

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Single-Sided: Associations Between Social Network Opinions and Singlehood Among Heterosexual and Sexually Diverse Individuals

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## ABSTRACT

Although romantic relationships are often idealized, many individuals find satisfaction in being single. Evidence shows social networks influence commitment within romantic relationships—with network approval being a boon, and disapproval a detractor—but whether this social network effect extends to commitment to being single remains unclear. This study examined whether perceived approval from parents and friends predicts commitment to singlehood and fear of being single, and if associations differ according to one's sexual orientation. Single US adults ( $N = 501$ , 47% women, 50% White) identifying as heterosexual ( $n = 256$ ) and sexually diverse (e.g., gay, pansexual;  $n = 245$ ) completed an online survey assessing aspects of singlehood. Network approval—especially from friends—is related to higher commitment and lower fear. After including covariates, approval was no longer associated with commitment or fear in either group. Combining heterosexual and sexually diverse participants, parent and friend approval remained significant predictors of lower fear, even after covariates were included. Subjective norms, calculated as opinions weighted by motivation to comply, showed little consistency in their associations. Approval from friends appears especially important for sexually diverse singles, who may rely more on their chosen family for social support. Findings extend understanding of the nuanced nature of the social network effect when applied to singlehood.

## 1 | Introduction

Although romantic relationships are often idealized (e.g., Dennett and Girme 2025; DePaulo and Morris 2005), many people are committed to—and quite satisfied with—their singlehood. For instance, it has become increasingly common in Western cultures for individuals to delay or “opt out of” entering a romantic relationship. According to the Pew Research Center, the share of adults living outside a romantic partnership has increased across recent decades in the United States (Fry and Parker 2021).<sup>1</sup> Singlehood is far more common than in prior generations, in part due to partnering later-in-life and shifting family formation patterns (e.g., co-parenting without marriage). Past research further suggests that people may be more

motivated to prioritize personal growth, career ambitions, and autonomy over entering or maintaining romantic partnerships (e.g., Copen et al. 2012).

Despite its growing prevalence, singlehood remains socially evaluated, and perceptions of singles are often shaped by the opinions of close others. Understanding how these social network opinions influence singlehood is therefore critical for explaining when singlehood is experienced as empowering versus defaming. More broadly, discrimination against singles and a perceived lack of social support are a few factors linked with poorer well-being for singles (Girme et al. 2022), underscoring the importance of examining the social dynamics surrounding singlehood.

## 2 | Singlehood Experiences

Corresponding with this demographic shift, researchers have begun to further explore what predicts positive singlehood experiences. Contemporary work treats singlehood not as mere absence of a partner but as a psychologically meaningful orientation with distinct motives, identities, and vulnerabilities (Adamczyk 2023; Girme et al. 2023). For instance, contrary to existing stereotypes that women are uniquely unhappy in singlehood (e.g., Ward 2020), more recent research offers evidence that women are, on average, happier in their singlehood than men (Hoan and MacDonald 2025).

Yet singlehood can also be accompanied by fear of being single—concern that singlehood reflects personal inadequacy or will lead to long-term loneliness and rejection (Spielmann et al. 2013). This fear predicts lower well-being, greater attachment anxiety, and a willingness to settle for less satisfying or even unhealthy relationships (Park et al. 2021; Spielmann et al. 2020; Spielmann and Cantarella 2020). Recent work suggests that a greater fear of being single is linked with an increased likelihood to engage in romantic behaviors, both extreme (e.g., neglecting work/educational or family commitments to meet a potential partner) and nonextreme (e.g., taking care of your appearance or creating a profile on a dating site to find a partner; Bonarska et al. 2025).

Predictors central to romantic commitment—satisfaction, perceived quality of alternatives, and investment size (Rusbult 1980; Rusbult et al. 1998)—also predict commitment to staying single (Beauparlant et al. 2024). Building on this focus on internal predictors, less is known about how external social feedback from close others shapes singlehood experiences. To address this gap, we tested associations between perceived parent and friend approval and singlehood outcomes among heterosexual and sexually diverse singles. We examine first whether parents' and friends' approval shape how people feel about remaining single. Then, if so, we explore whether these dynamics differ by sexual orientation.

## 3 | Social Network Opinions and Singlehood

The social network effect suggests that opinions from friends and family members shape people's romantic relationships (Felmlee 2001; Sinclair et al. 2015). For example, network approval contributes to relationship satisfaction and persistence, whereas disapproval can increase the likelihood of relationship dissolution (Sinclair et al. 2015; Felmlee and Sinclair 2018). Yet, just as networks hold opinions about one's romantic partners, they may also have specific opinions about someone's singlehood. Similar to how relationships are often influenced by a variety of sources ranging from family and friends to religion and global conditions (see the couple in context model, Karney and Neff 2013), people may feel pressure to enter a relationship not only from broader cultural norms (e.g., Budgeon 2008), but due to the expectations of close others. For instance, research has shown that women—especially those with past heterosexual relationships—often experience pressure to conform to normative life pathways, including finding a romantic partner and

starting a family (Sharp and Ganong 2011). Such pressure may reflect both implicit social norms and explicit cues from friends and family.

