

The changing tides of attractive alternatives in romantic relationships: Recent societal changes compel new directions for future research

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Abstract:

Societal changes over recent decades have drastically transformed the frequency and manner in which people are exposed to attractive alternative relationship partners, arguably resulting in such alternatives posing a greater threat to committed relationships now than ever before. Yet despite a growing need for novel research on attractive alternatives, research on this topic has failed to account for such changes and thus is growing stagnant. Specifically, although interdependence perspectives and supporting research have consistently and robustly demonstrated that (a) attractive alternatives threaten committed relationships and (b) committed partners protect their relationships by devaluing such alternatives, research has yet to examine how the changing nature of attractive alternatives might affect these processes. To this end, the present article first reviews foundational theory and research that guided the study of attractive alternatives and then highlights how recent societal changes (e.g., technology that increases access to attractive alternatives, increasingly diverse relationship types, the emerging desire to remain single) diverge from this research and thus warrant new directions. We encourage researchers to expand how they study attractive alternatives and to ultimately reignite research on this increasingly important topic.

Keywords: relationships | committed relationships | attraction

Article:

1 INTRODUCTION

Over 40 years ago, a line of research emerged with the goal of understanding how close relationships persist (Kelley & Thibaut, [1978](#); Rusbult, [1980](#)). This inquiry ignited countless research questions and led to many impactful discoveries that remain relevant to the study of close relationships today. One of the most important developments addressed how people maintain committed romantic relationships in the face of relationship threats. Although numerous factors can threaten the stability of committed relationships (e.g., stress and partner violence; Baker et al., [2017](#); Randall & Bodenmann, [2009](#)), some of the most prevalent and disruptive threats to romantic relationships are attractive alternatives, typically alternative partners, that may provide superior outcomes to the current relationship (Kelley & Thibaut, [1978](#); Rusbult, [1980](#)). An abundance of research has revealed that attractive alternatives threaten intimates' commitment to their current relationship when the perceived quality of an alternative is better than the current relationship (Le & Agnew, [2003](#); Rusbult, 1980, [1983](#); Rusbult et al., [1998](#)). Given the benefits associated with quality romantic relationships (e.g., improved psychological and physical well-being; see Kansky, [2018](#)), and the negative relational outcomes associated with decreased commitment (e.g., increased likelihood of infidelity and relationship dissolution; Drigotas et al., [1999](#); Le et al., [2010](#)), attractive alternatives impose a substantial threat to both individual and relational well-being. Accordingly, extensive research has investigated who functions as an attractive alternative, why they threaten committed relationships, and how people can protect their relationships from such threats.

Yet despite the ample research on attractive alternatives, there is a critical need to expand how attractive alternatives are conceptualized and studied. Specifically, although original theories (e.g., interdependence theory and the investment model; Kelley & Thibaut, [1978](#); Rusbult, [1980](#); Thibaut & Kelley, [1959](#)) conceptualized alternatives broadly, supporting research has maintained a narrow focus by exclusively examining in-person alternative relationship partners. Importantly, several subsequent societal changes have transformed the frequency and manner in which people are exposed to attractive alternatives; thus, new research is needed to address the broader range of alternatives that people currently encounter. For example, the rapid increase in Internet access over recent decades has substantially increased the prevalence and availability of attractive alternatives via social media and online dating services, yet limited research has accounted for

this change or considered the possibility that online alternatives may pose unique threats compared to in-person alternatives.

To this end, the present review will focus on the two major areas of research on attractive alternatives that have emerged: (a) How attractive alternatives threaten romantic relationships and (b) the relationship maintenance mechanisms that protect relationships from the threat of attractive alternatives. We first review foundational theory and research that guided how attractive alternatives were initially conceptualized and studied. Next, we highlight the need to expand these previous perspectives by reviewing how current societal trends—for example, technology that has increased the quantity of and access to attractive alternatives, the growing diversity in relationship types, and the emerging desire to remain single—may diverge from past research and suggest new directions for future research. In doing so, we hope to encourage researchers to broaden their focus when studying attractive alternatives and ultimately to reignite the field of research on attractive alternatives.

