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# What Could Have Been: Predicted and Actual Exclusion by Potential Romantic Partners and Platonic Friends

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## ABSTRACT

Romantic partners are instrumental to more goals than friends, and therefore, people have more to lose when denied a romantic relationship than a friendship. We explored people's forecasted and experienced rejection by a potential romantic partner or friend. In Study 1, participants ($N = 1500$) reported their lay beliefs about which experience would hurt more. Twice as many people indicated that potential romantic (vs. friend) rejection would be worse. In Studies 2 and 3, participants ($N = 934$, 477 respectively) were accepted or rejected by potential romantic partners or friends. The source of the exclusion did not impact participants' forecasted or experienced affect or needs satisfaction. However, participants overestimated the pain of exclusion. Despite believing romantic rejection would hurt more when directly comparing it to platonic rejection and forecasting an exaggeration of this hurt, exclusion appears universally painful, and the potential relationship between the source and target matters little.

## 1 | Introduction

Initiating potential relationships can be interpersonally risky. You could gain a valuable relationship, but doing so makes you vulnerable to rejection. Although we often approach social interaction expecting to be included, this is not always the case: Most people are excluded on a weekly (Bernstein et al. 2021), maybe even daily (Nezlek et al. 2012), basis. Because most exclusion stems from strangers, or perhaps because it is easier to study in the lab, the literature largely focuses on the experience of exclusion by a forever stranger (someone who was a stranger going into the study and will always remain a stranger). But we commonly interact with strangers expecting the relationship to develop: We talk to a classmate to initiate a friendship, or we ask out a person at a bar hopeful for a romantic relationship to develop. These types of interactions with strangers lead to the question, 'How do people feel when they are rejected by someone they thought could be a close other?'

In the present work, we investigate this question by exploring the effect of being rejected (and accepted) by potential close others. However, the way that we approach and experience these interactions might depend on what we are hoping to gain from the potential relationship. Due to past experiences, we might know that it is more common to be rejected by potential friends than romantic partners. Or we may anticipate receiving more benefits from a romantic relationship than friendship, so we have much more to lose when we are denied that possibility. In the current research, we tested the effect of being accepted or rejected by a potential platonic friend or romantic partner where we predicted more negative effects of romantic rejection and more positive effects of romantic acceptance. We also explore internal attributions

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of the experience and perceived partner instrumentality of the potential close others as possible mechanisms of this effect.

## 2 | Social Exclusion and the Exclusion Source

Social exclusion involves being kept apart from other people, either physically or emotionally (Riva and Eck 2016). It is evolutionarily advantageous to detect exclusion quickly, and the temporal need threat model helps us understand this experience by describing it in three phases (Williams 2009). Once exclusion is detected, in the *reflexive* stage, the target immediately experiences decreased positive affect, increased negative affect, and thwarted basic psychological needs for belonging, self-esteem, control, meaningful existence and certainty (Hales and Williams 2018). Then, in the *reflective* stage, the target will behave in ways to restore their thwarted needs and make themselves feel better. They might act prosocially to be reincluded (e.g., mimicking others' behaviour; Lakin et al. 2008), antisocially to be provocative (e.g., acting aggressively; Leary et al. 2006) or seek solitude to avoid future interactions that could result in exclusion (e.g., Ren et al. 2016). Finally, in the *resignation* stage, targets will feel helpless, depressed, and unworthy if the exclusion persists and they are not able to restore their needs (Riva et al. 2017).

The reflexive stage of exclusion is experienced similarly for everyone, and it is almost always painful (Williams 2009). However, as people begin to consider the experience in the reflective stage, certain factors can lessen or exacerbate the effect of exclusion. Because exclusion is at the very least a dyadic process, one such factor is the identity of the exclusion source—and what little research has been conducted that manipulates the source's identity suggests that it might affect the negative outcomes of exclusion. For example, past work suggests that although exclusion from an outgroup member is still painful (even when the source is from a despised outgroup) (Gonsalkorale and Williams 2007), the experience hurts more when being excluded by an ingroup member (Bernstein et al. 2010). Or, when comparing the social status' of the source and target, it is easier for someone of higher status to exclude someone of lower status as doing so can make them feel powerful, though they simultaneously thwart the target's need for status, which hurts like the threat to other basic needs (Nezlek et al. 2012; Williams et al. 2000). Because the relationship between the source and target can affect the impact of exclusion, examining the types of relationships—particularly the relational closeness—is relevant to the current research question.

