OMG! The Gossip Behind One Program's Effects on Interpersonal Relationship Expectations

The Honors Program
Senior Capstone Project
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April 2010

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the effects of media on the interpersonal relationship expectations of television viewers. The study sought to better understand the implications of this topic in addition to determining whether one television program can affect the mindset of viewers. Through the use of an online survey, a focus group, a cultivation analysis of the television show *Gossip Girl,* as well as an analysis of the show's fan pages this research discovered that television viewing has an impact on viewer expectations of relationships (as well as a general desire for themes within television programs in reality). This research demonstrates the impact that media messages have on viewers' everyday lives.

INTRODUCTION

"Why did you say that?" It is fairly certain that at some point in our lives, we have heard someone ask us this question. Many of us wonder why we behave in the way we do, or why we say the things we do. Although many of us attribute our beliefs and ideas to parental or peer influence, the most significant models and mentors for most adolescents as they develop may, in fact, be characters depicted through popular television programs. Throughout our youth, we are frequently exposed to television. We watch it for entertainment, education, or simply to alleviate boredom. As we watch, we internalize many of its messages and images and learn from what we see.

Many young children dress up and act out roles of their favorite Disney characters. Scenes from their play time include scenarios from movies or lines from characters. Although some may see this as simple play time, how much of the messages from television remain with children as they grow? Movies such as *Cinderella* or shows like *The OC* depict the "perfect" life, concluding with the all too familiar, "happily ever after." Do these programs set unattainable real life expectations for the viewer? Movies and television programs highlight moments of interest, leaving out intricate details regarding emotions and relationships between characters. In actuality, fairy tale stories of poverty stricken women falling in love with princes are implausible. Life is much more complex and elaborate.

Media representations of life are confusing for many viewers. When we watch these portrayals, we assume the characters' actions are reasonable. When we observe television characters behaving in a particular way, we assume that comparable actions in our lives will result in similar consequences. Many programs lead us to believe that we cannot be happy alone, and that in order to live a happy and successful life, we must find a partner or soul-mate.

Watching television on a regular basis has a profound impact on who we are. For years, researchers have studied the effects of television on behavior and self-satisfaction. Recent studies have shown that body issues and body dissatisfaction result from watching television. Children as early as seven years old have already associated thinness in women as an

admirable and popular trait (Henry, 2006). Studies over the years have shown how children replicate what they see on television. But why is this important? Television is an entertaining instrument in many individuals' lives.

The Neilson Company reported that television consumption in the United States in the 2008-2009 season reached an all time high. Americans each spend approximately four hours and 49 minutes watching television every day (Media Literacy Clearinghouse, 2009). Spending this much time watching television is bound to affect us somehow. When television programs begin to impact our behaviors more deeply than does the influence of our parents or teachers, it is time to take a deeper look into this phenomenon and discover its real implications. A better understanding of this behavior may contribute to existing knowledge of individual's interpersonal relationships, especially heterosexual romantic relationships, and how television impacts our expectations of these relationships.

Purpose of This Study
Throughout this study, we will discuss the representations of interpersonal relationships in television. This study will focus on the expectations of relationships created by television programs and the themes apparent throughout these programs.

While many may believe intimacy between three people to be inappropriate, the writers of television's new hit series *Gossip* Girl consider it entirely acceptable. Throughout its run on the family oriented network station The CW, *Gossip Girl* has set a new standard for risqué. News programs and entertainment shows exploded with commentary when the series' main character engaged in sexual activity with two partners. Many described this specific occurrence on the show to be "grossly irresponsible by adding a story line where a sexual threesome was to be celebrated as some sort of 'rite of passage' for teenagers. The network inserted this story line into a program that they themselves deem to be appropriate for 14-year-old children based on its content rating," said Parent Television Council President Tim Winter (Parent Television Council, 2009). During its lifetime, *Gossip Girl* has pushed the limits with its sexual references and scandalous nature.

The self proclaimed "mind-blowingly inappropriate" show, which revolves around the privileged lives of elite private school teenagers in New York City's Upper East Side, has

acquired over 2.4 million viewers in its three seasons (Hampp, 2009). Many argue that shows of this nature have little impact on viewer's personalities and lifestyles, thus should not be regulated or subject to scrutiny. This claim is suspicious at best.

In order to determine the impact of the media's influence, the show *Gossip Girl* was selected because of its large fan following. *Gossip Girl* only averages approximately 2.4 million viewers for its Monday night airings, placing it 100th in terms of broadcast TV viewership, which is significantly less than similar programs on competing networks, its multi platform viewing bossts its ranking to 15th (Hampp, 2009). The multi platform viewing dramatically increases when the Total Audience Measurement Index is taken into consideration. Most individuals who watch the show do not view it through the typical television medium (Hamp, 2009). Viewers download, DVR, and stream the show in order to view it. This process increases viewership and makes it one of the most popular shows to actively watch. Viewers will go to greater lengths to view it than other shows. By taking an active role when watching a show, is a viewer then influenced more greatly by that show?

How much are we influenced by what we see and hear through the media? Are our decision making processes shaped by what we watch on television? Are there really consequences for watching sexually natured programs such as *Gossip Girl*? What is the real impact of television shows of this nature? This research study seeks to answer these questions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Cognitive Theory

One of the most generally accepted theories used to explain the influence of media on individuals is social cognitive theory. Although there is some debate regarding the full influence of the media on viewers, it is known that humans learn from observation. According to Albert Bandura, things people experience in their environments affect their behavior and values. When they see behavior that is rewarded or praised, they are likely to exhibit the behavior themselves through operant learning (Bandura, 1994). Thus, should we witness a particular behavior on television, we are likely to imitate that behavior in our own lives.

Many theorists have developed ideas regarding the impact of television on viewers. One of the most famous tests was developed by Albert Bandura and his associates in a 1961 experiment. In this experiment, 24 preschool children were assigned to three conditions. The first group observed adult models displaying aggressive behavior towards an inflatable plastic Bobo doll; the second group saw adult models displaying non-aggressive behavior to the Bobo doll; and the subjects in the third group received no exposure to the adult models or the Bobo doll (Bandura et. al,. 1961). Subjects were also divided by gender; one half observing same-sex models and the second half observing opposite sex models.

Observations and assessments of the subjects were based upon their interaction with the Bobo doll when the models were not present.

The behavior observed was based upon the imaginative or the imitative aggression performed upon the Bobo doll (Bandura et al., 1961). The study revealed that those subjects exposed to aggressive models exhibited more aggressive tendencies compared to those who were exposed to non-aggressive models or no model at all. Moreover, those in the aggressive condition exhibited significantly more "partially imitative and non-imitative aggressive behavior and were generally less inhibited in their behavior than subjects in the nonaggressive condition" (Bandura et al., 1961). The study also discovered that the sex of the subject was directly related to his or her demonstration of aggression. Males showed notably more aggression than females.

Given the results of the study as well as numerous others, Bandura was able to identify the theoretical basis for his social learning theory. Through his work, Bandura fueled future research for theories associating violent television programs with aggressive behavior in the viewer and television programs with fighting and wrestling. These studies demonstrated television's impact on our lives today. Wrestling and ultimate fighting programs are widely accepted within our culture. These violent acts are often portrayed as justified, likely to go unpunished, and unlikely to produce fatal injuries. These programs increase the harm for their viewers (Tamborini et al., 2005). Studies show that children under the age of 5 are seldom able to differentiate between fantasy and reality. They are thus prone to accept what they see on television as real simply because they saw it on television. Even though as they

grow children are better able to distinguish reality from fiction, there is evidence that this distinction is still blurred (Tamborini et al., 2005). Given the difficulty differentiating various aspects of reality, it is understandable how children may act out those things they view on television without fully understanding the imact of their actions. If children are prone to demonstrate various acts after witnessing them on television, simple conversations and interactions may be influenced as well.

Children are not only prone to violent acts after watching television, television representations of human behavior and relations have an impact on the viewer as well. "Heavy exposure to the symbolic world may eventually make the televised images appear to be the authentic state of human affairs… Television influence is best defined in terms of the contents people watch rather than the sheer amount of television viewing" (Bandura, 2009). The impact of the content of the show has a greater impact on how messages are interpreted and beliefs are shaped. Several studies preformed, discuss how television portrayals shape viewers' mindsets. Television has the ability to influence and "[verify] personal conceptions against televised versions of social reality [and thus] foster some collective illusions" (Bandura, 2009). Television has the ability to model the beliefs of individuals due to the situations and characters' believed similarities to real life. Through the imitation of and identification with characters on television, viewers exhibit behavior similar to the characters in their own lives. While watching television programs, viewers learn about through social cognition.

<u>Elaboration Likelihood Model</u>
We are constantly bombarded with promotional messages whether we recognize them or not. From the moment we wake in the morning, we brush our teeth with name brand toothpaste, eat cereal advertised on TV, drive to work and listen to the radio, view billboards on the side of the road, see advertisements on our computer, observe others wearing stylish clothing, unconcerned and oblivious to the fact that much of our routine behavior is media based.

