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In the Eye of the Motivated Beholder:
Promotion- or Prevention-Focused Evaluation of Romantic Alternatives

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Submitted – 5/22/08

Abstract

The processes by which people select potential romantic partners can have a profound influence on the relationships that they eventually form. This article presents four studies that examine such processes in terms of how many alternative partners people consider when attempting to develop and maintain intimate relationships. Results of cross-sectional and longitudinal investigations that feature participants in both established, long-term relationships and developing relationships show that individuals who are primarily focused on their general motivations for advancement (i.e., *promotion*) more readily attend to, more positively evaluate, and more vigorously pursue alternative partners than do individuals who are primarily focused on their general motivations for security (i.e., *prevention*). Moreover, whereas increasing commitment to either a developing or established relationship was, on the whole, associated with a less favorable evaluation of alternative partners, as in previous research, this effect was significantly weaker for promotion-focused individuals. The costs and benefits of a promotion-focused or prevention-focused approach to one's romantic alternatives are discussed.

Keywords: Relationship Formation; Relationship Maintenance; Commitment; Regulatory Focus

For most of us, finding a romantic partner is among our most important and enduring goals. Although in the course of our daily social interactions we typically encounter a wide variety of eligible partners, not many of us would be likely to claim that this goal is easily fulfilled. That is, despite the abundance of alternative partners surrounding us, there are typically only a select few whom we would consider as acceptable candidates for a romantic relationship and even fewer with whom we may actually attempt to develop such a relationship. To better understand how people do establish, and maintain, romantic relationships, it is therefore necessary to better understand the processes by which they attend to, evaluate, and pursue alternative romantic partners.

Much previous research on people's consideration of potential romantic partners has focused on what types of qualities people desire in these partners (i.e., what makes certain partners more attractive than others; Byrne, 1997; Curtis & Miller, 1986; Finke & Penton-Voak, 2002; Sprecher & Regan, 2002), as well as why certain people are attracted to some qualities over others (Buss, 1989; Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002). However, in this article we examine a different set of questions that has received somewhat less attention: what determines *how many* alternatives people consider in their quest for a romantic partner or *how likely* they are to pursue those whom they find desirable (cf. Schmitt & Buss, 1993)? Regardless of what particular qualities someone finds most attractive, he or she may decide to eagerly search far and wide for people who possess these qualities and make romantic overtures toward many of these individuals simultaneously. Or, this same person could instead decide to narrow his or her focus and vigilantly concentrate on only a select few desirable alternatives at any given time. Whereas the first approach might increase the likelihood of finding a partner who reciprocates one's interests and of establishing some kind of romantic relationship, the second approach might increase the likelihood that one remains invested in developing any particular romantic relationship that does arise. The extent to which some individuals favor one strategy of

considering alternative romantic partners over another could therefore have profound influences on the relationships that they form.

Thus, the primary objective of the research presented here is to investigate (a) what determines who selects eager versus vigilant strategies of pursuing relationship partners, and (b) what consequences the use of these strategies has on the initiation and maintenance of close relationships. We begin by discussing one potential source of differences in the consideration of alternative romantic partners that involves the general strength of people's motivations for growth and advancement (i.e., *promotion*) or for safety and security (i.e., *prevention*). We then review previous research on how the consideration of alternative partners influences close relationships and discuss the potential implications for such relationships of pursuing a more eager, promotion-focused or a more vigilant, prevention-focused approach to this process. Finally, we present four studies that investigate these implications in both established and developing romantic relationships.

Promotion- and Prevention-Focused Consideration of Alternatives

People are motivated to fulfill a variety of basic needs that are central to both their physical and social well-being. In considering such needs, scholars have frequently distinguished between those concerned with advancement (i.e., nourishment, growth, and development) from those concerned with security (i.e., shelter, safety, and protection; see Bowlby, 1969/1982; Maslow, 1955). Building upon this distinction, regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997) proposes that motivations for advancement and security not only originate in different fundamental needs, but also foster different modes of goal-pursuit. That is, people represent and experience motivations for advancement (*promotion concerns*) differently than they represent and experience motivations for security (*prevention concerns*).

When pursuing goals that involve promotion concerns, people are primarily focused on attainment; they view themselves as working to achieve their hopes and aspirations and striving for positive outcomes (i.e., *gains*), while attempting to avoid the absence of positive outcomes

(i.e., unrealized opportunities, or *non-gains*). Furthermore, because promotion concerns involve this focus on attainment, they motivate people to adopt what have been termed *eager* strategies of goal pursuit that involve seeking all possible opportunities for gain, even at the risk of committing errors and accepting losses. That is, promotion-focused individuals prefer to take chances and to be overly inclusive when evaluating their options, so as not to overlook anything that might allow them to achieve a gain (Higgins, 1997; Molden, Lee, & Higgins, 2008).

In contrast, when pursuing goals that involve prevention concerns, people are primarily focused on maintenance; they view themselves as working to uphold responsibilities and obligations and striving for the absence of negative outcomes (i.e., security from threats, or *non-losses*), while attempting to avoid the presence of negative outcomes (i.e., *losses*). Furthermore, because prevention concerns involve this focus on maintenance, they motivate people to adopt what have been termed *vigilant* strategies of goal pursuit that involve protecting against losses, even at the risk of missing opportunities and forgoing possible gains. That is, prevention-focused individuals prefer to play it safe and to be overly exclusive when evaluating their options, so as not to accept anything that might result in losses (Higgins, 1997; Molden et al., 2008).

This basic distinction in the strategies of goal pursuit preferred by those with promotion concerns versus prevention concerns suggests important differences in the way these individuals consider alternatives in a variety of decision contexts. An eager, promotion-focused strategy of considering alternatives should lead people to remain open to a wide array of options, so as to not overlook anything that could plausibly be a good choice, and to refrain from too strongly favoring any one option at the expense of another. This approach takes a chance at identifying and pursuing all potentially desirable alternatives so that no opportunities for gain are missed. In contrast, a vigilant, prevention-focused strategy of considering alternatives should lead people to narrowly focus on what they believe to be the few best options, so as to concentrate only on what seems probable to be a good choice, and to elevate these favored options above the rest. This

approach plays it safe by rejecting all potentially undesirable alternatives to prevent what might result in a mistake.

Much evidence that individuals with chronically active or temporarily induced promotion versus prevention concerns do indeed favor these particular decision strategies has been found across many different settings (see Molden et al., 2008). For example, when completing a recognition memory task, promotion-focused individuals displayed a greater bias toward errors of being overly inclusive in identifying previously studied words whereas prevention-focused individuals displayed a greater bias toward errors of being overly exclusive (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Friedman & Förster, 2001). In addition, when asked to sort a group of everyday objects, promotion-focused individuals tended to more openly use many different potentially relevant categories, whereas prevention-focused individuals tended to more narrowly use only a few central categories (Crowe & Higgins, 1997). Furthermore, when attempting to explain others' behavior, or form impressions about them based on these behaviors, promotion-focused individuals tended to engage in a more balanced endorsement of multiple explanations or impressions whereas prevention-focused individuals tended to select one central explanation above the rest (Liberman, Molden, Idson, & Higgins, 2001; Molden & Higgins, 2004, in press). Finally, when an established course of action that they were pursuing was interrupted, promotion-focused individuals were more likely to switch to a new course of action to seek out new opportunities, whereas, prevention-focused individuals were more likely to continue with the original course of action to secure completion of the goal they had initially undertaken (Liberman, Idson, Camacho, & Higgins, 1999).

In light of these broad and robust differences in the strategic approach to considering alternatives preferred by those with stronger promotion or prevention concerns, such concerns could also have important effects on people's consideration of alternative romantic partners. Whereas promotion-focused individuals might be expected to cast a wide net in attending to, evaluating, and pursuing many different desirable partners, prevention-focused individuals might

be expected to more narrowly concentrate their attention, evaluation, and pursuit on a more select group of especially favored partners. However, before developing these ideas further, we should first examine the broader role of considering alternate romantic partners in the process of maintaining and initiating close relationships.

Consideration of Alternative Partners in Established Relationships

The antecedents and consequences of people's evaluation of alternative romantic partners have perhaps been most thoroughly analyzed in the literature on people's commitment to existing relationships. Rusbult (1980; Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996) classifies the process of evaluating one's romantic alternatives outside of an existing relationship as one of the basic pillars that determine people's commitment to a particular partner. Indeed, much research has shown that how positively people evaluate such alternatives is indeed a powerful predictor of both their current reports of commitment to this person (Le & Agnew, 2003; Rusbult, 1980) and their likelihood of continuing to remain with him or her (Bui, Peplau, & Hill, 1996; Rusbult, 1983). Furthermore, research has shown not only that evaluations of romantic alternatives influence people's commitment to a relationship, but also that people's ongoing commitment can alter their evaluation of romantic alternatives. That is, people's psychological commitment to a romantic partner, as defined by their attachment to, long-term orientation toward, and intent to persist with the relationship (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998; Arriaga & Agnew, 2001), can motivate them to "defend" this commitment by selectively derogating attractive romantic alternatives.

