



THE IMPACT OF CELEBRITY COUPLE LIFESTYLE EXPOSURE VIA SOCIAL MEDIA ON UNREALISTIC LIFESTYLE EXPECTATIONS AND MARITAL CONFLICT AMONG YOUNG COUPLES: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF UNMET NEEDS

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ABSTRACT: The increasing influence of social media and its portrayal of idealized celebrity couple lifestyles significantly affects the psychological and relational functioning of young couples, shaping their perceptions of marital life. Continuous exposure to such content may foster unrealistic lifestyle and relationship expectations, which, when unmet in real life, can lead to frequent marital conflicts. Despite its growing relevance, this phenomenon remains underexplored in psychological research, and few studies have examined these variables within an integrated framework. This conceptual paper aims to investigate the impact of celebrity couple lifestyle exposure via social media on unrealistic lifestyle expectations and marital conflict among young couples aged 18–35, while exploring the mediating role of unmet relational needs. A cross-sectional correlational design will be employed, with a sample of 100 young couples (200 participants) recruited through purposive sampling. Standardized and validated scales will be used to measure the variables, and mediation modeling will assess both direct and indirect relationships. The findings are expected to provide valuable insights for psychologists, counselors, and relationship educators in addressing marital dissatisfaction and conflicts among young couples in the digital era.

KEYWORDS: celebrity couple lifestyle exposure, social media, unrealistic lifestyle expectations, unmet needs, marital conflict, young couples

1.INTRODUCTION

Marriage represents a complex emotional and social relationship extending beyond legal or religious contracts, reflecting modern expectations of intimacy and companionship. Psychologically, marriage is a high-investment, emotionally intense, and socially structured relationship. Traditionally, marriage is viewed as a sacred, lifelong bond. However, in contemporary contexts, partners are expected to fulfil multiple roles—lovers, best friends, sexual partners, financial partners, and emotional confidants—which contribute to marital health. In the digital era, the growing influence of social media has reshaped young couples' perceptions of marital life, often shifting expectations from high to unrealistic levels. Continuous exposure to idealized couple-based content on platforms such as YouTube and Instagram fosters unrealistic expectations inspired by celebrity couples. When these expectations are unmet, frequent marital conflicts may arise, mediated by unmet relational needs. Social media exposure refers to the amount of time individuals spend on social platforms and the nature of the content they consume. Social media has a significant influence on individuals' thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, and expectations regarding romantic relationships. Celebrity couples often portray highly curated and idealized versions of their lives—marked by luxury, beauty, emotional support, and constant harmony. Constant exposure to such representations may create unrealistic expectations among young couples, distorting their perceptions of real-life marital dynamics. Emerging evidence suggests that comparing real relationships to idealized online portrayals can distort expectations, decrease satisfaction, and create relational strain. Yet, the mechanisms through which celebrity couple lifestyle exposure affects relationship outcomes remain underexplored, particularly among young, socially active adults. This paper proposes a conceptual model wherein celebrity couple lifestyle exposure leads to unrealistic lifestyle expectations, which foster unmet needs and, subsequently, marital conflict.

2. BACKGROUND AND NEED FOR THE CONCEPT

In this era of pervasive social media, curated celebrity couple content significantly shapes young couples' expectations of marriage. Social media not only influences perceptions of marital happiness but also constructs idealized relationship standards that are largely unattainable. Continuous exposure to these depictions encourages the formation of unrealistic lifestyle expectations, which, when unmet, often lead to conflict mediated by unmet emotional and relational needs. Several psychological theories support the relationships among these variables:

- **Cultivation Theory (Gerbner, 1969):** Individuals who spend more time-consuming media tend to perceive reality in line with the media's representations.
- **Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1997):** People imitate behaviours modelled by admired figures; exposure to celebrity couples' romantic gestures or lifestyles fosters imitation and expectation.
- **Social Comparison Theory (Cherry, 2025):** Individuals assess their worth through comparison; celebrity couples become upward comparison targets, leading to dissatisfaction.

- **Ideal Standards Model (Fletcher & Simpson, 2000):** Discrepancies between ideal and perceived relationship standards influence satisfaction and conflict.
- **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943):** When psychological needs remain unfulfilled, individuals experience distress, which exacerbates relationship conflict.

