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Trust Me, He's Not Right for You: Factors Predicting Trust in Network Members' Disapproval of a Romantic Relationship

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ABSTRACT

When individuals experience disapproval of their romantic relationship from friends or family members, how do they determine whether they should trust or believe that negative opinion? In this study, we examined a hypothesised model in which level of perceived relationship expertise, level of perceived bias, quality of evidence provided, and level of perceived approval for the romantic relationship from the broader social network predicted levels of trust/distrust in a disapproving opinion. Using hierarchical multiple regression, we found support for the hypothesised model in an online study ($N = 173$). Contrary to expectations, no differences in the model were found by relationship type (marginalised vs. non-marginalised). Implications and theoretical explanations for the findings are discussed.

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KEYWORDS

Social support; romantic relationships; marginalised relationships; social network effect

Whether from the classic *Archie* comics or the recent Netflix show *Riverdale*, many readers will be familiar with the romance between Archie Andrews and Veronica Lodge. Though Veronica cares for Archie, she also experiences ongoing disapproval of her relationship. In particular, her father, Hiram Lodge, strongly disapproves of Archie. What factors will predict whether Veronica trusts, or distrusts, Hiram's negative opinion of her relationship with Archie? Furthermore, would the process of evaluating Hiram's disapproving opinion vary if Veronica were in a relationship with Betty, or with Chuck Clayton, an African-American character? Such relationships (e.g. same-sex, inter-racial) are often marginalised (i.e. they may elicit disapproval by their very nature), and disapproval of them might therefore be interpreted differently by the recipient. The current study aims to address these issues.

The social network effect

Past research has consistently shown that social network approval plays a key role in romantic relationships, a phenomenon labelled 'the social network effect' (Felmlee, 2001; Felmlee & Sinclair, 2018). Individuals who perceive that others in their social network approve of their romantic relationships display greater relationship commitment (Cox, Wexler, Rusbult, & Gaines, 1997), romantic involvement (Parks & Adelman, 1983), relationship stability (Blair, 2012; Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010; Lehmilller & Agnew, 2007), love, satisfaction (Blair & Holmberg, 2008; Sinclair, Felmlee, Sprecher, & Wright, 2015; Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992; Holmberg & Blair, 2016), and relationship quality over time (Blair, 2012). In comparison, disapproval from social network members is associated with lower relationship satisfaction (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992) and higher risk for infidelity and divorce (Zak, Coulter, Giglio, Hall, & Sanford, 2002). Receiving disapproval may lead people to question their

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relationship, thus potentially contributing to lower relationship quality and satisfaction (Felmlee, 2001; Zak et al., 2002) and eventually to relationship dissolution (Blair, 2012; Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992). Alternatively, poor relationship quality might encourage individuals to seek out disapproving opinions to validate their growing dissatisfaction (i.e. self-verification theory; Lecky, 1945). Either way, social network disapproval and poor relationship outcomes seem to co-occur.

Research on 'marriage' or 'relationship' work has found interesting patterns in terms of how disclosure of relationship issues to social network members can shape the experience of individuals within the relationship (Helms, Crouter, & McHale, 2003). Discussing relationship issues with social network members more than discussing issues with one's own spouse or partner has been associated with reduced relationship well-being (Helms et al., 2003). However, this research has largely focused on the perspective of the person within the relationship disclosing to network members and has not evaluated the other side of the dynamic. Thus, we know much less about how individuals within relationships assess the explicitly or implicitly communicated opinions of social network members.

Sensing that others disapprove of one's romantic relationships is a relatively common experience (Holmberg, Jenson & Blair, 2017). For example, Holmberg and colleagues found that 80.5% of participants in a large online survey indicated that they had experienced disapproval of a relationship at least once. Thus, we know that disapproval of a relationship is a common experience that is associated with many negative outcomes; however, we still know very little about the dynamics of how social network members' opinions of a romantic relationship are sought out, received, or understood.

Uncertainty reduction theory provides a potential explanation as to why people might seek out or attend to others' opinions of their romantic relationships (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). This theory suggests that the self, the partner, and the relationship constitute three sources of potential uncertainty within romantic relationships, and uncertainty motivates information seeking. When uncertain in any of these areas, individuals will seek input from important people in their social network to help clarify their own views, particularly in the early stages of a relationship. If the opinions of network members are approving of the romantic relationship, such approval can help to reduce uncertainty, potentially leading to a more satisfying and stable relationship (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999; Sprecher, 2011). Similar logic applies if social network members disapprove of the romantic relationship. Disapproval may encourage the uncertain person to end the relationship, therefore eliminating ongoing uncertainty about the suitability of their partner.

Evaluating opinions

Uncertainty reduction theory (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999) suggests when individuals will be motivated to seek out the opinions of others regarding their romantic relationships. However, previous research has not investigated what factors predict whether the negative opinions of others are believed/trusted, versus disregarded. Fortunately, the question of what factors predict whether the views of others are heeded as valid and trustworthy, and therefore prove persuasive, has a long history within social psychology. Rooted in classic research on persuasion, we propose four key predictors of the perceived trustworthiness of a disapproving relationship opinion: perceived relationship expertise, quality of evidence, broader social network approval, and perceived bias. These variables emphasise the key roles of the communicator, the message content, and perceived social norms in shaping persuasion.