For example, relative to their less committed counterparts, heterosexual individuals who are strongly committed to their romantic relationship spend less time viewing pictures of attractive members of the opposite-sex (Miller, 1997). Those who are highly committed to their partner also evaluate other members of the opposite sex as relatively undesirable, particularly when these other individuals are both attractive and available for a potential relationship (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989). Similarly, college-aged individuals who are involved in exclusive (i.e., committed) romantic

relationships have shown even greater specificity in their derogation of alternative partners; compared to individuals who are either single or involved in a nonexclusive romantic relationship, those in committed relationships evaluate college-aged, opposite-sex targets as less attractive, but do not differ in their evaluations of college-aged, same-sex targets or middle-aged, opposite-sex targets (Simpson, Gangestad, & Lerma, 1990). Thus, overall, people who are highly committed to their current romantic relationship tend to evaluate romantic alternatives as less desirable than do individuals who are less committed, and this tendency is especially strong when the alternatives seem as if they could potentially pose some threat to the current relationship (see also Lydon, Fitzsimons, & Naidoo, 2003; Lydon, Meana, Sepinwall, Richards, & Mayman, 1999).

Commitment to a particular partner thus appears to narrow people's focus away from considering a variety of different romantic alternatives and to elevate the attractiveness of their current partner as compared to other possibilities. This relationship maintenance strategy associated with commitment (Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996) is therefore highly compatible with the generally vigilant approach to considering alternatives preferred by those with strong prevention concerns. In contrast, this relationship maintenance strategy is somewhat in conflict with the generally eager approach of considering a wide variety of alternatives and of not too strongly favoring any one option at the expense of others preferred by those with strong promotion concerns. Therefore, elevated concerns with promotion may attenuate the established effects of commitment on the evaluation of romantic alternatives, such that promotion-focused individuals continue to evaluate their alternatives as somewhat desirable even when committed to a particular relationship. These potential effects of promotion versus prevention concerns on the consideration of alternatives within committed romantic relationships represent the first central question investigated in the present studies.

Consideration of Alternative Partners in Developing Relationships

Although research on people's consideration of more or fewer romantic alternatives has largely been confined to the study of established relationships, such consideration could have

substantial influence on people's attempts to initiate and develop new relationships as well. Using a broad definition of *alternative romantic partners* that includes any romantic possibility people might pursue, regardless of whether they do or do not have a current partner, there are a several components of the relationship formation process for which the number of alternatives one considers could have important implications.

For example, to the extent that people are open to considering a wide array of romantic partners, they may perceive more of the people they encounter in the course of their daily interactions as potential partners and classify more of these individuals as romantic interests. That is, the more people are focused on considering many possible options, the more they may *attend to* a wealth of romantic alternatives in their environment. Furthermore, to the extent that people are keeping their options open and refraining from strongly favoring one romantic partner over the other, the more likely they may be to simultaneously view a variety of the potential partners they've identified as good choices. That is, the more people are focused on considering many possible options the more likely they may be to *evaluate* multiple romantic alternatives as desirable. Finally, to the extent that people are seeking all possible opportunities for gains, the more likely they may be to attempt to establish some romantic contact with those partners they've identified as desirable. That is, the more people are focused on considering many possible options, the more they may actually *pursue* romantic alternatives. Given this analysis, we would thus expect individuals with strong promotion concerns to more readily attend to, more enthusiastically evaluate, and more vigorously pursue alternative romantic partners than individuals with strong prevention concerns. These potential effects of promotion versus prevention concerns on the consideration of alternatives in the initiation and development of romantic relationships represent the second central question investigated in the present studies.

In addition to effects on the attention to, evaluation, and pursuit of romantic alternatives, we should note that one further effect that stronger promotion concerns could have in this context is how picky or selective people are in determining who qualifies as attractive enough to merit

romantic interest. That is, the more people are focused on reviewing many possible options, the lower the *standards* may be that they set for whom they regard as a desirable candidate for their affections (cf. Schmitt & Buss, 1993). Although such lower standards would certainly be consistent with the promotion-focused strategies of considering alternatives we have discussed, they are not necessary for the occurrence of the other hypothesized effects of these strategies. For example, it is possible that when evaluating the same limited and finite field of eligible partners, promotion-focused and prevention-focused individuals will display similar standards and will not differ in how desirable they rate each of these alternatives. However, during their day-to-day encounters, promotion-focused individuals may classify some individuals who meet these standards (e.g., the waiter or waitress who smiles at them or the acquaintance from the office they talk to in the elevator) as potential romantic interests that prevention-focused individuals do not, and in this way attend to and pursue a greater number of romantic alternatives. This possibility will be investigated in the present studies as well.

Overview of the Present Studies

To test the effects of people's general concerns with promotion or prevention on their consideration of romantic alternatives within established and developing relationships, we conducted four studies that employed both cross-sectional and longitudinal methodologies. Study 1 surveyed promotion-focused versus prevention-focused individuals about their general attention to and pursuit of alternative romantic partners. Study 2 examined the extent to which promotion-focused versus prevention-focused individuals' commitment to an established relationship partner affected their evaluation of alternatives to this partner over a 6-month period. Study 3 assessed the extent to which any differences in promotion-focused versus prevention-focused individuals' strategies of considering romantic alternatives might be associated with their likelihood of having actually initiated romantic relationships. Finally, Study 4 examined how promotion-focused versus prevention-focused individuals attended to, evaluated, and pursued romantic alternatives in the actual process of developing new relationships over a one-month period following a speed-dating

event, as well as how their developing commitment to newly forming relationships with a particular partner affected their evaluation of other alternatives.

Across these four studies, we tested three primary hypotheses. As outlined above, our first, *consideration of alternatives* hypothesis was that, in both established and developing relationships, promotion-focused individuals would more readily attend to, more positively evaluate, and more vigorously pursue romantic alternatives than prevention-focused individuals. Our second, *commitment* hypothesis was that, replicating past work (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Simpson et al., 1990), as people's commitment to an established or newly developing relationship increased, their evaluation of romantic alternatives would decrease. Our third, *attenuation* hypothesis was that because of promotion-focused individuals' greater attention to, evaluation, and pursuit of romantic alternatives overall, the typical effects of increased commitment on the decreased evaluation of such alternatives would be significantly weaker for these individuals.

Study 1

The primary objective of Study 1 was to provide a first, general test of our consideration of alternatives hypothesis that involved the attention to and pursuit of romantic partners by promotion-focused versus prevention-focused individuals. In this study we also performed a preliminary exploration of whether these individuals possess different romantic standards. In addition to completing questionnaires that assessed each of these variables, participants also completed measures of their general willingness to engage in casual sexual relationships (i.e., their *sociosexuality orientation*; Simpson & Gangestad, 1991) and the strength of their sex drive in order to rule out these alternate mechanisms as explanations for any effects of stronger promotion or prevention concerns.

Method

Participants

Participants were 112 university students (68 women, 44 men) who volunteered in exchange for course credit. Participants averaged 18.99 years of age ($SD = 1.04$). Of the 73

individuals who reported their relationship status, 34 reported they were currently involved in a romantic relationship; relationship status did not moderate any of the effects reported below.

Procedure

As part of a large mass-testing session, participants completed a packet of questionnaires that included measures of their promotion or prevention concerns, their consideration of romantic alternatives, and their romantic standards (among other measures not relevant for this study). We randomly varied the order in which they completed these questionnaires, with approximately half of them completing measures of promotion or prevention concerns first and the other half completing the romantic alternatives and romantic standards measures first. Unless otherwise noted, all items were assessed on scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), and all continuous variables were transformed into z-scores for analysis.

Measuring Concerns with Promotion or Prevention

We assessed the strength of participants' concerns with promotion or prevention using the well-validated Regulatory Focus Questionnaire (RFQ; Higgins et al., 2001). On scales from 1 (*never or seldom*) to 5 (*very often*), participants reported how often in their lives they felt they had succeeded on both their generally promotion-focused goals (e.g., "How often have you accomplished things that got you 'psyched' to work even harder?") and their generally prevention-focused goals (e.g., "How often did you obey rules and regulations that were established by your parents?"). Because perceptions of past success in a particular domain are related to greater expectations of and value for future success in this domain (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953), participants' subjective reports of successful promotion or prevention self-regulation serve as proxies for the general strength of their promotion and prevention concerns. Many past studies using the RFQ have confirmed the validity of this approach (see Ayduk, May, Downey, & Higgins, 2003; Cesario, Grant, & Higgins, 2004; Grant & Higgins, 2003; Higgins et al., 2001; Sassenberg, Jonas, Shah, & Brazy, 2007; Semin, Higgins, de Montes, Estourget, & Valencia, 2005).

As noted above, previous research has shown that to the extent that people's concerns with promotion are predominant over their concerns with prevention, they prefer eager strategies of considering alternatives, whereas to the extent that people's concerns with prevention are predominant over their concerns with promotion, they prefer vigilant strategies of considering alternatives (see Molden et al., 2008). Therefore, in this and all subsequent studies, participants' predominant concerns with promotion versus prevention were calculated by subtracting their responses to the prevention items from their responses to the promotion items to create a single *regulatory focus* index (see Cesario et al., 2004; Higgins et al., 2001; Molden & Higgins, in press; Sassenberg, et al., 2007; Semin et al., 2005), with more positive scores indicating a stronger promotion focus, and more negative scores indicating a stronger prevention focus.

