

# **'Similarity breeds liking' revisited: The moderating role of commitment**

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ABSTRACT

The association between perceived similarity and liking for a romantic partner was examined in college students' relationships over the course of one year. Despite substantial evidence that similarity breeds attraction, perceived attribute similarity was positively correlated with liking only in high-commitment relationships. In low-commitment relationships, perceived *dissimilarity* was associated with greater liking and with maintenance of liking over time, consistent with Aron and Aron's (1997) self-expansion model. Relationship status (ongoing or ended) after one year was primarily explained by commitment at time 1. However, high perceived similarity appeared to buffer couples against destructive accommodation responses; relatively destructive responses were associated with ended status only when perceived similarity was low.

KEY WORDS: attraction • commitment • liking • perceived similarity  
• relationships • self

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In a familiar classroom demonstration, psychology students are asked: Do birds of a feather flock together or do opposites attract? Students are encouraged to generate instances substantiating each of these time-worn adages to illustrate the ease with which people can persuade themselves of

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contradictory beliefs. However, the empirical evidence is rather one-sided – evidence for the notion that opposites attract is scant and, with few exceptions, similarity is the rule. In this article, we take another look at the association between perceptions of similarity to one's partner and feelings of liking in college students' romantic relationships. In particular, we consider the moderating role that commitment may play. A recent survey of dating patterns reported that college students vary widely in their motivations for engaging in relationships and in the level of commitment ascribed to them: whereas some relationships are more serious and bound for long-term partnerships, many college relationships are casual and fleeting (Marquardt & Glenn, 2001). Here, we consider the possibility that the association between perceived similarity and liking for one's partner depends on the degree of commitment to the relationship, and that similarity and commitment will jointly predict changes in liking over the course of one year. In addition, we explore whether perceived similarity moderates the association between accommodation responses (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991) and the likelihood of staying together over a one-year period.

Despite lay beliefs that opposites sometimes attract, the notion that similarity breeds attraction and liking in interpersonal relationships has received voluminous support in the relationships literature (see Sunnafrank, 1983, for a review). Liking has been associated with similarity along a variety of dimensions, including attitudes (Byrne, 1971), personality traits (Buss, 1984; Terman & Buttenwieser, 1935), physical characteristics (Berscheid, Dion, Walster, & Walster, 1971; Berscheid & Walster, 1974), and self-concept descriptions (LaPrelle, Hoyle, Insko, & Bernthal, 1990). Theoretical explanations for the association of similarity and liking have focused on the motivational processes that underlie people's involvement in relationships. Byrne (1971, 1997) posited that similarity is attractive because it is reinforcing. That is, one prefers similar others because they tend to corroborate one's own attitudes and beliefs (Byrne, Nelson, & Reeves, 1966). Other theoretical conceptualizations of the similarity–liking association, such as the matching hypothesis (Berscheid et al., 1971) and genetic similarity theory (Rushton, 1990; Rushton, Russell, & Wells, 1984), share with Byrne's model a motivational theme and the position that greater similarity is associated with greater liking.

In the context of romantic relationships, researchers have distinguished between the effects of *perceived* similarity and *actual* similarity. Generally, perceived similarity between partners has been found to be more strongly associated with important relationship variables (e.g., reports of partner liking, marital satisfaction) compared with measures of actual similarity (Acitelli, Douvan, & Veroff, 1993; Hendrick, 1981; Levinger & Breedlove, 1966; Murray, Holmes, Bellavia, Griffin, & Dolderman, 2002). More specifically, recent research has shown that perceived similarity to one's partner predicts self-esteem and relationship satisfaction (Murray, Holmes, Dolderman, & Griffin, 2000; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000), and suggests that perceptions of the partner can be motivated by relationship goals, such as commitment (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). This literature generally

supports the notion that higher levels of perceived similarity are associated with greater liking for the partner.

Although the literature on close relationships has strongly favored the association between perceived similarity and relationship well-being, Aron and colleagues (Aron & Aron, 1986; Aron, Paris, & Aron, 1995) have proposed an alternative model, whereby greater perceived *dissimilarity* may be associated with greater attraction and relationship satisfaction. This ‘self-expansion’ model suggests that expanding the self-concept is a basic human motivation that may be fulfilled by incorporating the attributes of a romantic partner into the self. From this perspective, the most attractive partners are those who offer the greatest opportunity for self-expansion. Rather than choosing a partner who is most similar, people may be motivated to prefer partners perceived as dissimilar in order to expand the self. Aron and colleagues reasoned ‘it is dissimilarity that enhances attraction by increasing the potential for self-expansion – the more different a person is, the more new perspectives the person can add to the self’ (Aron & Aron, 1997, p. 268).