Whereas the social network effect captures external pressures, decisions about remaining single or pursuing a relationship also reflect internal, calculative commitment processes—the focus of the investment model for commitment processes. To further understand the role of social network feedback in commitment to singlehood, we draw on Etcheverry and Agnew's (2004) extension of the investment model of commitment, which incorporated subjective norms—a multiplicative combination of normative beliefs and people's motivation to comply with those opinions—as an additional predictor of relationship commitment. For those currently in romantic relationships, subjective norms represent how individuals internalize others' beliefs about their relationship status and the degree to which they feel like they should go along with those social perceptions (Etcheverry and Agnew 2004). Although the original context of this framework involved romantic relationships, it remains less clear whether similar mechanisms operate for predicting one's commitment to staying single. Prior work (Beauparlant et al. 2024) has shown that perceived approval from close others is linked with greater commitment to singlehood; however, this work did not differentiate between approval from friends or parents, nor did it examine how separate motivation to comply may moderate these opinions. Extending the social network effect to work by Beauparlant et al. (2024) and integrating Etcheverry and Agnew's (2004) focus on perceived normative beliefs, the present study offers a more comprehensive understanding of how social networks are associated with singlehood experiences.

## 4 | Sexual Orientation and Singlehood

In parsing out the individual roles of opinion sources, the impact of network opinions may vary based on sexual orientation. Particularly, sexual orientation may moderate whether network approval is influential and, if it is, whether different sources of network approval carry more weight than others. We use the term sexually diverse to refer to individuals who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, queer, or otherwise nonheterosexual. Although singlehood research has focused on *between*-group comparisons (e.g., comparing singles to partnered individuals), there remains a need for further *within*-group comparisons of singles (i.e., how singles may differ from each other; Girme et al. 2023).

Similar to the rising number of single individuals, people expressing sexually diverse identities have increased (e.g., Twenge et al. 2024). Accompanying this increased visibility has come an increase in social acceptance (Poushter and Kent 2020). Still, many sexually diverse individuals frequently face maltreatment due to their sexual orientation, even from their own families. In fact, a recent study revealed that nearly half of LGBTQ+ adults are estranged from their families, and a third of youth are unsure their parents will accept them (Just Like Us 2023). Consequently, sexually diverse individuals often navigate different relational and familial dynamics than heterosexual

individuals, such as a greater reliance on “chosen family” (Carr et al. 2002; Gates 2017). Chosen family refers to a group of individuals who mutually choose to play significant roles in each other’s lives. As Kim and Feyissa (2021, 3) explain, “one way of understanding a chosen family is as a group of people to whom a person is emotionally close enough to consider them as family, even though they are not biologically or legally related.” These are often friends, surrogate “aunts,” “uncles,” or “parents” within a community, or other sources of support (e.g., groups, clubs, political organizations).

In one of the few studies examining the social network effect within sexually diverse couples, Holmberg and Blair (2016) found that individuals in same-sex relationships perceived less social support for the relationship from family, but not friends. Similarly, past research has found that family opinions of their romantic relationship had significantly less influence on homosexual respondents than on heterosexual respondents (Blair and Holmberg 2008). Together, these findings suggest that for many sexually diverse individuals, family approval may hold less sway over relationship experiences than the views of peers and close friends. Although these studies focused on couples, similar dynamics may extend to singlehood, where family opinions could be less central—and peer feedback more salient—in shaping how sexually diverse individuals evaluate their single status.

It may be that parent/familial opinions will matter less than peer or alternative opinions for sexually diverse individuals when it comes to *any* relationship status. Disapproving social network members may think it is better for the person to be single than in a couple, and may, in a sense, “approve” of the singlehood if the alternative is a same-sex relationship; that approval may allow family opinions to carry weight among children potentially wanting to reconnect. In certain Christian communities, they believe that homosexuals, for example, should remain celibate (Rêgo-Moreira et al. 2024; Yarhouse et al. 2017). Further, even within their peer social network, sexually diverse (versus heterosexual) people may experience singlehood differently, such as LGBTQ+ men reporting greater singlehood satisfaction than their heterosexual peers (Træen and Kvalem 2022), as well as having higher rates of singlehood than heterosexuals or LGBTQ+ women (Gelles-Watnick 2023). As such, we examine whether the association between network opinions, subjective norms, and singlehood outcomes differs by sexual identity. Specifically, we explore whether friend approval (as well as subjective norms) plays a more central role for sexually diverse singles than heterosexual singles.

## 5 | The Current Research

The current study expands prior work by examining how both perceived network opinions and willingness to go along with the opinions of others (subjective norms) affect the satisfaction with singlehood while accounting for differences in the source of opinions and sexual identity of the single individual. We operationalized single individuals as those who self-identified as being single (whether casually dating or not), divorced, or widowed.

In this study, we focus on two core outcomes: commitment to singlehood—the extent to which individuals are dedicated to remaining single (Beauparlant et al. 2024)—and fear of being single—the concern that being single reflects personal failure or will lead to long-term loneliness or rejection (Spielmann et al. 2013). These constructs capture both positive attitudes and potential vulnerability as they relate to one’s single status, allowing us to examine how perceptions of one’s social network relate to intent to remain *and* anxiety surrounding one’s singlehood.

With regard to these two core outcomes, the present study had two primary aims. First, we examined the extent to which social network opinions predict singlehood outcomes—specifically, commitment to singlehood and fear of being single. Second, we assessed whether these associations differ between heterosexual and sexually diverse individuals. Drawing on the social network effect and Etcheverry and Agnew’s (2004) extension of Rusbult et al.’s (1998) investment model, we predicted that, after controlling for established investment model predictors (satisfaction, quality of alternatives, and investment), greater perceived approval from close network members (i.e., parents and friends) would be associated with greater commitment to singlehood (Hypothesis 1a) and lower fear of being single (Hypothesis 1b).