We have become members of a society where we receive messages through centralized forms of national and international media. One theory which explains the cognitive processes by which we receive and decipher the denotative and connotative in messages in the media is Petty and Cacioppo's Elaboration Likelihood Model. This model argues that individuals wish to be correct in their assumptions on various topics and thus will consider arguments to be

relevant if they correspond with the thoughts and opinions of others. Through this model, individuals choose one of two paths when provided with information. This choice is not necessarily a conscious or deliberate choice according to the Elaboration Likelihood model. Assuming that we find the message to be routine and convincing, we will follow the "peripheral route" and presume that the provided information is accurate. When individuals choose this route they "do not elaborate on the message through extensive cognitive processing of arguments. Instead, the receiver will rely on cues in the persuasion environment to guide decisions about message acceptance" (Miller, 2005). Alternatively, if we process the information and are willing to change our attitude, we follow the "central route" (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In the central route to persuasion, we will "carefully scrutinize the content of the message, looking at the strength of the arguments proposed" (Miller, 2005). Thus, information worthy of being processed and considered will be interpreted using the "central route," yet information which seems banal will be disregarded and explained through the "peripheral route."

The Elaboration Likelihood Model explains "processes responsible for accepting persuasive messages and spawns from the cognitive response theory…The cognitive response approach suggests that yielding to persuasion is associated with idiosyncratic cognitive responses, or pro- and counter arguments, generated regarding the message" (Schroeder, 2005). ELM and the cognitive response theory explain why we are more susceptible to messages seen on television, especially if we do not think actively about the subject matter itself. This is possible, because watching television is a routine action. Many consider the television to provide entertainment, an action which does not require thought or action. Televisions appears to have no impact on the viewer's life, thus does not necessitate reflection of any kind. ELM explains the inclination of viewers to accept messages and internalize them without an analysis of the information.

Although this theory provides us with information regarding how we process information, the consequences of our decision making can at times be unexpected and unsettling. For example, when do we make these specific types of decisions? The central route is employed when individuals feel they need to be conscious of what they are thinking about; but shouldn't that be all the time? Typically, individuals follow the central route when they have interest of

high involvement in the messages provided. Otherwise they use the peripheral route and follow the popular or the easy solution. Imagine how difficult daily life would be otherwise. Typical Americans are more susceptible to messages, because they do not have the time to decipher messages, yet by not being active in our decision making is a dangerous endeavor. It is seductively easy if we believe we live in a homogeneous society and that people are fundamentally the same. By taking the more routine route we can never be sure if we are truly getting what we like, or just liking what we get.

It is the impact of the possible effects of Elaboration Likelihood Model that allows viewers to more readily consume messages depicted on television as fact rather than working through the central route to determine what is true. Children and adolescents are especially inclined to believe information they see on television as fact because they have fewer real life experiences that might change their thought processes.

The Early Window

Another theory that aims to describe the effect of media on young viewers is the early window theory. This theory examines how children are allowed to see the world and its various aspects before they possess the skill set to adequately understand and act in it.

> [Television] allows the very young child to be "present" at adult interactions. Television removes barriers that once divided people of different ages and reading abilities into different social situations….television nevertheless exposes them to many topics and behaviors that adults have spent several centuries trying to keep hidden from children. Television thrusts children into a complex adult world and provides the impetus for children to ask the meanings of actions and words they would not yet have heard or read about without television. (Meyrowitz, 1985)

According to this theory, children learn at early ages about gender roles and their function within society. Not only are children exposed to various portrayals of reality, but these portrayals can "encourage expectations of others…Portrayals in television and other media of highly attractive persons may encourage dissatisfaction [with] or lowered evaluations of attractiveness of those of the pertinent sex in real life" (Comstock, 1991). These portrayals can influence the behavior of children regarding personal body image and the image of others' bodies as well.

It is clear that "those who have shaped, directed, and used the information technology of the late twentieth century have played an exaggerated role in the reformulation of childhood" (Kincheloe, 1997). The early window seeks to explain the implications of television on the lives of youthful viewers. Children may not normally be exposed to certain experiences or emotions, but because of television during the time of growth, children are shown elements of reality meant for their later years.

Cultivation Theory
The media have become an important aspect in American's lives. The media disseminate large amounts of information about sexual practices which reflect many contemporary trends and matters. In recent years, media outlets have grown increasingly permissive regarding the information offered to the public through television programs, commercials, and news programs. The "typical" teenager is depicted as thin, beautiful, and generally financially stable. On television, 17.5% of male characters are considered to be thin, while 69.1% of female characters are thin (Eisend, 2006). This marked difference between females and males has an impact upon how viewers perceive men and women in reality as well. According to cultivation theory, "enduring exposure to television has subtle and cumulative effects on shaping views of social reality. Heavy television users rely on what they see on television as representations of reality. Since television reality is exaggerated and fictitious, they come to have a distorted 'social perception' of the world" (Eisend, 2006). After observing beautiful women depicted on television, one out of every two women is dissatisfied with her body (Eisend, 2006).

According to George Gerbner, Bell Atlantic Professor of Telecommunications at Temple University, cultivation is not a "unidirectional flow of influence from television to audience, but part of a continual, dynamic, ongoing process of interaction among messages and contexts. In many cases, those who watch more television (the heavy viewers) are more likely—in all or most subgroups—to give the 'television answers'" to questions about the real world (Gerbner, 1998). Although there are numerous factors that influence cultivation, the relationship between the amount of viewing and the tendency of exaggerated perceptions of the images portrayed are more readily seen than the occurrences in the actual world of the actions portrayed (Gerbner, 1998). Because television is generally introduced early in the

viewer's life, it plays a crucial role in the formation of predispositions and can strongly influence behavior.

The more people see false representations of life and relationships on television, the more they accept it as reality. Viewers will consequently believe in a greater incidence of the overrepresented portrayals, which will subsequently affect their behavior (Eisend, 2006). Cultivation theory explains the importance of viewers' thoughtful examination of media messages before accepting them as truth. The influence of media representations of reality is powerful in the development of self image and world understanding.

Recent studies show that the amount of sexual content on television has been considerable and increasing over the years (Eyal & Finnerty, 2009). Television and media messages contribute significantly to individuals' thoughts and behaviors. It comes as no surprise to see that, "research has established that exposure to sexual content in entertainment programming can contribute to a young person's sexual socialization and that adolescents turn to magazines and television as central sources of information about sex and contraception" (Eyal & Finnerty, 2009). These studies have discovered that sexual behavior depicted on television typically occurs between unmarried individuals and that many of the risks related to this behavior (unplanned pregnancy and contraction of sexually transmitted diseases [STD]) are rarely seen as consequences (Eyal & Finnerty, 2009). As stated previously, when these actions are rewarded or justified, individuals will be more likely to engage in the behavior themselves.

The purpose of this study is to determine if college students accept mass media messages about relationships as truth without investigating their validity or source. The study will also discuss possible outcomes of a society accepting questionable information as truth and determine the reasons for this acceptance, whether they do it out of laziness, inexperience, or an innate need for authority to inform them of their future actions.

METHOD

Grounded Theory
This study examines the influence of television on viewers' perception of relationships by collecting qualitative data and using grounded theory to identify themes in the data. The analysis of *Gossip Girl* fan pages, the show *Gossip Girl,* a survey, and a focus group were used to obtain information. In order to complete this study, great emphasis was placed on a variety of data collection methods in order to use "grounded theory." Grounded theory is an inductive methodology which includes the "systematic generation of theory from systematic research. It is a set of rigorous research procedures leading to the emergence of conceptual categories…[which are] related to each other as a theoretical explanation of the action(s) that continually resolves the main concern of the participants in a substantive area" (Rhine, 2009). Through the use of a grounded theory, we can establish a full understanding of a topic and thus have the ability to make practical assumptions.

Grounded theory begins with preparation. General research on the topic is necessary for minimizing preconceptions and understanding the basis for study. The second phase of grounded research is the data collection. This can be achieved through intensive interviews, sampling, and/or observation. Then an analysis of the key findings is completed in order to conceptualize how the data relate to themselves. While gathering data, it is important to simultaneously determine the interrelation of data and concepts (Rhine, 2009).

Throughout this study, the use of grounded theory will produce a wide variety of data in order to achieve an ultimate understanding of the topic. Through the use of surveys, focus groups, general observation, and background research, we will be able to better determine the impact of media on interpersonal relationship expectations. Grounded theory provides a wide range of information in order to understand and make determinations for future investigations.

Content Analysis
Content analysis is a way of transforming qualitative material into quantitative data, thus the extent to which teenage individuals are portrayed as promiscuous and the extent to which teenage individuals are portrayed as dramatic was analyzed throughout this study. This study analyzed the first season of the television series *Gossip Girl*. First, the first season was

viewed and summarized based on general plot, interactions between the characters, portrayals of life themes, and depictions of various situations. A summary of findings was then written in order to determine the major themes throughout the season and to ascertain the selection of the single most indicative episode. By studying a full season period of the show *Gossip Girl,* a greater insight into the full portrayal of interpersonal relationship interaction was discovered. After viewing the entire season, I was able to select an episode which best exemplified the variety of themes and interfaces between characters.