### 2.1 | Exclusion and Close Relationships

People are more frequently excluded by strangers or acquaintances than by close others such as romantic partners and friends (Nezlek et al. 2012, 2015). Although infrequent, most people experience some form of relationship partner exclusion, often seen as giving the 'cold shoulder' or the silent treatment (Williams 2001). Research regarding the actual consequences of exclusion from current close others is quite limited and mixed (Blackhart et al. 2009). For instance, due to exclusion being *relational* devaluation, it is suggested that exclusion from a close other (compared to a stranger) may especially hurt because it signals to the target that the relationship between the source and target may be less important than the target desires (Leary et al. 1998). In other words, existing relationship partners cannot rely on the uncertainty inherent in interactions with strangers as an explanation for the exclusion, increasing the negative effect. Although immediate reactions to exclusion from romantic partners hurt similarly to exclusion from strangers, partner-related exclusion carries additional costs to the individual regarding their perceptions of the romantic relationship (Arriaga et al. 2014). Specifically, after being ostracized by their romantic partner, people report decreased feelings of closeness to their romantic partner, lowered satisfaction within the relationship, and perceiving better relationship alternatives. Contrastingly, exclusion was shown to be more stressful when from a stranger than from a current close friend among children (Baddam et al. 2016). This may be due to heightened self-surveillance behaviour that comes from wanting to present one's self in a positive manner to the stranger, whereas that same concern may not exist for current friends (Vohs et al. 2005). Although the source of the exclusion may be an important factor, prior research has only compared exclusion from a single type of close other (e.g., romantic partners) to exclusion from a stranger. The *aspiration* for contact with close others, like one's friends, has been shown to be more significantly related to feelings of loneliness than *actual* contact with close others (Nicolaisen and Thorsen 2017). As such, it may be that potentially close others also have an impact. To our knowledge, research has yet to comparatively examine how the type of close relationship impacts the experience of exclusion, such as directly comparing romantic and platonic partners.

### 2.2 | Romantic vs. Platonic Exclusion

On the basis of the current research examining exclusion within current close relationships, we predict that the experience of being excluded by a potential close other would differ based on the relationship type. Many factors can contribute to relationship initiation success, like setting and attractiveness of the initiator (Adams and Gillath 2024).

#### 2.2.1 | Expectations and Counterfactual Thinking

Similarly, our expectations going into an interaction are going to impact how we respond. Indeed, past work suggests that existing expectations influence the effect of exclusion: People will have exacerbated need threat when they expect to be included but are actually excluded (Wirth et al. 2017). We may expect to be excluded by acquaintances/platonic partners more so than romantic partners. This expectation is likely based on previous experiences: Being excluded by friends is more common than being excluded by romantic partners (Nezlek et al. 2012), so it may not have as large of an impact as the less common romantic exclusion. Similarly, because people expect to be included during social interactions, they may think about how things could have gone differently when they are excluded. Indeed, negative and unexpected events lead to greater upward counterfactual thinking (Roese 1997). In Study 3, we test counterfactual thinking as potential mechanism of why romantic rejection might have greater negative outcomes compared to other exclusion.



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### 2.2.2 | Instrumentality

People have limited time, energy and resources to commit to relationships, and there is always a compromise when a new one is initiated: Too little or too much time spent with friends is associated with poor romantic relationship quality (Marabel-Whitburn et al. 2023). People must use criteria to determine how important a specific relationship is to them, and they may use norms to help make this decision. Another reason why being excluded by a potential romantic partner could hurt more than exclusion by a potential friend is the value placed on both types of relationships. The suffocation model, also known as the 'all or nothing' marriage, posits that society has shifted the idea of marriage from just helping partners meet their basic economic needs to now needing to fulfil all personal needs, like intimacy, passion, autonomy, and personal-growth (Finkel et al. 2014, 2015). This change in value has resulted in romantic partners being perceived as instrumental to more goals than friends (Orehek, Forest, and Wingrove 2018). Because we rely on romantic relationships to fulfil many psychological needs, we have a lot to gain when a relationship forms. But we are denied these benefits when romantically excluded and therefore could make stronger upward counterfactuals regarding the romantic context (Roese 1997) and experience greater hurt when excluded by a potential romantic partner than by a potential friend. To test this possibility, in Study 2, we examine perceived partner instrumentality as one potential mechanism of the effect of relationship type on basic psychological needs.

### 2.2.3 | Attributions

The attributions someone makes when they are excluded is a third reason why being excluded by potential romantic partners could hurt more than being excluded by potential friends. Past research shows that attributing exclusion to internal reasons (i.e., I am being rejected because of *who I am*) hurts more than when the exclusion is attributed to external reasons (i.e., I am being rejected because of *who the source is*; Wirth and Williams 2009). Because people tend to have greater self-other overlap with romantic partners than friends (Quintard et al. 2020), they may attribute exclusion from a romantic source to be due to an internal reason, whereas the lesser self-other overlap between oneself and friends creates enough distance to make external attributions for the exclusion. Therefore, although internal attributions of exclusion hurt more for everyone, we expect this to especially be the case with potential romantic partners than potential friends because of the greater self-other overlap that people have with romantic partners. Parallel to perceived partner instrumentality, we investigated internal attributions as another potential mechanism of the effect of relationship type on needs.