Perceived relationship expertise. People may be more likely to trust another's opinion of their relationship if they view that person as a relationship expert. An expert might be someone who is seen to have good information to provide about relationships, because of specialised training (e.g. they are a relationships counsellor), relevant personal experience (e.g. their own past or current relationships have been particularly high-quality), or a solid track record (e.g. they have provided high-quality advice about relationships in the past, whether to the current participant or to others).

In this initial study, we do not sort out different sources of perceived expertise, but instead simply ask participants to rate whether a social network member is perceived to be a good person to turn to for relationship advice.

French and Raven (1959) suggested that one's perceived expertise and knowledge in a particular area increase one's influence. Similarly, Kelman (1958) theorised that social influence occurs through a process of internalisation, wherein one comes to hold the same beliefs as the source of influence. According to Kelman (1958), if the source of information is deemed to be credible, internalisation is more likely to occur. Hence, if disapproving social network members appear to have a credible, consistent history in assessing how healthy relationships work, their opinions will likely be trusted more. Therefore, our first hypothesis (H1) is that there will be a positive association between perceived relationship expertise and trust in a social network member's disapproving opinion.

Evidence. Past research suggests that the strength of an opinion increases when the opinion is based on a substantial body of knowledge (Wood, 1982). Petty and Cacioppo (1986) argue that when an issue is especially important to individuals, they tend to be more resistant to persuasion and more prone to develop counterarguments. Such motivated individuals tend to be more resistant to persuasive attempts that rely on peripheral or heuristic routes. Instead, they will be more inclined to be persuaded via the central route, using well-reasoned arguments and evidence. In other words, individuals in romantic relationships will be more likely to be convinced that their romantic relationship is unsuitable if social network members support their opinion with logical reasons and compelling evidence. For example, network members might provide a carefully thought-out justification as to why the members of a couple are not well-suited in terms of their personality or values, or they might provide solid evidence that a partner has engaged in inappropriate behaviour (e.g. infidelity). In contrast, less well-reasoned opinions might simply consist of having a 'bad feeling' about a romantic partner, or stating the couple are poorly matched without being able to explain why. In this preliminary study, we left it up to participants to determine what constitutes solid evidence from their own perspective. Thus, our second hypothesis (H2) posits that there will be a positive association between perceived quality of evidence and trust in the social network member's opinion.

Broader social network approval/disapproval. Opinions of other members of the social network might be another relevant factor in evaluating a specific individual's disapproving opinion about a romantic relationship. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2005; Ajzen, 1991) suggests that normative beliefs (i.e. beliefs regarding how others believe one should think or act), are strong predictors of behavioural intentions. If others in our social network think we should feel or act a particular way, we are more likely to do so. In line with this theory, Etcheverry and Agnew (2004) found that individuals' perceptions of what others in their social network thought about their romantic relationship predicted relationship commitment and longevity.

Thus, when deciding how to handle her father's disapproval, Veronica is likely to consider what others in her social network think. If it turns out most of her other friends and family also disapprove of Archie, her father's negative opinion is supported, and she will be more likely to trust the opinion. However, if most of her other friends and family approve of her relationship, then her father becomes the 'odd man out', and she may be more likely to decide that her father's opinion is not to be trusted in this instance. Therefore, our third hypothesis (H3) posits that there will be a negative association between perceptions of broader social network approval and trust in a specific social network member's disapproving opinion.

Perceived bias. Extensive research has documented that people assume their own perceptions of the world are authentic and will be shared with other truthful and open-minded people, a phenomenon labelled naive realism (Ross & Ward, 1996). This belief motivates people to search for an explanation when they perceive others do not agree with them. One frequent explanation

they reach is that others' opinions are simply biased (Pronin, Lin, & Ross, 2002). Results from three studies conducted by Pronin and colleagues showed that other people's opinions are frequently viewed as stemming from some form of personal bias, whereas one's own opinions tend to be seen as more objective and accurate.

Perceptions that others are biased may also apply when interpreting relationship disapproval. There are many potential sources of bias that could be drawn on to explain why others disapprove of one's relationship: jealousy, irrational dislike of the partner, projection of the social network member's own past relationship problems onto the individual's relationship, etc. In general, we hypothesise (H4) that greater perceived bias will be associated with lower levels of trust in a social network member's opinion.

One specific type of perceived bias might be particularly salient for certain types of couples: bias against their romantic relationship because of its very nature. Lehmilller and Agnew (2006) define a marginalised relationship as 'a non-traditional romantic involvement in which couple members experience social disapproval as a result of their union' (p. 41). Past research has focused on visibly marginalised relationships (i.e. ones where the couple's relationship type is immediately visible, such as mixed-race, same-sex, and highly age-discrepant couples). Regardless of the source of marginalisation, those in marginalised relationships tend to perceive less approval for their relationship, and more bias and discrimination against their relationship type, compared to those in non-marginalised relationships (i.e. traditional or normative relationships, where the partners are of different sexes, but similar in terms of race, age, social background, etc.; Blair & Holmberg, 2008; Lehmilller & Agnew, 2006).

For individuals in marginalised relationships, attributing perceived disapproval of their relationship to bias may be a very salient explanation. According to Crocker and Major's (1989) theory of attributional ambiguity, making external attributions for negative feedback (e.g. attributing disapproval to a social network member's bias against their type of relationship) could potentially serve to protect mood and self-esteem more than making internal attributions (i.e. that there are in fact problems with the relationship; see Crocker & Major, 1989; Mendes, McCoy, Major, & Blascovich, 2008). Thus, our final hypothesis (H5) is that the negative association between perceived bias and trust in the social network member's opinion will be stronger for those in marginalised relationships than those in non-marginalised relationships.