The thirteenth episode of the series entitled, "The Thin Line Between Chuck and Nate," was analyzed based upon its manifest and latent content. The manifest content of the show, the surface content of communication, and the latent or underlying meaning, were coded and documented. After greater understanding of the television show and the media messages that potentially influence viewers, primary data were gathered from college students at Bryant University.

Data Collection
Fan Pages

In order to investigate the influence of television programs on college students' perceptions and expectations of relationships, several research techniques were used. An ongoing observation of *Gossip Girl* fan sites on the internet was conducted in order to achieve an understanding of how typical viewers and fans interpret content from the show. This observation took into account comparisons to reality or personal stories shared by fans. Statements made by fans were important in understanding whether or not these individuals hope to behave like the characters in reality.

The Survey

A survey was administered to Bryant University students in order to get a better understanding of how much television they view, what kinds of programs they watch, and the extent to which these programs influence their daily interactions with others. The survey allowed respondents to remain anonymous; however, it asked certain demographic and psychographic questions in order to understand if gender or age differences impacted the consumption of television and media messages.

In order to achieve the best possible understanding of viewers' behavior and formation of expectations for future actions, a series of 14 questions were administered to a variety of college aged respondents. Students were selected from the pool of Bryant University underclassmen, both in classroom settings and from through Facebook.com.

I asked a series of questions that allowed me to achieve a better understanding of how television shows impact those who watch it. The research I gathered indicated the importance of content and frequency of viewing. Based on this understanding, I developed a series of questions that addressed the main questions.

The survey was administered to over 200 Bryant University students, and 155 respondents completed the survey, a very high response rate of 78%. The survey was administered through various forms. Surveys were given online with the survey website QuestionPro. Individuals were informed of the survey through a Facebook invite and 89 individuals responded through this method. Individuals in communication professor Dr. Stanley Baran's communication course (32 students) as well as Professor Sharmin Attaran's marketing course (34) were administered surveys. Due to the fact that the individuals surveyed were Bryant University students and the majority of respondents were female, this provides a limitation in the data, but I was able to gather information from a variety of individuals. The survey asked general demographic and television watching questions as well as more detailed questions regarding *Gossip Girl* (see Appendix I).

The survey asked respondents to indicate their gender. This question was important in determining if females or males interpret messages differently, in addition to the amount of television viewed by both sexes. The second question asked the participants to indicate their age. Individuals between the ages of 18 and 23 were asked to participate in the survey. Although the age difference between the respondents was not significant in terms of number of years, the students' proximity to high school might have been an indication of the impact of television messages on individuals.

The next question asked participants to state the number of hours they watched television per week. They were given the options of 0, 1-3, 4-6, 7-10, and 10+ hours per week. This question was asked in order to determine if the number of hours of television watching

corresponded to the programs and interpretation of media messages. The next question asked participants if they watched television with others and how often they did so. Should individuals watch television with others, it could impact the messages they internalize as well as the importance of the shows.

The next question asked participants to indicate what genres of television they watch. They were given the options of: sports, news, romantic, drama, comedy, thriller, mystery/crime, soap opera, cartoon, reality, music television, and other. Depending on what television genres the participants watch, they could react differently to media messages or formulate different opinions of interpersonal relationships. The genres were selected based on popularity with the age group as well as general popularity as well.

The respondents were also asked to indicate what shows they watch on a regular basis. This segment of the survey allowed participants to write in what specific shows they watch. Although shows may be of a specific genre, they might depict different messages or information.

The next questions regarded the discussions participants engaged in as a result of watching television. If participants discussed television programs with others, the survey asked them to indicate what topics they discussed. Options included the general plot of the show, expectations for future episodes, similarities to real life, and desire for similar themes in the participants' own lives.

The last several questions of the survey were specific to *Gossip Girl.* Survey participants were asked if they had previously seen episodes of the CW series and which male and female characters were their favorites and why. Understanding what characters find the most interesting, believable, attractive, or funny is important to discovering the impact of the television show. What characters are the favorites and what characters are the most popular are important in understanding the priorities of the participants. What they deem important in characters is crucial when determining how the participants think.

The next question involved the impressions that participants had regarding the show *Gossip Girl.* Respondents were asked to write out in a few sentences about what they thought of the

show. This question was asked to establish why the respondent watched the show. Although each response has different meaning and implications, the responses are important when understanding the ultimate impact of the show. These responses are important in discovering the shows' significance for respondents.

The last question in the survey required respondents to choose one of the predetermined responses from watching an episode of *Gossip Girl.* The responses included, "I think it's completely unrealistic and dismiss it right away," "I find some parts of it interesting and useful in my own life," "I find similarities in my own life and copy characters on the show," "I wish that my life could be like the show." After selecting one of these responses, participants were asked to explain their choice. This was one of the most definitive questions on the survey. It allowed respondents to validate the show and then justify the response. Depending on how the individual answered this question, a better understanding of the impact of the show can be made.

Focus Group Questions
Although the survey was important in order to gain a more objective understanding of television viewing and internalization of messages, a focus group could produce a more insightful information about specific participants. Individuals were selected based on participation in the online or hard-copy of the survey. After completing the survey, the individuals expressed interest in the topic and requested to be involved in the focus group. The focus group was comprised of several questions which discussed inter-personal relationships (see Appendix II).

The focus group questions were prepared in advance and included eight questions to discover more information about how people perceive interpersonal relationships. The questions in the beginning of the focus group concentrated on real life relationships. The questions at the end of the focus group were tailored more to the participants' interpretation of television relationships and interactions. I asked questions that I believed would allow the participants to express themselves and uncover information about how they internalize messages.

RESULTS

Gossip Girl Fan Page Analysis

Numerous *Gossip Girl* forums were observed through the show's fan pages. On Facebook alone there are over 500 pages dedicated to *Gossip Girl.* Innumerable fan pages and forums are available on the internet for individuals to post comments, discuss episodes, or merely to chat with other adoring fans. Most discussions stem from episode dialogue; however, individuals who post on the site did discuss similarities to real life and the desire for similar themes. On the J-14 website, individuals commented on the post "Does Your School Have Drama Like *Gossip Girl?*" Many posts discussed frustration regarding school girl drama or gossip about other students, but others commented on their desire for themes seen in *Gossip Girl* at their schools in reality. This was seen through various fan pages posed questions to subscribers about situations in life or on the show. One question asked fans to discuss the amount of gossip in each fan's high school and impressions of "Gossip Girl." One fan stated, "I wish! R skool is so boring! There aren't any "Blair Waldorfs" or attractive "Serena van der Woodsens" or little "jenny Humphreys" or anyone similar to them! No artsy "Dan Humphreys" or dangerous "Chuck Basses" urg!" Another response was, "Totally!!! I am her! I can't keep a secret 4 long unless it's about me."

Other websites discussed the desire for life to be more like the characters on *Gossip Girl.* One fan posted, "Well, I can't magically teleport myself into the Gossip Girl scene (Believe me I've tried), so I've attempted to find the Upper East Side in my life." This was a typical answer from various fans of the show.

One of the many Facebook pages asked fans to describe their interest with the show and what they did that made them "obsessed." Some of the responses included, "I also created Blair and Chuck in Sims 3 and gave them accurate personality traits and I try to play out their relationship in the game," and "I'm obsessed with Serena and Nate being together. Kinda creepy but the only episodes I have are them close to getting together." Others wrote, "I lovvvvve Blair's style especially her headbands when I wear this headband I notice that start to like them also I speak different and walk different," and "My boyfriend gets mad at me because I have a love affair with a character that isn't real and an actor that I can never have and I'm like haha a girl can dream can't she?"

Another fan page asked viewers to choose their favorite character and why that character was selected. Fans compared themselves to characters on the show with responses like, "I'd probably pick jenny...because I've found a part of me in her…" and, "I absolutely love Chuck Bass and he is the most seductive actor in Gossip girl. I love the way how he talks with such passion and how he reacts to certain situations as if it doesn't bother him at all."

Gossip Girl Content Analysis

This study analyzed the first season of the television series *Gossip Girl*. First, the first season was viewed and summarized based on general plot, interactions between the characters, portrayals of life themes, and depictions of various situations. A summary of findings was then written in order to determine the major themes that appeared throughout the season and to ascertain a specific sample of one indicative episode. By studying a full season period of the show *Gossip Girl,* a greater insight into the full portrayal of interpersonal relationship interaction was discovered.

Season 1 featured 18 episodes, which aired from September 19, 2007 through May 19, 2008. The show follows the lives of Manhattan's Upper East Side high school socialites. Each show in the series begins with the page of the city's gossip blog "Gossip Girl," which dishes scandalous details about the show's main characters. The internet blog is the source of all information about characters and serves to fuel the drama and scandal for those it discusses. *Gossip Girl* features a cast of nine regular characters from the original book series from which the show was adapted. These nine characters include Serena van der Woodsen, Dan Humphrey, Blair Waldorf, Nate Archibald, Chuck Bass, Jenny Humphrey, Lily van der Woodsen, Rufus Humphrey, and Vanessa Abrams. Each character possesses classic sex appeal and incredible wit.