## 3 | The Role of Affective Forecasting

Making cognitive errors when estimating how one will feel in the future or during a certain situation is common, and people are notoriously bad at affective forecasting (Wilson and Gilbert 2003). Yet very little research has examined this phenomenon in the context of social exclusion. After being rejected, participants anticipated feeling less happy during a positive event and less sad during a negative event compared to included and control participants—in other words, the emotional numbing that occurs when rejected can lead to potential errors in expected affect (DeWall and Baumeister 2006). One reason why people might overestimate the negative experience of rejection is because they are misremembering or distorting past experiences. Because people are more likely to remember negative events than positive ones (Rozin and Royzman 2001), when tasked with imagining a potential relationship initiation, they may be less likely to focus on the possibility of acceptance and rather focus on the possibility of exclusion, an experience common in both everyday life (Bernstein et al. 2021) and close relationships (Leckfor et al. 2023). This negative remembering bias might then impact forecasting how one would feel in this situation.

Close relationships impact affective forecasting. For example, in a simulated dating game, participants forecasted they would feel less happy after 'losing' the game compared to how people actually felt, though there was no difference between forecasted and actual happiness for people who 'won' the game (Wilson et al. 2004). Additionally, the difference between those who 'won' and 'lost' the game was much larger when people were forecasting their happiness versus actually experiencing it. In real-world experiences, single people forecasted they would be happier in a relationship than those currently in a relationship actually were, and people who had never experienced a romantic breakup forecasted to be less happy than those who had experienced breakups actually were (Gilbert et al. 1998). Although most affective forecasting research uses between-person designs (forecasted vs. experienced), similar patterns arise when examined within-person, like we test in Study 3. People initially in romantic relationships anticipate greater emotional distress following a breakup compared to the distress actually experienced after the breakup (Eastwick et al. 2008). This affective forecasting error was especially true for people who thought it was unlikely they would start a new relationship soon after the breakup, which is in line with the people-as-means theory that suggests that people who have more alternatives are less committed to current relationships, and there is a greater likelihood of relationship dissolution (Orehek, Forest, and Barbaro, 2018).

However, no research (to our knowledge) has examined how the specific relationship of others (romantic vs. platonic) influences one's ability to accurately assess how they will feel during such interactions. As mentioned previously, most people have experienced relationship dissolution, both romantic and platonic, suggesting that they would likely rely on past experiences to inform their affect forecast. Because romantic relationship dissolution is more painful than platonic relationship dissolution, people might overestimate the pain they would expect to experience during the former.

In the present work, Study 1 assesses people's lay beliefs (an assessment of beliefs about the general experience) of being rejected by potential romantic partners and friends, whereas Study 2 assesses their actual experience of this rejection. Study 3 directly tests the impact of relationship type and inclusion status on affective forecasting ability.



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## 4 | The Current Research

People approach interactions expecting to be included (Wesselmann et al. 2017). However, situational factors can affect the degree to which this norm is upheld. For example, groups are less willing to include prospective members compared to current members (Delton and Cimino 2010). Research on dyadic or small group exclusion largely uses sources who are a current close other or participants who go into the study as strangers and will remain strangers. But we are often in situations where we meet someone who has the *potential* to become a romantic partner or friend, which is the situation we examine in the current research. Past work has yet to directly compare how the experience of exclusion differs when the source is in a romantic or platonic context. In the current research, we address these gaps in the literature and examine if being rejected by potential romantic partners hurts more than being rejected by potential platonic friends. In Study 1, we examine people's lay beliefs about these experiences. In Study 2, we test the actual experience of being excluded by potential romantic partners or friends using a mock dating/friend app environment to simulate the many affordances of mobile dating apps (Coduto and Fox 2024). Study 3 expands on the previous two studies by directly comparing people's forecasted and actual experiences. For all studies, materials (including the preregistration for Studies 2 and 3, survey files, data, and analysis code) are available at https://researchbox.org/3377.

## 5 | Study 1: Lay Beliefs

The first study explored people's lay beliefs about the experiences of being rejected by a potential romantic partner and a potential platonic friend. This initial study was exploratory and not preregistered.

