RELATIONSHIP BEHAVIORS PORTRAYED IN A POPULAR TELEVISION DRAMA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF MAD MEN

by

Emily A. Hawkins

An Abstract
of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Communication & Sociology
University of Central Missouri

April, 2012
ABSTRACT

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Using the lens of cultivation theory, a critical analysis of the pilot episode of *Mad Men* was conducted to determine the relationship themes present within the drama, and whether negative relationship consequences were present for males, females, or both. Five themes were observed with regards to how women must look and behave to be considered for marriage, what rules are in place for men regarding fidelity, and how marriage is perceived. It was observed that while very little consequences are portrayed within the pilot and subsequent episodes in season one, the consequences that are depicted typically affect the female characters only.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE ...............................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY ............................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS ..................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of <em>Mad Men</em> Characters ..........................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synopsis of <em>Mad Men</em> Pilot Episode: “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes” ..........</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question #1 ................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question #2 ................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION ..............................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Future Research .................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations ..............................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES .............................................................................</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Media messages consistently inundate the daily lives of Americans. According to the Nielsen Company (2010), the average American watches over 35.6 hours of television per week -- almost as much as the typical work week. With the amount of time spent watching television, it is only natural that viewers might begin to perceive the messages they view as reality. While many different messages are presented in media programming, of particular importance are the messages presented about marriage and romantic relationships. Television and film are wrought with depictions of marriage and relationships, both healthy and unhealthy.

Research has shown that young adult viewers who watch romance-specific programming have higher intentions of marrying (Segrin & Nabi, 2002) and are more likely to believe in the existence of pre-destined relationships (Holmes, 2007). In addition, Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, and Smith (2007) found that watching reality dating shows has been shown to affect viewer’s perceptions of dating behaviors and Galician (2000) noted several relationship myths gleaned from media programming, including “love at first sight” and that all couples should be able to read each other’s minds. If young adults are looking to media programming to form their beliefs about marriage, conceivably before they would enter into their first marriage, it is important to study the relationship themes in popular programming among that demographic, such as the television drama Mad Men.

Mad Men

Mad Men is a cable television drama that is steadily gaining viewership each season, reaching 1.6 million viewers in the season one premiere (Levin, 2008) and most recently, 2.92 million viewers for the season 4 premiere (Crupi, 2010). While the viewership is average for a cable television show, the critical acclaim of the show and various product tie-ins have garnered
a unique and young audience. Idov (2011) noted that the Mad Men audience is “unusually upscale, with a median household income among 25-to-54-year olds exceeding $100,000” (para. 14).

Set in 1960s New York City, the series focuses on the exploits of Don Draper, played by Jon Hamm, a heavy drinking, chain-smoking, philandering creative director for a small advertising agency, Sterling Cooper, his equally uncouth colleagues, and their oblivious spouses. Mad Men “depicts authentically the roles of men and women in this era while exploring the true human nature beneath the guise of 1960s traditional family values” (“New to the Show,” n.d.). While Don is a lothario inside of the New York City limits, he transitions into a traditional family man on the train ride back to Ossining, New York, where he resides with his wife and two children. Mad Men is about the juxtaposition between who Don Draper is and who he would like to be – which is a dichotomy many can relate to.

The Mad Men franchise has produced four seasons with thirteen episodes per season. Mad Men was the recipient of the Golden Globe for Best Drama from 2008 to 2010 and the Primetime Emmy for “Outstanding Drama Series” in the same years (“About the Show,” n.d.). Mad Men can be viewed on television, online, or on DVD. The Mad Men franchise also engages in several product tie-ins with popular brand names that broaden the show’s reach from merely the dedicated, weekly viewers to those who would not otherwise be familiar with the show.

For example, Mattel introduced a line of Mad Men Barbie dolls in 2010 featuring the likenesses of Don Draper and his wife, Betty, as well as Roger Sterling and his mistress, Joan Holloway. Elliott (2010) noted, “that two dolls represent a relationship outside wedlock, and Don Draper’s propensity for adultery, may be firsts for the Barbie world since the brand’s introduction five decades ago” (para. 6). A Clorox bleach commercial that runs during Mad Men
episodes portrays a man’s white dress shirt with a lipstick stain on the collar and the text:

“Clorox. Getting ad guys out of hot water for generations” (Wright, 2009).

Banana Republic’s *Mad Men* fall collection debuted in August 2011 to rave consumer reviews, which prompted the launch of a spring line for 2012. *Mad Men* Costume Designer Janie Bryant, who collaborated on the spring line, noted, “we’ve given fans the tools to create their own looks, just like their favorite ‘Mad Men’ characters” (“Banana Republic to Debut Mad Men Spring 2012 Collection,” 2012). The 2012 Mad Men collection was featured in all of Banana Republic’s spring marketing pieces, including direct mail and online advertisements. The tie-ins with Mattel, Clorox, and Banana Republic and their success indicate that *Mad Men* has attained a level of pop-culture status, further extending the reach of the show beyond the weekly viewers and in turn, its potential for impact.

Kelner (2010) noted, “the show is crafting a whole new generation of would-be Bettys (Draper’s stylish wife) not Peggys (the show’s ambitious ‘career girl’)” (2010, para. 3). While *Mad Men* is set in a time that is completely foreign to generation X, Y, and the Millennials, there is an obvious desire of these generations to emulate the characters portrayed on the show and thus, emulate their behaviors. While a superficial understanding of the show might warrant one to assume that the only relationship behaviors portrayed are negative, deeper analysis is necessary to truly understand what messages or themes are presented. With this in mind, the primary aim of this study will be to identify what relationship themes are portrayed on *Mad Men* and if negative themes are present, are they presented as having consequences? The following research questions will be the basis of the study:

RQ1: What relationship themes are portrayed on *Mad Men* in the first episode?
RQ2: What relationship consequences are present for the characters of *Mad Men*, and do they occur more for males or females?

In order to analyze relationship themes on *Mad Men*, it is prudent to scrutinize past research on cultivation and relationship themes in various genres of television and film to understand what areas have already been explored and if any gaps in research are apparent.

CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Cultivation Theory

George Gerbner (1998) indicated, “television is the source of the most broadly-shared images and messages in history. It is the mainstream of the common symbolic environment into which our children are born and in which we all live out our lives” (p. 177). In 1967, Gerbner started a research project called “Cultural Indicators,” which aimed to study central themes on primetime television. Since 1967, the Cultural Indicators project has recorded one week of U.S. network television dramas annually and analyzed the data to find recurring themes in the programming, which is a process referred to as *message systems analysis*.

This is where the basis of cultivation theory emerged. “Based on message systems analyses, cultivation researchers develop hypotheses about what people would think about various aspects of ‘reality’ if everything they knew about some issue or phenomenon were derived from television’s dominant portrayals” (Morgan and Shanahan, 2010, p. 339).

Cultivation theory seeks to comprehend how society’s heavy exposure to messages on television affects their perceptions of reality, and what consequences might result from that. Gerbner (1998) used the term “cultivation” to explain how watching television can contribute to how a viewer perceives reality:
The influences of a pervasive medium upon the composition and structure of the symbolic environment are subtle, complex, and intermingled with other influences…thus, television neither simply “creates” nor “reflects” images, opinions, and beliefs. Rather, it is an integral aspect of a dynamic process. Television viewing both shapes and is a stable part of lifestyles and outlooks. It links the individual to a larger if synthetic world, a world of television’s own making (p.180).

While Gerbner (1998) focused on the effects of television violence with regards to viewer’s perceptions of reality, many researchers have utilized cultivation theory to examine various aspects of romantic relationships.

