

*MEDIA EFFECTS ON DIVORCE ATTITUDES: BREAKING THE TABOO*

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Jack J. Valenti

School of Communication

University of Houston

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Masters of Arts

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By

Mansuereh Yvonne Eype

May, 2016

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## **ABSTRACT**

The taboo associated with divorce has decreased among young adults. What was once a silent issue has become a more casual topic of discussion, with some discourse transcending onto social media sites. Research has shown that media and the act of divorce have a positive measurable relationship. However, understanding the role of the media in the shaping of divorce perceptions and the weakening of taboos, should be a precursor to expanding the literature in this area. Using cultivation theory as a framework, this thesis found that while media's glamorization of divorce through television programs and celebrity news had an effect on divorce perceptions, overall television consumption yields a more significant correlation. It was supportively hypothesized that a high intake of television correlates to a more positive attitude of divorce.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sometimes thesis papers are written in the quiet comfort of a library, with like-minded knowledge-hungry students surrounding you. Other times, they are written in breakfast rooms with Mickey Mouse blasting tunes on the television; while a one-year-old climbs up your leg in an effort to hit every key on your laptop. Both settings have been very conducive for me in finishing this thesis paper. The latter setting, may have caused me to rethink my ability to be a mother and a student, concurrently, but it also allowed me to realize how badly I wanted to succeed. So first and foremost, I want to thank my one-year-old, Isabella, who drove me crazy, but challenged me to never give up.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

“Everyone else is doing it, what makes us so special?” my husband replied to me after my last effort to save our marriage. He was talking about divorce. Did he really feel that because other people were “doing it,” it validated the acceptance of our road to separation? Where did this perception first formulate? He had never mentioned divorce during the eight years that we were married, but all of the sudden, here it was—a valid option based on the perception of the masses. He even continued to bring up the topic casually every day until our divorce.

Through teaching high school students, I have also witnessed a more casual discourse among students in regards to the topic of divorce. Fifteen years ago, when I first started teaching, divorce seemed to be a very taboo topic among my students. Students rarely engaged in discussions about their parents' separation. I would only become aware of certain situations through private notes or one-on-one discussions. Most discussions would end with “please keep this between us.” Outside of the classroom, this taboo was highly reflective within various social outlets. During that time, there were rarely any television shows or celebrity news reports about divorce. When celebrities had a divorce, the tone and demeanor of the news report was done quite forlornly.

As the years progressed, so did the publications of divorce-centered content. The topic of divorce no longer seemed to hold the same tabooed weight as it once had. News media began to glamorize celebrity breakups to a point that it became another form of entertainment that no longer sadden or shocked, but instead amused the public. The media's new positive personification of divorce through television shows, movies, and celebrity

news, seemed to have transcended into my classrooms. I witnessed various students talking about their own parental divorce quite openly and casually. These discussions were even apparent in assignments and oral presentations. Although the same negative emotions were associated with their parents' divorce, the readiness to talk about it had clearly changed. It seemed to me that as society became more open about the topic, so did my students and my now ex-husband.

The increase incidents of divorce have marginalized its social impact on society. Through the changing perceptions of divorcees, children of divorced families, and a less stigmatized societal climate, the acceptance of divorce has been more legitimized since the 1970s (Gottman & Notarius, 2002; Pinsof, 2002). Divorce is one of the most prevalent topics of discourse (Gähler, 1998). This life-altering event causes turmoil and strife for some people, while giving others a fresh new start. With such polar effects, divorce has become a powerful topic within various pop cultural platforms. In turn, the media has now taken on the role of perception shaper on this topic. Mass media has undergone various dramatic changes within the past 50 years. One possible entity of this change is that the media's contribution to the notion of a mass society. Information is easily disseminated everywhere. With that information, comes the influence on beliefs, values, conduct, mindsets, and societal norms; playing a role in the rise or decline of wisdom, and the general edification of people on crucial subjects of civilization and humanities (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Things occurring anywhere are quick to be known everywhere. The media, more specifically mass media, both subdues the public with information, and helps to sort it out. Mass media has the overwhelming power to disseminate a narrow ideology to a large audience.

People in today's society are inundated with media. The media operates as the glue that bonds social commonalities and occurrence. Therefore, it can be predicted that the media can play a part in the spreading of specific divorce ideologies. More specifically, mass media is known to glamorize divorce, and in turn, validates its acceptance. Throughout various literatures, the overwhelming message is that with the increase in divorce rates comes a decrease in the stigma associated with it (Kamaruddin, 2005). This phenomenon is greater observed through younger generations, which in general, tend to be less conservative when it comes to the institute of marriage (Cunningham & Thornton, 2006).

Researchers coined the theory of cultivation to address the effects of high television viewership. Gerbner & Gross (1976) initially developed this theoretical analysis in order to see if violent content on television had an effect on a person's real-world perceptions of crime. More specifically, they sought to discover whether or not higher television consumers, perceived the world as more violent compared to low television viewers. This theory has since been expanded upon in order to include a broad range of genres and television content. Of these genres, infidelity, relationship dynamics, and family ideologies are all developing areas of study in the field of cultivation (Hoff, Greene, & Davis, 2003).

### **Divorce Background**

Divorce ideology has been altered in the court of public opinion over the course of a handful of decades. The feminist movement, women's suffrage, and the men's right movement have all fundamentally challenged the view of a monogamous relationship. The concept of equality among the human psyche has spirited a liberal acceptance of a taboo reaction to irreconcilable differences. Studies done on various populations, even the most conservative ones, have also revealed a change in ideology. According to a study done in the

UK, nearly two-thirds of the population surveyed felt that divorce no longer had a stigma attached to it. In fact, this same population voiced that they felt divorce was socially acceptable. Even with the presence of a diversified society, with various cultures, divorce attitudes have shifted in a positive direction (Kapinus, 2005; Riggio & Fite, 2006). Studying what factors contribute to this shift in attitude is vital.

According to the *Enrichment Journal* (2012), the divorce rate in America, for a first marriage, is 41%. It appears that significant progress in divorce reform has made it less complex and more justifiable to obtain. Researchers would most likely agree that not only has divorce become more collectively acceptable, divorce laws have also changed to provide more reasonable solutions for many couples.

A study published in the *Social Science Research Network* looked at the survival rate of a marriage within a social network that consisted of divorcees. Using data taken from the Farmington Heart Study, the study discovered that even though a marriage is thought to be a 'couple thing', in most instances, intimate connections are rooted into the social web we weave (Christakis, Fowler & McDermott, 2009). Breaking up is hard to do, unless everyone else is doing it too, was the underlying message of this study.

The decision to get a divorce is not the only view that has been altered through some sort of social medium. With the divorce rates on the rise, people are also waiting longer to get married. According to the 2011 United States Census Bureau, in 1890, the median age for a man to get married was 26 years of age, and 22 years for a woman. Currently in 2015, that rate has risen to 29 years for a man, and 27 years for a woman. Nearly every year, the average age of first marriages has risen indicating that people are waiting longer before marrying for the first time. Part of the reason may lie in the increased number of divorces. It

appears that people wait longer the first time because they want to make sure they are marrying the right person and to beat the odds.

According to the Barna Group (2008), over 60% of marriages in America are done under some type of religious sacrament, with a vow that the couple shall stay together – until death does them part. If this is the standard perception embedded at the time of marriage, where does the rising decision to get a divorce manifest from? During a study addressing marriage perceptions, participants revealed that even though they desired a long term-forever marriage, they were not very hopeful about the outcome (Segrin, 2002). Results also indicated that the younger generation of adults have begun to adopt the concept of serial marriage; a way of living in which an individual has several marriages throughout the course of their life.

These perceptions of divorce are linked to the cynicisms about marriage. Sociologists Dr. Paul Amato's (2000) interviews on marriage attitudes with couples that were living together, found that two-thirds had already developed a fear about the "legal, emotional and economic consequences of splitting up later". These couples voiced concerns about the "hassle" of divorce lawyers, child custody battles, and unresolved issues about their own parents divorcing (Amato, 2000). Some told researchers that the institution of marriage was condemned and lacked seriousness.

