

RELATIONSHIP PROTECTION AGAINST ATTRACTIVE ALTERNATIVES

by

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Relationship Capitalization as a Means of  
Relationship Protection Against Attractive Alternatives

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**Abstract**

The current study investigated whether a strategy shown to enhance closeness between close others – capitalization of positive events – might reduce the influence of attractive alternative partners on perceptions of commitment and willingness to accommodate a romantic partner’s faults. Participants were college-students who were given the opportunity to describe positive events surrounding a romantic partner or a close other and then exposed to either attractive or unattractive alternative partners (threat to a relationship) via an online survey. Participants then completed measures of commitment and accommodation. Inconsistent with previous research, no difference across the two threat conditions or capitalization conditions emerged for reported commitment or constructive accommodation strategies. Participants accommodated constructively across all conditions. Males, however, were more constructively accommodative partners when presented with low threat alternatives and given the opportunity to capitalize about their romantic partner. Females did not show this tendency.

## Relationship Capitalization as a Means of Relationship Protection Against Attractive Alternative

Relationships require maintenance, just as a car or any other object needs maintenance in order to remain in a good-working condition. Relationship maintenance includes positive and negative behaviors aimed at preserving a valuable interpersonal relationship (Canary & Stafford, 1994; Goodboy, Myers, & Members of Investigating Communication, 2010). Stafford and Canary (1991) described five primary positive maintenance behaviors used in romantic relationships: positivity, openness, assurances, social network building, and sharing tasks. Stafford, Dainton, and Haas (2000) extended the previous research by adding conflict management and advice to these positive behavior strategies. Although most relationship-maintenance research focuses on positive behaviors, Goodboy et al. (2010) and Dainton and Gross (2008) suggest that negative actions that include avoidance, jealousy induction, spying, infidelity, destructive conflict, and deception, may also serve a maintenance function.

### **Negative Maintenance Behaviors**

Negative maintenance behaviors may be preferred to positive when one feels inequity in the relationship. Hatfield, Traupmann, Sprecher, Utne, and Hay (1985) proposed the equity theory of relationships to address perceptions of ratio of costs and rewards in any given relationship (as cited in Dainton & Gross, 2008). When a partner is being over-benefited or under-benefited by a relationship, the relationship is out of balance and may require maintenance to regain equity (Dainton & Gross, 2008). The feeling of a partner being under-benefited is negatively correlated with using positive maintenance, and those partners are much more likely to use avoidance behaviors (or removal of positive behavior

contributing to the relationship's success) towards their romantic partner (Dainton & Gross, 2008).

Though they may seem somewhat destructive, negative relationship maintenance behaviors are used to fulfill one's own individual needs due to a motive to continue the relationship (Goodboy et al., 2010). Behaviors, such as spying or jealousy induction, are used as a way to further boost individual confidence about the strength of a current romantic relationship. A particularly surprising negative maintenance behavior associated with fulfilling individual needs, though still aimed at preserving the current romantic relationship, is infidelity (Dainton & Gross, 2008). While it is a significant contribution to divorce rates, this particular behavior is often used in order to boost individual self-esteem and seek rewards that may not currently be present in the primary romantic relationship (Buunk & Van Driel, 1989; Jones & Burndette, 1994). These maintenance behaviors often also emerge when a threat is presented in a romantic relationship.

### **Threat and Commitment in Romantic Relationships**

Maintenance behaviors can be thought of as an intentional, sometimes subtle, reaction to an event that has posed a potential threat to an individual's relationship. Ironically, while extra-dyadic relationships can be a negative maintenance behavior, alternative mate options are often also one of the most prominent threats to relationships (Lydon, Menzies-Toman, Burton, & Bell, 2008). What distinguishes between an attractive alternative utilized in the context of maintaining a relationship, as compared to serving as a threat to the existence of a relationship? An individual's level of commitment to the primary relationship may be one of the central determinants in answering this question.

Leik and Leik (1977) define commitment as occurring when a partner no longer considers attractive alternative mate options when in a current romantic relationship. The presence of attractive alternative mates is one of several factors under the umbrella of commitment that predicts the rate of relationship termination (see Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992). Not surprisingly, perceptions of alternative availability are negatively correlated with relationship commitment (Jemmott, Ashby, & Lindenfeld, 1989). Referencing the high rates of divorce and infidelity among celebrities, Lydon et al. (2008) suggests that the rich and famous face a higher challenge of temptation dealing with attractive alternatives than the average population. Reports suggest that celebrity relationships are much shorter, and that they often find a new partner much quicker than the average person because the pool of attractive alternatives is much more saturated for celebrities, than it is for most individuals. This ultimately increases temptation and lowers commitment.

Placing a lower value on an attractive alternative may be used as a tactic to convince oneself that the temptation is in fact less attractive than the current romantic partner. Miller (1997) used a series of measures including satisfaction, available alternatives, investments, commitment, relationship adjustment, and attention to alternatives to assess participants in committed romantic relationships. He also had individuals complete a task that involved looking at advertisements containing a neutral product, a male model, or a female model. Participants then rated the attractiveness of four of the advertisements based on how interested they were in meeting the person or using the product (two opposite-sex, one same-sex, and one neutral product). The amount of time a participant spent looking at any given slide, ratings of attentiveness to the alternative, and skin conductance all measured the participant's interest in the new potential target relative to the existing romantic relationship.