**Cultivation Theory and Relationships in Television and Film**

Ward (2002) looked at all sexual relationships on television and the affect on viewers. Ward indicated that television is constantly presenting information on how one should handle romantic relationships or physical intimacy. Ward noted that while there are many examples of sexual relationships on television, very few portray healthy relationships or sexually responsible situations. Most sexual relationships on television are portrayed as short-lived and consequence-free. Ward determined that while many examples of relationships exist on television, the limited availability of healthy relationship portrayals could lead viewers to develop inaccurate expectations within their own relationships and careless attitudes towards sex.

In order to determine if television influences distorted perceptions of relationships, Ward (2002) studied 269 undergraduate students who answered survey questions and participated in two groups that watched different types of television programming. The first group watched clips from popular television shows that were non-sexual in nature and the second group watched television clips featuring two non-sexual and four sexual scenes. Participants answered questions
regarding their demographics, the amount of television they watched, what type of programming they preferred, and which popular television characters they most identified with. Participants also answered questions regarding their attitudes about sex, dating, and their perceptions of their peer’s sexual behaviors. Participants then watched a series of clips from popular television shows and answered questions relating to how funny they felt each clip was, whether or not they felt the situation was realistic and if they identified with any of the characters.

Ward (2002) found that the more males watched television, the more likely they were to endorse gender and sexual stereotypes. Ward noted, “frequent viewing among males was also associated with higher expectations of the level of sexual experience of their peers, and of male peers, especially” (p. 9). Ward found similar patterns for female participants, indicating females endorsed sexual stereotypes and had high expectations regarding their peer’s sexual behaviors when they experienced greater media exposure.

The purpose of Ward’s (2002) study was to see if participants in the second group would endorse sexual stereotypes more than participants in the first group because the clips the second group viewed were more sexual in nature. Ward found that females in the second group positively endorsed the stereotypes more than in the first group, as did females who identified themselves as watching mainly primetime sitcoms and dramas. Ward noted that male viewers “seemed unaffected by viewing these clips…thus, exposure to TV’s sexual stereotypes does appear to affect viewers’ acceptance of those stereotypes, but only among women” (p. 9).

Based on these findings, Ward (2002) confirmed heavy television exposure correlated with stereotypical sexual attitudes. Ward also addressed the differences between male and female viewing experiences, suggesting, “because men were more likely to endorse each of the 3 sexual stereotypes, it may have been difficult to produce stronger agreement with statements that were
already supported” (p. 11). Ward noted that these findings produce several implications, including the possibility that women who believe men are sex-driven will be more likely to accept instances of infidelity and sexual harassment and women who believe females are sex objects will feel less comfortable taking control of their sexuality. While the correlational and experimental analyses produced strong connections between females and sexual stereotypes, the results for the male population were significantly weaker. Ward indicated that the male population was much smaller than the female population (only 36%) and the choice of television clips were from female-oriented shows, which could have caused the weak outcomes.

Segrin and Nabi (2002) surveyed university students to see if there was a connection between watching television and having idealistic expectations about marriage:

In the context of marital expectations, cultivation theory suggests that in portraying idealized images of marriage, the media may be cultivating unrealistic beliefs about what marriage should be. At the same time, media portrayals that exclude or minimize conflict and mundane marital behaviors and interaction could also contribute to idealized views of marriage (p. 249).

285 undergraduate students answered open-ended questionnaires about their ideal hypothetical marriage and television viewing habits. Segrin and Nabi categorized the answers based on themes that emerged, including “fantasy rumination about marriage; idealized expectations for intimacy within marriage; and a passionate, romanticized love style” (p. 251).

Segrin and Nabi (2002) found that students who watched more hours of television per day had negative expectations of intimacy in marriage while those who watched romantic television genres had positive expectations of intimacy in marriage and higher intentions to marry in the future. Participants who indicated that they felt relationship portrayals were realistic
indicated less likelihood to enter into marriage. Segrin and Nabi noted that while television viewing was generally associated with negative expectations of marriage, those who watched romantic programming were more likely to have idealized marital views.

Segrin and Nabi’s (2002) results confirmed weaknesses in Gerbner’s (1998) research on cultivation, noting that if viewers watch specific genres of programming, they will be cultivated differently. This means that individuals who watch romantic programming could have their beliefs on romance influenced, but not violence, and individuals who watch violent programming would not have their views on romance influenced but might on violence. While Segrin and Nabi were able to strongly correlate television viewing with marital expectations, they were unable to definitively establish causality between the two.

Ferris, Smith, Greenberg and Smith (2007) examined reality dating programming to understand how these shows affect dating behaviors, preferences and attitudes. Using social cognitive theory and cultivation theory as a lens, 64 hours of 18 different reality dating programs were analyzed for the presence of specific dating attitudes (i.e. ‘dating is a game,’ ‘men are sex-driven and ‘women are sexual objects’), characteristics looked for in a date and any typical first-date behaviors. These attitudes and behaviors were also coded as being punished or rewarded. Using a per-hour score for each dating attitude, researchers found that the most-expressed attitude on reality dating shows was that ‘women are sex objects’ (5.9 per hour) and ‘dating is a game’ (5.2 per hour).

Once the content analysis was complete, 197 undergraduate students (70 men/127 women) from a large Midwestern university were surveyed on their reality dating show viewing habits and dating attitudes. They also answered questions pertaining to how realistic they believed reality dating shows are. Ferris, Smith, Greenberg and Smith (2007) found that male
viewers who watched more reality dating shows and perceived those shows to be more realistic were significantly more likely to believe that women are sex objects and men are sex-driven. Judged importance of specific dating characteristics (i.e. physical appearance or personality traits) was not associated with viewing reality dating programs and only two first-date behaviors, drinking alcohol and getting into a hot tub, were associated with watching reality dating shows.

Ferris, Smith, Greenberg and Smith (2007) noted that during the 64 hours of reality dating shows that were analyzed, the concepts of “men are sex-driven,” “women are sex objects” and “dating is a game” were featured 14-15 times per hour. The concept of “dating is a game” and “women are sex objects” were rewarded considerably more than they were punished. The male viewers who were surveyed were more likely to endorse these concepts if they viewed more of the reality shows and perceived them to be realistic. The researchers indicated these are signs of second order cultivation and it is very likely that viewers are modeling the behaviors they see on the reality dating shows.

Much like Ward’s (2002) study on attitudes about sexual relationships, Holmes (2007) used cultivation theory to study individual beliefs on “soul mates.” Holmes (2007) sought to answer if an individual’s preference for romantic media was associated with a belief in soul mates. 294 undergraduate students at a large U.S. university answered survey questions related to popular movies, television shows and magazines and were instructed to rate each example on a scale of 1-7. Participants were also instructed to use a 7-point scale to indicate their level of agreement with various statements related to belief in soul mates.

Holmes (2007) found a positive relationship between romantic media preference and a belief in soul mates and that relationships require the ability to be a “mind reader.” Females were most likely to hold these beliefs while males were more likely to believe that sexual perfection is
a requirement in relationships. Holmes suggested “people with these types of beliefs tend to want to give up too easily in a relationship when confronted with problems, interpreting strife as a sign the relationship ‘just wasn’t meant to be’” (Discussion section, para. 2). Holmes’ study indicated that romance-specific media is influencing individuals to believe that relationships are meant to be easy, which is not factual and is damaging to any future relationships a person may have. Holmes noted that further study is needed to determine if romantic-specific programming is the cause of these beliefs or if general television viewing can also contribute.