### 5.1 | Participants

One thousand five hundred and thirteen US adults were recruited from Prolific. Thirteen people were excluded from analyses because they did not answer the question relevant to this study. The final sample included 1500 participants (49.20% men, 47.50% women, 3.27% another gender; $M_{age} = 40.48$, $SD_{age} = 28.43$; race and other demographic information was not collected). A sensitivity power analysis indicated that this sample size is sufficient to provide 80% power to detect a Cohen's $d$ of 0.07 or greater.

### 5.2 | Materials and Procedure

The question of interest was embedded in an unrelated survey. Participants were asked, 'Imagine you are meeting someone for the first time. In one scenario, you are expecting that they might be a potential future *friend*… In another scenario, you are expecting that they might be a potential future *romantic partner*. However, in both scenarios, this person rejects you. Which would hurt more?' Participants reported their response on a 7-point Likert scale. To address potential order effects, the presentations of friend and romantic partner were counterbalanced, and whichever one was mentioned first in the question stem corresponded with 1 (e.g., 'Being rejected by a potential friend would hurt more'), and whichever was presented second corresponded with 7 (e.g., 'Being rejected by a potential romantic partner would hurt more'). For analyses, responses were coded such that higher scores indicate an expectation that romantic rejection would hurt more. Basic psychological need threat (which we measure in full in Study 2) after experiencing exclusion is physiologically (Eisenberger et al. 2003) and psychologically (Riva et al. 2011) similar. Because we attempted to keep this exploratory study brief with a single question, we used the word 'hurt' as a single-item indicator of psychological need threat, as the word colloquially indicates an experience of physical or psychological (as we are implying here) distress.

### 5.3 | Results and Discussion

See Figure 1 for results of this study. More people indicated that rejection would hurt more when done by a potential romantic partner than by a potential friend (when coded as greater scores indicating rejection from a potential romantic partner would hurt more: $M = 4.56$, $SD = 1.91$), compared to the scale midpoint (4.00): $t(1499) = 11.37$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.29$.

Descriptively, when presented with a scenario about being rejected by a potential romantic partner and a potential friend, about twice as many people indicated potential romantic rejection would be worse than potential friend rejection (50% vs. 25%, with the remaining 25% selecting the neutral/midpoint option). We suggest this might be the case because romantic relationships are valued more than platonic relationships (i.e., instrumental), have greater overlap with the self, and thus someone is put into a more vulnerable position when romantically rejected (i.e., makes more internal attributions) and thus may think about what they could have gained but lost with the romantic relationship developing further (i.e., counterfactual thinking). We examine the first two (perceived partner instrumentality and internal attributions) as potential mechanisms in Study 2, and we test counterfactual thinking as a potential mechanism in Study 3.

Thus, Study 1 provided descriptive evidence that people's forecast about romantic and platonic rejection is in line with our overall prediction that people would anticipate romantic rejection hurting more. However, people are not always accurate when predicting how they will feel in certain situations. Specifically, we tend to overestimate valence by estimating that we will feel even more positive or negative than we actually end up feeling (Wilson and Gilbert 2003). To address this limitation, in the next study, we tested people's actual experiences of potential romantic and platonic rejection.

## 6 | Study 2: Actual Experience

The second study experimentally tested if being rejected by a potential romantic partner would hurt more than being rejected by a potential friend, in line with the theoretical notion that people have more to lose when being rejected by a potential romantic partner and consistent with people's lay beliefs on this assumption observed in Study 1. Participants were randomly assigned to be either accepted (included) or rejected by either prospective friends or prospective romantic partners in a 2 × 2



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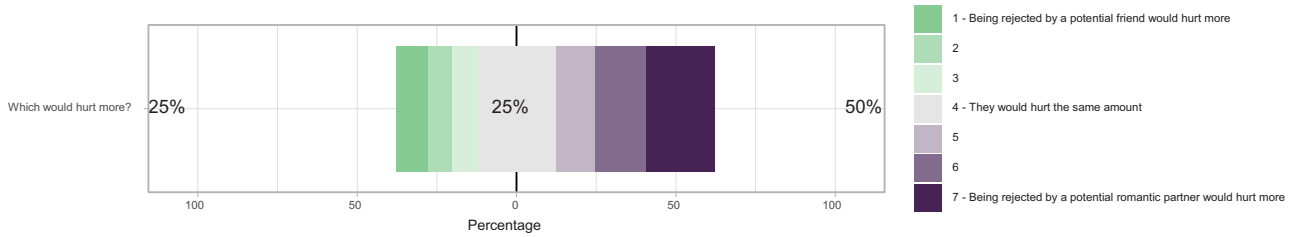



**FIGURE 1** | Lay beliefs of romantic and platonic rejection (Study 1). Figure was generated using the Likert package in R (Bryer and Speerschneider 2016).

design. We hypothesized that the effect of relationship type (romantic vs. friend) would be moderated by inclusion status, such that being rejected by a potential romantic partner would hurt more than being rejected by a potential friend and being accepted by a potential romantic partner would feel better than being accepted by a potential friend. In other words, the romantic context should intensify reactions such that the positive effects of inclusion are even more positive, and the negative effects of rejection are even more negative relative to the friendship context.