Participants with higher attentiveness [to alternatives] reported less investment, less satisfaction, less closeness, poorer adjustment, and being less “loving” in their current relationship. High attentiveness correlated to the impression that one had more alternatives, and that they were more easily obtainable. These same participants had dated more people in the past year than those who were low in attentiveness, directly suggesting low levels of commitment in the presence of a threat [attractive alternative] (Miller, 1997).

Interestingly, commitment and relational threats can be bidirectional in nature; just as attractive alternatives may serve to reduce commitment, enhanced commitment could elicit behaviors to protect against and minimize threat (Lydon, Meana, Sepinwall, Richards, & Mayman, 1999; Lydon, et al., 2008). According to the motivated-cognition approach (Lydon, Burton, & Menzies-Toman, 2005), commitment works to enable people with the perspective and motivation to continue their romantic relationships. This approach also influences one’s viewpoint such that they perceive their partner’s behaviors in a more favorable light. Through this reaction in romantic couples arise accommodation behaviors, which have the potential to be constructive or destructive (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovick, & Lipkus, 1991). A partner responds constructively with problem solving behaviors or simply remains passively alongside their partner through the circumstance; destructive responses are also a possibility in problem situations, such as leaving the relationship or ignoring and being rude to the partner who is responsible for the issue.

According to Rusbult et al. (1991), under the umbrella of constructive behaviors are the categories of voice and loyalty. Voice response behavior is defined as engaging active attempts to improve the situation, which includes a discussion of problems, seeking help, and adapting behavior to find a solution to a problem within the relationship. Loyalty has been



described as behaviors that involve passively waiting alongside one's partner and silently hoping for the best. In contrast, destructive behaviors include exit and neglect responses. Neglect is said to encompass avoiding the problems and possibly ignoring the partner all together. Exit refers to behaviors aimed at escaping from the relationship (i.e. moving out, getting a divorce, threatening to leave, etc.). When considering accommodation behaviors, it is possible that the concept of increasing or decreasing threat could have an effect on the choice between constructive and destructive responses (Rusbult et al., 1991; Lydon et al., 2008).

Active attempts to minimize threat to an existing relationship appear to be pivotal in relationship maintenance. Lydon et al. (2008) examined "if-then" contingencies on the construal of attractive others as detrimental to a relationship. The "if-then" statement contains a possible situation followed by a relationship-protecting response. For example, *if* an attractive person approaches me at the bar tonight, *then* I will focus on protecting my relationship (Lydon et al., 2008). Through a series of seven studies, participants were presented with a scenario describing an evening out with friends while a romantic partner was away. The participant was then asked to create a tactic that would help protect his/her romantic relationship "if" an attractive target person approached the person with a romantic proposition. Following the experimental manipulation, participants showed indications of relationship maintenance when responding to attractive alternatives by using the "if, then" statement they had decided upon to protect their relationship. Males displayed the need of priming with an intentional tactic to be reminded of their commitment to their current romantic relationship ("if, then") in order to react to a threat with relationship maintenance.

Women, however, displayed positive relationship maintenance, regardless of being primed to protect their relationship when approached by an attractive alternative.

### **Capitalization as a Strategy for Maintenance**

It is important to note that when using “if-then” contingencies in Study 3, Lydon et al., (2008) left the protection strategy up to the discretion of the participant. Arguably, allowing the participant to make a choice about his/her protection strategy makes it difficult to identify what they are choosing and how they are coming to that choice. The current study sought to examine a strategy that has received attention in other research: capitalization (Reis et al., 2010). Capitalization is the sharing of good news with close others to boost the importance of the event (Reis et al., 2010). Reis et al. (2010) found that the use of capitalization improves the relationship bond between two people, resulting in the individual engaging in capitalization to view the event as more important. This is a potential strategy that could strengthen one’s view of a positive event in her/his own romantic relationship in order to boost relationship satisfaction and commitment. The enhancement of a relational bond that happens when one capitalizes with another person would be expected to bolster feelings of commitment, which should then influence the devaluation of attractive alternatives and boost the desire to be more accommodating of a partner’s mistakes. When commitment is increased from capitalization, the individual should be more willing to forgive a partner’s faults (constructive accommodation). However, when individuals are not primed via capitalization, then commitment would be expected to remain the same, which could lead to being less likely to forgive a partner’s faults (destructive accommodation).

### **The Present Study**

The purpose of the current study was to further investigate strategies that can be used to protect romantic relationships when encountering threat, and thus, potentially bolster commitment and increase the use of constructive accommodation. Previous research has shown that there is a relationship between commitment and threat (Lydon et al., 1999), as well as a third association with accommodation behaviors (Lydon et al., 2008). Lydon et al.'s (2008) research, however, presented several limitations that the current research was designed to circumvent. The first is that the prepared *if-then statement* is an approach decided upon by each individual participant to defend his/her relationship. The second limitation is the need for a rehearsed statement for each possible scenario that an individual might encounter. A criticism of such a strategy is that it is both person- and situation-specific and may lack generalizability.

