Committed to Succeed: Commitment Determines Reactions to Upward Relationship

Comparisons

Sabrina Thai

Brock University

Penelope Lockwood & Rashan J. Boksh

University of Toronto

Authors' note: Sabrina Thai, Department of Psychology, Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada. Penelope Lockwood and Rashan J. Boksh, Department of Psychology, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

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The data used in the research are available. The data can be obtained via email by contacting the first author (sthai@brocku.ca). The materials used in the research are available. The materials can be obtained at: <https://osf.io/2ud7x/>.

Correspondence concerning this article should be address to Sabrina Thai, Department of Psychology, Brock University, 1812 Sir Isaac Brock Way, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada L2S 3A1. Email: sthai@brocku.ca

Abstract

Individuals encounter numerous examples of happy relationships in their social networks and through the media; however, it is unclear how comparisons to superior couples affect one's own relationship. We examined individuals' responses to upward relationship comparisons by exposing dating and married participants to highly successful relationships drawn from their own lives (Study 1) and an exemplar given to them (Studies 2-3). We predicted that moderately committed individuals would evaluate their relationship against the superior relationship, and consequently be less motivated to engage in relationship-maintenance behaviors. In contrast, highly committed individuals would be inspired by the superior relationship and view their relationship more positively. Across all studies, higher commitment yielded more positive responses to upward relationship comparisons than did lower commitment.

Keywords: social comparison, commitment, romantic relationships, motivation, relationship optimism, relationship satisfaction

Committed to Succeed: Commitment Determines Reactions to Upward Relationship Comparisons

Throughout their daily lives, individuals are barraged with examples of highly successful relationships. Romantic comedies with happily-ever-after endings win big at the box office and on Netflix. Television shows draw large audiences when a popular small-screen couple, like Sheldon and Amy on *The Big Bang Theory*, resolve seasons of romantic tension with a wedding (e.g., Otterson, 2018). Romance novels are a billion dollar a year industry (Garcia-Navarro, 2018). In addition to such fictional examples, individuals may encounter positive examples in friends or family who have, or who at least present the appearance of having, a “perfect” relationship – the elderly relatives who are celebrating a golden wedding anniversary, or friends who have found a “soulmate.” Such examples of apparent romantic success may contrast with individuals’ own relatively less ideal relationship experiences, thus affecting their perceptions of or satisfaction with their own relationships.

Interdependence theory suggests that exposure to other relationships may shape individuals’ expectations for their own relationships (i.e., comparison levels; Thibault & Kelley, 1959). Comparison levels are the standards against which individuals evaluate their own relationship outcomes, and are affected by the individuals’ personal experiences, outcomes they see others experience, and outcomes that are forced upon them. Thus, a superior relationship may make comparison levels more salient and may even serve as a comparison standard against which individuals will assess their own relationships. Specifically, when their relationships fall below their comparison levels, individuals may experience decreased satisfaction. In contrast, when their relationship meets or exceeds their comparison levels, individuals may experience increased satisfaction. If exposure to a superior relationship increases individuals’ comparison

levels, even temporarily, then upward relationship comparisons should decrease individuals' satisfaction.

Indeed, past research on social comparison suggests that when individuals are exposed to others who are superior in a domain that is highly self-relevant, they contrast their own attributes or accomplishments with those of the other, and consequently feel threatened by their inferiority (e.g., Tesser, 1988). Thus, exposure to examples of highly successful relationships may be distressing, highlighting the less-than-perfect nature of one's own relationship, especially if there is a large discrepancy between one's own relationship and the superior one (cf. Midgley, 2019; Patrick, Neighbors, & Knee, 2004). Consistent with this possibility, past research has found that exposure to popular romantic media is associated with lower relationship satisfaction (Shapiro & Kroeger, 1991), suggesting that idealized relationship examples may threaten individuals' perceptions of their own partnership. Similarly, recent research suggests that thinking about a friend's superior relationship leads to more negative perceptions of one's own relationship (e.g., "My relationship is not so good after all"), and such perceptions contribute to lowered satisfaction (Morry & Sucharyna, 2016; Morry, Chee, Penniston, & Sucharyna, 2019). These negative responses to comparisons to more successful couples may be the norm; a meta-analysis of over 60-years of social comparison research suggests that individuals' default response to upward comparisons is to contrast the self to superior others, resulting in lowered self-evaluations (Gerber, Wheeler, & Suls, 2018).

However, upward comparisons are not inevitably threatening (e.g., Gardner, Gabriel, & Hochschild, 2002; Lockwood & Kunda 1997; Lockwood & Pinkus, 2008; McFarland, Buehler, & MacKay, 2001; Pinkus, Lockwood, Schimmack, & Fournier, 2008). In general, the impact of the comparison – positive or negative – will be determined by whether the superior target

functions as a standard against which individuals can evaluate their own attributes and abilities, or a target to which they can assimilate their self-perceptions (Blanton, 2001; Gerber et al., 2018). According to the selective accessibility model (Mussweiler, 2003), individuals determine whether they should assimilate to or contrast themselves from a standard by first assessing whether they are similar to the standard at a holistic level. The outcome of this broad assessment determines whether individuals will engage in similarity or dissimilarity hypothesis testing. Once individuals have settled on a hypothesis, they search for evidence consistent with their hypothesis. Thus, similarity testing results in assimilation, and dissimilarity testing results in contrast. Indeed, meta-analytic evidence suggests that primed dissimilarity leads to contrast effects, whereas primed similarity leads to assimilation effects (Gerber et al., 2018).

In the case of comparisons across relationships, how committed individuals are to their relationship may determine which hypothesis (i.e., similarity or dissimilarity) they test. Past research suggests that individuals high in commitment have more positive illusions about their relationship (Murray & Holmes, 1997), and more positive global evaluations of their relationship (Auger, Menzies-Toman, & Lydon, 2017; Li & Fung, 2013). Consequently, when committed individuals holistically assess similarity between their own relationship and the superior one, they may perceive greater similarity, leading them to test for similarity and find evidence indicating that they are just like the superior couple, and thus respond positively. Drawing this analogy between their own relationship and the superior one may allow highly committed individuals to make inferences about their own future by using information about the superior couple. Superior relationships may bring to mind thoughts about what is possible for their relationship in the future, which also result in positive evaluations of their relationship, just as exposure to superior others may bring to mind possible future selves and bolster self-evaluations

(Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). Indeed, recent research suggests that encountering a more successful relationship may activate positive images of the future of one's relationship (Morry & Sucharyna, 2016).

In addition, highly committed individuals may also perceive similarities to a superior couple because they expect positive relationship outcomes in the future. Recent research has shown that individuals who report greater commitment expect greater satisfaction in the future, regardless of their current levels of satisfaction (Baker, McNulty, & Vanderdrift, 2018; Lemay, 2016). Indeed, higher commitment individuals may thus see their relationship as in the "same league" as that of a superior couple (Collins, 1996). Their positive expectations may lead them to interpret upward comparisons more positively: Because they expect to be like the superior couple in the future, high commitment individuals will test their similarity to that couple, which in turn will lead to an assimilation effect; they will find evidence of the similarity they seek, and feel more positive about their relationship as a result.

The positive outcomes of these upward comparisons may, in addition, have important consequences for motivation. Specifically, highly committed individuals may be motivated to enact behaviors that maintain their current relationship in order to achieve these possible future relationships. Indeed, individuals who forecast greater satisfaction enact more relationship-maintenance behaviors (Baker et al., 2018; Lemay, 2016). Moreover, a large body of evidence suggests that highly committed individuals' current behaviors are guided by their consideration for the longevity of their relationship (e.g., Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991; Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002). For example, when these individuals experience a partner transgression, they do not retaliate; instead, they respond constructively (Rusbult et al., 1991). Thus, given highly committed individuals' orientation towards the future of their

relationship, they may be especially motivated to realize the positive future relationship outcomes that come to mind when they encounter a superior couple.

In contrast, individuals who are less committed hold fewer positive illusions about their relationship and less positive global evaluation, relative to individuals who are more committed (Auger et al., 2017; Li & Fung, 2013; Murray & Holmes, 1997). Consequently, their holistic assessment of similarity to the superior couple may lead them to engage in dissimilarity testing: They may see fewer similarities between themselves and the superior relationship, making it difficult for them to draw an analogy between themselves and the highly successful relationship. This inability to map their own relationship onto the superior one increases the likelihood that these individuals will contrast themselves, rather than assimilate, resulting in more negative responses. Rather than looking to the superior couple as an example of how to achieve similar relationship success, these individuals may use the superior couple as a standard against which to determine whether their current relationship is still worthwhile, which may also motivate them to assess their relationship more accurately (Fletcher & Simpson, 2000). For these individuals, another relationship may serve as a proxy that provides useful information for determining whether or not they can make their current relationship successful (Martin, Suls, & Wheeler, 2002; Wheeler, Martin, & Suls, 1997). These more accurate perceptions are by definition less optimistic, resulting in less effort invested towards relationship maintenance (Zhang & Fishbach, 2010).

In sum, individuals high in commitment are likely to experience an assimilation effect when they encounter a superior couple: Their positive relationship views and expectations for the future lead them to see themselves as similar to the superior relationship. For such individuals, a superior relationship is not a comparison standard, but rather a target to which they can

assimilate their own relationship, providing reassuring evidence that their own relationship is stellar and will become more stellar in the future. High commitment individuals should respond to an upward relationship comparison by becoming more satisfied, more optimistic, and more motivated to strengthen their relationship. Conversely, individuals who are lower in commitment to their existing relationship are more likely to experience a contrast effect when encountering a superior couple. Low commitment individuals hold less positive relationship views and expectations for the future as well as weaker intentions to persist in their current relationship: Indeed, they may be in the process of determining whether their current relationship is their best alternative available. For such individuals, the highly successful relationship functions as a standard against which to compare their own relationship; when their own relationship fails to measure up to the superior example, less committed individuals should respond to upward relationship comparisons by becoming less satisfied, less optimistic, and less motivated to engage in relationship-maintenance behaviors.