Current study

More broadly, the current study will also investigate whether additional aspects of the hypothesised model shown in [Figure 1](#), other than perceived bias, operate differently between individuals in marginalised versus non-marginalised relationships. Given that very little research has examined these factors to date, we will conduct exploratory analyses to assess whether the strength of association between predictor variables and trust varies as a function of relationship type (i.e. marginalised vs. non-marginalised).

In summary, the current study seeks to test the hypothesised model as outlined in [Figure 1](#). Specifically, when deciding whether to trust a social network member's disapproval of one's romantic relationship, it is hypothesised that:

H1: Perceived relationship expertise will be positively associated with trust.

H2: Perceived quality of evidence will be positively associated with trust.

H3: Broader social network approval of the relationship will be negatively associated with trust.

H4: Perceived bias will be negatively associated with trust.

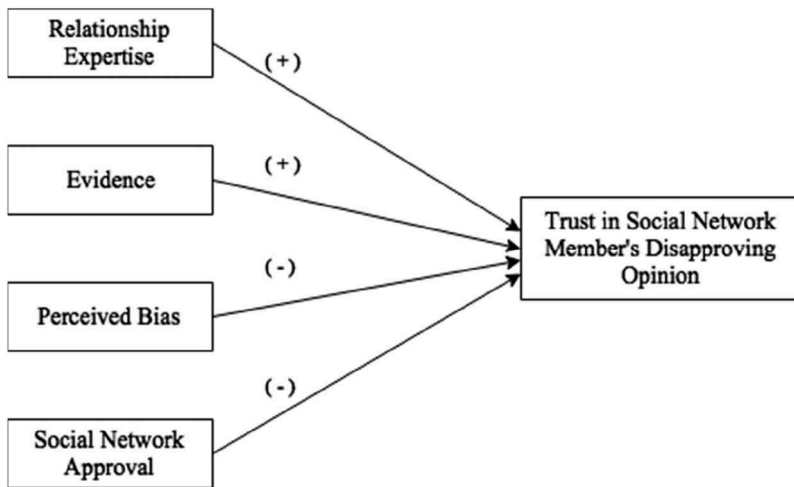


Figure 1. Hypothesised model: factors associated with the evaluation of the social network member's disapproving opinion.

H5: The negative association between perceived bias and trust will be stronger for those in marginalised relationships than those in non-marginalised relationships.

RQ1: We will explore whether other aspects of the model (e.g. strength of associations between other predictor variables and trust) vary by relationship type.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited through advertisements on social media platforms, flyers, classroom announcements, and MTurk. In addition, emailed invitations were sent to participants who had taken part in previous studies by the authors and had agreed to be contacted when future studies became available. This database contains relatively high numbers of LGBTQ+ participants, as some previous studies had targeted this population.

Participants in the current study had to be 18 years or older, able to read and write in English, and currently in a romantic relationship of any length or type. A total of 173 participants completed the measures for the current study. The majority of participants (73.4%) identified as women, 79.8% were White, and 64.2% identified as straight. The average age was 32.6 years and the average relationship length was 6.35 years. A more thorough overview of demographics can be found in [Table 1](#).

Procedure

After reading a brief description of the study, participants completed a screening survey, in which they indicated if they had any friends or any family members who currently disapproved of their current romantic relationship, even mildly. Those who had no disapproving network members (0.5%) were not eligible for the current study. Those who had both disapproving friends and family members (49.8%) were randomly assigned to complete questions about one group or the other. Those who had only disapproving friends (19.7%) or only disapproving family members (30%) answered questions about that group only. Note that we initially explored whether friend or family status moderated any aspects of the model. As it did not, it is not discussed further.

Table 1. Demographics for all participants (N = 173).

	N	%
Average Age in Years	32.6	
Average Relationship Length in Years	6.35	
Relationship Stage		
Casually Dating	8	4.6%
Seriously Dating	81	46.8%
Engaged	19	11%
Married or Equivalent	65	37%
Gender Identity		
Woman	124	73.4%
Man	38	22.5%
Non-Binary	3	1.8%
Not Listed	4	2.4%
Sexual Identity		
Lesbian	17	9.8%
Gay	9	5.2%
Bisexual	24	13.9%
Straight	111	64.2%
Queer	12	6.9%
Ethnicity		
White	138	79.8%
Black	8	4.6%
Mixed-Race	9	5.2%
Latinx	6	3.5%
Asian	11	6.3%
Not Listed	1	0.6%
Religion		
Christianity	66	39.3%
Judaism	4	2.4%
No Religion/Atheist	72	42.9%
Not Listed	26	15.5%
Origin Social Class		
Working Class	49	29.2%
Lower Middle Class	28	16.7%
Middle Class	68	40.5%
Upper Middle Class	23	13.7%
Current Social Class		
Working Class	53	31.7%
Lower Middle Class	40	24.0%
Middle Class	58	34.7%
Upper Middle Class	16	9.6%

Participants listed the names or aliases of up to five network members in the relevant group who disapproved of their relationship (average number provided was 3.5, with 53.5% listing the full 5 requested), and completed additional information about each (e.g. how strongly they disapproved, whether they were willing to contact each individual to take part in a parallel study). If the participant was not willing to invite anyone else to the parallel study, they were immediately directed to complete the current study, with regards to the most disapproving network member on their list. Participants who indicated they were willing to invite one or more network members to participate in the parallel study completed the current study with regards to the most disapproving network member they were willing to contact. All participants then completed the main online survey, which consisted of measures relevant to the current study, described below, as well as others. At the end of the study, participants were debriefed, and compensation was awarded.

