

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Balancing Relationships: What Happens When Your Friends and Romantic Partners Do Not Get Along?

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**Received:** 19 December 2023 | **Revised:** 7 October 2025 | **Accepted:** 13 October 2025

**Funding:** This research was supported in part by the National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship Program under Grant 2235036 to Wicks. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation. Materials (including preregistrations, data, and analysis code) are available at <https://osf.io/9a5wp/>.

**Keywords:** balance theory | friendships | romantic relationships | social network effect | social network opinions | social opinion backlash effect

## ABSTRACT

Research has extensively examined how social network opinions (approval or disapproval from friends) affect romantic relationships. Friends are not the only ones to have opinions, yet there has been less exploration into whether one's friendship is influenced by opinions of the romantic partner. Balance theory suggests that individuals seek congruent attitudes within triads. Thus, this research (total  $N = 439$ ) proposes that just as friend opinions (of romantic partner) impact romantic relationships, partner opinions (of friend) influence friendships. In Study 1, participants reported perceptions of a chosen friend's opinion of their partner and the partner's opinion of this friend. In Study 2, we manipulated opinion source and type using vignettes, assessing the hypothetical quality of relationships. Consistent with past research, friend disapproval was associated with lower romantic relationship quality. Uniquely, we found that perceived partner opinions—but not hypothetical ones—predicted friendship outcomes. Whereas friends' opinions did not appear to impact the friendship, partner opinion predicted romantic relationship satisfaction—revealing a potential social opinion backlash effect, whereby partners voicing disapproval of friends not only harm the friendship but also the romantic relationship. Findings suggest a bidirectional influence within networks for partners and friends, with expressing disapproval carrying added costs for romantic partners.

## 1 | Introduction

Research on the social network effect has established that friends' opinions, whether perceived or actual, can influence the initiation, maintenance, and dissolution of romantic relationships (Blair et al. 2023; Plamondon and Lachance-Grzela 2018; Rodrigues et al. 2017; Sinclair et al. 2014). Although the impact of a friend's opinion on one's romantic relationship is well-documented, studies have yet to examine whether a romantic partner's opinions of one's friend have a

similar influence on those friendships. Further, less attention has been devoted to the consequences of voicing opinions for the relationship between the person giving the opinion and the person they are sharing with (referred to as the source relationship; Gillian et al. 2022). The following studies tackle these unexamined aspects of the social network effect, examining (1) whether the effect of opinions within one's network goes both ways (i.e., a romantic partner's opinion of a friend impacts the friendship just as a friend's opinion of a romantic partner has been found to impact the romantic relationship)

and (2) whether there are any consequences (good or bad) for those expressing these opinions for the source relationship. In the end, we hope to provide a fuller picture of the dynamics of the social network effect.

Fifty years of research on the relational contexts in which romances are embedded has demonstrated that the evolution of romantic relationships can involve more than just the dyad (for review, see Sprecher et al. 2019). Associations with friends, family members, and acquaintances—those who typically make up one's social network—have been demonstrated to influence the initiation and upkeep of these romantic relationships (Schembri 2020; Sprecher et al. 2006). For example, a romance may begin with an introduction by a close friend or may be sustained with the financial help of parents. In addition to these forms of support, family and friends typically offer their personal input on romantic partners (whether solicited or not). Indeed, friends in particular are often the primary source of relationship advice, particularly, for women (Canary and Stafford 1992; Jensen and Rauer 2014; Julien et al. 1994; Powell 2008; Reevy and Maslach 2001). Research indicates that positive opinions (also referred to as social network approval) contribute to the success of romantic relationships, whereas negative opinions (commonly termed social network disapproval) can precipitate the dissolution of such relationships (see Felmlee and Sinclair 2018).

This link between social network opinions and relationship outcomes has been termed the *social network effect* (Felmlee et al. 1990; Sinclair et al. 2014; Sprecher and Felmlee 1992). Historically, social network effect research has focused on the relationship between third-party opinions (e.g., friend and family member opinions) and romantic relationship outcomes, with the *romantic partner* typically being the target of social network members' opinions. Tension may arise in a relationship because a friend does not like one's partner. However, third parties are not the only ones who have opinions. The social network effect may not be limited to the effect of friends and family on romantic relationships, as romantic partners' opinions may likewise have consequences for relationships with these third-party members. Such a perspective would be consistent with Heider's (1958) balance theory.

## 1.1 | Balance Theory

Heider's balance theory emphasizes the importance of harmony in the feelings, attitudes, and beliefs held within interpersonal relationships (Heider 1958). Heider's *P-O-X* model describes sentiment relationships between triads made up of a focal individual (*p*), an object, issue, or person (*o*), and another object or person (*x*) (Heider 1946). In a triad made up of a boyfriend, a girlfriend, and the girlfriend's close friend, *o* would be the friend, whereas *x* would be the boyfriend/romantic partner. As such, *p* would be the girlfriend, also serving as the "shared associate" between the friend and boyfriend.

If the shared associate (*p*) and the friend (*o*) share congruent attitudes toward the romantic partner (*x*), then there is a positive sentiment relationship between the shared associate and their friend. If the shared associate and the friend have conflicting

attitudes toward the romantic partner, then there is a negative sentiment relationship between the two individuals. Balance occurs in a triad when the sentiment relationships are either all positive or there are two negatives and one positive. This is reflected in the configuration: *My friend's friend is my friend, my friend's enemy is my enemy, my enemy's friend is my enemy, and my enemy's enemy is my friend* (Heider 1958). Or, in our case, something like *my partner's enemy is my enemy*.

Conversely, triadic imbalance emerges when *all* sentiment relationships are negative or when only *one* sentiment is negative. This can occur when the friend does not like the romantic partner (or vice versa). Such an imbalance triggers feelings of discomfort within the shared associate, akin to cognitive dissonance, motivating the shared associate to alleviate the tension by changing their sentiment toward either the friend or romantic partner in an effort to restore equilibrium (Chiang et al. 2020; Festinger 1957; Heider 1958; Newcomb 1960; Taylor 1967).

