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Abstract

Relational aggression is a form of aggression characterized by harming or attempting to harm an individual's social relationships. Previous research has identified a link between the consumption of relationally aggressive media and the perpetuation and endorsement of relational aggression. Previous studies have also identified reality television programs as significantly more relationally aggressive compared to their scripted counterparts. This study investigated the association between reality television consumption and peer-directed relational aggression and normative beliefs about relational aggression, as well as the moderating role of perceived realism in these associations. Follow-up analyses were conducted to further understand whether these associations differed depending on the specific type of reality television that was viewed. Participants were 336 college students (83% female) who completed an online survey. Though perceived realism was not a moderator of these associations, it did emerge as a significant predictor of peer-directed relational aggression. Additionally, male participants held stronger normative beliefs about relational aggression.

Keywords: emerging adulthood, reality television, relational aggression, perceived realism

Reality Television Viewing and Peer-Directed Relational Aggression in Emerging Adulthood

Previous research has highlighted the importance of emerging adulthood as a unique stage of individual development, most frequently defined as the ages of 18 to 25. Characterized by an increased sense of freedom and responsibility, the social interactions and relationships in this developmental period are particularly important to one's construction of self and their developing worldview (Arnett, 2000, 2016). Relational aggression is one factor that may impact the positive development of these crucial relationships. While relational aggression and its outcomes are thoroughly understood in childhood and adolescence (Card et al., 2008; Goldstein et al., 2008; Grotpeter & Crick, 1996), research regarding relationally aggressive behavior into adulthood is less common. Therefore, the current study aims to understand potential social factors, namely reality television consumption, that may contribute to relationally aggressive behaviors and the belief that these behaviors are normative, particularly within this unique developmental period.

Theoretical Background

Both Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1973) and the General Aggression Model (Anderson & Bushman, 2002a) provide a framework for understanding potential links between reality television viewing and relational aggression. Under social learning theory, Bandura posits that there exists a two-way causal relation between an individual's behavior and their environment (Bandura, 1973). In this conceptualization, an environment influences an individual's behavior, which then continues to shape their environment. As such, social learning theory frames learning as a process that can occur via observation and behavioral modeling. Prior research has used a social learning theory framework to understand the use of relational aggression among peers (e.g., Dyches & Mayeux, 2012). Within the scope of this study, the environmental influence that individuals learn from is the behavior displayed in reality television programming. The following endorsement and perpetuation of relationally aggressive behavior from the individual then continues to shape their environment, such as the context of their friendships. For example, within their friendships, relationally aggressive adolescents expect their friendships to recover from and continue after instances of relational aggression, reinforcing the behavior as normal (Goldstein & Tisak, 2004).

The general aggression model reinforces the concepts of social learning theory, but in tandem with additional theories of aggressive behavior including script theory (Huesmann, 1986, 1998), excitation transfer theory (Zillmann, 1983), and social interaction theory (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994), in an effort to construct a broader framework. Under this framework, Anderson and Bushman (2002a) emphasize the importance of the person in a given situation. The person and the situation function as inputs, which then influence various internal routes towards aggressive cognitions or arousal. Person inputs capture elements such as personality or attitudes and beliefs, such as believing relational aggression to be normative, while situation inputs capture incentives for action or aggressive cues, such as particularly aggressive television programming. Internal routes refer to various internal states, such as affect, cognition, and arousal. These internal routes then produce outcomes, as a result of situational appraisal and decision making, which can take the form of thoughtful or impulsive actions, such as exhibiting relational aggression within a friendship context. These actions then comprise a given social encounter, which in turn shape the person and situation inputs. Under this model, aggression comes as a result of a consistent feedback loop between internal and external states (Anderson & Bushman, 2002b).

Emerging Adulthood as a Developmental Context

In recent years, research in developmental psychology has identified the existence of emerging adulthood as an important stage of development, a transitional stage between adolescence and adulthood. Primarily driven by the work of Arnett and colleagues and building upon the identity development stage research of Erikson (1968), some of the core features of this developmental period include instability, heightened self-focus, and continued identity exploration (Arnett, 2000; Arnett & Mitra, 2020). Particularly within the United States, college functions as the primary context of emerging adulthood, largely due to the increase in personal responsibility and freedom over one's choices and daily life, as well as new, diverse social interactions that shape one's worldview (Arnett, 2016). Additionally, as a result of decreased time with one's nuclear family, the friendships and romantic relationships developed in this life stage are also significant sources of social and personal development.

Research has identified a distinctive connection between emerging adults and media use. Namely, emerging adulthood scholars highlight that individuals within this developmental context utilize media at higher rates compared to other age groups, largely for the purposes of social connectedness and problem-solving in such a highly transitional period, through social networking sites and digital communication with others (Benvenuti et al., 2023). Additionally, research has shown that emerging adults spend more time using media compared to any other daily activity and consequently display behaviors influenced by this heightened use. For example, when exposed to prosocial content through media, emerging adults have been shown to have increased prosocial thoughts and helping behavior (Coyne et al., 2013; Greitemeyer, 2011). Similarly, aggressive media consumed by emerging adults is shown to also have short-term effects, such as increased aggressive thoughts and decreased empathy (Coyne et al., 2012, 2013).

Given that media use is clearly a notable aspect of this developmental period, further research focused on the impact of specific types of media use (i.e. television consumption) on aggressive behavior within this period is important, most notably from a social and developmental approach.

