

ARTICLE

Back off: Disapproval of romantic relationships predicts closeness to disapproving network members

Sarah R. Gillian¹ | Diane Holmberg¹  | Kay Jenson¹  |
Karen L. Blair² 

¹Department of Psychology, Acadia University, Wolfville, Nova Scotia, Canada

²Department of Psychology, Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario, Canada

Correspondence

Karen L. Blair, Department of Psychology, Trent University, Peterborough, ON K9J 0G2, Canada.
Email: kblair@trentu.ca

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Abstract

Is the perception that a social network member (SNM, i.e., friend or family member) disapproves of your romantic relationship associated with perceived changes in emotional closeness to that person? This question was investigated using an online survey ($N = 703$). Participants reported their current closeness to a disapproving SNM, and retrospectively rated closeness before the disapproval and at the height of disapproval. As predicted, perceiving disapproval was associated with a drop in recalled emotional closeness to the SNM, with stronger disapproval associated with a steeper drop. Closeness recovered somewhat after the point of strongest disapproval, but not nearly to its original level. Analyses on a smaller sample of matched dyads ($N = 42$) suggested this pattern was identical from the SNM's perspective. The recalled trajectory was moderated by SNM group (i.e., family/friend) and by relationship type (mixed-sex/same-sex, and age-discrepant/similar-age, but *not* mixed-race/same-race).

Statement of Relevance: “Speak now, or forever hold your peace.” But if we do speak regarding a loved one’s problematic relationship, will it harm our relationship with them? This study is the first to investigate this issue systematically. We show that perceived disapproval predicts long-lasting drops in perceived emotional closeness to the disapproving network member and explore factors that shape these patterns. Our findings matter to anyone who wonders whether to intervene in another person’s troublesome relationship or stay silent.

We discuss implications for those in close relationships and their friends/family members.

KEYWORDS

gay/lesbian relationships, interpersonal perceptions, networks, relationship types, repair of personal relationships, social support

1 | INTRODUCTION

In Shakespeare's (1597) classic tale of star-crossed lovers, Romeo and Juliet experience strong disapproval of their romantic relationship from their loved ones. The drama of the play arises from an examination of the ensuing challenges for the young lovers' romantic relationship. However, other relationships behind the scenes receive less attention. For example, how was the relationship between Juliet and her father affected by his disapproval of Romeo? Did it cause a lack of closeness in the father-daughter relationship? If Juliet had lived, could her relationship with her father ever have recovered its former level of closeness, or was the damage permanent? What factors might predict the steepness of the recalled drop in perceived father-daughter closeness, or the degree of recovery in closeness after the point of strongest disapproval? These questions have received surprisingly little research attention and are the focus of this research.

It is very well-established that social network members' (SNMs, i.e., friends or family members) disapproval of a romantic relationship is correlated with negative outcomes for the romantic relationship and for its members (see Parks, 2007 and Agnew, 2014 for overviews). SNM disapproval is associated with poorer relationship quality (e.g., Sinclair et al., 2015), increased likelihood of breakup (Le et al., 2010), and lower mental and physical well-being for romantic relationship members (Blair & Holmberg, 2008). In contrast, SNM support for a relationship can facilitate the formation of a dyadic identity, reduce relationship uncertainty, and serve as a barrier to relationship dissolution (Parks, 2011; Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992).

Given its benefits, it is perhaps not surprising that individuals actively engage in attempts to garner support for their romantic relationship from others, a process Crowley (2012) refers to as support marshaling. In an early study, Leslie et al. (1986) found that university students who were closer to their parents engaged in more behaviors to garner parental support for their romantic relationships. In more recent research, Crowley interviewed (Crowley, 2012) and surveyed (Crowley & Faw, 2014) participants, regarding strategies they used to manage SNM disapproval of their romantic relationship. Strategies were classified as either direct or indirect, and as emphasizing approach (i.e., attempts to enhance support, such as emphasizing a partner's good qualities) or avoidance goals (i.e., attempts to minimize opposition, such as by withholding negative information about the partner).

Most of Crowley's (2012) avoidance strategies involved limiting discussion of the romantic relationship with the opposed SNM. Participants reported tactics such as explicitly refusing to discuss the relationship, more subtly trying to steer conversations in other directions, lying about aspects of the relationship, or simply trying to ignore the disapproval. Establishing taboo topics may undermine relational closeness (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000). More directly, 15% of

Crowley and Faw's (2014) participants reported dealing with relational opposition by limiting time spent with the opposed SNM. Thus, directly or indirectly, one potential consequence of receiving relationship disapproval may be reduced emotional closeness to the opposed SNM.

Such reductions in closeness resemble a strategy Parks (2011) calls *network structuring*, wherein individuals actively attempt to “work” their social networks to maintain balance. As originally discussed by Heider (1946), Balance Theory proposes that if Juliet loves both Romeo and her father, balance will be maintained if Juliet's father also likes Romeo. If Juliet's father disapproves of Romeo, discomfort will ensue, which Juliet will strive to reduce. Juliet has several possible routes to restore balance, such as convincing her father of Romeo's good qualities, or breaking off her relationship with Romeo. Alternatively, she could break off her relationship with her father, or at least reduce her physical or emotional closeness to him. Such strategies of reducing contact with opposed network members have been noted in other studies (e.g., LaSala, 2002); however, to our knowledge the effect has not been clearly documented in a large-scale quantitative study with a diverse sample. Thus, our first hypothesis is:

H1. *Participants will recall a reduction in closeness to an opposed SNM when romantic relationship disapproval is perceived, relative to the time before disapproval was detected.*

As this effect has not yet been studied systematically, little is known about potential moderating factors that might predict the steepness of the recalled drop in perceived closeness. One obvious candidate is the strength of the disapproval. The stronger Juliet's father is in his condemnation of Romeo, the more discomfort Juliet will feel, and the more motivation she will feel to restore balance in her network. Again, Juliet has several routes to restore balance. One is to magnify and intensify her passion for Romeo in the face of strong opposition, that is, the “Romeo and Juliet effect” (Driscoll et al., 1972). This effect has not been well-replicated (Sinclair et al., 2014). Another reaction to strong network opposition, however, might be to reduce closeness to the opposed network members more firmly. Thus, our second hypothesis is:

