

Don't Tell Me Who I Can't Love: A Multimethod Investigation of Social Network and Reactance Effects on Romantic Relationships

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Abstract

In three studies, we examined the influence of social network reactions on feelings toward a romantic partner. Study 1 was a large survey (N = 858), Study 2 was a vignette design in which social network reactions were manipulated, and Study 3 was a laboratory-based, dating game experiment. We found extensive support for the social network effect, whereby relationship approval from family and friends leads individuals to feel more love, more committed, and more positive about a partner. We also examined whether psychological reactance moderated social network influence. Analyses revealed two types of reactance: defiant reactance (doing the opposite of that urged by others) and independent reactance (a desire to make free and independent decisions). Independent reactance but not defiant reactance interacted with network effects and buffered the effects of social adversity. Independent individuals appear capable of ignoring disapproving network opinions. Findings demonstrate a noteworthy interaction between individuals and their social environment.

Keywords

social networks, psychological reactance, romantic relationships

Romantic relationships flourish or flounder within extensive social networks that consist of family and friends (Sprecher et al. 2002, 2006; Wright and Sinclair 2012). In particular, the *social network effect* refers to how network approval for one's relationship boosts positive relationship outcomes and how social disapproval can lead to relationship termination (Felmlee 2001). Nevertheless, not all studies fully replicate the

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social network effect. In a few exceptions, disapproval from network members has been found to strengthen, rather than weaken, romantic relationship bonds (Driscoll, Davis, and Lipetz 1972; Felmlee 2001; Parks, Stan, and Eggert 1983). Current scholarship fails to account for these anomalies in the literature, which poses a problem we attempt to redress here. An explanation for these contradictory findings regarding network disapproval, we argue, lies in the interaction between social network influence and personal characteristics. Various models of relationship development emphasize that both external factors (cultures, networks) and internal characteristics (e.g., partners' attributes) simultaneously influence relationships (e.g., Kelley et al. 1983; Niehuis, Huston, and Rosenband 2006). Yet there has been little attention paid to individual variation in the degree of receptivity to social network influence.

There are two general purposes to this study. First, across multiple methods we examine how social network reactions—both positive and negative—affect romantic relationships, including partner choices and the development of love and commitment. Studies examining the social network effect typically rely on surveys of small samples. Here we employ a relatively large survey (Study 1) as well as a vignette experiment (Study 2) and a laboratory experiment (Study 3) in which we directly manipulate network opinion, thus enhancing our ability to address questions of causal order. Second, we consider how responses to social influence attempts may be tempered by psychological reactance. People are unlikely to be uniform in their reactions to others' influence attempts, and this study offers an initial investigation into reactance as a personal characteristic that may buffer the social network effect.

The Social Network Effect

When studying the social network effect, researchers typically survey participants about approval/disapproval from their network members of their relationship and examine the associations of these perceptions with relationship outcomes. Participants are asked about network approval/disapproval in various ways, including queries about the global network, different network sectors separately (e.g., own network vs. partner's network, friends vs. family), or for individual network members (e.g., mother, best friend). Research indicates that perceived network support is associated with love, commitment, and other positive relationship phenomena (for a review, see Parks 2007). In addition, longitudinal studies show that perceived network support can significantly predict an increase in relationship quality (Sinclair, Hood, and Wright 2014) and stability over time (Felmlee, Sprecher, and Bassin 1990; Johnson and Milardo 1984; Sprecher and Felmlee 2000).

This social network effect (Felmlee 2001), whereby romantic relationships are helped by the approval of their network, occurs not only for dating partners but also for married couples (Bryant and Conger 1999), societally marginalized pairs (e.g., same-sex couples, interracial couples, age-gap relationships; Blair and Holmberg 2008; Lehmiller and Agnew 2007), Internet relationships (Wilder-muth 2004), and among diverse couples including adolescent (Parks 2007), African American (Goodwin 2003), and international samples (MacDonald and Jessica 2006). In fact, a meta-analysis by Le et al. (2010) showed that perceived social network approval is a consistent, negative predictor of relationship termination. Furthermore, *perceived* social network reactions are more predictive than *actual* network member opinions (Etcheverry,

Le, and Charania 2008; Felmlee 2001). To date, these aforementioned studies have been correlational. We examine how social network reactions affect love, commitment, and liking in romantic relationships across three separate designs. Our first hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 1: The social network effect.

Across the three studies, approving, as compared to neutral or disapproving, social reactions toward a targeted romantic relationship will be linked to greater liking, love, and/or commitment for a partner.

Reactance to the Social Influence of Network Opinions

Social network opinions can be conceptualized as attempts to influence a couple's members' relationship. Couple members often seek out friends and family for "relational sense-making," soliciting information so they can evaluate their own relationship (Parks 2007:51). In the case of network approval, network opinion verifies an existing mate choice and does not require that the recipient of the opinion question why the network approves. Rather, one can receive this affirming feedback and maintain the existing course of action (that is, remaining with a partner), perhaps heartened by the knowledge that the path one is on is a good one. In contrast, network disapproval produces imbalance (Heider 1958). Thus, it is unlikely that individuals will respond the same to network disapproval as they would to network approval.

In fact, unlike findings that demonstrate the positive influence of social network approval on relationships, examinations of social disapproval have yielded disparate findings. Some find no impact of the disapproving behaviors of social network members (Bryan et al. 2001; Leslie, Huston, and Johnson 1986), others find evidence consistent with the social

network effect that disapproval harms the relationship (e.g., Sinclair et al. 2014), and a few find evidence of a positive impact of network disapproval on feelings of love (e.g., Driscoll et al. 1972; Felmlee 2001; Parks et al. 1983). Driscoll et al. (1972), in their classic study, coined the term *Romeo and Juliet effect* to refer to findings showing that increases over time in perceived parental interference intensified romantic relationship affect. Such disparate reactions to social network disapproval may be caused by differences in characteristics of those who face disapproval of their relationship (Wright, Sinclair, and Hood 2014).

Reactance theory, a major framework used to explain the impact of disapproval (e.g., Driscoll et al. 1972; Parks et al. 1983), may provide a clue as to who is more or less susceptible to social opinion. *Psychological reactance* refers to a negative emotional state that arises when people believe their freedom is being restricted (Brehm 1966). The negative state of reactance arouses behavior to restore access to restricted options. Individuals can exhibit reactance to the wishes of their friends and family in Western cultures (Graupmann et al. 2012), particularly when they perceive the source to be controlling (Chartrand, Dalton, and Fitzsimons 2007). People also display reactance when they believe they have the power to disregard their network members' desires without negative consequences (Inesi and Rios 2013). To our knowledge, however, psychological reactance has not been considered directly in research concerning the influence of network reactions on intimate relationships. We believe that this individual factor is key to understanding when social network opinions may be defied or ignored.