**Relationship Portrayals in Television and Film**

William Douglas (1996) stated, “television families are seen to offer lessons about appropriate family life and, in a more general sense, to affect the way in which people think about the family” (p. 676). Douglas noted that various surveys and studies indicated a belief in the weakening of the American family, and, sought to find out if television sitcoms reflected these beliefs. Douglas posited that while prior analyses of television families did indicate some level of distressed relationships, only a narrow view of ‘family’ was considered. In order to present a more in-depth study, Douglas used extant family theory to measure various family dynamics, including spousal relations, family power, satisfaction and stability. Eight sitcoms were encompassed in this study, including *The Cosby Show, Family Ties, Who’s the Boss?, Growing Pains, Roseanne, Family Matters, Full House,* and *Home Improvement.*

240 undergraduate students (147 female/93 male) from a large Southwestern university participated in the study. The participants were randomly assigned to groups and each group viewed four episodes from one of the eight sitcoms. A pre-test questionnaire, which assessed their demographics, hours spent watching television each week, and familiarity with the specific sitcom they were going to watch for the study, was given to each participant. After watching
each of the four episodes for their specific sitcom, participants were asked to assess various aspects of the episodes, including the importance of the relationship between the husband and wife, their level of affection for that television family, and if that family represented a desirable model.

Douglas (1996) found that the participants rated The Taylors (*Home Improvement*) as the least stable and supportive and most conflictual and controlling of the television couples. The Huxtables (*The Cosby Show*) were rated as the most supportive couple. The Taylors (*Home Improvement*) and the Conners (*Roseanne*), while representing the most traditional family models, also exhibited the highest levels of conflict and lowest levels of relational satisfaction and stability, as well as multiple attempts by one spouse to control the other. For *Roseanne*, participants viewed the spousal relationship positively while the parent-child and sibling relationships were rated very negatively. Douglas indicated this dichotomy reveals a model in which children introduce distress to an otherwise satisfied couple.

Overall, the analysis of the eight sitcoms suggested that “although contemporary television families often exhibit high levels of conflict, many of them seem able to not only resolve that conflict but to establish a relational environment that observers define as substantially confirming” (Douglas, 1996, p. 695). Douglas noted that while families like the Huxtables (*The Cosby Show*) offer the illusion of the ‘ideal family,’ the perceptions of the Conners (*Roseanne*) and the Taylors (*Home Improvement*) were more consistent with the belief in the weakening of the American family. Because television sitcoms are likely to influence family cognition, the results of this study are important to consider.

Zare (2001) sought to analyze the culture of sentimentalized adultery she believes pervades media. Zare (2001) noted that for television and film “a winning formula seems to be to
depict adultery not only generously, but also downright sentimentally” (p. 29). Zare examined three popular films whose plot dealt heavily with the concept of sentimentalized adultery, *The Bridges of Madison County*, *The English Patient* and *Shakespeare in Love*, in an effort to understand the messages these films presented. ‘Sentimentalized adultery’ is defined as “the depiction of a relationship in which one or more married persons finds phenomenal passion and emotional satisfaction in an affair” (Zare, 2001, p. 30).

Zare (2001) indicated that a common myth of sentimentalized adultery is that an individual is entitled to seek happiness, even if it means betraying another to attain it - adultery is justifiable in the pursuit of happiness. After viewing *The Bridges of Madison County*, Zare noted that male and female residents of Madison County, Iowa approached the film considerably differently. The female residents described the character of the husband as trapping his wife in a dull marriage while the wife sacrifices her true love to save it, however unhappy it makes her. The male residents described the husband as a decent man who loved his wife as well as he could, even though he knew he would not be able to make her happy.

Zare (2001) noted that while the novel of *The English Patient* focuses equally on all four characters, the film adaptation relies heavily on the adulterous relationship of just two of the characters. The infidelity is not presented as consequence-free in the film, but it is introduced into an otherwise happy marriage, leaving the audience to wonder if the marriage would have succeeded if not for the affair. *Shakespeare in Love* relied heavily on the sub-plot of Shakespeare’s affair with Viola, although it had little impact on the overall plot, and the stereotype of the wife as a ball and chain was used to justify his adulterous ways.

In her analysis of these three films and the messages presented within them, Zare (2001) noted:
We are implicitly asked to believe that the married partners’ sex lives contain no positive emotional intensity. We instead focus on two attracted people conducting a market test: is this new person good enough to risk a fling? Become a life partner? Or just serve as a pleasant distraction (p. 38)?

Zare’s concern is that the genre of “cheatin’ movies” (p. 38) is misleading audiences on the benefits of marriage in order to cultivate the perceived excitement of adultery. As Zare (2001) noted, “cinema’s dissemination of the capitalist gospel that rapid change equals goodness should disturb us” (p. 39).


Johnson and Holmes (2009) separated each relational situation into both positive and negative categories such as kissing, hugging, loyalty, cheating, and deception. Results indicated 82 incidents of deception and 33 incidences of cheating, which Johnson and Holmes suggested could influence viewers to question the good intentions of others and to believe that their actions do not have consequences. Johnson and Holmes also noted that in all incidents of affection, only a select few were between married couples, most of whom were either unhappy or implied happiness but did little to show it. Johnson and Holmes suggested that portraying marriage in such a way leads viewers “to see marriage and romance as disparate entities and with affection between married couples as an exception instead of the norm” (p. 362).
Johnson and Holmes (2009) aimed to highlight possible relationship behaviors that viewers might learn from watching romantic movies to suggest how these learned behaviors can be detrimental for viewers’ future relationships. This suggests how inaccurate media portrayals have the potential to lead viewers to perceive society in a way that is not factual. While this content analysis suggested possible relationship behaviors that can be gleaned from romantic movies, it is unable to determine what these behaviors could mean for an individual’s future relationships. Further study is needed to determine what, if any, causality is possible.

Following Johnson & Holmes’ (2009) study, Boelman, Zimmerman, Matheson, and Banning (2010) utilized a content analysis method to study five Emmy Award-winning comedy shows from 2000-2004 to learn what negative and positive relational behavior were portrayed by the characters. Two coders were tasked with watching each of the five shows and noting every instance of couple interaction and categorizing them into pre-determined groups. The coders also noted demographic data about the couples. After viewing an episode separately, the coders came together to discuss their notes and assess for inter-rater reliability. Boelman et al. found that among the 47 television couples, most of them portrayed positive emotional engagement (i.e. concern or appreciation for the other) and facilitative behaviors (i.e. validating the other through active listening). Television couples in relationships for over a year had more occurrences of defensiveness, stonewalling, criticism, and contempt. These behaviors also occurred more in committed partners than in couples who were merely dating.

Boelman et al. (2010) suggested that results might have been skewed due to coded behaviors typically only occurring once (making it difficult to establish patterns). Also, the characters lacked diversity because the majority were white, heterosexual, upper-middle class couples. Boelman et al. would have benefited from expanding the study to include shows
featuring a predominantly black cast or homosexual relationships in order to be able to
generalize the results.

These studies have shown a correlation between media viewing and the acceptance of
sexual stereotypes (Ward, 2002), rape myths (Kahlor and Morrison, 2007) and the existence of
soul mates (Zare, 2001; Holmes, 2007); as well as marital expectations (Zare, 2001; Segrin and
Nabi, 2002; Johnson and Holmes, 2009). These findings are significant and set the stage for
future research on cultivation and message systems analysis, but are lacking in the genre of
drama and current television programming. While comedies may make light of marital strife
(Johnson and Holmes, 2009), dramas often get right to the point with marital and relationship
difficulties, showing a side that is not as funny as comedies and sitcoms tend to portray. This is
why it is important to explore a popular television drama such as Mad Men to understand what
relationship themes are being portrayed.

CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

While past studies have examined marriage in television and film (e.g. Zare, 2001; Segrin
& Nabi, 2002; Holmes, 2007; Johnson & Holmes, 2009), few have focused on relationship
behaviors in a specific, popular television program. While many television dramas could have
been utilized for this study, AMC’s first scripted drama, Mad Men, was chosen because of its
rapid and pervasive reach across popular culture. Elliott (2010) noted:

Mad Men has attained a level of popular-culture cachet. There have been magazine cover
articles, calendars, and an episode of The Oprah Winfrey Show all devoted to it, spoofs on
The Simpsons and Saturday Night Live, and even a Mad Men category on Jeopardy (para. 1).
Mendelsohn (2011) further posited, “its appeal goes far beyond what dramatic satisfactions it might afford” (para. 1). In addition to its reach across popular culture, *Mad Men* was also chosen because of the nature of the programming. As stated in the introduction, a major premise of *Mad Men* is Don Draper’s struggle to be the traditional “family man” with a wife and kids in the suburbs while living an adulterous lifestyle in the city. Thus, the high level of relationship content allowed for rich analysis. Finally, episodes of *Mad Men* are easy to access due to all four seasons being available on DVD, as well as through streaming services such as Netflix or Hulu.

As was noted in the Review of Literature, a key aspect of cultivation theory is message system analysis, which refers to “scholarship that involves careful, systematic study of TV content” (Griffin, 2012, p. 368). Before Gerbner was able to determine if viewers’ perceptions were affected by what they saw on television, he first needed to analyze what messages were being presented in the first place. This study was not looking to determine how viewers’ perceptions are affected by watching *Mad Men*, instead, it was merely looking to document what relationship themes are portrayed. In order to discover this, a text-centered critical analysis of *Mad Men* was performed using the lens of cultivation theory. The pilot episode of *Mad Men* was the focus of this study because it set the tone for the whole series, introducing characters and storylines that carried through the first season and subsequent seasons thereafter. While only the pilot episode was analyzed in-depth, subsequent first season episodes were referenced with regards to RQ2 (relationship consequences).

The analysis was conducted in two steps. First, positive and negative relationship behaviors portrayed in the pilot were identified based on a template of categories by Johnson and Holmes (2009). While the categories from Johnson & Holmes (2009) were originally utilized for viewing romantic comedies, they were categories that are relatively exhaustive for observing any
romantic relationship, regardless of genre. Positive behaviors include affectionate touching, dancing, flirting, holding hands, hugging, compliments, chivalry, or kind gestures between couples. Negative behaviors include cheating, deception, divorce or separation, inappropriate flirting, gifts or conversation, jealousy, neglect or violence.

Because individuals evaluate these behaviors differently, specific criteria were considered for categorization. With regards to positive behavior, “affectionate touching” was categorized as non-sexual physical contact between partners that signifies fondness or support for the other (i.e. a consoling hand on the shoulder), including a hug or holding hands. “Sexual invitation” was categorized as behavior that implies a desire to have sex. “Denial of sexual advances” was categorized as any action or dialogue that spurned the sexual advances of a person who is not a spouse or romantic partner. “Compliments” were categorized as positive comments directed at or about a partner from their significant other. “Affirmations” referred to statements spoken to a partner to signify support or care for the other. “Sweet talk” referred to affectionate conversations that are not affirmations. “Advice seeking” was categorized as statements from a partner soliciting help or advice from the other. It was also noted if these behaviors took place between monogamous or adulterous couples.

With regards to negative behaviors, “cheating” was categorized as extra-marital physical contact with the opposite sex of a sexual nature, including kissing and touching of a sexual nature and/or statements that implied an intention to cheat. “Disaffirming statements” referred to any conversation with a partner that downplays the relationship or maligns the other. “Women as sex objects” referred to statements that classify women as merely sex objects, either by a romantic partner or a member of the opposite sex. “Inappropriate flirting” was categorized as
sexual advances made toward an individual of the opposite sex that is not that individual’s significant other.

“Inappropriate conversation” was categorized as conversations about the opposite sex with others of a sexual nature. “Relationship criticism” referred to any conversation about marriage or relationships that puts committed relationships in an unflattering light. (i.e. reference to a wife as a “ball-and-chain” or saying that one’s life is “over” when married). If other positive or negative behaviors not included in this original list became apparent during observation, they were added to the list.

With regards to RQ2, I also made note if negative behaviors begat a consequence for those involved, and if said consequences occurred for the male or female, or both. “Consequences” were categorized as a negative outcome directly relating to previous negative relationship behaviors. For example, if a man is unfaithful to his wife and when she finds out, she asks for a divorce, the divorce would be the consequence of engaging in the negative behavior of infidelity. I also noted if the non-offending spouse suffered a consequence of the offending spouses negative behavior. For example, if a man is unfaithful to his wife and she contracts a sexually transmitted disease from him. The sexually transmitted disease would be a consequence the wife suffers from the husband’s negative behavior.

Each incident involving these positive and negative behaviors was noted separately, then described clearly and explicitly in order to delineate one from another. Once the individual behaviors were noted, the second step of analysis involved going over the individual behaviors found and grouping similar behaviors together based on the categories listed above. For example, all instances of “relationship criticism” were grouped together to see if the criticism was specific to a certain part of relationships or if the criticism was only spoken by a specific gender. I also
repeatedly viewed the pilot episode and allowed myself to ruminate on the behavior groupings I had found. I took copious notes on the behaviors I observed and analyzed the grouped behaviors, which yielded an emergence of various themes portrayed on the show. Between the repeated viewings of the pilot episode and pouring over the behaviors I observed, I was able to draw out the five relationship themes depicted the most in *Mad Men*, which are: (1) marriage means one’s figurative life is over; (2) sexually active women won’t get married; (3) mutual respect and attraction can only be found outside of marriage; (4) centerfolds preferred; and (5) while the wife’s away, the men can play.

**CHAPTER 4**

**ANALYSIS**

As stated in the Methodology, the pilot episode was the artifact I analyzed to draw out relationship themes portrayed on *Mad Men*. Each behavior or conversation was listed separately, utilizing the categories by Johnson and Holmes (2009), as well as categories that emerged within the pilot episode. Once the individual behaviors were categorized, they were grouped together to see if any relationship themes emerged. Before one can fully appreciate the analysis, it is important to first understand the context of the pilot episode, entitled “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes,” and of the various characters portrayed on the show. Therefore, I will first briefly describe the characters that were introduced during the pilot episode and detail the notable plotlines established as well. Then I will present the five themes I observed with regards to RQ1 and what consequences were observed with regards to RQ2.

**Mad Men Cast of Characters**

This episode, and subsequent episodes thereafter take place in New York City or just outside New York in the country village of Ossining, New York in the early 1960s. The main character, Don Draper (Jon Hamm), is a handsome and powerful, but also hard-drinking and
secretive, creative director at Sterling Cooper Advertising Agency. Don Draper is highly intelligent and appears to hold others to a high moral standard, but it is revealed in later episodes within the first and second seasons that Don’s real name is actually Dick Whitman, and he stole the identity of the real Don Draper, a fellow soldier who died next to Dick in Korea, in order to avoid further military service. In addition to his stolen identity, Don also enjoys sexual relationships with different women when he is in the city, even though he is married and has two children in the suburbs. The cognitive dissonance between what Don believes is the “right thing to do” and what he wants to do is a struggle he deals with in nearly every episode.

One of the women with whom Don engages in an affair is Midge Daniels (Rosemarie DeWitt), an artist who lives in the Village in New York City and appears to be a part of the Beat poet scene. Midge is very sarcastic and free-thinking, often referencing her other lovers besides Don. Don is in love with Midge and proposes marriage to her, but she does not believe a marriage between them would work, knowing that Don is unfaithful to his current wife, Betty Draper (January Jones).

Peggy Olson (Elisabeth Moss) is Don Draper’s secretary at Sterling Cooper Advertising Agency. In our first introduction to Peggy, she is riding the elevator in the Manhattan building where the Sterling Cooper offices are located. Peggy is a graduate of Miss Deaver's Secretarial School and lives in Brooklyn, not too far from her extremely religious parents and sister. The secretary position at Sterling Cooper is her first real job in the city, and although she appears to be very shy and naïve, Peggy is hopeful that her new job in the city will bring more excitement and romance to her life.