Measuring the Consideration of Romantic Alternatives and Romantic Standards

In this study, we assessed participants' *reported attention to* romantic alternatives with a 6-item measure adapted from Miller's (1997) attention to alternatives scale (e.g., "I am distracted by other people that I find attractive," "I'm very aware that there are 'plenty of fish in the sea,>"). To make the scale more accessible to the students in our sample, we replaced one of the original items ("I'm interested in having an affair,") with a new item of our own creation ("In general, I tend to have many options for romantic partners"; cf. Simpson, 1987). The reliability of this adapted scale was acceptable ($\alpha = .67$). Participants who were not currently in a romantic relationship were asked to respond to this questionnaire based on how they "would have answered during [their] most recent relationship." If participants had never been in a romantic relationship ($N = 8$), they skipped these questions. We also assessed participants' *reported pursuit of* romantic alternatives with a 2-item measure: "I usually initiate a dating or romantic relationship with someone rather than waiting for that person to initiate" and "In general, I am comfortable expressing my romantic interest to someone I am interested in" ($\alpha = .77$). Finally, we assessed participants' *perceived romantic standards* with a 1-item measure: "I am very picky about my choice of romantic partners."

Measuring Sociosexuality and Sex Drive

We have hypothesized that people's predominant concerns with promotion or prevention influence their tendencies to consider romantic alternatives because it alters their strategic approach to this process. In order to rule out alternate explanations for how such motivations affect the consideration of romantic alternatives, we assessed two additional variables in this study. The first was a shortened version of Simpson and Gangestad's (1991) sociosexuality measure that included two of the *attitudinal* items (see Webster & Bryan, 2007) on this scale ["I can imagine myself being comfortable and enjoying 'casual' sex with different partners," and "I would have to be closely attached to someone (both emotionally and psychologically) before I could feel comfortable and fully enjoy having sex with him or her" (reverse-scored); $\alpha = .77$]. The second was a 2-item measure of their *sex drive*: "I have a strong sex drive" and "I experience sexual desire extremely frequently" ($\alpha = .92$).

Results

Primary Hypothesis Tests

The associations between participants' predominant promotion or prevention concerns and their attention to and pursuit of romantic alternatives were initially tested using simple regression analyses. The results of these analyses are displayed in Table 1. Supporting our consideration of alternatives hypothesis, promotion-focused individuals reported greater attention to and pursuit of romantic alternatives than did prevention-focused individuals. In contrast, as is also displayed in Table 1, no evidence emerged for any differences between promotion-focused and prevention-focused individuals in their romantic standards, as assessed by their self-reported pickiness concerning potential partners.

Eliminating Alternative Explanations

To eliminate alternative explanations for these findings that involve differences between predominantly promotion-focused or prevention-focused individuals in their sociosexuality orientation or the strength of their sex drive, the above regression analyses were repeated with

the addition of these variables as covariates. Small to moderate zero-order correlations were observed between the regulatory focus index and both the sociosexuality, $r = .19, p = .032$, and sex drive, $r = .39, p < .001$, measures, with promotion-focused individuals displaying more comfort with casual sex and a stronger sex drive than prevention-focused individuals. However, after controlling for these effects, the regulatory focus index still significantly predicted both participants' attention to, $\beta = .24, t(104) = 2.70, p = .008$, and pursuit of, $\beta = .19, t(104) = 2.00, p = .048$, romantic alternatives. Thus the relationship between promotion or prevention concerns and the consideration of romantic alternatives presented in Table 1 cannot be explained by these other mechanisms.

Discussion

The results of Study 1 provide initial support for our primary consideration of alternatives hypothesis. Consistent with a more eager, advancement-oriented strategy of considering romantic alternatives, promotion-focused individuals reported greater attention to and pursuit of romantic alternatives than did prevention-oriented individuals. Moreover, these effects were independent of any differences in either participants' sociosexuality or sex drive. In contrast to the results for attending to and pursuing romantic alternatives, participants' predominant promotion or prevention concerns did not significantly predict their romantic standards. That is promotion-focused individuals did not report being any less picky concerning acceptable partners than did prevention-focused individuals.

Although clearly supportive of our hypotheses, the results of Study 1 also have several limitations. First, whereas in the present study participants described their general strategies when pursuing alternative relationship partners, more conclusive evidence could be gathered by measuring people's thoughts about their actual romantic partners. Second whereas the present study provides a retrospective and cross-sectional analysis of people's consideration of romantic alternatives, more convincing evidence could be provided by ongoing, longitudinal analyses. Finally, whereas the present study focused solely upon our primary consideration of alternatives

hypothesis, the larger motivational model of this process we have proposed includes commitment and attenuation hypotheses as well. Thus the primary objective of Study 2 was to extend the results of Study 1 by addressing each of these limitations.

Study 2

In Study 2, we recruited a sample of participants who were involved in an established romantic relationship. After completing a measure of their predominant concerns with promotion or prevention at an initial session, participants evaluated the desirability of their romantic alternatives and their commitment to their current partner every other week for six months. In line with our consideration of alternatives hypothesis, we predicted that promotion-focused participants would generally evaluate their alternatives as more desirable than prevention-focused participants. Furthermore, in line with our commitment hypothesis, we predicted that increased commitment to one's current partner would generally predict a devaluation of one's romantic alternatives (see also Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Simpson, et al., 1990). However, in line with our attenuation hypothesis, we also predicted that increases in the perceived desirability of romantic alternatives associated with predominant promotion motivations would weaken the devaluation of these alternatives typically observed in more committed relationships. As in Study 1, to ensure that any observed differences in people's consideration of alternatives were not driven by other mechanisms involving sociosexuality orientations, self-esteem, or interpersonal attachment style, additional measures of these variables were administered at the initial session at the beginning of the study as well.

Method

Participants

Participants were 43 first-year university students (25 women, 18 men) whom we recruited via flyers posted around campus.¹ At study entry, most participants were 18 years old (although three were 17 and three were 19), and they had been involved with their dating partners for over one year on average ($M = 12.52$ months; $SD = 9.13$). Eligibility criteria required that each

participant be: (a) a first-year undergraduate at the university, (b) involved in a dating relationship of at least two months in duration, (c) a native English speaker, and (d) the only member of a given couple to participate in the study.

Procedure

The present study was part of a larger investigation of dating processes. After enrolling, participants were mailed a questionnaire packet which included a measure of the strength of their concerns with promotion or prevention, as well as measures of their self-esteem, sociosexuality, and attachment style. Participants then brought these completed questionnaires to an initial laboratory session, where we trained them on the logistics of completing the internet-based questionnaires. These online questionnaires included, among other measures, assessments of relationship commitment and of the desirability of the alternatives to one's current partner. Participants completed the first of these online questionnaires within the first two days after the laboratory session, and they completed subsequent questionnaires every other week for six months, for a total of 14 online waves. Unless otherwise noted, all items were assessed on scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), and all continuous variables were transformed into z-scores for analysis.

Participants who completed all components of the study were paid \$100; those who failed to complete one or more components were paid a prorated amount. Participant retention was excellent: All 43 participants completed the study, and they completed an average of 13.44 of the 14 online measures.

Measuring Concerns with Promotion or Prevention

As in Study 1, we used the Regulatory Focus Questionnaire (RFQ) to assess the strength of participants' concerns with promotion or prevention. Participants' predominant concerns with promotion versus prevention were again calculated by subtracting their responses to the prevention items from their responses to the promotion items to create a single regulatory focus

index (see Cesario et al., 2004; Higgins et al., 2001; Molden & Higgins, in press; Sassenberg, et al., 2007; Semin et al., 2005).

Measuring Commitment and the Desirability of Romantic Alternatives

We assessed *commitment* with a 2-item measure at each wave of the online questionnaires (“I am committed to maintaining this relationship in the long run” and “I think my partner is my ‘soulmate’”). These two items were highly correlated (across all 14 waves, α 's ranged from .70 to .88, with a mean of .78), and we included the second item to ensure that we adequately captured participants' psychological attachment to this partner (see Agnew et al., 1998; Arriaga & Agnew, 2001). Because all of the Study 2 participants were involved in established and stable romantic relationships, at each wave of the online questionnaire we specifically asked them to rate the perceived desirability of their alternatives to their current partner. This *evaluation of alternatives* was assessed with the following item: “The alternatives to my current relationship (including being on my own) are desirable.”

Measuring Sociosexuality, Self-Esteem, and Attachment Style

In Study 1, we only used a shortened version of Simpson and Gangestad's (1991) measure of sociosexuality. To ensure that this psychological construct was adequately captured, and thus adequately eliminated as an alternate explanation for our findings, in this study we used the full 7-item measure. Furthermore, to rule out additional alternative mechanisms for any observed differences between promotion-focused and prevention-focused individuals' evaluation of romantic alternatives, we also included widely used, full-scale measures of self-esteem (e.g., “I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others”; Rosenberg, 1965) and attachment style (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). The attachment style measure included two dimensions, *anxious* attachment (e.g., “I need a lot of reassurance that I am loved by my partner”) and *avoidant* attachment (“I prefer not to be too close to romantic partners”).