Relational Aggression within Interpersonal Relationships

Aggressive behavior is one primary example of a source of potential conflict in interpersonal relationships. While aggression can present in traditional, overt forms, such as physical and verbal, it can also present in a uniquely social form. This form, known as relational aggression, occurs when an individual threatens to harm or attempts to purposefully harm another individual's social relationships (Crick, 1995; Goldstein, 2011). Under this definition, relationally aggressive behaviors may include actions such as gossiping, excluding individuals from social interactions or groups, and spreading rumors, and can be seen in both peer and romantic relationships. Within romantic relationships, relational aggression is associated with alienation from peers, increased approval of relationally aggressive behavior, and symptoms of anxiety and depression (Goldstein et al., 2008; Linder et al., 2002). While more common within the context of romantic relationships, emerging adults exhibit modest to moderate relational aggression in both romantic and platonic contexts, with relationally aggressive behavior in one relationship context moderately correlated with its presence within the other relationship context (Goldstein, 2011). In both romantic relationships and friendship dyads, high relationship exclusivity is a significant predictor of relational aggression, as is endorsement or perceived normalcy of relationally aggressive behavior (Goldstein, 2011; Werner & Nixon, 2005). Within this context, exclusivity captures how bothered an individual is by their partner or close friend's relationships with other people, which motivates them to attempt to damage those relationships or reinforce their own (Goldstein, 2011; Grotpeter & Crick, 1996).

In the context of friendship, these predictors remain relatively consistent across genders, such that male and female friends both exhibit higher relational aggression as a function of increased exclusivity and endorsement of relationally aggressive behaviors (Goldstein, 2011). While relational aggression is stereotypically attributed to adolescent girls, studies have shown that the true gender differences in relational aggression are negligible (Card et al., 2008), and the predictive relation between the endorsement of aggressive beliefs and enacting relationally aggressive behavior is consistent across genders (Werner & Nixon, 2005). Within romantic relationships, however, women report expressing more relational aggression toward their male partners, while men report receiving more relational aggression from their female partners (Goldstein et al., 2008). Regardless of relationship context, research has found that, similar to other forms of aggression, relational aggression is associated with social and psychological maladjustment in children, adolescents, and emerging adults (Goldstein et al., 2008; Werner & Nixon, 2005). Frequent relationally aggressive behavior is linked to a variety of negative social outcomes, such as low peer acceptance and lower friendship satisfaction and quality (Casper et al., 2020; Kraft & Mayeux, 2018). Among emerging adult women, employing relational aggression is negatively related to self-esteem, as well as perceived mattering to friends (Weber & Kurpius, 2011). In addition to the behaviors associated with exhibiting relational aggression, research also shows that emerging adults have unique beliefs and expectations about normative aggressive behavior. When surveyed about conflict, emerging adult participants favored indirect relational aggression as a normative behavior, specifically between two women. Additionally, when prompted to choose a direct form of aggression, participants perceived women as more likely to use relational aggression over physical aggression (Nelson et al., 2008). Particularly among emerging adult women, relational aggression is both expected and perceived as “normal.”

Research has also highlighted the specific role of relational aggression in the development of both individuals and relationships within emerging adult populations. For example, within a college sample, studies have identified that relational aggression is negatively correlated with prosocial behaviors, while also positively correlated with exclusionary behaviors (Lento-Zwolinski, 2007). Additionally, research has displayed that exclusivity serves as a mediator between relational aggression and relational victimization within this developmental period (Ostrov et al., 2011). Previous studies have also shown the association between relational aggression and a myriad of mental health issues. In addition to the relation to anxiety and depressive symptoms (Goldstein et al., 2008; Linder et al., 2002), research with emerging adults has also indicated an association between borderline personality pathology and both relational aggression and victimization (Ostrov et al., 2011).

While aggression is frequently conceptualized as a maladaptive behavior, relational aggression can also be viewed as an adaptive tool under particular relationship circumstances. For example, research finds that relationally aggressive behavior is positively associated with popularity in adolescence (Casper et al., 2020; Kraft & Mayeux, 2018). Reinforcing the aforementioned impact of exclusivity, popularity also moderates the association between friendship jealousy and exhibiting relationally aggressive behavior (Kraft & Mayeux, 2018). Some youth who are relationally aggressive are also quite prosocial, with good leadership skills and high levels of sociability; such youth are often particularly popular with peers (Puckett et al., 2008). Some researchers have used the term *bistrategic controllers* to describe individuals who successfully combine coercive behaviors (like relational aggression) with prosocial behaviors in order to control social resources like peer status and friendships (Hawley et al., 2007).

Additionally, relational aggression can *positively* impact overall friendship quality in adolescence, under the contingency that the friendship is reciprocal and that both friends reinforce the use of relationally aggressive talk with one another (Banny et al., 2011; Goldstein, 2010). An adolescent's relationally aggressive behavior can also predict how they expect others to respond to relational aggression within the context of friendship. When adolescents use high levels of relational aggression themselves, they are significantly more optimistic about a friendship recovering and continuing after a relationally aggressive incident, thereby normalizing the behavior within the friendship context (Goldstein & Tisak, 2004). Taken together, this large range of research highlights that relationally aggressive behavior is commonplace, is viewed as normative, and has a significant impact on an individual's relationships and outcomes often related to well-being, whether adaptive or maladaptive.

Media Consumption in Adolescence & Emerging Adulthood

Media consumption in adolescence and emerging adulthood can function as one primary context of development. Contemporary research has highlighted that television viewing habits in the United States have changed significantly in recent years. Researchers have found that television viewing can be divided into three different categories: appointment, serial, and binge viewing. Appointment viewing, which captures traditional, live broadcast viewing, has decreased significantly in recent years. Serial and binge viewing, which are both largely characterized by the use of non-traditional viewing platforms and personal pacing, have both significantly increased, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Rubenking & Bracken, 2020). Specifically regarding television choices, reality television has seen an increase in viewership in the past year, with shows like *The Golden Bachelor* premiering with an audience of 7.7 million people, significantly surpassing previous seasons of *The Bachelor* franchise (Roeloffs, 2023).