### **Role of commitment in the similarity–liking association**

To date, research has not directly addressed the apparent discrepancy between the preference for similar partners predicted by the attraction literature and the preference for dissimilar others predicted by self-expansion. One explanation is that similarity governs processes of attraction among strangers, whereas dissimilarity may sometimes facilitate ongoing relationships. However, there are noteworthy exceptions to this rule, such as studies of assortative mating in married couples in which similarity persists long into the relationship (Acitelli et al., 1993), and Dryer and Horowitz’s (1997) studies of complementary social interactions between dominant and submissive strangers, suggesting that partners who are dissimilar are sometimes preferred. Interestingly, the studies that make the strongest case for dissimilarity (Aron et al., 1995) rely primarily on a third population, namely, college students in ongoing romantic relationships. These individuals are neither strangers nor married couples, and although they should know each other fairly well, they may vary in their degree of commitment to the relationship. We suggest that one factor that may determine whether similarity or dissimilarity processes are at work in college students’ relationships is level of commitment.

College students pursue romantic relationships with varying degrees of commitment and for a variety of purposes (Marquardt & Glen, 2001; Stewart, Stinnett, & Rosenfeld, 2000), yet the extent to which differences in commitment may moderate the association of similarity and liking for one’s partner has not been addressed. We propose that an individual’s level of commitment may alter the priority given to similar versus dissimilar characteristics in evaluating the desirability of a partner or one’s satisfaction in a relationship. On the one hand, college student relationships that involve high commitment may reflect interest in long-term companionship leading to marriage and a family (Stewart et al., 2000). Individuals in these

relationships may value long-term compatibility, ease of interaction, and mutual understanding (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). For these 'compatible' relationships, similarity should prevail; that is, greater perceived similarity to one's partner should be correlated with a more positive attitude toward him or her (i.e., greater liking) because similarity contributes to factors such as mutual understanding between partners.

On the other hand, in college student relationships that are less committed, different features of the relationship may be important. Some of these relationships may be exploratory, characterized by self-expansion, new experiences, change in one's social circle or social status, sexual exploration, and current companionship. If these relationships are valued for their potential to offer new experiences, then liking for one's partner might actually be greater when one sees the partner as being dissimilar from the self. A dissimilar partner may draw out a unique set of personal attributes, offer new social contacts, and facilitate new behaviors. In other words, commitment may moderate the association between perceived similarity and one's attitude toward one's partner, such that perceived *similarity* is associated with greater liking in highly committed relationships, whereas perceived *dissimilarity* is associated with greater liking in less committed relationships.

### **Change in liking and relationship outcomes**

Few studies have examined the associations between perceived similarity and the course or outcome of the relationship. However, past research suggests that in newer relationships, overall liking for one's partner declines over time from an initially high level (Aronson & Linder, 1965; Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001). One explanation for this decline is that negative characteristics and incompatibilities that are concealed or ignored at the beginning of a relationship begin to surface (Braiker & Kelley, 1979). Although commitment has been demonstrated to predict positive relationship outcomes (Rusbult et al., 1998), we suggest that this association may be moderated by partners' perceived similarity. We propose that when a person is highly committed to a relationship, high perceived similarity may act as a buffer to mitigate this decline (Acitelli et al., 1993; Felmlee, 1998). When a partner is perceived to be a lot like oneself, the flaws that are revealed over time may be less surprising and more easily understood. Thus, similar characteristics may be the glue that holds the relationship together when tensions arise.

In less committed relationships, changes in liking over time are also likely to vary as a function of similarity level. Among low-commitment, low-similarity relationships, discovering a dissimilar partner's negative attributes and incompatibilities may have little or no impact on one's overall attitude toward a partner valued for current companionship or for the ability to expand one's self. Liking for one's partner would be based on desirable but unshared attributes that one enjoys or hopes to explore. When commitment is low, these self-expanding attributes may be unmarred by negative attributes that eventually emerge. Consider the shy and retiring

physics student who is drawn out by a talkative, life-of-the-party partner. Discovering that an outgoing partner is also disorganized and careless should have little impact on the relationship as long as commitment is low.

Of course, liking or change in liking does not necessarily predict relationship outcome (i.e., whether a couple stays together). For example, Rusbult's (1983) model of commitment emphasizes the role of investment (as opposed to feelings of liking) in determining whether relationships last. Thus, even if similarity (and sometimes dissimilarity) contributes to liking, this does not mean that the relationship will be long-lived. Consistent with Rusbult's model, commitment should be a strong predictor of relationship longevity (Bui, Peplau, & Hill, 1996; Drigotas, Rusbult, & Verette, 1999). However, one possible role for perceived similarity is that it might buffer the impact of certain types of stressors on relationship outcomes. For example, what others see as a partner's flaws (e.g., being extremely talkative or reticent; extremely confrontational or avoidant) would be less devastating if both partners share these behavioral styles (Gottman, 1994). Moreover, perceptions of similarity may enable individuals to weather transient threats to the relationship, such as a partner's bad behaviors (Murray et al., 2002). Thus, perceived similarity may moderate the tendency for difficult or destructive relationship behaviors to end the relationship (e.g., by promoting feelings of empathy or providing safe domains to fall back on when the relationship is stressed).

### **Overview and hypotheses**

This study investigated associations among perceived similarity to one's partner, commitment to the relationship, and liking for one's partner in college students' ongoing romantic relationships. We examined two specific hypotheses involving the interactive effects of perceived similarity and relationship commitment on reports of liking for one's partner and for changes in liking over a one-year period. We also examined the ability of perceived similarity and commitment at the outset of the study to predict relationship outcomes (ongoing vs ended) one year later, especially as moderators of potential threats to the relationship (indexed by self-reported accommodation responses).