We considered two potential mediators. Past work suggests that attributing exclusion to internal reasons (e.g., I am being rejected because of something about *me*) hurts more than when the experience is attributed to external reasons (e.g., I am being rejected because of something about *them*; Wirth and Williams 2009). Thus, although greater internal attributions of rejection will hurt more overall, we believe this will especially be the case with potential romantic partners than potential friends because people have greater inclusion of other and self with romantic partners than friends (Quintard et al. 2020). Further, because romantic partners are instrumental to more goals than platonic partners (Orehek, Forest, and Barbaro, 2018), when someone is rejected by a potential romantic partner (vs. a potential friend), they are being denied access to more benefits which we believed would hurt more than if being denied fewer benefits when being rejected by a potential friend. Therefore, we examined (1) internal attributions of the rejection and (2) perceived partner instrumentality as mechanisms for the negative effect of rejection and positive effect of acceptance. We hypothesized that the effect of relationship type would be conditionally mediated by internal attributions (of the acceptance/rejection) and perceived partner instrumentality. Specifically, in rejected participants, we expect the romantic context to increase both of these variables, which will, in turn, predict worse outcomes. However, in included participants, we expect these indirect effect pathways to be reversed.

The hypotheses, stopping rule, exclusion criteria and analyses were preregistered prior to data collection, which is available online at https://aspredicted.org/DLC_ZR1 (and available at the researchbox.org page for this project).[1]

## 6.1 | Participants

Our target sample size was 1000 respondents (250 per condition). This provides 90% power to detect a simple effect of context within rejected participants of the magnitude observed in Study 1 and >99% power to detect a symmetrical crossover interaction pattern (i.e., the predicted outcome).

Anticipating exclusions, we initially intended to recruit a sample of 1100 young people completely from an online crowdsourcing platform. However, response rate on the online platform was slow, so we supplemented data collection with a university subject pool.[2] We recruited 969 adults from Prolific Academic who were compensated with $2.00 for their participation and 160 undergraduate students from a university subject pool who were compensated with partial course credit for their participation. For both channels of recruitment, people were prescreened to be single and between the ages of 18 and 29 years old to be recruited for the study. Per our preregistered exclusion criteria, 16 people were excluded because they requested that their data not be used in a reconsent form or they did not make it to the end of the survey, 58 people were excluded for failing at least one attention check item, and 121 people were excluded because they indicated that they had played Ostracism Online (our acceptance/rejection paradigm) prior to participating in the study. This left a final sample of 934 people ($M_{age}$ = 23.39, $SD_{age}$ = 3.33; gender: 57.90% women, 37.70% men and 4.39% another gender; race: 58.70% White, 10.80% Asian, 10.50% Black, 9.53% Latinx, 2.89% multiracial, 0.86% another race and 6.75% did not report). The majority (63.60%) of the sample was straight (19.80% bisexual, 4.28% asexual, 3.96% lesbian, 3.85% pansexual, 3.10% gay and 1.39% another orientation), and while people were prescreened prior to recruitment to be single, and most (91.20%) participants did report being single, not everyone was (6.00% casually dating, 2.57% seriously dating, 0.11% engaged and 0.11% another relationship status).

## 6.2 | Materials and Procedure

The study had a 2 (inclusion status: accepted vs. rejected) × 2 (relationship type: romantic vs. platonic) between-subjects design. After consenting to participate in the study, participants were introduced to the task and told that they would be interacting with (based on condition) either potential romantic partners or potential friends. They then completed the measure of perceived partner instrumentality. Next, they participated in the acceptance/rejection paradigm. Afterward, they completed the measures of basic psychological needs and internal attributions of their experience.

### 6.2.1 | Acceptance/Rejection Paradigm

Participants completed an adaptation of Ostracism Online as a manipulation of acceptance versus rejection from potential close others (Lutz and Schneider 2021; Wicks et al. 2023; Wolf et al.



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2015). They were first told that they would soon connect with other online participants in our network. In the romantic context condition, they were told, 'This is an online dating platform where single people can connect, see if there is a spark, and may even find that special someone.' In the platonic friend context, they were told, 'This is an online social platform where people can connect, see if they have interests in common, and maybe even find a new friend.' Depending on their condition (romantic partner vs. friend), participants were asked if they were interested in meeting men, women or both. In Ostracism Online, participants provided their name and wrote a brief bio about themselves. They were then introduced to a social media-like environment with other participants (who were not real people), whose gender(s) the participant indicated they were interested in meeting, with their names and bios displayed. Participants could then interact with the other people by liking or disliking their profile, whereas the participant's profile was also receiving attention. If the participant was in the accepted condition, they received six likes and zero dislikes. If they were in the rejected condition, they received zero likes and six dislikes. After 2 min of interacting with the other people, the participant moved on with the survey.

