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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167219841633>

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Citation

TAN, Kenneth, AGNEW, Christopher R., & HADDEN, Benjamin W..(2019). Seeking and ensuring interdependence: Commitment desirability and the initiation and maintenance of close relationships. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, , 1-15.

Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soass_research/2843

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Seeking and Ensuring Interdependence: Desiring Commitment and the Strategic Initiation and Maintenance of Close Relationships

Kenneth Tan¹, Christopher R. Agnew²,
and Benjamin W. Hadden³

Abstract

The current research offers and examines the concept of *commitment desirability*, defined as the subjective desire to be involved in a committed romantic relationship at a given time. In pursuing their desire for a committed romance, how do individuals high in commitment desirability strategically ensure success? We suggest that high perceived partner commitment is sought by individuals who themselves desire to be involved in a committed relationship. In three studies involving individuals both currently involved and not involved in a relationship, we found support for the hypothesized interactive effect of commitment desirability and perceived partner commitment, such that greater commitment desirability was associated with more positive relationship outcomes, especially when partners were perceived to be high in commitment. The present research suggests that commitment desirability is a meaningful predictor of relationship attitudes and behaviors. Implications for understanding relationship commitment as well as future research directions are discussed.

Keywords

commitment, commitment desirability, close relationships, relationship receptivity, perceived partner commitment

Received February 14, 2018; revision accepted February 17, 2019

Life is surely empty when you wake in the morning with nobody
in mind to love for the day.

—Terry Mark

As reflected in the above quotation, romantic relationships are considered to be a particularly important social relationship (Day, Kay, Holmes, & Napier, 2011; DePaulo & Morris, 2006). A committed romantic partnership that is enduring and dependable is assumed to provide fulfillment in and meaning to people's lives (Day et al., 2011). Indeed, it is considered natural for people to harbor deep motivation for social connection, and involvement with a romantic partner is a common route to achieving such a connection (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). However, desire for a committed romance is not universal, despite evidence that people may be fearful of remaining single (Spielmann et al., 2013). In some modern societies, there is evidence of an aversion to marriage, intimacy, and even being involved in close relationships (e.g., Descutner & Thelen, 1991; Li, Lim, & Tsai, 2015). Relational arrangements such as "hooking up" or "friends with benefits," characterized by an absence of commitment, have become more common in recent years (VanderDrift, Lehmillier, & Kelly, 2012). This

increase is not limited to younger adults, as there have been changes in norms of partnering in older adults as well (Manning & Brown, 2011), including notable increases in desire for independence in relationships (De Jong Gierveld, 2002). Furthermore, the notion that committed relationships are essential to well-being can be questioned, as single individuals can be just as well adjusted and happy as people involved in romantic relationships (Girme, Overall, Faingataa, & Sibley, 2015). Thus, it is not surprising that individuals might question the value of committed relationships and whether they actually want or desire them.

Past research has not adequately addressed personal attitudes toward commitment in relationships. Extant research has focused on examining *level* of commitment to a given relationship and whether high or low commitment level

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influences relationship maintenance behaviors and stability across a range of relationship types (Agnew & VanderDrift, 2018; Le & Agnew, 2003). However, current approaches to investigating commitment do not measure the extent to which individuals actually desire and/or seek committed relationships. From an attitudinal standpoint, this may be akin to assessing the valence (i.e., positivity or negativity) of one's overall evaluation of commitment. Commitment desirability can be considered a general disposition toward relationship involvement, whereas commitment level represents a relationship-specific variable that indexes perceptions with respect to a specific involvement. For those currently involved in a relationship, assessing commitment to a given partner does not assess one's overall subjective sense that commitment is particularly desirable for that individual at a given time. One can imagine a relationship in which a person expresses commitment to a particular partner but is not enamored with commitment in general. For example, their commitment might be due to social norms that place value on being in a committed relationship and not based on feelings that commitment is a particularly desired relational arrangement. Moreover, among those who are not currently involved in a relationship (and, thus, where commitment level to a partner is completely absent), we would expect the notion of desiring (or not desiring) a committed relationship to play a role in relational thoughts and behavior. We begin by situating the construct of commitment desirability within a larger theory of relationship receptivity before concentrating on its usefulness in predicting meaningful relationship processes and outcomes.

Relationship Receptivity Theory and Desiring a Committed Relationship

Relationship receptivity theory centers on the proposition that perceived personal timing is consequential for relationship cognitions, behavior, and stability (Agnew, 2014; Agnew, Hadden, & Tan, 2019a, 2019b; Hadden, Agnew, & Tan, 2018). A person may be more or less receptive to relationship involvement, momentarily and throughout the life course. At any given time, people have a sense of whether or not they want to be in close relationship with another person. These cognitions can refer either to a short-term (e.g., "I really want to be close to someone tonight") or long-term involvement ("I want to be in a committed romantic relationship"). In the current research, we focus on long-term *commitment desirability*, defined as the subjective desire to be involved in a committed romantic relationship at a given time. According to this perspective, commitment desirability denotes a motivation to seek and maintain a committed romantic relationship. To date, the concept of commitment desirability has not been the direct focus of theoretical or empirical work.

A good starting point for understanding commitment desirability is to build on work looking at normative desires for relationships. From an evolutionary perspective, desiring

romantic partners and consequently having sex and reproducing are adaptive for survival as compared with remaining single (Pillsworth & Haselton, 2005). This has led to the distinction between long-term and short-term sexual mating, particularly regarding sociosexual orientation, the willingness to engage in uncommitted sex (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991). Although related, sociosexual orientation is distinct from commitment desirability. One can imagine someone who feels uncomfortable with one-night stands (a short-term mating strategy) and yet lacks desire for a long-term relationship (a long-term strategy). Alternatively, an individual can feel open to short-term involvements while also desiring a long-term relationship. Thus, evolutionary perspectives on long- and short-term mating strategies do not fully capture variations in one's desire for commitment. This is further supported by research on the need to belong, which posits that meaningful associations between individuals are important for physical and psychological well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The lack of such meaningful social connections is associated with a host of deleterious consequences, such as impaired self-regulation (Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Twenge, 2005) and negative health outcomes (House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988). We argue that commitment desirability goes beyond simply focusing on broad social needs and desire for sex, social connection, and intimacy.

An interdependence perspective is particularly relevant in our theorizing concerning commitment desirability as it is foundational in the conceptualization of commitment level and provides a clear understanding as to why individuals rely on romantic relationships to attain desired outcomes. Interdependence theory conceptualizes the ways in which outcomes for the self and others are evaluated, including broader considerations that accompany and complement the pursuit of immediate self-interest (Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996). People can recognize and be concerned about the nature of their interdependence with others, which affects their behavioral choices and can translate to transformative prorelationship behaviors and relationship persistence (Rusbult & Agnew, 2010). Interdependence theory posits that individuals in a relationship are cognizant of both the positive and negative outcomes that can arise from mutual dependence. Just as transformational tendencies and comparison levels/comparison levels of alternatives can be developed and shaped by past experiences and patterns of social interactions that are conditioned by others (Van Lange, Otten, De Bruin, & Joireman, 1997), so too can they influence current desires and beliefs concerning the desirability of commitment (Simpson, Collins, & Salvatore, 2011). For example, experiences in previous relationships with romantic partners (e.g., bad breakup, abuse) can influence the development of one's mental model regarding commitment and how prospective relationships should be approached.