2 INTERDEPENDENCE PERSPECTIVES ON ATTRACTIVE ALTERNATIVES

Interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) first situated attractive alternatives as threats to romantic relationships. As previously mentioned, attractive alternatives broadly refer to any alternative to the current relationship that is believed to provide superior outcomes compared to the current relationship (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Rusbult, 1980). These alternatives are most frequently operationalized in research as other potential romantic partners; however, interdependence theory posited that the desire to spend greater time with non-romantic partners (e.g., friends and family) or by oneself can also serve as an alternative to the relationship. According to interdependence perspectives, people assess the value of an interpersonal relationship by evaluating the rewards and costs that result from that relationship. These outcomes are then compared to their alternatives; if those alternatives are perceived as more favorable than the current relationship, then commitment is more likely to decline and the relationship is more likely to perish than if those alternatives are perceived to be less favorable (Rusbult, 1980, 1983). An abundance of research corroborates these tenets. Indeed, numerous studies have demonstrated that perceiving high quality attractive alternatives tends to decrease relationship commitment (Baker et al., 2020; Bui et al., 1996; Le & Agnew, 2001, 2003; Rhoades et al., 2010; Rusbult, 1980, 1983; Rusbult et al., 1998), which can erode the stability of the relationship (Rhoades et al., 2010). Furthermore, perceiving high quality alternatives, and subsequently experiencing low commitment, are robust predictors of infidelity (de Lenne et al., 2019; Drigotas et al., 1999; Martins et al., 2016; Mattingly et al., 2011), which is one of the strongest predictors of relationship dissolution (Amato & Previti, 2003).

Given that attractive alternatives threaten the stability of romantic relationships, and given the importance of maintaining quality romantic relationships, another line of research emerged,

steeped in the tradition of interdependence theory, suggesting that committed partners engage in relationship maintenance mechanisms that protect against the threat of attractive alternatives. Indeed, an abundance of research has revealed that committed partners derogate the temptation of attractive alternatives. For example, highly committed partners tend to perceive others as less attractive than they objectively are (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Lydon et al., 1999, 2003; Simpson et al., 1990), spend less time looking at (Miller, 1997) and paying attention to (Maner et al., 2008, 2009) alternatives, suppress thoughts about alternatives (Gonzaga et al., 2008), and selectively recall negative qualities more than positive qualities about alternatives (Visserman & Karremans, 2014). These maintenance mechanisms are also reflected in committed partners' subsequent behavior. For instance, highly committed partners tend to display fewer signs of interest when interacting with an attractive alternative (Karremans & Verwigerem, 2008). These mechanisms appear to be effective; people are less likely to engage in infidelity to the extent that they employ these mechanisms (Brady et al., 2020; McNulty et al., 2018).

3 NEW DIRECTIONS

Although extensive research supports the ideas that attractive alternatives threaten committed relationships and committed partners protect their relationships by cognitively and behaviorally derogating attractive alternatives, this research remains incomplete and is arguably growing stagnant. Specifically, despite interdependence theory conceptualizing alternatives in a broad manner, the majority of extant research has operationalized alternatives in a narrow manner by focusing exclusively on in-person alternative relationship partners. Several recent societal changes have made it increasingly necessary to conceptualize alternatives in a broader manner though. To this end, we discuss four topics that should be considered when studying attractive alternatives, yet have received limited or no attention in recent research.

3.1 Quantity of attractive alternatives

As previously discussed, interdependence perspectives posit that a person's perceived *quality* of attractive alternatives should predict subsequent commitment (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Rusbult, 1980, 1983; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959); thus, perceived quality has typically been the focus of measures and methods used to assess attractive alternatives. In contrast, the *quantity* of attractive alternatives has largely remained unexplored. The decision for researchers to focus exclusively on the quality of alternatives was initially reasonable given that exposure to numerous alternatives is relatively unlikely when exposure is primarily limited to in-person encounters; however, numerous societal changes have increased the number of available attractive alternatives that people currently have compared to previous generations. For example, people now have a nearly endless supply of alternatives due to the emergence of the Internet and subsequent social networking sites (SNS) and online dating forums. Indeed, in recent decades, there has been a drastic increase in the percentage of people who use the Internet (52% in 2000

and 93% in 2021; Pew Research Center, 2021a) and participate on SNS (5% in 2005 and 72% in 2021; Pew Research Center, 2021b). Similarly, nearly 30% of adults report using an online dating service (Vogel, 2020). Thus, compared to the limited number of in-person alternatives, people are now able to access, and connect with millions of people online who could serve as alternatives.