To date, only a handful of studies have examined comparisons across relationships. A few studies have demonstrated that when individuals focus on ways in which their relationship is superior to other relationships, they tend to feel more satisfied than those who focus on ways in which their relationship is inferior (e.g., Buunk, Oldersma, & Dreu, 2001; Frye & Karney, 2002; Rusbult, Van Lange, Wildschut, Yovetich, & Verette, 2000). In these studies, however, participants compared themselves to an aggregate group (Buunk et al., 2001; Frye & Karney, 2002; Rusbult et al., 2000) or made hypothetical comparisons to imagined couples (e.g., Broemer & Diehl, 2003). Comparisons to the “average” relationship or other relationships in general are ambiguous references that individuals can manipulate to suit their motives at any given time (Mussweiler, 2003). Furthermore, other research examining comparisons between relationships

has focused on how individuals strategically choose comparison targets that are worse-off for the purpose of relationship maintenance (Frye & Karney, 2002; Rusbult et al., 2000) as opposed to their reactions to such comparisons. It remains unclear how individuals will respond to specific examples of relationships that are unambiguously superior or inferior.

In one of the few studies that examined comparisons to a specific superior relationship (Buunk, 2006), individuals higher in relationship satisfaction were more likely to report positive affect and identification with the successful couple in response to comparisons than were individuals lower in relationship satisfaction. This study provides important evidence that individuals make and are influenced by comparisons to successful relationships. However, participants' responses were assessed using direct self-report measures, in which participants indicated whether or not the couple they read about evoked positive or negative feelings. Thus, participants may have provided their theories about how the comparison would affect them rather than their actual response to the comparison. It may be that highly satisfied couples are threatened by upward comparisons, but that they defensively report such comparisons to be rewarding. In addition, this study focused on affective responses to the comparison. More recently, research has examined individuals' interpretations of specific relationship comparisons and how these interpretations influence personal (e.g., life satisfaction) and relationship outcomes (e.g., relationship satisfaction and commitment; Morry et al., 2019; Morry & Sucharyna, 2016; Morry, Sucharyna, & Petty, 2018). To date, no research has examined how relationship comparisons may influence self-regulatory constructs, such as individuals' optimism about the future of their relationship, or motivation to engage in relationship-maintenance behaviors.

In addition, past studies have focused on comparisons at the level of the individual (comparing oneself to another individual), examining such individual-level moderators as self-concept clarity (Pelham & Wachsmuth, 1995), self-esteem (Wood & Lockwood, 1999), and self-construal (Gardner et al., 2002). The present studies provide the first clear examination of the impact of upward comparisons at the level of the relationship (comparing one's relationship to another relationship), and the impact of such comparisons on variables key to the functioning of the relationship: relationship satisfaction, motivation to engage in relationship-maintenance behaviors, and relationship optimism. Further, these are the first studies to explore the role of a key relationship variable, commitment, in determining the outcome of these comparisons. These studies thus make a unique contribution to both the literatures on social comparison and close relationships.

In the present research, we adopted an Exploring Small Confirming Big framework (Sakaluk, 2016). That is, we conducted two exploratory studies using small samples (Studies 1-2) to test our initial hypotheses. We then replicated our initial findings using a large sample confirmatory study (Study 3). Study 1 examined the impact of comparisons to individuals' self-generated examples of highly successful relationships. Study 2 involved dating and married samples and examined comparisons to a specific example of a highly successful relationship provided by the researchers. Study 3 replicated the effects of Study 2 using a larger sample. We also tested potential mechanisms: perceptions of standard extremity (Studies 2 and 3) and perceived similarity (Study 3). That is, we tested whether greater commitment was associated with perceiving the upward comparison as less extreme, and whether these perceptions of comparison extremity lead to greater perceptions of similarity, as predicted by the selective accessibility model. Across studies, we predicted that higher commitment individuals would

assimilate to superior relationships and respond more positively, indicating greater satisfaction and motivation to engage in relationship-maintenance behaviors following the comparison. In contrast, lower commitment individuals would experience a contrast effect and respond negatively, reporting less satisfaction and reduced motivation to engage in relationship-maintenance behavior following the comparison.

Study 1

In Study 1, we conducted a small-sample exploratory study to examine reactions to comparisons with relationship examples drawn from participants' own lives. Participants described the most successful relationship they had ever encountered, and then rated their relationship satisfaction and relationship-relevant motivation.

Method

Participants. The sample size was set a priori to a minimum of 20 participants per condition. We recruited 52 introductory psychology students from a large urban Canadian university, who took part in the study for course credit. Participants were selected if they indicated in a prescreening questionnaire that they had been in a romantic dating relationship for at least one month. Students completed the prescreening as part of a larger questionnaire administered to their introductory psychology course. As part of this prescreening, participants also indicated their commitment to their partner: They rated themselves on two items from a longer commitment scale (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998; "I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner" and "I want our relationship to last for a very long time") on a 5-point scale (1=*not at all true*, 5=*very true*). These two items were highly positively correlated ($r=.71, p < .001$) and were therefore combined to form a single pretest measure of commitment. Four participants provided invalid responses to the commitment items (i.e., writing "6" as their

response on the 5-point scale) during the prescreening session, suggesting that they may have misunderstood the prescreening instructions or failed to take the pretest seriously. Altogether, 48 participants were included in the analyses. Participants were 28 women and 20 men ($M_{\text{age}}=20.83$, $SD=4.23$) currently involved in a romantic relationship ($M_{\text{relationship length}}=24.19$ months, $SD=34.85$).

Procedure. Participants were invited to the lab for a study on perceptions of relationships. Participants in the upward comparison condition were first asked to describe the most successful romantic relationship that they had ever encountered (excluding their own). They also indicated whether they knew the couple they described personally, how they knew the couple, and for how long they had known the couple. In addition, participants were asked to explain briefly what made this relationship so successful. Upward comparisons participants were then told that, because their own relationship might influence their perceptions of another relationship, they would be asked some additional questions about their own relationship; this provided an explanation for the dependent measures, described below. Control participants completed the dependent measures without first describing a successful relationship.

Dependent Measures. Upward and control condition participants completed 5-items measuring satisfaction that assessed global evaluations of the relationship (e.g., “I am perfectly satisfied with my relationship.”; $\alpha=.91$; Murray, Bellavia, Rose, & Griffin, 2003) using a 9-point scale (1=*not at all true*, 9=*completely true*). Participants then rated themselves on 26 items ($\alpha=.88$) tapping their intentions to use a series of relationship maintenance strategies (assurances, openness, conflict management, positivity, advice and social networks); these strategies were adapted from Stafford, Dainton, and Haas (2000). A seventh strategy, shared tasks, was not included because participants were for the most part not living together, and thus not sharing in

the tasks of daily household maintenance. Furthermore, past research has shown that shared tasks are reported less frequently by dating individuals as a relationship maintenance strategy relative to married individuals (Dainton & Stafford, 1993). Participants rated their intentions to engage in each strategy over the next six months (e.g., “I plan to be patient and forgiving with my partner,” “I plan to show my love for my partner”). Ratings were made on a 7-point scale (1=*not at all true*, 7=*very true*).

Results

Overview. We first report mean commitment levels to determine whether our sample consists of moderately to highly committed individuals and some qualitative information about the types of relationships our participants described. We then present our analytic strategy for Studies 1-3. Finally, we report findings on our key dependent outcomes: relationship satisfaction and motivation to engage in relationship-maintenance behaviors. Overall, we predicted that highly committed individuals would report more positive outcomes following an upward comparison relative to no comparison. In contrast, less committed individuals would report less positive outcomes following an upward comparison relative to no comparison.

Pretest Commitment. The sample as a whole was relatively high in commitment ($M=4.31$, $SD=0.92$). That is, our sample did not for the most part include participants so low in commitment that they were already planning to end their relationship.

Comparison Manipulation. One participant described a celebrity couple; the remaining participants all described a couple they knew personally (parents, grandparents, siblings; or friends; one participant described a teacher's relationship). Participants had known the couple they described for 120 months on average ($SD=114.24$ months). In describing the aspects of the

relationship that made it successful, participants noted mutual love, trust, communication, enjoyment in shared activities, compatibility, and caring for each other.¹

Analytic Strategy. For Studies 1-3, we conducted moderated multiple regressions with commitment entered as a mean-centered continuous variable and comparison condition entered as an effects-coded variable (control=-1; upward=1). We chose to bootstrap the distributions of the model parameters to account for any deviations from normality in the data and to minimize the influence of outliers without trivializing the inferential value of them. This approach also allowed us to estimate the reliability of each model parameter more accurately. We ran 5,000 resamples for the unstandardized regression coefficients and report 95% bootstrapped bias-corrected confidence intervals in square brackets for the unstandardized regression coefficient. For significant results, we also report standardized effect size (r) with 95% bootstrapped bias-corrected confidence intervals. We conducted simple effects analyses for the interaction by examining the differences between comparison conditions at 1 *SD* above and below the mean of commitment (Aiken & West, 1991). When the value at 1 *SD* above the mean was beyond the range of scale, we centered high commitment scores around the scale endpoint when examining the simple effects of comparisons at higher levels of commitment. We also report the simple slope of commitment for each comparison condition.

Relationship Satisfaction. There was no main effect of comparison condition, $b=0.22$ [-0.11, 0.58], $SE=0.19$, $t(44)=1.14$, $p=.261$, $r=.17$, but there was a main effect of commitment, $b=0.47$ [0.12, 0.95], $SE=0.23$, $t(44)=2.05$, $p=.046$, $r=.30$ [.08, .53]: Greater commitment was associated with greater satisfaction. As predicted, the comparison condition by commitment interaction was significant, $b=0.52$ [0.02, 0.83], $SE=0.23$, $t(44)=2.24$, $p=.031$, $r=.32$ [.03, .55] (see Figure 1, Panel A).

Next, we examined the difference between comparison conditions at each level of commitment. At lower levels of commitment, there was no difference between the comparison conditions in relationship satisfaction, $b=-0.26$ $[-0.64, 0.37]$, $SE=0.30$, $t(44)=-0.85$, $p=.397$, $r=.13$. At higher levels of commitment, however, participants felt more satisfied after making an upward comparison relative to no comparison, $b=0.57$ $[0.14, 1.05]$, $SE=0.23$, $t(44)=2.46$, $p=.018$, $r=.35$ $[.06, .58]$.