Analysis Strategy

Because participants completed the evaluation of alternatives measure up to 14 times (once at each online wave), this data set has a 2-level nested structure (wave of online questionnaire nested within participant). We accounted for this nonindependence in participants' responses by employing multilevel data analytic strategies (Kenny, Kashy, & Bolger, 1998; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Given that we had an average of 13.44 level 1 observations nested within each level 2 unit, we permitted intercept terms and the slope terms for our only time-varying independent variable (commitment) to vary randomly.

Results

Primary Hypothesis Tests

We initially tested our hypotheses with a two-step, hierarchical procedure. In the first step of the analysis, the overall consideration of alternatives and commitment hypotheses were tested by simultaneously predicting participants' evaluation of their romantic alternatives from their predominant promotion or prevention concerns and their reported commitment to their current partner in a multilevel regression model. The results displayed in Figure 1 supported both of these hypotheses. Promotion-focused individuals evaluated their romantic alternatives as more desirable than did prevention-focused individuals, $\beta = .28$, $t(499) = 3.03$, $p = .003$, and individuals who reported a stronger commitment to their current partner evaluated their alternatives as less desirable than did individuals who reported a weaker commitment to their current partner, $\beta = -.39$, $t(33) = -5.13$, $p < .001$.

In the second step of the analysis, the attenuation hypothesis was tested by adding a regulatory focus X commitment interaction term to the above multilevel model. As also displayed in Figure 1, this hypothesis was supported as well by the significant interaction term, $\beta = .13$, $t(499) = 2.28$, $p = .023$. Tests of simple slopes performed 1 SD above (representing promotion-focused individuals) and below (representing prevention-focused individuals) the 0-point of the regulatory focus index confirmed that, although the overall commitment effect remained significant in both cases, the association between stronger commitment and less desirable ratings

of romantic alternatives was attenuated for promotion-focused individuals, $\beta = -.34$, $t(32) = -4.72$, $p < .001$, as compared to prevention-focused individuals, $\beta = -.60$, $t(32) = -5.44$, $p < .001$.

Eliminating Alternative Explanations

To eliminate alternative explanations for these findings that involve differences between predominantly promotion-focused or prevention-focused individuals in their sociosexuality, self-esteem, or attachment style, the above two-step multilevel regression analyses were repeated with the addition of these variables as covariates. No significant zero-order correlations were observed between the regulatory focus index and participants' sociosexuality, $r = -.22$, $p = .164$, or anxious attachment, $r = -.15$, $p = .327$. Moderate zero-order correlations were observed between the regulatory focus index and participants' self-esteem, $r = .37$, $p = .014$, and avoidant attachment, $r = -.33$, $p = .032$, such that promotion-focused individuals had higher self-esteem and were less avoidantly attached than prevention-focused individuals. However, in the first step of the regression model, the simple effects of predominant promotion or prevention concerns, $\beta = .35$, $t(499) = 3.88$, $p < .001$, and commitment, $\beta = -.35$, $t(33) = -4.51$, $p < .001$, both remained significant when simultaneously controlling for all of these additional variables. In the second step of the regression model, the regulatory focus X commitment interaction effect remained significant as well, $\beta = .11$, $t(531) = 2.47$, $p = .014$. Thus, once again, the relationship between promotion or prevention concerns and the evaluation of romantic alternatives presented in Figure 1 cannot be explained by these other mechanisms.

Discussion

The results of Study 2 provide additional support for our primary consideration of alternatives hypothesis. As is again consistent with a more eager, advancement-oriented strategy of considering romantic alternatives, promotion-focused individuals evaluated their romantic alternatives as more desirable than did prevention-focused individuals, even when they were currently in an established relationship. The results of this longitudinal study also provide initial support for our commitment and attenuation hypotheses. Although, overall, the more committed

participants reported they currently were to their partner, the less desirable they evaluated their romantic alternatives (see also Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Simpson, et al., 1990), this effect was significantly weaker for promotion-focused participants. That is, the eager strategies of considering alternatives preferred by these individuals partially counteracted the typical effects of commitment on people's perceptions of other potential partners. Moreover, these effects were all independent of any differences in participants' sociosexuality orientation, self-esteem, or attachment style

One small caveat to these findings is that our primary measure of people's evaluation of alternatives was not completely restricted to the ratings of other potential romantic partners and also included the option of "being on one's own". Although there is therefore a chance that the results of this study could at least partially reflect differences in participants' evaluations of a *nonromantic* pursuit, the observed effect of commitment on the evaluation measure argues against this possibility. That is, because previous research has shown that increased relational involvement specifically predicts perceptions of the desirability of alternative partners but *not* perceptions of the desirability of spending time alone (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989), the alternatives measure we used here appears to be largely capturing the former rather the latter. Nonetheless, to clarify this issue, we employed a more focused measure of people's evaluations of romantic alternatives in Study 4.

Taken together, the results from Studies 1 and 2 have provided evidence that promotion-focused individuals more readily attend to, more positively evaluate, and more vigorously pursue romantic alternatives than do prevention-focused individuals, but do not report being more picky about whom they will accept as a romantic partner. Moreover, among those in established relationships, increased commitment to one's current partner was not as strongly related to the devaluation of alternative partners for promotion-focused as compared to prevention-focused individuals. However, with the exception of a few measures, these previous studies have primarily focused on people's considerations of romantic alternatives in the context of established

relationships. The primary objective of Studies 3 and 4 was therefore to examine our consideration of alternatives, commitment, and attenuation hypotheses in the context of developing romantic relationships.

Study 3

In Study 3, participants completed questionnaires about their past and current relationship status, along with measures of their concerns with promotion or prevention, self-esteem, self-control, and attachment style. In line with our consideration of alternatives hypothesis, we predicted that promotion-focused individuals would report a greater frequency of both past and current romantic relationships than would prevention-focused individuals. That is, if predominant promotion motivations do indeed lead to increased attention to, more positive evaluation of, and more vigorous pursuit of romantic alternatives, then individuals with these motivations would, on average, be expected to end up establishing more romantic relationships.

Method

Participants

Participants were 239 university students (133 women, 106 men) who volunteered in exchange for course credit. Participants averaged 18.71 years of age ($SD = 1.18$).

Procedure and Measures

As part of a large mass-testing session, participants completed a packet of questionnaires that included (among other measures not relevant for this study) measures of their promotion or prevention concerns (the RFQ as in Studies 1 and 2; Higgins et al., 2001). As in previous studies, participants' predominant concerns with promotion versus prevention were again calculated by subtracting their responses to the prevention items from their responses to the promotion items to create a single regulatory focus index. The questionnaire packet also included measures of self-esteem [the Rosenberg (1965) scale as in Study 2]; self-control (e.g., "I am good at resisting temptation"), as assessed by a measure developed by Tangney, Baumeister, and Boone (2004); and attachment style (e.g., "It is easy for me to become emotionally close to others. I am

comfortable depending on them and having them depend on me. I don't worry about being alone or having others not accept me"), as assessed by a measure developed by Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991). The attachment measured included indices of both participants' anxious and avoidant attachment style (see Brennan et al., 1998). Unless otherwise noted, all items were assessed on scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), and all continuous variables were transformed into z-scores for analysis. Within the questionnaire packet, participants also indicated, "Yes" or "No", both whether they were currently in or had ever been in a "committed romantic relationship".

Results

Primary Hypothesis Tests

Overall, 69% of participants reported having ever been in a romantic relationship and 31% of participants reported currently being in a romantic relationship. The associations between participants' predominant promotion or prevention concerns and their likelihood of past and current romantic relationships (coded as 0 = "No" and 1 = "Yes") were initially tested using simple logistic regression analyses. As is consistent with our consideration of alternatives hypothesis, promotion-focused individuals were significantly more likely to have ever been, $\exp(B) = 1.67$, $t(237) = 3.27$, $p = .001$, and to currently be, in a relationship, $\exp(B) = 1.40$, $t(236) = 2.37$, $p = .018$, than prevention-focused individuals.

Eliminating Alternative Explanations

To again eliminate alternative explanations for these findings that involve differences between predominantly promotion-focused or prevention-focused individuals in their self-esteem, self-control, or attachment style, the above analyses were repeated with the additional of these variables as covariates. Small to moderate zero-order correlations were observed between the regulatory focus index and self-esteem, $r = .26$, $p < .001$, self-control, $r = -.14$, $p = .029$, anxious attachment, $r = -.23$, $p = <.001$, and avoidant attachment, $r = -.19$, $p = .004$. Promotion-focused individuals tended to (a) have higher self-esteem, (b) have less self-control, (c) be less anxiously

attached, and (d) be less avoidantly attached than did prevention-focused individuals. However, even when controlling for these associations, the regulatory focus index still significantly predicted the likelihood of both past, $\exp(B) = 1.58$, $t(231) = 2.67$, $p = .008$, and current, $\exp(B) = 1.40$, $t(230) = 2.16$, $p = .031$, relationships. Thus, once again, the relationship between promotion or prevention concerns and the likelihood of previous or current romantic relationships cannot be explained by these other mechanisms.