H2. *Stronger network opposition will be associated with a steeper recalled drop in closeness to the opposed network member, compared to more moderate opposition.*

This initial drop in closeness to an opposed network member is well-grounded in theory (e.g., Parks, 2011) and has some empirical support (e.g., LaSala, 2002). To our knowledge, however, no one has investigated the longer-term trajectory. Will Juliet's father's disapproval of Romeo forever mar the father-daughter relationship? If neither wishes to sever their relationship completely, they will need some sort of an accommodation. If Juliet will not leave Romeo, her father must accept the reality of her relationship; likewise, Juliet may have to accept her father's disapproval as something to tolerate. Thus, it seems possible that over time, Juliet and her father might work through the issue and regain some of their original closeness. To our knowledge, however, this idea has never been empirically tested. It is unknown, for example, whether closeness returns fully to pre-disapproval levels, or settles at a lower level. It is also unclear whether the pattern differs depending on strength of disapproval. Thus, these issues are presented as exploratory research questions:

RQ1. (a) Will recalled closeness to the opposed SNM rebound over time? (b) Will it return to its original level, or stabilize at some lower level?

RQ2. Will the strength of recovery in recalled closeness be moderated by the strength of the SNM's disapproval?

In addition to the strength of disapproval, the trajectory of closeness may be moderated by other factors, related to Juliet, Romeo, Juliet's father, or the relationships between any two of them. For this preliminary study, we focus on two relational factors as potential moderators.

First, is the disapproving SNM a friend or a family member? As Crowley and Faw (2014) note, these relationships have key differences. Friendships are voluntary associations that may be dissolved at will. In contrast, family relationships are involuntary, and may be more challenging to dissolve, especially if one wants to continue to interact with other family members. Crowley and Faw (2014) found participants reported more frequent use of indirect strategies when marshaling relationship support from their own family members, compared to other network members (i.e., partner's family members, friends). They speculated that indirect strategies were used to minimize the chance of conflict with family members. If conflict is minimized successfully, perhaps the drop in emotional closeness after disapproval would be less steep for family members, compared to friends. On the other hand, if disapproving family members are truly more difficult to remove from the network completely, they may be retained even if disapproval is strong, and closeness is very low. In comparison, friends who disapprove very strongly might be dropped from the network completely, which would result in the friends who remain having more moderate levels of disapproval. Given the lack of previous research and uncertain dynamics, we address this issue with an open research question:

RQ3. Will the trajectory of recalled closeness be moderated by the SNM's group, that is, friend versus family member?

Finally, the trajectory of recalled closeness may be moderated by the nature of the romantic relationship itself. Lehmiller and Agnew (2006) compared relationship disapproval dynamics in visibly marginalized versus non-marginalized relationships. Marginalized relationships are those in which partners may experience disapproval from others simply due to the nature of the relationship, not due to its internal workings. Lehmiller and Agnew focused on three types of visibly marginalized relationships (i.e., same-sex, mixed-race, highly age-discrepant), which have been relatively widely studied in the literature, and in which couples' marginalized status is visibly apparent and highly salient.

Lehmiller and Agnew (2006) found that those in visibly marginalized relationships perceived significantly more disapproval of their relationship, yet still maintained levels of commitment that were equal to or higher than those in non-marginalized relationships. One technique to achieve this parity was by disparaging the quality of alternatives to their relationship. Holmberg and Blair (2016) found a related pattern for those in same-sex relationships: despite perceiving more disapproval of their relationships than did those in mixed-sex relationships, participants in same-sex relationships still managed to maintain relatively positive well-being outcomes. They seemed to be able to ignore or discount the disapproval, perhaps by attributing it to prejudice, rather than problems with the relationship itself. Thus, those in visibly marginalized relationships experience high levels of disapproval for their relationship but seem able to buffer themselves somewhat by adjusting aspects of their response to disapproval.

Exactly how such dynamics apply in the current context remains an open question. On one hand, similar to Lehmiller and Agnew's findings (2006), those in marginalized relationships

may prioritize their romantic relationship by disparaging alternatives, in this instance by strongly distancing themselves from disapproving SNMs. On the other hand, similar to what was seen in Holmberg and Blair (2016), those in marginalized relationships may be able to discount or disregard SNM disapproval of their relationship to some extent. Such views could lead to a smaller drop in closeness to the SNM (if they are excused as being old-fashioned or misguided), or to a larger drop in closeness (if they are viewed as being bigoted). Thus, we hypothesize:

H3. *Those in visibly marginalized relationships (i.e., same-sex, mixed-race, age-discrepant) will perceive stronger disapproval of their romantic relationship than those in non-marginalized relationships.*

We also ask:

RQ4. Will the trajectory of recalled closeness to the SNM be moderated by relationship type (i.e., visibly marginalized vs. non-marginalized?)

To address these hypotheses and research questions, we invited individuals in relationships currently disapproved of by at least one SNM to report their current perceived emotional closeness to the disapproving SNM, and retrospectively report on their closeness before any disapproval was felt, and at the point of strongest disapproval. Below, we compare patterns of change in these perceived closeness ratings across the three timepoints and assess whether the recalled trajectory of closeness varies by strength of disapproval, SNM group (friend vs. family), and /or relationship type (visibly marginalized vs. non-marginalized). For a subsample, we also obtained data from the opposed network member, allowing us to assess whether the basic trajectory of recalled closeness is similar from both parties' perspectives.

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Recruitment and participants

Participants were recruited online for a matched pair of studies examining “insiders’ and outsiders’ perspectives on relationships.” Links to a website describing the studies were circulated via social media ads, posts in relevant online groups and listservs, emails to participants in past studies, posters, classroom announcements, and on MTurk. Recruitment materials emphasized that we were interested in all relationship types and recruitment images featured diverse couples. To be eligible for the current study, participants had to indicate in a screening survey that they were at least 18 years old, currently in a romantic relationship (any type or duration) and had one or more friends or family members who disapproved of their current romantic relationship, even if only mildly. Those who had no disapproving network members were re-directed to the parallel SNM version of the study. The research received ethics approval from Acadia and St. Francis Xavier universities, and data were collected between December 2017 and July 2019.