We also examined the simple slopes in each comparison condition. In the control condition, commitment was not associated with satisfaction, $b=-0.04$ $[-0.49, 1.00]$, $SE=0.24$, $t(44)=-0.17$, $p=.87$, $r=.03$.² In the upward condition, commitment was positively associated with satisfaction, $b=0.99$ $[0.49, 1.34]$, $SE=0.39$, $t(44)=2.53$, $p=.015$, $r=.36$ $[.16, .56]$.

Behavioral Intentions. There was no main effect of comparison condition, $b=-0.05$ $[-0.23, 0.14]$, $SE=0.09$, $t(44)=-0.56$, $p=.576$, $r=.08$, but there was a main effect of commitment, $b=0.40$ $[0.17, 0.61]$, $SE=0.11$, $t(44)=3.66$, $p<.001$, $r=.48$ $[.22, .69]$: Greater commitment was associated with greater intentions to engage in relationship-maintenance behaviors. As predicted, the comparison condition by commitment interaction was significant³, $b=0.25$ $[0.01, 0.43]$, $SE=0.11$, $t(44)=2.27$, $p=.028$, $r=.32$ $[.05, .58]$ (see Figure 1, Panel A).

At lower levels of commitment, there was a marginally significant difference between the comparison conditions in behavioral intentions, $b=-0.28$ $[-0.52, 0.02]$, $SE=0.14$, $t(44)=-1.95$, $p=.058$, $r=.28$: Lower commitment participants were less motivated to engage in relationship-maintenance strategies following an upward comparison relative to making no comparison. At higher levels of commitment, however, there was no significant difference, $b=0.12$ $[-0.10, 0.35]$, $SE=0.11$, $t(44)=1.09$, $p=.284$, $r=.16$.

In the control condition, commitment was not associated with behavioral intentions, $b=0.15$ $[-0.07, 0.46]$, $SE=0.12$, $t(44)=1.32$, $p=.19$, $r=.20$. In the upward condition, in contrast, greater commitment predicted stronger behavioral intentions, $b=0.65$ $[0.25, 0.93]$, $SE=0.18$, $t(44)=3.49$, $p=.001$, $r=.47$ $[.19, .70]$.

Discussion

Study 1 provides initial evidence that individuals' level of commitment to their relationship will determine how they respond to a highly successful relationship. High commitment individuals reported greater relationship satisfaction after thinking about a superior couple, suggesting that they are indeed experiencing an assimilation effect. Contrary to our predictions, however, they were not significantly more motivated to engage in relationship-maintenance behaviors. Individuals lower in commitment did not report a significant reduction in relationship satisfaction; however, consistent with our predictions, they were indeed less likely to report intentions to engage in relationship-maintenance behaviors after thinking about a superior couple.

Although Study 1 provides some support for the key role of commitment in cross-relationship comparison outcomes, the results did not fully support our hypotheses. We note that participants in this study selected their own comparison targets. This manipulation allowed us to assess the impact of comparisons to the kinds of outstanding couples that individuals encounter in their daily lives. Nevertheless, it is possible that commitment levels may have influenced participants' choice of targets. For example, low commitment individuals may have defended themselves against a possible comparison threat by selecting comparison couples that were somewhat less successful, and as a result less likely to threaten their own relationship satisfaction. Alternatively, high commitment individuals might have had more difficulty

recalling examples of highly successful couples that might be motivating for them. Indeed, past research suggests that highly committed individuals have a sense of perceived superiority when it comes to their relationship: They believe their own relationship is better than (and not as bad as) other relationships (Rusbult et al., 2000). Accordingly, in a second study, instead of having participants generate their own comparison examples, we provided a target relationship that was designed to be perceived as unequivocally superior.

Study 2

In Study 2, we assessed the impact of a superior relationship on relationship satisfaction and motivation to engage in relationship-maintenance behaviors in a second small-sample exploratory study. In addition, we assessed the impact of the comparison on relationship optimism. To the extent that an upward comparison leads lower commitment individuals to evaluate their own relationship more accurately and thus feel that their own relationship is lacking, they may not only be less motivated to put effort into the relationship, but they may also adopt less optimistic expectations for the future of their relationship. Higher commitment individuals, who should respond to the comparison by focusing on the positive aspects of their own relationship and the positive future of their relationship, may adopt more optimistic expectations to motivate them to ensure their relationship's longevity. Accordingly, in Study 2, we examined the impact of a comparison to a superior couple on relationship satisfaction, motivation to engage in relationship-maintenance behaviors, and optimism about the future of the relationship. Whereas Study 1 involved individuals in dating relationships, Study 2 included both dating and married individuals.

We also used Study 2 to test a potential mediator that could explain our findings. We have argued that higher commitment individuals will be positively affected by comparisons to a

superior relationship because they will experience an assimilation effect: They will see the superior relationship as an example of what their own relationship will become in the future. One mechanism through which assimilation could occur is through the perception of standard extremity. That is, commitment may influence whether individuals view the standard to be moderate or extreme, which in turn affects whether individuals will test for similarity and assimilate to the standard, or test for dissimilarity and contrast from the standard (Mussweiler, 2003). Indeed, past research suggests that moderate comparison standards facilitate assimilation, whereas extreme comparison standards facilitate contrast (Herr, 1986). Because highly committed individuals' relationships may be objectively better than those of moderately committed individuals, they may see less discrepancy between their own relationship and the superior one, resulting in a less threatening comparison (cf. Midgley, 2019; Patrick et al., 2004) and more positive responses. Assimilation should be facilitated when the comparison is less extreme, making it easier for high commitment individuals to imagine that their relationship will become like that of the superior couple. Indeed, recent research investigating social comparisons in the fitness domain suggests that individuals perceive greater similarity between themselves and a moderately superior target relative to an extremely superior target, and experience a boost in motivation because the target's outcomes are perceived to be both inspirational and attainable (Diel & Hofmann, 2019). In Study 2, we tested the possibility that the degree to which participants perceived the target relationship as superior to their own would function as a mediator, explaining at least in part why higher commitment individuals would experience assimilation in response to the comparison.

Method

Participants. As in Study 1, the sample size was set a priori to a minimum of 20 participants per condition for each sample. We recruited 46 introductory psychology students from a large urban Canadian university, who took part in the study for course credit, and 40 married participants from the community of a large Canadian city, recruited through a newspaper advertisement, who took part in the study for \$25. Two dating participants completed the commitment prescreening testing questionnaire incorrectly (i.e., writing “6” as their response on the 5-point scale) and were excluded from analyses. Altogether, 84 participants (53 women and 31 men; $M_{\text{age}}=30.29$, $SD=13.93$; range=17 to 63) currently involved in a romantic relationship ($M_{\text{relationship length}}=89.62$ months, $SD=119.18$; range=1.5 to 543 months) were included in our analyses.

Procedure. Pretest questionnaire. Dating participants. As in Study 1, dating participants completed a two-item measure of commitment on a 5-point scale during a larger prescreening session in their introductory psychology course. The two items were highly correlated ($r=.85$, $p<.001$) and were combined to form a single measure of commitment.

Married participants. Approximately one week before married participants came to the lab, they completed an online pretest questionnaire. The pretest questionnaire included a measure of commitment⁴ (Rusbult et al., 1998; $\alpha=.81$) rated on a 9-point scale (0=*do not agree at all*, 8=*agree completely*) along with various demographic questions.

Because commitment was measured with different scales in the dating and married samples, we used standardized (i.e., z-scores) commitment scores in our analyses.

In-lab session. Participants were invited to take part in a study on perceptions of romantic relationships. They were told that the researchers were interested in assessing lay perceptions of relationships, and how well these perceptions correlate with assessments provided

by relationship experts. Participants in the upward comparison condition were first asked to read a bogus two-page account of a romantic relationship, ostensibly written by a relationship therapist with years of experience working with couples, describing a couple that had taken part in a similar study five years earlier. Control participants completed the dependent measures without first reading about the superior relationship.

Upward comparisons participants read an account that described an extraordinarily successful relationship between two individuals; for example, the “relationship expert” commented:

I noted that when this couple came to their interview in the lab, they exhibited many characteristics indicative of a healthy romantic relationship – healthy communication patterns, respect, and affection....Any criticisms were constructive, and were in fact made with wording that could have been used as an example in a textbook on effective communication....They clearly had a great deal in common and very much appreciated time in each other’s company. It was also evident that they maintained a healthy contact with their separate groups of friends and pursued their separate interests. Though the couple had conflicting views about certain issues, they were never defensive, and rather seemed to celebrate their differences. I was extremely impressed with their ability to listen to each other respectfully and look for solutions as they went through the various exercises that were part of the interview protocol...

For dating participants, the account finished with the information that the couple had married, and were still extremely successful at a 5-year follow-up. Married participants read a similar account that described a married couple instead of a dating couple. The account finished with the information that the couple’s relationship had strengthened over time and would be able to

weather any setbacks and disappointments that life presented. For both married and dating sample accounts, the expert observed that the relationship was in the top 0.1% of relationships reviewed in the course of the study.⁵

Manipulation check. In line with the cover story, upward comparison participants then indicated, in open-ended form, the factors that they believed made this relationship successful; they also rated the relationship on three items tapping relationship success (e.g., “This couple communicates effectively,” “This couple seems healthy”; $\alpha=.70$). Ratings were made on a 7-point scale (1=*strongly disagree*, 7=*strongly agree*).

Dependent measures. All participants completed the same 5-item measure of satisfaction ($\alpha=.93$) used in Study 1. Participants also completed a 31-item measure ($\alpha=.95$), similar to the motivation scale used in Study 1, assessing their motivation to engage in relationship-maintenance behaviors (e.g., “I plan to work harder on my relationship” “I plan to communicate more effectively with my partner”) on a 7-point scale (1=*not at all true*, 7=*very true*). In addition, participants completed a measure of relationship optimism (Murray & Holmes, 1997; dating version $\alpha=.85$); they rated the likelihood of 11 events (e.g., “The love my partner and I share continuing to grow”) on a 9-point scale (1=*much less likely to occur in my relationship than a typical relationship*, 9=*much more likely to occur in my relationship than a typical relationship*). Married participants completed the married version of this measure, which consisted of 16 events (married version; $\alpha=.92$).