Discussion

Overall, Study 3 provides preliminary evidence that, in addition to influencing the consideration of romantic alternatives within established relationships, participants' predominant promotion or prevention concerns are associated with their likelihood of initiating and developing such relationships as well. That is, the eager approach to considering romantic alternatives – perceiving many people as potential partners and being more likely to pursue relationships with these individuals – associated with stronger promotion motivations in Studies 1 and 2 also appears to predict a greater frequency of actually obtaining relationship partners. Moreover, these results were independent of participants' self-esteem, self-control, or attachment style.

Although consistent with our hypotheses, the results of this study do not provide any insight into the role that an increased consideration of alternatives might play in the relationship formation process itself. Study 4, was therefore intended to extend these results by more closely examining the role of participants' attention to, evaluation, and pursuit of romantic alternatives during the process of relationship formation. Study 4 also sought to extend the previous studies by returning to the question of people's standards for potential relationship partners and providing a more thorough examination of possible differences in the standards that promotion-focused versus prevention-focused individuals hold for those they consider possible romantic interests.

Study 4

In Study 4 participants initially completed a measure of their concerns with promotion or prevention and several of the consideration of alternatives measures that were included in Study

1. They then attended a *speed-dating* event where they had brief interactions with and evaluated approximately 12 potential relationship partners. Finally, following this event, participants completed a month-long longitudinal study concerning their romantic interest in these and other potential relationship partners. In line with our consideration of alternatives hypothesis, we predicted that, as compared to prevention-focused individuals, promotion-focused individuals should (a) show evidence of greater pursuit of romantic partners during the speed dating event, (b) attend to a greater number of romantic interests following the speed-dating event, and (c) generally evaluate their alternatives to each of these romantic interests as more desirable. Furthermore, in line with our commitment hypothesis, we also predicted that, overall, as participants became more committed to developing a relationship with one of their particular romantic interests they would view their alternatives to this interest as less desirable (cf., Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Simpson, et al., 1990). However, in line with our attenuation hypothesis, we predicted that this effect of commitment would be significantly weaker for promotion-focused individuals.

The speed-dating events in Study 4 also presented an opportunity to more closely examine potential differences in people's standards for an acceptable romantic partner. During these events everyone meets and evaluates the exact same set of eligible partners. Thus, in the context of this closed field of possibilities, participants' ratings of how desirable they find the individuals they meet, and their reports of whether or not they'd like to see them again, directly reflect their standards of who qualifies as a potential partner. Based on the results of Study 1, which showed no differences in promotion-focused or prevention-focused individuals' reported pickiness concerning romantic partners, we tentatively predicted that there would also be no differences in the standards displayed during the speed-dating event.

Method

Participants

Participants were 163 university students (81 women, 82 men) who were recruited through campus-wide advertisements and emails. They received \$5 for completing an initial questionnaire, \$3 for each of up to 10 follow-up questionnaires, and a \$10 bonus if they completed at least nine of these follow-up questionnaires. Participants averaged 19.56 years of age ($SD = 1.02$).

Procedure

Study 4 was part of a broad investigation of romantic attraction. This study consisted of three distinct components. In Part 1, participants completed a *pre-event* questionnaire over the internet that assessed their concerns with promotion or prevention and their attention to and pursuit of romantic alternatives on measures similar to Study 1.

In Part 2 of the study, participants attended a speed-dating event. Approximately 10 days after completing the pre-event questionnaire, they attended one of seven 2-hour speed-dating sessions that were hosted on campus. At these sessions, participants went on 4-minute “dates” with each of the ~12 opposite-sex individuals present (the range was 9 to 13 dates, depending on session attendance), and completed a brief *interaction-record* questionnaire following each date. After the sessions, participants returned home and indicated through a website especially created for the study whom they would or would not be interested in seeing again. If two participants were both interested in one another, they were notified of this *match*. Overall, the speed-dating events produced a total of 206 matching pairs, for a mean number of 2.53 ($SD = 2.02$) matches per participant.

In Part 3 of the study, participants completed a series of 10 *follow-up* questionnaires, which were administered through the study website. Participants completed the first of these 10 questionnaires two days after the speed-dating event, and they completed the rest of them every third day over the ensuing month. Of the 92% of speed-dating participants who elected to take part in the follow-up portion of the study, 69% completed at least 9 of the 10 questionnaires. Furthermore, on these follow-up questionnaires, participants reported not only on matches whom

they met at the speed-dating event, but also on any other romantic interests they happened to meet through other avenues (i.e., *write-ins*). Participants reported on a total of 143 write-ins over the course of the follow-up month; for participants who took part in the follow-up portion, the average number of write-ins reported on was 0.95 ($Mdn = 1$, $SD = 0.73$).

Because of time constraints, in all parts of the study, the variables of interest were generally assessed with short 1- to 2-item measures, which were adapted from longer questionnaires where possible. Unless otherwise noted, all items were assessed on scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), and all continuous variables were transformed into z-scores for analysis.

Measuring Concerns with Promotion or Prevention

We assessed the strength of participants' concerns with promotion or prevention on the pre-event questionnaire (Part 1) using an abbreviated, 4-item measure. Two items were taken directly from the RFQ (Higgins et al., 2001) used in all of the previous studies. The promotion item was, "I have often accomplished things that got me 'psyched' to work even harder", and the prevention item was "Growing up, I typically obeyed rules and regulations that were established by my parents." Two additional items, which were derived directly from another widely used measure of promotion or prevention concerns (see Higgins, Shah, & Friedman, 1997; Liberman, et al., 1999; Liberman, et al., 2001; Molden & Higgins, 2004, in press), were created especially for this study. The promotion item was "It is exceptionally important to me that I fulfill my hopes and aspirations" and the prevention item was "It is exceptionally important to me that I fulfill my duties and responsibilities." Unfortunately, the reliabilities of these abbreviated promotion ($\alpha = .45$) and prevention ($\alpha = .33$) scales in our sample of participants were low. However, to reduce error variance as much as possible through aggregation, we continued to average the two separate promotion items and prevention items before creating the regulatory focus index as in previous studies. Because this study included several dependent variables that were also featured in

Study 1, the validity of this approach can be directly tested by comparing these earlier results using the full RFQ scale with the present results (see below).

Measuring Reported Attention to and Pursuit of Romantic Alternatives

In addition to the measure of promotion or prevention concerns, the pre-event questionnaire included versions of the same *reported attention to* and *reported pursuit* of romantic alternatives measures that were included in Study 1. The attention measure consisted of a single item from the longer scale used previously (“In general, I tend to have many options for romantic partners”), and the pursuit measure consisted of the same 2 items ($\alpha = .69$) used previously.

Measuring Romantic Standards

The pre-event questionnaire also included the 1-item *perceived romantic standards* measure from Study 1 (“I am very picky about my choice of romantic partners”). However, in this study, beyond these reports of their romantic standards, it was also possible to directly observe such standards as reflected by participants’ ratings of the potential partners they met at the speed-dating event on the interaction-record questionnaire (Part 2). As noted above, within each speed-dating session, all participants met and evaluated the same set of potential partners. Thus, within this closed field of romantic possibilities, if promotion-focused individuals are setting lower standards for designating someone a romantic interest, they should, on average, evaluate these possibilities as more attractive than prevention-focused individuals. These evaluations were assessed in two ways. The first was participants’ ratings of their *overall attraction* to each of their speed-dating partners, as assessed by a 3-item measure, (“I really liked my interaction partner,” “I was sexually attracted to my interaction partner,” and “I am likely to say ‘yes’ to [seeing] my interaction partner [again]”; $\alpha = .86$). The second was the total proportion of potential partners the participants *selected* as wanting to see again on the study website after the event had ended.

Measuring Behavioral Pursuit of Speed-Dating Partners

Independent of participants’ overall attraction to and selection of the potential romantic alternatives at the speed-dating event, we also measured how vigorously they actually pursued

these partners during their 4-minute “dates.” Even if promotion-focused participants do not differ from prevention-focused participants in their standards for evaluating the individuals they met while speed-dating (i.e., how attractive they find these individuals to be), they might still differ in how vigorously they convey their interest in these potential partners. That is, as is consistent with their increased tendency to report generally expressing greater romantic interest, as observed in Study 1, promotion-focused individuals should also be more likely to express such interest in the partners they meet during the speed-dating event. Thus participants’ pursuit of romantic alternatives in this context was measured in terms of their speed-dating partners’ perceptions of the overall interest that participants communicated, as assessed on the interaction-record questionnaire by a 2-item measure (“I think that my interaction partner really liked me,” and “I think that my interaction partner was sexually attracted to me”; $\alpha = .91$).