Peggy aspires to be more chic and cosmopolitan, like her mentor Joan Holloway (Christina Hendricks), the buxom office manager at Sterling Cooper. Joan is extremely beautiful,
fashionable, and witty. Many of the men in the office pursue her romantically, and she makes it clear that her goal is to marry a rich businessman and become a housewife, despite her obvious intelligence and prowess in her career. It is revealed in later episodes that Joan had a long-term affair with married Sterling Cooper partner Roger Sterling (John Slattery) and a short-lived relationship with creative copywriter Paul Kinsey (Michael Gladis). Joan takes Peggy under her wing to teach her how to navigate the pressures of Sterling Cooper and what it means to be a single girl in 1960s Manhattan. It is Joan who puts Peggy in contact with Dr. Emerson, with whom Joan has also had a romantic relationship and who prescribes birth control pills to Peggy.

Pete Campbell (Vincent Kartheiser) is a 26-year-old account executive at Sterling Cooper, who we learn in the pilot episode is engaged to Trudy Vogel (Allison Brie). Pete comes from a wealthy family and often treats the people around him like they are his servants. He is very good at schmoozing clients but does not have many close friends because he often undercuts others to get ahead and talks down to any women he meets. He takes particular interest in Peggy Olson in the pilot episode and drunkenly comes on to her on the night of his bachelor party, resulting in a sexual encounter.

Paul Kinsey (Michael Gladis), Ken Cosgrove (Aaron Staton), and Harry Crane (Rich Sommer) are all mid-to-late-twenties junior Sterling Cooper employees, working in the creative (Kinsey), accounts (Cosgrove), and media (Crane) departments. Ken Cosgrove is the most outspoken when it comes to sex and women, often making lascivious comments about the female office workers. Harry Crane participates in the lewd office conversations, but stops short of making a pass at any of his female co-workers because he is married. Paul Kinsey appears to enjoy the boisterous sexual conversations, but also thinks he is more evolved than his colleagues, as he is a self-proclaimed beatnik.
Pilot Episode: “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes”

The opening scenes of the pilot episode show Don Draper (Jon Hamm) sitting alone in a loud, boisterous, and smoky bar in Manhattan, working on tag lines for an upcoming meeting with Lucky Strike Tobacco. Suffering from a bout of writer’s block, Don later stops by the Village apartment of his girlfriend, Midge Daniels (Rosemarie DeWitt), seeking comfort and advice. While she does not offer any advice, they do engage in sex. The following morning, Don casually suggests marriage to Midge only to be turned down and sent off to work. At the offices of Sterling Cooper, new secretary Peggy Olson (Elisabeth Moss) is subjected to lewd comments by her new co-workers, Paul Kinsey (Michael Cardiss), Harry Crane (Rich Sommer), and Ken Cosgrove (Aaron Staton). The first glimpse of Sterling Cooper depicts mostly young, attractive women working as secretaries outside the offices of the powerful advertising executives. Peggy, in her drab attire and scant makeup is clearly a fish out of water among the other beautiful secretaries. Peggy is shown the ropes of the office by the office manager, Joan Holloway (Christina Hendricks), and learns that she will be Don Draper’s secretary.

In addition to showing Peggy what must-haves need to be in her drawer at all times – “a fifth of something, band-aids, and a needle and thread” (“Smoke Gets in Your Eyes”) – Joan also arranges for Peggy to meet with her gynecologist, Dr. Emerson, to obtain a prescription for birth control pills. While the conversation that leads to this appointment is not shown, it is implied that Joan sees sexual encounters as an office pastime, and wants to ensure that Peggy is protected, even though Joan’s comments about Peggy’s looks imply that she does not see her as being much of a prize for men around of Sterling Cooper. Dr. Emerson writes Peggy the
prescription with a warning that if she abuses it, he will take her off it “for her own good” (“Smoke Gets in Your Eyes”).

At the end of the workday, Don turns down an invitation to Pete’s bachelor party and heads to a restaurant to meet a potential client he offended, Rachel Menken, in an attempt to win her over to Sterling Cooper. Don manages to persuade her to become a client despite insulting her with a diatribe about how love doesn’t exist. The connection between Rachel and Don is palpable, and foreshadows a future romantic affair. While Don is having drinks with Rachel Menken, the rest of the Sterling Cooper men head to the strip club, where they meet a few women that Ken invited to the party. The men zero in on the women they are interested in, and Pete comes on particularly strong to one of them. When she refuses his advances, he becomes sullen and later arrives drunk at Peggy’s apartment, where they have sex after he explains that despite getting married the next day, he had to see her.

The episode ends with Don back in his home in Ossining, NY, greeting his wife, Betty Draper (January Jones) and flirting with her. Up until this scene, the audience has had no indication that Don is involved romantically with anyone but Midge. It is clear in this scene that Betty is not aware that Don is leading a completely separate life within the city limits of Manhattan. This scene sets up the dichotomy of Don Draper’s life that carries throughout the entire series.

**Analysis of Research Question #1: Relationship Themes**

**Theme #1: Marriage Means One’s Figurative Life is Over**

According to the men of *Mad Men*, getting married is the equivalent of giving up one’s life. Johnson & Holmes’ (2009) study of romantic films noted that often a wedding is portrayed as the climax of the movie, and anything after that is up to the imagination of the viewer.
The omission of the relationship after the wedding, they noted:

May lead adolescents to view the act of getting married itself as the peak of the relationship, with the early discussed depictions of already married couples as unaffectionate with each other, speaking negatively of each other, and arguing with each other potentially reinforcing this (Johnson & Holmes, 2009, p. 364).

The depiction of the wedding as the culminating point in a relationship, with everything after being unhappy or unsatisfying, is a prominent message within the pilot episode of Mad Men. The characters appear to be aware that this is the case and accept it without question. On several occasions within Mad Men, marriage is referred to as an action that will end one’s figurative life. For example, when discussing Pete Campbell’s bachelor party with Paul Kinsey & Harry Crane, Ken Cosgrove jokingly replies that he will be in attendance because “I want to be there before they tie an anchor around his neck and drag him out to sea” (“Smoke Gets in Your Eyes”). This statement elicits laughs and smiles from his audience, Paul Kinsey and Harry Crane, implying that they agree with his assessment that marriage is equivalent to drowning in the ocean.

Also, when Pete is speaking with his fiancée, Trudy, on the phone, he attempts to calm her fears about his bachelor party by saying, “Of course I love you. I’m giving up my life to be with you” (“Smoke Gets in Your Eyes”). In an attempt to console his future wife, Pete’s only words of comfort are about how he must love her if he is willing to give up his for her. Both Pete and Ken’s statements imply that marriage is the end of a relationship or life as they know (and like) it, instead of viewing it as the beginning of a new phase in a couple’s romantic journey.
This message is consistent with the findings of Johnson & Holmes (2009), who found that most married television couples were portrayed as being unhappy.

Johnson and Holmes suggested that portraying marriage in such a way leads viewers “to see marriage and romance as disparate entities and with affection between married couples as an exception instead of the norm” (p. 362).

Viewers of *Mad Men* are presented with a scenario where the wedding and marriage is a dream or goal for women, and that men will eventually ‘give up their life’ to be married, but they won’t be happy about it and they certainly won’t give up the enjoyment of having sex with other women. The wives of *Mad Men* are depicted at home and caring for their children, but they do not present an image of women who are happy or are experiencing the joy or fulfillment of a person who has seen their dreams fulfilled. Instead, they are depicted as waiting patiently for their husbands to return from work, only to be chided if they bother them with talk of their day or questions about work. These wives are essentially playthings to be taken down from a shelf when the husbands want them – without any regard for the wife’s emotional needs - furthering the stereotype that married people are unhappy. Considering the life depicted for the wives (i.e. lonely, bored, unhappy) and the husbands (i.e. someone else cooks and cleans for them, still able to sleep with whomever they please), one would think that the men would be depicted as eager for marriage and the women would be resisting it as long as possible.