At the end of the study, upward condition participants completed a comparative rating item: They rated how their own relationship compared to the relationship they had read on a scale ranging from -3 (*Much worse than my relationship*) to +3 (*Much better than my*

relationship). This enabled us to assess whether the perceptions of standard extremity would mediate the effects of commitment on the relationship outcome measures.⁶

Results

Overview. We first report mean commitment levels to determine whether our sample consists of moderately to highly committed individuals and the effectiveness of our manipulation by reporting how positively participants perceived the target couple. Next, we report findings on our key dependent measures: relationship satisfaction, motivation to engage in relationship-maintenance behaviors, and relationship optimism. Overall, we predicted that highly committed individuals would report more positive outcomes following an upward comparison relative to no comparison. In contrast, moderately committed individuals would report less positive outcomes following an upward comparison relative to no comparison. Finally, we tested a mediational model in which higher commitment led to more positive outcomes following upward comparisons because more committed individuals viewed the target as “less upward” and less threatening; that is, we tested a model in which comparative ratings of the degree to which the target relationship was superior to participants’ own would mediate the association between commitment and our key dependent measures in the upward condition.

Pretest Commitment. As in Study 1, commitment scores across the dating sample were high ($M=4.47$ on a 5-point scale, $SD=0.82$). Commitment scores in the married sample were also generally high ($M=7.84$ on a 9-point scale, $SD=1.41$). That is, for both the dating and married samples, participants with lower commitment scores were moderately committed, rather than very low in commitment.

Manipulation Check. Participants viewed the relationship very positively ($M=6.62$, $SD=0.45$), suggesting we were successful in creating an outstanding target relationship.

Commitment was not significantly associated with target evaluations, $b=0.10$ $[-0.05, 0.25]$, $SE=0.07$, $t(37)=1.32$, $p=.19$, $r=.21$.⁷

Relationship Satisfaction. There was no effect of comparison condition, $b=-0.02$ $[-0.35, 0.29]$, $SE=0.16$, $t(80)=-0.14$, $p=.89$, $r=.02$, but there was a main effect of commitment, $b=0.87$ $[0.60, 1.12]$, $SE=0.17$, $t(80)=5.27$, $p<.001$, $r=.51$ $[.34, .67]$, such that greater commitment was associated with greater satisfaction. This commitment effect was qualified by the predicted commitment by condition interaction, $b=0.80$ $[0.53, 1.08]$, $SE=0.17$, $t(80)=4.86$, $p<.001$, $r=.48$ $[.31, .63]$ (see Figure 2, Panel A).

Simple effects analyses revealed that at lower levels of commitment, there was a significant difference between comparison conditions, $b=-0.83$ $[-1.24, -0.37]$, $SE=0.23$, $t(80)=-3.54$, $p<.001$, $r=.37$ $[.18, .54]$: Participants lower in commitment reported greater satisfaction in the control condition than those in the upward condition. In contrast, higher commitment participants reported greater satisfaction in the upward than control condition, $b=0.78$ $[0.40, 1.20]$, $SE=0.23$, $t(80)=3.35$, $p=.001$, $r=.35$ $[.17, .51]$.

In the control condition, commitment was not associated with satisfaction, $b=0.07$ $[-0.33, 0.48]$, $SE=0.23$, $t(80)=0.30$, $p=.77$, $r=.03$.² In contrast, commitment was positively associated with satisfaction in the upward condition, $b=1.67$ $[1.26, 1.99]$, $SE=0.24$, $t(80)=6.94$, $p<.001$, $r=.61$ $[.43, .77]$.

Behavioral Intentions. There was a main effect of commitment, $b=0.37$ $[0.21, 0.60]$, $SE=0.09$, $t(80)=4.22$, $p<.001$, $r=.43$ $[.23, .59]$, such that greater commitment was associated with greater intentions to engage in relationship-maintenance behaviors. There was no effect of condition, $b=0.13$ $[-0.04, 0.31]$, $SE=0.09$, $t(80)=1.45$, $p=.151$, $r=.16$, nor was the commitment by

comparison condition interaction significant, $b=0.06$ $[-0.12, 0.27]$, $SE=0.09$, $t(80)=0.69$, $p=.491$, $r=.08$.

Because we were interested in whether the pattern of simple effects was consistent with those found in Study 1, we conducted simple effect analyses even though the interaction was not significant. Specifically, we examined whether the comparison condition differences at high and low levels of commitment were in the expected direction. Consistent with Study 1, higher commitment participants who were exposed to the superior couple reported greater motivation than those in the control condition, $b=0.19$ $[-0.02, 0.42]$, $SE=0.13$, $t(80)=1.51$, $p=.134$, $r=.17$. There was no significant difference between the upward and control conditions among those lower in commitment, $b=0.07$ $[-0.24, 0.35]$, $SE=0.13$, $t(80)=0.53$, $p=.597$, $r=.06$. Although these effects are consistent with our hypotheses, they should be interpreted with caution given the lack of a significant commitment by condition interaction.

Commitment was positively associated with stronger behavioral intentions in both the control, $b=0.31$ $[0.12, 0.60]$, $SE=0.12$, $t(80)=2.58$, $p=.01$, $r=.28$ $[.09, .47]$, and upward conditions, $b=0.44$ $[0.20, 0.81]$, $SE=0.13$, $t(80)=3.37$, $p<.001$, $r=.35$ $[.15, .56]$.

Optimism. There was no effect of comparison condition, $b=0.07$ $[-0.17, 0.29]$, $SE=0.12$, $t(80)=0.58$, $p=.561$, $r=.07$, but there was a main effect of commitment, $b=0.78$ $[0.56, 0.99]$, $SE=0.12$, $t(80)=6.58$, $p<.001$, $r=.59$ $[.44, .74]$, such that greater commitment was associated with greater optimism. This commitment effect was qualified by the predicted comparison condition by commitment interaction, $b=0.60$ $[0.38, 0.81]$, $SE=0.12$, $t(80)=5.04$, $p<.001$, $r=.49$ $[.32, .67]$ (see Figure 2, Panel B).

Simple effects revealed that lower commitment participants were less optimistic about their relationship following an upward comparison relative to no comparison, $b=-0.53$ $[-0.87, -$

0.20], $SE=0.17$, $t(80)=-3.17$, $p=.002$, $r=.33$ [.14, .54]. However, higher commitment participants felt more optimistic after making an upward comparison relative to no comparison, $b=0.66$ [0.38, 0.98], $SE=0.17$, $t(80)=3.99$, $p<.001$, $r=.41$ [.22, .56].

In the control condition, commitment was not associated with optimism, $b=0.18$ [-0.23, 0.54], $SE=0.16$, $t(80)=1.13$, $p=.26$, $r=.12$. In contrast, commitment was positively associated with optimism in the upward condition, $b=1.37$ [1.16, 1.58], $SE=0.17$, $t(80)=7.98$, $p<.001$, $r=.67$ [.50, .81].

Mediation Analyses: Comparative Ratings of Own and Target Relationships.

Participants indicated that, on average, the target relationship was superior to their own ($M=1.07$, $SD=1.42$). Ratings of the target's superiority were negatively associated with pretest commitment, $b=-0.70$ [-1.03, -0.40], $SE=0.20$, $t(40)=-3.61$, $p<.001$, $r=.50$ [.23, .67]: More committed participants were less likely to view the target relationship as superior to their own relationship. This is consistent with our hypothesis that individuals higher in commitment perceived the superior relationship to be a less extreme comparison standard, making it easier for them to test for similarity and thus assimilate their relationship.

It is possible, therefore, that higher commitment participants were more positively affected by the target relationship because they viewed it to be a less upward comparison (see Figure 4, Panel A for general model). To test this mediational hypothesis, we assessed the associations between pretest commitment and the dependent variables following an upward comparison with bootstrap procedures to determine the significance of the indirect effect using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013). 5000 bootstrap resamples were used to provide stable estimates of the direct, indirect, and total effects. 95% confidence intervals were determined

from the bootstrap resample. Any interval that did not include 0 was considered to be significantly different from 0.

Relationship satisfaction. This analysis revealed that commitment affected relationship satisfaction as a function of its relationship with comparative ratings, $ab=0.36$ [0.09, 0.72], $SE=0.16$. The total effect of commitment on relationship satisfaction was significant, $c=1.63$ [1.28, 1.96], $SE=0.21$, and the direct effect remained significant even when the indirect path through comparative ratings was taken into account, $c'=1.28$ [0.80, 1.65], $SE=0.22$. Thus, highly committed individuals do feel more satisfied after reading about a superior couple, in part, because they view the superior couple as less upward than less committed individuals.

Behavioral intentions. This analysis revealed that commitment did not affect behavioral intentions as a function of its relationship with comparative ratings, $ab=0.02$ [-0.12, 0.18], $SE=0.07$. Although higher commitment was associated with greater motivation to engage in relationship-maintenance behaviors, this association was not mediated by comparative ratings in the upward condition.

Optimism. This analysis revealed that commitment affected relationship optimism as a function of its relationship with comparative ratings, $ab=0.26$ [0.07, 0.54], $SE=0.12$. The total effect of commitment on relationship optimism was significant, $c=1.34$ [1.12, 1.54], $SE=0.16$, and the direct effect remained significant even when the indirect path through comparative ratings was taken into account, $c'=1.08$ [0.74, 1.32], $SE=0.16$.

In sum, the mediational analyses indicate that viewing the upward comparison as less upward (i.e., a less extreme standard) was associated with participants feeling more satisfied and optimistic about their relationship; however, this only partially explained the effect of relationship commitment on relationship satisfaction and optimism: The direct effects remained

significant after the indirect effect of the comparative ratings mediator was taken into account. In addition, there was no evidence that comparative ratings mediated the relationship between commitment and behavioral intentions.