Aligning with the increases in the serial and binge viewing categories of television consumption, research also finds that adolescents and emerging adults alike rely on various online platforms to consume their chosen digital media. For example, as of 2023, 78% of the households in the United States report being subscribed to at least one streaming platform, such as Netflix or Hulu (Durrani, 2023). In addition to these platforms specifically dedicated to television, adolescents also consume media via platforms traditionally captured under the umbrella of social media. As of 2022, 95% of teenagers report regularly using YouTube, while 67% of teenagers report regularly using TikTok (Pew Research Center, 2022). Beyond these platform-specific statistics, previously cited research also highlights media use as the most common daily activity among emerging adults (Coyne et al., 2013). Ultimately, these findings taken together display the constancy and readiness with which individuals have access to full episodes, clips, and dialogue surrounding television via multiple media platforms, as well as the captive audience consuming reality television.

Reality Television and Aggressive Behavior

A large body of research documents that aggression and violence depicted through media can impact the consumer's behavior. This research has primarily focused on the association between portrayals of physical violence and increased physically aggressive behavior (Anderson & Bushman, 2002b), but more recent research has also tested similar effects for relational aggression (e.g., Coyne et al., 2008, 2010, 2012). Further, previous studies have identified the unique impact of reality television consumption on individual attitudes and behavior, in both early adolescence and adulthood. One of the driving forces of this impact is likely the aggressive behavior frequently portrayed in television programs, with reality television programs portraying greater amounts of verbal and relational aggression compared to their scripted counterparts (Coyne & Archer, 2004; Coyne et al., 2010). Researchers have found that acts of aggression portrayed in both non-reality and reality television are occasionally followed by some kind of reward, with peer approval being the most common reward in reality television (Coyne et al., 2010; Coyne, 2016). Even in instances in which the behavior is not rewarded, aggressors face few consequences for their aggression.

Broadly, research has found that watching reality television is associated with an increase in an individual’s state aggression levels, with the relation being most significant when the viewed television clip was rated as highly aggressive (Reysen & Katzarska-Miller, 2017). This finding specifically highlights the short-term impact of aggressive behavior when it is clearly modeled on reality television. In line with previous findings on aggression in media (Huesmann et al., 2003; Ostrov et al., 2006), research has also identified a short-term, crossover effect of viewing relationally aggressive media on aggressive behavior. After being primed by a movie clip containing physical, relational, or no aggression, undergraduate female participants were given the opportunity to be physically aggressive (via competitive reaction time test) and relationally aggressive (via evaluation of the experimenter). Participants who were primed with the relationally aggressive movie clip displayed an increase in both relational and physical aggression (Coyne et al., 2008). Similarly, viewing relationally aggressive media has also been shown to have a short-term impact on an individual’s access to aggressive cognitions. When shown a relationally aggressive movie clip, participants displayed quicker, heightened activation of relational aggression cognitions compared to participants shown non-aggressive movie segments (Coyne et al., 2012).

In addition to these short-term effects of watching relationally aggressive media, research suggests that viewing relational aggression on television predicts increased relational aggression over time. Interestingly, this association is not bidirectional, such that engaging in relational aggression at an earlier time point does not predict seeking out and consuming relationally aggressive programming at a later point (Coyne, 2016). This lack of bidirectionality further highlights the unique nature of relational aggression, as physical aggression does show this bidirectionality between the contexts of real life and television consumption. The association between relationally aggressive television and relationally aggressive behavior has also been observed longitudinally via observational data. Using data collected via text message in a high school sample, Coyne and colleagues identified that among adolescent girls, viewing relational aggression on television is associated with increased use of relationally aggressive behaviors (including *social exclusion* and *friendship manipulation*) through text messages to friends a year later (Coyne et al., 2019). Echoing the unidirectional association found previously (Coyne, 2016), initial relational aggression levels in text messages were not associated with higher levels of relationally aggressive television viewing in the following year in girls or boys (Coyne et al., 2019). Similar research has also expanded this focus to include peer assessments of one another. Within a sample of students ages 11 to 14, participants were asked to identify their five most watched television programs, as well as their most directly (e.g., physically) and indirectly (e.g., covertly relational) aggressive peers via peer nominations. Analyses indicated that frequent viewing of indirect aggression on television was positively associated with indirect aggression among peers in real life. Controlling for both sex and direct aggression, individuals whose favorite programs were high in indirect/relational aggression were nominated as the most indirectly aggressive by their peers (Coyne & Archer, 2005). These findings together emphasize the impact of consuming relationally aggressive television on real-life contexts, such as friendship and broader peer interaction, notably beyond survey measures and in-lab manipulations.

The relations between media consumption and relational aggression are typically modest to moderate in scope, highlighting the need to understand moderating factors. Studies have shown that viewing relational aggression in media may be particularly impactful on the behavior of viewers who are highly invested in these programs or perceive them to be an accurate, realistic portrayal of the world around them. This concept, often described as *perceived realism*, posits that when content is seen as more realistic, the influence of that content will be higher compared to content perceived as less realistic (Behm-Morawitz et al., 2016; Busselle, 2001). In addition to affirming the association between relational aggression and reality television viewing, prior research has also highlighted that higher levels of perceived realism are associated with increased reality television viewing. Though perceived realism alone did not predict an individual's relational aggression in one recent study, the interaction between perceived realism and reality television viewing was shown to be a significant predictor of relationally aggressive behavior in a youth sample (Ward & Carlson, 2013). Adolescents in this sample who attributed greater realism to these programs were more likely to display relational aggression in social interactions. Acknowledging previous findings that relational aggression on television is either inconsequential or rewarded with peer approval (Coyne et al., 2010), theoretical perspectives on aggression argue that individuals who perceive reality television as highly realistic or relatable may employ relationally aggressive behaviors in their real life, with the intention of seeking similar results. If consumers are perceiving these programs as realistic, they may then see them as models of behaviors to be replicated. Additionally, frequently consuming relationally aggressive content and finding it realistic may not only influence individuals to replicate these behaviors, but to also perceive them as more normative and appropriate.