**Theme #2: Sexually Active Women Won’t Get Married**

Sex and sexual conversation takes center stage in *Mad Men*, but there is a marked difference in how men speak about sex with each other, and how men speak about sex to women. One particular message being presented to the women is that sexually active women, while fun for men to ‘enjoy’ physically, are not ‘marriage material.’ One particular conversation that
presented this message was a scene where Peggy Olson visits a gynecologist recommended by Joan Holloway to get a prescription for birth control pills. Dr. Emerson makes an observation that while Peggy is seeking contraceptives despite the absence of a wedding ring on her finger. When Peggy stammers, Dr. Emerson assures her that he isn’t judging but qualifies it with, “of course, one would like to think putting a woman in this situation is not going to turn her into some kind of strumpet” (“Smoke Gets in Your Eyes”).

If that statement didn’t get his message across, Dr. Emerson mentions that a prescription for birth control pills shouldn’t give Peggy the license to “become the town pump” because “even in our modern times, easy women don’t find husbands” (“Smoke Gets in Your Eyes”). In addition to various comments by other male characters, such as Pete noting that a stripper who would be at his bachelor party “took down more sailors than the Arizona” and asking if he would get “first crack at her” (“Smoke Gets in Your Eyes”), the message is clear: sexually active women are good for pleasing men on a physical or sexual level, but they are not to be considered when it comes to seeking a marriage partner.

This message, which is depicted throughout the pilot episode (and seen throughout subsequent episodes) is of particular importance, considering studies by Taylor (2005) and Marron & Collins (2009) found that young adults’ sexual attitudes and beliefs are influenced by the conversations of television characters regarding sex. One might write off this type of message as archaic, but the recent media circus regarding Rush Limbaugh referring to Georgetown University law student Sandra Fluke, who spoke in front of a House Democratic committee on women’s reproductive health, a ‘slut’ and a ‘whore’ (Crary, 2012) suggests that this message is still very much in the public discourse. Schattner (2012) posited that the conservative pundits excusing Limbaugh is sending a message in itself: “you could say it doesn't
matter what he thinks… but this is a man who…feeds ideas to many households in America” (para. 10). The message that a sexually active woman, even a responsible one that utilizes a birth control method, is a slut or whore unworthy of marriage is not a notion that *Mad Men* is highlighting as a dinosaur of less-evolved times, but rather, a message that is alive and well in the discourse of today’s culture.

**Theme #3: Mutual Respect & Sexual Attraction Can Only Be Found Outside of Marriage**

Signorielli (1991) found that young adult television viewers tended to be of the opinion that “one sees so few good or happy marriages that one questions it as a way of life” (p. 145). The pilot episode of *Mad Men* heavily repeats this theme and it is continued throughout season one. The pilot episode of *Mad Men* also offers a suggestion with regards to where one can find a romantic relationship that provides mutual respect and sexual attraction – in an adulterous relationship. Don Draper visits his girlfriend, Midge, when he is suffering from writer’s block on an advertising campaign for Lucky Strike Tobacco. He expresses his fears about getting fired if he is unable to come up with a good campaign, and asks her if he can run a few ideas by her for her feedback. When Midge is unable to cheer Don up with her platitudes, she resorts to using her sexual wiles to take his mind off his problems, which he eagerly accepts.

The viewer is presented with an image of the adultery relationship as a place where Don can truly be himself, showing his vulnerable side and seeking comfort in the arms of his lover. The viewer also sees that all problems can be resolved through sex, which, in a marriage, sex might be a welcome distraction from problems, but eventually those problems need to be dealt with. Don and Midge do not want to deal with problems, and are happy to halt the discussion with sex, never to return to the conversation.
Conversely, Don does not talk with his wife, Betty, about his work and certainly does not ask for her opinion on his campaigns, although it is not clear why. It appears that Don wants to keep his work life completely separate from his home life, but this is not made explicitly clear. In later episodes, Don actually refers to his wife as being a child and she laments that he will shut down when she asks him too many questions about work or his past. While Betty is beautiful, intelligent, excellent at playing the part of doting wife and mother, and loves him immensely, it is clear that he only views her as a trophy to be paraded around, not as an equal partner whom he loves and respects.

While often acting as though he is trapped in his marriage to Betty, Don appears to think being married to Midge would make him much happier. Midge, on the other hand, seems to be keenly aware that a marriage with Don would be a disaster for their relationship, because when he proposes marriage to her after sex, she quips that he must think she would be a good ex-wife. Perhaps Midge has realized that Don does seek the emotional connection and support that a wife should provide, but the stressors of being responsible for paying the bills and being responsible for caring for a family drives a wedge in the marriage. Don is not responsible for paying Midge’s rent, and he does not have to answer to her if he doesn’t come to visit. He is free of responsibility to Midge, but not Betty. Don thinks Betty is the problem, while Midge believes that the problem is not Betty, but marriage itself that makes Don unhappy.

Pete Campbell also looks outside his impending marriage for a meaningful relationship. On the eve of his wedding, Pete drunkenly visits Peggy Olson at her apartment and states that he wanted and needed to see her, yet the way he stares at her and earnestly speaks implies that he wants to do more than just see her. Peggy takes Pete’s hand and draws him into her apartment, where it is implied that they have sex. In a later episode, Pete and Peggy have sex in his office.
when he reveals one of his deepest fantasies to her after getting into an argument with his wife. While Pete does not talk much with Peggy outside of their liaisons, he clearly believes that she is the only woman who understands him completely and likes him despite his flaws.

No emotionally supportive marriages are portrayed in the pilot episode of *Mad Men*. Instead, the adulterous affair between Don and Midge is the relationship that appears to be the healthiest in terms of emotional support. Later episodes reveal that both Don and Pete are dealing with extreme emotional issues, and engaging in affairs is merely a symptom of their “inability to master a…developmental life task or crisis” (Bagarozzi, Sr., 2008, pg 3), but the message that one can seek comfort, advice, and sexual pleasure outside of one’s marriage further perpetuates the findings of Signorielli (1991) that a married relationship is not where a person can find the relational support they seek.

**Theme #4: Centerfolds Preferred**

The title of this theme is in reference to a stereotype in television and film that in order to “attract and keep a man, a woman should look like a model or a centerfold” (Galacian, 2000). Tanner, Haddock, Zimmerman, & Lund (2003) noted that Disney films, which are targeted at very young children, tend to show couples falling in love at first sight, where the only knowledge the romantic partners possess is purely based on physical appearance, as a first meeting is typically not one where a deep understanding of the other is known. So it is not a stretch for a woman to believe that “physical appearance is the most important thing when entering an intimate relationship” (Tanner et. al, 2003, p. 368).

While Galacian advises one to “cherish completeness in companions – not just the cover” (2000), the latter message is spoken louder within the pilot episode of *Mad Men*. For example, when Joan Holloway, who dresses to accentuate her curvy physique, assesses the drab,
conservative clothing that Peggy Olson is wearing on her first day, she states, “go home, take a paper bag, cut eyeholes out of it. Put it over your head, get undressed and look at yourself in the mirror. Really evaluate where your strengths and weaknesses are. And be honest” and later elaborates by saying “a girl like you with those darling little ankles, I’d find a way to make them sing. Also, men love scarves” (“Smoke Gets in Your Eyes”).