### **Media and Family Structure**

Based on the most recent Pew Research center analysis, only 46% of kids below the age 18 are currently in traditional nuclear family. This is a 27% change from 1960, when more children lived in traditional family units. This family structure consisted of a breadwinning father, a passive mother that stayed home to raise the kids, and a couple of

polite, biological children. Jonathan Fitzgerald, writer of *Not Your Mother's Morals*, argued that a dominant contributor to these changes has been the media. "Sometimes pop culture is a reflection of where we are and other times it is a shaping force," he says. "In the case of television, we often don't know that our morals and values are being shaped until after it happens" (Merritt, 2013, para. 4). The 1950s were a time when television reflected the "American" family as universal notion. Programs like *Leave it to Beaver* and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, depicted the family in the traditional breadwinner-homemaker structure. Within this family infrastructure, divorce was never an option. However, as societal family models began to transform into more non-traditional entities, family depictions on television also started to evolve. In turn, so did America's way of thinking about family dynamics. Mass media operates as a communitarian social barometer. As trends become apparent, the media capitalizes on the potential entertainment aspects. In doing so, television not only mirrors, but can also mold societal norms and traditions. Television, its ethical principles and messages, and the standard of living it promotes, has a critical adverse bearing upon the institution of marriage and family (Brody, 1980). The cultural effects of divorce are evident when looking at popular culture. In the past, divorced relationships were not written into television shows and movies. Instead single parents were presented as widows. *The Brady Bunch*, for example, was created after the producer discovered that "30% of marriages [in the United States] have a child from a previous marriage" (Merritt, 2013, para. 5). In order to reflect societal norms, the show's father, Mike Brady, was characterized as a widower. Originally, Carol Brady was to be depicted as a divorcee. However, with objections from the Network, Carol's previous marital status was left opened (Merritt, 2013, para. 10).

Recent television shows integrate divorce content and characterizations as a humorous element. *Reba*, *The New Adventures of Old Christine*, *Happily Divorced*, and *Two and a Half Men* use divorced characters and/ or the topic of divorce as their main storyline. Movies, like *The First Wives' Club*, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, and *Along Came Polly*, poke fun at the idea of people surviving after a divorce. Operating under the same notion of a social barometer, this change is a good indication that viewers are more accepting of divorced people. Fictional characters are not the only ones breaking the taboo. *Divorce Court*, a half hour TV program where couples come before a judge to get a divorce, gives another outlet for dramatizing divorces. Viewing actual divorces on TV appears to postulates the concept that divorce is a common and accepted occurrence. Due to the limitations in broadcast and time allotments, *Divorce Court* has to be creative in the filtering and shaping of information that is shown. Therefore, the footage that is edited for the airway will be the portion that has the most entertainment value versus the most merit.

Celebrity news also plays a major part in the glamorization of divorce. This form of mass media speculates every aspect of a celebrity's divorce. From rumored infidelity, to predications about the effects of a celebrity's divorce, celebrity news covers all angles. Kim Kardashian's infamous 72-day marriage swamped headlines for weeks. The majority of the content, both televised and written in magazines about this notorious couple, were centered on rumors and various scandals. This dramatization of divorce can potentially cultivate a message that marriage is disposable.

This thesis study aims to expand upon the literature surrounding the cultivation effects of relationship dramas and celebrity news viewing on divorce perceptions. For the purpose of this study, divorce perceptions are coded as being either positive- lacking in

stigma or as negative-a presence of stigma. This study involves an online survey that asks participants about their overall television intake; more specifically, divorce centered news and program viewership, and their views in relations to divorce taboos. Multivariate data from the survey is used to examine patterns that answers three research questions. These questions address the possible cultivating influences within various levels of viewership: heavy to light; and are centered around first and second level cultivation effects. Genre-specific cultivation will also be taken into consideration.

The current study is an essential addition to previous mass communication literature because it lessens the disparity in the cultivation analysis where information about divorce perception effects is minute. Furthermore, this study focuses on a populace of young people that are highly receptive to unconventional views about divorce, which subsequently can alter overall divorce decisions. The social implications and results of this study may serve as a good foundation for other studies that attempt to understand the roles of the media in shaping divorce perceptions.

It is imperative to study pertinent research on this topic to determine how effective, if at all, the cultivation approach can be in helping us to understand the ways in which the mass media can shape public consciousness. There are also important lessons and benefits to be learned from methodological shortcomings that have been identified in the original Gerbner research designs.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to conduct research on the relationship between media and divorce perceptions, we must first look at the extensive research done on marriage/divorce perceptions, media effects, and cultivation theory.

#### **Theoretical Framework: Cultivation Theory**

The correlation between divorce perceptions and the sum of time spent watching television is analyzed through cultivation theory. This theory states that since television is a communal method of communication and presents pathos driven narratives, heavy viewing may lead people to adopt the values and belief that are disseminated on the monitor, that do not operate within a realistic behavior and/or perception pattern (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999; Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). Therefore, according to cultivation theorists, television cultivates a false social reality. The impact of this ramification weighs quite heavily since the perception of the audience may be that these fictional occurrences depict real life.

Foundationally, cultivation theory is a mechanism for determining whether or not heavy television viewers have a higher probability of seeing their world in ways that replicate the perceptions, messages, and behaviors that are most commonly presented by television programs (Gerbner, 1977).

The American population are inveterate television watchers. Television consumes more of our time than any other activity; with the exception of work and sleep (Morgan & Signorielli, 1990). The 2015 Nielsen report indicates that the average American watches five hours of television a day; with percentages increasing as the data includes non-traditional television viewership, such as time-shifted programs and smartphone usage. Due to this

steady growth, television has developed into the leading source of information (Signorielli, 2005). According to cultivationist, the synthetic reality of television influences heavy viewers' views, attitudes, and behaviors. Television and society have a collaborative bond; television serves as a "learning environment" that "mirrors and leads" society (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 1986). Through cross-applying this notion, we can deduce that the growing glamorization of divorce is simply the media's way of reflecting the divorce norms in our society. Cultivation is also presumed to be an internalization of opinions, personal standards, and assessments of societal veracity as they are routinely presented on television, more than it is a mere imitation of what is seen (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986). Hence, cultivation is broken into two parts: First-order effect and Second-order effect. First-order effects reference the significant relationship between heavy viewing and misconstrued societal perceptions, e.g., flawed assumption that everyone accepts divorce as normal and inevitable. Second-order effects are the relationship of heavy viewing with opinions molded through specific broadcasted messages, e.g., being anti-Muslims due to the continuous association of terrorist with the religion (Hawkins & Pingree, 1982; Gerbner, et al., 1986).

The shaping of divorce attitudes can be more applicable to second-level effects. Significant exposure to divorce-centered dramatization and celebrity news can potentially yield an artificial perception of divorce. The media can also play a role in communicating the idea that divorce is no longer a stigmatized issue. Understanding that high television viewing can form a media-shaped viewpoint is key in analyzing the overall effects within this study.

Furthermore, cultivation research gives a basis for labeling viewership. Viewing measures are labeled as either being high, low, or medium (Gerbner, 1998). Subjects that

viewed a minimum of four hours of television a day were labeled as heavy viewers; while subjects that averaged two hours or less per day, were labeled as a light viewer (Dainton & Zelley, 2005). Through a cultivation framework, participants in the current study, who are identified as high television viewers, in general, are predicted to have higher positive attitudes toward divorce, than those labeled as low to medium leveled viewership.

Cultivation is said to be most prevalent when two variables are present: high intake of media and certain first and second-order effects (Morgan & Shanahan, 1999; Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). Although some effects statistically yield a small significance, results are still considered cross-culturally reliable among various demographics (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999).

Cultivation research originated through the desire to discover the relationship between various television watching habits and an individual's perception and behavior. Original researches were concerned with how violence in the world was being perceived by heavy versus light television viewers (Gerbner, 1998; Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). Although, in general, heavy television viewers rated society as being more violent than light viewers, data for light viewers also indicated a more violent world in specific instances where they recently watched a violent program (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008; Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). Littlejohn & Foss's study (2008) raises a question of whether or not the recency of a show watched, affects a person attitude in different ways. For the method portion of this study, the positive perceptions of divorce are tabulated against a timeframe variable. Participants are asked to indicate whether or not they have watched a divorce genre program, in addition to notating when they watched this type of program last.

## Analyzing Genre-Specific Viewing

In spite of cultivation theory's original use to predict the perception of violence, the theory has now encompassed various types of genres. These observations have accounted for the considerable change in cultivation research in the past 30 years. Various literatures have concluded that a high intake of television does cultivate a person's perceptions, behaviors and attitudes in the real world (Gerbner, 1998; Hetsroni & Tukachinsky, 2005; Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). However, since the same effect can occur with any content of media, major methodological changes have been incorporated. Recent studies have centered around the influence of genre-specific television use versus the effects of high television viewership on worldly perceptions and attitudes (Bilandzic & Rössler, 2004; Brosius & Rössler, 2001; Hetsroni & Reizer, 2014). Many of these studies have widened their provisional use of this theory in order to cover possible perceptions effects on infidelity, health, family structure and roles, body image, and marriage. Although a fairly new take on cultivation research, less-traditional cultivation researchers for years have hinted that different TV genres may cultivate different conceptions: "The strife and heroes of crime adventure, the misunderstandings and embarrassments of comedy, the grasping idiocy and chance of game shows, the event-centered definitions of news – all may cultivate different views of the world" (Hawkins & Pingree, 1981, p. 299).