Extending this interdependence perspective, Murray and colleagues offered the risk regulation model (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006), positing that close relationships

involve an interdependence dilemma: People need to risk dependence to establish quality relationships that can fulfill their need to belong, but risking greater closeness to another leaves an individual more vulnerable to hurt and pain when faced with rejection. The psychological costs associated with rejection increase as interdependence and closeness grows, and individuals may be motivated to minimize dependence on romantic partners to reduce the likelihood of being hurt. Indeed, low self-esteem individuals engage in self-protection and decrease dependence to feel safe (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000). As self-esteem is a sociometer that gauges relational value and how one regards their relationship with others (Leary & Baumeister, 2000), it is related to but distinct from commitment desirability, which focuses on commitment itself. As such, flexibility in the extent to which a person desires commitment can be functional and may be viewed as a way of managing the psychological costs that accompany current or anticipated rejection.

Given that we are presenting a new construct, we felt it important to demonstrate that any observed empirical associations were beyond those of related existing constructs. The attachment literature addresses concerns about insecurity in romantic relationships, which can reflect on desires concerning intimacy (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Romantic attachment orientations are thought to differ along two dimensions, anxiety and avoidance (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Attachment anxiety, driven by a negative mental model of the self, is manifested as the degree to which individuals worry about being rejected by their partners combined with doubts about one's self-worth. Attachment avoidance, driven by a negative mental model of others, is manifested as the degree to which individuals are self-reliant and uncomfortable with closeness and intimacy, which is particularly relevant in the current research. One could conceive of low commitment desirability as consistent with high attachment avoidance, whereby individuals who do not desire commitment might want independence in their relationships and to not be psychologically attached to a partner. Thus, attachment avoidance and commitment desirability might share similarities in terms of manifestations of relational thoughts and behaviors. However, one may be comfortable with dependence and intimacy, but still not desire a committed relationship or vice versa. Because commitment desirability is not tapping into anxiety or fear-related constructs, we do not expect commitment desirability to be significantly associated with attachment anxiety. In the studies presented below, we control for attachment avoidance to demonstrate that any obtained effects are independent of this construct.

Commitment Desirability and Strategic Relationship Behaviors

Navigating interdependence dilemmas are inherent in the pursuit and maintenance of close relationships, but in the process of solving such dilemmas, individuals are also motivated

to meet their commitment goals. Strategically, a person who is higher in commitment desirability would be more likely to focus their efforts on potential partners who are perceived as also being interested in commitment (Murray et al., 2006). Indeed, the extent to which individuals maintain and implement their desires for committed relationships are at least partially determined by perceptions that their partners harbor similar desires (Holmes & Rempel, 1989). Hence, when desiring a committed relationship, a person should be especially interested in discerning their partner's commitment (or a potential partner's desire for commitment), as this would help determine whether one's own desire for commitment is likely to be met. In the quest to achieve one's own desired level of commitment, perceived partner commitment (or a potential partner's desire for commitment) plays a role in alleviating doubts about one's partner being able to provide what is desired (Arriaga, Reed, Goodfriend, & Agnew, 2006).

The notion of uncertainty reduction is crucial in our theorizing. Studies have shown that experiencing doubt is linked to decreased overall commitment levels and predicts relationship dissolution over and above mean commitment levels (Arriaga et al., 2006). Consequently, the match between own commitment desirability and perceived partner commitment alleviates uncertainty that one has about the potential success of a relationship (Owen et al., 2014). The certainty and assurance that this match provides may serve to help couples form a long-term vision for, and make future plans regarding, their relationship (Tan & Agnew, 2016). Relatedly, research on consistency between partner perceptions and ideal standards has shown that consistency between actual partner perceptions and desired states is associated with greater relationship success. However, when there are discrepancies between partner perceptions and desired states, people are motivated to regulate their partners or even leave the relationship (Overall, Fletcher, & Simpson, 2006).

Desiring commitment, then, should have implications for characteristics that are sought in a relational partner. Among those currently involved in a relationship, one should prefer a partner who is highly committed to the relationship, which would signal that their partner would facilitate their own goal of a sustained committed involvement. Among those who are currently single, in addition to seeking a partner who is perceived as being at least somewhat responsive to one's own needs (Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004), they should prefer potential partners who themselves are highly desirous of initiating a committed relationship. In either case, pursuing a relationship with partners who are perceived as being more committed or desirous of commitment should result in a higher probability of one achieving a successful committed relationship.

The Present Research

The primary goal of the present research was to examine commitment desirability and how it may affect relationship

attitudes and cognitions. We first developed and validated a measure of commitment desirability and then explored its association with relationship processes. Data from our scale development and validation efforts can be found in the online supplemental materials (OSMs). In short, a unidimensional five-item Commitment Desirability Scale emerged from data obtained from two samples of young adult college students (total $n = 1,027$), some involved and some not involved in a current romantic relationship. The measure demonstrated high internal reliability and evidenced theoretically appropriate convergent and divergent associations with other measures. Importantly, commitment desirability was found to be modestly associated with self-esteem ($r = .29$), attachment avoidance ($r = -.18$), and not with attachment anxiety ($r = -.08$). Furthermore, individuals currently in romantic relationships expressed greater commitment desirability ($M = 6.57, SD = 1.47$) compared with those not in romantic relationships ($M = 5.52, SD = 1.70$), $M_{diff} = 1.05, SE = 1.30, t(596) = 8.06, p < .001$. Using the validated measure, the present research examined how commitment desirability was related to maintenance cognitions among those involved in a romantic relationship, as well as initiation cognitions among those who were not involved.

Studies 1 and 2 examined participants who were currently involved in a relationship. Study 1 focused on commitment desirability and prorelationship cognitions that serve to ensure interdependence between couple members (Rusbult & Agnew, 2010). We hypothesized that individuals who were higher in commitment desirability would be more certain about the future stability of their relationship, especially if they perceived their partners to be high in commitment (Hypothesis 1). Study 2 focused on associations between commitment desirability and relationship maintenance variables, specifically dependence and dissolution consideration with respect to a current partner. Because dependence and dissolution consideration reflect specific attitudes toward a given relationship or partner, whereas commitment desirability is a more distal general attitude toward relationships, we hypothesized that individuals higher in commitment desirability would be more dependent on, and less willing to consider dissolving, their current relationship, especially if they perceived their partner to be high in commitment (Hypothesis 2). Finally, Study 3 used an experimental design to examine relationship initiation and attraction among currently single individuals. Using an online dating paradigm, participants evaluated their romantic interest in, and anticipated romantic success with, targets who were described as interested in either a short- or long-term relationship. We also varied the relative responsiveness of the target to be either somewhat or very responsive, expecting that one's interest in and anticipated success with a given target would not vary as long as the partner was interested in a long-term relationship. We hypothesized that individuals who were higher in commitment desirability would express greatest interest in

targets who were themselves most interested in committed relationships (Hypothesis 3).