Demographics for the 703 participants who completed all measures for the current study are shown in Table S1 in the Appendix S1. Participants were predominantly straight White North American women in serious relationships.

2.2 | Procedure

In the screening survey, participants listed by name/initials/alias up to five friends and up to five family members who disapproved of their current romantic relationship, even if only mildly, and to rate how much each disapproved, on a 4-point scale (*Mildly, Somewhat, Strongly, Extremely*). If participants had both friends and family members who disapproved, they were randomly assigned to one of the two groups by the survey software. If they had disapproving members from one group only, they reported on that group. Of the current study's participants, 412 (59%) answered questions about a family member's disapproving opinion, and 291 (41%) about a friend's opinion.

Participants could choose two options for the main study. Those in the direct route completed the study on their own; those in the (potentially) matched route first invited a network member to take part in the matched study, giving their outsider's view of the participant's relationship. For direct route participants, the most-disapproving network member in the relevant group became their focal network member. They proceeded immediately from the screening survey to the full study, with that person's name (or alias) piped into all relevant questions.

Potentially matched participants were asked to indicate, for each person listed during the screening survey, if they would be willing to invite them to complete the matched study. A research assistant selected the most-disapproving network member in the relevant group that the participant was willing to invite, who then became the participant's focal network member. Participants were sent back a customized link for their own survey with that person's name piped into all relevant questions, and an invitation email to forward to the focal network member, containing another customized link to the matched study. These customized links allowed for anonymous matching of survey responses after completion. Of the current sample, 78% chose the direct route, 19% chose the potentially matched route, and 3% entered through matches from the parallel study. Not all potential matches completed the study, however. In the end, we obtained 42 matched dyads. See the Appendix S1 for more detailed information regarding the 42 matched network members, and the analyses involving them.

Participants then completed the approximately 1-hour main survey, which after obtaining consent asked a variety of questions relevant to social network disapproval. Measures used in the current paper are described in more detail below.

For completing the screening survey, participants received either payment of \$0.50 to \$1.00 USD (MTurk participants), or one prize draw entry for monthly prize draws of \$50 and a grand prize draw of \$500. All participants (including MTurk ones) received five additional prize draw entries for completing the main study. In addition, participants in the potentially matched route were paid \$10 if their potential match completed the screening survey, and a bonus \$10 if the majority of questions on both matched surveys were completed. SNMs in the matched study were offered exactly parallel compensation.

2.3 | Measures

2.3.1 | Relationship type

Participants were asked to check off categories that described their current relationship from a list. Following Lehmilller and Agnew (2006), we categorized participants as being visibly marginalized if they 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)”. Participants were allowed to self-define what counted as an age-discrepant relationship. On average, the age gap was 10.38 years, with a range from 2 to 31 years. Men were more commonly the older partner: of those in age-discrepant relationships, 80% of men indicated that they were the older partner, while 93% of women indicated they were the younger partner. Those with other gender identities were split 50/50 between being the older versus younger partner.

Participants who checked off “Mixed-Sex (Your partner is a different sex than you)” and none of the other three categories were classified as not being visibly marginalized. Using this method of classification, 379 participants (53.0%) reported not being in visibly marginalized relationship, and 336 participants (47.0%) reported being in a visibly marginalized relationship (186 mixed-race, 179 same-sex, 167 age-discrepant; categories were not mutually exclusive).

2.3.2 | Perceived closeness to SNM

A modified version of the Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale (Aron et al., 1992) was used to assess the perceived closeness between the participant and the SNM. The measure consists of seven Venn diagram-like depictions of two overlapping circles, one labeled with the word “you,” representing the participant, and one with the letter “X,” signifying the SNM. Higher numbered diagrams show more overlap between the two circles, indicating greater perceived closeness. The original scale shows strong test–retest reliability scores, good discriminant and predictive validity, and minimal social desirability (Aron et al., 1992).

For the current study, participants were asked to select the appropriate image three times: “Which image best represents how close you WERE to ‘this person’ before you felt ‘this person’¹ disapproved of your romantic relationship?”; “Which image best represents how close you were to ‘this person’ at the point when they showed the STRONGEST disapproval of your romantic relationship?”; and “Which image best represents how close you are to ‘this person’ now?” Note that these items were scattered amongst other study measures; they were not presented consecutively, and current closeness was asked first, before asking about disapproval experiences.

2.3.3 | Strength of disapproval

Participants assessed the perceived strength of the focal network member's disapproval toward their romantic relationship using an adapted version of Etcheverry and Agnew's (2004) four-item Normative Beliefs Scale, assessing perceptions of degree of disapproval/approval of a target relationship. The original scale showed high reliability, with Cronbach's alphas averaging 0.97. For the current study, the SNM's name was piped into each question, and the phrase “in general” was added before each item, to acknowledge that although disapproval might vary across situations or time, we were looking for an overall assessment. A sample item is “In general, ‘this person’ thinks that I should continue in my current romantic relationship.” To fit better with other study measures, the response scales were modified to 1 to 7, ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*, reverse-scored as appropriate such that higher numbers indicated stronger disapproval of the relationship (M for current study = 5.08, SD = 1.53, α = .92).

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Analysis strategy

Primary analyses were conducted using a $3 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ Mixed ANOVA. The dependent variable was the level of perceived closeness to the SNM. Independent variables were time (within-subjects: before disapproval, at point of strongest disapproval, and current), strength of disapproval (between-subjects: median split into strong versus moderate disapproval at 5.20 on a 7-point scale), SNM group (between-subjects: friend vs. family member) and relationship type (between-subjects: visibly marginalized vs. non-marginalized). Bonferroni post-hoc tests were conducted to test for significant differences across time points, and Cohen's d statistics were calculated to assess the effect sizes of changes. To test H3, independent-samples t -tests were conducted to assess whether perceived strength of disapproval differed by SNM group or relationship type.