For completing the screening study, MTurk participants ($n = 66$; 38.2% of the sample) were compensated with approximately \$0.75, and all other participants ($n = 107$, 61.8% of the sample) were compensated with a single entry into a series of prize draws (monthly prize draws of \$50, and a grand prize draw of \$500 at study completion). For completion of the main study, participants were compensated with five additional prize draw entries (for those who did not wish to invite anyone to participate in the parallel study), or payment of \$10 (for those who did).

Measures

Several measures were constructed for the current study, as no pre-existing measures existed in the literature. See Appendices A to D on OSF (<https://osf.io/42ymd/>) for the complete text of all measures. Table 2 shows descriptive statistics for each measure. All measures showed good to excellent internal consistency.

Demographics

Participants answered a series of demographic questions; see Table 1 for details.

Marginalisation status

Participants were shown a long list of categories to which their relationship might belong and were asked to check all that applied. In our primary analyses, to remain consistent with previous research on marginalised relationships (e.g. Lehmilller & Agnew, 2006), we defined a marginalised relationship as being in a self-reported same-sex, mixed-race, or age-discrepant relationship. Specifically, participants who checked off one or more of 'Same-sex (Your partner is the same sex as you)', 'Mixed-race (Your partner has a different race/ethnicity than you)', or 'Age-discrepant (There is a substantial age difference between you and your partner)' as describing their current romantic relationship were coded 1 in all analyses ($n = 77$; 44.5%). All others were categorised as non-marginalised (coded 0 in all analyses; $n = 96$; 55.5%).

Trust in the social network member's opinion

Four questions were created for the current study to determine if the participant considered the network member's opinion about the romantic relationship to be valid, reliable, and trustworthy: for example, 'I trust <this person's> opinion about my romantic relationship' and 'When <this person> states an opinion about my romantic relationship, I tend to listen closely, and believe it.' A 7-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* was provided for this, and all subsequent, measures. In all cases, <this person> was replaced with the social network member's name or alias as provided by the participant.

Exposure to partner

In all main and supplemental analyses (<https://osf.io/42ymd/>), we controlled for the extent of opportunity the social network member had to get to know the participant's partner, given the likelihood of this construct correlating with core model variables. For example, those who have spent very little time with the partner are likely to be viewed as having lower-quality evidence for disapproval. These variations in exposure due to individual circumstance should be accounted for, but are not in themselves especially theoretically interesting. We therefore controlled for degree of exposure to the partner, effectively setting all participants statistically to an average level of prior exposure, before proceeding to our core variables.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics on all study variables and independent samples t-tests comparing by relationship type.

Measure	α	Descriptive Statistics			Comparing Groups
		Overall $M (SD)$	Marginalised $M (SD)$	Non-marginalised $M (SD)$	Marginalised Vs. Non-Marginalised $T(CI)$
Trusting SNM's Opinion	.92	2.59 (1.74)	2.37 (1.66)	2.76 (1.79)	1.459 (–.137, .911)
Exposure	.92	3.38 (1.91)	3.16 (1.88)	3.57 (1.93)	1.351 (–.183, .976)
Relationship Expertise	.94	3.04 (1.54)	2.97 (1.45)	3.10 (1.62)	.505 (–.350, .591)
Evidence	.96	2.97 (1.94)	2.81 (1.88)	3.10 (1.99)	.981 (–.297, .883)
Social Network Approval	.94	5.28 (1.61)	5.40 (1.57)	5.17 (1.63)	–1.290 (–.759, .159)
Perceived Bias	.95	5.74 (1.51)	5.91 (1.25)	5.61 (1.68)	–1.051 (–.744, .225)

All measures were measured on a 7-pt Likert scale, ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*.

Six items were created to assess whether the participant felt the disapproving social network member had enough exposure to the participant's partner to form a valid opinion about the relationship. Sample items are '<This person> has spent enough time with my partner to be able to reach an informed opinion about them' and '<This person> has seen my partner enough in various contexts to really know what they are like.'

Relationship expertise

Participants' perceptions of the individual's general ability to assess relationships accurately was assessed using a modified version of the Relationship Expertise scale (Etcheverry & Agnew, 2016). Higher scores on this measure indicated that the participant felt the individual was more of a relationship expert: for example, 'In general, I feel <this person> has a good understanding of what makes a romantic relationship succeed or fail' and 'In general, this person's advice on romantic relationships is valuable.'

Evidence

Six questions assessed whether participants felt the individual had provided strong reasons, backed by solid evidence, to support their disapproving opinion: for example, '<This person> has offered compelling reasons for disapproving of my romantic relationship' and '<This person> has legitimate evidence behind their disapproving opinion of my romantic relationship.'

Broader social network approval

The level of general network approval for the current romantic relationship, as perceived by the participant, was measured using a five-item modified version of the Normative Beliefs measure by Etcheverry and Agnew (2004). The original items, which focused on a specific network member, were modified to assess general perceptions across the relevant network group (friends or family). For example, the original item 'This person thinks that I should continue in my romantic relationship' was changed to 'In general, my friends think that I should continue in my romantic relationship.'