The frequency of alternatives has also increased at an especially rapid rate for sexual minorities for additional reasons. In particular, the increased legal protections and societal acceptance of sexual minorities in recent years (see Diamond & Rosky, 2016) has made it easier for sexual minorities to publicly disclose their sexual orientation (Schope, 2002; Tejada, 2006). Given that more people are publicly identifying as a sexual minority and there are more opportunities for sexual minorities to connect (e.g., through SNS and online dating forums specifically for LGBTQ+ individuals; Fox & Ralston, 2016), sexual minorities should perceive that they have more alternatives available than in previous generations. Together, these societal changes have substantially increased people's quantity of attractive alternatives.

Importantly, several fields of research highlight the importance of the quantity of alternatives. For example, economic theories (Rosato, 2016; Schwartz & Ward, 2004) and research on scarcity (Haynes, 2009; Iyengar & Lepper, 2000) suggest that the quantity of available options influences perceptions of those options; people tend to value limited options more than highly available options. It has been previously proposed that this tendency appears to also apply to romantic relationships (e.g., Finkel et al., 2012), and recent research supports this perspective. For instance, research on relationship initiation revealed that, among singles, people were less ready to commit to a romantic relationship to the extent that they perceived they had numerous potential partners available to them (Brady et al., in prep). Similarly, an experiment among online daters revealed that those who chose a partner from a larger pool of potential partners were more likely to change their initial selection compared to those who had fewer options (D'Angelo & Toma, 2017), suggesting that commitment to a partner decreases to the extent that there are more alternatives available. Finally, South and Lloyd (1995) analyzed national longitudinal datasets and found that quantity of attractive alternatives was among the strongest predictors of marital dissolution. Specifically, the risk of marital dissolution was highest in locations where the quantity of attractive alternatives was high (i.e., contained greater frequency of unmarried people of the participants' preferred gender, who were similar in age and ethnicity). These findings suggest that the quantity of attractive alternatives is an important consideration when studying commitment. Given the drastic increase in the number of available alternatives over recent decades, future research would benefit from further understanding the unique implications of quantity of attractive alternatives on commitment. Furthermore, future research should disentangle the unique contribution of quality and quantity of alternatives given that they are likely confounded with one another. In particular, as the number of alternatives that a person has increases, it is increasingly likely that the person will encounter highly desirable alternatives

(Felsenstein, 2008). Thus, it is unclear from previous research whether the association between alternatives and commitment is the result of the quality of those alternatives, the quantity of those alternatives, or both.

Recent increases in the quantity of attractive alternatives may also affect engagement in derogation mechanisms. Specifically, derogating alternatives is a motivated process that requires cognitive resources to successfully employ (Brady et al., 2020; Lydon & Karremans, 2015; Ritter et al., 2010). Given the drastic increase in the quantity of alternatives in recent years, and given that derogating alternatives is more challenging when cognitive resources are taxed (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004), it is possible that previously established derogation mechanisms may become exhausted due to the high quantity of available alternatives and thus may be less effective at protecting against alternatives. Indeed, numerous perspectives on self-regulation, such as the dual systems models of self-regulation (Heatherton & Wagner, 2011; Hofmann et al., 2009) and the resource model (Baumeister et al., 1998), suggest that people are less likely to successfully regulate their behaviors when they are fatigued, stressed, or experiencing other situational factors that impair their cognitive capacity (for review, Inzlicht et al., 2021). Supporting this perspective, recent research revealed that people in romantic relationships are more likely to pursue alternative partners on SNS to the extent that they are exposed to more alternative partners (de Lenne et al., 2019). Thus, consistent with prior theory and research, derogation mechanisms are likely still employed when evaluating attractive alternatives online; however, the ability to successfully derogate such alternatives likely declines as these processes become quickly exhausted because of the increased number of attractive alternatives online. Considering the drastic increase in the number of available alternatives over recent decades, it is critical for future research to identify the extent to which the quantity of attractive alternatives diminishes cognitive resources, and thus engagement in derogation processes.