In the current study, participants involved in an exclusive romantic relationship were primed to capitalize on positive events surrounding either their romantic relationship or a non-romantic close other, and then exposed to manipulations of high or low threat (attractive versus less attractive alternatives). They then completed measures of commitment and both constructive and destructive accommodation responses after reading that their partner had committed alleged relationship infractions.

The following predictions were made:

Hypothesis 1: Capitalizing on positive events surrounding one's current romantic partner would increase feelings of commitment when exposed to a high threat (attractive alternative) to the relationship compared to capitalizing about a family member. No difference was expected across capitalization instructions for participants exposed to unattractive stimulus photos, given that there was no threat presented.

Hypothesis 2: Individuals who capitalize about their romantic relationship prior to exposure to a high threat alternative will engage in more constructive relative to destructive accommodation (be more willing to forgive hypothetical transgressions) than those who instead capitalize about a family member. No difference is predicted between those who capitalize about a romantic partner or family member for those exposed to the low threat condition (unattractive alternatives).

## **Method**

### *Participants*

A final pool of 209 heterosexual females and 82 heterosexual males, in an exclusive romantic relationship ( $M_{\text{length}} = 18.75$  months;  $SD = 15.91$  months) at the time of the study, agreed to take part in the online experimental survey. Two-hundred-and-fifteen participants were excluded from the final data set due to exclusion criteria set prior to running the study (participants who identified as non-heterosexual and non-white were excluded due to the low diversity on the college campus and creation of stimulus materials that were biased toward heterosexual and Caucasian participants); failure to follow instructions about being currently in an exclusive romantic relationship also led to data exclusion. The average age of participants was 19.4 years old ( $SD = 1.46$  years). Participants were recruited from

undergraduate introductory psychology courses via an online participant pool at a Southeastern United States, comprehensive university. The only requirement to participate was currently being in a heterosexual, exclusive romantic relationship for at least three months.

### *Materials*

*Demographics Questionnaire.* Basic demographic questions were asked in order to determine the gender of photos to which the participant would be exposed for the manipulation of threat. Items were included about participant birthdate, racial/ethnic background, gender, and sexual orientation. A manipulation check was included to ensure that participants were currently in an exclusive dating relationship, as the criterion specified prior to entering the study. If the manipulation check was satisfied, then they were asked the length of their current relationship, and how satisfied they were with their relationship.

*Commitment Scale.* The 15-item commitment scale was created by Drigotas and Rusbult (1992). Sample questions include: “There is no chance at all that I would ever become romantically involved with another person,” and “I intend to do everything humanly possible to make our relationship persist.” Response options range on an 8-point scale from ‘do not agree at all’ to ‘completely agree’ for each of the 15 items. None of the items were reverse scored. Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew (1998) used an abbreviated 12 item version of the original 15 item scale, and reported a Cronbach’s alpha ranging from .91 to .95 for commitment level; for the current sample, Cronbach’s alpha was .94.

*Word Fragment Task One.* A filler test was created based on Anderson, Carnagay, and Eubanks (2003). This task consisted of six neutral word fragments. Each of the six words presented had several letters left blank, and required the participant to retype the completed

word. Each word had multiple possible answers. Since this task was used as a distraction task between the commitment scale and the capitalization task, there were no true correct answers. A sample item is *b\_h\_ \_ \_*, which could be completed as *behind, behave, behold*, etc.

*Capitalization Prime.* Two open-ended prompts were created, asking participants to take a moment to describe the most positive event they had ever experienced, either with their romantic partner (Romantic Capitalization) or a close family member (Family Capitalization), based on random assignment. The participants read the following:

“Describe the most positive experience you've ever had with your significant other. Recall a time that left you feeling fulfilled and happy to be spending time with your partner. This could be any event that you experienced with him or her, such as a road trip, vacation, holiday, concert, day trip, or time off just to hang out. Provide as much detail as possible regarding WHAT happened and HOW you felt while it was happening.”

The control condition read the same instructions with the words ‘close family member’ and ‘relative’ replacing the respective words ‘significant other’ and ‘partner’ in the instructions above. Participants were randomly assigned to either capitalize about their significant other or about a close family member. There was a 200 word minimum requirement when responding to the capitalization prompt.

*Profile Pictures.* Alleged social media profile photos of five opposite-sex, campus students were shown to each participant. The gender of the photos to be shown was determined by the respondent’s gender and sexual orientation stated at the survey’s introduction. Photos were rated on attractiveness, friendliness, commonality, and desire to

meet the person on an 11-point Likert-type (0 to 10) scale. Each participant was randomly assigned to see either five high threat (high attractiveness) or low threat (low attractiveness) photos. The pictures were selected via online public domain and rated by 7 research assistants (6 females and 1 male) at the university. Average responses of the ratings were examined. Photos in the high threat condition were selected if they received an average rating between 7 and 9.5 on an 11-point scale. In the low threat condition, photos were selected if they had a rating between 3 and 4.5 on the same scale.