First, we hypothesized that the association between perceived similarity and overall attitude toward one's partner (i.e., liking) would depend on level of commitment to the relationship. In high-commitment relationships, perceived similarity and liking should be positively correlated, consistent with the well-known similarity-liking effect (Byrne, 1971). In low-commitment relationships, including those that might be formed for purposes of self-expansion, this association should be weaker or even reversed because individuals may enjoy the advantages of being with a dissimilar other without concern for long-term compatibility.

Second, we hypothesized a similar effect for change in liking over time. Most individuals will experience a decrease in liking for their partner after

one year (Aronson & Linder, 1965; Huston et al., 2001), reflecting in part changes in the salience of partner attributes. In high-commitment relationships, dissimilar partners may discover important unexpected partner attributes and experience a substantial decline in liking. When commitment is low, such discoveries may have less impact if the basic dimensions of attraction remain intact. Hence, dissimilarity is expected to be associated with less decline in liking when commitment is low than when commitment is high.

The third hypothesis focused on the ability of perceived similarity, commitment, and accommodation responses to predict relationship status (ongoing or ended) over a one-year period. As explained earlier, we predicted that high perceived similarity would buffer the association between potentially destructive relationship behaviors and relationship dissolution, above and beyond the expected main effect for commitment.

## Method

### Participants

Eighty-four individuals participated in three laboratory sessions, two that took place when the participants were Introductory Psychology students (time 1), and one session that took place 1 year later (time 2). At the outset of the study, all participants were in an exclusive dating relationship that had been ongoing for 3 months or more. Although it was not a requirement for eligibility in the study, all participants were in heterosexual relationships. Data from five participants were excluded from the analyses due to incomplete responses (one participant at time 1, and one at time 2), outlying responses (one participant with a liking score more than three standard deviations below the mean), or because they did not follow instructions (two participants). Also, three participants were excluded because they were married. The average age of the remaining 76 participants (50 females, 26 males) was 19.0 years ( $SD = 1.5$ ; range 18–30 years); the average length of their relationships was 21.0 months ( $SD = 13.7$ ; range: 3–56 months). Participants' relationship status was as follows: 3.9% engaged, 5.3% living together, but not engaged or married, and 90.7% dating.

### Card sort measures

**Partner card sort.** Participants' beliefs about attributes of their partners and themselves were assessed by card-sorting tasks (Showers, 1992; Showers & Kevlyn, 1999). For the partner card sort, participants were given a deck of 40 note cards, each containing an adjective that might be used to describe one's relationship partner. There were 20 positive and 20 negative attributes, and the positive or negative valence of each attribute was established by independent raters (Showers, 1992). Participants were told 'Your task is to think of the different aspects of your partner or his or her life and then form groups of traits that go together, where each group of traits describes an aspect of them or their life.' Participants were told that they could form as many or as few groups as they needed, with as many or as few cards as fit into each one. If an adjective did not fit into any of their groups, they could simply set it aside. Participants

were given 25 minutes to complete this task (see Showers & Kevlyn, 1999, for additional details).

**Self-descriptive card sort.** This card sort consisted of the original version of the task used by Showers (1992), in which participants were asked to ‘Think of the different aspects of yourself or your life, and sort the cards into groups, so that each group describes an aspect of yourself or your life.’ The same card deck was used both for the partner task and for the self-descriptive task.

**Perceived attribute similarity.** The measure of self–partner similarity was the number of shared attributes (the number of attributes that appeared both in a participant’s partner card sort and self-descriptive card sort) divided by the total number of unique attributes used by the participant in both card sorts. That is, it was the proportion of attributes *used* that was shared. High similarity scores indicated that participants perceived themselves and their partner as sharing a large portion of self-descriptive attributes. A ratio measure of similarity was selected for two reasons: (i) previous research has shown that the ratio of similar attributes is a more effective measure than raw number of similar attributes (Byrne & Nelson, 1965), and (ii) the ratio of shared attributes to the total attributes corrects for any artifactual differences in similarity due to variation in the total number of attributes participants used in the card sort descriptions.

**Proportion of negative partner attributes.** This is the number of negative attributes appearing in the partner card sort divided by the total number of attributes used for the partner, and therefore represents an index of the perceived negativity of the partner’s attributes. However, perceived negativity is to be distinguished from a person’s overall attitude toward the partner, as a partner may be seen to possess an attribute that is objectively negative (e.g., sad), but that might not affect subjective liking for him or her. Here, proportion of negative partner attributes is used as a control variable to test whether similarity–liking effects can be attributed to differences in the negativity of partner attributes.

**Other card sort indices.** The card-sorting task can also be used to assess the evaluative structure of self-knowledge or partner-knowledge. Analyses of those indices for the present sample are reported elsewhere (Showers & Kevlyn, 1999; Showers & Zeigler-Hill, 2004).

### Questionnaire measures

**Attitude toward partner.** The measure of overall attitude toward the partner was Rubin’s (1970) Liking Scale. Each of the 13 items was accompanied by a 1 (*disagree completely*) to 9 (*agree completely*) scale. Rubin (1970) reports high internal consistency ( $\alpha = .81$  for women and  $.83$  for men) for this scale.