An earlier conversation between Peggy & Joan reveals that Joan believes the ultimate goal of working at Sterling Cooper is to find a husband so she won’t have to work anymore, and believes that in order to accomplish this goal, she needs to look and dress in a sexy manner. One could easily write off this belief as only belonging to Joan, but Peggy also is advised by one of the Sterling Cooper telephone operators, Nanette, that her great legs could be an asset within the office and “I bet Mr. Draper would like them if he could see them” (“Smoke Gets in Your Eyes”). Pete Campbell asks if Peggy is Amish when he surveys her attire, and snidely remarks that “it wouldn’t be a sin for us to see your legs. And if you pull your waist in a little, you might look like a woman” (“Smoke Gets in Your Eyes”).

In the pilot episode of Mad Men, not only must a woman look a certain way to attract a man, it is also how a woman acts that will draw their attention. Ken Cosgrove notes to Paul and Harry that his lewd comments to Peggy in the elevator were necessary because in order for her to be the type of ‘girl’ he wants, he has to let her know what type of guy he is. Therefore, in addition to dressing in a way that accentuates her assets, Peggy must also be ‘fun,’ which means she needs to smile and laugh when the men speak crudely about sex, and if the crude remarks are directed at her, she must not get upset.

The message that women must look and act a certain way to be valued is not a new concept. In the 1960s, when Mad Men takes place, women were clambering to look like a
“Jackie Kennedy” or a “Marilyn Monroe,” two of the prevailing female icons of the time. These two women had completely different looks - Jackie Kennedy was very thin and dressed in a conservative, chic, European style, while Marilyn Monroe was voluptuous and dressed quite provocatively. Season two of *Mad Men* even references this phenomenon in episode six when Ken Cosgrove tells Peggy Olson that she embodies neither of the icons, but rather, “Gertrude Stein” (“Maidenform”). This comment was obviously meant to be a great insult, because Gertrude Stein was a very masculine lesbian who was known for her intelligence, but not for her beauty or fashion sense. If Peggy wants to attract a man, looking like Gertrude Stein is not going to help her accomplish that goal.

Although the portrayal of women as dressing and acting in particular ways to attract men is meant to be a depiction of the way things ‘used to be,’ in actuality, things are very much the same, it’s just the icons that have changed to ultra skinny celebrities like Jennifer Aniston or the Victoria’s Secret models. Female viewers of *Mad Men* have this message reinforced every time Peggy is cajoled for her attire or lack of beauty and Joan is ogled as she walks past the executive’s offices. The ideal of what a woman should look like was different in that era, but the message was the same as it is today – look this way if you want to attract a man.

**Theme #5: While the Wife’s Away, the Men Can Play**

Within the pilot episode, the only spouse that is introduced is Betty Draper, Don’s wife, and she is shown only in Ossining, New York, where Don & Betty live – not within the city limits of Manhattan. Pete Campbell speaks about his fiancée, Trudy, but the audience does not see her until the second episode. Harry Crane is married, but this fact is not made known until the second episode. The absence of a spouses’ presence appears to mean that the men of Sterling
Cooper are allowed to act as if they are bachelors and/or the focus of the show is on the men and not their wives.

Don Draper visits his girlfriend Midge on an evening he decides to stay in the city and has sex with her. Pete Campbell makes lewd remarks to Peggy Olson upon meeting her, tries to put his hands up the skirt of a woman he’s just met at a strip club, and when he doesn’t get anywhere with that woman, goes to Peggy’s apartment in hopes of having sex with her. Harry Crane, while engaging in sexual conversation with his male colleagues and flirting with the waitress at the strip club, is the only character that does not cheat on his spouse in the pilot episode of Mad Men – although one might assume that he did not divulge his trip to a strip club to his wife, which could be considered deceitful by some.

It is implied that both Don Draper and Pete Campbell had sex with their respective wife and fiancée shortly after their sexual encounters with other women. Don is not shown putting on a condom and Pete impregnates Peggy Olson during their sexual encounter, so it is inferred that neither of the men are practicing safe sex, which is expected because it was not a socially accepted concept in the 1960s. While the threat of HIV and AIDS was not fully realized until the 1980s, unplanned pregnancy and possibly other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) were very much a concern in the early 1960s. Thus, Don and Pete were potentially exposing their partners to STDs without their knowledge, and putting themselves at risk to father a child out of wedlock.

Having unsafe sex with multiple partners, even with our modern day understanding of HIV and AIDS, is a problem even today. For example, a study of approximately 1,400 undergraduate by Knox, Vail-Smith, & Zusman (2008) found that “approximately one-in-five males in a ‘monogamous’ relationship reported having had oral sex and/or vaginal intercourse with someone else (22.2% and 19.7% respectively) and withheld this information from their
partners (thus leaving the partners vulnerable to STD/HIV infection)” (p. 1015). For any number of reasons, people are still having unprotected sex with multiple partners and spreading STDs and/or becoming pregnant.

One might argue that the unsafe sex practices displayed by the characters of Mad Men are not typical of people today, but as I previously noted, engaging in unprotected sex is still a common practice. The behaviors exhibited by the men of Mad Men send a message that having unprotected sex is common and does not elicit any consequences - at least no consequences for the men. With the exception of Peggy’s pregnancy by Pete in season one and Joan’s pregnancy later by Roger Sterling in season four, no characters on Mad Men in four seasons have ever been depicted as getting a sexually transmitted disease from practicing unsafe sex. This may have been a common practice in the 1960s when the show takes place, however, in today’s world, it is a careless and dangerous message to send, as “one in five people in the United States has an STD” (Chisholm, 2009, para. 15) and countless women become pregnant but do not want a baby.

Analysis of Research Question #2: Consequences of Negative Relationship Behaviors

Do Negative Relationship Behaviors Yield Consequences?

Segrin & Nabi (2002) noted that television presents “a conflicted view of marriage” (p. 260), and it is apparent that Mad Men also falls into this pattern. Marriage is presented as being the ultimate goal of the characters, from Joan’s advice to Peggy about how to best attract the men around the office so, “if you play your cards right, you’ll be in the country and you won’t be working at all,” to Don incredulously asking potential client Rachel Menken why she would rather be single and work than get married and have kids. On the other hand, marriage does not appear to be inherently valued by those who are married. Don Draper lies to his wife about having to work in the city in order to spend time with his girlfriend and Pete Campbell spends
the night before his wedding at a strip club before sleeping with another woman. Harry Crane freely engages in sexual conversations about other women and flirts with his waitress at the strip club.

Johnson & Holmes’ (2009) study of romantic movies noted that when it comes to negative relationship behaviors, “irrespective of seriousness, there appeared to be no real consequences for characters’ transgressions in their relationships” (p. 362). Their findings ring true with my findings in *Mad Men*. With regards to RQ2, there appeared to be few consequences for engaging in negative relationship behaviors, unless you are a woman. The only incident where a man suffers the consequence of a negative relationship behavior after Harry Crane sleeps with Pete’s secretary, Hildy, at an office party in episode 12. In episode 13, Harry suffers the consequences of his actions when he is shown sleeping in his office after being kicked out of the house by his wife, presumably after admitting to her that he had a one-night stand.

While Harry is punished for his one-night stand, Don Draper continues to carry out his affair with Midge, and then begins an affair with Rachel Menken as well. In episode 13, Betty admits to her therapist that she knows Don is having an affair, but she does not tell Don that she knows. Thus, Don does not experience any consequences for his affairs. Don does, however, become enraged with his wife Betty in episode seven when his boss, Roger Sterling, makes a pass at her during dinner. Rather than being upset at his boss, Don directs his anger at Betty, claiming that she was asking for it. In addition, Peggy Olson becomes pregnant from her short-lived affair with Pete and does not realize it until she goes into labor. During the nine months that she is unknowingly pregnant, Peggy is maligned by her male co-workers because they think she is fat. Peggy does not reveal to Pete that she had his baby until several seasons later, so Pete
does not suffer any consequences for cheating on Trudy, while Peggy has to deal with a pregnancy, lower self-esteem, and being ostracized by others in the office.