The first episode centers on the return of Serena van der Woodsen from boarding school. Soon after her return it is discovered that the reason for her departure was from the guilt she feels after sleeping with her best friend, Blair's, boyfriend Nate. Upon her return, Serena is shunned from her previous position within the private school's social hierarchy by Blair, and eventually meets and begins dating honors student and Brooklyn resident, Dan Humphrey. Dan is depicted throughout the show as the boy from the "other side of the tracks." He is

good natured and refuses to be consumed with money or class distinctions. Their vastly different backgrounds provide their relationship some difficulty in later episodes.

In addition to Serena's return, the season concentrates on Blair breaking up with her boyfriend Nate and subsequently engaging in a relationship with his best friend Chuck. Blair is continuously engaged in a power struggle with freshman, Jenny Humphrey, who threatens to remove Blair from her position of power within the school's realm. Other storylines include Nate's family issues, Lily and Rufus' previous love for each other, Rufus' failing marriage, and various power struggles within each group. All of these relationships are coupled with the additional drama of teenage hormones and sexual pursuits. The show constantly depicts the physical relationships between characters and the interactions within personal relationships. Three minutes into the show's pilot episode, high school students are shown engaging in sexual activities, such as intercourse, kissing, and erotic touching.

After viewing the entire season, I was able to select episode 13, "The Thin Line Between Chuck and Nate," which best exemplified the variety of themes and interactions between characters. After watching the episode, I was able to gain a better understanding of the manifest content. The episode begins with a classmate from the school witnessing Serena purchase a pregnancy test, then capturing it on camera. The girl submits the photo to the gossip website, where it is soon seen by all the students on campus. The news is popular with the students of the campus, but when Dan Humphrey, Serena's latest sexual partner, learns of the pregnancy he unexpectedly displays his eagerness to support Serena in whatever she decides to do. Dan's behavior is excessively supportive and understanding considering his level of age and education.

Serena dismisses the rumors and tells Dan that she is not pregnant; she is not even the person for whom the test was intended. Serena eventually discloses to Dan the true recipient of the pregnancy test, Blair. Serena tells Dan the secret of how Blair had an affair with Nate's best friend, Chuck, and how if she is pregnant, it is because of Chuck. Dan promises to keep the secret, but it is later leaked, due to the fact that Jenny was eavesdropping on the conversation.

Later, Serena speaks with Chuck, telling him that Blair could be pregnant and he informs Serena that it is not his, because he used protection. They come to the conclusion that Blair

also had intercourse with Nate. All is resolved when Blair discovers that she is not pregnant. Blair and Chuck meet and she tells Chuck that she is not pregnant and that she does not want Nate to know that she slept with Chuck. She hopes that the previous battles between the two of them will end, but as Blair confidently walks away, Chuck sends a text to Gossip Girl stating, "S not pregnant, covering for Blair: Same Blair whose sheets were rumpled by two guys in one week."

Nate learns of the news and hopes to clear his girlfriend's name but Jenny informs him of the news she heard when she overheard Dan and Serena's conversation. Nate finds Chuck and punches him for sleeping with Blair. Chuck tries to tell him that he was there for Blair when Nate couldn't be, but Nate tells him that their friendship is over. Blair tries to convince Nate that she still loves him, but he is too upset to listen. Serena tries to comfort Blair, who is upset that her best friend betrayed her trust by telling Dan. Serena then becomes upset with Dan for revealing a secret she entrusted to him.

Blair tells Serena that she is too upset to talk to her and tells Serena to leave. Blair thinks that her popularity with the other girls at the school will be enough to get through the difficult times, but when the girls come over, they inform Blair that her inappropriate behavior has dethroned her as "Queen B."

Defeated, Blair visits Chuck, in hopes that he will console her. She tells him that he won their battle and that he can have her if he so wishes. Chuck, disgusted, tells her that he wanted her when she was untouched and pure and now that she is used and dirty neither he nor anyone else will. Blair runs to her mother in hopes that she can be sent away for a semester abroad to escape the embarrassment and slander.

Meanwhile, Serena confronts Dan about the secret he neglected to keep. He denies ever saying a word and admits that the reason he didn't tell was because he loves her. Serena awkwardly says "Okay." Dan is upset at her answer and storms off. When Serena later asks Dan why he loves her and he explains, she finally tells him that she loves him too. Serena leaves to find Blair and stop her from leaving the country. She tells Blair that they will be able to fight any battles at school and they will do it together. The show ends with *Gossip Girl* foreshadowing future drama between the characters.

In order to quantify the information seen in this episode of *Gossip Girl*, certain categories were used to code information found in the show (see Appendix IV). References or words used throughout the show were documented. In a 41 minute episode of *Gossip Girl*, the phrase "I love you" was used 17 times. Throughout this single episode there were 14 kisses, 13 terms of endearment, 6 conversations of advice, 3 references to bulimia, 7 apologies, 10 surprise visits, and 13 concerned conversations. The most significant finding from the content analysis was the number of references to sex, and the discussion of sexual repercussions (including pregnancy). In total, there were 34 references, which is equivalent to .83 references per minute of show air time.

Throughout the show, there were three main themes 1. Dan's struggle to express his feelings for Serena 2. Blair's sexual scandal and subsequent unhappiness, and 3. Rufus' recent emergence onto the dating scene. At the end of the episode, three main occurrences of "happy endings" were noted, each corresponding to the three major themes of the show. Similar themes were seen through the entire season. These themes, which are crucial to the entertainment value and dramatic aspects of the show, lead the viewer to assimilate with the themes and become involved with the characters decisions. With all the show's themes addressed positively at the conclusion of the episode, it makes the viewer feel as though the same conclusions will happen in reality as well.

Survey Data Collection
In order to gain a greater quantitative understanding of university student's television viewing patterns, Bryant University students were invited to complete a survey.

Survey Participants
Survey participants were all Bryant University students residing on campus at Bryant University in Smithfield, RI. A total of 155 participants completed the survey. The participants consisted of 93 females (60% of sample) and 62 males (40% of sample). Although the majority of survey participants were female, this is not representative of the Bryant University population. Participants were ages 18 years (1.93%), 19 years (7.09%), 20 years (17.41%), 21 years (43.87%), 22 years (21.93%), and 23+ years (7.74%). The individuals who responded to the survey documented their television watching in hours per week. Of the respondents, 6 (3.85% of sample) watched 0 hours, 40 (25.64%) watched 1-3

hours, 52 (33.33%) watched 4-6 hours, 37 (23.72%) watched 7-10 hours, and 21 (13.46%) watched 10+ hours of television per week.

Respondents were asked to state how often they watched television with others and 50 (32.05%) stated "All the time," 91 (58.33%) stated "Sometimes," 11 (7.05%) stated "Rarely," and 4 (2.56%) stated "Never." From this data, is concluded that from this particular group of survey respondents, most watch television with others on a regular basis.

Below are charts, describing some basic demographics of the respondents:

Table #1

Gender		
Male	62	40.00%
Female	**93**	**60.00%**
Total	**155**	

Table #2

How often do you watch TV per week (in hours)?		
0	6	3.85%
1-3	40	25.64%
4-6	**52**	**33.33%**
7-10	37	23.72%
10+	21	13.46%
Total	**156**	

Table #3

How often do you watch TV with others?		
All the time	50	32.05%
Sometimes	**91**	**58.33%**
Rarely	11	7.05%
Never	4	2.56%
Total	**156**	

In order to gauge what type of television shows the respondents watch, they were asked to indicate all genres they watched. The most popular genre was "Comedy" with 120 (16.19%), then "Reality" with 93 (12.55%), "Drama" with 92 (12.42%), "Sports" with 83 (11.20%),

"News" with 62 (8.37%), "Action" with 59 (7.96%), "Mystery/Crime" with 54 (7.29%), "Romantic" with 48 (6.48%), "Music Television" with 40 (5.40%), "Cartoon" with 29 (3.91%), "Thriller" with 28 (3.78%), "Other" with 24 (3.24%), and "Soap Opera" with 9 (1.21%).

Table #4

What kind of TV program genres do you watch? (Circle all that apply)		
Action	59	7.96%
Sports	83	11.20%
News	62	8.37%
Romantic	48	6.48%
Drama	92	12.42%
Comedy	**120**	**16.19%**
Thriller	28	3.78%
Mystery/ Crime	54	7.29%
Soap Opera	9	1.21%
Cartoon	29	3.91%
Reality	93	12.55%
Music Television	40	5.40%
Other	24	3.24%
Total	**741**	

Respondents were asked to indicate if they discuss the programs they watch with others, and the majority of respondents indicated "Yes" (n=140, 92.11% of sample), while only 12 (7.89%) responded "No."

Table #5

Do you discuss the programs you watch with others?		
Yes	**140**	**92.11%**
No	12	7.89%
Total	**152**	

If the respondents answered "Yes" to the previous question, they were asked to indicate all topics discussed. The majority of respondents denoted "General Plot" as the main thing they discussed (n=108, 30.17% of sample). "Expectations of future episodes" was second (n=102, 28.49%). Of the respondents, 93 (25.98%) signified that they discuss "Similarities for real life" and "Desire for similar themes in own life.' The other options revealed that 49 (13.69%) discussed "Character Development" and 9 (1.68%) discussed "Other."