According to balance theory, whenever the friend has a negative opinion of the romantic partner, the shared associate has the following choices to restore balance: they can become more negative toward the romantic partner (as would be predicted by the social network effect) or become more negative toward the friend. This latter effect, which we refer to as the social opinion backlash effect, has been underexamined. The social network effect would likely suggest there to be consequences for sharing negative opinions. Furthermore, although much is known of the influence friends have on romantic relationships (Felmlee and Sinclair 2018), it is still unclear if romantic partners influence one's friendships, which leads us to the present research and our hypotheses.

## 1.2 | Present Research

Consistent with the social network effect, we anticipate that a close friend disliking a partner will have negative consequences for the romantic relationship, and a partner disliking a friend will have negative consequences for the friendship. The inverse (i.e., that approval from the other will have positive influences on each relationship, respectively) is also anticipated.

Informed by balance theory, we further posited that voicing negative opinions could cause personal backlash and harm to the relationship with the individual to whom the opinion is shared. For instance, perceived disapproval of one's romantic relationship from one's social network has been associated with decreased feelings of closeness to that social network member (Gillian et al. 2022). Thus, we investigated both scenarios: whether the partner's negative opinion harms the romantic relationship and whether the friend's negative opinion harms the friendship to see if there is further evidence of a social opinion backlash effect.

Materials (including preregistrations, data, and analysis code) are available at <https://osf.io/9a5wp/>. Our hypotheses are as follows:

**Hypothesis 1.** *The opinion of one's close friend will be positively associated with romantic relationship outcomes, such that*

*the presence of negative opinions from the friend regarding the partner is associated with detrimental effects on the romantic relationship, while positive opinions from the friend are associated with beneficial effects on the romantic relationship.*

**Hypothesis 2.** *The opinion of one's romantic partner will be positively associated with friendship outcomes, such that negative opinions from the partner (of the friend) will be associated with harm to the friendship, whereas positive opinions from the partner will be associated with benefits to the friendship.*

**Hypothesis 3.** *Negative opinions will be associated with backlash in the source's relationship.*

## 2 | Study 1

All study protocols were approved by the university's institutional review board. In Study 1, we used a survey to measure perceptions of close friend and romantic partner opinions as predictors of romantic and platonic relationship outcomes. The aim of this study was to examine the role of a close friend's opinion on romantic relationship outcomes, as well as to examine the role of a romantic partner's opinion on friendship-related outcomes. Data were collected from October to November 2016, but were not previously analyzed. Hypotheses and analysis plan were preregistered prior to analyzing the data (preregistration: <https://osf.io/akzjg/>).

## 3 | Method

### 3.1 | Participants

We collected responses from 315 US undergraduate students currently in romantic relationships, with ages ranging from 18 to 43 years old ( $M = 19.00$ ,  $SD = 2.01$ ; gender: 68% women, 32% men; race/ethnicity: 79% European American/White, 18% African American/Black, 1% Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 2% Multiracial/Not Specified). Among the 315 participants, 3% of the sample were of Spanish, Latino, or Hispanic origin. Most participants were in cross-gender romantic relationships (97%; e.g., man–woman) and same-gender friendships (91%; e.g., man–man). The mean romantic relationship length was 3.00 years ( $SD = 1.72$ ), and the mean length of friendship was 7.09 years ( $SD = 5.20$ ). Approximately 74% of the sample ( $n = 233$ ) had friendship lengths that were longer than the length of their romantic relationship. A power analysis suggests that a sample of this size is 90% powered to detect a modest effect ( $R^2 = 0.04$ ) of predictors on outcome variables (Faul et al. 2007). When referring to a friendship, participants were asked to specifically consider their relationship with a close friend.

### 3.2 | Procedure

Participants filled out a series of questionnaires regarding these relationships and received course credit in their psychology classes; the order of measures was randomized. See OSF for the

complete codebook; we describe only the measures used in our analyses.

## 3.3 | Measures

### 3.3.1 | Friend's Perceived Opinion of Romantic Partner

Sinclair et al.'s (2015) Social Network Opinion scale was used to assess perceptions of friends' opinions of romantic partners (eight items;  $\alpha = 0.85$ ). Four items assessed approval (e.g., "How supportive is your close friend of your romantic relationship?"), and four items assessed disapproval (e.g., "To what extent does your close friend say negative things about your partner?"). Participants responded to items using a 5-point scale (1 = *Not at all*, 5 = *Very Much*). These items were averaged to form a composite score, with disapproval items being reverse-coded. Thus, high scores indicate approval, and low scores indicate disapproval.

### 3.3.2 | Romantic Partner's Perceived Opinion of Friend

Sinclair et al.'s (2015) Social Network Opinion scale was also adapted to assess partners' perceived opinion of the friend (eight items; e.g., "How supportive is your romantic partner of your friendship?";  $\alpha = 0.88$ ). As with the friend's opinion of the partner, participants responded to items using the same 5-point scale mentioned above. Similarly, these items were averaged to form a composite score. For both types of opinions, lower scores indicated disapproval of the romantic relationship or friendship, whereas higher scores indicated approval.

### 3.3.3 | Romantic Relationship Quality

Relationship quality (composed of satisfaction, quality of alternatives, investment, and commitment) was assessed using the Investment Model of the Commitment Scale (Rusbult et al. 1998). This scale consisted of 37 items designed to assess satisfaction level, quality of alternatives, investment size, and commitment levels. Participants responded to items using a 7-point scale response format (1 = *Disagree strongly*, 7 = *Agree strongly*). Each subscale was individually averaged to form four individual composite scores: satisfaction (10 items; e.g., "I feel satisfied with our relationship.";  $\alpha = 0.96$ ), quality of alternatives (10 items; e.g., "My need for security (feeling trusting, comfortable in a stable relationship, etc.) could be fulfilled in alternative relationships.";  $\alpha = 0.93$ ), investment size (10 items; e.g., "I have invested a great deal of time in our relationship.";  $\alpha = 0.90$ ), and commitment level pertaining to romantic relationship (7 items; e.g., "I want our relationship to last for a very long time.";  $\alpha = 0.87$ ). Higher scores were associated with higher satisfaction, investment, quality of alternatives, and commitment.