3.2 | Primary analyses

ANOVA results for the full sample are shown in the first column of Table 1. Means and mean comparisons for significant effects are shown at the top of Table 2. Supporting H1, there was a significant effect of time, with a substantial recalled drop in perceived closeness to the SNM from before disapproval was felt to the point of strongest disapproval ($d = 0.66$). Addressing RQ1, perceived closeness to SNM then recovered slightly and significantly, on average ($d = 0.14$), but (addressing RQ2) perceived closeness remained considerably below its original level ($d = 0.50$). Using the 42 matched pairs, we were able to determine that this basic trajectory was recalled almost identically by the opposed network members. As can be seen in Table 3, ratings of closeness at each time point were moderately correlated, and the means never differed significantly across the two parties. The basic trajectory of recalled closeness was almost identical from both parties' point of view (see Figure 1). See the Appendix S1 for more detail on these analyses.

Supporting H2, there was a significant main effect of strength of disapproval, with those who perceived stronger disapproval reporting being less close to their SNM, on average ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.68$), than those who perceived more moderate disapproval ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.75$, $d = 0.34$). This effect was moderated by time (see Figure 2). The groups started out similar in recalled closeness, but supporting H2, those who perceived stronger disapproval of their relationship reported a steeper drop in recalled closeness to the SNM ($d = 0.78$) than those who perceived moderate disapproval ($d = 0.56$). Addressing RQ2, those who perceived moderate disapproval then showed a small but significant recovery in perceived closeness ($d = 0.22$), while those who perceived strong disapproval showed no recovery ($d = 0.04$).²

For the SNM group effects, recall that participants were asked to select just one target family member to focus on, or one target friend. The selected family member was perceived to disapprove of the relationship more strongly ($M = 5.30$, $SD = 1.39$) than the selected friend ($M = 4.77$, $SD = 1.65$, $t[701] = 4.54$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.35$).³ There was a significant main effect of SNM group on perceived closeness: on average, participants felt significantly closer to the selected friend ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.68$) than to the selected family member ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.70$, $d = 0.28$).⁴ Addressing RQ3, there was a significant time by SNM group interaction. People started out feeling somewhat closer to their selected friend than their family member, before disapproval was felt. Recalled closeness to both groups showed a similar-sized drop from then

TABLE 1 ANOVA results, overall and for each relationship type

Effect	Overall	Same-race versus mixed-race	Mixed-sex versus same-sex	Similar-age versus age- discrepant
Time	287.24***	204.45***	203.97***	154.95***
Strength of disapproval	19.90***	7.66**	13.70***	15.56***
SNM group	15.01***	5.86*	10.45**	2.68
Time × Strength of disapproval	22.81***	21.64***	14.50***	16.37***
Time × SNM group	3.17*	3.28*	2.52	4.28*
Strength of disapproval × SNM group	0.21	0.18	0.13	0.62
Time × Strength of disapproval × SNM group	1.75	3.34*	3.10*	0.35
Relationship type	1.95	2.82	14.35***	0.40
Relationship type × Time	0.85	1.98	4.25*	0.07
Relationship type × Strength of disapproval	0.14	2.28	0.78	0.76
Relationship type × SNM group	0.03	2.19	0.49	3.76
Relationship type × Time × Strength of disapproval	1.80	2.56	0.26	4.02*
Relationship type × Time × SNM group	1.52	0.55	0.74	1.12
Relationship type × Strength of disapproval × SNM group	0.80	2.45	0.01	0.23
Relationship type × Time × Strength of disapproval × SNM group	2.41	2.50	2.57	0.97

Note: Significant effects are in bold. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Abbreviation: SNM, social network member.

to the point of strongest disapproval ($d = 0.66$ for friends and $d = 0.69$ for family); however, perceived closeness then rebounded slightly for the family member ($d = 0.20$) but not at all for the friend ($d = 0.06$).

Participants in marginalized relationships perceived slightly more disapproval ($M = 5.20$, $SD = 1.49$) than did those in non-marginalized relationships ($M = 4.98$, $SD = 1.55$), but the effect was only marginally significant, $t(701) = 1.93$, $p = .054$, providing weak support for H3. Somewhat surprisingly, for the full sample, there was no significant effect of relationship type (marginalized vs. non-marginalized) on overall perceived closeness to the SNM, nor, addressing RQ4, any significant interactions involving relationship type.

3.3 | Analyses by specific relationship type

Lehmiller and Agnew (2006) found very similar patterns of results across the three different visibly marginalized relationship types. Furthermore, combining the three into one group provided a larger sample and therefore maximal power to detect effects of relationship type, if present. However, it is possible that the different types of visibly marginalized relationships

TABLE 2 Patterns of change in closeness to social network member (SNM) over time, overall and as moderated by other study variables

Effect	Group	Before disapproval <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	At strongest disapproval <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Current <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
Time, overall		4.18 _a (1.82)	2.96 _b (1.89)	3.23 _c (1.97)
Moderated by strength of dis.	Moderate disapproval	4.34 _a (1.80)	3.31 _b (1.88)	3.72 _c (1.90)
	Strong disapproval	4.14 _a (1.82)	2.71 _b (1.84)	2.79 _b (1.91)
Moderated by SNM group	Family	3.98 _a (1.89)	2.69 _b (1.86)	3.08 _c (1.95)
	Friends	4.50 _a (1.65)	3.32 _b (1.84)	3.44 _b (1.95)
Moderated by sex/gender	Same sex	3.69 _a (1.81)	2.17 _b (1.48)	2.54 _c (1.68)
	Mixed sex	4.31 _a (1.80)	3.16 _b (1.93)	3.40 _c (2.00)
Moderated by age and strength of disapproval	Mod. dis., Similar ages	4.33 _a (1.78)	3.33 _b (1.88)	3.69 _c (1.88)
	Strong dis., Similar ages	4.08 _a (1.81)	2.61 _b (1.82)	2.83 _c (1.96)
	Mod. dis., Age discrepant	4.39 _a (1.93)	3.20 _b (1.87)	3.89 _c (2.03)
	Strong dis., Age discrepant	3.84 _a (1.87)	2.62 _b (1.96)	2.44 _b (1.71)

Note: Means that do not share a common subscript are significantly different, $p < .05$.

Abbreviations: Mod., moderate; Dis., disapproval.