Study 1

How might commitment desirability influence individuals who are currently involved in a relationship? We first examined whether commitment desirability would be associated with future expectations of relationship stability (Girme et al., 2018). In the current research, relationship stability is construed as how much one's relationship is variable as opposed to consistent and constant. We examined future expectations of relationship stability as these forecasts of relational (un)certainly can escalate doubts and undermine predictability and confidence about the stability of the relationship. Hence, doubts that people experience could influence their degree of commitment to the relationship. As described earlier, we posited that perceived partner commitment is used as a gauge for relationship certainty and stability. We expected that commitment desirability would be positively associated with expectations for relationship certainty and stability. Furthermore, we expected an interaction whereby higher commitment desirability would predict higher expectations of relationship stability when one perceives a partner to be highly committed.

Method

Participants and procedure. Participants were 197 Amazon Mechanical Turk workers (63% female) who were involved in romantic relationships at the time of their participation ($M_{months} = 96.17, SD = 99.60$). Due to a computer error, 122 participants did not report their age and were thus coded as missing for age ($M_{age} = 41.47, SD = 9.78$). They completed the Commitment Desirability Scale, a measure of perceived partner commitment, and a measure of expectations concerning the stability of their current romantic relationship. They also answered demographic questions before being debriefed about the study.

Measures

Commitment desirability. Participants completed the five-item Commitment Desirability Scale developed for this study, using a scale ranging from 0 (*do not agree at all*) to 8 (*agree completely*): "The idea of a long-term committed romantic relationship appeals to me," "I want to be in a committed romantic relationship," "Maintaining a committed romantic relationship is important to me," "I prefer to be involved in a committed romantic relationship that lasts a long time," and "I prefer not to be in a committed romantic relationship" (reverse-scored). Internal reliability of the scale was high ($\alpha = .89$).¹

Perceived partner commitment. Participants completed a modified version of the seven-item commitment subscale

Table 1. Correlations Among Variables and Descriptive Statistics, Study 1.

Variable	1	2	3	4	M (SD)
1. Commitment desirability	—				7.24 (1.24)
2. Perceived partner commitment	.41**	—			6.75 (1.48)
3. Expectations of stability	.47**	.59**	—		5.03 (1.06)
4. Attachment avoidance	-.24**	-.09	-.22**	—	3.19 (1.35)

** $p < .001$.

from the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998) with response options ranging from 0 (*do not agree at all*) to 8 (*agree completely*), that tapped participants' perceptions of their partner's commitment level (Arriaga et al., 2006; $\alpha = .92$).

Expectations of relationship stability. Participants indicated their expectations concerning the stability of their current relationship, partner, and the self by responding to 12 items, using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Example items include the following: "The quality of my relationship will be stable over time," "My partner's feelings for me are likely to go up and down a lot," and "My love and care for my partner will remain stable over time" ($\alpha = .86$).

Attachment avoidance. As a control variable, participants completed the Experiences in Close Relationships–Relationship Structures measure (ECR-RS; Fraley, Heffernan, Vicary, & Brumbaugh, 2011) to assess attachment avoidance. This is a six-item scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), including items such as "It helps to turn to people in times of need," "I find it easy to depend on others," and "I don't feel comfortable opening up to others" ($\alpha = .88$).

Results and Discussion

Descriptive statistics and correlations among variables can be found in Table 1. We used multiple regression analyses to test for the predicted two-way interaction between commitment desirability and perceived partner commitment as predictors of expectations for relationship stability. There was a significant main effect of commitment desirability on expectations for stability, $b = .30$, $t(194) = 5.06$, $\beta = .34$, $p < .001$; confidence interval (CI) = [.18, .41], and a significant main effect of perceived partner commitment on expectations for stability, $b = .35$, $t(194) = 8.16$, $\beta = .50$, $p < .001$; CI = [.26, .44]. Consistent with hypotheses, there was also a significant two-way interaction between commitment desirability and perceived partner commitment, $b = .08$, $t(194) = 2.66$, $\beta = .17$, $p = .008$; CI = [.02, .14]. These associations did not change when controlling for attachment avoidance.

A follow-up examination of simple slopes at high (+1 SD) and low (–1 SD) levels of perceived partner commitment

(see Figure 1) revealed that individuals exhibited a stronger positive association between commitment desirability and expectations of relationship stability at high levels of perceived partner commitment, $b = .41$, $t(194) = 4.56$, $p < .001$, as compared with at low levels of perceived partner, $b = .18$, $t(194) = 3.83$, $p < .001$. Thus, individuals who had higher commitment desirability had greater expectations for relationship stability, especially when they perceived their partners to be highly committed. In contrast, individuals with lower commitment desirability also had higher expectations for relationship stability based on perceived partner commitment, but it was a significantly weaker effect. It would appear, then, that commitment desirability is associated with such prorelationship cognitions as future relationship certainty, particularly when a current partner is perceived as more committed, which might serve to motivate greater subsequent relationship maintenance cognitions.

Study 2

In Study 1, we focused on associations between commitment desirability and expectations about the stability of the relationship in the future, showing how individuals who desired commitment were most certain about future stability if they perceived their partners to be also highly committed. In Study 2, we sought to replicate this interaction with variables associated with cognitions promoting relationship maintenance that are specific to a partner and at the current point in time. In Study 2, we examined the association between commitment desirability and perceived partner commitment on relationship dependence as well as on dissolution consideration among those currently involved in a romance.

Dependence is the extent to which one relies on a current relationship to obtain desired outcomes and fulfill one's needs (Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999), whereas dissolution consideration is the extent to which individuals find salient the prospect of relationship termination (VanderDrift, Agnew, & Wilson, 2009). Just like commitment, both dependence and dissolution consideration have been shown to be strong predictors of relationship stability, but they are theoretically distinct from commitment. Dependence concerns the structural bases of a relationship that are theorized to influence commitment, whereas dissolution consideration serves as a mediator between commitment and the enactment of leave behaviors (VanderDrift et al.,