Even when captured with a single-item measure, later research identified that higher perceived realism of reality television is associated with a stronger belief in relational aggression as a rewarding behavior. Additionally, beyond the scope of traditional perceived realism, research has also identified an association between the relational aggression levels of a participant's favorite reality television "character" and the participant's endorsement of relationally aggressive behaviors (Behm-Morawitz et al., 2016). Taken together, these findings emphasize the impact of reality television on an individual's own behavior as well as their endorsement of aggressive behavior as not only normal, but also a useful means of achieving some measure of social reward. Further, the literature suggests that perceived realism is an important potential moderating factor in these associations. Independently, however, there exists a gap in the literature to observe this combined impact within the scope of one study, particularly in an emerging adult sample.

Current Study & Hypotheses

Acknowledging the extant literature, the current study aimed to investigate the association between reality television consumption and relational aggression in the context of friendships, as well as the association between reality television consumption and the endorsement of relational aggression as a normative, acceptable social strategy. Additionally, this study aimed to further understand the role of perceived realism as a potential moderator of these associations. As such, I first hypothesized that reality television viewing would be positively correlated with both peer-directed relational aggression and the endorsement of relational aggression as a normative behavior. Secondly, I hypothesized that perceived realism would moderate the association between reality television viewing and self-reported relational aggression, as well as the association between reality television viewing and the endorsement of relational aggression. Specifically, at low levels of perceived realism, I anticipated that the association between reality television viewing and the outcome variables of relational aggression and endorsement of relational aggression will be nonsignificant. When high levels of perceived realism are reported, I expected a significant, positive association between reality television viewing and relationally aggressive behavior, as well as a significant, positive association between reality television viewing and the endorsement of relationally aggressive behavior.

In addition to the influence of frequency of reality television consumption overall, I also suspected a potential influence of reality television program type. Previous research suggests that reality television programs often differ in their level of relational aggression portrayal (Coyne et al., 2010; Reysen & Katzarska-Miller, 2017; Ward & Carlson, 2013), thereby possibly affecting their impact on the viewer's behavior. As such, follow-up analyses were conducted to observe the role of specific reality television types on peer-directed relational aggression and normative beliefs about relational aggression. Following findings that shows like *Jersey Shore*, *Real Housewives*, and *Survivor* were rated as highly relationally aggressive (Reysen & Katzarska-Miller, 2017; Ward & Carlson, 2013), I expected that viewing *Real Life/Slice of Life* and *Competition* reality television shows would be most strongly related to peer-directed relational aggression and normative beliefs about relational aggression, compared to other forms.

Lastly, gender will also be explored as a moderator in this study. Though the gender difference in relational aggression and normative beliefs about relational aggression is often not significant, prior research has indicated that the link between media and relational aggression (Coyne et al., 2019), as well as the association between relational aggression and various adjustment outcomes (Nelson et al., 2008; Ostrov et al., 2011; Weber & Kurpius, 2011), are influenced by gender.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were undergraduate students (*N* = 336; 83% women) recruited from undergraduate Psychology classes at a large, public south-central university. Three participants failed attention checks embedded in the online survey and were excluded from analysis. The following measures were part of a larger battery developed to measure various social attitudes and behavior as they relate to reality television consumption. Completion of the online survey was compensated with class credit.

Measures

Reality Television Viewing. In an effort to capture the broad expanse of reality television viewership, we developed a new measure with items attending to familiarity with reality television, frequency of watching, and method used to watch reality television, with each dimension measured separately for each reality television genre. Based on prior research (Ferguson et al., 2013), we identified four primary genres of reality television: *talent*, *competition*, *dating*, and *real-life/slice of life*.

Watch frequency ("How often do you watch reality TV shows in the following genre?") was assessed with one item per genre, all rated on a five-point Likert-style scale ranging from *1 (Never)* to *5 (Always)*. The sum total of the watch frequency items was used in analyses involving total reality television viewing frequency (α = 0.72). For analyses involving reality television type, participants' individual frequency scores for the genre were used.

Relational Aggression. Relational aggression was measured using a scale of 14 items, developed to assess behavior in both friendships and romantic relationships. Four of these items refer to peer-directed proactive relational aggression, while peer-directed reactive relational aggression is measured with five items. Respectively, example items from each subscale include "When I want something from a friend of mine, I act 'cold' or indifferent towards them until I get what I want," and "When someone does something that makes me angry, I try to embarrass that person or make them look stupid in front of his/her friends" (Murray-Close et al., 2010). Frequency of each item was rated on a four-point Likert-style scale ranging from *1 (Never)* to *4 (Always*). The mean of all nine items were used in analyses as participants' relational aggression score. Reliability of this measure was strong (α = 0.89).

Normative Beliefs about Relational Aggression. Endorsement of relational aggression was assessed using a four-item measure, with items rated on a four point Likert-style scale ranging from *1 (Perfectly Okay)* to *4 (Really Wrong)*. Example items include "If you are angry, it is okay to spread rumors about another person" and "In general, it is wrong to ignore someone, even if you really don't want him/her to be a part of your group" (Werner & Nixon, 2005). The mean of all four items were used in analyses as participants' normative beliefs (NOBAGS) score. Reliability of this measure was acceptable (α = 0.67), and consistent with its reliability in previous studies (α = 0.72; Werner & Nixon, 2005).