With the exception of Harry Crane, no men are portrayed as experiencing consequences as a result of their adulterous affairs or other negative relationship behaviors. Johnson & Holmes (2009) noted that in presenting a lack of consequences for negative relationship behaviors, “viewers may underestimate the consequences their behaviors can have on their own relationships” (p. 363). Mad Men viewers are presented with a depiction of adultery or negative relationship behaviors being consequence-free as long as the one committing the act is male. In actuality, previous surveys have found that both men and women have engaged in adulterous affairs without suffering the consequences. An MSNBC/iVillage survey found that “six in 10 cheaters believe they totally got away with their affair and another one in 10 felt their partner was suspicious, but never found out for sure” (Weaver, 2007, para. 15).

It should be noted that a relationship is not unscathed merely because the adulterers are not caught. The same MSNBC/iVillage article (2007) noted that admitted adulterers experienced “lingering feelings of sadness (25 percent), stress (32 percent) and guilt (49 percent)” (Weaver, para. 38). Finally, the article indicated, “survey takers guessed that twice as many people are having extramarital affairs as really are, estimating that 44 percent of married men and 36 percent of married women are unfaithful” (Weaver, 2007, para. 8). With the level of infidelity occurring on Mad Men, let alone every other prime time television show, soap opera, or hit movie, it is not surprising that the population would believe that infidelity is more common than it actually is.
While research has been done with regards to romantic comedies and sitcoms, there has not been as much research done on television dramas. This is why I chose to utilize the behaviors observed in Johnson & Holmes’ (2009) study of relationships in the romantic comedies as a template to study the relationship themes presented on *Mad Men*. The positive and negative relationship behaviors observed in romantic comedies are nearly identical to the behaviors portrayed in dramas, but the context of the behaviors is different. Being a fan of the show and having seen all four seasons, I was aware that infidelity is central to many storylines, but my interest was not in that overarching theme, but in the more subtle themes that were lying underneath. The five themes that I observed within the pilot episode of *Mad Men* were (1) marriage means one’s figurative life is over; (2) sexually active women won’t get married; (3) mutual respect and sexual attraction can only be found outside of marriage; (4) centerfolds preferred; and (5) while the wife’s away, the men will play. These themes are repeated so often throughout the series, it is impossible to ignore the messages conveyed to viewers.

While theme #2 and #4 appear to be similar, I specifically separated them to highlight the conflicting messages presented to female viewers. On one hand, if a woman is sexually active, her chances of getting married are slim (theme #2); but on the other hand, a woman must be visually appealing, fun, and flirty to attract a man and to hold his interest long enough to get the marriage proposal (theme #4). Female viewers are presented with an impossible message – they need to be sexy enough to catch a man’s eye, but not *too* sexy (and certainly not sexually active) to avoid being labeled as a ‘slut’ and losing out on the prospect of marriage, which is presented as a major life goal. Although, considering the portrayal of the wives of *Mad Men* as bored, lonely, and emotionally starved by their husbands, one might say that a sexually active woman really isn’t missing out on the spoils of marriage by remaining unwed.
Theme #3 and #5 both fall under an overarching theme of infidelity, but each refers to specific facets of adulterous relationships. Theme #3 identifies the adulterous relationships that provide the emotional support and physical intimacy that should be found within marriage, while theme #5 refers to sexual flings (i.e. purely physical and/or short-lived), the sexual objectification of women, and engaging in flirtatious, sexual conversation with women who are not a man’s wife. While sexually objectifying other women at a strip club or engaging in flirtatious sexual conversation is not considered infidelity, they are behaviors that a man would not typically engage in if his significant other were in his presence, and would most likely not divulge to her either. In other words, theme #5 implies that even if the behavior is potentially hurtful to his wife, either emotionally or physically (with regards to transmitting STDs), as long as she doesn’t know, then there isn’t a problem. These themes are disturbing messages to communicate to viewers because they present a version of marriage where deceit is acceptable as long as no one finds out, and fidelity is optional because the most fulfilling relationships are found outside of marriage.

Theme #3 (mutual support can only be found outside of marriage) was the most surprising discovery during my analysis because it is in such stark contrast to the stereotype of an affair being purely sexual (as in theme #5). As I stated before, Don clearly yearns to be with someone who he can divulge his secrets to and be vulnerable with, but for some unstated reason, he does not feel that his wife is that person. Throughout the four seasons of Mad Men, Don engages in multiple affairs and with each one, he reveals a little more about his past and his secrets – and several times implores his lovers to run away with him and start a new life. Don is so focused on Betty being his problem that he is oblivious to the fact that he is the one having trouble connecting emotionally, not Betty.
With regards to RQ2 (consequences of negative relationship behavior), *Mad Men* clearly presents the message that women are almost always the ones who bear the overt consequences of negative relationship behavior. As noted previously in the analysis of RQ2 in Chapter 4, the women who engage in sexual relationships with married men are depicted as bearing the consequences, such as Peggy Olson becoming pregnant by Pete Campbell. Pete has no idea that Peggy is pregnant with his child, and even when he does find out that she bore him a son in a later season, he is not held financially responsible for the care of her child or even asked to meet him. This sends a message that men can engage in negative relationship behavior without consequence while women must proceed with caution. This is simply not true, and implying that it is sends a dangerous message to men that can result in any number of consequences, including STDs.

It is not particular groundbreaking to note that a prime time television program conveys messages that only extremely attractive women will be pursued by men or that men can cheat on their wives and not get caught, but what is important to take away from this analysis of *Mad Men* and of other popular shows for younger adult viewers is that these messages being presented to a large audience have the potential to influence the beliefs and behaviors of those who watch them. The media circus regarding Rush Limbaugh’s use of the word ‘slut’ to describe a responsible, sexually active female is a reminder that the seemingly archaic themes of *Mad Men* are actually still very much up for public discussion. Obviously, without interviewing *Mad Men* viewers about their relationship beliefs and attitudes, I cannot say if they are affected by watching the show or if their beliefs and attitudes were present before watching it, but the message system analysis aspect of cultivation theory only seeks to study the content, not to assess it’s affect on the viewer. But it appears that the messages portrayed on *Mad Men* regarding sex, infidelity,
marriage, and gender roles are not unique to the show, but rather, indicative of the messages being presented within television and movies today, and has been for a long time.

**Implications for Future Research**

Now that I have examined the relationship themes presented within the pilot episode of *Mad Men*, the door is open to future researchers to take on the next step of cultivation analysis, which would be to see how *Mad Men* viewers are affected by exposure to those themes by interviewing people who watch the show and assessing their attitudes about relationships, utilizing the themes I observed as a basis for questions. A study could also look at an entire season or seasons of *Mad Men* for a more complete analysis of themes presented with the show. For example, while very few consequences were noted for negative relationship behaviors committed by men within the first season, subsequent seasons resulted in more male characters experiencing consequences for their behavior. Regardless of what avenue of research is taken, as Johnson & Holmes (2009) posited, “we have limited understanding on what specific influences such media have on viewers” (p. 368) and further study is needed.

**Limitations**

While four seasons of *Mad Men* are currently available for viewing on DVD or online, only pilot episode was considered for critical analysis. As stated previously, the pilot episode set the tone for the show with the introduction of characters and the basis for plotlines that have spanned all four seasons. While analyzing all four seasons (52 episodes) would allow for a total understanding of behaviors, in the interest of manageability, only the pilot was considered for in-depth analysis, with the remaining season one episodes referenced with regards to RQ2. Also, what are considered positive or negative relationship behaviors are different to every individual, so only the behaviors listed in the methodology were considered to account for time and
manageability of the study. While there are limitations associated with this study, I believe that it will provide a new insight into the large body of work on cultivation analysis and create a new path for future studies on the theory.
References


Piazza, J. (2011, December 13). Why ‘Pan Am’ flies on while ‘Playboy Club’ crashed and