Social disapproval could be perceived as a threat to one's ability to choose one's romantic partner. Once a threat is

perceived, there are a number of ways individuals can restore freedom. These methods include derogating the source of the threat, minimizing the effort to process persuasive messages, and, perhaps most emblematic of reactance, exhibiting the “boomerang” effect (for a review, see Quick and Stephenson 2008). The boomerang effect refers to an appraisal change in which the threatened behavior or object comes to be viewed as even *more* attractive than when its attainability was not perceived as threatened. This boomerang effect was argued to underlie findings whereby network disapproval heightened perceptions of relationship quality (Driscoll et al. 1972:2). We argue that when there is opposition from family and/or friends to a love interest, the likelihood of a boomerang type of response to network opinions diminishes, and instead the chances increase that people will pursue less confrontational strategies to restore their sense of freedom to engage in romantic pursuits.

One such less confrontational response, according to Brehm (1966), is that people may resist compliance and simply maintain their preexisting course of action and level of interest regardless of others’ responses. In this case, reactance is more about resisting the influence attempts of others than it is about defying them by acting in a contrary manner. We argue, therefore, that those who experience reactance in response to network influence might simply resist those appeals and maintain their positive view of their partner regardless of others’ opinions.

Although psychological reactance was first conceptualized as a motivational state that occurs in response to a specific situation (e.g., when choices are restricted), it was subsequently recognized that people vary in their propensity to experience reactance generally. Several scales exist to measure reactance proneness (e.g., Dillard and Shen 2005; Dowd,

Milne, and Wise 1991; Hong 1992; Merz 1983). Yet, prior research has had difficulty identifying the psychometric properties of various individual reactance scales, with studies identifying anywhere from one to four factor structures, depending on the sample and scale used (e.g., Brown, Finney, and France 2011; Jonason, Bryan, and Herrera 2010; Quick 2012; Shen and Dillard 2005). Based on our previous pilot work (Sinclair et al. 2012), we noted that the reactance measures typically reflected the emotional drive to make independent choices as well as accounting for the boomerang effect.

Accordingly, we conducted our own factor analyses using the two major social psychological scales of reactance simultaneously, while the majority of previous studies (excluding Quick 2012) focused only on one scale with only one sample. The analyses revealed two factors, leading us to distinguish between two aspects of what we label defiant and independent reactance. *Defiant reactance* captures the tendency for people to do the opposite of what they believe others are trying to push them to do (“boomerang effects”). *Independent reactance* reflects an affect-laden resistance to social influence due to a desire to make independent decisions. Independent responses are less confrontational and thus less socially costly than defiant responses (Quick and Stephenson 2008). Thus, we believe that in cases where individuals do not want to risk challenging their relationship with the source of the influence attempt—namely, parents, friends—they will choose the path of least risk. As such, our second purpose is to examine the degree to which the social network effect is moderated by psychological reactance. Our prediction is:

Hypothesis 2: The role of reactance. We expect to find that feelings of commitment, love, and/or liking (for a partner)

will be less negatively affected by network reactions for those who are high in reactance, particularly independent reactance, than those who are lower.

Study Overview

We present data from three studies to examine how social network reactions affect love, commitment, and liking in romantic relationships and the degree to which these effects are moderated by psychological reactance. Each study employs a different method with corresponding strengths. Consistent with past social network studies, Study 1 surveys people actively involved in romantic relationships. It consists of one of the largest samples ($N = 858$) to date in social network effect research. In Study 2, we employed an experimental vignette design in which participants imagined meeting a new partner about whom friends or parents either approve or disapprove. Vignette studies are novel to social network influence research but are advantageous because they allow exploration of a wider array of potential network reactions than might be uncovered in surveys of ongoing relationships (Finch 1987). Additionally, vignettes allow us to examine potential cause-effect relationships between opinions and relationship outcomes, particularly with regard to disapproval effects. In our third study, we analyze data from an experimental dating game paradigm (Wright and Sinclair 2012). We examine the degree to which reactance moderates the effects of alleged social network reactions provided to the participants about online dating game partners. Study 3 has the strength of examining how social networks affect early dating choices in an experimental design in which network responses are directly manipulated. Here we can more closely approximate causal processes in order to examine the influence of approval versus disapproval.

In sum, with a triangulation of methods (experimental and survey) and examining different stages of romantic relationships (initiation and developed), we study the interaction of individual reactance and network opinions on feelings toward romantic partners.

STUDY 1: SURVEY

Following the survey methodology of many studies (e.g., Felmlee 2001), we recruited participants in dating relationships to complete measures of perceived social network opinion and relationship quality. Two psychological reactance scales were included (and factor analyzed). Our primary goals were to replicate past findings regarding the social network effect with a larger sample but also to extend these past surveys by examining whether individual differences buffer the negative impact of social disapproval.

METHOD

Participants

Individuals ($N = 858$) in dating relationships at a large southeastern university completed an online survey for course credit. The sample was 69.1 percent female with a mean age of 18.98 ($SD = 2.30$). Most participants (75.6 percent) were Caucasian, and 17.7 percent were African American. In the sample, 27 percent identified as casually dating, 58.3 percent were exclusively dating, and 15.2 percent were committed (e.g., married or engaged), with a mean relationship length of 18.15 months ($SD = 20.94$).

Procedure and Materials

Via mass screening, only those who identified themselves as currently involved in a romantic relationship were granted

access to the survey. The survey started with individual and relationship descriptors. Next, participants were presented with the measures described below. The order of the measures was randomized, and within each scale the order of items was randomized.

Social network opinions. Participants completed a ten-item Social Network Opinion Scale (SNOS; five items for approval, five items for disapproval). Items were drawn from prior studies (e.g., Bryant and Conger 1999; Johnson and Milardo 1984). Sample approval items included: "My mother is supportive of my romantic relationship" and "My friend includes my partner in things." Sample disapproval items included: "My father discourages me from continuing my relationship" and "My friend disapproves of my romantic relationship." Disapproval items were reverse-scored. The response-format was a nine-point Likert scale that was scored such that -4 represented the highest level of disapproval, 0 referred to opinions that were neutral or mixed, and 4 represented the highest level of approval. If the source's opinion was unknown or unavailable, participants had the option to choose "decline to respond." Those with missing data were removed from analyses. The inventory was completed four times, once for each parent/guardian and once for each of the respondent's two closest friends. Scores for the parents/guardians were averaged to represent Parental Opinion ($\alpha = .90$), and scores for the friends were averaged to represent Friend Opinion ($\alpha = .86$).

Moderator variable: reactance. We used both the 12-item Hong (1992) Psychological Reactance Scale (HPRS) and the 18-item Merz (1983) Questionnaire for the Measurement of Psychological Reactance (QMPR). Participants responded to each

item on a nine-point Likert scale, $-4 = completely\ disagree$, $4 = completely\ agree$. In the current sample, two factors emerged from the 30 reactance items. We excluded any items that loaded less than .40 and any items that loaded on both factors above .30.

The first factor loaded 13 of the items, accounting for 23.3 percent of the variance. The label that appeared to suit this factor was *defiant reactance* because the items shared a common theme of doing the opposite of what others advised (e.g., "Suggestions and advice often make me do the opposite"). The second factor loaded 15 items and accounted for 23.1 percent of the variance. These items reflected a theme of resentment toward perceived attempts to inhibit one's free will and efforts to resist influence (e.g., "I get very irritated when someone tries to interfere with my freedom to make decisions"). Accordingly, we labeled this type of reactance *independent reactance*. Participant mean scores on these two dimensions of reactance were then computed. Subsequent reliability analyses yielded an $\alpha = .91$ for each subscale. Subscale scores were positively correlated, $r = .57$.