Table #6

If yes to the previous question, what do you discuss? (Circle all that apply)		
General Plot	**108**	**30.17%**
Expectations of future episodes	102	28.49%
Similarities to real life	50	13.97%
Desire for similar themes in own life	43	12.01%
Character Development	49	13.69%
Other	6	1.68%
Total	**358**	

Although 155 individuals completed the survey, only 41 (27.33%) had seen the television show *Gossip Girl.*

Table #7

Have you seen episodes of the CW series Gossip Girl?		
Yes	41	27.33%
No	**109**	**72.67%**
Total	**150**	

When these individuals were asked their general opinion of the show *Gossip Girl,* 22 respondents (52.38%) determined that the show was interesting, useful, similar to real life, desirable, and they copy characters on the show. The other 20 respondents (47.62%) revealed that they found the show unrealistic.

Table #8

When you watch an episode of Gossip Girl, you typically think: (choose one)		
I think it's completely unrealistic and dismiss it right away	**20**	**47.62%**
I find some parts of it interesting and useful in my own life	12	28.57%
I find similarities in my own life and copy characters on the show	4	9.52%
I wish that my life could be like the show.	6	14.29%
Total	**42**	

After cross-tabulating the number of individuals who watched the show *Gossip Girl* to the gender of the respondents, I found that 36 females (40.91% of female sample) and 5 males (8.33% of male sample) reported having watched the show.

Table #9

Cross Tabulation Frequency/Percent	**Have you seen episodes of the show *Gossip Girl?***			
Gender		Yes	No	**Row Totals**
	Male	5	55	**60**
		8.33%	**91.67%**	**40.54%**
	Female	36	52	**88**
		40.91%	**59.09%**	**59.46%**
	Column Total	**41**	**107**	**148**
	Column Percent	**27.7%**	**72.3%**	**100%**

I then cross-tabulated the discussion topics with regard to television viewing in general with the general impressions indicated from the *Gossip Girl* series. I found that individuals who watched *Gossip Girl* and compared their lives to the show were more likely to discuss how programs related to reality when watching shows other than *Gossip Girl*. From this cross-tabulation, it can be noted that 55% of individuals who watch *Gossip Girl* and have interest in similar themes in their own lives also discuss how television in general relates to reality.

Table #10

Cross Tabulation Frequency/Percent	**When you watch an episode of *Gossip Girl,* what do you typically think?**					
If yes to the previous question, what do you discuss?		I think it's completely unrealistic and dismiss it right away	I find some parts of it interesting and useful in my own life	I find similarities in my own life and copy characters on the show	I wish that my life could be like the show.	**Row Totals**
	General Plot	13	11	4	3	**31**
		41.94%	**35.48%**	**12.9%**	**9.68%**	**26.72%**
	Expectations of future episodes	16	11	3	4	**34**
		47.06%	**32.35%**	**8.82%**	**11.76%**	**29.31%**
	Similarities to real life	9	7	3	1	**20**
		45%	**35%**	**15%**	**5%**	**17.24%**
	Desire for similar themes	8	4	3	3	**18**
		44.44%	**22.22%**	**16.67%**	**16.67%**	**15.52%**

in own life					
Character	8	3	1	1	**13**
Development	**61.54%**	**23.08%**	**7.69%**	**7.69%**	**11.21%**
Other	0	0	0	0	**0**
	0%	**0%**	**0%**	**0%**	**0%**
Column Total	**54**	**36**	**14**	**12**	**116**
Column Percent	**46.55%**	**31.03%**	**12.07%**	**10.34%**	**100%**

I then cross tabulated viewers of the program *Gossip Girl* to the discussion topics after watching television in general. After comparing these figures, 32.17% of *Gossip Girl* watchers discussed similarities to real life as well as desire for similar themes in reality, whereas only 23.3% of non-viewers discuss these topics. This is the most interesting finding obtained through the survey. This indicates that *Gossip Girl* may potentially have an impact on the expectations and views of fans in terms of similar their expectations of their real lives. Although the figure is not statistically significant, it does indicate that from the pool of individuals surveyed, a larger majority answered in this way.

Table #11

Cross Tabulation Frequency/Percent	If yes to the previous question what do you typically discuss?						
Have you seen episodes of the show *Gossip Girl?*		General Plot	Expectations of future episodes	Similarities to real life	Desire for similar themes in own life	Character Development	Other	**Row Totals**
	Yes	31	33	19	18	14	0	**115**
		26.96%	**28.7%**	**16.52%**	**15.65%**	**12.17%**	**0%**	**32.76%**
	No	74	67	30	25	34	6	**236**
		31.36%	**28.39%**	**12.71%**	**10.59%**	**14.41%**	**2.54%**	**67.24%**
	Column Total	**105**	**100**	**49**	**43**	**48**	**6**	**351**
	Column	**29.91%**	**28.49%**	**13.96%**	**12.25%**	**13.68%**	**1.71%**	**100%**

		Percent							

Focus Group Results

After conducting a focus group with eight Bryant University students, seven females and one male, I was able to uncover some of the interpretations of television relationships as well as the personal views and beliefs of those individuals (See Appendix III). Focus group members were recruited after completing the survey. Members were acquaintances of mine, thus might provide a limitation on the data. All focus group participants were between the ages of 20 and 22. At the time the focus group was conducted, only two of these individuals were in a relationship. When discussing the characteristics the participants looked for in a relationship partner, most of the individuals valued humor as a large contributor to the relationship. These individuals also expressed interest in a relationship developing from a friendship. Many believed that physical characteristics were important in the initial attraction to the other person, but agreed that an attraction can develop over time when they get to know the person better. One participant stated, "I think that in order to be attracted to someone they have to be good looking. It is hard to get past it if you don't think they are at all attractive." Most participants expressed an interest in a person who is "passionate" and "hardworking."

The next question focused on an ideal date. A majority of the focus group participants included dinner in the date with various activities accompanying the dinner including, a carnival, drinks, walks on the beach, a movie or concert, or even just playing games. The male participant chose a climb to a mountain summit at sunset, which generated a warm and effectionate response from the other female members. Another group member stated that she would like to go to an amusement park because it would allow the other person to see her at her best and worst all in one day.

When asked to describe an ideal relationship, some members discussed friends from home or family members who had positive and healthy relationships, but others chose relationships depicted on television shows or movies. One participant selected the couple from the movie *The Notebook*. In the movie, a true "love story" is presented as a forbidden love that conquers all obstacles. The couple gets married and ends up dying together at the end of the movie. The focus group member said the reason why she chose them was because, "They found time apart and realized they wanted to be together no matter what. I think that fighting is a must in

a relationship-it is boring without it. Besides, making up is so much better afterwards. Passion is necessary." Here the group member selected a common theme of drama within a typical television representation of a relationship and focused her answer around the need for that drama. This response could be the result of the member imitating the drama she has watched on television.

Another individual selected Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley from the book and movie series *Harry Potter.* She selected a "forbidden" love as well and described the passion demonstrated by the characters and the eventual happy ending for them at the end. The television characters, Jim and Pam, from *The Office,* were selected by a member of the group because they are "hilarious," and "fun [but] not too serious about life." The situation depicted also touched upon the idea of the couple being separated but still lasting. The topic of "passion" and "love" was discussed when another group member chose the characters, Nathan and Hailey from *One Tree Hill.* The concept of trust throughout difficult times was apparent and the fact that the two characters loved each other no matter what.

The next topic discussed was that of group members' idea of a normal, healthy, or ideal progression of a relationship. The group was split over the issue of whether the couple should be friends before dating. Some believed that a healthy relationship is the result of a solid friendship first, while others believed that dating a friend can only end in disaster. Many discussed their belief in the essential "first fight." They believed that every relationship needs to get over that first fight and be able to move on from that quarrel. After getting over the fights, participants agreed that people should live together before marriage in order to determine if the relationship can progress to that next stage. One member discussed the relationship in terms of a lifecycle that goes through peaks and valleys and begins with the infatuation of the other person.

The next question asked participants to comment on relationships depicted on television. Most of the group members understood the over-dramatization of television shows in addition to the idealized lifestyles of characters, yet some stated that they would like to have the lives of some of the characters they see on TV. Many individuals believed that the television programs "give people hope" and are "fun to watch." One member said, "I don't think that it

is terrible but it is drama filled. I don't think that it harms anyone, it is just more fun. People feel what they are experiencing and can associate with the characters."

Should participants be put in a similar situation to those on TV, I asked them if they would act similarly. While only two participants responded to the question, they stated that the shows did not provide them with information on how to act, but reminded them of situations they had had in the past. Both members stated that they wished they were able to respond in similar ways, but realized that the television programs are scripted and have time to figure out the perfect line to say.

The rest of the group was asked to discuss a time in which they used conversations from television in interaction with friends, or if they emulated characters in any way. Some members discussed how they take quotes from television shows and put them in their away messages or Facebook status, but many stated that they did not use quotes in a direct or serious conversation. Many believed that they didn't have a good enough memory to remember and use a quote in a conversation, but one member stated that they used a quote from a Mary-Kate and Ashley Olson video when she was younger. She remembered the quote and said it to a young man who was pursuing her at the time.