Perceived bias

Seven items assessed whether the participant felt the network member's opinion was generally biased, with the exact source of the bias left unspecified: for example, '<This person's> opinion is based in their biased views, rather than what's best for me' and 'I believe <this person's> own issues might be clouding their view of my romantic relationship.'

Commitment

Additional post-hoc analyses, discussed later, were conducted using participants' level of commitment to their romantic partners. This construct was measured using the 7-item commitment subscale of the Investment Model (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). A sample item is 'I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner.'

Results

Preliminary analyses

Preliminary descriptive analyses revealed that most of the variables showed moderately high levels of skewness and/or kurtosis, indicating non-normal distributions. All analyses were therefore conducted using bootstrapping (Efron, 1979), a non-parametric technique that uses the original dataset to conduct random resampling with replacement, and recalculates the analysis for many iterations (here, 1,000). Bootstrapping provides a 95% confidence interval of the distribution of the effects to determine the direction of the association. It does not assume underlying normal distributions and is

therefore generally a more accurate, as well as a more powerful, method for testing hypotheses when variables are not normally distributed (Efron, 1979).

Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations for each model variable, overall and by relationship type (compared using independent-samples *t*-tests). On average, participants had a negative view of the network member's opinion about their relationship, reporting relatively low levels of trust, perceived expertise, and perceived evidence quality, and high levels of perceived bias. They perceived relatively high levels of approval for the relationship from other network members. There were no relationship type differences, with those in marginalised and non-marginalised relationships evaluating the disapproving opinion similarly.

Table 3 shows correlations between all model variables. The analyses provided preliminary support for H1-H4, as all model variables were significantly correlated with trust, and in the hypothesised directions (see bolded correlations).

Main analyses

A four-step hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to test the hypotheses, with results shown in Table 4. At Step One, the network member's level of exposure to the partner was entered as a control variable. Greater exposure to the partner predicted trusting the individual's opinion more, accounting for 9.2% of the variance in trust.

At Step Two, the four main model variables were entered to test H1-H4. These variables together accounted for an additional 69.1% of the variance in trust. As seen in Table 4, H1-H3 were supported. Greater perceived relationship expertise, greater perceived quality of evidence, and lower levels of perceived bias were each strong and significant unique predictors of trust in the network member's opinion, in the hypothesised directions. However, H4 was not supported in the full model. Although broader social network approval was associated with trust at the bivariate level (see Table 3), when other model variables were included, it had no unique variance to add, and was therefore non-significant.

At Step Three, relationship type and the interaction of relationship type by perceived bias were added, to test H4. H4 was not supported: contrary to expectations, the association between perceived bias and trust did not differ as a function of relationship type.

At Step Four, the three remaining interaction terms (i.e. relationship type by each of relationship expertise, quality of evidence, and social network approval) were added, to assess the RQ. The answer to the research question was negative: no other aspects of the model varied by relationship type.

Follow-up analyses

Although several hypotheses were supported, the predicted interaction between relationship type and perceived bias was not significant. Furthermore, it was surprising that those in marginalised relationships did not perceive more bias, or trust the network members' disapproving opinions less,

Table 3. Correlations between model variables.

	Trust in Opinion	Exposure	Relationship Expertise	Evidence	Social Network Approval	Perceived Bias
Trust in Opinion	1					
Exposure	.302**	1				
Relationship Expertise	.803**	.231**	1			
Evidence	.793**	.301**	.728**	1		
Social Network Approval	-.325**	-.022	-.266**	-.323**	1	
Perceived Bias	-.769**	-.326**	-.689**	-.667**	.373**	1

**significant $p < .01$, *significant $p < .05$; Bolded numbers indicate significant correlations between model variables and trust in the SNM's disapproving opinion.

Table 4. Results of hierarchal multiple regression predicting trust in social network member's opinion.

	<i>b</i>	SE <i>b</i>	LLCI	ULCI	ΔR^2
Step 1					.092
Exposure	.277	.071	.134	.418	
Step 2					.691
Exposure	.020	.035	-.051	.097	
Relationship Expertise	.397	.069	.251	.523	
Evidence	.293	.065	.163	.415	
Social Network Approval	-.022	.043	-.110	.045	
Perceived Bias	-.343	.084	-.499	-.176	
Step 3					.001
Exposure	.018	.036	-.053	.098	
Relationship Expertise	.401	.070	.253	.530	
Evidence	.291	.067	.167	.417	
Social Network Approval	-.022	.043	-.109	.050	
Perceived Bias	-.329	.082	-.475	-.171	
Relationship Type	-.122	.129	-.367	-.126	
Rel. Type X Perceived Bias	-.032	.100	.743	-.198	
Step 4					.006
Rel. Type X Perceived Bias	.094	.200	-.259	.533	
Rel. Type X Relationship Expertise	.012	.133	-.244	.272	
Rel. Type X Evidence	.166	.130	-.097	.416	
Rel. Type X Social Network Approval	.080	.085	-.085	.247	

b, unstandardised regression coefficient; SE *b*, standard error of regression coefficient; LLCI, lower limit of 95% confidence interval; ULCI, upper limit of 95% confidence interval; bolded effects signify significance at $p < .05$; All samples were run using bootstrapping with 1000 samples.

than those in non-marginalised relationships (c.f. Blair & Pukall, 2015). Consequently, additional post-hoc analyses were conducted to explore potential explanations. The details of these analyses are available in the Supplemental Materials (see <https://osf.io/42ymd/>). Briefly, the lack of group differences on the bias variable were not accounted for by the specific way we defined marginalisation, or by whether the network members had previous experience being in a marginalised relationship themselves. Additional analyses focusing on perceived *prejudice* (i.e. a very specific form of perceived bias, focused on the individual's opinion being driven by biased views of the partner's social group or identity) showed precisely the hypothesised patterns. Compared to those in non-marginalised relationships, those in marginalised relationships perceived more prejudice towards their relationship, and that prejudice was a significantly stronger predictor of reduced trust. Thus, perceived *prejudice* showed differential effects by relationship type, but the broader construct of perceived *bias* did not.