**Commitment.** The measure of participants’ commitment to their relationship was Lund’s (1985) Commitment Scale. Responses to each of the nine items were made on a 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*) scale. Lund reports a coefficient alpha of  $.82$  for this scale.

**Accommodation response.** The measure of accommodation (Rusbult et al., 1991) assesses individuals' reports of how they would respond to negative behaviors performed by their partner. This 24-item scale assesses four types of responses – exit, neglect, voice, and loyalty – to hypothetical relationship-threatening behaviors. These responses differ on dimensions of constructive/destructive and active/passive. Exit represents the active destruction of a relationship, and may involve separation or active abuse of one's partner. Neglect responses allow the relationship to deteriorate passively (e.g., by ignoring one's partner). Voice represents an active, constructive effort to repair a relationship. Finally, loyalty represents a passive desire for relationship conditions to improve, such as hoping or praying for improvement. Following the procedure of Weiselquist et al. (1999), the exit and neglect subscales were reverse scored, and then scores on all four subscales were standardized and averaged to compute a measure on which high scores correspond to relatively constructive accommodation responses ( $\alpha = .62$ ).

### **Procedure**

**Time 1.** Time 1 data collection occurred in two sessions. Participants completed Session 1 measures in groups of 2 to 12. In this session, each participant completed the card-sorting task to describe the partner and a set of questionnaire measures pertaining to their partner and the relationship, including liking and commitment. In Session 2, conducted in groups exactly 1 week after Session 1, participants performed the card-sorting task to describe themselves, a set of personality and mood measures not relevant to this study, and the additional relationship measures described above, including Rusbult et al.'s (1991) measure of accommodation responses.

**Time 2.** Time 2 data collection also involved two separate sessions. First, a 10-minute interview was conducted approximately 1 year after time 1 and included questions about the current status of the relationship (ongoing vs ended). Second, participants were paid \$15 for their participation in a laboratory session. They performed the card-sorting task to describe their partner and completed questionnaire measures, including liking and commitment. Participants were asked to respond according to their current feelings if the relationship was ongoing. If the relationship had ended, they were asked to respond according to how they felt 1 month before the relationship ended.

### **Results**

Correlations and descriptive statistics for all variables are presented in Table 1. For all regression analyses, predictor variables were standardized for the purpose of testing interactions, as suggested by Aiken and West (1991). Initial analyses revealed that participant sex did not moderate the effects of similarity, commitment, or their interaction, and therefore this variable was removed from the regression model.

#### **Hypothesis 1: Role of commitment in similarity–liking association**

The hypothesis that commitment level moderates the effect of similarity on partner liking was tested via hierarchical regression, in which liking scores were

**TABLE 1**  
**Intercorrelations and descriptive statistics**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Similarity (time 1)										
2. Commitment (time 1)	.12									
3. Liking (time 1)	.00	.32**								
4. Negativity (time 1)	.42**	-.07	-.29*							
5. Similarity (time 2)	.59**	.15	.03	.28						
6. Commitment (time 2)	.01	.57**	.19	.09	.22					
7. Liking (time 2)	.01	.17	.76**	-.24	.15	.28				
8. Negativity (time 2)	.02	-.12	-.26	.25	-.18	-.28	-.39**			
9. Change in liking	-.09	-.10	-.26	-.12	.19	.15	.43*	-.22		
10. Accommodation	-.01	.45**	.25*	-.23*	-.02	.37**	.17	-.08	-.30*	
<i>M</i>	.63	5.71	7.19	.65	.63	5.77	6.96	.24	-0.28	-.01
<i>SD</i>	0.13	0.79	0.91	0.25	0.12	0.87	0.93	0.13	0.62	1.06
<i>N</i>	76	76	76	76	48	48	48	48	48	71

*Note.* Negativity = proportion of negative partner attributes. Descriptive statistics are reported for the *N* used in regression analyses of each variable. Although all 76 participated at time 2, statistics for time 2 similarity, commitment, liking, negativity, and change in liking are presented for the 48 participants in ongoing relationships whose data were used in the analyses reported. The correlations shown here were conducted pairwise, so that the *N* for each correlation corresponds to the lowest *N* for that pair of variables.

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ .

regressed onto measures of similarity, commitment, and their interaction. We first conducted this analysis for time 1 values, and then for time 2 variables for the subset of participants who were still in ongoing relationships at time 2,  $n = 48$ . Statistics for each step of these regressions appear in Table 2.

The analysis for time 1 variables produced a main effect for commitment,  $\beta = .32, p < .01$ , which was qualified by a significant Similarity  $\times$  Commitment interaction,  $\beta = .24, p < .05$ . These effects were replicated in the analysis of time 2 variables, which produced a marginal effect for commitment,  $\beta = .26, p < .09$ , qualified by a significant Similarity  $\times$  Commitment interaction,  $\beta = .29, p < .05$ . Predicted values for the Similarity  $\times$  Commitment interactions at time 1 and time 2 are shown in Figure 1. At both times, for high-commitment participants, perceived similarity was associated with greater liking, whereas for low-commitment participants, greater perceived similarity was associated with lower liking.