3.2 Online attractive alternatives

The emergence of the Internet and SNS have drastically increased the quantity of attractive alternatives, resulting in new ways in which attractive alternatives shape commitment and influence the use of derogation mechanisms. Importantly, the emergence of the Internet and SNS may further affect commitment and the use of derogation mechanisms in a second distinct way: by introducing attractive alternatives who are often *perceived* as nonthreatening, yet can still shape commitment and thus pose a significant threat to relationships. Indeed, people often perceive online alternatives as less threatening than in-person alternatives due to the inability to engage in physical contact with online alternatives (see Sahni & Swasti, 2018). Similarly, online alternatives are often perceived as more abstract than in-person alternatives because they are more likely to convey observable attributes (e.g., physical attractiveness) rather than experiential attributes (e.g., humor; see Finkel et al., 2012), thus contributing to the perception that online alternatives do not represent proximal threats. However, although people may perceive online

alternatives as nonthreatening, research suggests that online alternatives pose a comparable threat to relationships as in-person alternatives. For example, online infidelity—which involves engagement in emotional and/or sexual behaviors with someone other than one's partner in an online setting (Vossler & Moller, 2020)—is increasingly an issue for romantic relationships (Goldberg et al., 2008) and rates of online infidelity are now comparable to rates of offline infidelity (Martins et al., 2016). Online and offline infidelity share many common characteristics (e.g., sexual communication, disclosing of personal information), as well as similar emotional (e.g., loss of trust and anger) and relational outcomes (e.g., relationship dissolution; Cravens et al., 2013; Martins et al., 2016). Unlike in-person infidelity, however, online infidelity does not involve physical contact with attractive alternatives (Vossler & Moller, 2020) and the extent to which people engage in online infidelity does not seem to be contingent on commitment level. For instance, rates of online infidelity are similar among people in casually dating and highly committed relationships (Abbasi, 2019). Together, these findings highlight the possibility that online alternatives pose a comparable threat to relationships as in-person alternatives, despite the fact that online alternatives are often considered nonthreatening.

Given that online alternatives are often perceived as nonthreatening, the way that they shape commitment may be unique compared to in-person alternatives. Specifically, interdependence perspectives suggest that attractive alternatives threaten commitment because people consider whether those alternatives would be a more suitable partner, and thus only alternatives perceived as *feasible* partners should threaten relationship commitment and alternatives perceived as *unfeasible* partners (e.g., uninterested others) should be nonthreatening (Lydon et al., 1999, 2003). To this end, given that people are unable to directly interact or engage in physical contact with most online alternatives (see Sahni & Swasti, 2018), we would expect that a majority of online alternatives would be perceived as unfeasible alternatives, and thus nonthreatening to commitment. Nevertheless, online alternatives may still shape commitment via a different mechanism—by shaping people's *standards* for a relationship partner. That is, although such alternatives may not be perceived as feasible alternative partners, they may create a point of comparison that increases a person's expectations for their own relationship partner and therefore still pose a threat to commitment (Lydon et al., 2003; Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996).

Several lines of research support this perspective. Specifically, research on social comparison suggests that people frequently compare their romantic partners and romantic relationships to others (Buunk, 2001; Morry & Sucharyna, 2016) and those others shape people's standards for their partners (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Rusbult, 1980). Given that people now have greater access to the Internet (Pew Research Center, 2021a) and spend significantly more time on SNS (Greenwood et al., 2016), they may have more opportunities to make relationship comparisons to others, and thus may be more likely to experience altered relationship standards. Furthermore, given that people on SNS tend to emphasize the positive aspects of their lives and enhance their presentation (see Vogel & Rose, 2016), such online alternatives may actually increase standards

more than in-person alternatives. As people's standards for a partner increase, there is a greater likelihood that their partners will fall short of such standards, thus decreasing their commitment to those partners. Indeed, the ideal standards model (Fletcher et al., 1999) suggests that people compare their existing partners and relationships with ideal standards for what is desired in a romantic partner, and that greater discrepancies between ones' ideal standards and perceptions of the partner predict lower relationship satisfaction (Fletcher et al., 1999) and greater risk of relationship dissolution (Fletcher et al., 2000). Although research has yet to investigate the extent to which online alternatives shape relationship standards, and thus threaten commitment, previous research has found that pornography (Lambert et al., 2012) and social media usage (Kerkhof et al., 2011) predict lower levels of relationship commitment, which is consistent with the idea that online alternatives threaten commitment by increasing people's relationship standards. Together, these findings suggest that online attractive alternatives, who are often treated as if they are nonthreatening, may actually threaten relationship commitment by serving as an unrealistic comparison to one's romantic partner, resulting in more negative interpretations about one's partner and relationship. Thus, future research should refrain from discounting alternatives who may be perceived as nonthreatening (e.g., online alternatives), and instead consider indirect ways that nonthreatening alternatives may still shape commitment.