*Word Fragment Completion Two.* This task, taken from Lydon et al., (2008), was intended to measure how much an individual was thinking about commitment. There were six words with several missing letters, where two potential answers were possible (Lydon et al., 2008). The blanks were filled in by typing a completed version of the word adjacent to the prompt. One example is *De\_\_ted*, which could be answered as *Devoted* (commitment-related word) or *Deleted* (non-commitment-related word). It was always the case that one of each of the answers was a commitment-related word and the alternate answer was a neutral answer. The range of possible scores were 0 to 6 (number of commitment words correctly answered), and the mean number of correct words was 2.34 with a standard deviation of 1.31 words. The more commitment words correctly completed correlates with higher commitment.

*Accommodation Scenarios.* This measure describes how much an individual is willing to respond with four different behaviors (exit, voice, loyalty, or neglect) when considering a relationship infraction committed by a romantic partner. Rusbult, Verett, Whitney, Slovik, and Lipkus (1991) used this in their original investigation of when people are willing to accommodate a partner's transgressions and if it is a natural reaction. Responses were

changed for the current study such that participants could rate to what degree (on an 8-point Likert-type scale from *Not likely at all* to *Extremely likely*) they would respond in each of the four ways to each individual scenario. Four hypothetical scenarios were given describing an incident involving their romantic partner committing a transgression. The task aims to capture the type of response the participant would likely have to the event. Each response option models one of the categories of Exit (separation from partner), Voice (discussion of problems with partner), Loyalty (waiting silently for improvement), or Neglect (ignoring problems) presented by Rusbult et al., (1991). The responses provided to our participants were as follows:

*Voice*: I would tell my partner that I was hurt; discuss the situation with my partner and try to come to a resolution.

*Exit*: I would give her an ultimatum to change or might even consider breaking up with \_\_\_\_\_.

*Loyalty*: I would assume the best, not do anything actively, and hope that by not reacting things would improve.

*Neglect*: I would not plan to react, and would give him the silent treatment for a few days.

One example scenario presented to the participants was “Your partner cancels a dinner date with you allegedly to study for a test, but you find out that instead she went to a bar with friends.” The scores for accommodation were calculated by subtracting the destructive categories (exit and neglect) from the constructive behavior categories (loyalty and voice), based on the method in Lydon et al. (2008). Thus, accommodation differences scores were used as indicators of constructive versus destructive styles of action; a positive



score indicated greater use of constructive responses.

*Debriefing.* Participants were made aware of the real purpose of the research study, but not given full knowledge regarding each specific measure. Participants were also provided contact information for counseling resources, should the need arise.

### *Procedure*

Participants completed the online survey on an individual basis prior to a deadline assigned via the participant pool system. When the survey was first opened, they were presented with a consent form stating: the purpose of the research, what would be required of them, possible discomforts during the study, benefits of the research, compensation (partial course credit), confidentiality of the data, and contact for further questions. Following the completion of the consent, participants were briefly introduced to the survey with the following message:

College years involve coming into contact with new acquaintances and the opportunity to form new friendships. Simultaneously, students navigate existing relationship. We are interested in studying how relationships progress. During the course of the study, we will be asking you to evaluate current and new relationships.

This introduction informed participants of the overall focus of the current study.

Participants then answered basic demographic questions about their birthdate, race, gender, sexual orientation, and if they were currently involved in an exclusive dating relationship. If they were not currently in an exclusive dating relationship, they were sent to the concluding message of the survey. However, if they were currently in a romantic dating relationship, they reported the length of time in which they had been in their relationship, as well as their relationship satisfaction.

The first task they completed was a pre-assessment of their commitment via Rusbult's (1998) 15-item commitment scale. Second, they completed the Word Fragment Task One, containing neutral words, as a distractor task. The participants were randomly assigned to the Romantic Capitalization or Family Capitalization condition via Qualtrics (the survey software). Following the capitalization manipulation, participants were randomly assigned to the alleged profile pictures of high or low threat alternatives. Finally, the commitment word fragment completion measure and accommodation scale of their romantic partner was administered.

Following the final accommodation question, the participants were presented with a debriefing statement, which thanked them for participation, provided a contact for campus counseling resources, and informed them that the photos were not actually students, but photos gathered from public domain on the Internet.

## Results

### *Manipulation Check*

In order to assess whether the photo attractiveness/threat conditions were successfully manipulated, a 2 Threat condition (high attractive photographs vs. low attractive photographs) x 2 Gender (male vs. female) ANOVA was conducted. The analysis yielded a main effect for Photo condition, ( $F[1, 287] = 210.4, p < .0001, \eta_p^2 = .42$ ), a main effect for Gender, ( $F[1, 287] = 26.6, p < .0001, \eta_p^2 = .085$ ), as well as a significant interaction, ( $F[1, 287] = 18.56, p < .0001, \eta_p^2 = .061$ ).