A popular content for genre-specific studies is medical dramas. Over the past decade there has been an increase in medical dramas such as *ER*, *Grey's Anatomy*, and *House*. Concurrently, a significant following of this type of genre has also developed; making this phenomenon a lucrative area of study. However, the findings have been mixed at best. Wober and Gunter (1985) found a small correlation between routine viewing of this genre

and the decrease in confidence in the professional field of medicine and the overall quality of hospital management of patients. Whereas, Quick (2009) detected a positive relationship between doctor ratings and medical dramas viewership. Furthermore, these studies' findings were contingent on a third variable of viewers' perception of the shows' credibility. Critics of this form of study, feel that the mix results are due to a lack of a content analysis component, researchers only asking about specific programs, and not adjusting for a ceiling effect phenomena. Hetsroni (2014) took all of these components into consideration in order to conciliate the contradictions. By employing relevant content analysis data, comparing genre viewing and total viewing for their effects, and by asking about medical dramas in general, instead of a specific programming, Hetsroni felt that they were able to get a more reliable measure of genre-specific viewing effects. With the exception of news, this study concluded that genre-specific viewing produced smaller cultivation effects than total viewing (Hetsroni, 2014).

The current study tests Hetsroni (2014) results in relations to divorce oriented dramas and celebrity divorce news, to evaluate whether or not this type of genre would yield a higher effect. Since similar studies done on love and family were able to produce a positive correlation between romantic messages portrayed on television and viewer attitudes; the current study has a high probability of generating a second-level effect. Research results have indicated that television episodes have been used as a social guide in love matters (Bachen & Illouz, 1996). A study conducted by Bachen and Illouz (1996), revealed 94% of American teens indicated that they used television as an informational source on love and romance. In addition to similar significant findings, there needs to be more research done to measure cultivation effects of watching television on relationship conflicts and romantic relationship

tactics. The few studies that focus on these types of variables have not produce consistent results. Two of those studies concluded a positive relationship ( $r = .10$ ) between the quantity of time devoted to consuming television and romantic beliefs that are more old-fashioned in nature (Morgan, 1980 & Signorielli, 1991). However, the significance was very small. Morgan, Legette, and Shanahan (1999) discovered that heavy television viewers were not as probable to support traditional family values when it came to issues such as single parenthood and having children without being married. These coefficients were similar to other cultivation studies (Morgan & Shanahan, 1997). This relationship was consistent with the concept that television in fact cultivates the receptivity of single parenthood.

In the latter study, statistical controls were employed in order to account for potential sources that may have caused falsity in results. Similar to some of the demographic questions proposed in the current study, these controls were “age, education level, sex, marital status, parenthood (i.e., whether the respondent has children), political party (Democrat, Republican, Independent), race (White vs. non-White), and religiosity (a single-item, self-report of religious intensity)” (Morgan, Legette, & Shanahan, 1999). Although cultivation analysis is broadly utilized around the world, the original methodology devised by Gerbner and his colleagues has in the past received a lot of criticism and since been refined in various ways. Morgan, Legette, & Shanahan (1999) accounted for these proposed shortcomings by employing a multi-regressive analysis. In order to minimize spuriousness and to authenticate cultivation effects the current study finds it necessary to control various demographic variables.

Furthermore, in both studies, age was an important intervening variable. Younger people tend to be less traditional in their views. As they explained, this could possibly be a

third variable effect of already possessing non-conservative family views versus a contributor to it (Morgan, Legette, & Shanahan, 1999). In other words, young people who accepted illegitimacy and single parenthood turned to television more. Segrin and Nabi (2002) detected a significant positive relationship amongst romance-centered program viewership and an unrealistic expectation of marriage. Another study revealed a small but positive relationship between idealistic relationship principles and romantic novel and comedy movie viewership (Shapiro & Kroeger, 1991).

These types of correlations between content-specific programs and viewer perceptions are also evident in sex-related content. People who watch more sexual television content perceive real-world occurrence of sexual behaviors to be more frequent and more mischievous than they really are. These perceptions surround topics of sexual permissiveness, adultery, fornication, sexual discourse, conceiving children out of wedlock, and the utilization of sex as a bargaining tool (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Strouse, 1993; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999; Buerkel-Rothfuss & Mayes, 1981). Formation and satisfaction of sexual identities and more liberal beliefs have also been linked to various types of sexual television content (Signorelli, 1991; Buerkel-Rothfuss & Mayes, 1981; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999, Aubrey, Harrison, Kramer, & Yellin, 2003).

Talk show content-specific cultivation is another area of research concern. Studies have found that talk shows have adverse effects on adolescent behavior and judgment processing. Davis and Mares (1998) conducted a study of high school students in order to measure desensitization and issue complexity of talk shows in relation to adolescents' personal assessment of social behavior. Topic-content included teen-pregnancy, weapon possession at school, run-aways, adultery, and premarital sex (Davis & Mares, 1998). First

order cultivation effects were significant in majority of the issues tested. A hypothesis, which predicted that talk show viewing would significantly predict frequency estimates of behaviors discussed on talk shows, was validated in all teen-related issues (Davis & Mares, 1998). This finding is supportive of first-order effects.

Rössler & Brosius (2001) furthered the research on talk show genre-specific effects of adolescents, by studying whether or not adolescents subjected to extended exposure to talk show content about lesbian or gay male relationships, transsexuals, and tattooed persons would overestimate the quantity of these individuals in general, view them as being less restrictive, and have less restrictive attitudes towards them. The study's sample was taken from a pool of high school students living in a small city in Germany. Test consisted of (a) pre-experimental questionnaire to measure participants' overall television use, (b) viewings of talk shows on five sequential days, (c) daily television-use surveys to manage participants' media usage throughout the observation process, and (d) a survey given out the following week that measured potential treatment effects (Rössler & Brosius, 2001). This method of experimentation was employed to lessen possible restrictions set by using a survey. It also enabled researchers a platform to present their participants with diverse variables over an extended period of time and a way to assess potential effects after a delay. Results for this study indicated that both a first order and second order effect were present. Adolescence did over-estimate the presence of lesbians and gay males in German after watching a controversial talk show about the content. Secondly, adolescents gave a less restrictive evaluation of public opinion toward an issue after watching it being talked about in a more open manner. Lastly, in regards to lesbian or gay relationships and body tattooing and piercing, participants in the experimental group displayed a considerably more open-minded

attitude (Rössler & Brosius, 2001). These findings help to reinforce the possibility that opinions about tabooed topics, similar to that of divorce, can also be transferred and transformed through any format of media.

These studies propose a prudent question for the current study in regards to methodology. What would be the most reliable and accurate method for analyzing possible cultivation effects of the media on divorce perceptions? Although a prolonged exposure design might be best, limitations may not make it possible.

### **Understanding Marriage and Divorce Perceptions**

Modern society may have taken away the stigma associated with divorce, but has failed to substitute it with an attitude in favor of marriage (Bayme, 1994). Government laws and the media should be reconditioned as a tool in solidifying marriages. Lowered expectations concerning nuptial arrangements and the widening scale of the number of divorces contribute to the overwhelming attacks against the institute of marriage (Bayme, 1994). An American Jewish Committee report done in 1983, reveal an underlying issue with how marital difficulties were portrayed in comical situations on prime-time TV. This report observed that marital conflicts were unrealistically being resolved in twenty-two minutes or less - alluding to the notion that relationships were easy to maintain (Kovsky, 1983). The implications of this type of message can have a heavy effect on impressionable viewers. When viewers begin to compare their own unresolved relationship conflicts with those of fictional characters, they may deem their own issues as irreconcilable.

Various researchers have used theories to predict outcomes and to determine the effects of divorce. Exchange theory, for example, employs the notion that positive views of divorce correlate with a diminished sense of commitment and marriage enriching practices

(Amato & Rogers, 1999). Cognitive dissonance theory, on the other hand, predicts that a person in an unhappy marriage will find ways to manipulate the convention of marriage and even adopt a more affirmative perception of divorce (Amato & Rogers, 1999). Gender and age also play a big role in the way society thinks of the institution of divorce. Men tend to view divorce on a more pragmatic level than woman. Children from homes in which a divorce has occurred are more likely to perceive the father as responsible for the breakup of the family (Lepak, 1985). Additionally, children who come from a divorce household are more likely to be more tolerant of divorce than those whose parents remained married (Jennings, Salts, & Smith, 1992).

Attitudes about the foundation of marriage and the reception of divorce have had a major face-lift in recent years. A large percentage of the population believe that difficulties of obtaining a divorce should be made less cumbersome. This open-mindedness about divorce coincides with the actual increase in the number of divorces each year (Cherlin, 1992). Studies done over the course of years have ascertained that pro-divorce attitudes have a higher relation to actual divorces (Amato, 1996). Expanding upon these studies, other studies have indicated that a more positive attitude towards divorce is established after an individual gets a divorce (Amato & Booth, 1991).