### 3.3.4 | Friendship Quality

Similarly, participants also indicated their agreement with statements relating to friendship quality using an adapted form

**TABLE 1** | Means, standard deviations, and correlations of Study 1 variables.

Variable	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Friend opinion of partner	4.18 (0.67)	—								
2. Partner opinion of friend	4.12 (0.76)	0.68***	—							
3. Romantic relationship—Satisfaction	6.04 (1.17)	0.53***	0.44***	—						
4. Romantic relationship—Alternatives	3.33 (1.60)	−0.25**	−0.14*	−0.25**	—					
5. Romantic relationship—Investment	5.77 (1.11)	0.31***	0.20***	0.55***	−0.18**	—				
6. Romantic relationship—Commitment	6.03 (1.16)	0.43***	0.28***	0.66***	−0.38**	0.63***	—			
7. Friendship—Satisfaction	5.64 (1.28)	0.30***	0.44***	0.30***	0.06	0.14*	0.17**	—		
8. Friendship—Alternatives	3.85 (1.64)	−0.08	−0.14*	−0.05	0.47***	−0.02	−0.11*	−0.08	—	
9. Friendship—Investment	5.46 (1.24)	0.22***	0.32***	0.29***	0.03	0.29***	0.18**	0.60***	−0.07	—
10. Friendship—Commitment	5.69 (1.03)	0.31***	0.44***	0.25***	−0.10	0.15**	0.26***	0.69***	−0.25**	0.59***

\* $p < 0.05$ .\*\* $p < 0.01$ .\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

of Rusbult et al.'s (1998) Investment Model of Commitment Scale. Although friendship quality typically refers to specific characteristics of the friendship (e.g., Asher and Weeks 2018), for the sake of this work, friendship quality is used similarly to the term romantic relationship quality to refer to the satisfaction, quality of alternatives, investment, and commitment one has relating to the friendship. This measure consisted of 35 items designed to assess the same qualities as previously mentioned but this time, focusing on one's friendship: satisfaction (9 items; e.g., "I feel satisfied with our friendship";  $\alpha = 0.96$ ), quality of alternatives (9 items; e.g., "My need for security [feeling trusting, comfortable in a stable relationship, etc.] could be fulfilled in alternative friendships";  $\alpha = 0.97$ ), investment size (10 items; e.g., "I have invested a great deal of time in our relationship.";  $\alpha = 0.93$ ). Commitment level pertaining to friendship (7 items; e.g., "I want our friendship to last for a very long time.";  $\alpha = 0.77$ ). Following the same format as previously mentioned, each subscale was individually averaged to form composite scores.

### 3.4 | Data Analysis

We conducted a series of hierarchical linear regressions to see if social network opinions<sup>1</sup> predicted various dependent

variables relating to relationship and friendship qualities (see Table 1 for correlations, means, and standard deviations for all variables). A significant relationship is indicated by a confidence interval (CI) that does not include zero. At Step 1, the main effects of friend's opinion of partner (centered) and partner's opinion of friend (centered) were entered. At Step 2, we entered the interaction between friend's and partner's opinions.<sup>2</sup> In the event of a significant interaction, we examined the simple slope of friend's opinion (of romantic partner) by partner's opinion (of friend).

## 4 | Results

Specific breakdowns for each outcome variable are below. In sum and as hypothesized, perceived friend opinion was significantly associated with outcomes relating to romantic relationship quality (see Table 2). Similarly, as we hypothesized, perceived partner opinion was significantly associated with outcomes relating to friendship quality (see Table 3). In addition to partner opinion being associated with friendship outcomes, we also found that partner opinion also predicted romantic relationship satisfaction, such that perceived disapproval of one's friend was associated with lower satisfaction ratings. There were no significant interactions ( $p$ 's > 0.05).

**TABLE 2** | Associations between friend and romantic partner opinions, satisfaction, alternatives, investment, and commitment relating to romantic partner.

	Romantic relationship— Satisfaction			Romantic relationship— Alternatives			Romantic relationship— Investment			Romantic relationship— Commitment		
	<i>b</i>	SE	$\Delta R^2$	<i>b</i>	SE	$\Delta R^2$	<i>b</i>	SE	$\Delta R^2$	<i>b</i>	SE	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1			<b>0.29</b>			<b>0.06</b>			<b>0.10</b>			<b>0.05</b>
Friend opinion of partner (mean centered)	<b>0.76</b>	0.11		<b>−0.66</b>	0.18		<b>0.53</b>	0.12		<b>0.78</b>	0.12	
Partner opinion of friend (mean centered)	<b>0.22</b>	0.10		0.10	0.16		−0.03	0.11		−0.05	0.11	
Step 2			0.00			0.01			0.00			0.00
Friend opinion of partner, partner opinion of friend	0.07	0.09		−0.19	0.15		0.04	0.10		0.07	0.10	

Note: Bold text indicates a significant relationship,  $p < 0.05$ . Positive scores on the social network opinion scale indicate greater perceived approval from the social network member.

**TABLE 3** | Associations between friend and romantic partner opinions, satisfaction, alternatives, investment, and commitment relating to friend.

	Friendship— Satisfaction			Friendship— Alternatives			Friendship— Investment			Friendship— Commitment		
	<i>b</i>	SE	$\Delta R^2$	<i>b</i>	SE	$\Delta R^2$	<i>b</i>	SE	$\Delta R^2$	<i>b</i>	SE	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1			<b>0.19</b>			<b>0.02</b>			<b>0.10</b>			<b>0.20</b>
Friend opinion of partner (mean centered)	−0.01	0.13		0.05	0.19		0.01	0.14		0.01	0.12	
Partner opinion of friend (mean centered)	<b>0.75</b>	0.12		<b>−0.33</b>	0.17		<b>0.52</b>	0.12		<b>0.60</b>	0.10	
Step 2			0.00			0.00			0.00			0.00
Friend opinion of partner, partner opinion of friend	−0.05	0.19		0.01	0.15		−0.03	0.11		−0.10	0.09	

Note: Bold text indicates a significant relationship,  $p < 0.05$ . Positive scores on the social network opinion scale indicate greater perceived approval from the social network member.