Consistent with prior work, we also predicted that subjective norms—defined as perceived approval weighted by motivation to comply—would show similar associations: positively predicting commitment (Hypothesis 2a) and negatively predicting fear (Hypothesis 2b). Finally, we hypothesized that friend approval would be a stronger predictor than parent approval among sexually diverse individuals (Hypothesis 3), such that parent opinion—whether measured as approval or as subjective norms—may not emerge as a significant predictor in this group.

Accordingly, hypotheses were tested separately within heterosexual and sexually diverse samples using two related but distinct operationalizations of social network influence: perceived approval (opinions alone) and subjective norms (opinions weighted by motivation to comply). By extending the social network effect to singlehood, this study provides new insight into how perceived approval from close others relates to singlehood experiences and whether the role of different network sources varies by sexual orientation.

## 6 | Method

Our study was preregistered. Herein, we describe only measures used in the present analyses. Preregistration, full survey materials, data, and analysis script are openly available at <https://researchbox.org/3658>.

### 6.1 | Power Consideration

Using the estimated average correlation coefficient in social psychology for interpersonal relationships research ( $r=0.32$ ; Lovakov and Agadullina 2021) and G\*Power (Faul et al. 2007),

a power analysis suggests that 500 responses provide 95% power to detect at least modest associations between network opinions and singlehood outcomes.

## 6.2 | Participants

People were eligible to participate in this study if they indicated in a screening survey that they self-identified as single and their friends and parents knew of their single status. Overall, 529 responses were collected from Prolific in October–November 2024. As preregistered, we excluded those who did not finish the survey ( $n=20$ ) or failed at least one of two attention checks ( $n=8$ ). This left a final sample of 501 single adults in the United States ( $M_{\text{age}} = 34.22$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 9.89$ ). Participants reported their gender identity (“What is your gender identity?”; response options: man, woman, transgender man, transgender woman, nonbinary, gender variant/nonconforming, and not indicated here): 46% identified as men, 47% women, 6% nonbinary/gender nonconforming, 2% transgender men, and 1% transgender women. Participants reported their race/ethnicity using a “select all that apply” format (response options: Asian or Asian American, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latinx, Native American or Alaska Native, Pacific Islander, White/Caucasian/European, Biracial/Multiracial, or not indicated here): 50% identified as White, 21% Black, 11% multiracial/multiethnic, 11% Asian, 6% Latinx, < 1% Native American, and < 1% Pacific Islander. Although people were screened to be single, and most (99%) reported being so, a few participants were not (indicating either being in a serious relationship,  $n=2$ , or married,  $n=1$ ). Singlehood length ranged from less than a year to 60 years ( $M_{\text{years}} = 10.56$ ,  $SD_{\text{years}} = 10.77$ ).

Sexual orientation was measured with the question, “What is your sexual orientation?” with the following response options: straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, pansexual, demisexual, and not indicated here. Participants were categorized as heterosexual if they self-identified as straight. For power, participants who selected any orientation other than straight were categorized as sexually diverse. Specifically, participants were categorized as sexually diverse if they self-identified as one of the following: bisexual (48%), gay (16%), asexual (13%), pansexual (11%), lesbian (8%), or had a nonheterosexual identity not included in the presented options (4%). Sex assigned at birth was not assessed, nor did we reclassify sexual orientation based on gender identity. With this categorization, there was a relatively equal number of heterosexual ( $n=256$ ) and sexually diverse ( $n=245$ ) individuals. Most participants’ close others were aware of their sexual orientation. Nearly all heterosexual participants and about two-thirds of sexually diverse participants said their parents knew, and most participants in both groups reported that their friends knew.

## 6.3 | Materials and Procedure

The study protocol was approved by the lead author’s university’s Institutional Review Board. After providing informed consent, participants completed the survey in approximately 8 min and received \$1.50 as compensation via Prolific.

Network opinions and motivations to comply with each source were first assessed in a randomized order. Next, the satisfaction, alternatives, investment, commitment, and fear of being single measures were presented in a randomized order within their respective block. Items within each questionnaire were randomized. Lastly, participants completed additional questionnaires and provided demographic information. Unless otherwise specified, all items were rated on a 7-point scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*), and composite scores for each scale were calculated by averaging relevant items.

### 6.3.1 | Social Network Opinions

We adapted Sinclair et al. (2014) Social Network Opinion scales to assess the perceived opinion of one’s singlehood from parents/guardians (eight items, four reversed;  $\alpha=0.83$ ) and friends (eight items, four reversed;  $\alpha=0.76$ ). Each 8-item scale included four items assessing approval and four items assessing disapproval with disapproval items (e.g., “How much do YOUR PARENT(S)/GUARDIAN(S) disapprove of you being single/your singlehood?” reverse-coded). Participants responded to items using a 7-point scale (1 = *Not at all*, 7 = *Very much*). Items were averaged to form composite scores of parent and friend opinions, with higher scores indicating social approval of one’s singlehood and lower scores indicating social disapproval.

### 6.3.2 | Subjective Norms

In line with Beauparlant et al. (2024), we assessed motivation to comply with two items: “How much do you care about whether your family approves of your relationship status?” and “How much do you care about whether your friends approve of your relationship status?” Participants responded to items using a 7-point scale (1 = *Not at all*, 7 = *Very much*). Subjective norms were computed by multiplying mean opinion scores by the corresponding motivation to comply, with higher scores indicating greater motivations to comply with perceptions that the network member approves of their singlehood.