Outcome variables: passion and commitment. Participants completed the passion and commitment subscales of Sternberg's (1997) Triangular Theory of Love Scale. Each scale has 15 items asking participants about the extent to which they feel passionately in love ("I adore my partner," "My relationship with my partner is passionate") or committed ("I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner," "I view my commitment to my partner as a solid one"; 1 = *not at all*, 9 = *extremely*). Reliabilities were $\alpha = .95$ for the passion subscale and .96 for the commitment subscale. Due to the high degree of correlation between the

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations of Study 1 Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	Mean	SD
1. Passion	—						7.37	1.50
2. Commitment	.92***	—					7.54	1.56
3. Parent opinion	.29***	.34***	—				1.22	1.08
4. Friend opinion	.36***	.40***	.38***	—			1.22	1.04
5. Defiant reactance	-.03	-.09**	-.14***	-.19***	—		-.75	1.38
6. Independent reactance	.18***	.16***	-.09**	.01	.57***	—	.85	1.45

Note: High scores on opinion measures indicated approval, low scores indicated disapproval. Scores ranged from -4 to 4 for opinion and reactance variables. Scores ranged from 1 to 9 for the Sternberg Triangular Love subscales.

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

subscales ($r = .92$) and identical results when analyzed separately, these variables were combined into a single index we referred to as *love*. See Table 1 for scale descriptives.

RESULTS

To test our hypotheses, the reactance factor scores and the scores for the parental and friend opinions were centered. We then conducted a hierarchical regression analysis with main effects of parent opinion, friend opinion, defiant reactance, and independent reactance entered in the first step; two-way interactions entered in the second step; and three-way interactions entered in the third step (Table 2). The four-way interaction was not significant.¹ Consistent with Hypothesis 1, the first step, $F(4, 855) = 73.15$, $p < .005$, $R^2 = .26$, revealed that the greater the network approval, the higher the love. Additionally, independent reactance was positively associated with love, whereas defiant reactance was negatively

associated with love. These effects remained across subsequent steps.

The second step, $F(9, 850) = 43.06$, $p < .005$, $\Delta R^2 = .06$ (Δ significant at $p < .005$), showed three two-way interactions. We will focus on the hypothesis-relevant interactions with reactance. Results revealed that independent reactance attenuated the relationship between social network opinions and love for one's romantic partner. Defiance did not interact with network opinion. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, we see in Figures 1A and 1B that those who prefer to make independent decisions are not as negatively affected by the disapproving opinions of their network as are those low in independent reactance.

These two-way interactions were qualified by an unanticipated significant three-way interaction of parent opinion, friend opinion, and independent reactance, $F(13, 846) = 28.93$, $p < .005$, $\Delta R^2 = .02$ (Δ significant at $p = .012$). This interaction is depicted in Figure 2. Simple slopes tests reveal that when all network sources disapprove, reactance comes into play (simple slopes tests confirm, $p < .005$, that the slope for the both disapprove/low independent reactance line is significantly different from all other lines; t values range from -4.19 to -6.75). The primary difference is due to individuals

¹All regression analyses were checked for multicollinearity. All Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and Tolerance statistics were within acceptable ranges. Additional analyses were also run controlling for gender. The inclusion of gender did not change the pattern of the results nor did the inclusion of relationship length.

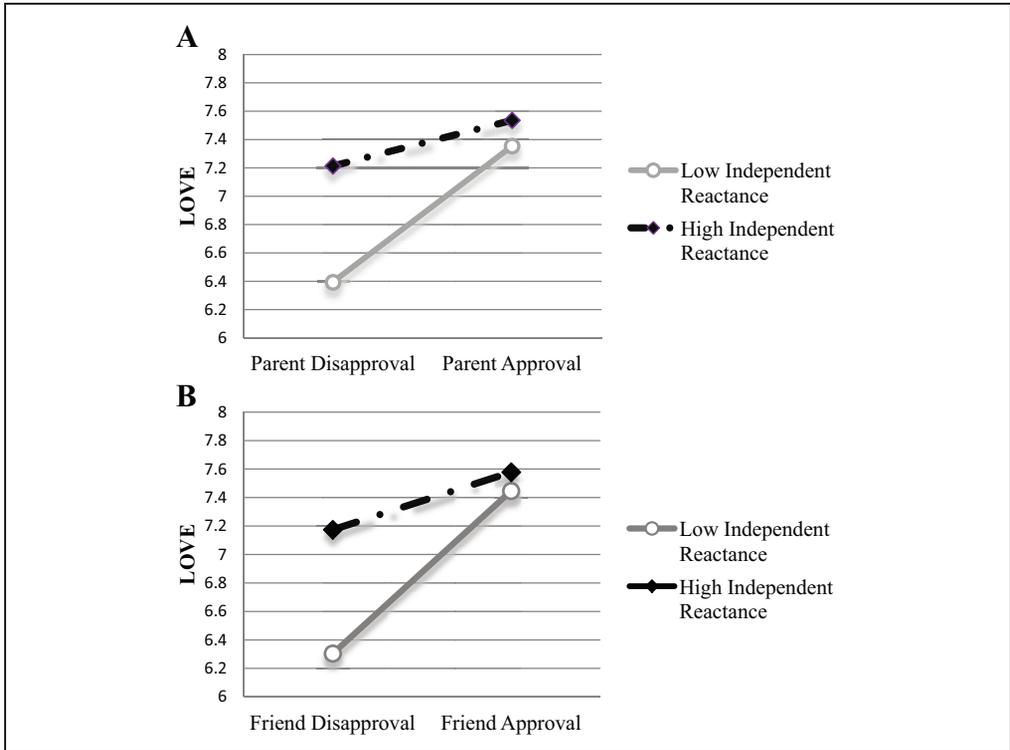


Figure 1. (A) Interaction of Parent Opinion and Independent Reactance in Study 1 (B) Interaction of Friend Opinion and Independent Reactance in Study 1

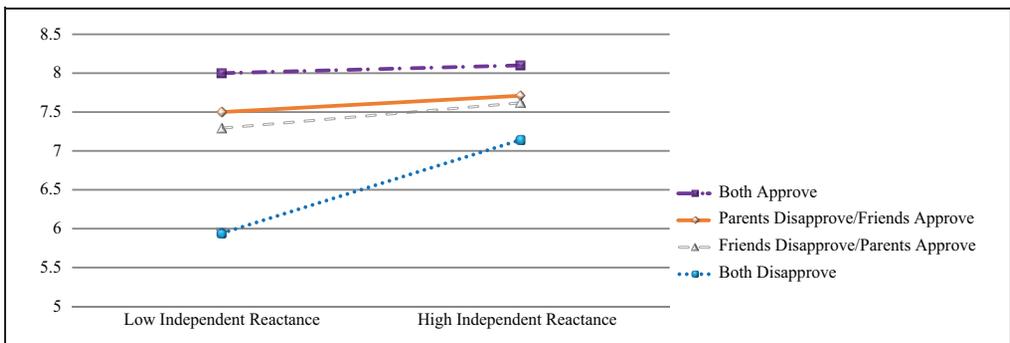


Figure 2. Three-Way Interaction of Independent Reactance and Social Network Opinions in Study 1

low in independent reactance having the lowest scores on love indices when both friends and parents disapprove of their relationship. In contrast, those high in

independent reactance and those who have at least one source supporting their relationship, particularly friends, seem to be resistant to network disapproval.