## 4.1 | Romantic Relationship Quality

### 4.1.1 | Satisfaction in Romantic Relationship

There was a main effect of friend's opinion of partner, such that friend's perceived approval was a predictor of higher romantic relationship satisfaction levels ( $b=0.76$ ,  $SE=0.11$ ,  $\beta=0.43$ ,  $CI: 0.53-0.98$ ). There was also a main effect of partner's approval of friend on participant's romantic relationship satisfaction, such that partner's approval was a predictor of higher satisfaction ( $b=0.22$ ,  $SE=0.10$ ,  $\beta=0.14$ ,  $CI: 0.02-0.42$ ; Step 1:  $F(2,312)=63.83$ ,  $p<0.001$ ;  $R^2=0.29$ ). Conversely, negative opinions from each source were associated with harm to the romantic relationship. This suggests that partners offering negative opinions of friends could harm their romantic relationship satisfaction levels.

### 4.1.2 | Quality of Alternatives in Romantic Relationship

There was a main effect of friend's opinion of partner, such that friend's approval was a significant predictor of lowered perceptions of quality romantic alternatives ( $b=-0.66$ ,  $SE=0.18$ ,  $\beta=-0.28$ ,  $CI: -1.01$  to  $-0.31$ ). There was no main effect of partner's opinion ( $b=0.10$ ,  $SE=0.16$ ,  $\beta=0.05$ ,  $CI: -0.21$  to  $0.42$ ; Step 1:  $F(2,312)=10.15$ ,  $p<0.001$ ;  $R^2=0.06$ ).

### 4.1.3 | Investment in Romantic Relationship

There was a main effect of friend's opinion of partner, such that friend's approval was a positive predictor of investment within the romantic relationship ( $b=0.53$ ,  $SE=0.12$ ,  $\beta=0.32$ ,  $CI: 0.29-0.77$ ). Again, there was no main effect of partner's opinion ( $b=-0.03$ ,  $SE=0.11$ ,  $\beta=-0.02$ ,  $CI: -0.24$  to  $0.18$ ; Step 1:  $F(2,312)=16.35$ ,  $p<0.001$ ;  $R^2=0.10$ ).

### 4.1.4 | Commitment to Romantic Relationship

There was a main effect of friend's opinion of partner, such that friend's approval was a predictor of increased romantic relationship commitment ( $b=0.78$ ,  $SE=0.12$ ,  $\beta=0.46$ ,  $CI: 0.55-1.02$ ). Like the findings above, there was no detectable effect of partner's opinion ( $b=-0.05$ ,  $SE=0.11$ ,  $\beta=-0.04$ ,  $CI: -0.27$  to  $0.16$ ; Step 1:  $F(2,312)=35.88$ ,  $p<0.001$ ;  $R^2=0.19$ ). Thus, throughout all metrics, the social network effect was confirmed, as it has been historically, with there also being limited support for the social opinion backlash effect regarding satisfaction.

## 4.2 | Friendship Quality

### 4.2.1 | Satisfaction in Friendship

There was a main effect of partner's approval on the level of satisfaction within friendship ( $b=0.75$ ,  $SE=0.12$ ,  $\beta=0.44$ ,  $CI: 0.52-0.98$ ). Reports of partner's approval were positively associated with higher satisfaction within friendship. There was no

main effect of friend's opinion of partner ( $b=-0.10$ ,  $SE=0.13$ ,  $\beta=-0.004$ ,  $CI: -0.27$  to  $0.25$ ; Step 1:  $F(2,312)=37.37$ ,  $p<0.001$ ;  $R^2=0.19$ ).

### 4.2.2 | Quality of Alternatives in Friendship

There was a main effect of partner's opinion on perceptions of quality alternatives regarding friendship ( $b=-0.33$ ,  $SE=0.17$ ,  $\beta=-0.15$ ,  $CI: -0.66$  to  $-0.01$ ). Reports of partner's opinion were negatively associated with perceptions of quality alternatives to friendship. As partner's approval of friend increased, reports of quality alternatives to the friendship decreased. There was no main effect of friend's opinion of partner ( $b=0.05$ ,  $SE=0.19$ ,  $\beta=0.02$ ,  $CI: -0.31$  to  $0.42$ ; Step 1:  $F(2,312)=3.09$ ,  $p=0.047$ ;  $R^2=0.02$ ).

### 4.2.3 | Investment in Friendship

There was a main effect of partner's opinion on investment within friendship ( $b=0.52$ ,  $SE=0.12$ ,  $\beta=0.32$ ,  $CI: 0.28-0.75$ ). Reports of a partner's opinion were positively associated with higher investment within friendship. There was no main effect of friend's opinion of partner ( $b=0.01$ ,  $SE=0.14$ ,  $\beta=0.00$ ,  $CI: -0.26$  to  $0.27$ ; Step 1:  $F(2,312)=17.52$ ,  $p<0.001$ ;  $R^2=0.10$ ).

### 4.2.4 | Commitment to Friendship

There was a main effect of partner's approval of the friend on commitment within friendship ( $b=0.60$ ,  $SE=0.10$ ,  $\beta=0.44$ ,  $CI: 0.42-0.79$ ). Reports of partner's approval were positively associated with higher commitment to friendship. There was no main effect of friend's opinion of partner ( $b=0.00$ ,  $SE=0.11$ ,  $\beta=0.00$ ,  $CI: -0.20$  to  $0.21$ ; Step 1:  $F(2,312)=38.15$ ,  $p<0.001$ ;  $R^2=0.20$ ).

Overall, across all metrics, there was evidence that the social network effect goes both ways. Friend's opinion of the partner affects romantic relationships just as the partner's opinion of the friend affects friendships. There was no evidence of a backlash effect for friends, but some backlash for partners.