Measuring Attention to Alternative Partners Following the Speed-Dating Event

On the 10 follow-up questionnaires (Part 3) that they completed every three days for the month following the speed-dating event, participants indicated the status of their relationship with all the individuals with whom they were matched at the event plus any additional romantic interests they had met through other means (i.e., the write-ins). Participants were asked “What is the current status of your relationship with [partner name]?” and could choose any one of the following responses: (a) dating seriously, (b) dating casually, (c) friend with romantic potential, (d) acquaintance with romantic potential, (e) friend without romantic potential, (f) acquaintance without romantic potential, (g) no relationship at all. The study website automatically inserted into this question the actual first name of each speed-dating match or write-in (whose names participants provided when they initially identified them).

For each of the follow-up questionnaires, we tallied the total number of individuals that participants reported were romantic interests (category a, b, c, or d), which served as an index of their attention to potential relationship partners. Even if participants come away from the speed-dating event with an equivalent number of matches, this measure assesses differences in the

extent to which these matches continue to be thought of as romantic interests, as well as differences in the number of new individuals who become classified as romantic interests following the event. At each follow-up wave, the number of potential romantic partners to whom participants were attending ranged from 0 to 4 (*Mdn* = 1).

Measuring Commitment and the Desirability of Romantic Alternatives

In addition to identifying on the follow-up questionnaire whether or not their speed-dating matches and write-ins were romantic interests, analogous to the measure in Study 2, participants' completed a 1-item *evaluation of alternatives* measure assessing the perceived desirability of their romantic alternatives to each match or write-in ("My romantic alternatives to [partner name] are desirable"). Furthermore, to assess how the seriousness of any developing romantic interest might influence this evaluation of alternatives, for any individual whom participants classified as a romantic interest (by the standards outlined above), participants completed a 2-item measure of their *commitment* to pursuing a relationship with this person(s). These items were: "I am committed to pursuing/maintaining a romantic relationship with [partner name]" and "I would like to have a serious relationship with [partner name]" ($\alpha = .73$).

Measuring Sociosexuality, Sex Drive, and Romantic Appeal

Finally, to once again rule out alternative explanations for any effects of concerns with promotion or prevention on participants' consideration of alternatives, on the pre-event questionnaire we included a 3-item measure of participants' sociosexuality orientation ($\alpha = .86$), which included the two items from Study 1 plus a third attitudinal item, "Sex without love is okay." (see Simpson & Gangestad, 1991; Webster & Bryan, 2007). The pre-event questionnaire also included the same 2-item sex drive measure ($\alpha = .92$) used in Study 1. Furthermore, data from the speed-dating event also allowed us to assess participants' *objective romantic appeal* in two ways. We first calculated the proportion of people at the speed-dating event who selected the participant as someone whom they would want to see again. In addition, six undergraduate coders (three male, three female) who did not participate in the study itself rated the physical

attractiveness of each participant from a head-and-shoulders photograph that was taken at the speed-dating event ($\alpha = .76$).

Analysis Strategy

For analyses of the dependent variables in the pre-event questionnaire (Part 1) and the summary measures of the proportion of speed-dating partners selected (or whom participants were selected by), we employed standard ordinary least squares regression techniques, as these dependent variables were assessed at the “person level” (i.e., each participant has only one score). For analyses of participants’ ratings of speed-dating partner attractiveness and speed-dating partners’ ratings of participants’ conveyed interest on the interaction-record questionnaire (Part 2), we utilized Kenny’s (1994) Social Relations Model for the analysis of dyadic data. This model estimates three separate effects: *actor effects* representing a person’s average impression of all interaction partners, *partner effects* representing the average response a person elicits from all interaction partners, and *relationship effects* representing a person’s impression of a particular individual beyond the general actor and partner effects. Thus, participants’ overall impressions of speed-dating partner attractiveness were assessed as actor effects and speed-dating partners’ ratings of participants’ conveyed attraction were assessed as partner effects, both of which were calculated using a computer program especially developed for these analyses (WinBlocko; Kenny, 1995). Finally, for the analyses on the dependent variables in the follow-up questionnaire (Part 3), which had either a 2-level nested structure (follow-up wave nested within participant), or, for participants’ evaluation of the desirability of alternative partners, a 3-level structure (follow-up wave nested within individual match/write-in, and individual match/write-in nested within participant), we accounted for the nonindependence in participants’ responses by employing multilevel data analytic strategies (Kenny et al., 1998; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). All intercept terms were allowed to vary randomly. Although commitment was a time-varying predictor variable, we treated its slope effects as fixed because there were only a small number of nested

observations within each higher-level unit (an average of 1.96 targets for each participant and an average of 3.57 reports for each target; see Kenny, Mannetti, Pierro, Livi, & Kashy, 2002).

Results

Primary Hypothesis Tests

Our primary consideration of alternatives hypothesis was first tested using regression analyses in which participants' predominant promotion or prevention concerns were used to predict their attention to, evaluation, and pursuit of romantic alternatives (using ordinary least squares regression, social relations model estimates, or multilevel regressions where appropriate). The results of these analyses are displayed in Table 2. Supporting our consideration of alternatives hypothesis, and replicating Study 1, promotion-focused individuals reported greater attention to and pursuit of romantic alternatives on the pre-event questionnaire than did prevention-focused individuals. Also replicating Study 1, there was no association between the regulatory focus index and participants' romantic standards as assessed by their perceived pickiness for potential partners. In addition to supporting our hypotheses, the close correspondence between these effects on those reported in Table 1, provides evidence for the validity of the abbreviated measure of participants' promotion or prevention concerns used in this study as compared to the full-length measure used in Studies 1 - 3.

In addition to these results from the pre-event questionnaire, results from the speed-dating sessions and follow-up questionnaire supported our consideration of alternatives hypothesis as well. As is also displayed in Table 2, there was no association between the regulatory focus index and participants' romantic standards in terms of the overall attraction participants reported for their speed-dating partners or the proportion of these individuals they selected as someone they would prefer to see again. However, promotion-focused participants did show marginally greater pursuit of their partners during the speed-dating events in the form of the interest they conveyed during the interactions they had with these partners. That is, whereas stronger promotion or prevention concerns did not affect how attractive participants thought their speed-dating partners

were, these concerns did affect the extent to which they communicated their interest in these potential partners. Also, although they did not differ in the proportion of matches they achieved during the speed-dating event, $\beta = .05$, $t(161) = 0.63$, $p = .531$, as compared to prevention-focused participants, promotion-focused participants showed greater attention to potential romantic partners following this event, as assessed by the number of these matches, or anyone else they had met in the interim, they considered romantic interests. That is, whereas stronger promotion or prevention concerns did not affect how many potential partners participants had identified at the end of the speed-dating event, these concerns did affect the extent to which these partners, and any other potential partners they had encountered, remained potential romantic interests over the course of the following month. Finally, on the whole, promotion-focused individuals also evaluated their romantic alternatives to any particular person in whom they were interested during the follow-up portion of the study as more desirable than did prevention-focused individuals.

To further test our commitment and attenuation hypotheses concerning the desirability of participants' romantic alternatives, we conducted a two-step hierarchical multilevel regression analysis as in Study 2. In the first step of the analysis, participants' evaluations of the desirability of alternative romantic partners were predicted from their predominant promotion or prevention concerns and their commitment to their current romantic interests. As displayed in Figure 2, promotion-focused participants were again found to evaluate their alternatives as more desirable overall than prevention-focused individuals, $\beta = .16$, $t(607) = 2.41$, $p = .016$, whereas individuals who reported a stronger commitment to their current partner also evaluated their alternatives as less desirable than did individuals who reported a weaker commitment to their current partner, $\beta = -.29$, $t(607) = -6.07$, $p < .001$. In the second step of the analysis, the regulatory focus \times commitment interaction term was added to the regression model. As also displayed in Figure 2, this interaction effect was significant as well, $\beta = .08$, $t(606) = 1.97$, $p = .049$. Tests of simple slopes performed 1 SD above (representing promotion-focused individuals) and below

(representing prevention-focused individuals) the 0-point of the regulatory focus index confirmed that, although the overall commitment effect remained significant in both cases, the association between stronger commitment and less desirable ratings of romantic alternatives was attenuated for promotion-focused individuals, $\beta = -.23$, $t(606) = -4.58$, $p < .001$, as compared to prevention-focused individuals, $\beta = -.38$, $t(606) = -5.21$, $p < .001$.

Eliminating Alternative Explanations

To eliminate alternative explanations for these findings that involve differences between predominantly promotion-focused or prevention-focused individuals in their sociosexuality, sex-drive, or romantic appeal, the above simple and two-step regression analyses were repeated with the addition of these variables as covariates. No significant zero-order correlations were observed between the regulatory focus index and participants' sex-drive, $r = .09$, $p = .240$, or their romantic appeal as assessed by either the proportion of people who selected the participant as someone they would like to see again, $r = .09$, $p = .249$, or participants' physical attractiveness, $r = .13$, $p = .105$. A small correlation was observed between the regulatory focus index and participants' sociosexuality orientation, $r = .23$, $p = .003$. However, repeating the above analyses controlling for all of these additional measures did not substantially change the significance of any of the effects reported, $t_s(150 - 1652) = 1.66 - 2.44$, $p_s = .097 - .016$. Overall, these analyses thus suggest that the associations of regulatory focus with the consideration of romantic alternatives observed in this study cannot be explained by promotion-focused individuals having a stronger sex drive than prevention-focused individuals, having a less restricted sociosexuality orientation or having greater appeal as a romantic partner.