To demonstrate that the effects for liking were not due simply to the negativity of attributes ascribed to the partner in the card-sorting task, we repeated the regression described earlier, controlling for proportion of negative partner attributes. That is, the proportion of negative partner attributes was entered in the first step of the regression model along with similarity and commitment scores. The Similarity  $\times$  Commitment interaction term was entered in the second step. Proportion of negative partner attributes was a significant predictor of liking at both time 1,  $\beta = -.36, p < .01$ , and time 2,  $\beta = -.32, p < .02$ . Importantly, however, the Similarity  $\times$  Commitment effects remained significant at time 1,  $\beta = .32, p < .01$ , and at time 2,  $\beta = .31, p < .01$ .

To take a closer look at perceived negativity, proportion of negative partner attributes was regressed onto similarity, commitment, and their interaction. A main effect for commitment,  $\beta = -.26, p < .03$ , was qualified by a marginally significant Similarity  $\times$  Commitment interaction,  $\beta = .21, p < .08$ , indicating that

**TABLE 2**  
**Hierarchical regressions of liking onto measures of similarity, commitment, and their interactions at time 1 and time 2, respectively**

Predictors	Liking (time 1) <sup>a</sup>				Liking (time 2) <sup>b</sup>			
	Cumulative $R^2$	Increase in $R^2$	$sr^2$	$sr$	Cumulative $R^2$	Increase in $R^2$	$sr^2$	$sr$
Step 1:	.10*	.10*			.09	.09		
Sim			.00	-.04			.01	.10
Com			.10**	.32**			.06	.25
Step 2:	.15**	.05*			.17*	.08*		
Sim $\times$ Com			.06*	.24*			.08*	.29*

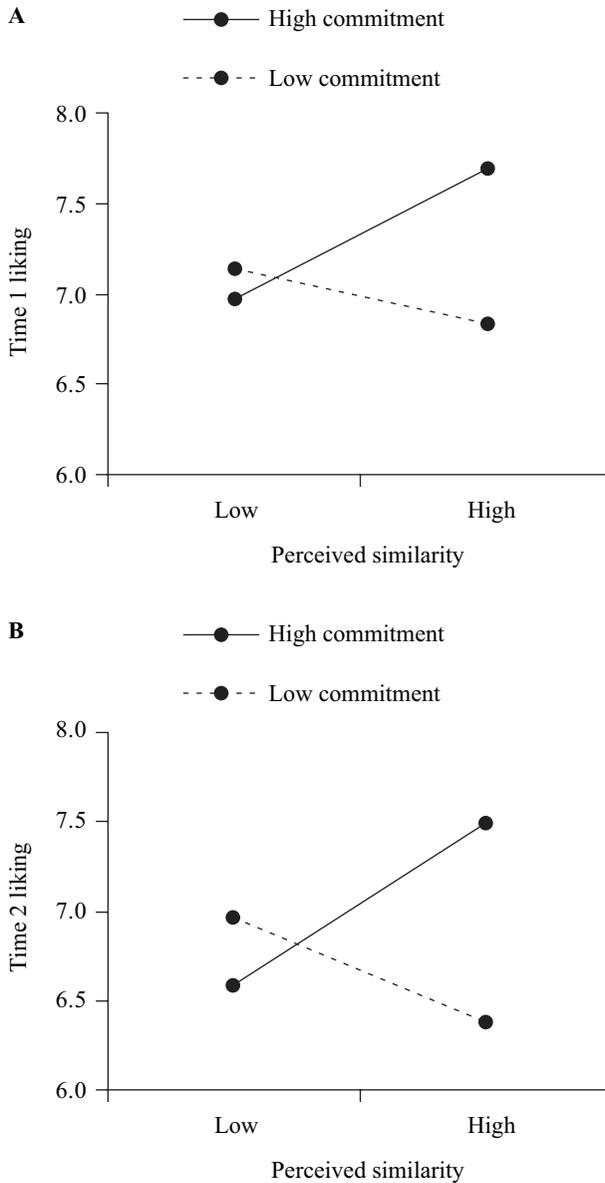
Note. Sim = similarity; Com = commitment.  $sr^2$  = squared semipartial correlation coefficient (represents the proportion of variance uniquely accounted for by each predictor, beyond that accounted for by all other predictors at that step). The sign of  $sr$  indicates the direction of the relation between each predictor and the dependent variable.

<sup>a</sup> Time 1 predictors,  $N = 76$ .

<sup>b</sup> Time 2 predictors,  $N = 48$ .

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ .

**FIGURE 1**  
**Predicted values for liking, illustrating the interaction of perceived similarity and commitment at time 1 (panel A) and time 2 (panel B), computed at values that are one standard deviation above and below the means.**



partner descriptions were most positive in the low-similarity, high-commitment group (where liking was only moderate): high similarity, high commitment  $\hat{Y} = .23$ , low similarity, high commitment  $\hat{Y} = .13$ , high similarity, low commitment  $\hat{Y} = .26$ , low similarity, low commitment  $\hat{Y} = .25$ .