### 6.3.3 | Investment Model for Singles Variables

We used the Investment Model Scale for Singles (Beauparlant et al. 2024), which assessed perceived *satisfaction* (three items;  $\alpha=0.85$ ), *quality of alternatives* (three items;  $\alpha=0.69$ ), *investment size* (three items;  $\alpha=0.74$ ), and *commitment* (four items,  $\alpha=0.92$ ) as they relate to one’s singlehood status. Beauparlant et al. (2024) obtained internal consistency ( $\alpha_s=0.60$ – $0.91$ ) and convergent validity ( $r_s \leq 0.67$ ) with other measures of similar constructs across two studies. Example items include “I feel satisfied with being single” (satisfaction item), “The people I might become involved with are very appealing” (alternatives item), “I feel very attached to being single—very strongly linked to my single lifestyle” (investment item), and “I am oriented toward the long-term future of being single (e.g., I imagine being single several years from now).” (commitment item). Items within each subscale were averaged to form individual composite scores.

**TABLE 1** | Correlations and means for measures.

Variables	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. Parent opinion	—								
2. Parent subj. norms	0.35***	—							
3. Friend opinion	0.43***	0.11*	—						
4. Friend subj. norms	0.15**	0.42***	0.35***	—					
5. Satisfaction	0.24***	-0.07	0.39***	0.06	—				
6. Alternatives	-0.10*	0.04	-0.09*	0.09*	-0.36***	—			
7. Investment	0.07	0.00	0.19***	0.08	0.60***	-0.30***	—		
8. Commitment	0.19***	-0.07	0.32***	0.04	0.83***	-0.46***	0.67***	—	
9. Fear of being single	-0.27***	0.13**	-0.34***	0.04	-0.55***	0.22***	-0.15***	-0.42***	—
10. Sexual orientation	0.01	-0.06	0.11*	0.09*	0.06	-0.06	0.02	0.08	-0.09*
<i>M</i>	4.15	11.25	4.58	13.32	4.21	4.35	3.39	3.86	3.74
<i>SD</i>	1.23	8.50	1.01	9.70	1.64	1.35	1.54	1.79	1.75

Note: *N* = 501. Higher scores on opinion measures indicate greater approval from that source. Sexual orientation was dummy coded: *Heterosexual* = 0, *Sexually Diverse* = 1.

\**p* < 0.05.

\*\**p* < 0.01.

\*\*\**p* < 0.001.

### 6.3.4 | Fear of Being Single

Participants completed the Fear of Being Single Scale (six items; e.g., “It scares me to think that there might not be anyone out there for me;” Spielmann et al. 2013). Higher scores reflect greater fear of being single ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ). Spielmann et al. (2013) obtained internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.75$ ) and convergent validity ( $r_s = 0.10$ – $0.51$ ) with other measures of similar constructs for this scale. See Table 1 for correlations and descriptives.

## 6.4 | Data Analysis

We examined associations involving perceived network opinions, subjective norms, and dimensions of one’s singlehood. The primary analytic strategy followed our preregistration, which involved hierarchical linear regressions conducted separately for heterosexual and sexually diverse participants. In each model, investment model variables (satisfaction, investment, and quality of alternatives) were entered at Step 1, followed by either perceived approval or subjective norms involving each source at Step 2 to assess their incremental predictive value. Exploratory analyses were conducted using the full combined sample to assess overall trends across sexual orientation groups. All analyses were conducted using an alpha level of 0.05 (two-tailed).

## 7 | Results

### 7.1 | Preliminary Analyses

Though not preregistered, regression analyses were conducted to assess direct associations between perceived network opinions and singlehood outcomes. As expected, we found

significant associations between network opinions, singlehood commitment, and fear of being single. However, subjective norms—whereby opinions were weighted by motivation to comply—were largely unrelated to outcome variables. The only significant association was among sexually diverse individuals between greater parent-related subjective norms and fear of being single ( $b = 0.03$ ,  $p = 0.026$ ). All other associations involving subjective norms were not significant ( $p_s > 0.05$ ). Below, we describe how perceived network approval was associated with each outcome among heterosexual and sexually diverse singles.

#### 7.1.1 | Associations Between Network Opinions and Singlehood Commitment

Among heterosexual participants, parent approval ( $b = 0.33$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and friend approval ( $b = 0.57$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) were associated with higher ratings of commitment to being single,  $F(2, 253) = 35.01$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $R^2 = 0.22$ . Although both opinions were associated with commitment among heterosexual singles, only friend opinion ( $b = 0.41$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) was associated with commitment for sexually diverse individuals, but parent opinion was not ( $b = -0.12$ ,  $p = 0.244$ ),  $F(2, 242) = 6.03$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ;  $R^2 = 0.05$ .

#### 7.1.2 | Associations Between Network Opinions and Fear of Being Single

There is a similar trend for fear of being single. Parent approval ( $b = -0.28$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ) and friend approval ( $b = -0.45$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) were associated with decreased fear of being single among heterosexual singles,  $F(2, 253) = 22.51$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $R^2 = 0.15$ . Similarly, friend approval was associated with less fear of being single for sexually diverse singles ( $b = -0.48$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ); however, the association between parent opinion and fear was not

**TABLE 2** | Associations between network opinions and singlehood outcomes among heterosexual and sexually diverse singles.