Perceived Realism. Perceived realism was assessed using a measure developed to capture the impact of television news and drama programs, adapted by replacing the example program titles with common reality television program titles. Five items were rated on a seven point Likert-type scale ranging from *1 (Strongly Disagree)* to *7 (Strongly Agree*). Sample items included "You cannot learn anything about real life by watching reality television programs" (reverse scored) and “The personal problems people have in reality television programs, like *The Bachelor* or *Keeping Up with The Kardashians*, are very similar to problems real people have” (adapted from Busselle, 2001). Two items were reverse scored; the mean of all five items was used in analyses as participants’ perceived realism score. Reliability of this measure was acceptable ($\alpha = 0.61$).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Intercorrelations among reality television watch frequency, self-reported relational aggression, normative beliefs about relational aggression, perceived realism, and each reality television type are presented in Table 1. As predicted, reality television watch frequency was positively correlated with perceived realism ($r = .31$, $p < .001$) and peer-directed relational aggression ($r = .11$, $p = .04$) at a significant level. Additionally, perceived realism and peer-directed relational aggression were significantly positively correlated with one another ($r = .25$, $p < .001$). Peer-directed relational aggression was also significantly positively correlated with normative beliefs about relational aggression ($r = .31$, $p < .001$). However, contrary to our hypothesis, reality television watch frequency was not significantly correlated with normative beliefs about relational aggression. Additionally, perceived realism was significantly positively correlated with each type of reality television. Peer-directed relational aggression was significantly positively associated with talent reality television watch frequency ($r = .11$, $p = .04$) Lastly, all reality television types were significantly positively correlated with one another.

Gender differences for each variable were analyzed using one-way ANOVA. Results of these analyses can be seen in Table 2. Total reality television viewing frequency showed significant differences by gender, F (2, 332) = 11.727, $p < .001$, with women reporting higher viewing frequency. Normative beliefs about relational aggression also showed significant differences by gender, *F* (2, 328) = 7.689, $p < .001$, with men reporting more endorsement of relational aggression. Female participants reported higher levels of perceived realism , *F* (2, 332) = 7.928, $p < .001$. Dating reality television viewing showed significant gender differences, *F* (2, 332) = 27.315, $p < .001$, with female participants viewing more dating reality programs. Talent reality television viewing showed significant differences by gender, *F* (2, 332) = 3.065, $p = .048$, as did Slice of Life reality television, *F* (2, 331) = 6.025, $p = .003$, with female participants viewing more of both program type. Peer-directed relational aggression and competition reality television viewing frequency did not show significant differences by gender.

Perceived Realism as a Moderator of the Association Between Reality Television Consumption and Peer-Directed Relational Aggression

To further understand the association between reality television viewing frequency and peer-directed relational aggression, as well as analyze the potential moderating role of perceived realism in this association, a hierarchical regression was used. In this analysis, peer-directed relational aggression was the outcome variable. In Step 1, gender, reality television viewing frequency, and perceived realism were entered. In Step 2, the two-way interactions of Reality Television Viewing Frequency × Perceived Realism, Perceived Realism × Gender, and Reality Television Viewing Frequency × Gender were entered. In Step 3, the three-way interaction of Reality Television Viewing Frequency × Gender × Perceived Realism was entered. Gender, viewing frequency, and perceived realism scores were centered before being used in the analysis. Results for this analysis can be seen in Table 3. Step 1 of this regression accounted for 8.2% of the difference in peer-directed relational aggression ($\Delta R^2 = .082$, $p < .001$). In Step 1, gender ($\beta = -.142$, $p = .01$) and perceived realism ($\beta = .247$, $p < .001$) both had significant positive associations with peer-directed relational aggression. In Step 2, the interaction between perceived realism and gender had a significant positive association with relational aggression (β = -.136, p = .026). The interaction between reality television viewing frequency, perceived realism, and gender did not significantly predict peer-directed relational aggression. Regression coefficients can be seen in Table 3.

Perceived Realism as a Moderator of the Association Between Reality Television Consumption and Normative Beliefs About Relational Aggression

To address the proposed association between reality television consumption and normative beliefs about relational aggression, as well as the potential moderating role of perceived realism between this association, another hierarchical regression was conducted, using the same analysis structure explained in the previous section. For this analysis, the normative beliefs about relational aggression score served as the outcome variable. Results for this analysis can be seen in Table 4. Step 1 accounted for 5.3% of the difference in endorsement of relational aggression (ΔR^2 = .053, $p < .001$). In Step 1, gender had a significant positive association with normative beliefs about relational aggression (β = -0.227, $p < .001$). In Step 2, none of the two-way interactions were significant. In Step 3, the three-way interaction did not significantly predict normative beliefs about relational aggression. Regression coefficients for this analysis can be seen in Table 4.

Reality Television Type as a Predictor of Peer-directed Relational Aggression

To parse out the association between specific reality television type and relational aggression, as well as the role of gender and perceived realism within this association, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted. Peer-directed relational aggression served as the outcome variable for this analysis. In Step 1, gender, perceived realism, and each type of reality television were entered (*Real life/Slice of life*, *Dating*, *Talent*, *Competition*). In Step 2, the two-way interactions between each variable were entered. Lastly, in Step 3, the three-way interactions between variables were entered. All variables were centered before being used in this analysis, and the interaction terms were created using the centered scores. The hierarchical structure and results for this analysis can be seen in Table 5. Step 1 accounted for 8.8% of the difference in peer-directed relational aggression ($\Delta R^2 = .088, p < .001$). At Step 1, gender had a significant positive association with peer-directed relational aggression ($\beta = -0.145, p = .012$). None of the reality television types had a significant main effect in predicting peer-directed relational aggression. At Step 2, none of the two-way interactions had a significant association with relational aggression. The interaction between gender and real life/slice of life reality television trended toward significance, as did the interaction between gender and competition reality television. At Step 3, none of the three-way interactions had a significant association with relational aggression. Regression coefficients for this analysis can be seen in Table 5.