## 5 | Discussion

Consistent with the social network effect, Study 1 shows that social network approval of one's romantic partner was associated with positive romantic relationship outcomes, whereas disapproval was associated with negative romantic relationship outcomes. In line with balance theory, just as a friend's opinions play a role in romantic relationship outcomes, we also see that the opinions of one's romantic partners play a role in their friendship. Social norms may allow for friends to voice opinions, and such disclosure may even be encouraged (Duck 1991). In Western cultures, social norms dictate that friends are expected confidantes (Tovares and Kulbayeva 2022), especially when it comes to seeking romantic relationship advice (Sullivan et al. 2012). "Meeting the friends" is a sort of expected relationship hurdle, like

“meeting the parents,” for relationships moving into further commitment.

However, it is not so normative for individuals to anticipate advice from their partner about their friendship. Friendships often predate romantic relationships as was the case for the majority of our participants. As such, the friendship is not what is on trial. Subsequently, people do not tend to gauge how well a friendship fits into one's romantic network. There appears to be a limited number of studies even offering insight on how romantic partners may even give advice, even if not on friendships, with some suggesting partner advice-giving is not helpful (Pauw et al. 2024). Thus, a partner offering an opinion on a friend is probably more likely to be unsolicited, which does not tend to be received well (Feng and MacGeorge 2006). Although a friend's opinion of a partner may influence the romantic relationship, the friendship seems to be neither helped nor harmed by the friend's opinion. Thus, this may suggest that friends are more able to express disapproval of romantic partners without immediate fear/risk of relationship dissolution (i.e., a friendship breakup).

Unfortunately, it seemed romantic partners were not afforded the same luxury. Although the partner's opinion of a friend predicted participants' satisfaction ratings regarding the friendship, thus extending the social network effect to the role of romantic partner opinions on friendships—partner's opinion was also shown to predict satisfaction ratings within the *romantic relationship*. More specifically, a partner's perceived disapproval of a friend seems to threaten how satisfied participants felt with their romantic partner. The lack of interactions may also indicate that feelings do not have to be mutual and/or shared between romantic partners and friends for the potential imbalance to be felt. It just takes one dissatisfied “o” or “x” in the *P-O-X* model to result in consequences for the relationship triad.

## 6 | Study 2

The second study experimentally tested the effect of friend and romantic partner hypothetical opinions on aspects of the friendship and romantic relationship. In Study 2, participants were randomly assigned to receive either approval or disapproval from either a romantic or platonic other in a 2×2 design using vignettes. Data were collected from March to April 2017; hypotheses and the analysis plan were preregistered before analyzing the data (preregistration: <https://osf.io/z29d3/>). Similar to Study 1, participants were asked to report their reactions to scenarios in which their friend *hypothetically* approved/disapproved of the participant's romantic partner or whether their romantic partner *hypothetically* approved/disapproved of the participant's friend.

## 7 | Method

### 7.1 | Participants

We collected 128 responses from US undergraduate students currently in romantic relationships.<sup>3</sup> After excluding those who either did not finish ( $n=1$ ) or had multiple romantic partners

( $n=3$ ), our final sample consisted of 124 participants with ages ranging from 18 to 49 years old ( $M=20.88$ ,  $SD=3.93$ ; gender: 77.4% women, 22.6% men; race/ethnicity: 71.8% European American/White, 21% African American/Black, 1.6% Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 0.8% Native American/Alaska Native, 4.8% multiracial/not specified). Among participants, 4.1% of the sample were of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin. At the time of data collection, romantic relationship length ranged from less than a year to 22 years ( $M=2.45$ ,  $SD=2.84$ ). Friendship length ranged from less than a year to 31 years ( $M=6.94$ ,  $SD=6.21$ ). 95% of participants were in cross-gender relationships (e.g., man–woman), whereas 91% of participants were in same-gender friendships (e.g., woman–woman). Out of 124 participants in Study 2, approximately 76% of the sample ( $n=94$ ) had friendship lengths that were longer than the length of their romantic relationship. A post hoc power analysis indicated that a sample of this size provides 78.4% power to detect a medium effect ( $\eta_p^2=0.06$ ) or larger at  $\alpha=0.05$ , two-tailed (Faul et al. 2007). This is slightly below the conventional 80% threshold, which further cautions against overinterpreting null results or marginal trends.

### 7.2 | Procedure

Similar to Study 1, participants were asked to specifically consider their relationship with a close friend. In a 2 (Source of opinion: partner vs. friend)×2 (Opinion: approval vs. disapproval) experimental design, participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions where they received a hypothetical scenario in which one party expressed either approval or disapproval of the other:

**Those in the Friend Disapproval condition** received the following scenario: You have decided you would like your romantic partner and your friend to get to know each other better. You, your romantic partner, and your friend go out to eat dinner together on a Saturday night. Towards the end of dinner, your *partner* goes to the restroom. While your *partner* is away, you ask your *friend* their opinion of your *partner*. Your *friend* says to you, “I’m really sorry, but I really don’t like your partner. Your partner does not seem to really care about you, and the two of you do not seem very compatible. I do not see why this relationship is valuable to you.” After dinner, you say goodbye to your friend as your friend leaves, and you and your partner get in the car to go home.

Italicized portions indicate what was changed in the alternative scenarios. Friend was changed to (romantic) partner, for example, and disapproving opinions were changed to approval, specifically reading: “Thanks for inviting me tonight. I really like your friend. I feel that your friend is considerate. The two of you have a lot in common, and I see why your friendship is valuable to you.”