Various studies have addressed the factors that influence divorce perceptions and attitudes. Some studies have taken a more longitudinal approach in order to further the literature on parental influence. These studies emphasize the importance of using statistics that encompass measures of parental divorce viewpoints spanning over a longer period of time, and ranging from various milestones within a child's life, including adulthood (Kapinus, 2004). Kapinus (2004) sought to discover the answer to three different questions in

regards to what factors affected a child's attitude towards divorce. The first question analyzed the possible correlation between parental attitudes toward divorce and "offspring" attitudes toward divorce. The study concluded that parental views about divorce were the most probable indicator of a child's views about divorce. The study also concluded that the gender of a child was an influencing factor. Kapinus (2004) discovered that fathers did have a greater influence on their son's attitude towards divorce than mothers did. The second question asked whether or not a child's attitude towards divorce was influenced by parental divorce. Results from the study indicated that parental divorce did in fact influence their child(ren)'s attitudes toward divorce. The study revealed that parental divorce did lead to a pro-divorce attitude in children. Lastly, the third question took into account additional conditions that may also contribute to the shaping of divorce attitudes. Findings for this question revealed that conflicts after a divorce and the lessening of the bond between father and child, are gender specific- yielding different effects (Kapinus, 2004). Taking into account that a positive relationship between parent's attitudes and that of their children, is vital for the current study.

Media may heighten or exploit a glamorous perception of divorce in viewers, however, it is not the only variable that attributes to a pro-divorce attitude. Through this study's questionnaire and the interpretation of its findings, parental divorce will be accounted for in order to increase overall reliability.

There are also other predicted causes for the increase in divorces. The judicial system has created a "no-fault" clause in divorce proceedings; making filing a divorce easier. Contracted marriages with a specified termination date also make getting a divorce effortless. However, the implications of divorce are more social than legal. Greenberg (1981)

acknowledges that although feminism is a vital and necessary part of today's society, it can destroy families and the institute of marriage. Greenberg (1981) notes that an increasingly high proportion of women with feminist leanings have been or are now being divorced. Similarly, Sylvia Barack Fishman (1993) agrees that some contemporary divorces may indeed be linked to the greater ambition of women today (Bayme, 1994).

Children are another important element in divorce perception studies. Even with the varying opinions about divorce, two-parent households are the desirable link to a healthy and prosperous childhood. Children who are raised in one-parent homes have a higher chance of experiencing problems socially, behaviorally, and mentally. In a society that is far removed from being able to maintain traditional family structures, the shaping of divorce attitudes should be a long-term agenda of scholarly studies. If divorce in itself has a negative effect, variables that effect attitudes towards divorce can yield a more favorable effect. Understanding the effects that a glamorized version of divorce has on children is important. Children growing up without the stigma of divorce may form the ability to cope with a parental divorce more effectively. This study can pave the way to observing the magnitude of effects on a child's attitude, behavior, and overall coping abilities.

### **Media Portrayal of Relationships**

Fictional portrayals of divorce on television have contributed to several divorce decisions and validations. Even during decades when divorce was most stigmatized, the public actively followed the marital ups and downs of celebrities. The world of young adult television provides a notable set of norms about romantic relationships. First, romantic couples generally do not experience conflict; suggesting that relationships are easy to maintain (Johnson & Holmes, 2009). Romance is portrayed as happy feelings and happy

endings without the need to resolve conflict. In fact, 84% of television's romantic couples are in a traditional steady relationship defined as marriage or dating (Johnson & Holmes, 2009). Non-normative relationships such as living together or having sex with platonic friends are rare, accounting for about 3% of portrayals (Johnson & Holmes, 2009).

The second norm defines the origin of conflict in relationships. This norm suggests that most romantic conflict originates with the female partner's anger over something the male partner did (Johnson & Holmes, 2009). The final norm depicts conflicts within relationships as always resulting in a perfect “happily, ever after” resolution (Johnson & Holmes, 2009). It is important to research the ramification of conflict resolution in the media in order to get a better understanding of its power.

According to various media theories, television portrayals affect the real world attitudes and behaviors of its audience (Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008; Gerbner, 1998; Hetsroni & Tukachinsky, 2005; Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). While romantic relationship research has not been a large focus of media researchers to date, it is important to conduct research in order to know if young adults learn conflict behaviors from such television content, if they develop certain worldviews about conflict from television, and if they use such television content to gratify specific decisions, for example, divorce.

Dating perceptions also have a direct effect on marriage and divorce. Research shows that the media has the power to cultivate dating norms. Findings from Rivadeneyra and Lebo's (2008) study indicated a significant relationship between viewing romance-genre programs and possessing set attitudes about what is or isn't an acceptable gender-role during courtship. Overall, the results indicated that in conjunction with an adolescent's own experiences in dating, adolescents are also acquiring from TV that dating is role specific and

gender-oriented (Rivadeneira & Lebo, 2008). This attitude is connected to a worsening of sexual harms for young women and a diluted standard of commitment, overall.

Through the following research questions, this study will explore the relationship between a high intake of media, portraying a more glamorized divorce norm, and the attitudes toward divorce in young adults.

RQ<sub>1</sub>: Does media's glamorization of divorce (through TV shows, and/or celebrity news) affect the way young adults perceive divorce?

RQ<sub>2</sub>: Does heavy television viewership cultivate a more positive perception of divorce?

RQ<sub>3</sub>: Do these attitudes affect marriage/divorce decisions?

Answering these questions will reveal whether or not the media plays a role in shaping divorce perceptions. Cultivation analysis will be used as a framework in understanding the current relationship between television and divorce perceptions. Although various social and personal factors contribute to the positive perception of divorce, in this paper I advance the hypothesis that the glamorization of divorce through television dramas and celebrity news has contributed to the removal of the stigma associated with divorce perceptions.

In summary, media has been shown to have an effect of the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of individuals. Therefore, it can be argued that mass media is capable of cultivating a perception that divorce is an acceptable resolution to conflict and can lessen its negative impact by homogenizing the decision.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

Media's glamorization of divorce sends a message that marriage is dispensable. This study was conducted to determine whether or not a relationship existed between heavy television consumption and the positive perceptions of divorce. A positive perception of divorce can be characterized by, but not limited to, the perception that divorce is a socially acceptable end to a marriage; divorce is a preferable option for an unhappy marriage; and life after a divorce can be more pleasant.

The data were accumulated from a sample of participants recruited from several undergraduate communication courses at the University of Houston. Respondents were asked to complete an anonymous web-based cross-sectional survey (Appendix B), in exchange for extra credit. The survey was sent electronically from the students' professors and was estimated to take approximately 15 minutes or less to complete. Upon accessing the survey, all participants were prompted to read a cover letter, as approved by the University of Houston's Institutional Review Board, indicating that they have been informed of all survey criteria, guidelines, and expectations.

#### Survey Participants

A total of 206 undergraduates with an average age of 21.79 ( $SD = 3.01$ ) participated. The majority of participants were female (74%), with 28% of the sample being White, 29% Hispanic, 15% African American, 15% Asian, 5% other, and 7.3% indicated that they were Multiracial. The year in school was Freshman (17%), Sophomore (26%), Junior (36%), and Senior (20%). Data about the current dating status of participants was also collected: Not dating 51%; dating Less than a year (18%); dating more than a year (27%); and married

(3%). In order to account for a predisposed tolerance of divorce caused by having divorce parents or close family/friends (Jennings, Salts, & Smith, 1992), participants were asked: “How many people do you personally know that have been divorced?” About 47% of the sample indicated that they had either a friend or family that experienced a divorce.

### **Measures Overview**

The questionnaire consisted of three main measures: a) Divorce perceptions, b) Marriage perceptions, and c) Media use. The dependent variables were divorce/marriage perceptions. The main independent variable was media consumption as well as genre-specific program consumption. The questionnaire consisted of Likert-type statements concerning students' perception towards marriage, divorce, and media usage. The instrument consisted of 32 questions (see Appendix B for full instrument).