Reality Television Type as a Predictor of Normative Beliefs About Relational Aggression

To further parse the association between specific reality television type and normative beliefs about relational aggression, as well as the role of gender and perceived realism within this association, another hierarchical regression analysis was conducted, using the same hierarchical structure as the previous analysis. Normative beliefs about relational aggression served as the outcome variable for this analysis. The hierarchical structure and results for this analysis can be seen in Table 6. Step 1 of this regression accounted for 5.4% of the difference in normative beliefs about relational aggression ($\Delta R^2 = .054, p = .006$). At Step 1, gender had a significant positive association with normative beliefs about relational aggression ($\beta = -0.202, p < .001$). None of the reality television types had a significant main effect in predicting normative beliefs about relational aggression. At Step 2, the interaction between gender and real life/slice of life reality television was significantly positively associated with normative beliefs about relational aggression (β = -.151, *p* = .020). At Step 3, the three-way interaction between gender, perceived realism, and dating reality television was significant (β = -0.291, *p* = .046). However, the proportion of variance explained by these variables did not reach significance. Regression coefficients for this analysis can be seen in Table 6.

Discussion

Ultimately, the current study investigated the association between reality television consumption, peer-directed relational aggression, and endorsement of relational aggression in emerging adults, as well as the role of perceived realism in this association. While the proposed moderation models were not supported by the data, the correlations between the variables reaffirmed the associations found in previous research. Though perceived realism was not a significant moderator of these associations, it did emerge as a significant predictor of peer-directed relational aggression, as evidenced by a significant main effect. Follow-up analyses to further differentiate the influence of specific reality television types on both outcome variables did not produce television type main effects or significant interactions. However, these analyses did highlight the significance of gender in predicting peer-directed relational aggression and normative beliefs about relational aggression. Additionally, this study highlighted significant gender differences in the endorsement of relationally aggressive behavior, such that male participants reported endorsing relational aggression more than their female counterparts.

These findings are particularly interesting to consider when acknowledging the heavily gendered perception of relational aggression. Though previous research has identified a negligible gender difference in relational aggression (Card et al., 2008), as replicated in this study, both men and women often conceptualize relational aggression as a more acceptable “female” form of aggression (Nelson et al., 2008). Previous research on normative beliefs about aggression, specifically within adolescence, does not highlight this same gender difference (Werner & Nixon, 2005). Regarding acceptability, previous studies with emerging adults have shown that men may perceive relationally aggressive behavior as less aggressive overall, thereby viewing it as more acceptable (Stewart-Williams, 2002). Viewing the current study through this lens, it may be possible that our male participants viewed the relationally aggressive acts described in the normative beliefs scale as less aggressive overall, thereby making them seem more acceptable.

Emerging adulthood scholars have highlighted that one major developmental goal of this stage is constructing one’s worldview, largely through new experiences and interactions (Arnett & Mitra, 2020). As such, the significance of perceived realism within this study aligns within this developmental framework. An emerging adult’s ability to perceive and discern between realistic and unrealistic portrayals of the world in their chosen media, through this developing worldview, would logically have significant impact on behavior within this development context.

The current study presents two major strengths. First, this study finds strength in its focus on an emerging adult sample. While previous literature has studied the influence of relationally aggressive media on behavior within college samples, this study utilized emerging adulthood theory and aimed to conceptualize the associations and findings through a developmental approach. Secondly, this study finds strength in its inclusion of reality television type in the supplementary analyses. While not ultimately significant, this approach was unique in its attempt to utilize specific genres or types to further parse the influence of total reality television consumption.

One of the primary limitations of the study lies in its lack of attention to further demographic information, namely participants' racial and ethnic identity. While much of the extant research also lacks this focus, a portion of media-focused psychology has explored the role of race within reality television consumption, regarding both the viewers and the stars, with a particular focus on Black women (Ward et al., 2021, 2023). Future research should aim to further tease apart the influence of racial and ethnic identity on the consumption of reality television and how it impacts viewer behavior and beliefs. Additionally, given the importance of perceived realism within this sample, future research may aim to interrogate differences in perceived realism by race or ethnicity, as well as other antecedents that may influence this potential difference.

Another limitation of this study lies in the gender proportions of our participants. Similarly to other studies recruiting from college populations, our sample was overwhelmingly female. While the literature emphasizes no significant difference in relational aggression between men and women, follow-up research should aim to specifically recruit male participants for a more accurate representation of the population. Particularly given the clear influence of gender across each analysis, recreating this study with a more balanced sample may be beneficial. Additionally, our sample lacked gender diversity beyond the binary, with only one participant reporting a non-binary gender identity. Lastly, similar to other survey studies, this study and its results have the potential of being affected by self-report bias. Particularly regarding behaviors perceived as negative, such as relational aggression towards peers and romantic partners, participants may be hesitant to accurately disclose the level to which they engage in these behaviors. Within this study, relational aggression scores were considerably low (sample M = 1.27, on a scale from 1 to 4), with small standard deviations, which may demonstrate this self-report bias. Previous research measuring relational aggression via self-report present similarly low means and small standard deviations (Coyne, 2016; Goldstein et al., 2008), further highlighting the possibility of this bias. Future research should aim to incorporate alternative methods of measuring relational aggression, such as in-lab paradigms and potentially peer nominations, particularly within established friendship or social groups.