## 6.3 | Measures

### 6.3.1 | Perceive Partner Instrumentality

As a measure of the perceived instrumentality (i.e., being a means to achieve goals) of the partners with whom they would soon be interacting, participants completed a slightly modified version of the Perceived Partner Instrumentality Scale (Orehek, Forest, and Wingrove 2018). They rated how harmful or helpful these people would be to nine types of goals on an 11-point Likert scale (−5 = *Extremely harmful*, 0 = *Neither helpful nor harmful* and 5 = *Extremely helpful*). Example items include career/academic goals and emotional support goals (one of the goals in the original scale was 'Romantic or Sexual Relationship Goals', but we removed this item to avoid conceptual redundancy with the relationship type manipulation). Greater scores averaged across the nine items indicate greater perceived partner instrumentality ($\alpha = 0.85$).

### 6.3.2 | Basic Psychological Needs

Participants completed a measure of basic psychological needs satisfaction by indicating their current belonging, self-esteem, meaningful existence, control, and self-certainty satisfaction (Wood et al. 2023). They rated their agreement with 15 items on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*). Example items include 'I feel liked' and 'I feel powerful.' Greater scores averaged across the 15 items indicate greater basic psychological needs satisfaction ($\alpha = 0.94$).

### 6.3.3 | Internal Attributions

Participants completed a measure of internal attributions of the acceptance/rejection (adapted from Wirth and Williams 2009). They rated their agreement with two items on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*). The items were 'The other people in this study chose to like or dislike my profile *because of something about me*' and 'The other people in this study chose to like or dislike my profile *because of who I am*.' Greater scores averaged across the two items indicate greater internal attributions ($r = 0.55$).

## 6.4 | Results

### 6.4.1 | Manipulation Checks

As a manipulation check, participants rated how rejected/disliked they felt during the interaction task on a 7-point Likert scale (administered after the dependent variables). Participants in the rejected condition ($M = 5.23$, SD = 1.94) felt significantly more rejected/disliked than the participants in the accepted condition ($M = 1.34$, SD = 0.82), $t(627.31) = -39.93$, $p < 0.001$, $d = -2.61$. Participants were also asked how many likes and dislikes they received during the interaction task. Accepted participants ($M = 5.60$, SD = 0.98) reported receiving more likes than those in the rejected condition ($M = 0.04$, SD = 0.34), $t(575.42) = 116.09$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 7.62$. Similarly, participants in the rejected condition ($M = 5.79$, SD = 0.86) reported receiving more dislikes than those in the accepted condition ($M = 0.19$, SD = 0.84), $t(928.16) = -100.57$, $p < 0.001$, $d = -6.59$.[3] Finally, participants were asked what they believed was the purpose of the task (1 = *Definitely to interact with potential romantic partners*, 7 = *Definitely to interact with potential platonic friends*). Participants in the platonic condition ($M = 6.22$, SD = 1.15) indicated that the purpose of the task was to interact with potential platonic friends to a greater extent than romantic partner condition participants ($M = 1.67$, SD = 1.31), $t(917.70) = 56.31$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 3.68$. Together, manipulation check results indicated that both manipulations were perceived as intended.

### 6.4.2 | Overall Condition Effects

As planned, we conducted a 2 (inclusion status: accepted vs. rejected) × 2 (relationship type: romantic vs. friend) factorial ANOVA on needs satisfaction (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics and Figure 2). There was a main effect of inclusion status on basic needs, $F(1, 923) = 267.85$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.22$, such that accepted participants reported greater needs satisfaction than rejected participants. There was not a main effect of relationship type on needs satisfaction, $F(1, 923) = 0.05$, $p = 0.821$, $\eta_p^2 < 0.001$. There was also not an interaction between inclusion status and relationship type on needs satisfaction, $F(1, 923) = 0.07$, $p = 0.789$, $\eta_p^2 < 0.001$.