The main effect found for Threat Condition demonstrated that unattractive photos were rated as less attractive ( $M = 3.19, SD = 1.74$ ) than the attractive photos ( $M = 5.84$ ,

$SD=1.75$ ). The main effect for Gender demonstrated that males rated opposite-sex photos as more attractive ( $M = 5.17$ ,  $SD = 2.56$ ) than did females ( $M = 4.22$ ,  $SD = 1.97$ ).

The interaction demonstrated that males rated unattractive photos ( $M = 3.31$ ,  $SD=1.95$ ) similarly to females ( $M = 3.13$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ ). However, for attractive photos, follow-up  $t$ -tests revealed that males rated the target women as more attractive ( $M = 7.32$ ,  $SD=1.06$ ) than females rated the target males ( $M = 5.30$ ,  $SD = 1.64$ ) ( $p < .0001$ ).

### *Main Hypotheses*

Correlation coefficients for all dependent variables are presented in Table 1. As expected, a positive correlation ( $p = .348$ ,  $p < .001$ ) emerged between Rusbult's Commitment Scale and the Voice subscale (from the Accommodation measure). No significant correlation between the Rusbult Commitment scale (1998) and the Commitment Word measure that been previously used by Lydon et al. (2008), which was very unexpected.

To test Hypothesis 1 that capitalizing on the events surrounding a romantic relationship would increase commitment when encountering a threat to the relationship relative to a family member, scores from the commitment word-fragment completion task were submitted to 2 (Threat: high vs. low) X 2 (Capitalization: family vs. romantic) ANCOVA, with the pre-test measure of commitment used as a covariate. All results were not significant (all  $F_s[1, 285] < 1$ ,  $p_s > .05$ ), with the exception of a significant main effect for Threat condition,  $F(1, 285) = 7.82$ ,  $p < .03$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .02$ . Contrary to expectation, individuals exposed to the high threat targets completed more commitment-related words to achieve higher scores on the commitment measures ( $M = 2.17$  words,  $SD = 1.31$  words) than those who were exposed to the low threat targets ( $M = 2.52$  words,  $SD = 1.29$  words).

To test Hypothesis 2 that those who capitalized about one's romantic partner prior to a threat would respond with more constructive accommodation comparative to capitalizing about a family member, a 2 (Capitalization: family member vs. romantic) by 2 (Threat: high vs. low) ANOVA was run on the accommodation difference scores. The analysis yielded no significant results for willingness to accommodate constructively toward a partner's behaviors, (all  $F_s[1, 287] < 3, p_s > .05$ ). Thus, the results did not confirm that capitalization impacts accommodating constructively versus destructively in the face of high or low threat. The accommodation difference scores did show that participants accommodated similarly, and positively, regardless of condition (Low Threat, Romantic Capitalization  $M = 4.65, SD = 2.85$ ; High Threat, Romantic Capitalization  $M = 3.65, SD = 3.22$ ).

#### *Exploratory Analyses*

Given that males and females reacted somewhat differently to the threat manipulation via ratings of photograph attractiveness, two separate 2 (Threat: high vs. low) X 2 (Capitalization: family member vs. romantic) ANOVAs were conducted within gender. For males, the analysis generated non-significant results for both Threat condition and Capitalization condition (all  $F_s[1, 77] < 1, p_s > .05$ ). However, a significant interaction emerged between Threat condition and Capitalization condition,  $F(1, 77) = 5.65, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .068$ . To interpret the interaction, follow up  $t$ -tests showed that males who were instructed to capitalize about their romantic partner subsequently reported use of more constructive accommodation when then exposed to low threat targets ( $M = 5.19, SD = 3.03$ ) relative to high threat targets ( $M = 3.09, SD = 3.20$ ) ( $p > .05$ ). By contrast, no differences emerged between the low ( $M = 3.33, SD = 2.96$ ) versus high threat ( $M = 4.21, SD = 2.17$ ) targets if males first capitalized about a close, nonromantic other ( $p > .05$ ).

For females, the 2 (Threat: high vs. low) X 2 (Capitalization: family member vs. romantic) ANOVA did not reveal a significant main effect for Threat condition, Capitalization condition, or the interaction (all  $F_s[1, 203] < 1.5, p_s > .05$ ).

### **Discussion**

Despite previous research suggesting that capitalization of positive events can increase perceptions of positivity and bonding between individuals (Reis et al., 2010; Gable et al., 2004), the current experimental manipulations of capitalization and threat [attractive alternatives] via an online survey did not provide evidence of an increase in commitment following capitalization about one's romantic partner (relative to a close other) nor did it reveal a relationship between capitalization and enhanced constructive accommodation for relationship partners. Additionally, the results are not consistent with previous research, showing that when attractive alternative partners were available, constructive accommodation via voice and loyalty strategies of the current romantic partner decreased (Rusbult et al., 1991; Lydon et al., 2008), as did reports of commitment, for individuals.