Furthermore, given that people often perceive online alternatives as less threatening than in-person alternatives, it is possible that previously established derogation mechanisms that are employed for in-person alternatives may not be employed when encountering online alternatives. For example, research suggests that committed people must be motivated to protect their relationship from the threat of alternatives to successfully initiate derogation mechanisms (Lydon & Karremans, 2015); however, if online alternatives are often perceived as nonthreatening, then people may be less motivated to employ derogation mechanisms when encountering online alternatives compared to in-person alternatives. Thus, despite the fact that online attractive alternatives are often perceived as if they are nonthreatening, they may actually threaten relationships by increasing the risk of infidelity due to a lack of motivation to employ protective relationship mechanisms. Indeed, this perspective would resolve the seemingly inconsistent past research that online infidelity occurs as frequently and is as damaging to the relationship as in-person infidelity (Abbasi, 2019; Cravens et al., 2013; Goldberg et al., 2008; Martins et al., 2016), despite the fact that online alternatives are often perceived as nonthreatening. Given the extent to which people use SNS (Greenwood et al., 2016; Pew Research Center, 2021b) and have access to online alternatives, future research would benefit from identifying whether specific derogation mechanisms are employed less for online alternatives than in-person alternatives, and to understand why this occurs.

3.3 Consensually non-monogamous relationships

Since the introduction of interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), extensive research has demonstrated that the association between attractive alternatives and commitment generalizes across many diverse cultures (Davis & Strube, 1993; Lin & Rusbult, 1995) and relationship types (e.g., marital and non-marital relationships, heterosexual and non-heterosexual relationships; Duffy & Rusbult, 1986; Kurdek, 1995; Lin & Rusbult, 1995). However, limited research has addressed whether the findings generalize to consensually non-monogamous (CNM) relationships. Though CNM remains relatively rare (Conley et al., 2013), societal trends suggest an increased involvement in CNM relationships within recent years, with more than one in five people reporting engagement in CNM relationships at some point in their lifetime (Hauptert et al., 2017). Importantly though, little is known about whether people in CNM relationships conceptualize attractive alternatives in a similar manner as do people in monogamous relationships, and thus whether such alternatives influence commitment to a lesser extent, or not at all, for people who are in CNM relationships.

However, there is reason to expect that people in CNM relationships may conceptualize attractive alternatives differently than do people in monogamous relationships. Specifically, monogamous relationships are characterized by an inherent choice when considering attractive alternatives: You can either have your current partner *or* an alternative. This ultimately results in the comparison between alternatives and current partners, which subsequently influences commitment. However, people in CNM relationships are often not faced with this choice; they can have their current partner *and* an alternative. Accordingly, people in CNM relationships may perceive attractive others as additional partners, rather than alternative partners, and thus they may be less threatening to the relationship. To this end, attractive others may decrease commitment less in CNM relationships compared to monogamous relationships. Recent research supports this perspective. Specifically, although it might be expected that people in CNM relationships (who tend to regularly engage with attractive others; Conley et al., 2013) should be less committed to their primary partner than people in monogamous relationships, commitment among people in CNM and monogamous relationships is actually comparable (Conley et al., 2017), suggesting that attractive others may not threaten commitment in CNM relationships to the same extent as in monogamous relationships. Indeed, the quality of extradyadic partners is not associated with commitment to one's primary partner in CNM relationships, furthering the perspective that quality of alternatives may not threaten commitment in CNM relationships (Balzarini et al., 2017).