TABLE 3 Means of, and correlations between, two parties' ratings of each study measure

Measure	<i>r</i>	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>) from person in target relationship	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>) from network member	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
Strength of disapproval	0.50 ^{***}	4.11 (1.88)	4.30 (1.68)	0.70	0.49	0.11
Closeness before	0.57 ^{***}	5.15 (1.55)	5.43 (1.26)	1.32	0.20	0.20
Closeness at strongest disapproval	0.49 ^{***}	3.93 (1.73)	4.03 (1.78)	0.36	0.72	0.06
Current closeness	0.64 ^{***}	4.48 (1.63)	4.63 (1.53)	0.70	0.49	0.09

Note: ^{***} $p < .001$.

have somewhat different dynamics. On an exploratory basis, we repeated the analyses above three times, once for each different type of visibly marginalized relationship. Results are shown in Table 1.

The significant results found in the full sample (i.e., first five lines in Table 1) replicated almost exactly for each of the three subgroups. Means always followed the same pattern, and the effects were almost always significant. In addition, significant three-way interactions emerged between time, strength of disapproval, and SNM group for both the same-race/mixed-race and same-sex/mixed-sex comparisons. For these analyses, the interaction pattern between time and SNM group described above (i.e., some recovery after disapproval for family, but none

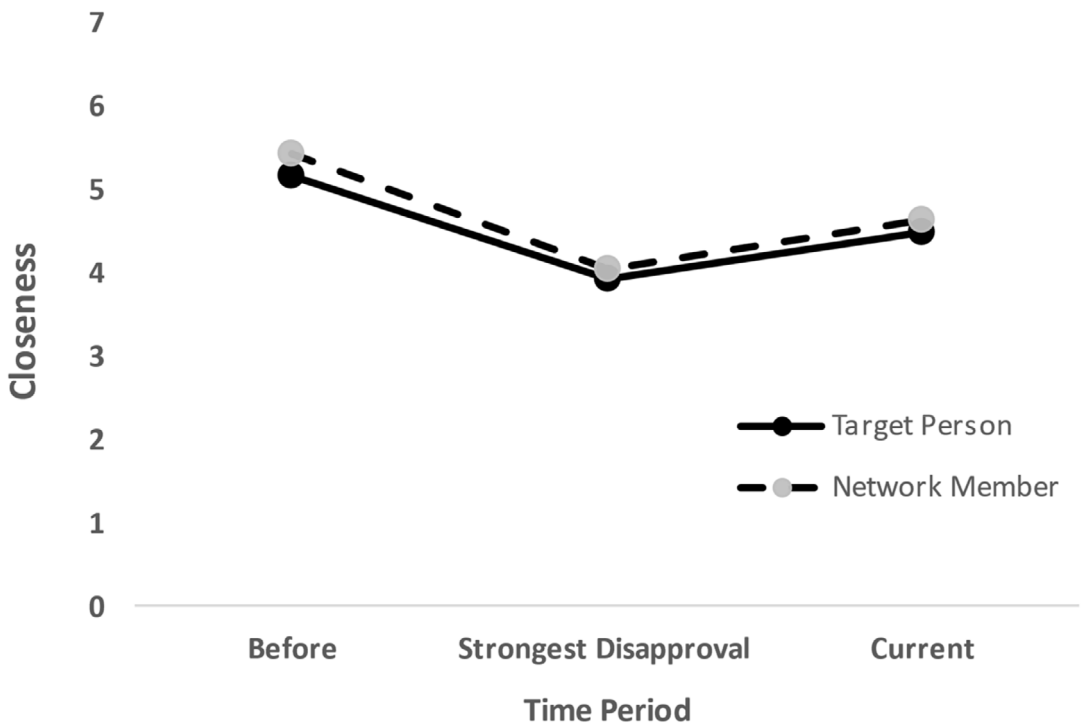


FIGURE 1 Changes in recalled closeness over time, by party reporting

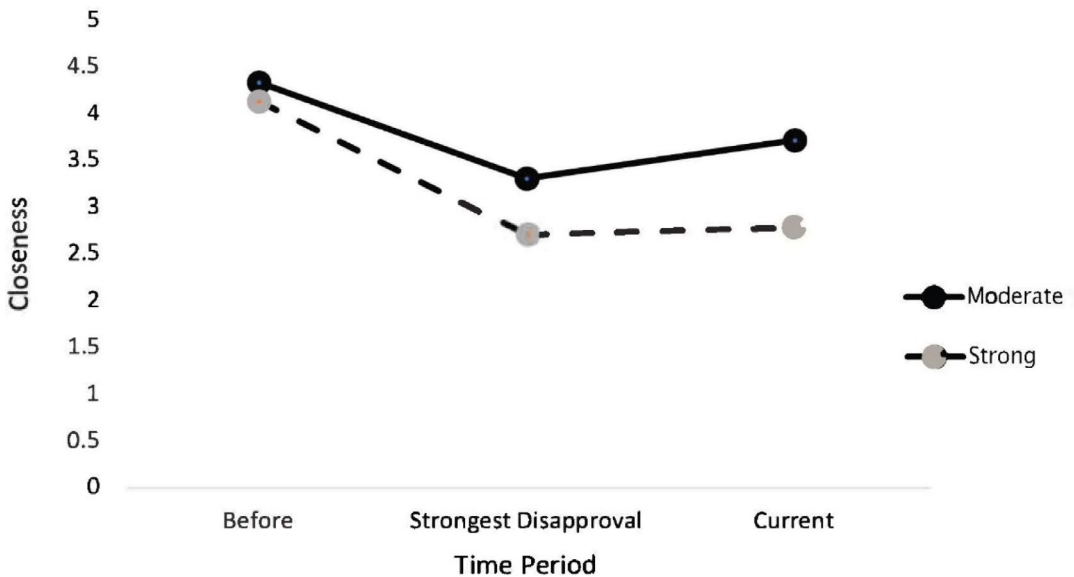


FIGURE 2 Interaction of time and strength of perceived disapproval on closeness with social network members

for friends) applied most clearly when perceived disapproval was strong. When disapproval was more moderate, recalled closeness to friends recovered very slightly after disapproval, but still considerably less than it did for family members.

3.3.1 | Same-race versus mixed-race relationships

Racial composition of the relationship did not moderate the overall results. Those in mixed-race relationships perceived no more disapproval of their relationship ($M = 5.12$, $SD = 1.47$) than did those in same-race relationships ($M = 5.07$, $SD = 1.54$), $t(701) = .32$, $p = .75$, $d = 0.03$. The recalled trajectory of closeness over time showed similar patterns for both types of relationships, and no effects involving relationship type were significant (see Table 1, below the line).