Table 2. Study 1 Hierarchical Regression: Network Opinion, Reactance, and Love for One’s Partner

	Step 1			Step 2			Step 3		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
Parent opinion (PO)	.327	.043	.242***	.349	.042	.259***	.345	.046	.257***
Friend opinion (FO)	.401	.046	.281***	.380	.046	.267***	.412	.050	.289***
Defiant reactance (DR)	-.145	.035	-.155***	-.128	.033	-.137***	-.121	.035	-.129***
Independent reactance (IR)	.280	.037	.273***	.270	.036	.263***	.225	.039	.220***
PO × FO				-.074	.033	-.065*	-.115	.040	-.100***
PO × DR				-.000	.033	.000	-.006	.034	-.007
PO × IR				-.136	.037	-.143***	-.134	.037	-.141***
FO × DR				.066	.034	.073	.062	.036	.067
FO × IR				-.173	.039	-.172***	-.159	.040	-.159***
PO × FO × DR							.005	.027	.007
PO × FO × IR							.085	.032	.111**
PO × DR × IR							.012	.016	.027
FO × DR × IR							-.017	.016	-.039

Note: High scores on network opinion measures indicated approval, and low scores indicated disapproval. On measures of reactance, higher scores equaled greater defiance or independence. Love was measured by combining Passion and Commitment subscales from the Sternberg Triangular Theory of Love scales. Higher scores demonstrate greater love.
 p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

DISCUSSION

Consistent with the social network effect, individuals express more love and commitment for their partner when sources in their social network are supportive, as hypothesized. Also consistent with our expectations, psychological reactance moderated the relationship between network opinions and love for one’s partner. Yet *type* of reactance mattered. We again found two types—defiant reactance (or exhibiting “boomerang effects”) and independent reactance (or emotional resistance to perceived influence attempts). Independence enabled couple members to withstand the threat of network disapproval. Thus, reactive responses to network opinions were not about doing the opposite of what one’s parents or friends were advocating (e.g., loving the disapproved partner more or the approved partner less), but instead a matter of continuing to love one’s partner regardless of social opinion.

STUDY 2: EXPERIMENTAL VIGNETTES

Next we examined whether the correlational findings in Study 1 would be replicated in an experiment. We specifically manipulated the presence of network disapproval, which tends to be rarer than approval in studies of romantic relationships. In our experimental vignette design, participants were randomly assigned to read one of four scenarios manipulating source of opinion (parents vs. friends) and type of opinion (approval vs. disapproval) about a new romantic partner. Participants next reported whether they would experience psychological reactance in response to the feedback they received. Therefore, in Study 2, psychological reactance was measured specifically in response to the situation rather than as a general individual difference trait. Participants then reported how committed they would be to the hypothetical relationship. We expected that the anticipated commitment of participants

who reported more reactance to network influence would be less affected by the social network opinions than those who experienced less reactance.

METHOD

Participants

Undergraduates at a large southeastern university ($N = 340$) completed an online survey for credit in their psychology classes. The sample was 70.9 percent female and had a mean age of 19.17 ($SD = 2.27$). Most participants (71.8 percent) were Caucasian; 21.8 percent were African American. Approximately half (49.4 percent) were single, and the remainder were in a dating relationship.

Procedure and Materials

Participants completed basic demographic questions and described their relationship with either their parents or their two closest friends in order to have these individuals in mind for subsequent questions.

Independent variables: stimulus materials. Next, participants were assigned to read one of four vignettes based on a 2 (source of opinion: parents vs. friends) \times 2 (type of opinion: approval vs. disapproval) factorial design. See sample scenario in the appendix.

Opinion manipulation check. To ensure that participants correctly interpreted their network members' opinions, after reading the scenario, participants were asked: "Based on your reading of the scenario provided earlier, how would you interpret the opinion of the friends/guardians of your relationship?" They responded on a nine-point Likert scale: 1 = *very negative*, 5 = *neutral*, 9 = *very positive*.

Responses to the situation: reactance. After reading the scenario, participants responded to six items that assessed psychological reactance based on the independent reactance subscale identified previously. Sample items include: "I would become angry about family/friends' attempts to restrict my relationship choices" and "I would welcome the suggestions and advice from my guardians/friends about my relationship (reversed)." Participants responded on a seven-point Likert scale where 1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree*. The reliability for the six items was $\alpha = .79$. Items were presented in a random order along with additional items that were used as filler or to test hypotheses not relevant to the present project.

Attitudes toward the partner: commitment. Lastly, participants completed the nine-item Lund (1985) Commitment Scale ($\alpha = .84$). The scale contained questions such as "How likely do you think it would be that you and your partner would be together in six months?" The question order was randomized within the section, and participants responded using an eight-point Likert format where 1 = *not at all likely* and 8 = *definitely likely*.

RESULTS

Manipulation Check

To verify that the opinion manipulations worked, we ran a univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) that included type of opinion (approval vs. disapproval) and source of opinion (parent vs. friend) as the independent variables and the opinion manipulation check as the dependent variable. There was a strong, main effect of type of opinion, $F(1, 339) = 624.78$, $p < .005$, $\eta^2 = .65$, in the anticipated direction. The mean perceived favorability of the network opinion was 7.37 ($SD =$

Table 3. Study 2 Hierarchical Regression Examining Relationship between Source of Opinion, Type of Opinion, Independent Reactance, and Commitment to a Hypothetical Partner

	Step 1			Step 2			Step 3		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
Source (S)	-.130	.101	-.065	-.114	.095	-.057	-.093	.100	-.047
Type of opinion (O)	.360	.053	.361***	.204	.072	.205***	.202	.072	.203**
Independent reactance (IR)	.010	.051	.011	-.060	.074	.063	-.063	.074	-.066
S \times O				.304	.099	.219***	.304	.100	.219***
S \times IR				.069	.097	.054	.075	.097	.059
O \times IR				-.311	.048	-.311***	-.352	.074	-.353***
S \times O \times IR							.072	.097	.056

Note: Source was dummy coded 0 = friends and 1 = parents. Opinion was coded -1 for disapproval and 1 for approval conditions.

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

1.55) for those in the approval condition and 3.22 (SD = 1.50) for those in the disapproval condition. There were no differences by source of opinion.

Hypothesis Testing

We expected that when participants reported reactance as a response to the scenario, the impact of social network opinion would be tempered. To test this hypothesis, we ran a hierarchical regression. Reactance scores were centered. Source was dummy coded: 0 = friends and 1 = parents. Disapproving opinions were coded -1 and approving opinions coded 1. Main effects of each variable were entered in Step 1. Two-way interactions were entered in Step 2, and Step 3 included the three-way interaction (Table 3).