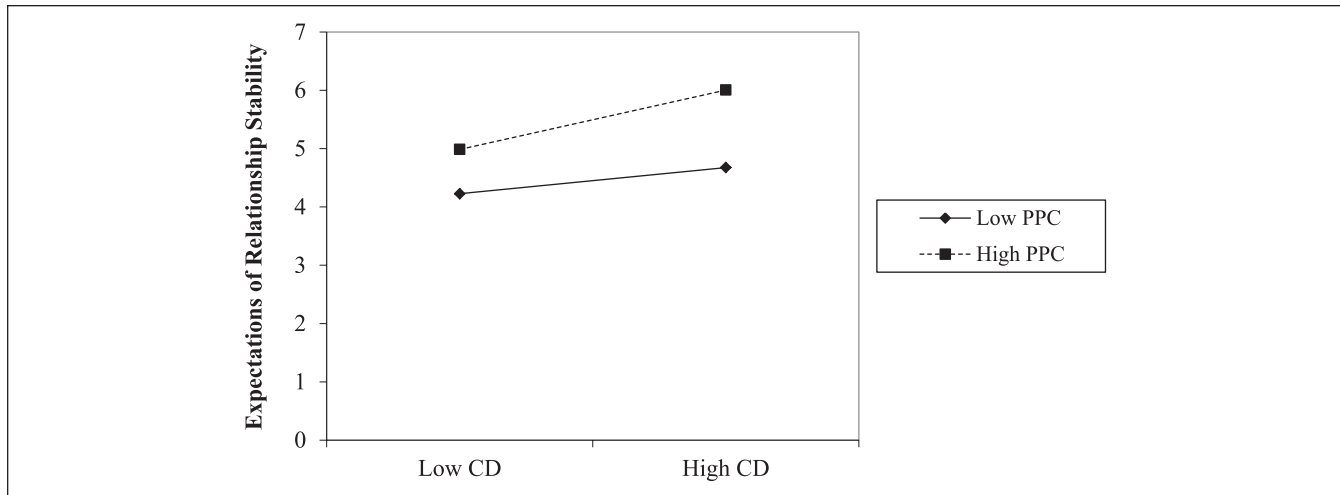


Figure 1. Expectations for relationship stability as a function of own commitment desirability and perceived partner commitment, Study 1. Note. CD = commitment desirability; PPC = perceived partner commitment.

2009). We hypothesized that individuals who are higher in commitment desirability would be more dependent and less likely to consider dissolving their current relationship compared with those who are lower in commitment desirability, especially when they perceive that their partners are also highly committed to the relationship. Specifically, we hypothesized that there would be a significant interaction between commitment desirability and perceived partner commitment on own relationship dependence and dissolution consideration, whereby higher commitment desirability would predict higher dependence and lower dissolution consideration particularly when one perceives a partner to be highly committed.

Method

Participants and procedure. Participants were 275 undergraduates who took part in the study in partial fulfillment of course credit for their introductory psychology course and were currently involved in a romantic relationship (58.8% female). Participants ranged in age from 17 to 30 years old ($M = 19.04$, $SD = 1.40$). They completed the Commitment Desirability Scale, a measure of perceived partner commitment, a measure of dissolution consideration, as well as a measure of relational dependence on their current romantic relationship. They also answered demographic questions before being debriefed about the study.

Measures

Commitment desirability. Participants completed the Commitment Desirability Scale as described above ($\alpha = .87$).

Dependence. Participants completed a five-item scale assessing how dependent they are on their current relationship (Murray, Holmes, MacDonald, & Ellsworth, 1998;

Sample item: “I feel that I need my partner a great deal”), with response options ranging from 1 (*not at all true*) to 9 (*completely true*; $\alpha = .90$).

Dissolution consideration. Participants completed a five-item scale assessing the extent to which a respondent has salient thoughts about breaking up with their current romantic partner (VanderDrift et al., 2009; Sample item: “I have been thinking about ending our romantic relationship”). The response scale ranges from 0 (*do not agree at all*) to 8 (*agree completely*; $\alpha = .95$).

Perceived partner commitment. Participants completed a modified version of the commitment subscale from the Investment Model Scale as described in Study 1 ($\alpha = .91$).

Attachment avoidance. Participants completed the ECR-RS to measure attachment avoidance as described in Study 1 ($\alpha = .86$).

Results and Discussion

Descriptive statistics and correlations among the variables can be seen in Table 2. We used multiple regression analyses to test for the predicted two-way interaction between commitment desirability and perceived partner commitment as predictors of relationship dependence. There was a significant main effect of commitment desirability on dependence, $b = .47$, $t(272) = 6.40$, $\beta = .34$, $p < .001$; $CI = [.32, .61]$, and a significant main effect of perceived partner commitment on dependence, $b = .55$, $t(272) = 7.71$, $\beta = .43$, $p < .001$; $CI = [.41, .70]$. Consistent with hypotheses, there was also a significant interaction between commitment desirability and perceived partner commitment on dependence, $b = .11$, $t(272) = 2.62$, $\beta = .14$, $p = .009$; $CI = [.03, .20]$ (see

Table 2. Correlations Among Variables and Descriptive Statistics, Study 2.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	M (SD)
1. Commitment desirability	—					6.57 (1.47)
2. Perceived partner commitment	.44**	—				6.61 (1.54)
3. Dependence	.50**	.53**	—			6.10 (1.99)
4. Dissolution consideration	-.50**	-.51**	-.43**	—		2.39 (1.95)
5. Attachment avoidance	-.18**	-.09	-.14*	.13*	—	3.47 (1.26)

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$.

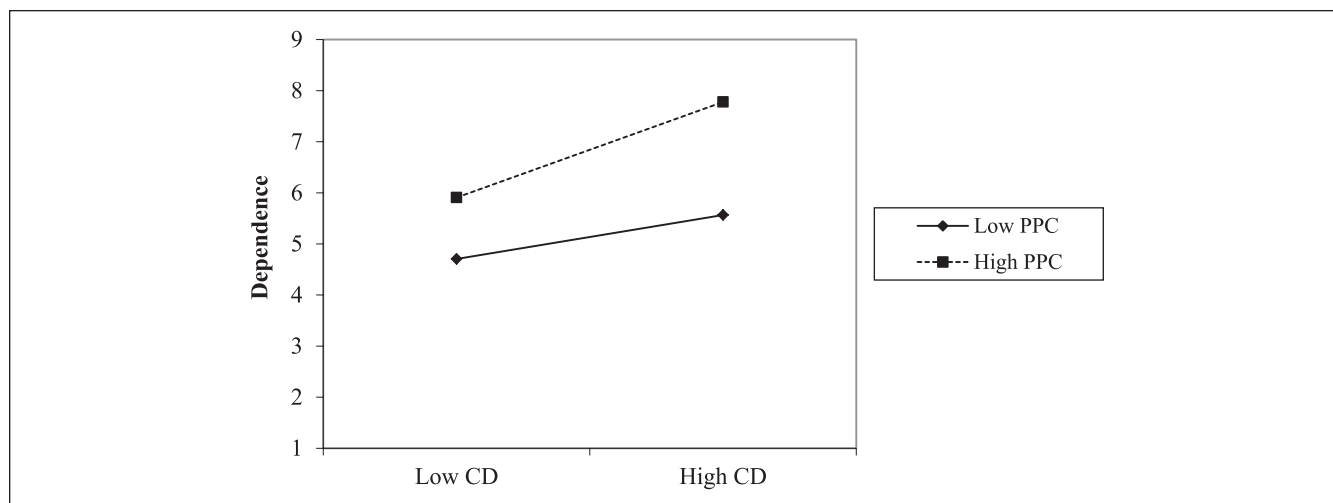


Figure 2. Dependence on the relationship as a function of own commitment desirability and perceived partner commitment, Study 2. Note. CD = commitment desirability, PPC = perceived partner commitment.

Figure 2). These associations did not change when controlling for attachment avoidance. We conducted analyses of the simple slopes at high (+1 *SD*) and low (-1 *SD*) levels of perceived partner commitment (Aiken & West, 1991). At lower levels of perceived partner commitment, individuals reported more dependence when they were higher in commitment desirability compared with when they were lower in commitment desirability, $b = .29$, $t(272) = 3.15$, $p < .001$. At higher levels of perceived partner commitment, individuals also reported more dependence when they were higher in commitment desirability compared with when they were lower in commitment desirability, $b = .64$, $t(272) = 6.14$, $p < .001$, and it was a significantly stronger effect.