Discussion

The results of Study 4 further support all three of our primary hypotheses. As is consistent with a more eager, advancement-oriented strategy of considering romantic alternatives, promotion-focused individuals not only reported greater general attention to and pursuit of such alternatives, they also more vigorously courted potential romantic partners during a speed-dating

event, attended to a greater number of potential romantic interests in the month following that event, and evaluated their romantic alternatives to these interests as more desirable. In addition to this increased consideration of alternatives overall, promotion-focused individuals were also less influenced by increasing commitment to developing a relationship with a particular romantic interest when evaluating the desirability of alternative partners. That is, although increased commitment did, on the whole, reduce participants' evaluation of these alternatives, this effect was significantly weaker among promotion-focused individuals. Moreover, all of these effects were independent of participants' sociosexuality orientation, sex-drive, or romantic appeal. Thus, the findings of this study conceptually replicate Studies 1 and 2 and provide strong evidence for the influence of participants' promotion or prevention concerns on their consideration of romantic alternatives in developing new relationships and well as in maintaining those that are already established.

General Discussion

The processes by which people attend to, evaluate, and pursue alternative romantic partners can have a profound influence on how they establish and maintain romantic relationships. In this article, we have presented four studies that investigated how the strength of people's basic motivations for growth and advancement, or promotion, versus the strength of their basic motivations for safety and security, or prevention, affect such processes. These studies, have repeatedly shown that a predominant focus on promotion is associated with an eager approach to considering romantic alternatives that involves remaining open to and pursuing a wide variety of partners, whereas a predominant focus on prevention is associated with a vigilant approach to considering romantic alternatives that involves more narrowly concentrating on a few favored partners. Moreover, such associations were observed within both established and developing relationships and when investigated with both cross-sectional and longitudinal methods.

The differences observed between promotion-focused or prevention-focused individuals are illustrated by two central findings. The first finding was that stronger promotion versus prevention concerns were associated with an increased consideration of possible romantic alternatives. As compared to prevention-focused individuals, promotion-focused individuals (a) generally reported increased attention to and an increased pursuit of possible romantic partners (Studies 1 and 4), (b) displayed more vigorous pursuit of their partners during a speed-dating event and gave greater attention to the romantic potential of these partners in the month following the event (Study 4), and (c) actually developed romantic relationships with greater frequency (Study 3). Moreover, both when contemplating their romantic alternatives to particular individuals in whom they were developing an interest (Study 4) and when contemplating their romantic alternatives to a partner with whom they had a well-established relationship (Study 2), promotion-focused individuals evaluated these alternatives as more desirable than did prevention-focused individuals. The second finding was that although, as in past work, increased commitment to either a developing or established relationship was associated with less positive evaluations of alternative partners overall (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Simpson, et al., 1990), this effect of commitment was attenuated for those with stronger promotion versus prevention concerns (Studies 2 and 4). That is, although promotion-focused individuals still evaluated alternative partners as less desirable the more committed they were to a particular relationship, the influence of such commitment was markedly less than it was for prevention-focused individuals.

To further bolster our proposal that these observed differences were due to the basic eager versus vigilant approaches to decision making favored by promotion-focused or prevention-focused individuals, respectively (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Friedman & Förster, 2001; Liberman et al., 1999; Liberman et al., 2001; Molden & Higgins, 2004, in press), we performed a variety of covariate analyses to eliminate alternative theoretical accounts. These analyses revealed that although there were, at times, small to moderate correlations between people's predominant concerns with promotion or prevention and other motivational constructs, the differences between

participants' attention to, evaluation, and pursuit of romantic alternatives could not simply be explained by promotion-focused individuals' (a) greater acceptance or enjoyment of casual sexual relationships, (b) stronger experiences of sexual desire, (c) higher self-confidence or self-regard, (d) lower self-control, or (e) less anxious or avoidant attachment styles. Although, future research could more closely investigate the precise mechanisms by which stronger concerns with promotion versus prevention have these effects, at present, the general preferences for eager or vigilant strategies of considering alternatives during decision making that have repeatedly been demonstrated in previous research (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Friedman & Förster, 2001; Liberman et al., 1999; Liberman et al., 2001; Molden & Higgins, 2004, in press; see Molden et al., 2008) appears to be the most plausible account for the current findings.

One additional finding of note in the present studies was that the differences between the eager approach to pursuing romantic alternatives preferred by promotion-focused individuals and the vigilant approach preferred by prevention-focused individuals did not extend to the general standards they set for whom might be considered a potential romantic interest (cf. Schmitt & Buss, 1993). Stronger concerns with promotion versus prevention did not have any associations with either general reports of how picky participants were when selecting potential partners or with their attraction to and preferences for potential partners while speed-dating, (Studies 1 and 4). These results further suggest that the differences illustrated in the present studies are not due to variations in how discerning people are when searching for someone with whom to share a romantic relationship, but instead are driven by variations in the extent of this search and the enthusiasm of the pursuit that occurs when individuals who meet their standards are found.

Although the results of the four studies described here are clear and consistent, there are a few limitations to these results. First, there were possible uncertainties concerning the measurement of some constructs in Studies 2 and 4. In Study 2, the item assessing people's evaluation of romantic alternatives left open the possibility that people's responses reflected their impressions of the alternative of being on their own as well as being with a different partner.

However, as noted earlier, because commitment to one's current partner has not been found to influence people's preferences for being on their own (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989), the significant effects of commitment observed in this study argues against this possibility. Furthermore, the more precise item used to measure people's evaluation of alternatives in Study 4 produced nearly identical results. Second, in Study 4, the abbreviated measures of people's promotion or prevention concerns had low reliability. Nonetheless, these abbreviated measures directly replicated the results of both Studies 1 and 2. It is thus perhaps a testament to the robustness of the effects of people's concerns with promotion or prevention observed in Study 4 that they so clearly emerged despite the increased error variance caused by the less reliable measures.

Another limitation of the present studies is that we have only examined differences in people's predominant concerns with promotion or prevention in terms of chronic individual differences. Although these chronic differences were strong, and unique, predictors of people's attention to, evaluation, and pursuit of romantic alternatives, previous research has repeatedly shown that stronger concerns with promotion or prevention can also be temporarily induced by particular circumstances or incentives that emphasize basic needs for growth or security (Higgins, 1997; Molden et al., 2008). Thus an interesting topic for future research would be to more closely investigate whether situations that activate a predominant promotion or prevention focus might also influence people's consideration of romantic alternatives and the influence that commitment has upon this consideration.

Despite these caveats, on the whole, the new motivational perspective on the consideration of potential romantic partners that we introduce in this article makes several contributions to the literature on how people develop and maintain close relationships. First, instead of focusing on what *types* of partners people most prefer (Buss, 1989; Finke & Penton-Voak, 2002; Sprecher & Regan, 2002), our perspective focuses on *how many* partners people attend to, evaluate, and pursue. As the findings of the present studies indicate, the promotion-focused or prevention-focused motivations that influence the consideration of more or fewer

potential partners can have important effects on how likely people are to initiate romantic relationships, as well as the extent to which they continue to dwell on other romantic possibilities when they are in an established relationship. Thus, the motivational analysis we provide suggests another avenue by which to approach the study of how people evaluate potential relationship partners.

An additional contribution of the present studies is the extension of research on how increasing commitment to a particular relationship partner affects the desirability of alternative partners from established relationships to developing relationships. Although people who are thinking about someone whom they merely consider a romantic interest are perhaps not truly “committed” to this person in the traditional sense of how this construct is studied in the relationships literature (see Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996), it is interesting to note that merely a sense of a developing commitment to pursuing a serious relationship with someone appears to reduce people’s evaluation of alternative partners just as do actual feelings of commitment to an established relationship (cf. Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Simpson, et al., 1990). Moreover, the increased consideration of romantic alternatives by promotion-focused individuals in general was associated with the same attenuation of such commitment effects in both developing and established relationships. This is further indication that examining people’s concerns with promotion or prevention could lead to important insights concerning their evaluation of potential romantic partners, regardless of whether or not they are currently in a relationship.

Implications of a Promotion-Focused Consideration of Romantic Alternatives

Given our findings that predominantly promotion-focused individuals continue to evaluate their romantic alternatives as more desirable even as they become more committed to a developing or, as is perhaps more worrisome, an established relationship, there could be substantial costs to this approach to romantic relationships. Indeed, past research has repeatedly shown that the more people attend to (Miller, 1997) and positively evaluate (Bui et al., 1996; Rusbult, 1983) alternative partners, the less stable their relationships are and the more likely

these relationships are to dissolve. Thus it appears that, because of the eager way in which they generally prefer to consider alternatives, promotion-focused individuals could find it more difficult to sustain romantic relationships in the long run than do prevention-focused individuals.