Discussion

As predicted, participants higher in commitment responded more positively to an upward comparison than did those lower in commitment. Higher commitment was associated with more relationship satisfaction and more optimism regarding the future of the relationship. Instead of evaluating their own relationship against the superior example, they appeared to assimilate to the successful relationship, feeling more positive about their own relationships, and more optimistic that it would succeed. In contrast, it appears that lower commitment makes individuals more vulnerable to the threat posed by an upward comparison to a superior couple; they come away from the comparison feeling less satisfied and optimistic about their own relationship.

We did not, however, find the predicted interaction for relationship-maintenance motivation. Although we did replicate one of the simple effects from Study 1 (i.e., greater commitment predicted more relationship-maintenance behavioral intentions after reading about a superior couple), we interpret this with caution given the nonsignificant interaction. It is possible that the greater heterogeneity in this sample (combining married participants and undergraduate dating participants) decreased our statistical power further, which was already limited due to our relatively small sample size.

We also found initial evidence indicating that the perceived discrepancy between one's own relationship and the superior relationship (i.e., perceptions of standard extremity) may partially account for why greater commitment is associated with more positive responses following upward relationship comparisons. Highly committed individuals see a smaller

discrepancy between themselves and the superior couple, which may help them to see themselves as being in the same league as the superior relationship (Collins, 1996), resulting in greater satisfaction and optimism. In contrast, less committed individuals perceive a greater difference, making it more likely that will contrast their own relationship and thus feel worse about their own relationship. However, it is important to note that this mediation effect was partial only, and further, that the perceived discrepancy did not account for increased motivation reported by more committed individuals.

Taken together, Studies 1-2 provide promising evidence that commitment will determine the impact of highly successful relationships on individuals' perceptions of and intentions toward their own relationships. However, the sample sizes in these studies were relatively small, and the purpose of these studies was more exploratory rather than confirmatory. Thus, we sought to replicate our results in Study 3 with a much larger sample to obtain more accurate estimates of our effect sizes.

Study 3

In Study 3, we conducted a preregistered study (<https://osf.io/xbas9>) to replicate our findings using the same manipulation as Study 2, but with a much larger sample.⁸ Consistent with Studies 1-2, we predicted that higher commitment individuals would respond more positively to being exposed to an unambiguously superior relationship: They would be more satisfied, more motivated to engage in relationship-maintenance behaviors, and more optimistic about the future of their relationship.

We also used Study 3 to further test our proposed mechanism for our findings. In Study 2, we examined comparative ratings of the discrepancy of one's own relationship and the superior couple to capture perceptions of comparison standard extremity as a possible mediator.

We argue that because high commitment individuals see the superior couple as less extreme, they are more likely to view this couple as similar, and thus experience assimilation rather than contrast. In Study 3, we tested this possibility in a serial mediation model (see Figure 4, Panel B). That is, we tested both standard extremity ratings and similarity ratings as mediators explaining the relationship between commitment and the outcome variables. We expected that, consistent with the selective accessibility model (Mussweiler, 2003), high commitment individuals would view the superior couple as less extreme than would lower commitment individuals, and would in turn view the superior couple as more similar to themselves; as a result, they would experience an assimilation rather than contrast effect, viewing their own relationship more positively and more optimistically, and becoming more motivated to achieve this positive outcome.

Method

Participants. We set an a priori sample size of 300 participants (150 participants in each condition). American residents were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and paid \$1.50 USD for completing the study. Participants were eligible for the study if they were currently involved in an exclusive romantic relationship. To ensure we would reach our target sample size, we initially recruited 370 participants. However, three participants indicated their relationship status was single and were thus excluded from the study. In total, 367 participants who completed the study were eligible. Of those, 19 participants did not complete the open-ended question that was part of experimental manipulation correctly: Five did not answer the question, one did not read the manipulation, five provided responses that did not answer the question, and eight expressed suspicions about the veracity of the manipulation materials. In addition, 43 participants indicated that their relationship was superior to the relationship

described in the manipulation (34 indicated their relationship was a little better than the target relationship; nine indicated their relationship was better or much better than the target relationship).⁹ Altogether, 305 participants were included in the analyses. Participants were 212 women and 93 men ($M_{\text{age}}=37.89$, $SD=16.94$) currently in a romantic relationship ($M_{\text{relationship length}}=67.84$ months, $SD=41.02$). Most participants were married (279 married, 4 engaged, 22 dating).

Procedure. Participants were invited to take part in a study investigating perceptions of relationships that was conducted in two parts. In the first part, 2039 participants completed an online demographics questionnaire (e.g., age, ethnicity, education levels, income level, and relationship status). Those in a relationship completed the same commitment measure used for the married sample in Study 2 (Rusbult et al., 1998; $\alpha=.84$). Participants who indicated that they were in an exclusive relationship ($n=1603$) received an email invitation to complete the second part of the study two days after completing the first part.¹⁰ In our recruitment efforts, we invited married participants to the study first, followed by dating and engaged participants.

In the second part of the study, participants in the upward condition were asked to read an account of a highly successful relationship. Control participants completed the dependent measures before reading about the superior relationship. This account was the same as the one used in Study 2; however, to ensure the superior couple was relevant to both married and dating participants, we removed all mentions of relationship status from the description.⁵ Participants indicated, in open-ended form, the factors that they believed made this relationship successful; they also rated the relationship on six items ($\alpha=.79$) tapping relationship success (e.g., “This couple is very satisfied with their relationship”) on a 7-point scale (1=*strongly disagree*, 7=*strongly agree*).

Next, they completed dependent measures similar to the ones used in Study 2: relationship satisfaction (Rusbult et al., 1998; $\alpha=.96$), motivation to engage in relationship-maintenance behaviors ($\alpha=.97$; same as Study 2), and relationship optimism (Murray & Holmes, 1997; $\alpha=.87$). As in Study 2, at the end of the study, upward condition participants rated how their own relationship compared to the relationship they had read on a scale ranging from -3 (*Much worse than my relationship*) to +3 (*Much better than my relationship*). They also reported the degree to which they perceived their own relationship as similar to the target relationship using two-items (“My relationship is similar to the relationship I read about” and “My relationship is about the same as the relationship I read about”; $r=.87, p<.001$) rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Results

Overview. As in Study 2, we first present mean commitment levels to determine whether our sample consists of moderately to highly committed individuals and the effectiveness of our manipulation by reporting how positively participants perceived the target couple. Next, we report findings on our key dependent measures: relationship satisfaction, motivation to engage in relationship-maintenance behaviors, and relationship optimism. Overall, we predicted that highly committed individuals would report more positive outcomes following an upward comparison relative to no comparison. In contrast, less committed individuals would report less positive outcomes following an upward comparison relative to no comparison. As in Study 2, we then tested whether greater commitment led to more positive outcomes following upward comparisons because more committed individuals viewed the target to be a less extreme comparison standard (i.e., less upward) and thus less threatening. That is, we tested whether participants’ comparative ratings mediated the associations between commitment and our key

outcomes. Finally, we conducted serial mediation models to test whether the full pathway proposed by the selective accessibility model accounts for the positive upward comparison responses of more committed individuals (Mussweiler, 2003): Individuals higher in commitment should see less discrepancy between their relationship and the superior one, leading them to test for similarity between themselves and the superior couple. Their perceptions that they are similar to the successful couple should in turn lead to assimilation and more positive responses.

Pretest Commitment. As in Studies 1-2, commitment scores were generally high ($M=8.27$ on a 9-point scale, $SD=1.23$); participants with lower scores were moderately committed as opposed to low in commitment.

Manipulation Check. Participants rated the target relationship very highly ($M=6.46$, $SD=0.62$). There was a significant effect of pretest commitment on evaluations of the target, $b=0.09$ [0.02, 0.18], $SE=0.03$, $t(301)=3.07$, $p=.002$, $r=.17$ [.05, .31], such that participants higher in commitment evaluated the target relationship more positively. No other effects were significant, $ts < 0.12$, $ps > .90$.

Relationship Satisfaction. There was no effect of comparison condition, $b=-0.003$ [-0.20, 0.19], $SE=0.10$, $t(301)=-0.03$, $p=.974$, $r=.002$. There was a significant effect of commitment, $b=0.92$ [0.75, 1.09], $SE=0.08$, $t(301)=11.44$, $p<.001$, $r=.55$, [.44, .65]: Greater commitment was associated with greater satisfaction. This effect, however, was qualified by the predicted commitment by comparison condition interaction, $b=0.23$ [0.06, 0.40], $SE=0.08$, $t(301)=2.79$, $p=.006$, $r=.16$, [.05, .26] (see Figure 3, Panel A).

Simple effects revealed that, among those lower in commitment, upward participants reported less satisfaction than controls, $b=-0.28$ [-0.59, 0.03], $SE=0.14$, $t(301)=-2.00$, $p=.047$,

$r=.11$ [.22, .01]. Among those higher in commitment, there was no difference between conditions, $b=0.16$ [-0.06, 0.36], $SE=0.11$, $t(301)=1.43$, $p=.155$, $r=.08$.

In both the control, $b=0.70$ [0.40, 0.95], $SE=0.12$, $t(301)=5.66$, $p<.001$, $r=.31$ [.17, .47], and upward conditions, $b=1.15$ [0.96, 1.38], $SE=0.10$, $t(301)=11.02$, $p<.001$, $r=.54$ [.43, .62], greater commitment was associated with greater satisfaction; however, this effect was larger in the upward condition.

Behavioral Intentions. There was no main effect of comparison condition, $b=-0.01$ [-0.12, 0.10], $SE=0.06$, $t(301)=-0.17$, $p=.863$, $r=.01$. There was a significant effect of commitment, $b=0.33$ [0.23, 0.44], $SE=0.05$, $t(301)=7.16$, $p<.001$, $r=.38$ [.26, .51]: Those higher in commitment reported greater motivation to engage in relationship-maintenance behaviors. This effect, however, was qualified by the predicted commitment by comparison condition interaction, $b=0.11$ [0.003, 0.20], $SE=0.05$, $t(301)=2.27$, $p=.024$, $r=.13$ [.01, .25] (see Figure 3, Panel B).