We next tested for the predicted two-way interaction between commitment desirability and perceived partner commitment as predictors of dissolution consideration. There was a significant main effect of commitment desirability on dissolution consideration, $b = -.48$, $t(272) = -6.67$, $\beta = -.36$, $p < .001$, $CI = [-.62, -.34]$, and a significant main effect for perceived partner commitment on dissolution consideration, $b = -.52$, $t(272) = -7.41$, $\beta = -.42$, $p < .001$, $CI = [-.66, -.39]$. Consistent with hypotheses, there was also a significant interaction between commitment desirability and perceived partner commitment on dissolution consideration,

$b = -.15$, $t(272) = -3.54$, $\beta = -.18$, $p < .001$; $CI = [-.23, -.07]$ (see Figure 3). These associations did not change when controlling for attachment avoidance. We again tested simple slopes at high (+1 *SD*) and low (-1 *SD*) levels of perceived partner commitment. At lower levels of perceived partner commitment, individuals reported less dissolution consideration when they were higher in commitment desirability compared with when they were lower in commitment desirability, $b = -.25$, $t(272) = -2.69$, $p = .002$. At higher levels of perceived partner commitment, individuals also reported less dissolution consideration when they were higher in commitment desirability compared with when they were lower in commitment desirability, $b = -.71$, $t(272) = -6.83$, $p < .001$, and it was a significantly stronger effect.

Thus, within ongoing involvements, commitment desirability was found to be significantly associated with both relationship dependence and dissolution consideration. Individuals who had higher commitment desirability were more dependent and considered breaking up with their partners less, especially when they perceived their partners to be highly committed. The results from the current study follow from Study 1 and suggest that commitment desirability is also associated with cognitions that are salient in promoting relationship stability.²

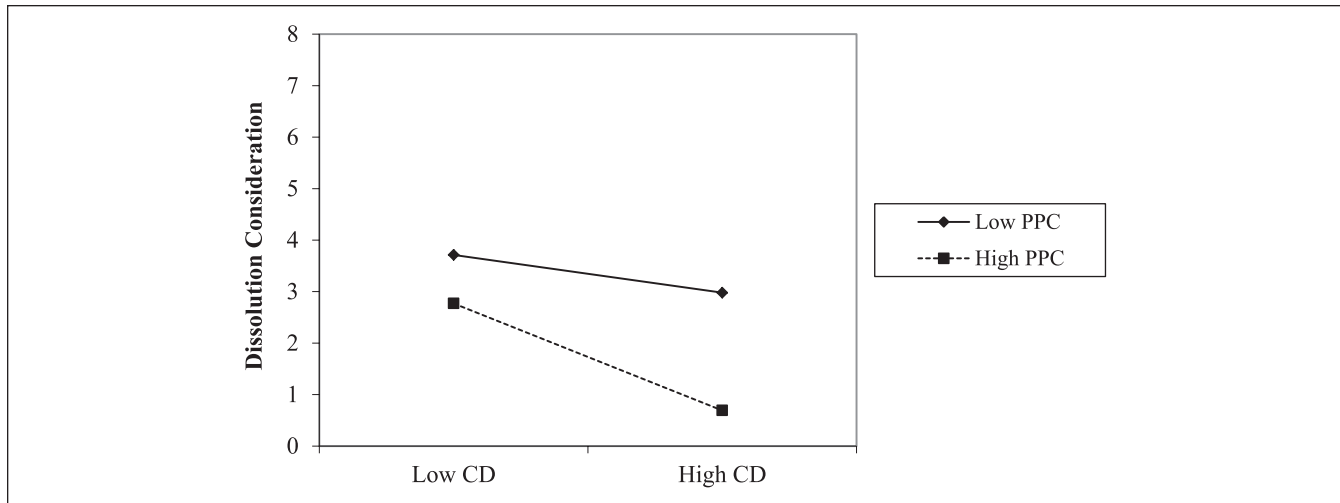


Figure 3. Dissolution consideration as a function of own commitment desirability and perceived partner commitment, Study 2.
 Note. CD = commitment desirability; PPC = perceived partner commitment.

Study 3

How would commitment desirability extend to interest in a potential romantic partner? In trying to capture a more holistic understanding of the effects of commitment desirability, we examined how commitment desirability was related to relationship interest and attraction among people not currently involved in a romantic relationship. In a two-factor (partner prefers short-term vs. long-term relationship and partner demonstrates modest vs. high responsiveness) between-subjects experiment, participants were asked to indicate their interest in, and anticipated success with, dating a hypothetical dating partner.

Following from our theorizing as well as initial results that individuals are strategic and use perceptions of partner's commitment as a gauge to enable successful relationships, we posited that, with respect to romantic attraction and success, they would use perceptions of the target's own desire for commitment as the primary gauge in determining their selection. Accordingly, we hypothesized that individuals who were higher in commitment desirability would express more interest in targets who express interest in a committed relationship compared with targets who do not. In contrast, individuals who were lower in commitment desirability would not express differences in romantic interest for targets who expressed interest in either a committed or a noncommitted relationship.

We also varied the relative responsiveness of the target with responsive partners seen as caring, understanding, and validating (Reis et al., 2004). Responsiveness can be viewed as indicating partner quality and involves standards that individuals may see as crucial in a relationship partner. The extent to which individuals might accept less than ideal partner responsiveness in favor of information indicating a partner's high commitment desirability could be strategic for

expected relationship success. As such, we hypothesized that one effect of higher commitment desirability would be for a person to overlook ideal partner responsiveness in seeking a long-term relationship partner. In their desire to be in a committed relationship, they might be romantically interested in any number of people, including individuals who are described as less than completely responsive to their needs. Thus, we expected an interaction between own and target commitment desirability to remain even if the target was described as less than ideal in responsiveness.

Finally, to account for the motivated perception that the match in own commitment desirability and perceived target commitment desirability fuels relationship success, we also tested whether this effect on romantic interest was mediated by the extent to which individuals think that a long-term relationship with the romantic target would be successful.

Method

Participants and procedure. Participants were 187 White, single, heterosexual undergraduates ($M_{age} = 19.31, SD = 1.30$; 99 females and 88 males) who took part in the study in partial fulfillment of course credit in their introductory psychology course. They first completed the Commitment Desirability Scale. Next, they were directed to assess a target taken from an ostensibly real Internet dating website, under the cover story that the study was on personality and evaluations of online dating profiles, and participants were asked to evaluate these profiles. These profiles included a photograph of either a White male or female, and were pretested to be equal in terms of moderate physical attractiveness rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 10 (*extremely*), $M_{difference} = .58$; $SE = .35$; $t(23) = 1.69, p = .11$. Male participants were presented with a profile containing the female photograph,

whereas female participants were presented with a profile containing the male photograph.