	Commitment						Fear of being single					
	Heterosexual			Sexually diverse			Heterosexual			Sexually diverse		
	<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	$\Delta R^2$
<b>Step 1 (Covariates)</b>			<b>0.72</b>			<b>0.80</b>			<b>0.36</b>			<b>0.36</b>
Satisfaction	<b>0.69</b>	0.05		<b>0.68</b>	0.04		<b>-0.69</b>	0.07		<b>-0.81</b>	0.07	
Alternatives	<b>-0.16</b>	0.05		<b>-0.27</b>	0.04		<b>0.21</b>	0.07		<b>-0.07</b>	0.07	
Investment	<b>0.26</b>	0.05		<b>0.27</b>	0.04		<b>0.27</b>	0.07		<b>0.35</b>	0.07	
<b>Step 2</b>			0.01 <sup>†</sup>			0.00			0.01 <sup>†</sup>			<b>0.02</b>
Parent opinion	0.11 <sup>†</sup>	0.06		-0.06	0.05		-0.09	0.08		-0.14 <sup>†</sup>	0.08	
Friend opinion	0.06	0.07		-0.03	0.06		-0.17	0.10		-0.16	0.10	
<b>Step 1 (Covariates)</b>			<b>0.72</b>			<b>0.80</b>			<b>0.36</b>			<b>0.36</b>
<b>Step 2</b>			0.00			<b>0.01</b>			0.01			0.01 <sup>†</sup>
Parent subjective norms	0.01	0.01		<b>-0.02</b>	0.01		0.00	0.01		<b>0.03</b>	0.01	
Friend subjective norms	0.00	0.01		0.01	0.01		0.01	0.01		0.00	0.01	

Note: *N* = 501. Heterosexual (*n* = 256). Sexually diverse (*n* = 245). Bold text indicates a significant relationship,  $p < 0.05$ . <sup>†</sup> $p < 0.10$ . Positive scores on opinion scales indicate higher levels of approval from that network member.

significant ( $b = -0.15$ ,  $p = 0.113$ ),  $F(2, 242) = 15.36$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $R^2 = 0.11$ .

## 7.2 | Confirmatory Analyses

### 7.2.1 | Network Opinions and Singlehood Outcomes (Hypotheses 1a and 1b)

We further examined whether links between network opinions and main outcome variables remained after accounting for other investment model predictors. Results of the preregistered hierarchical regression analyses for each sexual orientation group are presented in Table 2. At Step 1, investment model variables (satisfaction, alternatives, and investment) were entered as covariates. To test Hypotheses 1a and 1b, perceived parent and friend approval were entered at Step 2. To reiterate, we hypothesized that social network approval would be associated with greater singlehood commitment (Hypothesis 1a) and less fear of being single (Hypothesis 1b). Replicating prior research, covariates were significant ( $ps \leq 0.002$ ), except for alternatives and fear of being single ( $p = 0.318$ ).

*Singlehood commitment (Hypothesis 1a).* After accounting for covariates, neither parent nor friend approval significantly predicted singlehood commitment among heterosexual ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.01$ ,  $p = 0.053$ ) or sexually diverse participants ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.00$ ,  $p = 0.279$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 1a was not supported.

*Fear of being single (Hypothesis 1b).* Hypothesis 1b was also not supported. Neither parent nor friend opinion had a significant association with fear of being single for heterosexual singles after accounting for covariates ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.01$ ,  $p = 0.063$ ). While the change in  $R^2$  was significant among sexually diverse singles after accounting for covariates ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.02$ ,  $p = 0.012$ ), associations involving parent ( $b = -0.14$ ,  $p = 0.085$ ) and friend opinions ( $b = -0.16$ ,  $p = 0.112$ ) were not. Overall, contrary to Hypotheses 1a and 1b, parent and friend approval did not explain additional variance in singlehood outcomes beyond covariates.

### 7.2.2 | Subjective Norms and Singlehood Outcomes (Hypotheses 2a and 2b)

To test Hypotheses 2a and 2b and examine the role of motivations to comply, analyses were repeated with subjective norms at Step 2. To reiterate, we hypothesized that greater subjective norms would be associated with greater singlehood commitment (Hypothesis 2a) and less fear of being single (Hypothesis 2b). Covariates remained the same as in prior models. See Table 2 for results of the preregistered hierarchical regression analyses with subjective norms entered at Step 2.

*Singlehood commitment (Hypothesis 2a).* After accounting for covariates, neither parent-related nor friend-related subjective norms had an observable relationship with singlehood

**TABLE 3** | Associations between network opinions and singlehood outcomes among the full sample.

	Commitment			Fear of being single		
	<i>b</i>	SE	$\Delta R^2$	<i>b</i>	SE	$\Delta R^2$
<b>Step 1 (Covariates)</b>			<b>0.76</b>			<b>0.36</b>
Satisfaction	<b>0.69</b>	0.03		<b>-0.76</b>	0.05	
Alternatives	<b>-0.22</b>	0.03		0.07	0.05	
Investment	<b>0.27</b>	0.03		<b>0.33</b>	0.05	
<b>Step 2</b>			0.00			<b>0.01</b>
Parent opinion	0.10	0.04		<b>-0.12</b>	0.06	
Friend opinion	0.02	0.05		<b>-0.18</b>	0.07	
<b>Step 1 (Covariates)</b>			<b>0.76</b>			<b>0.36</b>
<b>Step 2</b>			0.00			0.01 <sup>†</sup>
Parent subjective norms	-0.01	0.01		0.01 <sup>†</sup>	0.01	
Friend subjective norms	0.00	0.01		0.01	0.01	

Note: *N* = 501. Bold text indicates a significant relationship,  $p < 0.05$ . <sup>†</sup> $p < 0.10$ . Positive scores on opinion scales indicate higher levels of approval from that network member.

commitment for heterosexual singles ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.00$ ,  $p = 0.419$ ). Among sexually diverse singles, greater parent-related subjective norm ratings were associated with *lower* (not higher, as we originally hypothesized) commitment ( $b = -0.02$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ); however, the overall change in  $R^2$  was small but significant ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.01$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ), and the association was in the opposite direction of our hypothesis. Thus, contrary to our expectations, Hypothesis 2a was not supported.