Consistent with the social network effect, there was a main effect of opinion in the first step, $F(3, 336) = 17.30$, $p < .005$, $R^2 = .13$. Approval conditions yielded higher levels of predicted commitment than did disapproval conditions. This effect was present across the additional steps. The second step, $F(6, 333) = 18.01$, $p < .005$, $\Delta R^2 = .25$ (Δ significant at $p < .005$), revealed a significant two-way interaction between opinion type and

reactance that was hypothesis-consistent (Figure 3).

If participants viewed the opinion as interfering with their ability to make independent choices about their romantic relationship, they seemed better able to disregard it. Thus, there was little difference in commitment between the approval and disapproval conditions for those exhibiting reactance. Those low in reactance, on the other hand, reported more commitment to an approved, rather than a disapproved, partner. The three-way interaction was not significant, suggesting this effect exists regardless of source of opinion.²

DISCUSSION

Building on the findings of Study 1, Study 2 also suggests that: (1) network opinions

²We examined whether certain independent variables were more likely to elicit psychological reactance. We ran an ANOVA with the independent variables of source and opinion type but with the reactance measure as the outcome variable. There was a significant main effect of opinion type, $F(1, 336) = 29.03$, $p < .005$, $\eta^2 = .08$, such that higher independent reactance scores were evident in disapproval conditions ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 1.05$) than in approval conditions ($M = 3.69$, $SD = .95$). There were no other main effects or interactions. Thus, participants were not more likely to exhibit reactance toward a friend than a parent.

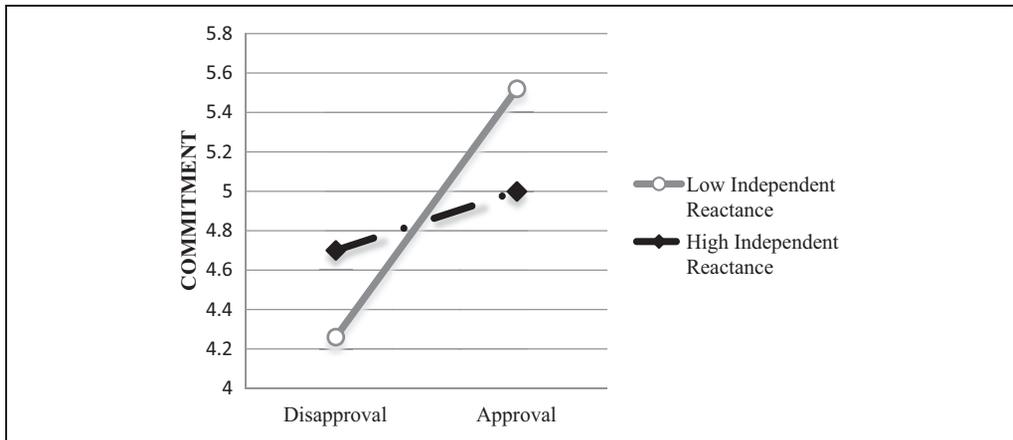


Figure 3. Interaction of Independent Reactance and Opinion in Study 2

may *cause* differences in predicted commitment and (2) the social network effect is tempered by whether the opinions elicit reactance. Social network approval increased how committed individuals thought they would be to a hypothetical romantic partner. In contrast, disapproval decreased anticipated commitment. If individuals believed that their friends or parents were interfering in their romantic decision making, however, they seemed to ignore those opinions and maintained their own assessment of their hypothetical partner regardless of network response, as hypothesized.

In Study 2, we found that manipulated network opinions interact with reactance to influence assessments of a hypothetical partner. Yet people may not be able to predict how they would respond in an actual social setting. Next, we present analyses from a study in which people were put in a situation that required making judgments about potential dates who appeared to be real.

STUDY 3: VIRTUAL DATING GAME

In Study 3, we used a virtual dating game paradigm (Wright and Sinclair 2012) to further explore the interaction of reactance and the social network effect. In

this study, we considered the influence of psychological reactance on third-party opinions at the very earliest stage of relationship initiation, a stage that has been relatively underexamined in social network influence research.

In the virtual dating game, participants not in a dating relationship interacted with two “bachelors” or “bachelorettes” online (actually trained confederates) and were given feedback allegedly from their friend and parent about whether one of the interaction partners would be a good or bad romantic partner. Whereas Study 2 assessed what participants said they would do, Study 3 allowed us to assess individuals’ “real-life” reactions to a potential date. Furthermore, whereas Study 1 had the strength of examining existing relationships, Study 3 adds the investigation of relationship initiation. Accordingly, this study complements the weaknesses of other methodologies just as its weaknesses are complemented by the other studies’ strengths.

Earlier reports on the virtual dating game study (Wright and Sinclair 2012) showed that receiving positive feedback from a friend or parent (but especially a friend) was associated with greater reported interest in the interaction

partner. These results are consistent with Studies 1 and 2. Not previously examined, however, are the data on reactance. Thus, we build on the initial findings to investigate the moderating role of reactance on likeability as well as to examine an additional dependent variable—perceptions of attributes of the potential date. We expected that participants who learned of network approval for their potential romantic partner would view the partner as likeable and in possession of more positive attributes than partners who received network disapproval. Social network opinions of prospective dates should carry less weight, however, if individuals perceive that these opinions inhibit their ability to make free choices about whom to date. Specifically, network effects on liking and the perceived attributes of the potential date are hypothesized to be attenuated for those individuals who are high in independent reactance.

METHOD

Participants

Participants ($N = 228$; 137 female, 91 male) were recruited for a study titled “Impression Formation over the Internet.” All participants were heterosexual and single. The mean age of participants was 18.59 ($SD = 1.09$), most were Caucasian (73 percent, with 20 percent African American), and all received psychology course credit.

Design

Participants interacted online with two opposite sex confederates and received bogus network reactions about one of the two interaction partners. The study employed a 2 (parent opinion: approval vs. disapproval) \times 2 (friend opinion: approval vs. disapproval) \times 2 (interaction partner: evaluated, unevaluated—within subjects) mixed factorial design.

Participants received feedback for the “evaluated target” interaction partner. The other interaction partner served as a within-subjects unevaluated control. In two conditions, the parent and friend agreed in their approval or disapproval of the evaluated target as a “good match” or a “bad match” for the participant. In the other two conditions, the sources disagreed (friend approved/parent disapproved or friend disapproved/parent approved). For the unevaluated interaction partner, the participant was told that no assessment could be obtained.

Procedure and Materials

Overview. This study involved a two-part procedure in which participants first completed a screening survey including: a reactance scale, a friend and parent contact information sheet, and a profile sheet. Participants later returned to the lab to participate in a virtual dating game where they interacted over an instant messenger with two confederates. After initial interactions and assessments of the confederates were obtained (First Impressions: Likeability Scale), participants were given false feedback about what their friend and parent allegedly thought of *one* of their potential matches (the “evaluated target”). Participants then interacted with each confederate again and rated how much they liked their interaction partners (Second Impressions: Likeability Scale) and assessed their partners’ positive traits (Positive Attributes Scale).

Screening survey. The screening packet included the following materials:

- *Profile sheet.* Participants completed a profile sheet that asked them to describe themselves (e.g., religious and political affiliation, personality attributes, hobbies)

and describe what they want in a romantic partner.