When discussing the advice given to friends, the focus group discussed the sources for the advice. In many cases, group members based advice on their parents or personal experience in addition to a mere rational analysis of the situation. A group member mentioned that "people tend to see what they've seen in friends, parents and TV relationships and use that in their advice…" A few group members believed that the advice they give was formed based on experiences and information they gathered from watching television or seeing relationships in reality.

In completing these four forms of data collection, I was able to uncover various themes and better understand how individuals interpret and perceive media representations of relationships. The focus group analysis allowed me to see how *Gossip Girls* feel about the show as well and how they discuss it with others. The content analysis of the show let me see the images and scenarios that are shown to viewers and discover the potential impact the

messages could have. The survey and focus group were then used to gather information from students who watch these programs and decipher the messages.

DISCUSSION

With the completion of this study, I have been able to more clearly understand the impact of television on the expectations of interpersonal relationships. By completing a grounded theory study of the television show *Gossip Girl,* I have learned the impact that one show can have on the relationship expectations of the viewers. Many people watch television with the general impression that what they see has no future impact on their emotions or states of being. While some programs may have little effect on the overall personality or course of a person's life, others influence the viewer into believing that the course of actions on television or dialogue between characters is how reality will play out.

The literature review completed for this study allowed me to understand previous studies and enable me to develop my own research. As a result, it became apparent to me that media play a large role in the development of viewers' belief systems and actions. The emphasis on characters and the eventual outcome of the program plays a role in how we envision reality transpiring. After finishing my literature review, I determined that the only way I could find out if a program like *Gossip Girl* truly influenced viewers was to watch the program myself.

After watching *Gossip Girl* I established that it is a drama filled and sexually based show. The content analysis of the program demonstrated the extent to which characters run the full gambit of drama. The interactions between characters are well scripted and perfectly executed. The storyline provides ample crises and excitement, including the scandal of multiple relationships, the confession of love, and the pursuit of future love interests. The teenage characters conduct themselves in a state far beyond the typical standards of teenage maturity and vocabulary. The show features characters who say exactly the right line and show up at exactly the right time. The sequences of events in the show are implausible within the confines of reality, yet provide sufficient entertainment.

My viewing of *Gossip Girl,* to establish my coding categories showed me that there was a lot going on in an entire season. Each episode runs for approximately 40 minutes and within that

time, the interactions of the characters produced significant results. In the analyzed episode, I recorded 34 references to sex or the repercussions of the act. As previously noted, this accounts to .83 references per minute of show air time. What message is this sending to the teenagers for whom this show is specifically geared? This does not include the 17 times the phrase "I love you" was used or the 14 kisses that appeared. It also does not include the "happy endings" of the episode's story lines. Although the importance of being a program with drama to engage the watcher and maintain viewership is understandable, is this show misleading youth to believe that these situations occur in reality as well? Studies have determined that many girls have negative body image as a result of the programs they watch. Can a program also negatively affect the expectations that we have for our lives?

Through my analysis of *Gossip Girl* fan pages, I found that girls in particular are most susceptible to these messages. The comments left on the fan pages indicate that fans not only discuss the events of the shows, but how they relate to their personal lives as well. The comments revealed that the *Gossip Girl* fans found similarities to their own lives and stated their desire for similar situations in their own realities. Some girls played out scenarios in virtual games or with their significant others. Some try to emulate characters by wearing similar clothing and change the way they express themselves, to more closely resemble the characters. When discussing characters on the show, the fans talked about them as if they were real people. The fans had comments about all aspects of the characters' lives and personalities. Many spoke adoringly of them, stating how much they wanted these aspects in reality.

Judging by the number of fans who write comments on Facebook walls or fan pages about these topics, I can assume that there are many others who feel similarly. In the pursuit of some quantifiable information regarding this topic, I used a survey. The survey did not examine only *Gossip Girl* viewers. This helped me understand the effects of media more generally. The 155 survey participants produced some interesting results. A majority of respondents were female (60%) which serve as a limitation in one sense; however, it may not be because the typical viewers of *Gossip Girl* are female (87.8% of sample of *Gossip Girl* viewers). A majority of viewers watched between 4-6 hours of television per week and most indicated that they watched television viewing is a social activity.

Not only did viewer's watch television with each other, but they found the context of the show so compelling that the majority (92%) discussed the programs with others. By discussing a program with another individual, a person places a greater significance on that topic. When we discuss something with another person, we have signified that the topic is of great enough importance that we must verbalize our opinions or rationale behind the program. When discussing the program, 25.98% of respondents made comparisons to reality. When the respondents watched a particular program on television, they found aspects of the show that tied in with their own lives. This means that individuals were watching programs with reality in mind and making connections to reality as they watched.

Almost a third of respondents noted that they have watched *Gossip Girl*. These respondents talked about the issues they think about when they watch the show. Over half of the *Gossip Girl* viewers (52.38%) stated that the show was interesting, useful, similar to real life, desirable, and they copy characters on the show. With over half of the respondents mentioning the fact that they take information from the show and relate it to reality, it appears that the show has a significant impact on the viewers' ideas. One of the most interesting discoveries from my survey came from the cross-tabulation of those who have seen the show *Gossip Girl* with the topics discussed with others from watching television in general. My findings concluded that if a respondent had seen *Gossip Girl,* 32% would discuss similarities to reality and desires for similar themes in real life. If the individual had not seen *Gossip Girl,* they were only 23% likely to discuss these themes. This signifies the impact that this particular show has on viewers.

Survey participants were asked to indicate their favorite male and female character. The majority of individuals liked Blair Waldorf the best (76% of sample). They stated that she was fashionable and funny. She was able to express herself well and she has grown up as the show has progressed. Others indicated their admiration for her based on the fact that she "stuck with Chuck even through hard times…" and "she wants to find love." Many stated that her relationship with the character Chuck Bass was a reason they liked her. Blair was admired for her strong will and entertainment. As the majority of viewers of the show are women, it seems understandable that a female viewer would appreciate a strong and sexy leading role. Blair is a character who is able to stand up for herself and refuses to be

overlooked. This is a characteristic that many women strive to have. The participants admire Blair for these traits.

The most popular male character on the show was Dan Humphrey (39%). Participants liked him for his "cute" and "wholesome" nature. He was described as funny and not "stuck up." One participant stated that he was an "…outsider and an underdog…you can't help but root for him." He was also described as the most realistic character. This seems strange because his actions do not typify the American teenager. He is incredibly smart, attractive, and charming on the series. He has great lines and thinks rationally about most situations. Although he is not jaded by the upper class students at his school, he represents the "perfect" man, which is not the most "realistic."

Some respondents stated that their feelings regarding the show stemmed from the fact that they wanted their life to be like certain aspects within the show. One person also stated, "I think some of the characters' interactions have good outcomes that could be useful in real life." This statement relates to the major theme within this research study. Even though viewers realize the drama and implausibility of the show, they still indicate that they find aspects useful in reality. Although the show is based on reality, the outcomes of interactions are not the typical interactions of most interpersonal relationships.

The survey helped me understand the impact that *Gossip Girl* has on a small sample of students at Bryant University. It also let me understand that if these findings were multiplied across the entire sphere of *Gossip Girl* watchers (especially avid fans), the span of the show's influence might be greater. I conducted a focus group in order to gain a more insightful understanding of these findings and discovered interesting results.

The focus group provided me with some interesting responses. I discovered that although every participant recognized the dramatization and implausibility of television programs, they still watched these shows and valued the content to some extent. The participants idealized certain TV relationships and aspired to have a similar relationship with someone in a similar form. Focus group members described the model relationship partner when the topic of partner characteristics was talked about. Each person detailed the attributes of the other person and what they hope to get from a relationship. Many even discussed the progression

of an interpersonal relationship with a specific focus on disagreements and arguments. One member commented that, "…fighting is a must in a relationship-it is boring without it. Besides, making up is so much better afterwards." The impact of dramatic television shows makes it seem as though fighting is an integral part of a relationship. The comment by this focus group member seems as though she believes all healthy relationships require fighting or drama to stay healthy.

Focus group members also stated that a lot of the information they get in terms of advice for others comes from family and the television programs they watch. One member said "People tend to see what they've seen in friends, parents and TV relationships and use that in their advice, but to be brutally honest, I think of where you've seen this in other relationships." Group members stated that they understand certain situations because they have seen them on television shows, thus they are able to make decisions and give advice to others based on the fact that they have watched programs that discuss similar topics. The focus group members clearly established their understanding and interest in media messages. Overall, focus group members understood the function of media messages, yet still internalized them to a certain extent.

This study has examined the influence of one program's effects on interpersonal relationship expectations. I was able to gather information from various sources in order to determine the eventual impact on individuals. I was able to conclude that television programs, more specifically *Gossip Girl*, do in fact have an impact on the perceptions and expectations of the viewer. My survey analysis provided results that show how *Gossip Girl* watchers are more likely to discuss how the program relates to reality as well as the desire for similar themes in reality. Although many do not fully understand or recognize the effects of television viewing the reality is that many of us are shaped from the images we see and the actions carried out.