Despite increasing attention, few studies have examined these relationships in an integrated model—particularly in the Indian context—making this research conceptually and culturally significant.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

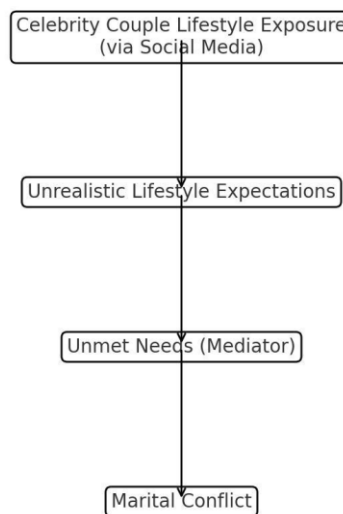
1. **Elnimr (2024)** investigated the influence of celebrity influencers on marital satisfaction within a Middle Eastern cultural context. Findings revealed that individuals frequently viewing celebrity couple content reported greater dissatisfaction and conflict arising from unmet expectations.
2. **Langlais (2024)** explored how TikTok influences relationship perceptions among young adults. Exposure to idealized romantic content created unrealistic standards and increased comparison, contributing to dissatisfaction.
3. **Al Sulaiti and Ben Mimoun (2024)** examined Instagram influencer attributes and their role in parasocial relationships. Influencer attractiveness and authenticity strengthened parasocial involvement, shaping personal expectations and satisfaction.
4. **Wei et al. (2023)** found that social media addiction reduced emotional intimacy and weakened relational bonds among Chinese undergraduates.
5. **Bouffard et al. (2022)** demonstrated that greater Instagram usage was linked to decreased relationship satisfaction and increased conflict.
6. **Abubakar et al. (2020)** found that digital romantic films influenced undergraduates' marriage expectations, with frequent viewers adopting romantic ideals.
7. **Reizer et al. (2018)** revealed that joint viewing of romantic content reinforced unrealistic ideals that later contributed to relational conflict.
8. **McCutcheon et al. (2016)** found that strong admiration of celebrities correlated with idealized relationship standards and unrealistic expectations.
9. **Reizer & Hetsroni (2014)** found that media exposure predicted lower commitment and satisfaction in romantic relationships.
10. **Segrin & Nabi (2002)** supported cultivation theory by showing that romantic TV exposure increases idealistic marriage expectations.

4. CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

This conceptual paper investigates how exposure to celebrity couple content on social media influences young couples' perceptions of marital life, leading to conflict through the mediating role of unmet needs. Exposure to idealized portrayals generates unrealistic expectations that, when unmet, create a discrepancy between perception and reality, resulting in conflict.

4.1 CONCEPTUAL PATHWAY

Celebrity Couple Lifestyle Exposure → Unrealistic Lifestyle Expectations → Unmet Needs → Marital Conflict



4.2 DEFINITIONS

- **Social Media Exposure:** The amount of time an individual spends on social platforms and the nature of content they encounter (Scherr, 2022).
- **Celebrity Couple Lifestyle Exposure:** The act of viewing content featuring admired celebrity couples on social media (IV).
- **Unrealistic Expectations:** Beliefs or assumptions that lack realism, often exaggerated or idealistic (DV).
- **Unmet Needs:** The gap between desired and achieved needs, which motivates individuals to seek fulfilment (MV).
- **Marital Conflict:** The frequency of verbal or emotional hostility between partners, often due to unmet expectations and poor communication (Rani & Kaushik, 2023).

5. IMPLICATIONS

5.1 THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

- Supports **Cultivation Theory**, showing that exposure to romanticized media shapes relationship ideals.
- Extends **Social Comparison Theory** by linking it to relational dissatisfaction.
- Expands the **Ideal Standards Model** by introducing unmet needs as a mediating factor.
- Integrates **Media Psychology** with **Relationship Studies**, offering a holistic view.

5.2 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

- Counselors can design **media awareness programs** to differentiate media portrayals from reality.
- **Premarital and marital counselling** can address expectation management.
- **Therapists** can guide couples to identify and challenge unrealistic standards.
- **Media literacy programs** can promote healthy digital consumption and relationship expectations.

6. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

- Examine **gender differences** in unrealistic lifestyle expectations.
- Conduct **cross-cultural comparisons** to identify contextual influences.
- Apply **longitudinal or experimental designs** to establish causality.
- Compare **celebrity-exposed vs. non-exposed couples** for variance in relationship satisfaction.
- Include **diverse cultural samples** for broader generalization.

7. CONCLUSION

Celebrity couple portrayals on social media create powerful symbolic models that shape how young adults perceive romance and relational success. When these idealized representations generate unrealistic expectations, real-life relationships struggle to meet elevated standards. The resulting unmet emotional and relational needs become precursors to marital conflict. This conceptual model integrates key psychological theories, offering a foundation for future empirical research and practical interventions aimed at improving relational health in the digital age.

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