- **Contact sheet.** All participants provided an email address and/or phone number for a close friend and parent on a contact sheet. Participants were told that we wanted to compare the impressions they form with the impressions close others form of the same targets.
- **Reactance.** Participants completed the 18-item QMPR (Merz 1983). This scale was factor analyzed again, and the two-factor structure found in Study 1 was replicated. Thus, we had factors labeled *defiant reactance* (accounting for 22.4 percent of the variance, $\alpha = .83$, 8 items) and *independent reactance* (accounting for 22.2 percent of the variance, $\alpha = .82$, 9 items).

Virtual dating game. After completing the screening packet, participants were scheduled to return approximately two weeks later to participate in the virtual dating game. This portion of the study included the use of Yahoo Instant Messenger and the following materials. Note, more details of the dating game materials and its procedure, including the numerous steps implemented to reduce order effects and to ensure believability of feedback and the cover story, can be found in Wright and Sinclair (2012).

Confederate profiles. Participants were first given a copy of their interaction partners' profile sheets. The profile sheets allowed participants to learn more about their partners before any interactions. The same two bachelor(ette) profiles were used for each participant. The profiles included the interaction partners' gender, race, religious and political views (all matched to participants' preferences), and other descriptive information. Profile sheets were piloted to ensure equal likeability.

Interview questions. Participants were given a list of the "Top 40 Getting to

Know You Questions" to help "break the ice." In reality, the list allowed confederates to respond to participants directly from their script (see below). The questions were compiled from open-access dating websites. Questions included, "In a general way, how would you describe yourself?" and "What is your ideal romantic partner?"

Confederate script. Confederates were given a script of which questions to ask the participant during the first interaction. Each confederate also had scripted responses to the questions that potentially could be asked of them by the participant. Several seconds after a participant asked a question, the confederate then sent the appropriate response. The scripts were piloted to make each confederate equally desirable.

Independent Variable Manipulation: Parent and Friend Opinion

After the first two ten-minute interactions, one with each confederate, participants completed First Impressions: Likeability scales to assess how much they liked each confederate. After assessments were completed, participants were presented with their friend's and parent's opinion of the evaluated target (that is, whether they thought he or she was a good/bad match for the participant). They were told that we had contacted their friend and parent and provided them with a summary of their prospective interaction partners based on their screening survey.

Dependent Variable Measurement

Likeability. After every interaction, participants completed scales assessing how much they liked their interaction partner on a scale of 1 = *completely disagree* to 8 = *completely agree* (e.g., "I could see my interaction partner and I becoming more than friends" and "I feel like this was

a waste of time”—reversed). The First Impressions: Likeability Scale (completed after the first interactions) included ten items. Scores were averaged for each interaction partner, thus reflecting how much each one was liked before network feedback was given. These initial assessments served to determine whether both confederates were equally liked premanipulation.

The Second Impressions: Likeability Scale, which was completed after the second interaction (and after receiving network feedback), contained all of the same items as the First Impressions Scale but also two items that compared the two interaction partners, “I think this interaction partner would make a *better* boy/girlfriend” and “I believe this interaction partner is a *better* match for me.” Scores on the Second Impressions Scale were again averaged for each interaction partner. Higher scores represented more liking. Reliability of the First Impressions: Likeability Scale was $\alpha = .86$, and for the Second Impressions: Likeability Scale $\alpha = .92$.

Positive attributes. We also examined the extent to which participants assigned positive attributes to their partners because network opinions may facilitate positive illusions during relationship initiation. At the end of the study, participants were asked to rate their interaction partners on 12 different characteristics using a 7-point semantic differential scale (range = -3 to 3). Specifically, each item was anchored with two characteristics, one of positive valence and the other negative (e.g., friendly/withdrawn, interesting/boring, attractive/unattractive, warm/cold). Higher scores indicated more positive perceptions, $\alpha = .91$.

Manipulation Check and Debriefing

At the conclusion of the study, numerous steps were taken to ensure that the

experimental manipulation worked correctly and to properly debrief participants (see Wright and Sinclair 2012). After debriefing, experimenters ran analyses with and without 16 participants identified as potentially suspicious. Results did not differ, so all participants were retained in the final sample.

RESULTS

Manipulation Checks

First, a repeated measures ANOVA examining pre-feedback liking of the evaluated target and the unevaluated control was conducted, and there was no significant difference in how the two candidates were judged by participants, $F(1, 227) = .04$. The scores were virtually identical ($M = 5.35$, $SD = .95$ for the evaluated target; $M = 5.34$, $SD = .96$ for the control target).

Evaluated Target Post-Feedback Likeability

Next, we examined the moderating role of psychological reactance on the influence of social network opinions on individuals' perceptions of potential romantic partners. We hypothesized that the positive influence of social network approval (relative to disapproval) on liking for a potential romantic partner would be weaker for those high in psychological reactance. A hierarchical linear regression analysis predicting the evaluated target's likeability was conducted. This analysis initially included both types of reactance, but defiant reactance was never a significant predictor. It was thus dropped from analyses. Independent reactance scores were centered and opinion was coded -1 for disapproval and 1 for approval. The main effects of parent opinion, friend opinion, and independent reactance were entered in the first step, and the two-way interactions were entered in the second step. The third step included the three-way interaction.

Table 4. Study 3 Hierarchical Regression: Friend Opinion, Parent Opinion, and Independent Reactance on Liking of a Potential Date

	Step 1			Step 2			Step 3		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
Friend opinion (FO)	.189	.073	.169	.193	.071	.173	.191	.071	.171***
Parent opinion (PO)	.202	.073	.180	.193	.071	.173	.193	.071	.174***
Independent reactance (IR)	.062	.082	.049	.029	.080	.023	.048	.082	.038
FO \times PO				-.181	.071	-.162	-.182	.071	-.162**
FO \times IR				-.214	.082	-.169	-.208	.082	-.164**
PO \times IR				-.208	.081	-.164	-.195	.082	-.154**
FO \times PO \times IR							.084	.082	.067

Note: Opinion was coded -1 for disapproval and 1 for approval conditions. Step 1 $F(3, 224) = 4.61, p = .004, R^2 = .058$; Step 2 $F(6, 221) = 5.45, p < .005, \Delta R^2 = .075$, final $R^2 = .133$.

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Consistent with expectations, a significant interaction between friend opinion and independent reactance emerged, $b = -.21, t(221) = -2.61, p < .01$, in predicting the evaluated target's likeability (Table 4). Simple slopes tests revealed that individuals who were higher ($+1$ SD) in independent reactance showed no difference in liking of the evaluated target when the friend approved versus disapproved ($b = .005, t = .05, p = .96$). In other words, friend opinion seemed to have little effect for those high in independent reactance. Those who were low in independent reactance, however, were influenced by their friend's opinion, such that they reported greater liking of the evaluated target when their friend approved versus when their friend disapproved ($b = .38, t = 3.80, p < .001$).

Similarly, parent opinion interacted with independent reactance to predict the evaluated target's likeability, $b = -.21, t(221) = -2.56, p < .01$. The pattern of results was nearly identical, revealing that parent opinion did not influence likeability ratings for those who were high in independent reactance ($b = .01, t = .10, p = .92$) but mattered for those who were lower in independent reactance ($b = .38, t = 3.75, p < .001$, Figures 4A and 4B).