Motivated cognition might be at play, in which all participants denigrate disapproving opinions as biased, to help maintain their own positive view of their relationship. To test this supposition, a regression equation was run predicting perceived bias using self-reported commitment to the partner, along with relationship type and the interaction between the two variables. As can be seen in Table 5, there was a strong and significant association, such that the more committed participants were to their partner, the more they perceived the disapproving network member as biased. Furthermore, this association was not moderated by relationship type; both those in marginalised and non-marginalised relationships showed the effect to the same extent.

Discussion

Main model

We began this paper with the familiar relationship of Veronica and Archie, seeking to determine what factors would predict Veronica trusting (or distrusting) her father's negative opinion of her relationship with Archie. We successfully identified three key predictors of trust in the network member's opinion: Veronica's trust in her father is associated with viewing her father as

Table 5. Results of hierarchal multiple regression predicting perceived bias.

	<i>b</i>	SE <i>b</i>	LLCI	ULCI	ΔR^2
Step 1					.106
Exposure	-.257	.066	-.386	-.128	
Step 2					.158
Exposure	-.199	.059	-.319	-.086	
Commitment to Partner	.569	.118	.334	.777	
Step 3					.021
Exposure	-.193	.057	-.311	-.091	
Commitment to Partner	.720	.130	.463	.931	
Relationship Type	.182	.205	-.235	.589	
Rel. Type X Commitment to Partner	-.399	.246	-.865	.143	

b, unstandardised regression coefficient; SE *b*, standard error of regression coefficient; LLCI, lower limit of 95% confidence interval; ULCI, upper limit of 95% confidence interval; bolded effects signify significance at $p < .05$; All samples were run using bootstrapping with 1000 samples.

a relationship expert, free from bias, who has presented high-quality evidence to support his opinion.

As this study was the first to investigate predictors of trust, there were many predictors that might have been included, and of course future research may identify others that should be considered. Still, in this initial effort, we were apparently successful in identifying key predictors, as they together accounted for 69.1% of the variability in trust scores, a very high amount. Furthermore, each of these three variables was a strong and significant unique predictor of trust, despite them having considerable overlap. As seen in Table 3, these three variables were all very strongly inter-related, with correlations in the .60-.70+ range. When network members were viewed as more expert, not surprisingly they were also seen as presenting better evidence and being less biased. Nonetheless, each of these three variables still had substantial unique, non-overlapping variance to contribute to the equation.

Of course, given our cross-sectional design, we cannot determine the precise causal ordering amongst these variables. Perhaps people are objective, first weighing the quality of evidence provided, then making associated assessments of expertise and bias, and finally reaching a logical conclusion as to the appropriate amount of trust to grant to another's opinion. Alternatively, they may instead decide instinctively that they distrust an uncomfortable opinion, and then reason backwards, assuming anyone who offers such an unwelcome opinion must be biased, non-expert, and possess weak evidence. Future research should track these processes longitudinally and/or using experimental methodologies, to attempt to sort out the causal sequences involved. For example, participants could be presented with approving versus disapproving opinions of their relationship and asked to assess the relationship expertise of the judge. If identical judges are rated as being less expert when they provide negative rather than positive opinions, it would be evidence for motivated cognition in this area.

Causal ordering might potentially explain why the broader social network's opinion was not a significant predictor of trust when included in the model with the other variables. It was significantly negatively associated with trust at the bivariate level, albeit at a weaker level than the other predictors (see Table 3). This finding is consistent with the consensus principle of persuasion (Cialdini, 1993), which states that widely-held views tend to be the most persuasive. However, when added to the model with the other variables, broader network views no longer had any unique variance to contribute (see Table 4). It overlapped with the other predictor variables (see Table 3) and that overlapping variance seemed to represent the key component of its explanatory power. One possibility is that broader social network approval serves as a signal that the social network member's disapproval is unusual and unexpected, and therefore requires further in-depth processing. We know that high consensus is often interpreted as evidence of objective truth or 'correctness,' (Erb, Bohner, Schmäzle, & Rank, 1998; Kelley, 1967; Mackie, 1987); thus, anything that

counters the consensus (in this case, a disapproving opinion) may become salient and trigger additional processing. However, research on persuasion and normative/informational social influence (Bohner, Moskowitz, & Chaiken, 1995; Martin & Hewstone, 2003) has noted that only evidence evaluated as strong or high in quality can override the consensus (majority) opinion in favour of the minority opinion. Thus, when a social network member's opinion diverges from the consensus of the rest of the network, the evaluator may begin to assess the quality of their evidence, as well as other features of the dissenter, such as whether they may be biased or lack the expertise to provide a 'valid' opinion capable of being trusted over and above the social network's consensus (e.g. the majority opinion). Ultimately, these other factors may then become the more proximal and powerful predictors of trust.