Each of the photos was also accompanied by a short written biography that depicted the target as either highly or moderately responsive to partners' needs and whether the target was interested in a short-term or long-term relationship, which constituted our manipulation of partner commitment desirability. Participants in the high responsiveness condition were provided with the following information about the target:

I really pay a lot of attention to my romantic partner. That means trying to understand them, getting to know them for who they are, and really trying to attend to their needs. I am interested in a short-term [or long-term] relationship.

Participants in the moderate responsiveness condition were provided with the following information about the target:

I like to have my own space when I am dating someone. That means I need someone who respects that and willing to take the back seat when necessary, and who does not need me to constantly care for them. I am interested in a short-term [or long-term] relationship.

Participants were asked to evaluate the target on various outcome measures, including romantic interest in, and anticipated success of, a relationship with the target before completing demographics and being debriefed at the end of the study.

Measures

Commitment desirability. Participants completed the Commitment Desirability Scale ($\alpha = .89$).

Perceived target commitment desirability. As a manipulation check, participants rated target interest in a long- versus short-term relationship, with a three-item measure, namely, "To what extent is this individual interested in a long-term romantic relationship?" "To what extent does this individual want a relationship that will last a long time?" and "To what extent does this individual want to find a long-term relationship partner?" responding on a scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 8 (*very much*; $\alpha = .98$).

Perceived target responsiveness. As a manipulation check, participants rated target responsiveness to a partner, using a three-item measure, namely, "How caring is this individual?" "How responsive does this individual seem toward you?" and "How considerate is this individual?" responding on a scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 8 (*very much*; $\alpha = .95$).

Romantic interest in target. Participants rated the extent to which they were romantically interested in the target on

an eight-item, 7-point scale (e.g., "I would be interested in going on a date with this person." 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; modified from Finkel & Eastwick, 2008; $\alpha = .93$).

Anticipated romantic success. Participants rated the extent to which they felt they could form a successful romantic relationship with the target, responding to three items, namely, "To what extent do you think you and this individual could form a successful relationship where they could fulfill your needs?" "How successfully do you think you and this individual could form a lasting relationship?" and "I believe that if we get together, that it will last for a long time," on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*; $\alpha = .88$).

Attachment avoidance. As a control variable, participants completed the ECR-RS to measure attachment avoidance ($\alpha = .87$).

Results and Discussion

Manipulation check. Descriptive statistics and correlations among the variables can be seen in Table 3. As expected, participants rated targets in the long-term relationship condition as more interested in long-term relationships than targets in the short-term relationship condition, $M_{\text{difference}} = -5.29$, $SE = .24$, $t(185) = -22.47$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, participants rated targets in the high responsive condition as more responsive compared with targets in the moderately responsive condition, $M_{\text{difference}} = -3.06$; $SE = .21$; $t(185) = -14.61$, $p < .001$.

Romantic interest. Romantic interest toward the target was analyzed using multiple regression, with participants' own commitment desirability used as a continuous predictor and manipulation of target commitment desirability and responsiveness each dummy-coded (0 = *short-term relationship* and 1 = *long-term relationship*, 0 = *moderately responsive* and 1 = *highly responsive*). Commitment desirability was centered and entered with the dummy-coded manipulations in the first step of the regression analysis, with the two-way interaction of these terms entered in the second step and the three-way interaction in the third step (Aiken & West, 1991). There was a main effect of commitment desirability on romantic interest, $b = -.20$, $t(180) = -2.65$, $\beta = -.30$, $p = .01$; $CI = [-.35, -.05]$. There was also a main effect of target commitment desirability on romantic interest, $b = .74$, $t(180) = 2.98$, $\beta = .29$, $p = .003$; $CI = [.25, 1.23]$, and a main effect of target responsiveness on romantic success, $b = .72$, $t(180) = 3.09$, $\beta = .28$, $p = .002$; $CI = [.26, 1.17]$. Consistent with the hypotheses, there was a significant two-way interaction between own commitment desirability and target commitment desirability, $b = .23$, $t(180) = 2.50$, $\beta = .24$, $p = .01$; $CI = [.05, .41]$. No other interactions were significant. These associations did not change when controlling for attachment avoidance.

Table 3. Correlations Among Variables and Descriptive Statistics, Study 3.

Variable	1	2	3	4	M (SD)
1. Commitment desirability	—				5.53 (1.86)
2. Romantic interest	-.006	—			3.48 (1.27)
3. Romantic success	.008	.74**	—		3.08 (1.48)
4. Attachment avoidance	-.28**	.10	.10	—	3.64 (1.31)

** $p < .001$.

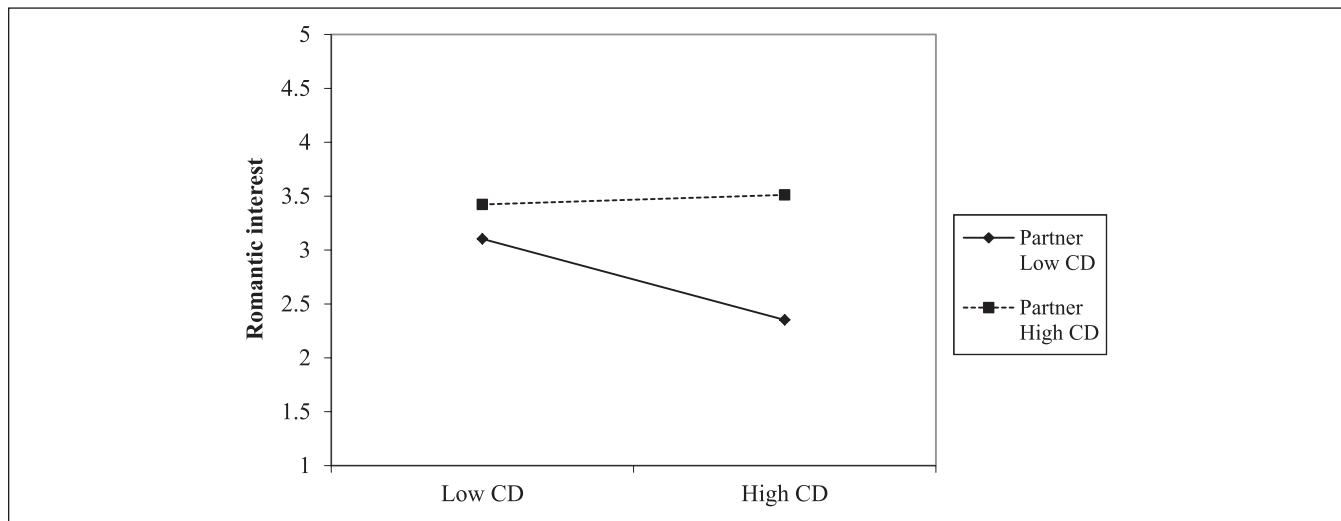


Figure 4. Romantic interest in dating target as a function of own commitment desirability and target commitment desirability, Study 3.
 Note. CD = commitment desirability.

Tests of the simple slopes (see Figure 4) showed that at low levels of target commitment desirability, individuals showed lower romantic interest in the target at higher levels of own commitment desirability compared with lower levels of own commitment desirability, $b = -.20$, $t(180) = -2.62$, $p = .01$. However, at high levels of target commitment desirability, individuals showed no difference in romantic interest in the target when they were either at lower or higher levels of commitment desirability, $b = .02$, $t(180) = .31$, $p = .76$.