At lower levels of commitment, there was a marginally significant difference between comparison conditions, $b=-0.14$ [-0.31, 0.03], $SE=0.08$, $t(301)=-1.73$, $p=.085$, $r=.10$ [.02, .21]: Lower commitment participants in the upward condition reported less motivation to engage in relationship-maintenance behaviors than those in the control condition. In contrast to our hypothesis, although in the predicted direction, there was no significant difference between conditions among high commitment participants, $b=0.07$ [-0.07, 0.19], $SE=0.07$, $t(301)=1.04$, $p=.301$, $r=.06$.

In both the control, $b=0.23$ [0.10, 0.36], $SE=0.07$, $t(301)=3.20$, $p=.002$, $r=.18$ [.08, .31], and upward conditions, $b=0.44$ [0.28, 0.59], $SE=0.06$, $t(301)=7.31$, $p<.001$, $r=.39$ [.25, .52], greater commitment predicted stronger behavioral intentions; however, this effect was larger in the upward than control condition.

Relationship Optimism. There was a marginally significant effect of comparison condition, $b=0.12$ $[-0.01, 0.25]$, $SE=0.06$, $t(301)=1.79$, $p=.075$, $r=.10$ $[-.01, .21]$: Upward participants reported greater optimism ($M=6.72$, $SE=0.09$) than control participants ($M=6.49$, $SE=0.09$). There was also a significant effect of commitment, $b=0.67$ $[0.54, 0.79]$, $SE=0.05$, $t(301)=12.55$, $p<.001$, $r=.59$ $[-.48, .68]$: Greater commitment was associated with greater optimism. Both of these effects were qualified by the predicted commitment by comparison condition interaction, $b=0.15$ $[0.002, 0.25]$, $SE=0.05$, $t(301)=2.35$, $p=.020$, $r=.13$ $[-.003, .25]$ (see Figure 3, Panel C).

Among those lower in commitment, there was no difference between comparison conditions, $b=-0.04$ $[-0.25, 0.18]$, $SE=0.09$, $t(301)=-0.42$, $p=.677$, $r=.02$. Among those higher in commitment, however, upward participants reported greater optimism than control participants, $b=0.21$ $[0.07, 0.35]$, $SE=0.08$, $t(301)=2.76$, $p=.006$, $r=.16$ $[-.05, .25]$.

In both the control, $b=0.55$ $[0.35, 0.72]$, $SE=0.08$, $t(301)=6.68$, $p<.001$, $r=.36$ $[-.23, .51]$, and upward conditions, $b=0.80$ $[0.64, 0.97]$, $SE=0.07$, $t(301)=11.54$, $p<.001$, $r=.55$ $[-.47, .64]$, greater commitment predicted stronger optimism; however, this effect was larger in the upward than control condition.

Mediation Analyses: Comparative Ratings of Own and Target Relationship.

Participants indicated that, on average, the target relationship was superior to their own ($M=1.84$, $SD=0.83$).⁹ There was a significant effect of commitment on ratings of target's superiority, $b=-0.22$ $[-0.30, -0.14]$, $SE=0.05$, $t(150)=-4.70$, $p<.001$, $r=.36$ $[-.22, .48]$: More committed participants viewed the target relationship as less superior to their own. That is, the comparison standard was less extreme for more committed individuals.

As in Study 2, we conducted mediation analyses to examine the possibility that higher commitment participants were more positively affected by the target relationship because they viewed it to be a less extreme upward comparison (i.e., smaller discrepancy between own and superior relationship). In contrast, less committed individuals viewed the superior relationship as more extreme and tested for dissimilarity, resulting in contrast effects and more negative responses (see Figure 4, Panel A for general model).

Relationship satisfaction. Consistent with Study 2, commitment predicted relationship satisfaction as a function of its relationship with comparative ratings, $ab=0.26$ [0.15, 0.41], $SE=0.07$, in the upward comparison condition. The total effect of commitment on relationship satisfaction was significant, $c=1.15$ [0.97, 1.40], $SE=0.10$, and the direct effect remained significant even when the indirect path through comparative ratings was taken into account, $c'=0.89$ [0.71, 1.14], $SE=0.09$. Thus, viewing the upward comparison as more superior did partially explain why participants lower in commitment reported less satisfaction; however, it did not fully account for the effect of commitment on relationship satisfaction following an upward comparison.

Behavioral intentions. This analysis revealed that commitment did not affect relationship-maintenance behavioral intentions as a function of its relationship with comparative ratings, $ab=0.04$ [-0.02, 0.10], $SE=0.03$. Thus, viewing the upward comparison as more upward did not explain why participants lower in commitment reported reduced motivation to engage in relationship-maintenance behaviors.

Optimism. Consistent with Study 2, commitment affected relationship optimism as a function of its relationship with comparative ratings, $ab=0.13$ [0.07, 0.21], $SE=0.04$. The total effect of commitment on relationship optimism was significant, $c=0.80$ [0.66, 1.00], $SE=0.07$,

and the direct effect remained significant even when the indirect path through comparative ratings was taken into account, $c' = 0.66$ [0.53, 0.86], $SE = 0.07$.

Thus, as in Study 2, though participants who viewed the upward comparison as less upward reported feeling more satisfied and optimistic about their relationship, this association only partially explained the effect of relationship commitment on relationship optimism. Moreover, viewing the upward comparison as less upward did not account for increased relationship-maintenance motivation among those higher in commitment.

Mediation Analyses: Perceptions of Similarity. Next, we tested the extent to which individuals perceived their own relationship to be similar to the superior relationship and thus assimilated their relationship to the superior one. That is, we examined whether testing for similarity mediated the association between commitment and our dependent variables. On average, participants agreed that their relationship was at least somewhat similar to the superior relationship ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 1.90$). However, consistent with our hypothesis, individuals higher in commitment reported greater perceptions of similarity, $b = 0.73$ [0.58, 0.92], $SE = 0.10$, $t(150) = 7.23$, $p < .001$, $r = .51$ [.39, .60], indicating that they were more likely to test for similarity between their own relationship and the superior one than individuals lower in commitment.

Next, we tested a serial mediation model by conducting a bootstrapped parallel mediation with 5,000 resamples (see Figure 4, Panel B for general model): We examined whether greater commitment would be associated with seeing the superior relationship as less extreme, leading to greater perceptions of similarity and ultimately more positive relationship outcomes.

Relationship satisfaction. Commitment predicted relationship satisfaction through comparative ratings and similarity ratings, $ab = 0.22$ [0.13, 0.36], $SE = 0.06$. Commitment also predicted relationship satisfaction through similarity alone, $ab = 0.27$ [0.16, 0.42], $SE = 0.07$, but

not through comparative ratings alone, $ab=0.04$ $[-0.03, 0.13]$, $SE=0.04$: Viewing one's own relationship as similar to the superior relationship did partially explain why participants higher in commitment reported greater satisfaction than those lower in commitment, whereas viewing the upward comparison as less superior did not. The total effect of commitment on relationship satisfaction was significant, $c=1.15$ $[0.94, 1.36]$, $SE=0.10$, and the direct effect remained significant even when the indirect paths through comparative and similarity ratings were taken into account, $c'=0.62$ $[0.45, 0.79]$, $SE=0.09$. Thus, the selective accessibility pathway was supported: Seeing the superior relationship as less extreme leads highly committed individuals to perceive themselves as more similar, resulting in greater satisfaction.

Behavioral intentions. Commitment predicted relationship-maintenance behavioral intentions through comparative ratings and similarity ratings, $ab=0.08$ $[0.02, 0.17]$, $SE=0.04$. Commitment also predicted behavioral intentions through similarity alone, $ab=0.10$ $[0.02, 0.20]$, $SE=0.04$, but not through comparative ratings alone, $ab=-0.04$ $[-0.13, 0.04]$, $SE=0.04$: Viewing one's own relationship as similar to the superior relationship did partially explain why participants higher in commitment reported greater relationship-maintenance behavioral intentions than those lower in commitment, whereas viewing the upward comparison as less superior did not. The total effect of commitment on behavioral intentions was significant, $c=0.44$ $[0.31, 0.57]$, $SE=0.07$, and the direct effect remained significant even when the indirect paths through comparative and similarity ratings were taken into account, $c'=0.31$ $[0.16, 0.46]$, $SE=0.08$. Thus, the selective accessibility model pathway was supported: Seeing the superior relationship as less extreme leads highly committed individuals to perceive themselves as more similar, resulting in greater motivation to engage in relationship-maintenance behaviors.

Optimism. Commitment predicted relationship optimism through comparative ratings and similarity ratings, $ab=0.12$ [0.06, 0.20], $SE=0.04$. Commitment also predicted relationship optimism through similarity alone, $ab=0.14$ [0.07, 0.23], $SE=0.04$, but not through comparative ratings alone, $ab=0.01$ [-0.05, 0.08], $SE=0.04$: Viewing one's own relationship as similar to the superior relationship did partially explain why participants higher in commitment reported greater optimism than those lower in commitment, whereas viewing the upward comparison as less superior did not. The total effect of commitment on optimism was significant, $c=0.80$ [0.66, 0.93], $SE=0.07$, and the direct effect remained significant even when the indirect paths through comparative and similarity ratings were taken into account, $c'=0.52$ [0.39, 0.65], $SE=0.06$. Thus, the selective accessibility model pathway was supported: Seeing the superior relationship as less extreme leads highly committed individuals to perceive themselves as more similar, resulting in greater optimism.

We also tested a serial mediation model in which the order of the two mediators was reversed. That is, greater commitment was associated with greater perceived similarity, leading to perceiving the standard as less extreme and more positive responses. The indirect effects for this model were not significant for relationship satisfaction, $ab=0.04$ [-0.04, 0.12], $SE=0.04$, behavioral intentions, $ab=-0.05$ [-0.14, 0.04], $SE=0.05$, or relationship optimism, $ab=0.01$ [-0.05, 0.08], $SE=0.03$. Taken together, these results suggest that the effect of commitment on relationship outcomes is through perceptions of standard extremity and then perceived similarity, not perceived similarity and then perceptions of standard extremity.