### **Hypothesis 2: Change in liking**

Analyses of liking change included only the 48 participants who were still in an ongoing romantic relationship with the same partner at time 2. Overall, a significant decrease was observed in participants' liking for their partners from time 1 ( $M = 7.25$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ) to time 2 ( $M = 6.96$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ),  $t(47) = 3.15$ ,  $p < .01$ . To examine the possible association between perceived similarity and this decline, change in liking (time 2 minus time 1) was regressed onto the time 1 similarity and commitment scores and their interaction. Liking at time 1 was held constant to control for the possibility of regression to the mean (Cohen & Cohen, 1983). Although there were no significant main effects, the Similarity  $\times$  Commitment interaction was marginally significant,  $\hat{Y} = .28$ ,  $p < .06$ . The key feature of this interaction is that low-commitment, low-similarity participants were able to maintain liking for their partner with virtually no decline over time,  $\hat{Y} = -.02$ . Predicted values for the remaining groups indicate more substantial declines: low commitment, high similarity  $\hat{Y} = -.49$ ; high commitment, high similarity  $\hat{Y} = -.20$ ; high commitment, low similarity  $\hat{Y} = -.47$ .

### **Hypothesis 3: Similarity and commitment as predictors of relationship outcomes**

The goal of this analysis was to explore whether perceived similarity would moderate any association of commitment or accommodation response at time 1 with ongoing status at time 2. Owing to experimenter error, five participants did not receive the accommodation measure and therefore the sample size for this analysis was 71. A logistic regression analysis was used in which relationship status (coded as 1 = *ongoing* or 0 = *ended*) was regressed onto similarity, commitment, accommodation, and their interactions. The significance of the logistic regression coefficients was evaluated using the Wald statistic, which is interpreted as a z-statistic (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996). As shown in Table 3, this analysis produced a significant main effect for commitment, and a significant Similarity  $\times$  Accommodation interaction. Figure 2 presents predicted values for the interaction. There was a positive association between relatively constructive accommodation responses and ongoing status only for individuals with low perceived similarity. For individuals with high perceived similarity, relatively destructive responses were actually associated with a higher likelihood of ongoing status. Apparently, constructive responses did not improve the likelihood of staying together when perceived similarity was high.

### **Length of relationship**

To address the possibility that Similarity  $\times$  Commitment effects for partner liking might be affected by the amount of time spent in the relationship, we examined associations between relationship length and all other variables using Pearson correlations. The only significant correlate of relationship length was commitment, such that participants in older relationships reported greater commitment at time 2,  $r(76) = .29$ ,  $p < .02$ . Relationship length did not predict partner liking as a main effect or in interaction with the other variables, nor was it predicted by the Similarity  $\times$  Commitment interaction,  $\beta = .00$ , *ns*.

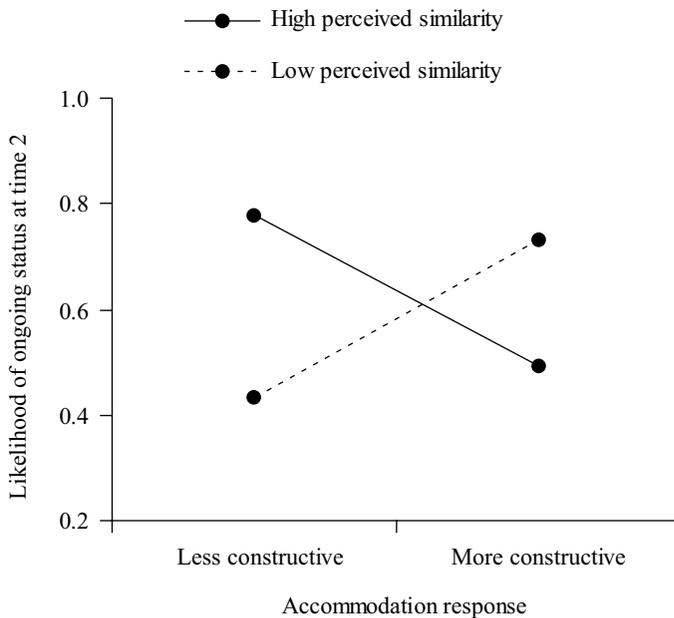
**TABLE 3**  
**Hierarchical logistic regression of likelihood of ongoing status onto time 1**  
**measures of similarity, commitment, accommodation response, and their**  
**interactions**

Predictors	Likelihood of ongoing status			
	Cumulative $R^2$	Increase in $R^2$	Wald B	$\chi^2$
Step 1:	.10	.10		
Sim			.14	.28
Com			.57*	3.81*
Accom			-.06	.05
Step 2:	.21	.11		
Sim $\times$ Accom			-.82*	4.68*
Com $\times$ Accom			.15	.21
Sim $\times$ Com			.49	2.29
Step 3:	.21	.00		
Sim $\times$ Com $\times$ Accom			.03	.01

*Note.* Sim = similarity; Com = commitment; Accom = accommodation.  $R^2$  was computed using the Nagelkerke method.  $N = 71$ .

\*  $p < .05$ .