3.3.2 | Same-sex versus mixed-sex relationships

Those in same-sex relationships perceived significantly more disapproval of their relationship ($M = 5.40$, $SD = 1.48$) than those in mixed-sex relationships ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 1.53$), $t(701) = 2.78$, $p = .006$, $d = 0.27$. They also reported being less close to their SNM, on average ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 1.80$), than those in mixed-sex relationships ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.68$, $d = 0.36$). The recalled trajectory of closeness also varied by relationship type (see Tables 1 & 2). Those in same-sex relationships started out somewhat less close to their SNM than those in mixed-sex relationships, and their recalled closeness dropped very substantially with the perception of disapproval ($d = 0.92$). Those in mixed-sex relationships also showed a large drop in recalled closeness, but not quite of the same magnitude ($d = 0.62$). However, closeness then showed a slightly stronger recovery for those in same-sex relationships ($d = 0.23$) than it did for those in mixed-sex relationships ($d = 0.12$); still, both groups' recovery in perceived closeness was small, and did not nearly approach pre-disapproval levels.

3.3.3 | Age-discrepant versus similar-age relationships

Those in age-discrepant relationships perceived only marginally stronger disapproval of their relationships ($M = 5.32$, $SD = 1.52$) than those in similar-age relationships ($M = 5.03$, $SD = 1.53$), $t(701) = 1.92$, $p = .056$, $d = 0.19$, and there was no overall effect of relationship type on reported closeness to SNM for this group. However, there was a significant three-way interaction between time, relationship type, and strength of disapproval (see Table 1). As can be seen in Table 2, those in similar-age relationships showed the now-familiar pattern of a recalled drop in closeness from before disapproval was felt to the point of strongest disapproval, and then a slight rebound afterward. The recalled drop was steeper ($d = 0.81$ vs. 0.54) and the rebound somewhat less strong ($d = 0.10$ vs. 0.19) for those who perceived strong disapproval, compared to those who perceived moderate disapproval.

Those in age-discrepant relationships showed a modified version of this same pattern. Those who perceived moderate disapproval of their age-discrepant relationship started out relatively close to their SNM, showed a moderate drop in recalled closeness at the height of disapproval ($d = 0.63$), and then showed the strongest rebound in closeness yet seen ($d = 0.37$), although still not nearly to original levels ($d = 0.35$). Those who perceived strong disapproval of their age-discrepant relationship started out less close to their SNM, showed a similar-sized drop in recalled closeness at the height of disapproval ($d = 0.61$), but then did not show any rebound at all in closeness in the present; they in fact showed a further small, recalled drop in perceived closeness ($d = -0.15$), albeit non-significant.

4 | DISCUSSION

The current study was the first large quantitative study to explore in-depth whether disapproval of a romantic relationship was associated with perceived changes in closeness to the disapproving SNM. We found a consistent pattern of a significant and moderate-to-strong drop in recalled closeness from the time before disapproval was felt to the point of strongest disapproval, from both parties' perspectives. In line with Parks' (2011) concept of network structuring, and with Crowley and Faw's (2014) reports of responses to disapproval, one correlate of SNM disapproval of a romantic relationship seems to be a reduction in reported closeness to the opposed SNM.

Furthermore, our study was the first to document that this recalled drop in closeness seems to be long-lasting. Although there was often a slight rebound in recalled closeness from the point of strongest disapproval to the present, the rebound was generally small in magnitude and closeness never returned to nearly the original level, from either party's perspective.

The stronger the disapproval, the more strongly this pattern held. Those experiencing strong disapproval showed a more sizeable drop in recalled closeness to the disapproving SNM, with no significant recovery after the point of strongest disapproval. Given Juliet's father's strong disapproval of her relationship with Romeo, it is likely that had she survived, the father-daughter relationship would have experienced irreparable damage.

Our findings have important implications for both parties, both of whom perceive damage to their relationship. For example, Juliet has to balance out her love for Romeo and her father. As a first step, she might ask herself whether her father's opposition to her relationship with Romeo stems from a valid, legitimate concern for her well-being (e.g., she is too young; the relationship is moving too fast). If so, distancing herself from her father may not be the wisest choice. If she decides her father has a valid point, she may decide to take his feedback into account and break off her relationship with Romeo; on the other hand, if she thinks her father's concerns are loving but misplaced, she could instead attempt to convince him of the merits of the relationship using approach-based support marshaling strategies (Crowley, 2012).

Alternatively, if Juliet decides her father's disapproval of Romeo is completely unfounded (e.g., implacable opposition for no reason except that Romeo is a Montague), she will have to decide whether she can reach some accommodation with her father, perhaps by using avoidance support marshaling strategies (Crowley, 2012), or whether she is better off distancing from him to protect her romantic relationship and her own well-being.

Juliet's father may want to take similar steps, asking himself whether his disapproval is valid. If he decides it is not or is still uncertain, it may be better to bide his time and keep his opinions to himself. If he decides his concerns are legitimate, he must carefully consider the best approach to express them so they will be heard. Jenson et al. (2020) found that the more individuals believe disapproving SNMs to be unbiased relationship experts with high-quality evidence, the more likely they are to trust their opinions. Juliet's father might therefore want to emphasize these factors when communicating his disapproval, to increase the chances he will be listened to. Clearly, determining the optimal approach for both parties is challenging, and further research is required to provide guidance.