In sum, these mediational results indicate that perceiving the superior relationship as less extreme leads to greater perceptions of similarity, and thus assimilation; this pathway partially accounts for the positive responses of individuals higher in commitment after an upward

comparison. Moreover, we found an additional indirect effect through perceived similarity alone, suggesting that greater commitment is associated with seeing more parallels between one's own relationship and the superior one more generally, which also facilitates assimilation. Taken together, these results suggest that assimilation arising from perceived similarity provides the most parsimonious explanation for our findings.

Discussion

Consistent with Studies 1-2, commitment moderated the impact of upward relationship comparisons: Participants higher in commitment responded to an upward comparison with increased relationship optimism following an upward comparison relative to no comparison. In addition, higher commitment predicted greater relationship satisfaction, motivation, and optimism among participants exposed to the superior relationship. Individuals higher in commitment see greater similarities between their own relationship and the superior one, making it easier for them to assimilate their relationship and thus feel inspired that they too will experience such positive outcomes in the future. In contrast, individuals lower in commitment perceive less similarity between themselves and the superior couple, making it difficult for them to assimilate and imagine comparably positive outcomes for their own relationship. Consequently, less committed individuals are more likely to contrast their own relationship and evaluate it less positively. Indeed, the mediation analyses suggest that perceived similarity, not simply perceptions of comparison extremity may account for the positive responses of more committed individuals after an upward relationship comparison. Moreover, the mediation analyses provided support for the selective accessibility model: Highly committed individuals' viewed the superior couple as less extreme and consequently more similar, resulting in assimilation and more positive responses. Taken together, these findings provide additional

evidence that highly committed individuals respond positively to upward relationship comparisons because these relationships reflect the positive future they see for their own relationship, not simply because they perceive less of a discrepancy between their own relationship and the superior relationship.

Internal Meta-Analysis

Taken together, Studies 1-3 suggest that individuals who are highly committed respond more positively to superior relationship examples than those who are moderately committed. However, given the small sample sizes of Studies 1-2 and some inconsistencies in the results, we conducted an internal meta-analysis to calculate the overall effect size estimates based on recent recommendations (e.g., Braver, Thoemmes, & Rosenthal, 2014; Maner, 2014). We conducted fixed effects meta-analyses for each effect (see Table 1) in which the mean effect sizes were weighted by sample size (see Goh, Hall, & Rosenthal, 2016). For all outcomes, a reliable but modest commitment by comparison condition interaction emerged, indicating that commitment does indeed influence how individuals will respond to upward relationship comparisons relative to no comparison. Moreover, all our simple effects and slopes, except three (highly committed individuals are more motivated following an upward comparison relative to no comparison, and less committed individuals are less optimistic and less motivated following an upward comparison relative to no comparison) that were marginally significant in the predicted direction, were reliable across studies. Taken together, our results indicate that individuals higher in commitment report greater satisfaction and optimism following an upward relationship comparison relative to no comparison. In contrast, individuals lower in commitment report lower satisfaction following an upward relationship comparison than no comparison. Finally, among

participants exposed to the upward relationship comparison, higher commitment predicted greater satisfaction, motivation, and optimism.

General Discussion

Taken together, the present studies provide compelling evidence that commitment will determine the outcome of social comparisons to highly successful relationships. Indeed, individuals higher in commitment were more satisfied with and optimistic regarding their relationship after encountering a single instance of a highly successful relationship. In contrast, individuals lower in commitment were less satisfied with their own relationships after reading about a highly successful relationship. We also found that the impact of the successful couple on motivation to engage in relationship-maintenance behaviors depended on participants' level of commitment. Our internal meta-analytic results indicate that individuals lower in commitment are less motivated following an upward comparison relative to making no comparison. In contrast, individuals higher in commitment report greater motivation to engage in relationship-maintenance behaviours; however, these effects were marginally significant in our internal meta-analysis.

These studies are the first to provide a comprehensive analysis of how individuals compare their own relationship to other relationships. Whereas past studies have focused on social comparisons in the context of close relationships have examined comparisons of self to partner (e.g., Lockwood, Dolderman, Sadler, & Gerchak, 2004; Pinkus et al., 2008; Pinkus, Lockwood, Marshall, & Yoon, 2012; Thai, Lockwood, Pinkus, & Chen, 2016) or of the partner to other individuals (Thai & Lockwood, 2015; Thai, Lockwood, Zhu, Li, & He, 2019), the present research examines comparisons at the level of the dyad itself, focusing on situations in which one's relationship is better or worse than that of another couple. Indeed, individuals report

that social comparisons are a tool that they use to evaluate their relationships (Wayment & Campbell, 2000), and that they make such comparisons on a regular basis (Smith LeBeau & Buckingham, 2008). However, to date, research examining comparisons to a specific example of a superior couple has only examined the affective consequences of these comparisons (Buunk, 2006). In the present research, rather than examining the implications of the comparison for individual difference variables such as self-esteem, or individual-level outcomes such as perceptions of the partner or affective responses, these studies examine how an important relationship-focused variable, commitment to the relationship, influences the impact of comparisons on relationship-focused outcomes: satisfaction with and optimism about the relationship, as well as motivation to engage in relationship-maintenance behaviors. Thus, in order to understand individuals' perceptions and evaluations of their relationship, one must consider not only variables associated with the self or the partner, but also the relationship in which one is situated.

Thus far, we have argued that individuals higher in commitment assimilate their relationship to the superior couple, whereas individuals lower in commitment contrast their relationship to the superior couple. One potential alternative explanation is that all individuals felt threatened, and were thus defensive, but responded in different ways. As proposed by risk regulation theory (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006), individuals who felt less certain about their partner's regard (i.e., lower in commitment) may have chosen to self-protect by derogating their relationship and distancing themselves from their partner. In contrast, individuals who felt more certain about their partner's regard (i.e., higher in commitment) chose to defend against the threat by connecting to their partner.

We suggest, however, that this threat-reduction explanation does not fit the data as well as our own assimilation explanation. First, there is limited evidence suggesting that highly committed individuals felt threatened and thus defensive following the upward relationship comparison. Indeed, the manipulation check from Studies 2 and 3 indicates that individuals higher in commitment had more positive perceptions of the superior couple. If individuals higher in commitment were actually threatened, they could easily have minimized this threat by derogating the superior couple just as they derogate attractive alternatives (e.g., Lydon et al., 1999). Indeed, derogating the superior other is one strategy commonly used to cope with threatening upward comparisons (e.g., Parks-Stamm, Heilman, & Hearn, 2008). Second, past research suggests that defensive responses are incompatible with self-improvement responses. Responses that are defensive are meant to restore self-worth and may cause resistance to change or addressing the underlying causes of the negative feedback (Nussbaum & Dweck, 2008; Sherman & Cohen, 2002). Thus, a defensive response is unlikely to include increased motivation to engage in relationship-maintenance behaviors. Indeed, our first mediator, comparative ratings of own and target relationship, does capture perceptions of threat to some degree, and it did not mediate the association between commitment and motivation in both Studies 2 and 3, providing further evidence that defensive responses may be incompatible with motivation to improve. Third, risk regulation theory states that individuals must balance their goals of minimizing risk of rejection by protecting themselves and maximizing connection by promoting their relationship. Moreover, some individuals may choose to self-protect, whereas others may choose to promote the relationship when faced with potential rejection from their *partner*. It is this assessment of whether there is the potential for partner rejection that triggers risk regulation processes. When individuals make an upward relationship comparison, however, there is no risk of rejection from

their partner as long as their partner is not making the same or a similar relationship comparison; consequently, risk regulation processes should not be initiated. In fact, in the case of an upward relationship comparison, the *partner* experiences an increased risk of rejection, not the individual making the comparison. Thus, it will be important for future research to examine whether partner's actual or perceived comparison behavior influences relationship processes and activates the risk regulation system. Taken together, it is unlikely that all individuals felt threatened by the superior relationship but engaged in different threat-reduction strategies.

Finally, although recent meta-analytic evidence suggests that contrast effects are the most common response to upward comparisons, the same meta-analysis suggests that assimilation does occur when similarity is primed (Gerber et al., 2018). Our results suggest that high commitment individuals were able to view the highly successful couple as similar to their own relationship, and as a result were positively affected by the comparison. Lower commitment individuals were unable to draw such parallels between their own relationship and the successful exemplar; as a result, they contrasted their relationship with the superior one and thus felt less positive and less motivated.

Given that comparisons are an inevitable part of daily life, it is important to understand how these comparisons may shape relationship processes. Interdependence theory states that comparisons may influence the expectations individuals have for their own relationships, which in turn can affect their satisfaction and dependence on the relationship (Thibault & Kelley, 1959). Consequently, the relationship comparisons that individuals make may shape their own relationship expectations. In particular, comparisons to vastly superior relationships may be problematic because such comparisons may increase individuals' relationship expectations without increasing the motivation necessary to reach these expectations, resulting in less

satisfaction and greater instability. Indeed, recent research indicates that upward comparison targets who are much more superior are less motivating and more likely to elicit stronger negative responses (Diel & Hofmann, 2019; Midgley, 2019; Patrick et al., 2004). Thus, when possible, couples should choose relationships that are slightly superior (i.e., less upward) because these comparisons are more motivating (Diel & Hoffman, 2019) and are less likely to elicit strong negative responses (Midgley, 2019). Indeed, our studies found that this smaller discrepancy between the superior relationship and the individual's relationship did partially explain why highly committed individuals felt more satisfied and optimistic after the upward comparison. Comparisons to moderately superior relationships may also provide individuals with useful information about how to improve their own relationships (e.g., Nussbaum & Dweck, 2008) and may help couples to identify problems within their own relationship that need to be resolved in order to strengthen their relationship. These comparisons may also increase individuals' awareness of their current behaviors in the relationship, which has been shown to be an effective way to lower risks of relationship dissolution (Rogge et al., 2013). Thus, although upward relationship comparisons may have negative immediate consequences, they may also help individuals to improve their relationships over time. Future research should examine the impact of relationship comparisons over time.