Interestingly, participants in the current study exposed to the high threat targets responded with higher scores on the commitment word measure relative to those exposed to low threat targets. It is possible that this was due to differences in the way threat was introduced relative to Lydon et al.'s (Study 3; 2008) investigation. Lydon et al. manipulated threat by asking an alleged participant (confederate) if he/she was currently involved in a relationship in front of the actual participant. However, in the current study, five photographs of alleged students on campus were presented as individuals interested in meeting other students. The latter means of introducing threat may have made recognizable the idea that there are many options open to college-aged individuals on a campus; therefore, the threat

may have been too broad, generalized, and unspecific as compared to the more concentrated threat of Lydon et al.'s (2008) study. The threat in the current study did not identify the participant as directly interested in the alleged photos of available students. Consequently, current participants may have felt the ambiguity of the threat manipulation, and were perhaps overwhelmed by the idea of fielding dating alternatives, instead, taking comfort in the predictability of their own romantic relationship. In comparison, the manipulation of threat used in Lydon et al.'s (2008) study, by targeting one individual with an apparent interest in the participant may have served as a more definite relationship threat because the attraction was obvious to the participant, and presented more specific consequences for his/her romantic relationship.

It is also important to note that this sample had a high percentage of female to male participants, 78% to 22%. In Lydon et al.'s (Study 3; 2008) study, only male participants currently in a heterosexual relationship were included, and exposed to female confederates as a means of introducing threat. Females have been shown to respond to threats by bolstering commitment to their current relationship (Lydon et al., 2008). According to the evolutionary theory, women and men are receptive to different threats that could also risk resources necessary for survival (Rydell, McConnell, & Bringle, 2004). One possibility to explain the difference in perceptions of alternative attractiveness between men and women is that when females encounter alternative dating options, it may prompt them to remember their commitment to their current romantic relationship, and in turn view those attractive alternative mates as inherently less attractive. Indeed, women have been shown to respond with higher levels of commitment in order to protect not only the relationship, but also the resources provided by the partner (Rydell et al., 2004). In light of this bent toward

relationship protection, threat exposure's lack of influence on women's reports of commitment or accommodation behaviors may not be surprising.

For men, evolutionary theory predicts that when they are subjected to attractive alternative mating options, commitment to their current partner is lowered due to the desire for sexual variety and competition in reproductive success (Buss, 2000; Rydell et al., 2004). Men generally require a reminder of their current relationship to respond with feelings of commitment and protection (Lydon et al., 2008). Consistent with this prior research, this study found that males viewed the attractive photos as significantly more attractive than did females, perhaps showing more initial receptivity to the introduction of new possible partners.

Although previous research might be supportive of gender differences on reactions to threat and accommodation responses to a partner's faults, what was unanticipated were males' reports of more constructive accommodation strategies (more use of voice and loyalty than exit and neglect) in response to *unattractive* targets relative to attractive targets *after thinking about positive events surrounding their romantic relationship*. This did not occur when they had first considered positive events surrounding a close other. Recall, however, that Lydon et al. (2008) argued that lack of threat to relationships may prompt greater commitment for males. Perhaps priming men to think about favorable aspects of their romantic partner, while simultaneously making them aware of *less desirable* alternative partners, presented a comparison for males that reminded them of the high value their current relationship held. On the other hand, capitalizing on a non-romantic, close other while considering alternative partners would hold no such benefits.

Unlike Lydon et al. (2008), who utilized “if–then” contingencies as strategies for enhanced commitment to a relationship, the current study examined the use of capitalization as a means of reducing threat to a relationship. This was based on previous research by Reis et al. (2010), which found that sharing a positive event with another person (even strangers) boosts the individual’s view of that event and enhances the bond between the two people, especially when it is a close other that responds positively. Although Lydon et al. (2008) focused on how a threat could influence accommodation behaviors in a relationship by introducing an attractive available confederate to participants, they did not directly have participants focus on positive aspects of their romantic relationship. Inconsistent with predictions, the manipulation of capitalization did not influence reported commitment to the relationship or correlate with expected accommodation strategies if a partner committed an action that threatened the relationship. In retrospect, this strategy may not have been effective because it may require than an active listener be present and responsive to the event. Reis et al. (2010) had included a responsive feedback condition, in which participants interacted with alleged interviewers about a predetermined personal positive event; it was determined that the present listener is what boosted the participant’s rating of the positivity of the event.

It is also possible that reflecting on positive aspects of any relationship (romantic or other) created in increase in overall mood for the participants. Gable, Reis, Impett, and Asher (2004) examined the link between sharing positive events with others and positive outcomes; they found that there is in fact a positive correlation between sharing positive events and enhanced positive mood. Mood was not measured in the current study, and therefore, it is impossible to discriminate whether this created an overall positivity effect on subsequent relationship ratings.



Additionally, one alternative explanation for not seeing an increase in commitment is that the participants in this study could have been overall more committed to their romantic partners and in significantly longer lasting exclusive romantic relationships ( $M_{\text{length}} = 18.75$  months) than the participants used in Lydon et al.'s (2008) study ( $Median_{\text{length}} = 12$  months). A source of evidence that the participants in the current study may have been more committed to their romantic relationships than Lydon et al.'s (2008) participants related to the Commitment Word Fragment Task that presumably measured commitment-relevant thoughts. In this study, the number of words completed correctly was 2.29 words for males in the high threat, romantic capitalization condition, and 2.69 words for females in the same condition with a range of possible scores from 0 to 6. By contrast, the mean number of commitment words completed on a similar word fragment task for Lydon et al., (2008) was 1.78 words for men and 2.58 words for women in the threat condition.