Of course, before considering any guidance, it is also important to keep in mind the limitations of the current study's approach. First, although the available dyadic data suggest that the processes described here work very similarly from both parties' perspectives, given our small and potentially unrepresentative dyadic sample, such conclusions can only be drawn with caution (see Appendix S1 for more discussion). We rely primarily on Juliet's perspective in our

analyses. Still, it is Juliet's own perspective that is going to guide her actions toward her father, and therefore is arguably the most important one to understand. Second, we asked participants to focus on the most-disapproving network member. Recalled trajectories of closeness might differ when disapproval was milder. Third, we assess only memories of the trajectory of change in relationship closeness. Both parties seem to recall the trajectory similarly, thereby reinforcing our confidence that their memories might be accurate. Note, however, that Ross (1989) proposed individuals combine their current perspectives with implicit theories of stability versus change over time to reconstruct their likely past attitudes, feelings, and behaviors. Such processes also apply within romantic relationships (Holmberg & Holmes, 1994; Karney & Coombs, 2000). If both parties share a common implicit theory that disapproval of a romantic relationship is likely to cause a rift between them, conceivably both might mentally reconstruct such a drop in closeness, even if it did not actually occur. A longitudinal study tracking changes in closeness over time would be a worthwhile addition to the literature, as would assessment of people's lay theories regarding the consequences of expressing relational disapproval. Still, regardless of whether their memories are accurate or not, it is the parties' current views on the situation that will guide their ongoing behavior toward each other, and are therefore arguably the most important to assess.

The most important limitation of our study is that it is cross-sectional, and we therefore cannot be confident that the causal flow is from disapproval (especially strong disapproval) to reduced closeness. It is possible the causal flow goes the other way: perhaps if Juliet and her father are especially close, he feels motivated to express his disapproval especially clearly and strongly to her, to save her from the heartbreak of a bad relationship. More emotionally distant SNMs may feel equally strong disapproval internally, but never bother to express it clearly to Juliet, so she does not encode or react to it. Thus, more emotional closeness may lead to the awareness of strong disapproval, rather than vice versa.

There may also be some third variable that accounts for perceptions of both disapproval and reduced emotional closeness. For example, if Juliet tends to take offense easily, it may be more challenging to stay close to her, and more likely that she will perceive stronger disapproval of her relationship from others. Knobloch and Donovan-Kicken (2006)'s relational turbulence model suggests that individuals perceive their network members as hindering their relationship more during times when the relationship is the most turbulent or uncertain; participants might be projecting their own relationship uncertainties onto the network members, leading them to perceive disapproval and to pull back from the network members in reaction. The current study can only note an association exists between strong disapproval and low reported closeness but does not permit definitive conclusions to be drawn about the causal flow. Vignette or simulation studies with random assignment would permit further clarification.

4.1 | Moderation of recalled closeness trajectories

4.1.1 | Family versus friends

In addition to demonstrating the overall recalled trajectories of closeness, we were able to assess whether these patterns of change were moderated by SNM group or relationship type (marginalized vs. non-marginalized). For friends versus family, we saw that the initial drop in recalled closeness was of a similar magnitude, but closeness to a disapproving family member was perceived to recover slightly after the point of strongest disapproval, whereas closeness to a

disapproving friend did not recover at all, especially when disapproval was strong. Any explanation of this difference is tentative and requires further exploration, perhaps through qualitative work. One possibility is that the selected family members started out more emotionally distant than the friends, suggesting they might be interacted with less frequently, and/or their disapproving opinion may be perceived as less hurtful or less relevant. If the disapproval of Juliet's romantic relationship comes not from her father, but instead from a distant cousin she only sees a few times a year, the two may find it relatively easy to reach some accommodation wherein the disapproval will not be discussed, and they can learn to get along again. They will likely remain somewhat distant, however; note that even after rebounding, participants were on average still not as emotionally close to the selected family member as they were to the selected friend. If an initially close friend disapproves, the disruption may be more salient, and relatively more long-lasting damage to the friendship may occur.

These suppositions emphasize another important limitation of our study. We are only looking at a subset of disapproval reactions, namely those in which a network member disapproved of the relationship, their disapproval was made known, the SNM continued to disapprove (at least to some extent), and yet the participant both remained in the romantic relationship and retained the disapproving SNM as part of their network. Processes might well differ if any of these factors were altered. For example, if Juliet saw that her father was justified in his disapproval and broke off her relationship with Romeo, it is possible the father-daughter relationship might then fully regain its initial closeness. Likewise, if Juliet's father came to fully accept her relationship with Romeo over time, they might then completely regain their initial closeness. Thus, our current procedures might result in an underestimation of the capacity for recovery in closeness to the SNM after disapproval.

On the other hand, we asked participants to report on the feelings of a *current* friend or family member. Especially for friends, someone who continued to disapprove of the romantic relationship over time might be cut from the network, ceasing to be considered a friend altogether. By focusing only on current friends, we may be overestimating the capacity for recovery in closeness to the SNM after disapproval, as instances of the most extreme loss of closeness (i.e., a complete dissolution of the friendship relationship) are not included in the sample using our current procedures. Longitudinal research tracking all potential responses to disapproval over time, while quite challenging given the topic, would be valuable.

4.1.2 | Relationship type

The findings for marginalized versus non-marginalized relationships were complex. In their study, Lehmiller and Agnew (2006) found almost no differences in the pattern of results for the three types of visibly marginalized relationships, giving us some confidence that collapsing across the groups was an appropriate analytical approach. However, in our study, each group showed a slightly different pattern, which when combined canceled out and left almost no effects overall. This finding suggests that although members of visibly marginalized relationships may share some similarities (e.g., greater societal disapproval, a tendency to maintain a commitment to the relationship by emphasizing its superiority to alternatives; Lehmiller & Agnew, 2006), they may also show some subtle differences in their approach to coping with relationship disapproval. One of our study's strengths is its inclusion of sufficient representation of marginalized relationships to allow exploration of both similarities and differences of dynamics across different groups.

Mixed-race versus same-race

First, those in mixed-race relationships simply showed no differences in their responses to relationship disapproval, compared to those in same-race relationships. Those in mixed-race relationships did not even report perceiving greater disapproval of their relationship, quite surprising given that mixed-race relationships are known to experience stigma (e.g., Rosenthal & Starks, 2015). Disapproval is greater for certain types of racial pairings (e.g., Black-White, Field et al., 2013) and in specific circumstances (e.g., from parents of second-generation immigrants, Shenhav et al., 2017); perhaps our sample was not adequately representative on these dimensions. The most common nationality in our sample was Canadian. Although Canada is certainly not free of racism, it is a highly multicultural society and therefore mixed-race relationships may carry relatively less stigma. In many circles, racist sentiments may also be particularly socially unacceptable, encouraging SNMs to hide or tone down any race-based disapproval they might feel, for fear of rejection from the social network.