After reading the hypothetical scenario, participants were directed to answer questions (with the order of these measures

**TABLE 4** | Correlations, overall means, and standard deviations of Study 2 measures.

Variable	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Romantic relationship—Satisfaction	5.86 (1.21)	—						
2. Romantic relationship—Alternatives	3.27 (1.51)	−0.45***	—					
3. Romantic relationship—Investment	5.48 (1.23)	0.72***	−0.38**	—				
4. Romantic relationship—Commitment	5.27 (1.22)	0.61***	−0.51**	0.76***	—			
5. Friendship—Satisfaction	5.61 (1.29)	0.16	0.04	0.28**	0.22*	—		
6. Friendship—Alternatives	4.04 (1.52)	0.07	0.30***	0.13	−0.03	−0.03	—	
7. Friendship—Investment	5.46 (1.19)	0.16	0.06	0.32***	0.23*	0.83***	−0.03	—
8. Friendship—Commitment	5.26 (1.06)	−0.01	0.00	0.10	0.25**	0.72***	−0.26**	0.69***

\* $p < 0.05$ .\*\* $p < 0.01$ .\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

being randomized) while imagining that the scenario described a recent occurrence between them, their romantic partner, and their close friend. Based on this hypothetical relationship as portrayed in the scenario, participants answered measures relating to their feelings on how their romantic relationship and friendship *could* hypothetically be affected. See OSF for the complete codebook; we describe only measures used in our analyses.

### 7.3 | Measures

Similar to Study 1, we assessed satisfaction, quality of alternatives, investment, and commitment as they related to both the romantic relationship and friendship. Rather than assessing the qualities of their *actual* relationships, we further adapted items from the Rusbult et al. (1998) investment model scale to measure their ratings in relation to *hypothetical* romantic relationship outcomes—satisfaction ( $\alpha = 0.98$ ), alternatives ( $\alpha = 0.97$ ), investment ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ), commitment ( $\alpha = 0.82$ )—and friendship outcomes—satisfaction ( $\alpha = 0.98$ ), alternatives ( $\alpha = 0.96$ ), investment ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ), commitment ( $\alpha = 0.78$ ). Specifically, items were framed to assess how participants could and/or would feel/react “based on their romantic relationship/friendship as portrayed in the scenario.” Participants responded to items using a 7-point scale response format (1 = Not at all/Strongly disagree, 7 = Completely/Strongly agree). Example items included “My needs for emotional involvement (feeling emotionally attached, feeling good when another feels good, etc.) could be fulfilled in alternative relationships,” and “I would still feel satisfied with our friendship.”

### 7.4 | Data Analysis

We performed a 2 (source: partner vs. friend)  $\times$  2 (opinion: approval vs. disapproval) factorial MANOVA separately for relationship outcomes and friendship outcomes.<sup>4,5</sup> See Table 4 for correlations, overall means, and standard deviations. See Table 5 for conditional means by opinion and source.

## 8 | Results

### 8.1 | Romantic Relationship Outcomes

The omnibus test was significant (Wilks'  $\lambda = 0.90$ ,  $F(4,117) = 3.12$ ,  $p = 0.018$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.10$ ). There was a main effect of opinion for satisfaction and investment within one's romantic relationship, such that approval (regardless of source) was linked to higher satisfaction,  $F(1,120) = 5.78$ ,  $p = 0.018$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$ , and investment,  $F(1,120) = 5.66$ ,  $p = 0.019$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$ . This also means that disapproval was linked to lower satisfaction and investment. Source did not have a moderating or direct effect on these outcomes ( $p$ 's  $> 0.05$ ). For instance, the romantic partner's opinion of the friend had similar consequences as the friend's opinion of the romantic partner for the quality of the romantic relationship. Thus, this offers some evidence for a backlash effect for the romantic partner.

There were no main effects of opinion on quality of alternatives or commitment ( $p$ 's  $> 0.05$ ). However, there was a significant interaction between opinion and source on predicting romantic relationship commitment,  $F(1,120) = 4.60$ ,  $p = 0.034$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$ . When given a friend's opinion of a romantic partner, the type of opinion influenced commitment levels within the romantic relationship,  $F(1,120) = 6.64$ ,  $p = 0.011$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$ , such that romantic relationship commitment was lowest when the participant's friend disapproved of the romantic partner, and highest when the friend approved. When provided with a romantic partner's opinion of a friend, the type of opinion had no detectable influence on commitment,  $F(1,120) = 0.17$ ,  $p = 0.684$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.001$ . There was no main effect of source on romantic relationship outcomes (all  $p$ 's  $> 0.05$ ).

### 8.2 | Friendship Outcomes

The omnibus test was non-significant (Wilks'  $\lambda = 0.97$ ,  $F(4,116) = 0.97$ ,  $p = 0.425$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$ ). As such, there were no main effects of hypothetical opinion or source on friendship outcomes on satisfaction, quality of alternatives, investment, or commitment to the friend relating to the friendship; further,



**TABLE 5** | Conditional means (standard deviations) by opinion and source.

Variable	Friend approval of romantic partner	Friend disapprovals of romantic partner	Romantic partner approval of friend	Romantic partner disapproval of friend
	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)
Romantic relationship—Satisfaction	6.06 (1.04) <sup>a</sup>	5.70 (1.35) <sup>a</sup>	6.19 (1.04) <sup>a</sup>	5.52 (1.30) <sup>b</sup>
Romantic relationship—Alternatives	2.82 (1.44) <sup>a</sup>	3.27 (1.53) <sup>a</sup>	3.30 (1.60) <sup>a</sup>	3.63 (1.43) <sup>a</sup>
Romantic relationship—Investment	5.71 (1.07) <sup>a</sup>	4.94 (1.54) <sup>b</sup>	5.75 (1.06) <sup>a</sup>	5.49 (1.09) <sup>a</sup>
Romantic relationship—Commitment	5.51 (1.28) <sup>a</sup>	4.71 (1.34) <sup>b</sup>	5.36 (1.08) <sup>a</sup>	5.48 (1.06) <sup>a</sup>
Friendship—Satisfaction	5.60 (1.32) <sup>a</sup>	5.60 (1.43) <sup>a</sup>	5.54 (1.31) <sup>a</sup>	5.71 (1.17) <sup>a</sup>
Friendship—Alternatives	4.20 (1.60) <sup>a</sup>	3.91 (1.66) <sup>a</sup>	4.04 (1.66) <sup>a</sup>	4.00 (1.23) <sup>a</sup>
Friendship—Investment	5.36 (1.27) <sup>a</sup>	5.56 (1.39) <sup>a</sup>	5.49 (1.08) <sup>a</sup>	5.47 (1.06) <sup>a</sup>
Friendship—Commitment	5.25 (1.07) <sup>a</sup>	5.25 (1.12) <sup>a</sup>	5.17 (1.02) <sup>a</sup>	5.43 (1.02) <sup>a</sup>

Note:  $n = 29$ – $34$  per cell. Means that do not share a superscript are significantly different,  $p < 0.05$ .

there were no significant interactions for any of the other friendship outcome variables (all  $p$ 's  $> 0.05$ ).