Beyond addressing these limitations, this study also presents distinct opportunities for future research. Firstly, future studies should attempt to gain clarity regarding gender differences, specifically in the endorsement of relational aggression and perceived realism. Regarding this study's outcome variables, the gender difference only existed within the endorsement of relational aggression, not the perpetuation of relationally aggressive behavior. As such, this invites further research on why emerging adult males find relational aggression more normal, even if they enact it at similar levels as their female counterparts. Given the role of aggression in the broader perception of manhood and masculinity (Vandello et al., 2008), this gender difference may be the result of men being socialized to accept aggression as more normal and socially instrumental (Archer & Haigh, 1997), regardless of the form. Regarding perceived realism, previous research has not identified or explored significant gender differences. What possible antecedents may contribute to the significant gender differences that presented in this sample? Past research has highlighted additional components of reality television viewing that may contribute to an individual's level of perceived realism, such as *first-person desire* and *homophily*, which respectively capture the desire to live a lifestyle similar to those on reality television and perceived similarity with reality television "characters" (Behm-Morawitz et al., 2016). Given the prevalence of female "characters" in reality television programming (e.g. *Jersey Shore, Real Housewives,* etc.), the ability to establish homophily and first-person desire may be easier for female viewers, which may contribute to this significant gender difference in perceived realism.

Lastly, peer-directed relational aggression is merely one component of a given friendship, with the ability to influence other aspects and outcomes. As such, future research should aim to investigate the impact of media-driven, peer-directed relational aggression on various metrics of friendship in emerging adulthood, particularly under the purview of reality television consumption. Potential measures and outcomes include friendship quality, closeness, and perceived social support. Given previous research (Banny et al., 2011; Goldstein & Tisak, 2004), I would anticipate that the influence of media-driven relational aggression on friendship quality and closeness would vary based on the level of mutual use and normalization of relational aggression within the friendship. In friendships where relational aggression is frequently used by both parties, I would expect positive friendship outcomes to increase. By contrast, friendships where relational aggression is used by only one member of the friendship, may experience lower felt closeness, quality, and support. Additionally, to expand on the emerging adulthood context, future studies may incorporate vignette-style relational aggression items. In doing so, participants may be able to better conceptualize how opportunities to be relationally aggressive present in their daily lives.

Conclusion

Most broadly, the findings of this current study do not show support for perceived realism as moderator of the relation between reality television consumption and relational aggression and its endorsement. However, within this sample, perceived realism seems to function as the primary predictor of peer-directed relationally aggressive behavior, as evidenced by the significant main effect. The hypothesized correlations between reality television viewing, perceived realism, and peer-directed relational aggression were also significant. Additionally, while peer-directed relational aggression did not differ significantly by gender, male participants held higher normative beliefs about relational aggression. Gender also emerged as a significant predictor of peer-directed relational aggression and normative beliefs about relational aggression in analyses on reality television type. Future research should aim to further investigate the role of gender in these associations, as well as incorporate additional insights from media psychology to further understand the importance of perceived realism.

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Table 1. Intercorrelations among Key Study Variables

	Perceived Realism	RTV Frequency	NOBAGS	Peer Relational Aggression	Real Life/Slice of Life	Dating	Talent	Competition
Perceived Realism	1	.313**	.058	.250**	.285**	.270**	.162**	.174**
RTV Frequency		1	-.017	.113*	.692**	.757**	.674**	.726**
NOBAGS			1	.312**	.006	-.091	.006	.019
Peer Relational Aggression				1	.039	.099	.111*	.100
Real Life/ Slice of Life					1	.471**	.190**	.282**
Dating						1	.359**	.446**
Talent							1	.637**
Competition								1

$^*p < .05$, $^{**} p < .001$

Table 2. Study Variable Descriptives and ANOVA Results by Gender

	Total Mean *(SD)*	Men, Mean *(SD)*	Women, Mean *(SD)*	*F*
Reality Television Viewing Frequency	2.31 *(.74)*	1.89 *(.60)*	2.39 *(.74)*	11.73**
Peer Relational Aggression	1.27 *(.44)*	1.35 *(.56)*	1.25 *(.41)*	1.29
Normative Beliefs about Relational Aggression	1.81 *(.51)*	2.05 *(.59)*	1.76 *(.48)*	7.69**
Perceived Realism	3.10 *(.89)*	2.77 *(.84)*	3.18 *(.88)*	7.93**
Real Life/Slice of Life	2.40 *(1.16)*	1.91 *(.95)*	2.49 *(1.12)*	6.03*
Dating	2.45 *(1.24)*	1.41 *(.68)*	2.66 *(1.23)*	27.32**
Talent	2.13 *(.93)*	1.86 *(.88)*	2.19 *(.93)*	3.07*
Competition	2.54 *(1.03)*	2.27 *(1.00)*	2.59 *(1.04)*	2.47

*$p < .05$, **$p < .001$

Table 3. Hierarchical Regression Predicting Peer-Directed Relational Aggression: Reality TV Viewing Frequency, Perceived Realism, and Gender

	β	*t*	*p*	Adjusted ΔR^2	ΔR^2
Step 1.				.074*	.082*
Gender	-.142	-2.578	.010		
Reality TV Viewing Frequency	.070	1.221	.223		
Perceived Realism	.247	4.397	.001		
Step 2.				.080	.014
Reality TV Viewing Frequency × Perceived Realism	.030	.533	.594		
Reality TV Viewing Frequency × Gender	.055	.860	.390		
Perceived Realism × Gender	-.136	-2.229	.026		
Step 3.				.080	.003
Reality TV Viewing Frequency × Gender × Perceived Realism	.080	.992	.322		

*$p < .001$.

Table 4. Hierarchical Regression Predicting Normative Beliefs about Relational Aggression: Reality TV Viewing Frequency, Perceived Realism, and Gender

	β	*t*	*p*	Adjusted ΔR^2	ΔR^2
Step 1.				.044*	.053*
Gender	-.227	-4.060	.001		
Reality TV Viewing Frequency	.011	.189	.850		
Perceived Realism	.088	1.546	.123		
Step 2.				.044	.009
Reality TV Viewing Frequency × Perceived Realism	-.076	-1.332	.184		
Reality TV Viewing Frequency × Gender	.031	.466	.641		
Perceived Realism × Gender	-.045	-.726	.468		
Step 3.				.045	.003
Reality TV Viewing Frequency × Gender × Perceived Realism	-.084	-1.031	.303		

*$p < .001$.