The most likely reason for a lack of differences in perceptions of disapproval, though, was our method. We asked participants to focus on disapproval from only one friend or family member. If we had asked about disapproval from society, or average disapproval across the whole network, clearer group differences may have emerged. In addition, in our study mixed-race relationships were compared to same-race relationships specifically selected because they were disapproved of, which was not the case in past research. Regardless of the reason, participants in mixed-race relationships in our study reported experiencing similar levels of disapproval to those in same-race relationships, and therefore also responded in a similar fashion, that is, with a drop in recalled closeness to the disapproving SNM, followed by some recovery in reported closeness. These similarities highlight the fact that experiencing disapproval of one's relationship is potentially a universal experience.

Mixed-sex versus same-sex

Those in same-sex relationships, in contrast, did report significantly greater disapproval of their relationship from their SNM. Furthermore, for many in same-sex relationships, disapproval of their relationship may be closely linked in their minds to disapproval of their overall sexual orientation (Holmberg & Blair, 2016), which in turn forms a key aspect of their overall identity (Pew Research Center, 2013). SNM disapproval of one's sexual identity has been shown to be associated with major disruptions in the relationship with that SNM, requiring extensive relationship work to repair (e.g., Reczek, 2016). Thus, a stronger connection to a cherished identity may explain why disapproval is associated with a steeper drop in perceived closeness for those in same-sex relationships than those in mixed-sex relationships.

The explanation for why they reported a stronger rebound in closeness after the point of strongest disapproval is more speculative. Perhaps, like the explanation for friends versus family, it is because they started out less close to the disapproving SNM, and a workable accommodation may be easier to achieve with more distant SNMs. It is also the case that although disapproval of same-sex relationships is common at first, many SNMs come to accept the relationship more over time, especially as it becomes more serious (e.g., LaSala, 2002). If the relationship is a fundamentally healthy one and gender composition is the only reason for disapproval, many SNMs may come around and become less disapproving over time, which in turn could predict increased closeness. Sexual minority individuals also work actively to change SNMs' disapproving views (Reczek, 2016). In some cases, particularly in lesbian relationships, romantic partners serve as bridges, seeking to heal long-standing rifts with family members of both partners to re-establish workable alliances (LaSala, 2002). Thus, although there may be

strong initial disapproval of same-sex relationships, any or all of the parties involved may become motivated to move past the initial disapproval and repair the rift.

Age-discrepant versus similar-age

Similar dynamics may apply to age-discrepant relationships. Past research suggests that disapproval of age-discrepant relationships is often tied to concerns that the relationships may not be founded on common interests, may be pursued for superficial reasons, and may even include some form of exploitation (Banks & Arnold, 2001). It is possible that SNMs who moderately disapproved of an age-discrepant relationship initially harbored some of these concerns, but over time saw that they did not hold true and that the relationship was fundamentally a healthy one. If so, then their disapproval might have receded over time, with an associated recovery in closeness, particularly if those in the relationship also worked to rebuild bridges.

In contrast, those who initially expressed strong disapproval of an age-discrepant relationship might have continued to feel their reasons for objecting to the relationship held true; if so, they would have been inclined to maintain their disapproval of the relationship over time, predicting an ongoing lack of closeness. These explanations all remain speculative, of course, as we only assessed strength of disapproval once, and did not ask for perceptions of changes over time in their reasons for approval or disapproval. Future research should take a longitudinal approach and ask for both ratings of disapproval and ratings of perceived closeness at each time point, to determine if they wax and wane in concert. It should also take a qualitative approach, asking participants to describe in more detail the nuances of how and why they believe that both approval/disapproval of the relationship and closeness to the disapproving SNM changed over time.

4.2 | Strengths and limitations

The primary limitations of the current study have already been noted: it is retrospective, self-report, cross-sectional, focuses primarily on one person's perspective, focuses on only a subset of possible circumstances (i.e., disapproval and all relationships are still ongoing), and may not contain a representative sample. Our sample is heavily skewed toward women; a more gender-balanced sample would allow for analysis of whether disapproval dynamics are moderated by the gender of any of the parties involved. These limitations are very real. Still, we have a large sample with good representation of varied relationship types. The general pattern of findings (i.e., a drop in recalled closeness followed by a smaller or even non-existent recovery) is very consistent, appearing again and again across groups, and from both parties' perspectives, while still showing some interesting nuances. Clearly, there is still much work to be done in this area. The current study, however, provides a good preliminary assessment of some of the key findings, and points toward many interesting future questions.

The effects of SNM disapproval on Romeo and Juliet's relationship remains intriguing to audiences centuries later and serves as a source of inspiration for modern-day researchers (Sinclair et al., 2014). We hope the current study persuades relationship researchers that the effects of that disapproval on Juliet's relationships with other members of her social network is equally intriguing, and merits further investigation.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

As part of IARR's encouragement of open research practices, the author(s) have provided the following information: This research was pre-registered. The aspects of the research that were pre-registered were the materials and the planned analysis strategy. The registration was submitted to OSF: osf.io/8p6fw. The data used in the research are available via email from the primary author upon reasonable request subject to REB/IRB approval. Data and materials can be obtained by emailing: kblair@trentu.ca.

ORCID

Diane Holmberg  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0349-9786>

Kay Jensen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8009-1664>

Karen L. Blair  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8602-098X>

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Throughout, the focal network member's name was piped into questions wherever 'this 'person' appears.
- ² Note that all remaining effects showed one of these two graphed patterns: either a drop in recalled closeness followed by a slight recovery, but not nearly to original levels, or else a drop in recalled closeness followed by no recovery.
- ³ Results were in the same direction from the perspective of the 42 matched SNMs: average reported disapproval of the relationship was somewhat higher for family members ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.62$) than for friends ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.70$) with a moderate effect size ($d = .43$); however, the difference was not significant at this sample size, $t(40) = 1.40$, $p = .17$.
- ⁴ This effect was not replicated from the perspective of the 42 matched SNMs. If anything, those family members rated themselves as being slightly closer to the disapproved-of person ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 1.26$) than did friends ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 1.26$; $d = .25$), but the difference was not significant ($p = .43$).

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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