## 9 | Discussion

As hypothesized, the results for Study 2 showed that approval positively predicted both hypothetical satisfaction and investment within one's romantic relationships (whether expressed by a friend or romantic partner). This aligns with previous research indicating that social approval can positively influence romantic relationship outcomes. Similarly, this also replicates findings from Study 1, suggesting that a romantic partner's opinion may have an influence on participants' hypothetical romantic relationship satisfaction. However, we did not find evidence that opinion impacted the *hypothetical* quality of alternatives or commitment within the romantic relationship, suggesting that participants' hypothetical perceptions of available alternatives and level of commitment to their partner remained relatively stable, regardless of whether they received approval or disapproval from either source.

However, a significant interaction emerged when examining commitment within the romantic relationship. When participants were presented with their friend's opinion of their romantic partner, the type of opinion influenced their commitment to their romantic partner. Specifically, when the friend approved of the romantic partner, participants reported higher commitment to the romantic partner, whereas

disapproval from the friend was associated with lower commitment. This suggests that the opinions of close friends (versus those of romantic partners) might have a more significant impact on an individual's commitment within their romantic relationships. These results also indicate that friend disclosure has minimal impact on friendship, whereas partner opinions, when disapproving, might strengthen future commitment to the friendship.

It is worth noting that the lack of significant effects might be attributed to the hypothetical nature of the scenarios presented to participants. Contrary to our expectations, there were no significant main effects of opinion or source on ratings of friendship satisfaction, quality of alternatives, investment, or commitment. Additionally, there were no significant interactions for any of the other friendship outcome variables. Ultimately, this suggests that the quality of friendship remains relatively unaffected by the social network opinions presented in these vignettes.

These results suggest that, within the context of this hypothetical scenario, friendship quality may be relatively unaffected by the opinions of others. However, these null findings should be interpreted with caution. As noted earlier, this preliminary study was slightly underpowered to detect small-to-moderate effects, and the observed effect size for the omnibus test fell just below the detectable threshold. Thus, the current findings may reflect insufficient statistical power rather than strong evidence for the absence of an effect. Although the vignettes

used have proven effective in past studies (e.g., Sinclair et al. 2015), real-life situations—such as those captured in Study 1's survey—may involve more nuanced and complex dynamics not captured. Thus, it may take stronger expressions of approval and disapproval to have a substantial impact on friendship outcomes.

## 10 | General Discussion

### 10.1 | Impact of Friends' Opinion on the Romantic Relationship

With these studies, we consistently found further support for the social network effect, with the impact of friend opinions on romantic relationships remaining clear. Friend approval of a romantic partner was associated with positive romantic relationship outcomes. Similarly, friend disapproval was associated with negative romantic relationship outcomes.

A friend's approval of one's romantic partner may strengthen the romantic relationship. Moreover, friends' positive opinions enhance one's commitment to the romantic relationship. On the other hand, when friends express disapproval of a partner, it may create tension and conflict in the romantic relationship, leading to decreased relationship satisfaction and, potentially, relationship dissolution (e.g., Felmlee 2001). It is worth noting that the impact of friend opinions on romantic relationships is not absolute. Although friends' opinions can influence a relationship's outcome, it is ultimately up to the individuals in the relationship to decide how to respond to their friends' opinions. For example, a couple may choose to ignore negative opinions and work on improving their relationship or may heed their friends' advice and end the relationship (Le et al. 2010; Sinclair et al. 2015).

### 10.2 | Impact of Romantic Partner's Opinion on the Friendship

Overall, the role of a romantic partner's opinion on one's friendship is less consistent. Although romantic partners' approval of friends was associated with greater friendship outcomes (e.g., higher commitment) in our survey of actual couple members, we did not find strong evidence of this when opinions were manipulated. The relationship between a partner's opinion and friendship outcomes is quite complex and may be influenced by various factors, like the partner's reasons for (dis)approval or the individual's response to their partner's opinions. For example, if the friendship is long-standing and strong, a partner's negative opinion may not have as much influence on the friendship. However, if the friendship is relatively new or fragile, negative opinions from a partner could lead to the dissolution of the friendship (e.g., Flannery and Smith 2021).

This asymmetry—where disapproval of a romantic partner from friends is expected, but disapproval of friends from a romantic partner may be viewed as inappropriate—may further explain these patterns. Indeed, it may seem less justified for a romantic partner to object to a pre-existing friendship, and such disapproval may be met with skepticism or concern. Gender and

power dynamics within the romantic relationship may also play a role (Fiori et al. 2018). For instance, disapproval of a close friend by a romantic partner may serve as a warning sign of attempts to isolate or control, particularly in cases of coercive or abusive relationships (Kassing and Collins 2025). In contrast, disapproval from friends or family of a romantic partner is often perceived as a communal safeguard motivated by care for the individual's well-being and is less likely to raise concerns about control or manipulation.

Beyond relational and contextual factors, psychological mechanisms may also shape responses to partner disapproval. Triadic imbalance can evoke cognitive dissonance as individuals reconcile conflicting sentiments toward two close ties (Heider 1958; Festinger 1957; Chiang et al. 2020). It is possible that prompting participants to evaluate their friend after learning of partner disapproval may have triggered this discomfort, leading them to reaffirm or amplify the friendship's positive qualities—particularly when the friendship felt worth preserving. This may have heightened the salience of those qualities in the moment, influencing reported commitment or closeness.