### 6.4.3 | Indirect Effects

To examine our moderated mediation hypothesis that the relationship between relationship type and needs satisfaction is mediated by internal attributions and perceived partner instrumentality depending on inclusion status, as planned, we conducted Process model 59 (Hayes 2018) with relationship type as the predictor, inclusion status as the moderator and internal



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**TABLE 1** | Means and standard deviations by condition (Study 2).

| | Overall | | Included | | | Rejected | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Platonic** | **Romantic** | **Overall** | **Platonic ($n$ = 228)** | **Romantic ($n$ = 239)** | **Overall** | **Platonic ($n$ = 238)** | **Romantic ($n$ = 229)** |
| Variable | *M* (SD) | *M* (SD) | *M* (SD) | *M* (SD) | *M* (SD) | *M* (SD) | *M* (SD) | *M* (SD) |
| Needs satisfaction | 4.31 (1.43) | 4.32 (1.38) | 4.98 (1.11) | 5.00 (1.15) | 4.96 (1.08) | 3.65 (1.35) | 3.65 (1.35) | 3.65 (1.35) |
| Internal attributions | 4.55 (1.69) | 4.72 (1.56) | 4.64 (1.48) | 4.55 (1.52) | 4.73 (1.45) | 4.62 (1.76) | 4.54 (1.85) | 4.70 (1.67) |
| Perceived instrumentality | 2.05 (1.38) | 2.45 (1.29) | 2.18 (1.36) | 1.96 (1.38) | 2.39 (1.31) | 2.32 (1.34) | 2.13 (1.39) | 2.51 (1.26) |

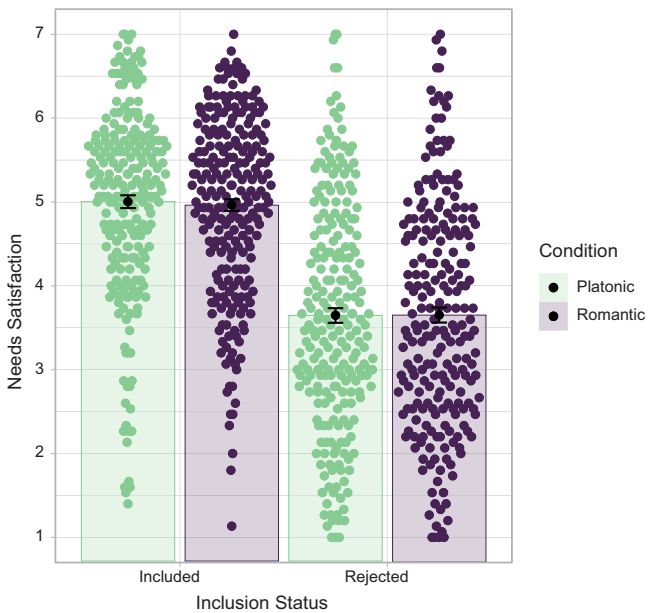



**FIGURE 2** | Effect of inclusion status and relationship type on needs satisfaction (Study 2). Each dot represents a participant. The black dot represents the mean, and the black bars represent ±1 standard errors.

attributions and perceived partner instrumentality as parallel mediators. The regression model predicting basic needs satisfaction was significant, $F(7, 918) = 75.04$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.36$ (see Figure 3).

**6.4.3.1 | Internal Attributions.** The index of moderated mediation for internal attributions was not significant, $b = -0.09$, SE = 0.06, 95% CI [−0.22, 0.03], indicating that the magnitude of the overall internal attributions pathway was similarly small across accepted and rejected individuals. Specifically, in both groups, relationship type did not significantly affect the degree to which participants internally attributed their treatment during the interaction (see blue *a*-paths in lower panels of Figure 3). Although the overall indirect effects were not significant (as relationship type did not elicit different internal attributions), the way in which attributions predicted needs did differ between those in the accepted group (for whom internally attributing the treatment predicted better needs satisfaction) versus the rejected group (for whom internally attributing the treatment predicted worse needs satisfaction; see the opposite signs of the blue *b*-paths in lower panel of Figure 3).

**6.4.3.2 | Instrumentality.** The index of moderated mediation for perceived instrumentality was significant, indicating that the instrumentality pathways operated differently for accepted versus rejected individuals, $b = -0.09$, SE = 0.03, 95% CI [−0.16, −0.02]. For both included and rejected participants, potential romantic partners elicited greater expectations of instrumentality than friends (see pink *a*-paths in lower panels of Figure 3). However, this increase in perceived instrumentality only predicted subsequent improvements in basic needs for accepted participants, $b = 0.19$, SE = 0.04, 95% CI [0.12, 0.27], not for rejected participants, $b = -0.01$, SE = 0.04, 95% CI [−0.08, 0.07] (see pink *b*-paths in lower panels of Figure 3). Accordingly, the simple indirect effect was only significant for the included group, $b = 0.08$, SE = 0.03, 95% CI [0.03, 0.14], not the rejected group, $b = -0.002$, SE = 0.02, 95% CI [−0.04, 0.04].