Future research must focus on developing a more in-depth understanding of each of the predictor variables identified here. With respect to relationship expertise, we know very little about what makes us evaluate others as relationship experts. For example, do we base such judgements on individuals' past success in their own relationships, or on their ability to provide good advice for others' relationships, including our own? Do we form a distinct judgement of someone as a relationship expert, or is it a more global assessment, wherein individuals who generally provide good advice on other issues are simply assumed to be relationship experts? Further research should seek to identify predictors of perceived relationship expertise, and also assess whether those factors actually predict superior skills in providing relationship advice or predicting relationship outcomes.

Similarly, more work is needed to identify what is perceived to constitute high-quality evidence that one is in a bad or unsuitable relationship. While some past research has explored the *reasons* that people disapprove of romantic relationships (Holmberg, Jenson & Blair, 2017), there is no present research assessing which reasons are considered more convincing or legitimate.

Bias is particularly interesting, as one person's perceived high-quality evidence might very well constitute another person's perceived bias. For example, Veronica's father might believe, with ample supporting research and statistics, that relationships between those of different social classes are less likely to succeed. He may therefore consider his disapproval of Veronica's relationship with Archie to be perfectly well-justified. Veronica, however, may believe that others should be judged solely on their personal characteristics, never on their social group, and therefore view Hiram's consideration of Archie's social class as clear evidence of his bias. Here, the two agree on the reason for Hiram's disapproval, but differ substantially in the interpretation of the validity of that reason as a basis for relationship disapproval.

The two may also differ in their perceptions of the reasons underlying Hiram's disapproval. Veronica may assume that Hiram is disapproving for biased reasons (e.g. an unreasonable disapproval of Archie based solely on his working-class background). Hiram may protest that his disapproval actually stems from more personal concerns, such as seeing Archie as a self-centred young man who is unable to decide between Veronica or her best friend Betty.

Notably, even if Hiram and Veronica can agree on the reasons for his disapproval, she will most likely still perceive his reasons as being more driven by bias. Past research has shown that we tend to rate ourselves as being more objective than others (Armor, 1999) and that we tend to perceive more bias in others' opinions than in our own (Pronin et al., 2002). In particular, we have a tendency to label dissenting (or disapproving) opinions as being extremely different and in opposition to our own (Robinson, Keltner, Ward, & Ross, 1995), consequently eroding our ability to evaluate such opinions objectively (Pronin et al., 2002). Thus, future research should examine the extent to which individuals are able to accurately identify and assess sources of bias that may be driving disapproving opinions of their own relationship from outsiders.

It is also important to note that the communication of disapproval is a dynamic process that involves both the target participant perceiving the disapproval as well as the social network member making an explicit or implicit expression of disapproval. Research on relationship work and self-disclosure of relationship issues to social network members has demonstrated that there are varying

associations between such disclosures and relationship well-being based on factors such as how frequently relationship issues are discussed outside of the relationship and the degree to which couples are actively discussing their issues with each other as well (e.g., Helms et al., 2003; Proulx, Helms, & Payne, 2004). For example, when more relationship work is engaged in with friends than with partners, negative associations with relationship well-being have been observed (Jensen & Rauer, 2004). Future research should explore how a social network member's expression of disapproval may disrupt external relationship work, such that the individual within the relationship may stop self-disclosing to that network member. The consequences of this disruption could then vary based on the action taken by the individual within the relationship. For example, they may increase relationship work within the relationship, attempt to self-disclose to different social network members, or withdraw completely from discussing relationship issues all together, with each potential route likely having different consequences for relationship well-being.

Marginalisation status

We were not at all surprised that participants viewed others' disapproving opinions of their relationship as being driven by bias, and that perceptions of bias predicted reduced trust in the other's opinions. What did surprise us, however, was that perceptions of bias were equally high for those in marginalised and non-marginalised relationships. Past research has shown that those in marginalised relationships face higher levels of discrimination (Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002) and perceive lower levels of approval for their relationships (Blair Holmberg & Pukall, 2018; Blair & Pukall, 2015; Holmberg & Blair, 2016) than those in non-marginalised relationships. Higher perceptions of bias from those in marginalised relationships therefore seemed very likely.

We were also very surprised that the association between bias and trust was equally strong for both relationship types. Past research on attributional ambiguity (e.g., Crocker & Major, 1989) shows that those in stigmatised groups may attribute negative feedback or disapproval to others' prejudice against their group, and that such external attributions help to protect self-esteem. We expected such dynamics to apply here, such that everyone would be somewhat inclined to perceive others as biased and to trust biased individuals less, but that these effects would be especially strong for those in marginalised relationships.

As shown in the supplementary analyses (<https://osf.io/42ymd/>), some obvious explanations for the failure to support our hypotheses in this area did not pan out. The findings remained exactly the same regardless of how marginalised relationships were operationally defined, and regardless of whether the disapproving opinion came from others with past experience in marginalised relationships, or not.

Supplementary analyses on another measure, perceived prejudice against the relationship, lent credence to our original theorising. When the questions focused on perceived *prejudice* (e.g. disapproval of same-sex relationship), then we got precisely the results we had initially hypothesised: compared to those in non-marginalised relationships, those in marginalised relationships perceived higher levels of prejudice, which in turn was strongly associated with distrust of the network member's opinion.

