in tasks jointly in order to establish a sense of shared responsibility within the relationship, whereas partners in a legal union might have developed more distinct roles over time.

When examining maintenance behaviors according to sex, there were no significant differences between men and women as have been identified in previous research (e.g., Dainton & Stafford, 1993). However, this finding appears in contrast with previous content analyses that find sex stereotypes to be prevalent on television. One possible explanation is that reciprocal

dialogue, plot devices, or other scripting needs for the show require balance within pairs and, given most couples are heterosexual, sex differences are washed out. Alternatively, although the number of behaviors did not differ, there could be sex-stereotypical ways of performing maintenance behaviors worthy of additional research. For example, in *Missing*, Becca Winstone is shown painting the new baby room, while her husband Paul is shown building the baby crib. Other studies have found that maintenance behaviors vary by gender (i.e., masculinity and femininity) rather than sex (e.g., Stafford, Dainton, & Haas, 2000), and thus it is possible that the gender of characters may predict relational maintenance behaviors more so than character sex. Future research should investigate the intersection of relationship behaviors and gender roles independent of sex.

In addition to examining character-level variables, this study also addressed the program-level variable of genre. Genres are important to explore as different TV genres have been found to have varying effects on viewing outcomes (e.g., Egbert & Belcher, 2012; Potter & Chang, 1990). Although relationship maintenance has not been previously explored, a recent study found that the genre in which sexual content was viewed determined viewers' attitudes toward sex, perceptions of norms, and behavior (Gottfried, Vaala, Bleakley, Hennessy, & Jordan, 2013).

In our study, one notable difference is that maintenance behaviors (specifically understanding, self-disclosure, and networks) were more prevalent in comedies than dramas. These genre differences may exist due to the nature of the specific type of programming. Comedic programming often includes a large cast of characters engaging in activities together (e.g., *The Office, Happy Endings, Modern Family*), which could impact a variety of maintenance behaviors, including networks. In addition, comedic programming often centers on characters engaging in funny or embarrassing activities or events, leading to needed explanations (self-disclosure) and understanding. Another notable finding suggested that animated programming had a significantly greater amount of maintenance behaviors portrayed. This finding may have appeared due to the fact that only two animated programs appeared in the sample, both of which are about families. In addition, animated programming often relies on dialogue as opposed to other devices frequently employed in other genres (e.g., lingering close-up shots of characters, montages), which could increase the presence of maintenance behavior in this genre.

These differences hold significant implications for viewers of one genre of programming (e.g., Segrin & Nabi, 2002). For instance, individuals who only watch network comedies will be exposed to more instances of maintenance than individuals who only watch network dramas. Due to the nature of genre-specific programming, fans of either genre may develop a skewed

perception of how frequently one should engage in relational maintenance (e.g., fans of comedy shows thinking that self-disclosure with a partner needs to occur frequently). In contrast, viewers that watch a variety of different genres may be exposed to contrasting messages (e.g., negative relationship maintenance leads to laughs and togetherness in a comedy but divorce in a drama).

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations are inherent within this analysis. First, the sample comprised only the five largest U.S. broadcast television networks' prime-time programming. To gain a better understanding of how maintenance behaviors are shown across television, a more diverse sample should be constructed including different sources (e.g., cable channels and Internet programming) and shows that air at different times (e.g., soap operas).

Second, within our sample week we identified only a limited number of gay or lesbian couples ($n = 3$). This lack of romantically involved LGBTQ characters on network television does not accurately reflect the makeup of the U.S. population. The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation reported that the number of LGBTQ characters increased between the 2011–2012 and 2012–2013 seasons (Kane, Gouttebroze, Townsend, & Carter, 2012), so future content analyses may find a more diverse sample.

In addition, we did not code for romantically involved but noncohabitating couples. The decision to exclude these couples was due to the fact that the RMBM was created to measure maintenance behaviors among serious, committed couples. However, by excluding noncohabitating couples, we may have overlooked potential portrayals of maintenance that could inform our analyses. Future studies may examine behaviors among dating or casual romantic relationships or may consider dyadic analysis as a possibility for capturing RMBM factors.

Another limitation to this study is the fact that the authors served as coders. Although the coders were found to be reliable, steps should be taken in the future to ensure that various individuals could account for the types of maintenance behaviors that happen on television. By involving outside coders, the validity of the content analysis could be strengthened.

A final limitation of this content analysis is the coding of speaking turns within single episodes, rather than a more holistic approach (e.g., coding by scene or coding over the course of the television season). This study serves as the first step in understanding how romantic relationships are portrayed on television. However, future research should consider examining relationships

over a long period. One possible avenue to explore by examining longer periods may be determining the behavioral outcomes of maintenance behavior choices and how they can influence modeling from audience members. For instance, Nabi and Clark (2008) found that in certain conditions, individuals may model behaviors even when they are shown to have negative outcomes. Due to the nature of television programming, behavioral outcomes may not be immediate (i.e., within a single episode) but may be cumulative across an entire season or series.

As with all content analyses, future research should seek to examine viewer perceptions of these behaviors and understand how these portrayals influence viewer attitudes and behavior. For instance, this exploratory study determined that portrayals of relationship maintenance behaviors on television appear to differ from real-world findings. Thus, it is important to continually examine whether interpersonal behaviors are starting to mirror those shown on television. A study by Ferris et al. (2007) found that heavy viewers of reality dating shows were likely to endorse certain behaviors portrayed on these shows, such as drinking alcohol and using a hot tub, on an early date with a romantic partner. In addition, via media-use questionnaires, respondent interviews, and content analyses of relevant media, Pardun et al. (2005) found an association between consumption of media containing sexual content and adolescents' sexual activity. Similarly, Bleakl, Hennessy, Fishbein, and Jordan (2008) conducted a longitudinal study on sexual media content consumption with an adolescent cohort. They identified a mutually reinforcing cycle wherein content modeled real-world behaviors, and then some viewers mimicked the televised content in their real-world interactions. Future longitudinal and experimental research should continue to parse out the directionality of the relationship between maintenance behaviors and television consumption.

In addition, significant claims can be made if individual audience members do not categorize these behaviors similarly to how scholars have defined them. Thus, differences between audience perceptions and the perceptions of scholars could result in a different understanding of how these behaviors work, who should engage in them, and whether they are successful. Future research should be conducted to examine the relationship between perspectives and determine what is causing these differences (e.g., social norms, cultural norms, or personal experience).

Individuals in a committed romantic relationship need to engage in relational maintenance behaviors to keep the relationship intact. To learn about these behaviors, individuals can rely on interpersonal or mediated portrayals of romantic relationships. Going forward, we must continue to analyze the content of mass messages as well as user-generated messages to recognize what lessons viewers are learning.

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