### **Marriage and Divorce Perception Variables**

*Marital Perceptions.* As a conceptual guide in measuring participants' perceptions about getting married and staying married, Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) 6-item instrument was used. This surveying instrument follows the idea that certain measurement techniques can arrive at a single attitude score, which represents the person's evaluation of the attitude object. Segrin (2002) conducted a survey that included items that were projected to determine romanticized marriage ideologies. These items were directed towards the expectancies to get married, circumstances that lead to a marriage, and the perpetuation of marriage. Prompts included: “ I expect to be engaged or married within the next five years,” “ I would not get married unless I was in love,” “ When I get married, I intend to stay married until I or my spouse dies,” “When married, I expect to spend a lot of time with my spouse,” “I have doubts as to whether I would enjoy living exclusively in marriage with a member of the opposite

sex,” “The responsibilities of married life will be enjoyable to me,” and “I will be very happy if I marry (Segrin, 2002).” According to this measure, the more favorable a person’s attitude, the more likely he should be to endorse favorable items and the less likely he should be to endorse unfavorable items. These seven items had acceptable reliability, Cronbach’s alpha = .77, with lower scores representing a more favorable attitude towards staying married. Therefore, variables were collapsed into a new marriage perception variable  $M = 2.06$ ,  $SD = .71$ .

*Likelihood of Divorce.* In order to measure attitudes about divorce, Mulder and Gunnoe’s (1999) Likelihood of Divorce Scale was used. The scale measures the likelihood of a person to “get a divorce in seven hypothetical marriage situations: no more love, physical abuse, spouse turned out differently than expected, no magic left, verbal abuse, spouse had an affair, and a lot of arguing” (Mulder & Gunnoe, 1999).

The current study utilized seven hypothetical marriage situations questions, such as, “Your spouse physically abused you?” and “You and your spouse did not love each other anymore.” Responses ranged from 1 (very unlikely) to 5 (very likely). Participants were instructed to imagine that they had been married for a couple of years and had no children. They were then prompted to indicate the likelihood of a divorce in each of the hypothetical situations.

These seven items had acceptable reliability, Cronbach’s alpha = .85,  $M = 3.85$ ,  $SD = .82$ , with higher scores representing a more likelihood of getting divorce.

*Divorce Perceptions.* Researcher created questions were also designed in order to measure overall divorce perceptions. This was done in an effort to solve for potential methodological problems, which occurred in the Mulder & Gunnoe (1999) study. By only

including seven items in their Likelihood of Divorce Scale, their results were not consistent with other findings. Increasing the number of items will aid in providing more reliable results.

A 5-point Likert-style scale similar to the marriage perception scale was developed to individually measure divorce perceptions. Items included questions such as, "I feel that there is no circumstances in which divorce is acceptable," "Divorce is a socially acceptable means to end a marriage," "If you are unhappy in your marriage, it is ok to divorce," "I feel that there is a highly negative impact associated with divorce," "Once married, how likely would a divorce be an option for you?" and "I often have doubts about my chances of having a successful marriage." In order to improve reliability, Item Five was dropped. This created a measure that had marginally acceptable reliability,  $\alpha = .665$ ,  $M = 3.02$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ .

### **Media Use Variables**

One of the fundamental questions asked about media by researchers is to what extent are they used? How often or how much are audience members exposed to media? These questions about media exposure are vital for a number of reasons. First, if the media is to have any impact, it must be experienced. In connection with demonstrating or establishing these media influences, there has to be some measurement of media exposure. Second, the media does not merely replicate social and cultural occurrences; it also creates and endorses various attitudes and beliefs. The independent variable in this study was the overall amount of time given to television viewing.

*Media Exposure.* Using a global time estimates model (Vandewater & Lee, 2006), the current study accounted for the mean total of time used consuming various types of media,  $M = 5.33$ ,  $SD = 3.3$ . Global time estimates prompts are normally formatted as: "How many

hours did you spend watching television yesterday?” “How many hours do you spend watching TV in a typical day (or a typical week)?” or “On average, how many hours did you watch television per day in the past seven days?” (Vandewater & Lee, 2006). Participants were instructed to indicate the total number of hours they watched television per day in the past seven days.

Gerbner and his colleagues give more weight to the total quantity of television consumed than to any other variables (Morgan & Signorielli, 1990). Other scholars argue that measuring genre-specific viewership is vital (Carlson, 1993). The current study took into account both genre-specific viewership and total television viewership. For the purpose of this study, the total television viewing time was measured by asking respondents how many hours they watched television last week (weekdays only),  $M = 5.33$ ,  $SD = 3.3$ , last weekend,  $M = 4.11$ ,  $SD = 2.81$ , and yesterday,  $M = 2.15$ ,  $SD = 1.6$ . These measures were used to examine a potential cultivation effect.

*Genre-Specific Measures.* Since studies have shown that genre-specific measures have been more significantly correlated with real-world views than a measure of total television viewing hours, a “genre-specific” measure created by Nabi et al. (2003) was also used to establish the scope in which participant routinely watch six different genre categories of television.

Respondents were also asked whether or not they watched specific divorce-centered programs (SEE APPENDIX B). They were asked to indicate how often they watched each specific program within a given week. Genre-specific frequencies results were noted: Romantic Comedy,  $M = 1.78$   $SD = 1.4$ , Soap Operas,  $M = 1.22$ ,  $SD = .80$ , Daytime Talk Shows,  $M = 1.28$ ,  $SD = .74$ , Reality TV,  $M = 1.70$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ .

Respondents were also prompted to think about their overall television watching behaviors in relation to content. Participants were asked to indicate percentages of time watching each of the following program genres: Romantic Movies,  $M= 23.53$ ,  $SD= 24.7$ , Soap Operas,  $M= 13.48$ ,  $SD= 21.42$ , Daytime Talk Shows,  $M=14.00$ ,  $SD=16.15$ , Reality-Based shows about relationships,  $M=25.08$ ,  $SD=28.34$ , Sitcom-Based TV shows about relationships  $M= 28.21$ ,  $SD= 26.22$ , and Celebrity News about relationship,  $M=16.05$ ,  $SD=21.95$ . Roughly half of all the participants indicated that they watch celebrity news,  $M=47.5$ ,  $SD= 26.64$ .

*Program Credibility.* To measure the extent to which participants found specific divorce centered programs: Credible/Not Credible, Realistic/ Not Realistic, and Believable/ Not Believable; a five-item measure was used. Using a sliding scale method, with 1 representing a negative response and 5 indicating a positive response, participants were asked to rate the following: “Images and storylines communicated in divorce dramas are”; Images and narratives communicated through Celebrity News are”; and “Images and narratives communicated through Divorce Court are.”

The five items had acceptable reliability for Divorce Dramas, Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .92$ ,  $M = 2.45$ ,  $SD = .99$ , Celebrity News Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .87$ ,  $M = 2.19$ ,  $SD = .98$ , and for Divorce Court, Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .95$ ,  $M = 2.28$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ , with lower scores representing a negative perception towards the overall creditability, believability, and realistic attributes of these specific program genres.

*Cultivation Measure.* Eight measures of cultivation were constructed: two were first-order (estimates) and six were second-order (assessments of beliefs). The first-order measures, which included celebrity and general divorce, required respondents to make an

estimate of the percentage of something from 0 to 100%. The two items selected to measure first-order beliefs about divorce asked “What percentage of marriage end in divorce?” and “What percentage of celebrity marriages end in divorce?”

A six item instrument ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” was employed to measure certain second order effects: “More marriage end in divorce than stay together”,  $M = 2.92$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ; “It is easy to talk about divorce”,  $M = 3.20$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ; “Television depiction of divorce is accurate”,  $M = 4.09$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ , “Divorce is morally acceptable”,  $M = 2.99$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ : and “Divorce is a normal occurrence”,  $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ .

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

Shifting ideologies about a once sacred engagement, marriage, has become an interesting subject of discussion due to the increasing amount of television programs glamorizing divorce. In consideration of this, the current study's first and guiding research question sought to examine the extent to which high consumption of media might influence a person's attitudes towards marriage and divorce.

On average, participants viewed television for about 24 hours per week. This viewing was comparatively consistent over genre type (Romantic Comedies, Soap Operas, Day Time Talk shows, and Reality TV), with none of the types accounting for more than 2 hours of total viewing time. The highest consumed viewing categories were sitcoms, romantic comedies, and reality TV, which accounted for 28.2%, 23.5%, and 25.1%, respectively, of average total viewing. The categories of daytime talk shows, celebrity news, and soap operas, accounted for a total of less than 14.5% of all viewing. These numbers indicate average viewing.

Research question two sought to understand the relationship between TV and media use and marriage and divorce perceptions. Correlation coefficients were used to examine these relationships. Of the five cultivation variables (see Appendix B) computed with total viewing, only one was statistically significant; "Divorce is morally acceptable" ( $p < .01$ ). The strength of association between television use and divorce perceived as moral was  $r = -.138$ . Results indicate that the more a person watches television, the more likely it would be that they will perceive divorce as morally acceptable.