*Fear of being single (Hypothesis 2b).* Hypothesis 2b was not supported. Specifically, subjective norms had no detectable influence on fear for heterosexual ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.01$ ,  $p = 0.325$ ) or sexually diverse singles ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.01$ ,  $p = 0.072$ ). Although the change in  $R^2$  was not significant, greater parent subjective norms were associated with *more* fear among sexually diverse singles ( $b = 0.03$ ,  $p = 0.030$ ), also in the *opposite* direction of our hypothesis. Overall, Hypotheses 2a and 2b were not supported. Although some associations emerged among sexually diverse individuals, they were not in the predicted direction and therefore do not support the hypothesized association between subjective norms and singlehood outcomes.

### 7.2.3 | Relative Importance of Parent Versus Friend Opinions (Hypothesis 3)

Hypothesis 3 proposed that friend opinions would be more strongly associated with singlehood outcomes than parent opinions, particularly among sexually diverse individuals. As noted in the preliminary analyses, friend approval was consistently a stronger predictor of both singlehood commitment and fear of being single than parent approval. Among sexually diverse singles, friend approval significantly predicted greater commitment ( $b = 0.41$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and less fear of being single ( $b = -0.48$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), whereas parent approval was not significantly associated with either outcome ( $ps > 0.05$ ). Among heterosexual singles, both parent and friend approval were significantly

associated with commitment (parent:  $b = 0.33$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; friend:  $b = 0.57$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and fear (parent:  $b = -0.28$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ; friend:  $b = -0.45$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), but friend approval was shown to be a stronger predictor in both models.

Although subjective norms were not the focus of this specific hypothesis, it is worth noting that greater parent-related subjective norms were associated with increased fear of being single among sexually diverse participants ( $b = 0.03$ ,  $p = 0.026$ ); however, this was the only significant association and was not predicted. Taken together, these results provide partial support for Hypothesis 3, especially in the context of sexual orientation. Although friend approval did not explain variance *beyond* investment model predictors in confirmatory analyses, friend approval emerged as the more robust correlate of singlehood commitment and fear of being single across groups, with a particularly pronounced pattern among sexually diverse singles.

### 7.3 | Additional Analyses

As exploratory analyses, we reran the main analyses using the combined sample collapsing across sexual orientation (see Table 3). Both parent approval ( $b = -0.12$ ,  $p = 0.036$ ) and friend approval ( $b = -0.18$ ,  $p = 0.015$ ) were negatively associated with fear of being single ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.02$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ),  $F(5, 495) = 60.80$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $R^2 = 0.38$ . This is consistent with the social network effect, suggesting that approval from close others is related to more positive perceptions of one's relationship status, even if that status is single.

All other associations involving opinions or subjective norms were not significant ( $ps > 0.05$ ). When examined separately, friend and parent network opinions and subjective norms had no significant associations after accounting for other known predictors. Indeed, analyses revealed that neither network opinions

were significantly associated with singlehood commitment once other predictors were accounted for. A similar trend was found with subjective norms, replicating Beauparlant et al. (2024)'s finding that subjective norms did not explain additional variance in singlehood commitment. Taken together, these exploratory results suggest that network approval may play a role in alleviating anxieties about singlehood but is less influential in shaping individuals' active commitment to remaining single once core investment model variables are considered.

## 8 | Discussion

Using a sample of US single adults, this study examined whether the social network effect extends to how one feels about one's singlehood. Specifically, we evaluated the role of parent and friend opinions—both as perceived (dis)approval and compliance with opinions—in shaping commitment to singlehood and fear of being single, while also testing whether associations differed among heterosexual and sexually diverse single adults.

Overall, the results provided limited support for our preregistered hypotheses. After accounting for key covariates (satisfaction, investment, and alternatives), neither network approval nor subjective norms significantly explained additional variance in singlehood commitment or fear of being single (Hypotheses 1a and 2b). However, preliminary and exploratory analyses revealed meaningful patterns. Specifically, higher friend approval was consistently associated with stronger commitment to singlehood and reduced fear of being single, whereas associations involving parent approval were less consistent. These patterns were most pronounced among sexually diverse individuals, partially supporting Hypothesis 3 and suggesting that friends may serve as a more central source of support and validation for individuals in marginalized groups.

Notably, friend approval predicted more favorable singlehood outcomes across both heterosexual and sexually diverse participants, whereas parent approval had comparatively muted or nonsignificant links with singlehood outcomes among sexually diverse individuals. These findings align with research on “chosen family” and underscore the nuanced role of peer support in contexts where family relationships may be strained or carry heteronormative expectations (e.g., Blair and Pukall 2015). Among heterosexual participants, both sources of approval were significant predictors of outcomes, though friend approval generally demonstrated stronger associations which is consistent with research on the social network effect on relationships (Sinclair et al. 2015). Friend opinion matters more, at least in Western cultures.