The generally low number of reported commitment word completions across both studies (out of a possible six words) does suggest that there may be a floor effect in responding for this measure. A floor effect happens when a measure results in a majority of scores clustered near a low number in the range of possible scores (Hessling, Schmidt, & Traxel, 2004). The measure may be too difficult and have detracted from the reliability of the scores as a true measure of commitment. Recall that this measure did not correlate with Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew's (1998) Commitment Scale, or the accommodation measures by Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, and Lipkus, (1991). This likely undermined the ability to assess changes in commitment for either of the capitalization conditions (family member or romantic partner).

Overall, participants in the current study did show positive accommodation behavior (constructive), which exhibits positive relationship maintenance towards their partners. For each scenario, participants were given the four response options (correlating with Exit, Voice, Loyalty, Neglect) and rated how much they would respond with each behavior. Then the destructive behavior scores were subtracted from the constructive scores. In Lydon et al., (2008), their resulting scores ranged from -2.95 to 4.97, however in the current study scores ranged from 3.75 to 4.65 across all conditions. As previously stated, this could be alternately explained by a very high baseline commitment to romantic partners on the part of this sample.

Recall that the current study slightly modified Lydon et al.'s (2008) measure of accommodation, in order to separate each of the response behaviors (Exit, Voice, Loyalty, Neglect) to determine to what degree participants responded in a particular way. Rusbult et al. (1991) argued that Exit is active and immediate separation from a romantic partner; Voice is a discussion and navigation to a solution with a romantic partner; Loyalty is silently waiting for improvement; Neglect is ignoring and avoiding a romantic partner. By providing specific scenarios for participants to assess, along with specific response behaviors, the current study sought to make the scale more applicable and relatable than had been done in former studies. However, these changes, may have, in fact, weakened the usability of the scale. The only behavior that was seemingly viewed positively by participants was Voice ("I would tell my partner that I was hurt; discuss the situation with my partner and try to come to a resolution"). Loyalty, the other presumably constructive behavior, was actually positively correlated with the destructive behaviors: Exit and Neglect, and negatively correlated with Voice. Loyalty involves waiting silently for the situation to make progress, and though it is

noted as a positive behavior by Rusbult et al.'s (1991) definition, the inactivity of the response may have turned participants away from assuming they would respond in such a way. These findings surrounding accommodation in the face of threat suggest that a stronger protection strategy is needed to positively mediate the relationship between threat and accommodation. Understanding how commitment is associated in the relationship is also important to use as a predictor of accommodation.

Participants in this study scored positively regardless of whether they were exposed to attractive or unattractive targets. So it very possible that the failure to influence accommodation strategies was not likely the result of a weak manipulation of threat given that there was a significant difference between the ratings of attractive [high threat] and unattractive [low threat] photos by both men and women in the current study.

### **Conclusion**

Capitalization has been used in previous research to enhance mood, boost the importance of positive events, and strengthen the bond between two people (Gable et al., 2004; Reis et al., 2010). In the current study, however, it did not demonstrate an influence on enhancing commitment and the anticipated use of constructive accommodation strategies relative to destructive strategies. Nonetheless, it is clear that accommodation and commitment are positively associated (Rusbult et al., 1991), and are somehow involved in the process of threat (Lydon et al., 2008). The utilization of a single strategy, in the current study, did not prove to be as influential as previous strategies, which have allowed individuals to adopt a strategy that works for him or her. While potentially more complex methodologically, it may be more realistic to allow individuals to tailor a strategy to his or her needs. Additionally, given that gender differences are related to different relationship

maintenance strategies and responses to threat, it may be important to consider different strategies that are employed in the male and female perspectives when encountering threats to relationships (Stafford, Dainton, & Haas, 2000; Lydon et al., 2008). In sum, understanding the interaction of threat, commitment, and accommodation in the context of romantic relationships is multifaceted in nature and requires further investigation. We recognize that the current study has limitations due to using an online medium; therefore, replication of the current study in a lab setting could contribute to finding stronger effects of capitalization and threat on accommodation and commitment.

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Table 1  
*Correlations Between Commitment and Accommodation Scores*

		Rusbult Commitment	Commitment Word Score	Voice Score	Exit Score	Loyalty Score	Neglect Score
	Pearson	1					
Rusbult Commitment	Correlation		.037	.348	-.104	.052	.017
	2-tailed sig.		.529	.000	.077	.374	.775
	Pearson		1				
Commitment Word Score	Correlation	.037		.009	.059	.040	.067
	2-tailed sig.	.529		.881	.318	.492	.255
	Pearson			1			
Voice Score	Correlation	.348	.009		-.014	-.087	-.076
	2-tailed sig.	.000	.881		.815	.138	.194
	Pearson				1		
Exit Score	Correlation	-.104	.059	-.014		.230	.472
	2-tailed sig.	.077	.318	.815		.000	.000
	Pearson					1	
Loyalty Score	Correlation	.052	.040	-.087	.230		.371
	2-tailed sig.	.374	.492	.138	.000		.000
	Pearson						1
Neglect Score	Correlation	.017	.067	-.076	.472	.371	
	2-tailed sig.	.775	.255	.194	.000	.000	

Note: Correlation significant at the .01 level (2-tailed)



Appendix A  
15-Item Commitment Measure

\*Note that this scale can be modified for either marital relationships or dating relationships by substituting relationship for marriage.  
(Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998)

Instructions:

To what extent does each of the following statements describe your feelings regarding your relationship? Please use the following scale to record an answer for each statement listed below.