### 10.3 | Preliminary Evidence of Potential Backlash for Voicing Negative Opinions

We found emerging evidence of—what we have termed—a social opinion backlash effect. Study 1 suggests that perceptions of a romantic partner's negative opinions about friends predicted harm to their romantic relationships, particularly, relationship satisfaction. Similarly, hypothetical disapproval of one's friend from one's romantic partner (and of one's romantic partner from one's friend) decreased levels of hypothetical investment and satisfaction within the romantic relationship in Study 2.

Our results suggest that friends were able to share their opinions of the romantic partner without negative consequences to their friendship. Some reasons for this finding may be due to the fact that friends are the primary source of relationship work and the social expectations that friends voice their opinions about romantic partners (Duck 1991). Although Gillian et al. (2022) found that disapproval of one's romantic partner was associated with decreased closeness toward the disapproving individual, their study assessed retrospective perceptions of closeness to a network member already known to have disapproved. In contrast, our study examined current evaluations of general friendship quality in an experimental context. Thus, although our findings may appear to diverge, they may reflect differences in methodological approach (e.g., measurement of closeness vs. other facets of friendship quality). It is also possible that closeness, in particular, is more susceptible to subtle adjustments in response to disapproval—occupying a gray area between the extremes of maintaining the relationship unchanged or ending it altogether (cf. Gillian et al. 2022). A longitudinal approach may be valuable in further examining the impact of expressing disapproval of one's romantic partner on the friendship. Our results suggest that voicing negative opinions can lead to a backlash in the source relationship, but only for romantic partners. Expressing opinions about romantic partners or friends may be perceived differently. As such, partners may not have the same social liberty to voice their opinions about friends.

## 11 | Limitations and Future Directions

It is also worth noting that the first study is correlational; thus, although we discuss the “impact” of opinions, we cannot make causal claims on the relationship between network opinion and romantic (or platonic) relationship outcomes. However, other work, including the present study, featuring experimental designs does establish cause-and-effect relationships (e.g., Sinclair et al. 2015). Further, we focused on the impact of perceived (Study 1) and hypothetical (Study 2) opinions of the friend and romantic partners. Although past research has shown that perceived opinions are more strongly linked to relationship outcomes than are actual opinions (Etcheverry et al. 2008), future research could expand upon this research through further vignette studies as well as incorporating *actual* friend and partner opinions of these relationships. While the present studies provide valuable insight into the influence of friend and partner opinions on both types of relationships, there are potential outcomes not addressed within these studies. Future research could expand on these outcomes using additional scenarios or gathering real-time, daily diary data on actual opinions of one's friend and partner.

Our research posited two potential outcomes in an unbalanced triad: the focal individual (the participant) would be expected to remove themselves from either their romantic relationship and/or friendship. There are, however, options unaddressed by the presented studies: Rather than distancing themselves from either relationship, in an effort to offer *some* degree of harmony in the triad, the focal individual may elect not to engage in both relationships simultaneously (e.g., date nights, boys' nights, girls' weekends), whereby individuals will limit the extent friends and romantic partners interact with each other. This may be an avenue for future research to pursue. Another option unaddressed is that the focal individual may also clear up tension in the triad by resolving the dissension between the friend and romantic partner. This may involve facilitating communication between the two parties, helping them to understand each other's perspectives, and working toward a mutually agreeable solution. Future studies on the social opinion backlash effect could expand research on this third option. Additionally, we did not assess the extent to which participants viewed their close friend as a romantic interest (thus a viable and potential alternative to the romantic partner) or vice versa (i.e., a romantic partner taking the platonic place of the close friend).

Finally, within our samples, friendship length tended to be longer than the length of a romantic relationship. Only one in four of our respondents had romantic relationships outlasting the friendship they chose to focus on. Given this imbalance, these studies do not support a statistically reliable examination of cases where the romantic relationship was longer. Future studies could try to recruit or direct a more balanced sample (e.g., ask participants to think of a newer friendship) to test the role of relationship length and who was first in the shared relationship's world, as well as whether the current pattern of results generalizes to contexts in which romantic relationships are of longer duration than friendships. Future studies could also consider the impact of other factors that may influence the social opinion backlash effect, such as cultural differences in social expectations, the nature of the relationship between the friend, partner,

and focal individual, or the individual's personality traits and coping strategies.

## 12 | Implications

Despite the limitations, the survey and vignette studies provide valuable contributions to the social network effect literature. These results reaffirm the role of one's social networks (e.g., friends) in impacting romantic relationships (Hypothesis 1) and offer insights into the role of romantic partners' (dis)approval on friendships (Hypothesis 2). The work also provides preliminary evidence for the social opinion backlash effect (Hypothesis 3). The findings suggest that whereas friend disapproval of the romantic partner may not have a significant negative impact on the friendship, partner disapproval can harm anticipated levels of investment, satisfaction, and commitment in the romantic relationship. Although friends may often feel that there are additional risks associated with sharing their disapproval of the romantic relationship, the studies provide valuable insights for romantic partners by highlighting the importance of considering the impact of their opinions on their partner's friendships and the potential consequences for their romantic relationship.

## 13 | Conclusion

Social network opinions matter for multiple types of relationships. Let us not forget that there are two sides to a coin; partners are not just the target of opinions but also have opinions of their own. Nonetheless, romantic partners who value their relationships should tread lightly. If you do not have anything nice to say about your partner's friend, it may be best that you do not say anything at all.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in OSF at <https://osf.io/9a5wp/>.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Separate analyses were conducted using only the four disapproval items as a separate scale, in which high scores indicated higher ratings of disapproval. Patterns of results remained the same.

<sup>2</sup> Additional analyses were run, controlling for relationship and friendship lengths. Neither relationship length nor friendship length changed the pattern of results.

<sup>3</sup> The number of responses mentioned on the preregistration was incorrectly recorded due to an error.

<sup>4</sup> Although we preregistered individual ANOVAs for each outcome variable, correlations between these variables revealed that the use of two MANOVAs was more appropriate.

<sup>5</sup> As with Study 1, additional analyses were run controlling for romantic relationship and friendship lengths. Neither of these relationship lengths changed the pattern of results.

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