Consistent with Beauparlant et al. (2024), our results affirm that the investment model's core components can be successfully adapted to singlehood: satisfaction with being single, quality of alternatives, and investment in single life each generally predicted commitment to remaining single. This alignment indicates theoretical continuity; fundamental drivers of commitment identified in romantic relationships similarly operate for those committed to staying single. Using a single-item measure of friend and family opinions, Beauparlant et al. (2024) explored subjective norms as correlates of singlehood commitment but

found that these external factors did not account for additional variance beyond core investment model constructs. However, their approach could not distinguish between family and friend influences or motivations to align with each other. The present study builds on this framework by examining these distinctions to offer a more nuanced understanding of how social networks influence singlehood experiences.

Drawing on the social network effect and Etcheverry and Agnew's (2004) framework, which added subjective norms to the investment model of relationship commitment, we measured both direct network approval and subjective norms (i.e., approval weighted by motivation to comply) from parents and friends. This approach yielded nuanced insights: In line with the social network effect and the role of opinion source, friends' opinions emerged as a particularly strong influence on singles' commitment-related outcomes, generally outweighing the impact of parental approval. In contrast, parent-related subjective norms were generally associated with more negative outcomes among sexually diverse individuals (less commitment, greater fear of being single), suggesting that parental attitudes toward singlehood may function differently in this group—perhaps reflecting ambivalence, conditional approval, or more complex family dynamics.

We utilized a US sample of heterosexual and sexually diverse singles, allowing for between-group analyses that revealed differences in how social network influences relate to singlehood outcomes across sexual orientations. In our data, friend approval predicted more positive singlehood outcomes (e.g., stronger commitment to singlehood, lower fear of being single) in both heterosexual and sexually diverse groups, echoing the importance of peer influence noted by the social network effect (Sinclair et al. 2015). However, parental approval had a comparatively muted influence among sexually diverse singles—often failing to reach significance after accounting for other factors—whereas it remained influential for heterosexual singles. This pattern suggests that sexually diverse individuals may rely more on friends (or “chosen family”) for validation and support (Blair and Holmberg 2008). Such a nuance extends prior findings by highlighting how network member type and participant identity intersect to shape commitment processes.

Our inclusion of fear of being single as an outcome further differentiates this work from earlier investment-model extensions. Whereas Beauparlant et al. (2024) centered on commitment to singlehood as one of the main outcomes, we demonstrate that social influences may also bear on singles' emotional well-being. Despite a significant increase in explained variance among the sexually diverse group after covariates, neither parent nor friend approval individually predicted fear of being single. Notably, we observed that higher parent-related subjective norms scores were sometimes linked with *greater* fear of being single—a counterintuitive result that challenges initial expectations based on the social network effect. As mentioned in the introduction, this could arise from familial disapproval of same-sex relationships—prevalent among approximately half of recently surveyed LGBTQ+ persons—leading them to approve of singlehood as a preferable alternative (Rêgo-Moreira et al. 2024; Yarhouse et al. 2017). That sort of approval may not be welcome, as ultimately, it is still a rejection.

This complexity offers nuance to the predominantly positive role of social support highlighted in past research. Research suggests that singles may experience greater well-being when they avoid harmful relational patterns (Girme et al. 2016) and foster meaningful, high-quality bonds with close others, such as friends and family (Fisher 2020; Girme et al. 2022). Our results complement these findings by suggesting that friend approval may help singles maintain a stronger sense of commitment to their singlehood while reducing fear about remaining single. This social affirmation may be especially meaningful for those resisting conventional relationship scripts or seeking autonomy over their relationship choices.

In sum, our findings both converge with and challenge previous work: we reaffirm the importance of social network attitudes, consistent with the broader frameworks of Etcheverry and Agnew (2004) and Beauparlant et al. (2024), while also exposing the conditional nature of associations. This study thereby builds on prior models by showing that *who* in the network expresses approval and how that approval is internalized can differentially shape singles' commitment to and comfort with that status. By extending these frameworks into the singlehood literature, we show how interpersonal feedback mechanisms can perpetuate or buffer against singlism—not just through overt stigma but also via normative expectations from close others.

## 8.1 | Limitations and Future Directions

Although our results offer new insights into the social dynamics of singlehood, some limitations warrant consideration and suggest directions for future inquiry. First, the correlational nature of our design precludes causal inference. Although analyses revealed associations between network approval and singlehood outcomes, we cannot determine whether social approval promotes greater commitment to singlehood or whether greater commitment to singlehood promotes social approval. Future research using experimental or longitudinal methods could help clarify this directionality. For instance, vignette-based designs (e.g., Wicks et al. 2025) could simulate scenarios in which a friend or family member either expresses concern (e.g., “You’ve been single too long”) or affirmation (e.g., “You seem fulfilled on your own”) to examine whether perceived feedback shapes singlehood-related outcomes.

Notably, our study relied on participants' perceptions of network approval rather than actual observed behaviors or communications. Perceived support holds psychological weight, yet it may differ from the support people actually receive. Comparing perceived versus expressed approval—especially across different relationships—could clarify how various forms of feedback influence singlehood adjustment. Additionally, our measure of subjective norms was based on a general “motivation to comply” framework, asking how much participants cared about parents' and friends' opinions. Although this aligns with common approaches to measuring subjective norms, it may not fully capture the complex motivations behind compliance. For some individuals, caring about others' views may reflect not admiration or respect, but fear of judgment, social obligation, or a desire to avoid conflict. For example, a single person may not personally value a parent's disapproval but still conform to their expectations to

maintain family harmony. These distinctions are especially relevant for individuals navigating marginalized identities or relational choices that challenge societal norms. Future research should examine estrangement status, prejudicial attitudes, and potentially religion-based celibacy recommendations as factors.