Response Scale:

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Do Not Agree				Agree				Agree
At All				Somewhat				Completely

Response

- 1) I will do everything I can to make our relationship last for the rest of our lives.
- 2) I feel completely attached to my partner and our relationship.
- 3) I often talk to my partner about what things will be like when we are very old.
- 4) I feel really awful when things are not going well in our relationship.
- 5) I am completely committed to maintaining our relationship.
- 6) I frequently imagine life with my partner in the distant future.
- 7) When I make plans about future events in life, I carefully consider the impact of my decisions on our relationship.
- 8) I spend a lot of time thinking about the future of our relationship.
- 9) I feel really terrible when things are not going well for my partner.
- 10) I want our relationship to last forever.
- 11) There is no chance at all that I would ever become romantically involved with another person.
- 12) I am oriented toward the long-term future of our relationship (for example, I imagine life with my partner decades from now).
- 13) My partner is more important to me than anyone else in life – more important than my parents, friends, etc.
- 14) I intend to do everything humanly possible to make our relationship persist.
- 15) If our relationship were ever to end, I would feel that my life was destroyed.

Key:

*Total: Take the average of all 15 items*

Subscales:

*Intent to persist: Items 1, 5, 10, 11, and 14*

*Attachment: Items 2, 4, 9, 13, and 15*

*Long-term orientation: Items 3, 6, 7, 8, 12*

## Appendix B

## Word Fragment Completion

Instructions: The next task consists of a series of words with several missing letters. In the text box provided under the word, you should type the entire word, complete with the blanks filled in. One underscore represents one missing letter, therefore the answer you type should include the same number of letters as the provided combination of letters and blanks.

## Part 1: Neutral Words

- 1) Spea\_ (Speak, Spear)
- 2) Ki \_ \_ (Kiss, Kill)
- 3) Expl \_ \_ e (Explore, Explode)
- 4) Fli \_ \_ er (Flicker, Flitter)
- 5) C \_ mp \_ \_ t (Compact, Compost)
- 6) Kn \_ \_ \_ (Kneel, Knead)

## Part 2: Commitment Related Words

- 1) Lo \_ al (Loyal, Local)
- 2) De \_ \_ ted (Devoted, Deleted)
- 3) At \_ a \_ \_ ment (Attachment, Attainment)
- 4) Com \_ \_ \_ ted (Committed, Commented, Comforted)
- 5) De \_ \_ \_ ated (Dedicated, Decorated)
- 6) In \_ e \_ ted (Invested, Infected)

Appendix C

Accommodation Scale

Read the following scenarios and then answer the scale below on how likely you would be to engage in the behavior 0 being not at all likely and 10 being extremely likely.

- 1) Your partner agrees to turn in an assignment to a professor, but oversleeps and never turns the assignment in. She tells you the following day, but the professor will not accept the assignment late.
- 2) Your partner is late picking you up after an evening class, leaving you waiting in the cold for 20 minutes.
- 3) At a party one night, your partner reveals to friends some embarrassing stories from your childhood that you have told her in confidence.
- 4) Your partner cancels a dinner date with you allegedly to study for a test, but you find out that instead she went to a bar with friends.

\*Set of response scales below were presented with each scenario.

I would tell my partner that I was hurt; discuss the situation with my partner and try to come to a resolution.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Not at all Likely

Extremely Likely

I would give her an ultimatum to change or might even consider breaking up with \_\_\_\_\_.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Not at all Likely

Extremely Likely

I would assume the best, not do anything actively, and hope that by not reacting things would improve.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Not at all Likely

Extremely Likely

I would not plan to react, and would give him the silent treatment for a few days.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Not at all likely

Extremely Likely

Responses based on the following Definitions (Rusbult et al., 1991):

*Exit:* Separating, moving out of a joint residence, actively abusing one's partner, getting a divorce, threatening to leave, or screaming at one's partner;

*Voice:* Discussing problems, seeking help from a friend or therapist, suggesting solutions, changing oneself, or urging one's partner to change;

*Loyalty:* Waiting and hoping that things will improve, supporting the partner in the face of criticism, or praying for improvement;

*Neglect:* Ignoring the partner or spending less time together, avoiding discussing problems, treating the partner poorly (being cross with him or her), criticizing the partner for things unrelated to the real problem, or just letting things fall apart

We could also describe some maintenance actions:

I would try to make \_\_\_\_\_ jealous by \_\_\_\_\_.

I would try to enhance our relationship by \_\_\_\_\_.

I would start an argument with \_\_\_\_\_.