The implications of attractive alternatives for the relationship commitment of those in CNM relationships may further depend on the partner of interest (e.g., primary and secondary) and the configuration of the relationship (e.g., primary–secondary configurations, co-primary configurations). Specifically, given that partners in CNM relationships often fulfill distinct relational needs (e.g., interdependence, sexual; Klesse, 2006), the same attractive alternative may be evaluated differently depending on whether they are being evaluated as an alternative to a

primary partner versus non-primary partners. Indeed, people in CNM relationships tend to report lower perceived quality of alternatives and greater commitment with primary compared to secondary partners (Balzarini et al., 2017), suggesting that interdependence perspectives may be more applicable to primary partners. Furthermore, although these findings emerged among people who prioritize one relationship over the other (i.e., primary–secondary configurations) and people who have multiple non-primary partners (i.e., non-primary configurations), people with two concurrent primary partners (i.e., co-primary configuration) reported fewer differences in quality of alternatives and commitment among their partners (Balzarini et al., 2019). Thus, the configuration of the CNM relationship may affect how people in those relationships conceptualize alternatives, and subsequently determine the extent to which interdependence perspectives apply to those relationships. To this end, future research may consider exploring additional nuances that could inform these results, such as whether certain types of attractive alternatives (e.g., alternatives who would become committed relationship partners vs. alternatives who serve exclusively as sexual partners) threaten commitment among people in CNM relationships.

Further, some (e.g., Finkel et al., 2014; Murphy et al., 2021) have suggested that CNM may provide a means for couples to maintain their romantic relationships in the face of desirable alternatives. In particular, more couples may be opting to open up their relationships, rather than ending their relationships, when faced with extradyadic threats due to the recent increased acceptance of CNM (Stephens & Emmers-Sommer, 2019). Indeed, recent research demonstrates that people are more interested in CNM to the extent that they perceive desirable alternative partners (MacDonald et al., 2021). Given that encountering desirable others often results in decreased commitment (Baker et al., 2020; Bui et al., 1996; Le & Agnew, 2001, 2003; Rhoades et al., 2010; Rusbult, 1980, 1983; Rusbult et al., 1998) and an increased risk of infidelity (de Lenne et al., 2019; Drigotas et al., 1999; Martins et al., 2016; Mattingly et al., 2011), which both tend to harm relationship satisfaction and stability (Amato & Previti, 2003; Rhoades et al., 2010), CNM may provide an option for people who are tempted by attractive others to remain committed to their primary relationship partner. To be clear, this may not be a desirable option for many couples. Specifically, although acceptance of CNM has been increasing, the majority of people still do not desire or approve of a CNM relationship (Conley et al., 2013) and a CNM relationship may be harmful for individuals facing relational insecurities (Murphy et al., 2021). Nevertheless, some couples may find it a viable way to maintain a committed relationship while reducing the threat of desirable others.

Similarly, research on the derogation of attractive alternatives has not distinguished between people in monogamous and CNM relationships. However, unlike monogamous relationships, people in CNM relationships are motivated to pursue romantic and/or sexual relationships with alternative partners rather than avoid them (Conley et al., 2013). Considering this, attractive alternatives may be less threatening among people in CNM relationships than among those in

monogamous relationships, and thus people in CNM relationships may not employ derogation mechanisms as often, or as intensely, as people in monogamous relationships. Although research has yet to directly address derogation mechanisms among people in CNM relationships, there is evidence that people in CNM relationships do not employ other protective mechanisms in response to relationship threats. For example, romantic jealousy is an emotion that arises in response to relationship threats (White, 1981), and often prompts people to engage in mate retention behaviors to prevent the loss of a romantic partner (Buss, 1989). If attractive alternatives are perceived as threatening to CNM relationships, then people in CNM relationships would presumably be as jealous and engage in similar mate retention behaviors when their partners are approached by others compared to people in monogamous relationships. However, recent research revealed that this is not the case; people in CNM relationships are often less jealous (Conley et al., 2017) and engage in fewer mate retention behaviors (Mogilski et al., 2017) than people in monogamous relationships. These findings suggest that attractive alternatives may be less threatening in CNM relationships, and therefore may not prompt derogation mechanisms. Given the rise in diverse relationship types in recent decades, including CNM relationships (Hauptert et al., 2017), future research on derogation of attractive alternatives should address differences that may emerge depending on relationship type, as well as directly assess whether or not people in CNM relationships employ derogation mechanisms.