To assess the effects of heavy television viewing on marriage perception, a correlation coefficient analysis was also performed. Pearson product-moment correlations were computed to determine if there was a relationship between marriage perceptions and television viewing. The results indicated a moderately negative correlation between marriage perception and a high frequency of television viewership ( $r = -.143, p < .05$ ). Consistent with a cultivation effect, a shift in attitude was evident (Gerbner, 1998; Hetsroni & Tukachinsky, 2005; Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). The more a person watched television, the less negative (more positive) their attitude about marriage become.

Correlation coefficients to determine cultivated effects were also computed to determine the degree of relationship between television consumptions and divorce attitudes and behavior. Results indicated that television viewership had a small correlation with both a respondent's likelihood to get a divorce ( $r = -.141, p = <.01$ ) and their overall attitude towards divorce ( $r = .23, p = <.01$ ). Therefore, as television consumption increase, the positive perception about divorce and the likelihood of a divorce can increase.

In addition to the standard cultivation analyses, the perception of respondents in regards to the credibility of television to disseminate an accurate depiction of divorce was also examined. This variable yielded a significant correlation to two other variables presented in the study: accuracy and ease of discussion. The strength of association between the belief in television's accuracies of divorce and the perception of divorce as morally acceptable was  $r = .25, p = < .001$ , and was moderately small ( $r = .24, p = < .001$ ) when related to the variable measuring the acceptancy of divorce as a normal possibility of a marriage. The strength of association between the belief in television's accuracies of divorce and ones' ability to discuss divorce with ease was  $r = .24, p = < .001$ . Taylor & Francis (2012) found similar

results when examining the relationship between the perceived accuracy of television's portrayal of romance and attitudes toward commitment. Their study discovered that an increase in the belief that television accurately portrays romance, correlated with a decrease in a person's relationship commitment.

Non-cultivation data were also analyzed to check correlations among other salient variables. A relatively large correlation exists between divorce perceptions and the likelihood of a divorce ( $r = -.6, p < .001$ ). Looking at the relationship between marriage and divorce perceptions, consistent with what one might expect, the less favorable an individual was toward marriage, divorce perceptions became more positive,  $r = .24, p < .001$ . Although there was a relatively small correlation, findings were consistent with other studies. Several studies have indicated that nuptial strength and happiness can be predicted by the quality of couples' preconceived notion of marriage- usually perpetuated by a positive pre-marital relationship. (Larsen & Olson, 1989; Markman, Ressick, Floyd, Stanley, & Clements, 1993).

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

Research has indicated that television has the ability to shift and cultivate perceptions of various views (Gerbner, 1992; Gerbner, et al., 1978; Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, & Morgan, 1980; Shanahan & Morgan, 1999; Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). The more one consumes television, the higher the chance for observable effects. The first objective of this study was to determine if a correlation existed between media's glamorization of divorce, through various divorce-content programming, and a less stigmatized perception of divorce (RQ1). The second and third goals were to determine if there was a relationship between the amount of television consumed, and college students' perceptions of divorce and their likelihood to get a divorce (RQ2 and RQ3). In general, and in accordance with cultivation research, the results suggested that television viewership, to some extent, can affect divorce perceptions. Additionally, cultivation effects were significant for five of the ten dependent variables presented in the survey.

The steadily high appearance of divorces in the United States has been an ongoing occurrence. Many studies have focused on the causes and effects of a divorce, but little research has been done on the factors that can affect perceptions of divorce. Furthermore, a large portion of correlation research center around internal issues within family structures (Amato, 2000; Christakis, Fowler & McDermott, 2009), and interpersonal issues among husband and wife (Qualls & Francoise, 1992; Weiss & Heyman, 1997; Baucom, Shoham, Mueser, Daiuto, & Stickle, 1998). Few studies examine correlations between outside factors such as the media, television, and social media (Lienemann & Stopp, 2013; Jiang & Hancock, 2013; Zurbriggen, Ramse, & Jaworski 2011). Even fewer studies have look at specific-genre

related program effects (Bilandzic & Rossler, 2004; Chory-Assad & Tamborini, 2001; Hetsroni, 2014). Studying genre-specific television effects is vital to the field of cultivation research. Furthermore, previous studies have concentrated on television consumption exposure as a whole and in relation to a very limited exposure effect (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). Although, with the progressively changing nature of television programs and concurrently shifting viewership habits, cultivation researchers should continue to encompass and evolve around these adaptations (Kamaruddin, 2005; Cunningham, 2006). In observation of various divorce centered television programs airing on a multitude of networks, this study set forth to examine the relationship between these types of programs, the lack of a stigmatized perceptions surrounding divorce, heavy television viewership, and the positive perception of divorce. Additionally, the current study examined whether a person's likelihood to get a divorce, held a relationship with the amount of television consumed.

Ultimately, results varied in nature, but were aligned with various cultivation research that have positively correlated a relationship with high television viewership and the shaping of a specific perception (Gerbner, 1992; Hetsroni & Tukachinsky, 2005; Shanahan & Morgan, 1999; Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). In this study, over 200 undergraduate students responded to questions about their perception of marriage and divorce, and their television usage. Findings were consistent with the reasoning that repetition and consumption of television can lead to a shift in ideologies (Shanahan, 1999).

The first research question addressed the overall effects of the glamorization of divorce on a viewer's perception of divorce. Although, not enough data was collected on specific program viewership, collectively looking at television consumption indicated that

the more a person watches television, the greater the chance they will perceive divorce as morally acceptable. For the most part, an individual's moral compass is based on the consensus of the majority (Rai & Fiske, 2011; Alexander, 2007; de Waal, 2006). As social beings, our moral behaviors and the standards that direct us are interconnected to one another. Therefore, it isn't surprising to discover that the more a person watches television- which serves as a social barometer, the more likely their moral compass will be aligned to the messages and content shown on various divorce related programs. Most television programs appear to depict divorce as just another part of life and/ or a normal expected path of life. Over half of the respondents in this study indicated that they too felt that divorce was a normal and moral marital occurrence.

The perception that television portrays an accurate depiction of relationships, also correlated with judging divorce as moral. Similar to Taylor and Francis (2012) study, the more a person believes in television's accurate portrayals of romance, the higher the chance for them to predispose divorce as a morally acceptable occurrence. Findings are also consistent with the work of Griffin (2012), who noted that: "Television viewing cultivates ways of seeing the world— those who spend more time 'living' in the world of television are more likely to see the "real world" in terms of images, values, portrayals and ideologies that emerge through the lens of television" (pg.370). Results indicated that individuals who viewed more television, felt that television portrays an accurate view of society, and in turn, were more apt to adopting similar ideologies about divorce.

The closest measurement to discovering whether or not a decrease in stigmatization is related to television's glamorization of divorce, came through the correlation between the belief in television's accuracies of divorce and an individual's ability to discuss divorce with

ease. This finding brought up an interesting notion about how the media serves as a social structure that offers a person guidelines in which define their opportunities for interaction (Tirado & Gálvez, 2007). Therefore, as television dilutes the severity of divorce, its discourse becomes more acceptable and less stigmatized. Low, but significant support was also discovered for genre-specific effects. These results were consistent with Rossler and Brosius (2001) findings that high consumption of specific programs can generate cultivation effects. Supported through Rossler and Brosius (2001) examination of daytime talk programs, the current study extends their findings, by observing congruent correlations when looking at sitcoms and romantic genre viewership collectively. The majority of participants indicated that these two genres are the most watched type of programs. Deductively, we can assume that since overall television consumption consists of these genres, these genres are also correlated to the respondent's perception of divorce. The implications indicate that romantic television program viewership is significant to a person's perceptions and attitudes towards divorce (Hawkins & Pingree, 1981; Segrin & Nabi, 2002) and offers support to the genre-specific cultivation effects.

Findings to RQ2 were important and to some degree expected. Results indicated that as television consumption increases, a more positive perception about divorce also increases. Although correlations were small, they were significant and aligned with traditional cultivation effects. First-order effect associations were weak and insufficient in nature. Although more than half of this study's respondents indicated that "more marriages end in divorce than stay together," results were incongruent with an increase in television consumption.

Conversely, findings implied second-order effects in relationship to marriage perceptions. The more a person watches television, the less negative (more positive) their attitude about marriage becomes. These results are noteworthy considering findings for the third research question. While heavy consumption of television correlated a positive perception towards marriage, the likelihood of divorce also increased. One potential explanation for this can stem from television ability to not only glamorize divorce, but also romanticizes marriage (Duncan, 2003; Edwards, 2005).

Non-cultivation data were also analyzed to check correlations between other dependent variables. A relatively large correlation between divorce perception and the likelihood of a divorce existed. Since perception has been argued to be directly connected to action (Skinner, 1938; Watson, 1913), these results are supported. Another supported result was observed when examining the relationship between marriage and divorce perceptions. As marriage perception decreased (negative perception), divorce perceptions increased (positive perception) (Amato & Rogers, 1999).