The impact of media messages on the mindsets of viewers is important for individuals to consider before producing a television or movie program. Understanding the full effect that a program can have on an individual is paramount to the production itself. The media messages present in most productions have the ability to shape our minds as viewers and change how we perceive ourselves in terms of interpersonal relationships. Although much of what we

know and understand about relationships does come from family or friends, we spend so much time absorbing the messages we see on television, it is no wonder we have been tainted by these dramatized versions of reality. Just as young children are introduced to fairy tales, they are introduced to television and movies as well. As shown through the early window theory, these children soak up messages before they are able to fully comprehend them. Have we been polluted from the beginning with false truths posing as reality?

By watching programs such as *Gossip Girl,* we are more likely to discuss how the show relates to reality in addition to the extent to which we wish our lives could be like the show. If one show can have an impact such as this, what is the impact of the rest of the messages we observe? The messages observed within one season of *Gossip Girl* included sex, drugs, alcohol, murder, love, hate, and marriage. These messages serve to entertain the viewer, but they also influence how the viewer perceives these similar themes in reality. Throughout this study, many participants stated that they receive much of the advice they give to others from television shows similar to *Gossip Girl.* If we base our advice and actions on the messages portrayed through shows like this, which may not an accurate depiction of reality, how then are we able to share advice or make wise decisions about our own reality?

This study has served to provide a scandalous look into the implications of television viewing on the lives of the viewer. Television provides us with a form of escapism, a break from reality, and a means to live vicariously through characters which have the means and perhaps the personalities we do not possess. The characters on television represent an extension of who we wish to be. They are the representation of what we want but cannot have in our own lives. This provides us with confusion when we watch television. Our lives are not scripted, and we do not always make the best decisions. It is important for us to understand the importance of reality and the distinction we must make between the lives depicted on television and the lives we live each day. This may be difficult to face at first, but if we choose to take the shows on television for their face value the "gossip" of reality would be easier to handle.

<u>APPENDICES</u>

Consent Form
Interpersonal Relationship Expectation Survey

You are invited to participate in a research study on interpersonal relationship expectations. This study is conducted by Cailin Rocco, Honors Program Student from Bryant University.

This study will take approximately three to 5 minutes of your time. You will be asked to complete an online survey about television viewing and relationships.

Your decision to participate or decline participation in this study is completely voluntary and you have the right to terminate your participation at any time without penalty. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer. If you want do not wish to complete this survey just close your browser.

Your participation in this research will be completely confidential and data will be averaged and reported in aggregate. Although your participation in this research may not benefit you personally, it will help us understand more about how expectations of interpersonal relationships are formed.

There are no risks to individuals participating in this survey beyond those that exist in daily life.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant in the study, please contact Cailin Rocco or the International Review Board at Bryant University

Please print a copy of this consent form for your records, if you so desire.

I have read and understand the above consent form, I certify that I am 18 years old or older and, by clicking the submit button to enter the survey, I indicate my willingness voluntarily take part in the study.

--/---------------------
Name   Date

Your decision to participate, decline, or withdraw from participation will have no effect on your current status or future relations with Bryant University.

Interpersonal Relationship Expectation Survey
Please take a few minutes to fill out this survey on television programs. Your feedback is welcomed and your answers will be kept confidential. Thank you for your participation.

General Information

1. **Gender**

   ○   ○

   Male   Female

2. **Age (in years)**

   ○   ○   ○   ○   ○   ○

   18   19   20   21   22   23+

Television Viewing

3. **How often do you watch TV per week (in hours)?**

   ○   ○   ○   ○   ○

   0   1-3   4-6   7-10   10+

4. **How often do you watch TV with others?**

   ○   ○   ○   ○

   All the time   Sometimes   Rarely   Never

5. **What kinds of TV program genres do you watch? (indicate all that apply)**

Action	○	Mystery/ Crime	○
Sports	○	Soap Opera	○
News	○	Cartoon	○
Romance	○	Reality	○
Drama	○	Music Television	○
Comedy	○	Other	○
Thriller	○		

6. **What specific shows do you watch on a regular basis?**

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

_____

7. **Do you discuss the programs you watch with others?**

    ○   ○

   Yes   No

8. **If yes to the previous question, what do you discuss? (indicate all that apply)**

○	○	○	○	○
General Plot	Expectations for Future Episodes	Similarities to Reality	Desire for Similar Actions/ Outcomes in Reality	Characters/ Development

Gossip Girl

9. **Have you seen episodes of the CW series *Gossip Girl*?**

    ○   ○

   No   Yes

If yes to the previous question, please answer questions 10-14.

10. **Which female character on *Gossip Girl* is your favorite? Why?**

_____
_____ 12
_____
_____
_____
_____

11. **Which male character on *Gossip Girl* is your favorite? Why?**

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

12. **What is your general impression of the *Gossip Girl* series?**

_____
_____
_____
_____

_____
_____

13. When you watch an episode of *Gossip Girl*, you typically think: (choose one)

I think it's completely unrealistic and dismiss it right away   O

I find some parts of it interesting and useful in my own life   O

I find similarities in my own life and copy characters on the show   O

I wish that my life could be like the show   O

14. Please explain your answer to the previous question:

_____
_____
_____

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this survey. Your answers are greatly appreciated.

Appendix B- Interpersonal Focus Group Questions
Consent Form
Interpersonal Relationship Expectation Focus Group

You are invited to participate in a research study on interpersonal relationship expectations. This study is conducted by Cailin Rocco, Honors Program Student from Bryant University.

This study will take approximately one hour of your time. You will be asked to answer a series of questions about television viewing and relationships.

Your decision to participate or decline participation in this study is completely voluntary and you have the right to terminate your participation at any time without penalty. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer. If you want do not wish to complete the focus group questions you may be excused at any time.

Your participation in this research will be completely confidential and data will be averaged and reported in aggregate. Although your participation in this research may not benefit you personally, it will help us understand more about how expectations of interpersonal relationships are formed.

There are no risks to individuals participating in this focus group beyond those that exist in daily life.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant in the study, please contact Cailin Rocco or the International Review Board at Bryant University

I have read and understand the above consent form, I certify that I am 18 years old or older and, by remaining in the focus group room, I indicate my willingness voluntarily take part in the study.

--/---------------------
Name   Date

Your decision to participate, decline, or withdraw from participation will have no effect on your current status or future relations with Bryant University.

- Good Morning/ Afternoon!
- My name is Cailin Rocco and I am a marketing major at Bryant University. I am also a student in the Honors Program, and I am conducting this focus group to further my research for my senior honors capstone project.

- Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. We understand that your time is valuable, so we will honor that fact and keep this discussion to one hour.
- Consent form
- In order to complete my senior honors capstone project, I am conducting research in order to evaluate interpersonal relationship expectations.
- The information collected will be confidential and no names will be released as to who participated in the focus group. I hope this encourages you to speak more freely.
- This project will be presented to students and faculty in mid April at the Honors Program Colloquium.
- Are there any questions before we start?

INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIP EXPECTATIONS FOCUS GROUP

1. Please state your name, age, and relationship status.
2. Please describe your ideal date.
3. What kinds of characteristics to you look for in a relationship partner?
4. If you could choose an ideal relationship (either family, friends, or television) whose would you choose and why?
5. Describe your idea of a normal, healthy, or ideal progression of a relationship.
6. What do you think about relationships depicted on television?
7. If you were put in a similar situation to those on television, would you act similarly?
8. Do you ever take conversations from television and use them in interactions you're your friends? Do you emulate characters?
9. What sources do you use when you give advice to your friends?

- Thank you for participating in my focus group.
- Your responses were incredibly helpful, and have given me a better understanding of (Television Behavior/ Relationship Expectations)
- Just to sum up what we covered today…
- Thank you again.

Appendix C- Focus Group Transcript

1. **Please state your name, age, and relationship status.**
    Arielle, 22, Single
    Michael, 22, Single
    Elyssa, 22, Relationship
    Jen, 21, Relationship
    Mikala, 20, Single
    Christine, 22, Single
    Jessica, 21, Single
    Jenna, 22, Single

2. **What kinds of characteristics to you look for in a relationship partner?**
    Arielle: I want someone who is passionate, hardworking, makes me laugh and thinks I'm funny, but I don't look at same guy each time. It changes from time to time.

    Michael: Definitely passionate, humorous. The person has to have a goal in life and ways to reach it. I used to want a bombshell but that has changed for maturity and intelligence.

    Elyssa: Humor, responsible, mature. I think that in order to be attracted to someone they have to be good looking. It is hard to get past it if you don't think they are at all attractive.

    Jen: Humor, like everyone else. They have to have a goal and be hardworking, and as interested in me as I am in them. I do have a "type." They have to be tall. I think that you have to be attracted to them, but you can become more than friends if get past type.

    Mikala: Humor too, mature but can have fun, and passionate. I think you need to be physically attracted to someone.

    Christine: They have to be funny and hardworking. If you get to know someone it really doesn't matter how they look, but initially if out searching then you are looking for certain features but if you are laidback the person can be anyone.

    Jess: I want someone I can be myself around. They have to have humor, and just like Jen said as interested in me as I am in them. They have to be goal oriented. Honestly, looks are somewhat important to the point that you need to be attracted to them but

you can become more attracted to someone because of their personality and they can grow on you.