Although our sample was diverse in several demographic characteristics, we were limited in our ability to examine how intersecting identities—such as race, gender identity, and socioeconomic status—may shape social network influences. These identities likely affect who is viewed as a meaningful source of input, how approval or disapproval is interpreted, and the psychological impact of that feedback. Our categorization of the sexually diverse group clustered individuals having multiple sexual orientations whose network experiences may differ. For example, expectations surrounding dating and partnership may further differ for gay and lesbian individuals compared to asexual individuals (Tessler 2025). Future work should disaggregate these groups to further examine subgroup-specific dynamics. Relatedly, we focused on parents and friends, but other sources—such as siblings, extended family, mentors, or online communities—may also play a critical role in shaping how people experience their singlehood. Future research should consider a broader range of network members and explore how identity-based variation changes their influence.

The cultural context of the present study limits the generalizability of the findings. As previously mentioned, our study relied on a United States-based sample, which reflects a context where individual autonomy and romantic choice are generally emphasized, but this is not universal. Given that all participants lived in the US, future research should test whether similar patterns emerge across countries and cultures, as gendered and cultural norms differ and strongly shape singlehood experiences (Ochnik and Slonim 2020). In collectivistic or familism-oriented cultures, singlehood may be more heavily stigmatized, and marriage more strongly expected. It is reasonable to postulate that, in such settings, parental disapproval may carry greater weight and exert stronger psychological pressure—especially when singlehood is viewed as a failure to meet normative obligations. These dynamics align with tight-loose theory (Gelfand et al. 2011), which suggests that tighter cultures enforce stronger social norms and may amplify the relational consequences of deviating from them. Future work should examine how network approval operates across cultural settings and how individuals' alignment with cultural values like autonomy or interdependence moderates these relationships.

Finally, although some observed associations were in the expected direction, several associations did not reach statistical significance. Contrary to Etcheverry and Agnew's (2004) model, subjective norms did not account for additional variance after accounting for satisfaction, alternatives, and investment. Motives to comply were quite low, suggesting that participants also did not seem to care very much about whether their friends and family approved of their relationship status. This may partially explain the null findings. It is also possible that because singles are perceived as less of a coherent social group than coupled people (Fisher and Sakaluk 2020), the normative weight of others' opinions may simply be weaker—though not absent—in the domain of singlehood compared to romantic relationships. Given

network opinions were linked independent of the investment model variables, another possibility is that network approval influences singlehood commitment indirectly. For instance, others' opinions may shape satisfaction with singlehood or perceptions of alternatives, which then influence commitment. In this view, network feedback operates through mediated pathways rather than as a unique predictor once investment model variables are controlled. Future work should examine these potential indirect effects to clarify whether network approval indirectly impacts singlehood outcomes.

## 8.2 | Implications

Despite limitations, this study offers key contributions to the literature on social networks and singlehood. Extending Etcheverry and Agnew's (2004) approach to commitment processes and building directly on Beaparlant et al. (2024), we provide new evidence that singles are not impervious to their social environment. Although network opinions did not account for variance in singlehood commitment beyond core investment model variables, our findings suggest that the opinions of close others—particularly friends—still play a role in how individuals experience and make meaning of their singlehood. This influence may be particularly consequential for groups whose identities or lifestyles are considered to diverge from dominant cultural norms, such as sexually diverse individuals.

Importantly, preliminary analyses revealed that perceived disapproval was linked to greater fear of being single. This complements work linking social pressure to increased relational anxiety and diminished selectivity in dating, such as settling for less (e.g., selecting less responsive dating targets) due to greater fears of being single (Spielmann et al. 2013). Supporting research linking social pressures to enter a relationship and heightened fears of being single (e.g., Sprecher and Felmlee 2021), we found that this extends to perceived disapproval from one's network of one's singlehood. Network members, particularly friends, expressing approval of one's singlehood may help diminish pressure singles feel, allowing them to remain selective in their choice, whether that involves abstaining from having a partner or not. By highlighting how even subtle disapproval can undermine singlehood security, our results underscore the potential value of affirming social messages. Practitioners and advocates might consider developing interventions or communication strategies that encourage positive singlehood narratives within personal and cultural spheres. Theoretical models of singlehood could also be revised to explicitly incorporate the role of interpersonal network dynamics as both sources of support and pressure. Such frameworks would allow for more comprehensive understandings of singlehood that account not only for internal resources and structural stigma but also for everyday interactions that validate or threaten singles' autonomy.

## 9 | Conclusion

Just as network members hold opinions about one's romantic partners, they also hold opinions about one's singlehood. This study shows that these opinions—especially when voiced by close friends—may matter for how singles feel about their

current relationship status. Although our preregistered hypotheses were not fully supported after controlling for known predictors, exploratory analyses offered nuanced insights into the conditional nature of network opinions. Building on prior adaptations of the investment model, we find that social approval is associated with both commitment to and fear surrounding singlehood, but the strength and direction of this association vary by network source and sexual orientation. Together, findings underscore the importance of social network members in shaping experiences both in and out of relationships and highlight the value of peer affirmation in fostering security in relationship choices.

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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 ResearchBox at <https://researchbox.org/3658>.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> More recent estimates show a modest decline since 2019—from 44% in 2019 to 42% in 2023 (Fry 2025)—but the overall trend remains toward greater prevalence of singlehood compared to previous generations. Further, due to the legalization of same-sex marriage, the rates of same-sex marriage have risen since 2015, not declined (Sears et al. 2025).

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