Testing these types of internal variables are key to potentially finding causal relationships. It can be argued that when such a reciprocal relationship exists between perception and behavior, media effects on behavior are more probable. These implications are quite significant. This relationship between television exposure and perception, and consequently, behavior have been examined through previous research. Carveth & Alexander (1985), reported in their study “that heavy viewers of soap operas report a greater perceived incidence of divorce and illegitimate children, common themes found in soap operas, than lighter viewers.” These individuals who had a greater exposure to character’s who displayed divorce type behaviors, were more likely to view their actions as normal, and therefore, were

more prone to adopting viewpoints and beliefs that led to a divorce. This same relationship was supported in studies dealing with a range of topics: media portrayal of the perfect body image correlated with lowered self-esteem (Martin & Gentry, 1997); representations of pregnancy and birth on television related to fear in expectant mothers (Ford, 2015); and violent behaviors being cultivated by violent programs (Bandura, 1978; Ross & Ross, 1963). Bandura's social cognitive theory suggests that a person (more specifically, children) may use any given media portrayal in order to learn new behaviors (Bandura, 1977). Therefore, since the media has been shown to shift certain behaviors, it can be strongly argued that television's effect on divorce perception can lead to influencing divorced decisions.

Understanding the role that television plays, is crucial to understanding the positive perceptions that are linked to the likelihood of a divorce. If the media has the power to reinforce positive divorce perception, it may also be able to play a role in diminishing some of its associated negative effects.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Although the University of Houston has a widely representative body of students, our participant sample was based more on convenience, and thus, reduced the generalizability of results. Demographic limitations were seen in the responses to specific type of programs watched and possibly to the overall attitudes towards divorce. The average sampled age of 21 may have consequently been linked to the insufficient number of respondents viewing any of the specific programs being examined. This age group is more apt to watching programs on networks like: MTV (median age 23.3); BET (mean age 26), and FX (mean age 26)<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Data was provided by Prime Time Media. <http://primemediaproductions.com/>.

According to Prime Time Media<sup>2</sup>, programs like: *Happily Divorced* (airs on *TV Land*; median age of 39.5); and *The New Adventures of Old Christine* (airs on *Lifetime*; median age of 47.7), have an older following. Hence, it is imperative to encompass a wider and more diverse selection of the public. Age demographics and the context in which the survey was administered, may have also affected the saliency of the survey, and in turn, affected results. First, the nature of the topic in relation to the study sample may be incongruent. If a respondent is potentially disinterested with the survey's topic, he or she may not answer questions to the same degree as a person with a vested interest; thus not having the same leverage-saliency (Groves, Singer & Corning, 2000; Kulka 1994, Singer 2002). Second, due to the fact that the data were collected via an anonymous survey, incentive to be accurate could have been low (Shrum, 2004). Item variables should be placed into future studies in order to measure the saliency and relevancy of the topic, in addition to the applying heuristic measures, such as availability. These heuristic measures will aid in response accuracies (Shrum, 2004). The present analysis raises some questions: What differences in perception arise from accounting for demographics; and are results varied due to methodology?

Demographic differences, more specifically with age, should be tested in future studies (Morgan, Legette, & Shanahan, 1999). For instance, children are not entirely shielded from marriage related messages that are in support of divorce (Kirk, 2002). The media, in conjunction with family dynamics, and interpersonal discourse, contribute to the shaping of views of young adults (Kirk, 2002). Unfortunately, this exposure adds to a young adult's openness towards divorce and the rising divorce rates. Therefore, accounting for age,

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<sup>2</sup> Prime Time Media. <http://primemediaproductions.com/>.

maturity, and current status in life, can pose very interesting results. For example, adolescence disposed to the effects of modeling, may adopt ideologies consistent and in accordance to celebrities that they deem significant. Certain celebrities would more likely be deemed "significant" by audiences who primarily view reality television, for instance. Therefore, another area of interest would center on whether young adults, whose primary television viewing choice is reality TV, would be more likely to accept a program's message that can potentially affect attitudes toward divorce.

Another limitation of this study is that findings are limited to the correlative relationship between television viewership and perceptions of marriage and divorce; and not its causal relationship. Although there is a significant suggestion that television plays a role in influencing these perceptions, findings have not been linked to any causal relationships. Television appears to merely reinforce pre-existing attitudes about divorce.

Limitations in survey design were also present. Questionnaire items were developed using similar design measures from previous research studies. Although reliability of each scale was acceptable (after some adjustments and omissions were made); reliability without adjustments were low to moderate for most scales. In order to improve measurement techniques in future research, more reliable scales can be pre-tested and used. More questions could also be developed, similar to Gigy and Kelly's (1992) study, which was comprised of 27 itemed divorce checklist. Increasing the quantity of questions in the current study's scale, could produce more accurate results.

This study's results were based on a cross-sectional survey, where analysis of instrumental correlations is at times based on interpretations. A longitudinal study can allow for a more rigid examination of hypotheses and research questions (Kapinus, 2004).

Although, observational in nature, a longitudinal study allows for the detection of growth or change in the traits of the target population. Longitudinal studies also establish sequences of events. It would be interesting to see if television yields the same effects on a person as they progress through various stages of their lives; especially during pre-marital and post-marital stages.

This study attempted to not only measure average television consumption, but to utilize a more summative scale (how regularly viewed) of specific programs; where the hours computed were not just hours of exposures (Volgy & Schwarz, 1980). Due to insufficient responses to specific programming, a valid measure was not computed for this type of summative measurement. These findings indicate that research method may influence possible outcomes in responses. Cultivation analysis may limit actual correlations between how the media shapes information and the attitudes adopted by society. In general, cultivation is “a repeated exposure process and thus experiments are unlikely to capture effects, particularly with stable beliefs such as attitudes and values” (Shrum, 2004). Therefore, future studies may need to utilize an experimentally designed pre-test in order to expose participants to specific television programs and test for content saliency (Rössler & Brosius, 2001). In order to do this, it may be necessary to employ a Heuristic Processing Model of Cultivation Effects (Shrum et al. 2004). This model is concerned with television viewing and its relationship with “social reality judgments of set-size or probability”, such as crime and divorce (Shrum 1995). The model constitutes a need to observe cognitive processes in relation to judgement accessibility. This method will add to the overall reliability of implemented measures (Shrum, 2004). Future studies should also take into consideration the differences in the processing of perception oriented measures.

There is clearly a unique interaction between attitudes of divorce and television exposure. Analyzing the results of this research is especially important to aiding individuals and researchers in understanding the impacts that television viewing can have on relationships; and potentially supporting future efforts to strengthening marriages and families. This study contributes essential results to cultivation literature and helps to support a foundation for future genre-specific research.

In this study, it was examined that, although overall television viewing was more significant in determining positive perceptions about divorce, it was also associated with a more positive perception of marriage. It appears, however, as attitudes diminish about marriage, positive attitudes about divorce flourishes. Consequently, the views about the likelihood of an individual getting a divorce, also appear to flourish. Additionally, it cannot be ignored that romance and divorce oriented programs add to this phenomenon. Reality television programs, for example, tend to portray romantic relationships that are filled with super-charged intimacy, infidelity, and unrealistic ideals (Osborn, 2012). Those who believed in fictitious romances may have a lower sense of relationship commitment, while, for some, their positive perceptions of marriage increase. When combined, these results insinuate that if the media contains any methodical premises through various genres-specific programs, those assumptions can exhibit contrasting views of marriage and divorce (Signorielli, 1991). However, within several types of programming, such as celebrity news, a more embellished image of divorce can exist. This notion, not only supports television's role in cultivating a glamorized - falsely depicted view of divorce, but it also advances the need for researchers to further examine genre-specific media viewing. Furthermore, since cultivation theories do not dismiss potential third-variable effects; meaning the media does not work alone in shaping

these perceptions, it is imperative for individuals to carefully assess all possible variables, including television, which can affect their relationships.

## APPENDIX A: CONSENT COVER LETTER

### Consent Cover Letter for Survey Research

#### MEDIA EFFECTS ON DIVORCE ATTITUDES: Breaking the Taboo

Dear Participant,

You are being invited to take part in a research project conducted by Mansuereh Yvonne Eype, Mass Communication graduate student from the Jack J. Valenti School of Communication at the University of Houston. This thesis project is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Temple Northup and Dr. Garth Jowett.

Taking part in the research project is voluntary and you may refuse to take part or withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may also refuse to answer any research-related questions that make you uncomfortable.

The purpose of this study is to discover whether or not heavy television viewers (in general and of specific content), have a more positive perception of divorce. This study will be conducted over a two-month timeframe.

Within the next week (7 days), we ask that you login into the web-link provided below and complete an anonymous survey. All participants regardless of whether or not they have been married and/or not have parents that have been affected by divorce, will be allowed to participate.

The survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. The survey includes questions about your overall television viewing intake, your perceptions of marriage, divorce, and relationships in general. Some of these questions may be personal in content; however, your openness and honesty will greatly improve the overall reliability of this study.

Every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of your participation in this project. No identifying information will be prompted.

No risks or discomforts are anticipated from taking part in this study. If you feel uncomfortable with a question, you can skip that question or withdraw from the study altogether. If you decide to quit at any time before you have finished the questionnaire, your answers will NOT be recorded.

While you will not directly benefit from participation, your participation may help investigators better understand the media's effects on shaping divorce perceptions. Opportunity for extra credit may exist at the discretion of your professor.

If you have any questions about the study and/or survey, please feel free to contact Mansuereh Yvonne Eype at 832-816-2221 or at [suereheype@gmail.com](mailto:suereheype@gmail.com). You may also contact Dr. Temple Northup faculty sponsor, at (713) 743-2873.

Any questions regarding your rights as a research subject may be addressed to the University of Houston Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (713- 743-9204). All research projects that are carried out by Investigators at the

University of Houston are governed by requirements of the University and the federal government.

If you agree to participate, go to the following select next to begin the survey.

Thank you for your potential participation. We value your time and consideration.

Sincerely,  
  
Mansuereh Yvonne Eype

## APPENDIX B: SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

### Cultivating Divorce Perception Survey

Thank you for taking the time to complete the following survey. This survey will remain anonymous. Please do not put your name on this survey.

**Please complete the following response.**

#### **SECTION ONE: Demographics**

**Instructions: Please complete the following response. Your information will only be used for the purpose of this study.**

1) Age: \_\_\_\_\_

2) Race: White      Black      Hispanic      Asian      Other      Mixed

3) Gender:      Male      Female

4) Current year in school (Circle One)

College Freshman    College Sophomore    College Junior    College Senior    Graduate Student

#### **5) Relationship Qualification (Check All that Apply)**

- Currently Married (If selected, skip question 6)
- Currently Divorced
- Have been divorced before
- Have been married before
- Have close friends or parents of close friends that have been divorced

#### **6) Relationship Status (Check All that Apply)**

- Are you currently dating?
- Have been dating for less than one year?
- Have you been dating for over 1 year?

## SECTION TWO: Marriage Perception

**Instructions:** Please respond to each item by circling the response that best describes your view towards the question.

1) I expect to be engaged or married within the next five years.

Agree Strongly    Agree Moderately    Agree Slightly    Disagree Slightly    Disagree Moderately    Disagree Strongly

2) I would not get married unless I was in love.

Agree Strongly    Agree Moderately    Agree Slightly    Disagree Slightly    Disagree Moderately    Disagree Strongly

3) When I get married, I intend to stay married until I or my spouse dies.

Agree Strongly    Agree Moderately    Agree Slightly    Disagree Slightly    Disagree Moderately    Disagree Strongly

4) When married, I expect to spend a lot of time with my spouse.

Agree Strongly    Agree Moderately    Agree Slightly    Disagree Slightly    Disagree Moderately    Disagree Strongly

5) I have doubts as to whether I would enjoy living exclusively in a marriage.

Agree Strongly    Agree Moderately    Agree Slightly    Disagree Slightly    Disagree Moderately    Disagree Strongly

6) The responsibilities of married life will be enjoyable to me.

Agree Strongly    Agree Moderately    Agree Slightly    Disagree Slightly    Disagree Moderately    Disagree Strongly

7) I will be very happy if I marry.

Agree Strongly    Agree Moderately    Agree Slightly    Disagree Slightly    Disagree Moderately    Disagree Strongly

**SECTION FOUR: Media Usage**

**Instructions: Please respond to each item by filling in the blank with the estimated amount of hours.**

1) On average, how many hours per week do you watch television?

|-----|  
1        2        3        4        5        6        7        8        9        10

2) This next question is about how much TV you watched this past weekend. Think about everything you watched and write down how many hours it was.

|-----|  
1        2        3        4        5        6        7        8        9        10

3) This next question is about how much TV you watched yesterday. Think about everything you watched and write down how many hours it was.

|-----|  
1        2        3        4        5        6        7        8        9        10

Thinking about all the TV you watch in a week how often do you watch ...

4) Watching romantic comedies?

|-----|  
1        2        3        4        5        6        7        8        9        10

5) Watching Soap Operas (*The Young and the Restless, Days of Our Lives, As the World Turns, etc.*)?

|-----|  
1        2        3        4        5        6        7        8        9        10

6) Watching daytime talk shows (Ex. *Opera, The View, Ellen DeGeneres, Greg Behrendt, Jerry Springer, and Maury Povich*)?

|-----|  
1        2        3        4        5        6        7        8        9        10

**(Reality Television** is a genre of television programming that presents purportedly unscripted dramatic or humorous situations, documents actual events, and usually features ordinary people instead of professional actors, sometimes in a contest or other situation where a prize is awarded...)

7) Thinking about all the TV you watched last week, how many hours of that were spent watching reality-based shows about relationships (Ex. *The Dating Game*, *The Bachelor*, *Blind Date*, *Farmer Wants a Wife*, *Joe Millionaire*, *Elimidate*, and *Flavor of Love*)?

---

1            2            3            4            5            6            7            8            9            10

8) Thinking about all the TV you watch overall; what percentage of time is spent watching each of the following categories? (Please note- it does not have to add up to 100%)

Romantic Movies \_\_\_\_\_ %

Soap Operas \_\_\_\_\_ %

Daytime Talk Shows \_\_\_\_\_ %

Reality-Based shows about relationships \_\_\_\_\_ %

Sitcom-Based TV shows about relationships \_\_\_\_\_ %

Celebrity News about relationship \_\_\_\_\_ %

**SECTION FIVE: Divorce-Specific Genre**

**Instructions.** For this last section, please respond to each item by checking the appropriate line or by circling a number that best represents your media usage.

**How often do you (or have you watched) watch the following TV programs?**

<b>TV Program</b>	<b>Never</b>	<b>Rarely</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Often</b>
<i>The New Adventures of Old Christine</i>				
<i>Reba</i>				
<i>Half and Half</i>				
<i>Grace and Frankie (Netflix)?</i>				
<i>Divorce Court</i>				
<i>Celebrity News</i>				
<i>Happily Divorced</i>				
<i>Girlfriends Guide to Divorce</i>				

7. Do you watch any other form of divorce-content driven television program and/or movies? Please, list all that applies.

---

<b>TV Program</b>	<b>Never</b>	<b>Rarely</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Often</b>

8. What percentage of time do you feel that the celebrity news content addresses relationship issues?

\_\_\_\_\_ out of % 100 (0% to % 100)

## SECTION SIX: Credibility Measurers

**Instructions: Please respond to each item by circling the number that best describes you.**

**(Divorce Drama** is a genre of programming that through either storyline or characterization, emphasizes some element of divorce as the main focus for dramatization. Ex. *Reba, Happily Divorced, Blended, Sofia the First, Divorce Court, Celebrity News, and Girlfriends Guide to Divorce*)

1. Images and storylines communicated in divorce dramas are:

Not Realistic	1	2	3	4	5 Realistic
Not Credible	1	2	3	4	5 Credible
Not Believable	1	2	3	4	5 Believable

2. Images and narratives communicated through Celebrity News are:

Not Realistic	1	2	3	4	5 Realistic
Not Credible	1	2	3	4	5 Credible
Not Believable	1	2	3	4	5 Believable

3. Images and narratives communicated through Divorce Court are:

Not Realistic	1	2	3	4	5 Realistic
Not Credible	1	2	3	4	5 Credible
Not Believable	1	2	3	4	5 Believable

## SECTION SEVEN: Societal Perceptions

1) What percentages of marriage end in divorce? \_\_\_\_\_%

2) What percentages of celebrity marriages end in divorce? \_\_\_\_\_%

3) More marriages end in divorce than stay together.

Agree Strongly   Agree Moderately   Agree Slightly   Disagree Slightly   Disagree Moderately   Disagree Strongly

4) I would find it easy to talk about a divorce, if I ever had one.

Agree Strongly   Agree Moderately   Agree Slightly   Disagree Slightly   Disagree Moderately   Disagree Strongly

5) Television depiction of divorce is accurate.

Agree Strongly   Agree Moderately   Agree Slightly   Disagree Slightly   Disagree Moderately   Disagree Strongly

6) Divorce is morally acceptable:

Agree Strongly   Agree Moderately   Agree Slightly   Disagree Slightly   Disagree Moderately   Disagree Strongly

7) Everyone accepts divorce as a normal possibility of a marriage.

Agree Strongly   Agree Moderately   Agree Slightly   Disagree Slightly   Disagree Moderately   Disagree Strongly

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