However, given our findings that predominantly promotion-focused individuals are more likely to report initiating romantic relationships and more likely to convey their affection to those they find attractive, there could be substantial benefits to this approach to considering romantic alternatives as well. Indeed, knowledge of someone else's attraction has long been found to be a powerful predictor of people's own attraction (e.g., Curtis & Miller, 1986), which implies that conveying attraction to others could facilitate the development of romantic relationships. Thus, it appears that, again because of the eager way in which they generally prefer to consider alternatives, promotion-focused individuals could find it easier to initiate romantic relationships than do prevention-focused individuals (as is supported by the findings of Study 3).

Therefore, on the whole, there may be both costs and benefits to a more promotion-focused or prevention-focused strategy of considering romantic alternatives. Whereas the former may be more advantageous when attempting to initiate or develop a romantic relationship, the latter may be more advantageous after one has established, and is attempting to maintain such a relationship. Given that these different motivational orientations seem to be best suited to different stages of relationships, perhaps the most satisfied individuals are those who are initially more promotion-focused, but who gradually become more prevention-focused as the relationship deepens and they become more committed to their partner. The extent to which people's motivational orientations shift over the course of a relationship, and the influence this has on their relationship satisfaction, could be an important topic for further research.

Promotion- or Prevention-Focused Strategies and Approach or Avoidance Social Goals

In an extended program of research, Gable and colleagues have investigated the influence on people's close relationships of their stable or temporary *appetitive* motivations for approaching desired end states versus their *aversive* motivations for avoiding undesired end-

states (see Gable & Strachman, 2008). This research has repeatedly demonstrated that whereas approach-oriented goals tend to predict more positive relationship outcomes and increased satisfaction, avoidance-oriented relationship goals tend to predict more negative relationship outcomes and reduced satisfaction. For example, those who make personal sacrifices for their partner in the service of approach motivations (e.g., to express love or enhance intimacy) experience more positive affect, more closeness and satisfaction, and less conflict with their partner, whereas those who make sacrifices in the service of avoidance motivations (e.g., to avoid conflict or feelings of guilt) experience more negative affect, less closeness and satisfaction, and more conflict (Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005).

Although there are thematic similarities between the approach or avoidance motivational orientations studied by Gable and colleagues and the concerns with promotion or prevention examined in the present article, it is important to note that these constructs are both theoretically and empirically separate. First, the concerns with attainment and fulfilling hopes that define a promotion focus and the concerns with maintenance and fulfilling responsibilities that define a prevention focus both represent appetitive motivations (Higgins, 1997; Molden et al., 2008). That is, although people differ in how they experience concerns with attaining advancement versus maintaining security, as well as in the strategies they choose to address these concerns, both advancement and security are desired end-states that people work to approach. Thus, the fundamental distinction between concerns with promotion or prevention is not captured by the distinction between appetitive versus aversive motivations.

Furthermore, the results of the studies presented here demonstrate that it is concerns with prevention rather than promotion that predict a derogation of attractive alternatives to a current romantic interest or relationship partner. If prevention-focused individuals were more likely to experience or anticipate reduced relationship satisfaction, as would presumably be the case if they were generally motivated by avoidance-oriented relationship goals, one would instead expect increased thoughts about and more positive evaluations of alternatives to a current

romantic interest or partner (cf. Bui et al., 1996; Rusbult, 1983). That this pattern of findings did not emerge is further indication that concerns with promotion or prevention are distinct from general motivations for approach or avoidance (see also Förster, Higgins, & Idson, 1998; Higgins, Roney, Crowe, & Hynes, 1994). Thus, future research on how people's motivations influence their relationship processes might profit from simultaneously examining the distinct, and perhaps even interactive, effects of these two separate motivational variables.

Conclusions

The processes through which people choose romantic partners can have a profound influence on the way in which they develop and maintain romantic relationships. In the present article we have illustrated how differences in people's general concerns with promotion and advancement versus prevention and security affect their attention to, evaluation, and pursuit of romantic alternatives, and may therefore have important implications for their long-term relationship outcomes. Further exploring such implications from this new motivational perspective we have outlined for the evaluation potential relationship partners could bring new insights to the question of how two people make the transition from simple romantic interests to committed romantic partners.

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Footnotes

¹ An additional 26 participants who were initially recruited broke up with their partner during the course of the study. Given that the goal of Study 2 was to examine how the evaluation of romantic alternatives differs for predominantly promotion-focused or prevention-focused individuals who are involved in established and stable romantic relationships, and because previous studies have shown that perceptions of romantic alternatives differ dramatically depending upon whether one's relationship remained intact or dissolved (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989), we excluded these 26 participants from all analyses. There was no evidence that the 43 participants whose relationships remained intact differed in their predominant promotion or prevention concerns from the 26 participants whose relationships dissolved ($p = .780$).

Table 1.

Association of Predominant Concerns with Promotion or Prevention with the Consideration of Romantic Alternatives and Standards for Romantic Interest – Study 1

Dependent Measures	β	t	p
Consideration of Romantic Alternatives			
Reported Attention to Alternative Partners	.29	3.48	.001*
Reported Pursuit of Alternative Partners	.27	3.07	.003*
Romantic Standards			
Perceived Pickiness for Partners	-.06	-0.57	.568

Note: Positive associations represent increased consideration of alternatives and more stringent romantic standards for promotion-focused individuals whereas negative associations represent increased consideration of alternatives and more stringent romantic standards for prevention-focused individuals.

* indicates a statistically significant effect

Table 2

Association of Predominant Concerns with Promotion or Prevention with the Consideration of Romantic Alternatives and Standards for Romantic Interest – Study 4

Dependent Measures	β	t	p
Consideration of Romantic Alternatives			
Reported Attention to Alternative Partners	.23	3.00	.003**
Reported Pursuit of Alternative Partners	.24	3.12	.002**
Conveyed Interest in Speed-Dating Partners	.15	1.85	.067 [†]
Romantic Interests after Speed-Dating Events	.11	1.91	.056 [†]
Evaluation of Alternative Partners	.10	2.31	.021*
Romantic Standards			
Perceived Pickiness for Partners	.04	0.49	.625
Attraction to Speed-Dating Partners	-.05	-0.62	.534
Selection of Preferred Speed-Dating Partners	.05	0.68	.498

Note: Positive associations represent increased consideration of alternatives and more stringent romantic standards for promotion-focused individuals whereas negative associations represent increased consideration of alternatives and more stringent romantic standards for prevention-focused individuals.

* indicates a statistically significant effect; [†] indicates a marginally significant effect

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Evaluations of the desirability of one's romantic alternatives by promotion-focused and prevention-focused individuals who are high or low in their commitment to an established relationship – Study 2. Values are plotted at 1 SD above and below the 0 point of the regulatory focus index and 1 SD above and below the mean of reported commitment.

Figure 2. Evaluations of the desirability of one's romantic alternatives by promotion-focused and prevention-focused individuals who are high or low in their commitment to a newly developing relationship – Study 4. Values are plotted at 1 SD above and below the 0 point of the regulatory focus index and 1 SD above and below the mean of reported commitment.

Figure 1 - TOP

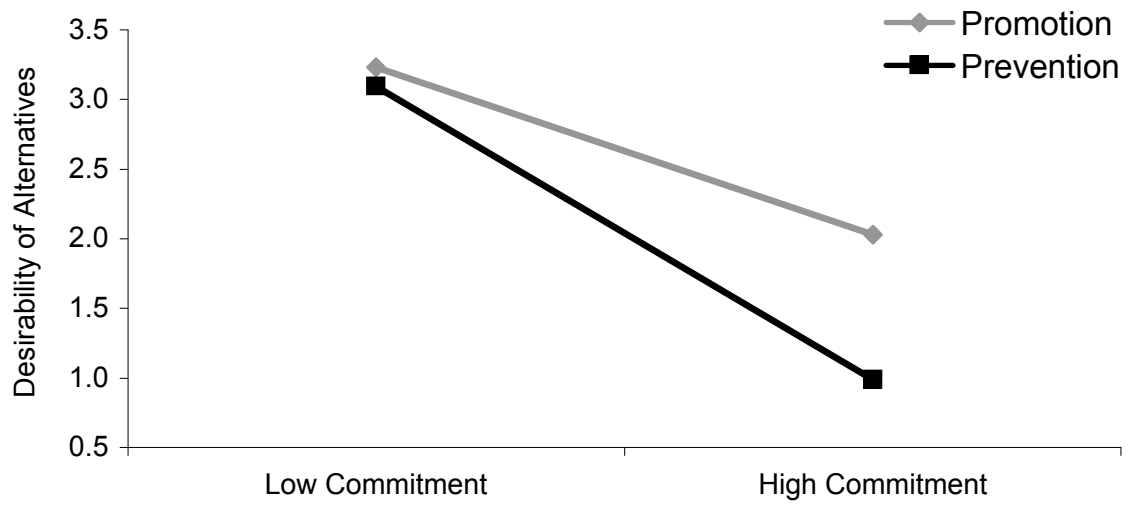


Figure 2 - TOP