However, this comparison seems somewhat unfair. Naturally those in non-marginalised relationships are going to perceive lower levels of *prejudice* as we operationalised it; after all, how likely are network members to object to normative identities and relationships? In developing our items for perceived bias, we therefore focused on the broader category of bias, with the exact nature of the bias left unspecified (e.g. '<This person> has distorted views about my romantic relationship'.) Using this measure, those in non-marginalised relationships apparently had no trouble finding potential sources of bias for another's disapproval of their relationship.

Future research should explore the specific types of bias identified as a function of relationship type. Those in marginalised relationships may focus more on prejudice, while those in non-marginalised relationships may discern other sources of potential bias, such as jealousy, projection

of one's own past relationship problems, or resentment by network members who no longer get to spend as much time as they would like with their loved one. Regardless of the specific source, however, everyone seems to be quick to identify potential biases in others' opinions of their relationships. Such findings are in line with past research showing that we have a tendency to analyse opinions that differ from our own more deeply than confirming opinions, and that the single most common attribution for disagreeing opinions is that the other person is biased (Pronin et al., 2002).

The final set of supplementary analyses further emphasises that the dynamics of bias appear to work similarly across relationship types. The more participants were committed to their partners, the more they perceived the disapproving network member to be biased, and this finding held to the same extent, regardless of the type of relationship. Participants' perceptions of bias may not even be associated with any 'true' bias on the part of the social network member at all. Instead, being highly committed to one's partner may provide the motivation necessary to seek out or invent reasons to discount disapproving opinions, thereby protecting one's own positive view of the relationship. Negative opinions about our relationships may be seen as particularly threatening, given that our choice of romantic partner is often seen as a reflection of our own selves (Taylor & Brown, 1988). Perhaps not so surprisingly after all, people are people, and we all share common motivations to defend our relationships, regardless of the specific relationship type.

Implications

Our findings highlight that perceptions of social network members' biases may or may not be indicative of actual bias, and that distinction is important for future decision-making. Individuals in relationships may write off disapproving opinions as biased. Perhaps they are right, and that is the optimal, healthy strategy. On the other hand, some individuals may be falsely ascribing bias to a disapproving opinion that is actually quite valid. After all, if social network approval of our romantic relationships is a mechanism through which our friends and family can assist us to select and maintain positive and healthy relationships, artificially or inaccurately dismissing someone's disapproving opinion as biased may actually put us at risk of pursuing an unhealthy relationship for a longer period of time than otherwise necessary.

McNulty, O'Mara, and Karney (2008) showed that when a relationship was relatively healthy overall, better long-term outcomes were associated with the couple members downplaying the severity of any issues they faced, via a benevolent attributional style. However, when the relationships faced more severe challenges overall, better long-term outcomes were associated with the couple members showing a more realistic assessment of their issues, acknowledging and seeking to address and repair the problems. Similarly, denigrating others' disapproving opinions as biased may predict better long-term outcomes in some circumstances (e.g. the others truly are biased; any relationship problems are minor and will resolve themselves) but may be a problematic strategy in others (e.g. there truly are problems in the relationship that must be addressed). This may be particularly relevant for individuals in same-sex and other marginalised relationships in which they have a readily available explanation as to why some network members may be biased: prejudice against their relationship type. However, while a great deal of bias does still exist within society, individuals in same-sex relationships may be at risk of erroneously discounting relationship disapproval that may prove to be accurate and predictive of future relationship woes. More research may help network members and couples' therapists to successfully navigate these difficult issues and arrive at the optimal advice to help the individual achieve maximum relationship success in the long term.

Strengths and limitations

Although our study was likely strengthened by not relying on an exclusively student-based sample, there are still some limitations that should be considered. Although we employed a variety of methods to increase the diversity of our sample, such as drawing on a database rich in LGBTQ+

individuals, using online research methodologies (e.g., Kraut et al., 2004), and recruiting on MTurk, which has been found to provide more diverse samples (Casler, Bickel, & Hackett, 2013), our sample still predominantly consisted of individuals who identified as White, heterosexual, women, thereby limiting the extent to which our findings generalise to other populations.

The cross-sectional nature of the data means that causality cannot be inferred. Our hypothesised model was kept fairly simple, with the four predictor variables predicting one outcome variable; however, we freely acknowledge that alternative models (e.g. trust as the predictor variable and the others as outcomes; various mediational models) are also possible. Future studies should assess these constructs at multiple timepoints, and explore whether some seem to precede others in the temporal sequence. Again, however, our suspicion is that these constructs are inter-related, and mutually reinforcing.

Finally, because this line of research is new, we had to construct a number of the measures for the purposes of this study, rather than using existing well-validated measures. The constructed measures seem to have good face validity and excellent internal consistency. The fact that the measures related as expected to each other and to the dependent variable in the current study provides some preliminary evidence of construct validity. However, the measures would still benefit from further exploration of their reliability and validity, including in different samples and contexts.

Conclusion

Clearly, much more research is needed. We believe, however, that this research represents a promising first step in going beyond the simple finding that social network approval/disapproval predicts relationship outcomes, by beginning to explore the underlying dynamics of these processes. Understanding the circumstances under which others' disapproval about our relationships should be trusted versus disregarded is an excellent first step in helping people successfully navigate the challenging task of finding and keeping an optimal romantic relationship.

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Ethical standards

The authors assert that all procedures contributing to this work comply with the ethical standards of the relevant national and institutional committees on human experimentation and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2008.

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