It will also be important to examine these effects at different relationship stages. For example, it may be that relationship comparisons are particularly significant for individuals just starting a new relationship: They may try to assess whether to invest in this relationship by examining how their new partnership matches up against the relationships of friends or family members. The present studies found that the role of commitment in determining comparison outcomes is not limited to relationships in young adults (Studies 1 and 2), but plays a role even

among married couples (Studies 2 and 3). Nevertheless, we note that the impact of these comparisons on the long-term outcomes of relationships may differ depending on whether one is in a new or well-established relationship. Individuals in the early stages of dating may make decisions about whether or not to continue the relationship when faced with even a few compelling examples of superior relationships, which may also increase their comparison levels. Individuals who are married or in long-term commitments, however, may be less likely to disengage from the partner on the basis of one or two upward relationship comparisons. Conversely, if married individuals are constantly reminded that their own relationship is inferior to the marriages of close friends and family members, these comparisons might contribute to an eventual break-up.

We note that the present studies focused on comparisons to other relationships, rather than to one's own past relationships. It may be that such temporal relationship comparisons to past partnerships will also play a significant role in determining relationship satisfaction. To the extent that one's current relationship is less fulfilling than a past relationship, one may be less motivated to engage in relationship-maintenance behaviors. Although past research has examined individuals' perceptions of how their current relationship has changed over time (e.g., Frye & Karney, 2002; Karney & Frye, 2002), research to date has not examined temporal relationship comparisons (i.e., how one's past relationships compare to one's current relationship). It will be important in future research to examine how often individuals make both social comparisons to other relationships and temporal comparisons to their own past relationships, and how both processes may contribute to individuals' satisfaction with their partner.

In North America, between 40-50% of marriages end in divorce, which in turn is associated with negative consequences for individuals' finances (Sayer, 2006), social network (e.g., Terhell, van Groenou, & van Tilburg, 2004), and both physical and mental health (e.g., Sbarra, Emery, Beam, & Ocker, 2014; Sbarra, Law, Lee, & Mason, 2009; Sbarra, Law, & Portley, 2011). A variety of studies have examined factors that may contribute to relationships ending, including infidelity, individual differences, and relationship quality. The present research identifies one additional factor, largely unexamined to date: The extent to which individuals make upward cross-relationship comparisons. Such comparisons may be beneficial, if they help individuals to identify relationships that are clearly inferior and problematic to those around them, or if the superior examples serve as models of relationships that inspire individuals to work at improving their own marriages. Alternatively, for individuals already experiencing a lower commitment level, these superior examples may lead them to disengage, quashing their interest in engaging in the kinds of behaviors needed to make their relationships better. Given the pivotal role that relationships play in determining well-being, life satisfaction, and even longevity (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010; Lucas, 2005; Lucas & Dyrenforth, 2006), it is crucial to understand how social comparisons affect how individuals engage in and make decisions about their relationships.

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Footnotes

¹ In Study 1, we were interested in exploring the effects of relationship comparisons in general. Thus, we also included a downward comparison condition. For both relationship satisfaction and behavioral intentions, the effects of the downward comparison condition did not differ from the no comparison control condition. Consequently, we chose to not investigate the effects of downward relationship comparisons further in subsequent studies.

Our comparison condition by commitment interactions were either marginally significant for relationship satisfaction, $F(2, 63)=3.11, p=.052$, or significant for behavioral intentions, $F(2, 63)=3.91, p=.025$, when we included the downward comparison condition in our analyses. Furthermore, consistent with our hypothesis, simple effects analyses revealed that individuals higher in commitment respond more positively to superior relationship targets than participants in the other comparison conditions. The full set of results from these analyses can be found in our supplementary materials (<https://osf.io/kebwh/>).

² Due to the smaller sample sizes in Studies 1 and 2, we did not find a significant association between commitment and satisfaction in the control condition; however, our internal meta-analysis revealed a positive association for this simple slope ($r=.23, p<.001$).

² This interaction was marginally significant when we included the shared tasks subscale in our aggregate measure of behavioral intentions, $b=0.20 [-0.03, 0.42], SE=0.11, t(44)=1.75, p=.088, r=.25$.

³ Because the pretest was not subject to the limits of the mass testing questionnaire, we were able to include the full commitment scale for married participants.

⁴ The full manipulation is available in our methods appendix (<https://osf.io/2ud7x/>) and supplementary materials (<https://osf.io/kebwh/>).

⁵ We were not interested in any relationship status differences; thus, we did not test for these differences in our primary analyses. We have reported these status differences in our supplementary materials (<https://osf.io/kebwh/>). We have also reported these results separately for the dating and married sample in our supplementary materials as well.

⁶ Control participants did not complete this comparative rating item.

⁷ We also conducted an additional exploratory study to test potential mediators; however, measuring three potential mediators before measuring our primary dependent variables diluted the effect of our manipulation on our dependent variables. This exploratory study included measures of the mediators mentioned in our pre-registration. Study 3 did *not* include any measures of the proposed mediators mentioned in the pre-registration. Study 3 participants in the upward comparison condition read about the superior couple and then completed the dependent measures immediately afterwards.

⁸ When we included participants who rated the target relationship as inferior to their own in our analyses, our results remained significant; however, our effect sizes were reduced. These results are reported in our supplementary materials.

⁹ When we included participants who indicated that the target relationship was worse than their own, participants still rated the target relationship as superior to their own on average ($M=1.56$, $SD=1.05$).

¹⁰ A subset of participants from this prescreening questionnaire were recruited for a separate study.

Table 1

Meta-Analytic Results of Commitment by Comparison Condition on Satisfaction, Behavioral Intentions, and Relationship Optimism

	Study 1 (<i>n</i> = 48)	Study 2 (<i>n</i> =84)	Study 3 (<i>n</i> =305)	Meta-analytic <i>r</i>
Relationship Satisfaction				
Commitment x Comparison	.32 [.03, .55]	.48 [.31, .63]	.16 [.05, .26]	$M_r=.24$ [.15, .33] $Z=5.13, p<.001$
Simple Effects (Low)	-.13 [-.38, .14]	-.37 [-.54, -.18]	-.11 [-.22, -.01]	$M_r=-.16$ [-.25, -.07] $Z=3.42, p<.001$
Simple Effects (High)	.35 [.06, .58]	.35 [.17, .51]	.08 [-.03, .19]	$M_r=.16$ [.07, .25] $Z=3.40, p<.001$
Simple Slope (Control)	.03 [-.26, .31]	.03 [-.19, .24]	.31 [.17, .47]	$M_r=.23$ [.14, .32] $Z=4.86, p<.001$
Simple Slope (Upward)	.36 [.16, .56]	.61 [.43, .77]	.54 [.43, .62]	$M_r=.54$ [.47, .60] $Z=12.42, p<.001$
Relationship-Maintenance Behavioral Intentions				
Commitment x Comparison	.32 [.05, .58]	.08 [-.14, .29]	.13 [.01, .24]	$M_r=.14$ [.05, .23] $Z=2.94, p=.003$
Simple Effects (Low)	-.28 [-.52, -.004]	.06 [-.21, .27]	-.10 [-.21, .02]	$M_r=-.09$ [-.18, .005] $Z=-1.86, p=.064$
Simple Effects (High)	.16 [-.13, .42]	.17 [-.05, .37]	.06 [-.05, .17]	$M_r=.09$ [-.003, .18] $Z=1.90, p=.057$
Simple Slope (Control)	.20 [-.09, .46]	.28 [.09, .47]	.18 [.07, .31]	$M_r=.20$ [.11, .29] $Z=4.22, p<.001$
Simple Slope (Upward)	.47 [.19, .70]	.35 [.15, .56]	.39 [.25, .52]	$M_r=.39$ [.31, .47] $Z=8.55, p<.001$
Relationship Optimism				
Commitment x Comparison		.49 [.32, .67]	.13 [.003, .25]	$M_r=.21$ [.12, .31] $Z=4.24, p<.001$
Simple Effects (Low)		-.33 [-.54, -.14]	-.02 [-.15, .11]	$M_r=-.09$ [-.19, .01] $Z=-1.73, p=.08$
Simple Effects (High)		.41 [.22, .56]	.16 [.05, .25]	$M_r=.22$ [.12, .31] $Z=4.29, p<.001$
Simple Slope (Control)		.12 [-.14, .38]	.36 [.23, .51]	$M_r=.31$ [.22, .40] $Z=6.32, p<.001$
Simple Slope (Upward)	-	.67 [.50, .81]	.55 [.47, .64]	$M_r=.58$ [.51, .64] $Z=12.90, p<.001$

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Simple regression lines depicting the relationship between commitment and satisfaction (Panel A) and relationship-maintenance behavioral intentions (Panel B) among participants in the upward comparison and control conditions (Study 1). Error bars represent standard errors.

Figure 2. Simple regression lines depicting the relationship between commitment and relationship satisfaction (Panel A) and relationship optimism (Panel B) among participants in the upward comparison and control conditions (Study 2). Error bars represent standard errors.

Figure 3. Simple regression lines depicting the relationship between commitment and satisfaction (Panel A), relationship-maintenance behavioral intentions (Panel B), and relationship optimism (Panel C) among participants in the upward comparison and control conditions (Study 3). Error bars represent standard errors.

Figure 4. Mediation models tested in Studies 2 (Panel A) and 3 (Panels A and B). In Studies 2 and 3, we used comparative ratings of own and target relationship to measure perceptions of standard extremity. Panel B depicts the full pathway proposed by the selective accessibility model, which was tested in Study 3.

Figure 1. Effect of Commitment on Relationship Satisfaction (Panel A) and Relationship-Maintenance Behavioral Intentions (Panel B) Following Upward or No Comparison (Study 1).

Figure 2. Effect of Commitment on Relationship Satisfaction (Panel A) and Relationship Optimism (Panel B) Following Upward or No Comparison (Study 2).

Figure 3. Effect of Commitment on Relationship Satisfaction (Panel A), Relationship-Maintenance Behavioral Intentions (Panel B), and Relationship Optimism (Panel C) Following Upward or No Comparison (Study 2).

Figure 4. Mediation models tested in Studies 2 (Panel A) and 3 (Panels A and B).