3.4 Beyond alternative romantic partners

Until now, attractive alternatives have largely been discussed in the context of people who could serve as alternative *partners* compared to one's current partner. Nevertheless, interdependence theory initially conceptualized attractive alternatives as any alternative that is more desirable than the current romantic relationship, including relationships with friends and family or possibly not having a relationship at all (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). Despite this operationalization, most research on attractive alternatives has focused on alternative romantic partners (Lydon et al., 1999, 2003; Maner et al., 2008, 2009; Miller, 1997; Plant et al., 2010), leaving other forms of alternatives unexplored. While this may be a result of the personal and social value placed on romantic relationships (see Clark & Lemay, 2010), other forms of alternatives—specifically, non-relationship alternatives (i.e., staying single)—are growing in importance.

Recent research supports the possibility that non-relationship alternatives, specifically singlehood, are growing in importance. For example, although people who choose to remain single have traditionally been stigmatized and perceived more negatively compared to their coupled peers (Etaugh & Birdoes, 1991; Etaugh & Malstrom, 1981), perceptions of singlehood are becoming more positive (Hertel et al., 2007). The rise of favorable perceptions of singlehood may be the result of recent societal shifts that have increased the benefits associated with singlehood. For instance, young adults are facing greater financial hardships in recent generations compared to young adults in previous generations, such as increased debt relative to

economic resources and an increased likelihood of filing bankruptcy (Draut & Silva, 2004; Houle, 2014). To this end, people are more likely to benefit from pursuing education and career goals to secure financial stability (see Goyette, 2008) compared to previous generations. Thus, remaining single may facilitate the pursuit of other important life goals and interests (Apostolou et al., 2020), which are often viewed as incompatible with relationship goals (Hill, 2020). Supporting this perspective, people are now prioritizing their education and career goals more than their romantic relationship goals (Ranta et al., 2014), and younger people are remaining single for longer periods of time (Klinenberg, 2012) and marrying at older ages (Wang & Parker, 2014) compared to previous generations. These findings highlight the possibility that non-relationship alternatives are becoming an increased threat to committed relationships, comparable to that of attractive alternative partners, and thus researchers should account for other forms of alternatives, such as non-relationship alternatives. It is important to note, however, that people's satisfaction with being single tends to decline over the lifespan (Oh et al., 2021); thus, although younger generations may have more positive attitudes toward singlehood compared to previous generations, it remains an open question whether non-relationship alternatives, such as singlehood, will remain an increased threat to committed relationships over time. Future research may also benefit from investigating whether the fear of being single undermines growing benefits associated with singlehood. Indeed, such fears predict lower relationship standards (Spielmann et al., 2013) and greater attempts to renew relationships with previous romantic partners (Spielmann et al., 2016). To this end, non-relationship alternatives may be less attractive, and thus may be less threatening to relationship commitment, to the extent that people fear being single.

In addition to exploring how non-relationship alternatives may pose an increased threat to committed relationships, research may also consider whether derogation mechanisms are successful at protecting relationships from non-relationship alternatives. Given that interdependence perspectives account for non-relationship alternatives as threats to romantic relationships (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), we can expect that similar processes may be employed for derogating relationship alternatives and non-relationship alternatives. Although research has yet to directly address whether derogation mechanisms are employed for non-relationship alternatives, research indirectly supports this perspective. For example, entry into marriage increasingly promotes pro-marriage attitudes (Moors, 2000) and reduces tolerance for divorce (Cunningham & Thornton, 2006) over time, suggesting that people who are highly committed to their relationships (i.e., through marriage) may devalue non-relationship alternatives (i.e., singlehood) by adjusting their relationship attitudes (e.g., reduced tolerance for divorce). Although these findings are broadly consistent with interdependence perspectives, they highlight the possibility that people employ distinct derogation mechanisms not only toward relationship alternatives, but also toward non-relationship alternatives. Thus, researchers should consider whether derogation mechanisms are successful at protecting relationships from non-relationship

alternatives, as well as explore mechanisms that may be unique to the derogation of non-relationship alternatives.

4 CONCLUSION

Attractive alternatives are arguably more threatening to committed relationships now than they have ever been before. Although an abundance of past research has consistently revealed that (a) attractive alternatives threaten commitment and (b) committed partners protect their relationships from the threat of attractive alternatives, drastic societal changes over recent decades highlight the critical need for researchers to expand how attractive alternatives are thought about and studied. To this end, the present article reviewed theory and research that has significantly shaped the study of attractive alternatives, as well as provided examples of how this area of research could grow to account for important societal changes. Ultimately, we hope to broaden how attractive alternatives are studied, and to spark new and exciting research on the topic of attractive alternatives.

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