Table 5. Hierarchical Regression Predicting Peer-Directed Relational Aggression: Gender, Perceived Realism, and Reality Television Type

	β	*t*	*p*	Adjusted ΔR^2	ΔR^2
Step 1.				.071*	.088*
Gender	-.145	-2.52	.012		
Perceived Realism (PR)	.247	4.351	.001		
Real Life/Slice of Life	-.066	-1.070	.285		
Dating	.102	1.466	.144		
Talent	.072	1.040	.299		
Competition	-.008	-.105	.917		
Step 2.				.083	.037
Gender × PR	-.113	-1.751	.081		
Gender × Real Life	-.050	-.792	.429		
Gender × Dating	.017	.183	.855		
Gender × Talent	-.074	-.947	.344		
Gender × Competition	.136	1.663	.097		
PR × Real Life	-.112	-1.589	.113		
PR × Dating	.073	.966	.335		
PR × Talent	.130	1.638	.102		
PR × Competition	-.047	-.565	.572		
Step 3.				.085	.013
Gender×PR×Real Life	.168	1.504	.134		
Gender×PR×Dating	-.225	-1.580	.115		
Gender×PR×Talent	.061	.724	.469		
Gender×PR×Competition	.019	.223	.823		

*p < .001.

Table 6. Hierarchical Regression Predicting Normative Beliefs about Relational Aggression: Gender, Perceived Realism, and Reality Television Type

	β	*t*	*p*	Adjusted ΔR^2	ΔR^2
Step 1.				.037*	.054*
Gender	-.202	-3.443	.001		
Perceived Realism (PR)	.089	1.530	.127		
Real Life/Slice of Life	.041	.649	.517		
Dating	-.082	-1.152	.250		
Talent	.017	.240	.811		
Competition	.037	.494	.621		
Step 2.				.050	.040
Gender × PR	-.024	-.360	.719		
Gender × Real Life	-.151	-2.340	.020		
Gender × Dating	.026	.284	.777		
Gender × Talent	-.029	-.369	.712		
Gender × Competition	,175	2.096	.037		
PR × Real Life	-.034	-.475	.635		
PR × Dating	-.022	-.291	.771		
PR × Talent	.004	.053	.957		
PR × Competition	-.009	-.101	.920		
Step 3.				.054	.015
Gender×PR×Real Life	.015	.134	.893		
Gender×PR×Dating	-.291	-2.007	.046		
Gender×PR×Talent	.023	.264	.792		
Gender×PR×Competition	.011	.126	.900		

*$p < .001$.

Appendix A

Reality Television Viewing Scale

How familiar are you with reality TV shows in the following genres?

(*1= Not familiar at all, 5 = Extremely familiar)*

Talent

Competition

Dating

Real-life/slice of life

Other

How often do you watch reality TV shows in the following genres?

(1 = Never, 5 = Always)

Talent

Competition

Dating

Real-life/slice of life

Other

How do you normally watch reality TV?

(1 = Never, 5 = Always)

Full episodes (Cable, Streaming, Netflix, Hulu)

Clips (YouTube, TikTok)

Binge-watching (Actively watching 3+ episodes in one sitting)

Appendix B

Self-Report of Relational Aggression Scale (Murray-Close et al., 2010)

(1 = Never, 4 = Always)

Peer-directed Proactive Items

1. My friends know that I will think less of them if they do not do what I want them to do.
2. When I want something from a friend of mine, I act "cold" or indifferent towards them until I get what I want.
3. I have threatened to share private information about my friends with other people in order to get them to comply with my wishes.
4. I have intentionally ignored a person until they gave me my way about something.

Peer-directed Reactive Items

5. When I am not invited to do something with a group of people, I will exclude those people from future activities.
6. When I have been angry at, or jealous of someone, I have tried to damage that person's reputation by gossiping about him or her or by passing on negative information about him/her to other people.
7. When someone does something that makes me angry, I try to embarrass that person or make them look stupid in front of his/her friends.
8. When I am mad at a person, I try to make sure she/he is excluded from group activities (going to the movies or to a bar).
9. I have spread rumors about a person just to be mean.

Romantic Relationship Items

10. I have threatened to break up with a romantic partner in order to get him/her to do what I wanted.
11. I have tried to make my romantic partner jealous when mad at him/her.
12. I have cheated on my romantic partner because I was angry at him/her.
13. I have given my romantic partner the silent treatment when my feelings were hurt in some way by him or her.
14. If my romantic partner makes me mad, I will flirt with another person in front of him/her.

Appendix C

Normative Beliefs about Relational Aggression Scale (Werner & Nixon, 2005)

(1= Perfectly Okay, 4 = Really Wrong)

1. In general, it is wrong to ignore someone, even if you really don't want him/her to be a part of your group. *(reverse-scored)*
2. In general, it is okay to not say anything when you see a group of people excluding a person from their group of friends.
3. If you are angry, it is okay to spread rumors about another person.
4. In general, it is okay to not include someone in your friend group's plans.

Appendix D

Perceived Realism Scale (adapted from Busselle, 2001)

(1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree)

1. People in reality television programs, like *The Bachelor* or *Keeping Up with The Kardashians*, are very similar to people in the real world.
2. The romantic relationships portrayed in reality television programs are not at all like romantic relationships in the real world. *(reverse-scored)*
3. The personal problems people have in reality television programs, *The Bachelor* or *Keeping Up with The Kardashians*, are very similar to problems real people have.
4. The issues that come up in reality television programs, *The Bachelor* or *Keeping Up with The Kardashians*, are very similar to the issues in the real world.
5. You cannot learn anything about real life by watching reality television programs. *(reverse-scored)*