**FIGURE 2**  
**Predicted values for likelihood of ongoing status at time 2, illustrating the**  
**interaction of perceived similarity and accommodation response, computed at**  
**values that are one standard deviation above and below the means.**



## **Discussion**

The results from this study represent a step toward resolving the fabled and clichéd ‘birds of a feather’ versus ‘opposites attract’ debate, suggesting that the heretofore equivocal association between perceived similarity and liking in ongoing relationships may be moderated by partners’ level of commitment to the relationship. Participants in high-commitment relationships were more likely to favor a similar partner, consistent with the well-documented association between similarity and liking. These individuals may be seeking a highly compatible, long-term companion who offers easy, predictable interactions. In contrast, participants in low-commitment relationships tended to favor less similar partners, a hallmark of the self-expansion motive for romantic relationships (Aron & Aron, 1997). Whereas highly committed relationships are sometimes assumed to be most rewarding, our findings point to the important functions that less committed relationships may serve.

### **Relationship styles**

More generally, the observed associations among perceived attribute similarity, commitment, and liking for one’s partner may reflect different relationship ‘styles’ that are common in college students’ romantic experience. These styles are not intended to be viewed as discrete groups, but rather as prototypes of different relationships that correspond to different degrees of perceived similarity and commitment. In what follows, we speculate on the characteristics of these prototypical relationship styles and suggest new hypotheses that may be generated by this framework.

Relationship partners who are highly committed to the relationship, who perceive themselves to be highly similar to their partners, and who report high levels of liking for their partners may represent the prototype of a committed relationship, presumably motivated by long-term compatibility and the desire for a stable and predictable partnership. Previous research has suggested that perceiving one’s partner as similar to oneself contributes to a sense of stability and control in the relationship (Swann, Hixon, & De La Ronde, 1992). To the extent that perceptions of similarity are accurate, a person is in a better position to understand a similar partner’s behavior, which in turn should facilitate the resolution of relationship conflicts. Interestingly, high-similarity, high-commitment participants did not use especially positive attributes to describe their partners in the card-sorting task. That is, they reported relatively high liking for partners who had a normative level of negative characteristics (23%), suggesting that perceived similarity may facilitate taking the good with the bad. Like most individuals in this study, their feelings of liking for their partner tended to decline over one year’s time.

A second relationship style is suggested by individuals with high commitment but low perceived similarity and moderate liking for their partners. What explains the high commitment of these individuals despite their relatively lower perceived similarity and liking? Interestingly, these individuals tended to use fewer negative attributes in their partner card sorts (13%)

than any other group, suggesting the possibility that these partners possess important qualities that are positive in an extrinsic sense (e.g., physically attractive, wealthy, or popular) but that do not necessarily make the partner a more likeable person. It may be easy to feel committed to partners with such positive ‘extrinsic’ qualities, despite low perceived similarity and moderate levels of liking. Although liking was moderate at time 1, it dropped substantially over the year.

The responses of individuals in low-commitment relationships suggest two additional relationship styles. ‘Exploration’ motives may characterize individuals with low commitment, low perceived similarity, yet moderate liking. These individuals may be seeking novel experiences in their relationships that will help them develop new personal qualities to integrate into their self-concepts (i.e., self-expansion; Aron & Aron, 1997). Dissimilar partners may be preferred in these cases because they offer greater potential for expansion.

One striking feature of these findings is the extent to which such ‘exploratory’ relationships appeared to be successful in this college population. These participants not only liked their partners well (considering their low commitment) in the initial data collection, but those whose relationships were still ongoing one year later also maintained their liking over time. In fact, they were the only participants in the sample who did not show a decrease in liking in their ongoing relationships over the course of the year. What is it about this group that keeps regard for the partner relatively high? Aron and Aron (1986, 1997) emphasized that engaging in self-expanding activities may help to maintain a successful relationship. It is possible that these participants engaged in many self-expanding activities by virtue of being in a relationship with a dissimilar partner. Moreover, exploration motives may make these couples less vulnerable to the typical decrease in liking that comes with learning more about a partner’s flaws over the course of a year. Newly discovered flaws may matter little for exploratory relationships that are not focused on commitment, but rather are rooted in the desire to expand the self along some positive dimension that one’s partner is perceived to have. Future research could directly test the possibility of self-expansion motives in individuals with low commitment and low perceived similarity.

Finally, we speculate that relationships characterized by low-commitment, high perceived similarity, and lower liking sometimes represent relationships of ‘convenience’. Participants who characterize their relationships in this way may be with unattractive partners whom they do not particularly like, but with whom they share a bond of similarity. An example would be a fellow student with the same major or perhaps an acquaintance from one’s hometown with whom frequent contact is made, and who, by virtue of this circumstance, shares sufficient experiences and interests to form the basis of a relationship. Although such partners may not be ideal in the minds of our participants, they may satisfy the need for companionship in the short-term. Liking in these relationships was initially relatively low and substantial declines in liking were reported one year later.