Evaluated Target's Positive Attributes

Next, we conducted a hierarchical regression to examine whether participants thought the evaluated target possessed more or less positive characteristics as a function of third-party opinion and reactance. In the final model, the evaluated target's positive attributes were regressed on friend opinion, parent opinion, independent reactance (first step) and the interactions of friend and parent opinion, friend opinion and independent reactance, and parent opinion and independent reactance (second step).

Consistent with our final hypothesis (Figure 5), independent reactance interacted with friend opinion, $b = -.20, t(182) = -2.97, p < .01$. Simple slopes tests revealed that individuals higher in independent reactance ($+1$ SD) rated the evaluated target's characteristics as favorable regardless of opinion ($b = -.03, t = -.31, p = .76$). Those who were lower in independent reactance (-1 SD) were more influenced by their friend's opinion, such that when the friend approved, participants reported that the evaluated target had more favorable characteristics than when the friend disapproved ($b = .33, t = 3.95, p < .01$). The

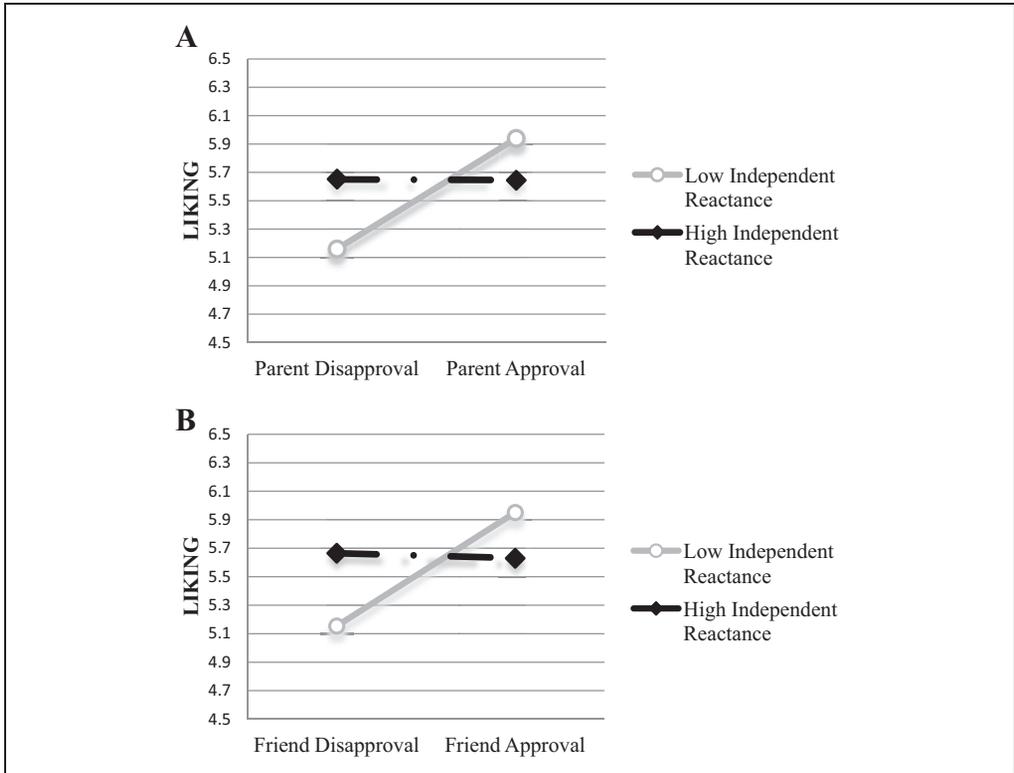


Figure 4. (A) Interaction of Parent Opinion and Independent Reactance on Liking in Study 3 (B) Interaction of Friend Opinion and Independent Reactance on Liking in Study 3

Table 5. Study 3 Hierarchical Regression: Friend Opinion, Parent Opinion, and Reactance on Perceptions of a Potential Date’s Positive Characteristics

	Step 1			Step 2			Step 3		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
Friend opinion (FO)	.154	.062	.179	.149	.060	.174	.150	.060	.174*
Parent opinion (PO)	.133	.061	.155	.128	.060	.150	.128	.060	.149*
Independent reactance (IR)	.046	.068	.048	.030	.066	.031	.034	.068	.035
FO \times PO				-.132	.060	-.153	-.131	.060	-.152*
FO \times IR				-.200	.067	-.209	-.197	.068	-.206***
PO \times IR				-.120	.067	-.125	-.118	.068	-.123+
FO \times PO \times IR							.025	.068	.026

Note: Opinion was coded -1 for disapproval and 1 for approval conditions.
 + $p < .08$. * $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

interaction between parent opinion and independent reactance was marginally significant when predicting the evaluated

target’s characteristics, $b = -.12$, $t(182) = -1.78$, $p = .08$. The same pattern emerged, however, such that those who

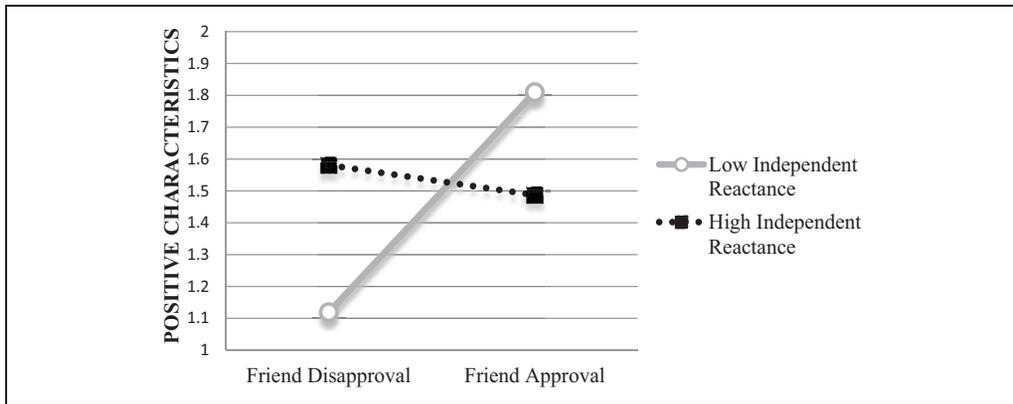


Figure 5. Interaction of Friend Opinion and Independent Reactance on Perceived Positive Characteristics in Study 3

were lower in independent reactance were more likely to report that the evaluated target had more positive characteristics when their parent approved versus disapproved ($b = .23, t = 2.82, p < .01$), but there was no difference for those high in independent reactance ($b = .03, t = .29, p = .78$).

DISCUSSION

Study 3 employed a virtual dating game to examine whether reactance mitigated the influence of friend and parent opinion on individuals' romantic interest in and positive perceptions of a potential romantic partner. Individuals who were higher in independent reactance showed no variability in their assessments of the potential romantic partner as a function of social network opinion. Those who were lower in independent reactance, however, liked the romantic partner more and viewed their partner more positively whenever their friend and parent approved. Study 3 results are consistent with our hypotheses and preceding studies. The desire to be free of the influence of one's social network over dating choices does in fact predict resistance to the disapproving opinions of friends and family.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Our research investigated the degree to which psychological reactance could aid in accounting for variations in people's responses to negative opinions of social network members toward a romantic partner. Our data yielded two reactance factors. One, defiance, reflects the desire to do the opposite of others' advice, whereas the second factor, independence, signals affective resistance to infringement of one's free will. Overall, those exhibiting the subtype of independent reactance resisted disapproving assessments of a dating partner.