Romantic success. Anticipated romantic success with the target was also analyzed as above, with participants' own commitment desirability used as a continuous predictor and manipulation of target commitment desirability and responsiveness dummy-coded. Again, commitment desirability was centered and entered with the dummy-coded manipulations in the first step of the regression analysis and the various possible interactions entered in subsequent steps as appropriate (Aiken & West, 1991). There was a main effect of commitment desirability on romantic success, $b = -.21$, $t(180) = -2.55$, $\beta = -.27$, $p = .01$; CI = $[-.38, -.05]$. There was also a main effect of target commitment desirability on romantic success, $b = 1.17$, $t(180) = 4.31$, $\beta = .39$, $p < .001$; CI = $[.63, 1.70]$, and a main effect of target responsiveness on

romantic success, $b = .84$, $t(180) = 3.27$, $\beta = .28$, $p = .001$; CI = $[.33, 1.34]$. Importantly, there was a significant two-way interaction between commitment desirability and target commitment desirability, $b = .32$, $t(180) = 3.21$, $\beta = .30$, $p = .002$; CI = $[.12, .52]$. No other interactions were significant. As with interest, these associations did not change when controlling for attachment avoidance.

Tests of the simple slopes (see Figure 5) showed that at low levels of target commitment desirability, individuals showed less anticipated romantic success at higher compared with lower levels of own commitment desirability, $b = -.21$, $t(180) = -2.56$, $p = .01$. At higher levels of target commitment desirability, individuals showed no difference in anticipated romantic success whether they were lower or higher in commitment desirability, $b = .11$, $t(180) = 1.28$, $p = .20$.

We also tested the hypothesized mediation of romantic interest by anticipated romantic success through a moderated mediation analysis. The analysis (95% CI approach) was conducted using PROCESS (Hayes, 2013), and bootstrapping results based on 5,000 resamples indicated a CI ranging from .08 to .34 for a significant indirect effect ($b = .21$) of romantic success. Specifically, the conditional indirect effect was .40 $[.07, .75]$ and significant for individuals lower in

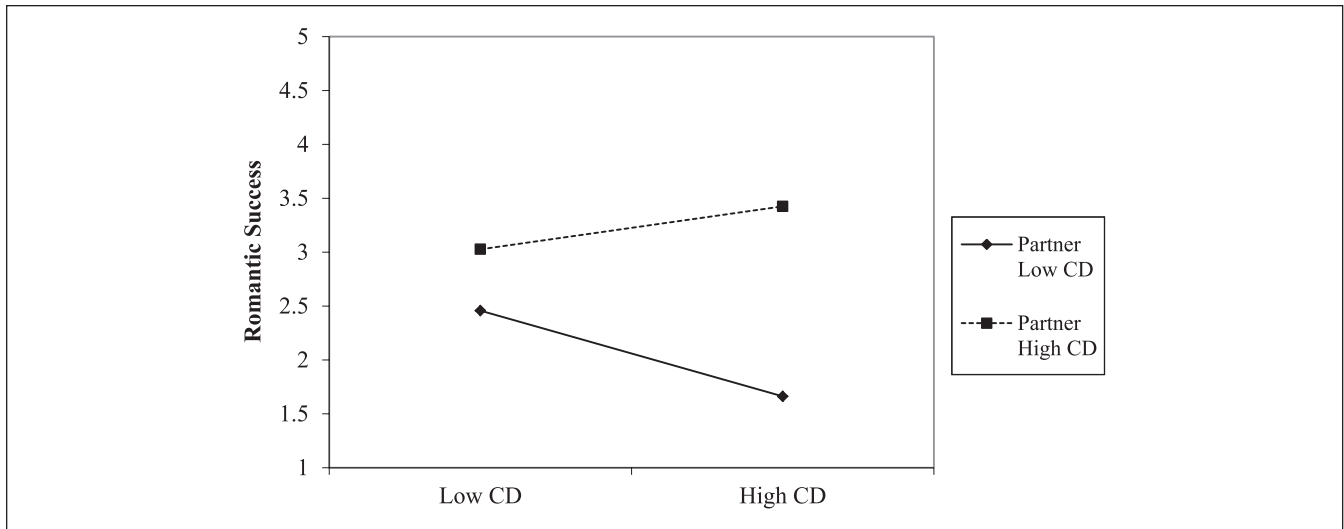


Figure 5. Anticipated romantic success with target as a function of own commitment desirability and target commitment desirability, Study 3.

Note. CD = commitment desirability.

commitment desirability. The conditional indirect effect was 1.18 [.80, 1.62] and significant for individuals higher in commitment desirability. Given that zero falls outside of the CIs, we can conclude that anticipated romantic success played a mediating role in romantic interest.

General Discussion

In the current article, we propose the concept of commitment desirability, the subjective desire to be involved in a committed romantic relationship at a given time, and examined how commitment desirability affects relationship cognitions for individuals in romantic relationships. By introducing the concept, we aimed to add novel insights into the literature on commitment as well as to integrate our work in the larger theoretical framework of interdependence theory. Interdependence approaches to date have focused on examining *levels* of commitment and have largely neglected consideration of whether an individual perceives commitment as desirable or not. Irrespective of the degree to which one is committed to a given relationship, individuals have different levels of needs and interest in interdependence, as captured by the construct of commitment desirability (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). That is, at any given time, some individuals appear to desire higher or lower levels of interdependence than do others.

We examined how individuals high in commitment desirability seek assurance that their relationships will be successful and stable over time. In Study 1, we found that higher commitment desirability was associated with higher future relationship certainty, especially when individuals perceived their partners to be high in commitment. This interaction was replicated in Study 2: Higher commitment desirability was

associated with higher dependence and lower dissolution consideration, again when individuals perceived their partners to be high in commitment. Beyond looking at individuals currently in romantic relationships, we also found that commitment desirability was associated with increased receptivity for involvement in a committed relationship. In Study 3, single individuals who more strongly desired commitment were more interested in potential partners who also displayed higher levels of commitment desirability. They also believed in the potential for these relationships to be more successful. Taken together, the evidence suggests that, in their efforts to have long-lasting relationships, individuals who desire commitment use perceived partner commitment as a gauge to think and behave in ways that facilitate and promote relationship success as well as protect themselves against getting too close to a partner who is not also interested in commitment.

We have focused our interpretation of results on individuals who are relatively high in commitment desirability, but what about individuals who do not desire commitment? It is plausible that individuals low in commitment desirability might ironically prefer partners who match their low commitment levels. Our results suggest that this is not the case. Although our findings show that relationship maintenance cognitions emerge when individuals high in commitment desirability perceive their partners as high in commitment, no such matching pattern was found for individuals low in commitment desirability. In particular, Study 3 shows that whereas individuals high in commitment desirability are strategic about who they are interested in, individuals who are low in commitment desirability are simply not as discriminating regarding perceived commitment or commitment desirability in the other partner.