**Perceived similarity and accommodation response**

Consistent with predictions, high perceived similarity appeared to buffer couples from the impact of destructive accommodation styles (i.e., preferences for responses of exit and neglect compared with loyalty or voice). The expected positive association between relatively constructive responses and persistence of the relationship over one year was found only for couples with low perceived similarity. However, the fact that individuals with high perceived similarity tended to have more positive outcomes when hypothetical responses were less constructive is somewhat surprising, and is not fully explained by the argument that perceived similarity buffers the impact of destructive responses. Because this measure asks about hypothetical behaviors, an alternative explanation is that reports of destructive responses by individuals with high perceived similarity are an indicator that these bad behaviors are essentially unimaginable within their relationships. If trust in one's partner is unusually high, the hypothesized bad behaviors might represent a clear violation of the relationship and warrant the report of destructive responses that might never actually be provoked in that particular relationship. Furthermore, individuals with high perceived similarity who report constructive responses on this measure (and show high likelihood of ended status) could possibly be those who have actually experienced substantial conflict in their relationships. These individuals may very well have displayed reasonable and constructive responses to conflicts, but this may not have been sufficient to sustain the relationship. Future research should look more closely at the ability of perceived similarity to buffer both relationship conflict and destructive accommodation responses, and at the possibility that exit responses to *hypothetical* bad behaviors are in fact a sign of trust (Wieselquist et al., 1999).

**Relationship preferences: Traits or states?**

Although in this discussion, a given relationship is linked to only one descriptive style, it is entirely possible that a single relationship may transit through alternative styles over its course. That is, as a relationship develops, the motives and preferences of the couple may change. For instance, a relationship that is initially driven by exploration motives may end up as a relationship characterized by high similarity and high commitment (i.e., 'compatible' type). In other words, relationship styles may be driven by both individual preferences and by external circumstances. A preference for a particular type of relationship may be determined in large part by an individual's current life circumstance. College life may be especially amenable to low-commitment and exploratory relationships, whereas life after college may be more conducive to relationships characterized by compatibility and a search for long-term partnership. Although our research was conducted over the course of a year while the participants were in college, studying changes in relationship priorities when partners move beyond their college years would require a longer timeframe. Nonetheless, examination of the extent to which the preference of individuals for these different types of relationships may change over time and across major lifestyle changes (e.g.,

post-college life, marriage) represents an interesting direction for future research.

### **Limitations**

We have already alluded to one of the critical limitations of this study, namely the use of a college student sample. It is important to know whether the dissimilarity effect observed here would emerge in older or less-educated populations. A second important limitation may be the reliance on the card sort measure of perceived attribute similarity. This is a novel approach to assessing similarity that has both strengths and weaknesses. The attributes in the card sort (e.g., *organized, fun and entertaining, irritable, tense*) can be construed as either states or traits. Moreover, the task encourages participants to link these attributes to specific roles or domains of self (me as a student, me during finals, me as a friend), so that high attribute similarity scores may result from perceptions like the following: I am irritable during final exams, my partner tends to be irritable around her family. Future research might test whether this type of attribute similarity is more or less powerful than sharing external characteristics (like age or race), attitudes, goals, or values, or generalized traits. One possibility is that similarity (or dissimilarity) in the attributes that people display in pursuing their values and goals (e.g., irritable when stressed) is more important for relationship functioning than similarity in values and goals per se (e.g., perceived importance of academic vs interpersonal goals). Because it is likely to be easier to create the perception of similarity or dissimilarity (Brewer & Gardner, 1996) by focusing on domain-specific attributes (sometimes irritable) rather than generalized traits (dispositionally anxious – which would be less malleable), the experience of perceived similarity in everyday life may in fact be linked more strongly to domain-specific attributes than to generalized traits or personal attitudes.

Future research might also consider the overlap between alternative relationship styles and an individual's other personal goals and behavioral styles. For example, individuals who engage in certain risky behaviors (e.g., sexual behaviors; cf. Gerrard, Gibbons, & Bushman, 1996) may be more prone to pursue the exploratory relationship style; similarly, identity status (e.g., diffused or moratorium vs achieved or foreclosed; Marcia, 1966, 1993) may be associated with a preference for either of the low-commitment styles. Although it seems that securely attached individuals could pursue any of these relationship styles, depending on their life circumstances, it would be worth testing the possibility that a preference for dissimilar partners or low-commitment relationships may reflect insecure attachment styles.

### **Conclusion**

Similarity has a long history of being associated with liking in the psychological literature. In ongoing relationships, however, dissimilarity has sometimes been found to be more advantageous. Our results indicate that the association between perceived similarity and liking in ongoing relationships

is moderated by level of commitment. The findings identify a set of alternative relationship 'styles' that vary in their levels of commitment, perceived similarity to one's partner, and degree of liking for the partner. The classic association between similarity and liking was evident only among highly committed partners. Among less committed partners, those perceived to be dissimilar were liked more. Over a one-year period, perceived similarity to one's partner appeared to protect relationships from the damaging effects of destructive accommodation responses. However, relationships characterized by low commitment and low perceived similarity (i.e., 'exploration' type) were notable for showing high liking and for maintaining liking over time. To summarize, by considering the moderating effect of commitment on the similarity-liking association, we find that although for many, similarity breeds liking, in the case of college relationships with low levels of commitment, there may actually be considerable truth in the adage that opposites attract.

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