Specifically, Study 1, a large survey, revealed that those high in independent reactance were significantly less likely to exhibit the social network effect than those low in independent reactance. That is, they maintained their feelings of love and commitment toward their partner regardless of network opinions. In Study 2, where network approval was manipulated in vignettes, participants who expressed a strong desire to make free and independent decisions post-feedback (vs. those who did not) were less likely to have their relationship commitment affected by network opinions. Finally, in the virtual dating experiment

of Study 3, feedback from actual friends and parents failed to significantly affect participants' liking or evaluations of a potential partner for those high, but not low, in independent reactance.

In short, we found extensive evidence that people who experience network opposition *maintain* rather than magnify their own evaluations of their romantic partner despite the opinions of others when they are high in independent reactance. We also found that the perception of peril to one's autonomy in romantic decisions can modify reactions to both parental *and* friend disapproval with regard to a wide range of partner evaluations, including perceptions of love, commitment, likeability, and positive partner characteristics. Moreover, reactance becomes particularly relevant when the odds are stacked against a couple. When both parents and friends disapprove, highly reactant individuals stand firm in their feelings, as do those with at least one source of network support. In contrast, those low in reactance report significantly less positive evaluations when their network disapproves.

There are several possible reasons why an independent reactant response to network disapproval may be more common than a defiant one. First, an independent reaction to network disapproval is relatively easy cognitively and behaviorally, as compared to defiance. Presumably it is simpler to continue feeling and behaving consistently in one's romantic life than it is to respond in an opposite manner to the wishes of friends and/or family. Thus, an independent reaction may be the "first line of defense" and is less costly than a boomerang type of response (Quick and Stephenson 2008) that risks greater conflict with close friends and family. Thus, defiance may be more frequent when the individual has less to lose (e.g., when he or she has more power in the relationship; Inesi and Rios 2013).

Second, perhaps more extreme cases of disapproval than we were able to investigate here can backfire and lead to enhanced partner love or commitment. Recall, however, that relatively *slight*, rather than strong, parental opposition, may increase relationship quality (Parks et al. 1983). Note, too, that defiant reactance was somewhat unusual in our data, representing about 15 percent of the sample, which could make its effects difficult to detect. Finally, it is possible that defiant reactance as an individual difference trait has "more bark than bite." People may express defiant attitudes in response to scale items but neglect to act on them. According to Silvia (2005), empirical findings fail to validate reactance as a trait that influences attitude change in the prototypical oppositional manner.

Our results are quite robust. Reactance moderated not only one but several types of partner evaluations, including perceptions of love, commitment, liking, and positive partner characteristics. Reactance effects were uncovered both in ongoing relationships and during the initial stages of attraction in the context of a vignette scenario and in a dating game. Furthermore, reactance had highly consistent effects on partner evaluations when measured as a trait or as a state across a combined sample of 1,426 participants.

Furthermore, our main effects regarding the beneficial outcomes of network approval for relationships underscore the importance of the social environment. Romance does not take place within a social vacuum; friends and family members typically help to mold relationship outcomes. These positive network effects may reflect the powerful sway of homogeneity in intimate bonds (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001), for example, with family and friends reinforcing norms of partner similarity, particularly

along the lines of race and social class. Social network effects are unlikely to be neutral and likely play a larger role in shaping the aggregate trends of mate formation in our society, a process worthy of future study.

Caveats and Future Directions

In spite of its strengths, this research also has limitations. In our focus on how people react to social influence, we did not consider how members of couples try to sway the reactions they receive from their network members. Research documenting individuals' attempts to influence their network (Leslie et al. 1986; Parks 2007) suggests that examining bidirectional effects would be a compelling topic for future research. Indeed, we demonstrated in the present set of studies that not all individuals respond to network feedback the same way and that social network disapproval does not necessarily seal the fate of every relationship. The question remains, however, as to what happens next when those high in reactance are not swayed by their friends and family. Do they attempt to change their network's opinions? Or what happens when the social network member has a history of being controlling (Chartrand et al. 2007)? Perhaps then defiant reactance would play more of a role.

Despite limitations, our studies, as a package, offer strong and consistent findings regarding the social network effect and the role of psychological reactance in moderating this effect. Avenues for future work include examining couples and their social environment as they attempt to influence each other and the possible role of psychological reactance in modifying those efforts. Here we identified two dimensions to the concept of reactance, but additional research into the underlying nature of this construct deserves further attention.

Reactance is unlikely to be the only individual-level factor that interacts with network influence or the only one that aids in accounting for anomalous research findings. Parsing reactance from other constructs, such as negative affect, individualism, or a general lack of motivation to comply with others (Etcheverry and Agnew 2004), would also be worthy of study. Continuing to explore close relationship intersections between the social environment and the individual (Felmlee and Sprecher 2000) represents a promising avenue for future investigation.

Here we examined the intersection of the social network effect and reactance on assessments of a current, hypothetical, or prospective romantic partner. We found that those high in independent reactance tend to *disregard* negative feedback about their romantic relationships from friends and family. Reactance does not appear to intensify fondness for a partner in the face of adversity but does play an important role in shielding a relationship from deterioration in the face of social disapproval.

APPENDIX: SAMPLE SCENARIO USED IN STUDY 2

Participants read one of four scenarios. We present the friend disapproval condition here. The parts in italics varied depending upon condition:

You sign up for an Internet Matching service and are sent a list of compatible matches. After looking at their profile information, you identify a man/woman who you would like to meet. He/She seems compatible in many ways and he/she doesn't live too far away. After several email exchanges and then phone calls, you finally meet him/her face-to-face in a coffee-house. Although you have been warned that online "chemistry" doesn't always transfer to offline chemistry, you feel attracted to him/her after the first meeting. The two of you take things slowly and continue phone calls and email exchanges, and wait another two weeks before meeting again in person, once again at a coffee house.

After another month of phone conversations and meeting two more times for coffee, you both

agree that the relationship might be worth developing. Although you are both very cautious about the future, you agree it's time to do something other than meet for coffee. You go on a "date," which includes dinner in a restaurant and a movie. Finding yourself even more attracted, you both decide it's time to meet family and friends. You begin by hosting a dinner and inviting your date and *your two closest friends/your guardians (depending on condition)*. The dinner goes well enough. Everyone seems to have a good time and the conversation is pleasant.

A few days later, you talk to each of your *friends/guardians*, separately, and come to the conclusion that *they really don't like your new date. They clearly point out that you could do better and they prefer that you don't date him/her again. They say they'd prefer not to hear about your relationship and that they'd also prefer that you didn't bring him/her to their next get-together.*

Or in the approval conditions, the scenario concluded with:

A few days later, you talk to each of your *friends/guardians*, separately, and come to the conclusion that *they really like your new date. They clearly point out that this partner is the perfect match for you and encourage you to continue dating him/her. They say they'd like to hear more about your relationship and that they'd also like for you to bring him/her to their next get-together.*

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BIOS

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