Jenna: The person has to be funny and able to laugh at life in general. We have to have similar interests, and they need to listen to me. Looks are important but not most important. When you spend time with someone they can look completely different.

3. **Please describe your ideal date.**

Arielle: I would want to go to an amusement park. Its fun and you can see me at my best and worst all in one day.

Mike: I would like to hike to summit of mountain during sunrise or sunset.

(Big "awww" from the rest of the group)

Elyssa: I would have dinner at a nice restaurant and then go to a carnival. I think the experience would be classy and fun.

Jen: I'm from New Hampshire, so I like to be outside. I would like to go on a boat during day, and for a dinner date just have dinner and go out for drinks. I think it is important just to hang out and talk one on one.

Mikala: I would want to go to dinner and then go to the beach afterwards to walk.

Christine: Well, it depends on the person and whether you knew them or not. Dinner and a movie or concert if you don't know the person, and if you know them an amusement park or just hanging out playing board games or watch movies.

Jess: I think dinner and something else. You really need to break the ice and just talk, so a walk on the beach would be great.

Jenna: I would want to go out to dinner and a movie.

4. **If you think of an ideal relationship (either family, friend, or on television), whose would you choose?**

Arielle: I would choose two friends from home. They were complete opposites and they filled where the other one was lacking. They were a couple everyone aspired to

be. They knew how to compromise. On dates they had fun and were the life of the party. They just really enjoyed being around each other. Even though they aren't together anymore, I would like to be in the relationship they had when they were together.

Mike: I think an ideal couple can hold up individually. They go after their own goals, support each other, hang out and goof off, but they don't spend every minute with each other. They live separate lives but come back to each other for support.

Elyssa: I think I am in an ideal relationship. I wouldn't be in my relationship if wasn't ideal. We have been together 3 ½ years, and we have had ups and downs, but it has worked out great. We don't spend every minute together, we have our own personalities, and we get along very well. I realized that TV shows are not what is going to happen and there is no "perfect" ideal relationship.

Jen: I would choose *The Notebook* couple. They found time apart and realized they wanted to be together no matter what. I think that fighting is a must in a relationship- it is boring without it. Besides, making up is so much better afterwards. Passion is necessary. You need time to do nothing- make dinner for each other, go out, and have a balance of having fun, going out. You can find out what is necessary and not.

Mikala: Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley. Harry is passionate in what he does and breaks up with Ginny so she doesn't get hurt by Lord Voldemort. She is his best friend's sister so it is kind of forbidden, but they eventually get married and have babies.

Christine: Jim and Pam from *The Office*. They are best friends. They are hilarious and feed off each other's humor. They had some struggles, Pam moved away and it still lasted. They are fun and not too serious about life. They just recently had a baby.

Jess: Hailey and Nathan on One Tree Hill. The passion and love between them is amazing. They trust each other and even through bad times they still love each other. Their relationship is all about team work.

Jenna: I would have to say some friends from last year. They have been together since they were seniors in high school. Their personalities complement each other so perfectly. They do fun activities together and they argue but it never gets out of hand. My friends and I always talk about how perfect they are together.

5. **Describe your idea of a normal, healthy, or ideal progression of a relationship.**

Arielle: I think you casually start dating at first and it leads into something more serious. Your first fight is a milestone. I don't think you can say you are in a relationship until that first fight. You see if you can be with them all the time and live together before marriage.

Mike: I don't think you should be good friends first but meeting friends of friends may be good. You have to start out liking each other in a friendship kind of way and I like a longer progression before actually dating. Before bringing someone home I like to make sure they are the one. You have to know the person before introducing them to the family. Then you must live together to test the relationship and see if it can last.

Elyssa: I thought of it differently. I think you have to start off with infatuation and idealization of other person, and then it becomes a honeymoon phase. Then you have to have your first big fight and past that it levels off and there are peaks and valleys in the relationship.

Jen: I think that after hanging out without expecting anything, you can go on a couple dates, and see if it's working out. You have to establish if you are going to hang out with other people or not, and if you are hanging out exclusively you are in a relationship.

Mikala: I don't believe in dating friends. I think you should meet someone and hang out with them and become friends. Then you see if you can date them and go from there and build a relationship with them.

Christine: I think that a relationship has to have some foundation of friendship first. It grows from there, divulging more info, getting to know each other better. You find out each others' likes and dislikes, learn how to live together, and get more serious from there.

Jess: I think you should casually date before actually becoming in a relationship. If you are not friends you need to know each other's strengths and weakness, communicate with each other, and learn how to work together. Then you move in together and see if that works. From there you build and eventually get married.

Jenna: You should find someone to be friends with first or casually date before getting serious. From there continue to get to know each other and see where it goes.

6. **What do you think about relationships depicted on television?**

Arielle: I think they are ridiculously overrated. I have never met someone with relationship anything similar to TV, even though I would like to have something like that.

Mike: Utter bullshit

Elyssa- I think they are idealized and dramatized.

Jen: I think they are idealized, but definitely amusing to watch. I think it gives people hope. I think people want their relationships to be like that, but it's not a good thing because it could create fights. It is fun to watch though.

Mikala: I think they are dramatized, but I like to watch them. I don't hope to be like them because know it's not true.

Christine: I believe that there is some hint of truth to them, but things that go on are ridiculous. It does give us hope and it is better than nothing. I don't think that it is terrible but it is drama filled. I don't think that harms anyone, it just is more fun. People feel what they are experiencing and can associate with the characters.

Jess: I think the relationships give a reason to set unreal expectations. It is highly unlikely you will be like them.

Jenna: I think they are idealized. People want to be like that couple, so they set unreal expectations. People love to watch them, though, so it stays the same.

7. **If you were put in a similar situation to those on TV, would you act similarly?**

Jen: I wouldn't think of the TV show in that situation, but I would notice after the fact. If it was still on my mind or the TV show brought t something up it would remind you about a similar situation or trigger something in you, but I am not that clever and I don't have that good of a memory to remember those things.

Christine: When I watch TV I always think "Oh! I should have said that" or "Why didn't I act like that." But then I remember that it is scripted and they have all day to figure out what they want to say and the perfect line to come back with.

8. **Do you ever take conversations from television and use them in interaction with your friends? Do you emulate characters?**

Arielle: I wouldn't use a quote to talk to a boyfriend, and I wouldn't feed a quote back if given one.

Mike: I hate when a girlfriend puts up a quote in an away message. I also don't like when people use TV, movie, or song quotes.

Elyssa: When I was 15 years old, I was at a party and sort of dating a guy but not really interested, we kissed and at the time I was obsessed with Olsen Twins. In one of their movies they say a line and so I fed it right back to the guy I was with and said, "I'm just not that into it."

Jen: I have such a bad memory and I'm not clever, so I wouldn't take it from them.

Mikala: I haven't thought of anything in the past.

Christine: When I am heartbroken, I have two websites of quotes. I look at them and use them as away messages.   I can relate life to something that has gone on in TV but not in a spoken way.

Jess: I usually don't talk about my own relationships, but will relate quotes for friends. I don't think there is anything I would say in the setting of a relationship conversation though.

Jenna: I put quotes in away messages, but I don't actually say them in a serious way or influence anyone else with them.

9. **What sources do you use when you give advice to friends?**

Arielle: I base a lot of my advice on my parents. They were high school sweethearts. They have been together for 27 years. Even though they are not an ideal relationship they have gone through a lot of things and they have hit all the stages. It provides a foundation because I experienced things with them. I don't think that people take my advice anyways though, because they will do what they want to do regardless.

Mike: I base it from my parents. They also have been married 27 years. They have a weird dynamic, but I have also learned a lot about relationships from first girlfriend. I play off that and give general advice to friends.

Elyssa: I base it off pure rationale. I can't really apply to myself but giving advice is very direct.

Jen: I base it of rationale, but spin it to be better than it might be. I try to make it good and put myself in the other person's shoes and think what they would like to hear. I try to twist the situation to make it sound better. I try to make it happy for the night and it will probably get better in the morning.

Mikala: I don't give advice that often, so I am no expert, but I do base my advice off rational and common sense. I like to make people feel better about themselves.

Christine: I would like to be rational, but I think about what's in my head, heart, and what I honestly think about the situation. Most of the time I ask what the other person thinks and what they want to do. I try to be there to help them get through it.

Jess: I think advice is usually the same for everyone. People tend to see what they've seen in friends, parents and TV relationships and use that in their advice, but to be brutally honest, I think of where you've seen this in other relationships. Then I make decisions and try to help other people.

Jenna: I think everyone has own view of head on what you've learned from relationships in your life, friends, or TV. You have in mind what you think and situations are pretty similar. I think you have an opinion of how it should be handled and tell what you think they should do.

Appendix D- Cultivation Analysis Coding

Reference or Word Use	Number of References
Reference to sex or repercussions of sex	34
"I love you"	17
Kisses	14
Actions of love/ interest	14
Terms of Endearment	13
Concerned Conversation	13
Rumors/ Scandal	11
Surprise Visit	10
Trust	10
Apology/ "I'm Sorry"	7
Advice	6
Appearance/ Looks	6
"Together" references	6
Relationship Pursuit	4
Bulimia Reference	3
Happy Ending	3

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