Attesting to the utility of the construct, effects emerged across different contexts of relationships, both in terms of relationship initiation/attraction and relationship maintenance/dissolution, and via both correlational and experimental methods. The effects reported also remained controlling for the effects of attachment avoidance. Although commitment desirability and attachment avoidance are both concerned with issues of independence, a key difference lies in the notion of desiring commitment instead of discomfort with intimacy. Even individuals who are low in attachment avoidance might not particularly desire commitment but are comfortable with intimacy with a current or prospective (albeit likely short-term) partner. Thus, the construct of commitment desirability might be more predictive of relationship thoughts and behaviors that are focused on examining long-term relationship stability and maintenance behaviors as opposed to thoughts and behaviors that are focused on examining regulation of insecurity. However, it should be noted that given sample characteristics we cannot make broad generalizations about our findings. As noted in the introduction, there are likely multiple reasons underlying whether a person may or may not desire commitment. For example, from a life history perspective, individuals who are lower in social class might see a committed relationship as more desirous, given the opportunity to gain resources via the relationship (Sng, Neuberg, Varnum, & Kenrick, 2017). In contrast, from an interdependence perspective, such individuals might instead desire a committed relationship less because of the uncertainty of such relationships (Emery & Le, 2014). Furthermore, hypotheses with respect to social class might also pertain to those involving race or ethnicity (Penner & Saperstein, 2008). In the current research, we did not posit any theoretical reasons as to whether our findings would differ by demographic characteristics, but this is something that future research should examine.

One issue that is important to consider is how partners navigate differences between their commitment desirability. In the face of potential mismatches between own commitment desirability and perceived partner commitment, one must consider the accuracy of perception regarding partner commitment. The extent to which one is accurate in perceiving their partner's commitment helps reduce uncertainty regarding relationship quality and stability. However, from a motivated cognition perspective, it is possible that individuals engage in benevolent transformations of perceived partner commitment, idealizing or projecting their own commitment (Murray, 1999). On the contrary, just as individuals with dispositional insecurities, such as anxious attachment or low self-esteem, have lower perceived partner regard, they might also have biased perceptions of perceived partner commitment as lower than it actually is (Murray et al., 2006), which would have implications for relationship quality and maintenance. Indeed, it might be fruitful to use a truth and bias model of judgment (West & Kenny, 2011), which examines partners' accuracy in discerning each other's commitment desirability, as this might have implications

regarding whether partners are willing to regulate their partner's level of commitment or exit the relationship.

Discrepancies between one's commitment desirability and actual commitment to a current romantic partner likely also matters. A person may highly desire commitment, but their partner does not inspire it. Alternatively, an individual might not desire commitment, but partner has characteristics that make a long-term relationship appealing. From an attitudinal perspective, as commitment desirability is general in nature, it may be considered a more distal variable in predicting relationship behavior in that it guides how one approaches relationships in general, whereas commitment level is more proximal in its influence on specific relationships. To the extent that commitment desirability and commitment level are misaligned, we would expect that when one places self-interests over relational interests, commitment desirability might have more predictive power, whereas when one places relational interests over self-interests, commitment level may be particularly predictive of relational outcomes.

A similar question is whether high commitment desirability is always adaptive, as implied by results presented here highlighting largely positive consequences. If taken to the extreme, would high commitment desirability mean one runs the risk of getting into a relationship with an individual who would provide security and need fulfillment in the long term but who is not a particularly responsive partner? Study 3 suggests that this might be so. With respect to mate preferences, high commitment desirability might be associated with a shifting of standards, such that the potential partner's commitment is a necessity while other characteristics (e.g., attractiveness, warmth) are treated as unnecessary luxuries (Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002). On one hand, from a relational standpoint and following from the idea that partners can respond to one's own level of commitment desirability, individuals who display exceedingly high levels of commitment desirability might drive away partners as this might project a tendency to become too dependent. On the other hand, they might have exceedingly high standards for their relationship partners with respect to commitment and they might be unwilling to settle for anything but the most committed partner.

It should be noted that because the data presented in Studies 1 and 2 are correlational, processes occurring between commitment desirability and other variables could run in the opposite direction than as hypothesized. It is plausible that those who expected their relationship to be stable in the future (Study 1), or were more dependent and considered dissolution less (Study 2), desire commitment more in general. Future research could try to manipulate commitment desirability to establish causal order. Moreover, future research might focus on examining whether commitment desirability predicts relationship stability or breakup initiation, beyond commitment levels. One could also concurrently examine whether commitment desirability decreases as a function of breakup and breakup responsibility. This might predict whether individuals get back together or

remain close to their ex-partners (Tan, Agnew, VanderDrift, & Harvey, 2015) or whether they engage in rebound relationships to fortify their unfulfilled desire for commitment. Similarly, future research should examine additional long-term effects of commitment desirability. Tracking single individuals over time to see whether they are more likely to enter into a relationship as their level of commitment desirability increases/decreases would provide stronger evidence of the importance of the construct in understanding relationship initiation. Moreover, it would also be interesting to examine whether individuals can reach or transition to higher levels of interdependence or commitment with their partners faster when they are higher in commitment desirability compared with when they are lower in it. For example, an individual might have sex earlier or say “I love you” to their partner earlier as declarations of interdependence when they have higher levels of commitment desirability compared with when they have lower levels (Ackerman, Griskevicius, & Li, 2011). Thus, commitment desirability might have an influence on the developmental trajectories of relationships.

One limitation of the construct of commitment desirability is that it is exclusively focused on approach-based motivations based on the potential rewards of committed relationships (e.g., Spielmann, MacDonald, & Tackett, 2012). For example, in the current studies, we had high mean levels of commitment desirability; even those who were comparatively low in levels of commitment desirability were close to the midpoint of the scale, perhaps highlighting the commonality of desire for commitment in the general population. However, the current research did not address perceptions of threat associated with committed relationships, nor how individuals are sometimes motivated to avoid the pitfalls of being in a committed relationship, where such involvements might be construed as painful or unfulfilling. Future research might explore fear of commitment, which captures those individuals who actively do not desire commitment due to threats such as perceived lack of independence. Achieving invulnerability to harm could be based on trying to de-escalate dependence and connectedness with romantic partners (Agnew & Dove, 2011). This is especially so in response to perceiving that partners are becoming increasingly dependent and committed to a relationship. The ultimate strategy might be to dissolve a relationship with a partner who is perceived to be highly committed.

In conclusion, the extent to which one desires commitment appears to have important consequences and implications in terms of relational cognitions and decision making, both in current romantic relationships and for romantic initiation and attraction. Those who are high in desire for commitment are especially motivated to engage in relationship initiation or maintenance when they perceive that their partners' commitment approximates their own high levels of desire. The current research is the first attempt to investigate empirically the motivation to seek committed relationships, and initial findings suggest the importance of considering such motivation in future research.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. We developed and validated the Commitment Desirability scale with data obtained from two separate samples. Details, including results, can be found in the online supplemental material (OSM) for this article.
2. We also conducted analyses controlling for current commitment level in both Studies 1 and 2. The predicted interaction between commitment desirability and perceived partner commitment remained significant, controlling for current commitment level. Results from these analyses can be found in the OSM.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material is available online with this article.

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