## 6.5 | Discussion

Against our hypothesis and general lay beliefs, results from Study 2 show that when actually experiencing interactions with potential close others, relationship type does not detectably moderate the effect of rejection on needs satisfaction. While being rejected hurts more than being accepted, the experience is comparably painful when being rejected (or pleasant in the case of being included) by potential close others, be that romantic or platonic.

When examining potential mechanisms of this effect—internal attributions and perceived instrumentality—we found mixed results. Internal attributions did not mediate the relationship between relationship type and need satisfaction. However, romantic relationships were seen as being more instrumental than platonic relationships which was then associated with greater needs satisfaction, but only for those who were included. This finding suggests there may be an influence of counterfactual 'what could have been' thinking, which we explore more in Study 3.

Due to a limitation in the design of Study 2, we cannot make the claim that there is something specific about being rejected/accepted by a potential close other. We address this limitation by including a control condition (meeting people



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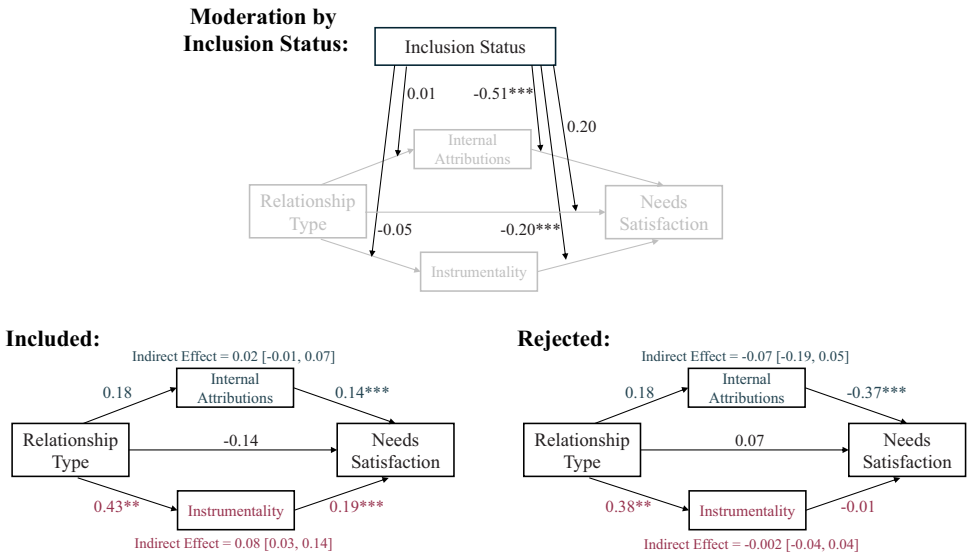



**FIGURE 3** | Indirect effect of internal attributions and instrumentality on needs satisfaction (Study 2). Coefficients in the top panel refer to interaction effects. *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

online without the implication that they could become a close partner) in the final study.

## 7 | Study 3: Forecasting vs. Actual Experience

In Study 1, we found that people think that, in general, being rejected by a potential romantic partner would hurt more than a potential friend. In Study 2, we found that the experience is equally painful for both potential relationships. In the third study, we use a more traditional affective forecasting design and test within-person forecasted and experienced affect when accepted or rejected by a stranger (who would not become a close other), potential romantic partner or potential friend. We hypothesized that (1) being accepted by a potential close other (romantic and friend vs. control) would lead to greater forecasted (but not experienced) mood, (2) being accepted by a potential romantic partner (vs. friend) would lead to greater forecasted (but not experienced) mood, (3) being rejected by a potential close other (romantic and friend vs. control) would lead to lower forecasted (but not experienced) mood and (4) being rejected by a potential romantic partner (vs. friend) would lead to lower forecasted (but not experienced) mood.

We also complement the partner instrumentality findings in Study 2 with a measure of counterfactual 'what could have been' thinking, which we tested as a mechanism of the above effect. We hypothesize that the effect of relationship type would be conditionally mediated by counterfactual thinking. Specifically, in rejected participants, we expected close relationships (vs. control) and romantic context (vs. platonic) to increase counterfactual thinking, which would, in turn, predict worse mood and needs. However, in included participants, we expected the indirect effect pathway to be reversed.

The hypotheses, stopping rule, exclusion criteria and analyses were preregistered prior to data collection, which is available online at https://aspredicted.org/ku24wf.pdf (and available at the researchbox.org page for this project).

### 7.1 | Participants

Anticipating the slow data collection that occurred in Study 2, we recruited participants from both Prolific and a university subject pool. Our preregistered stopping rule was our target sample size of 1500 respondents (250 per condition) or ceasing data collection on 21 November 2025, whichever occurred first, which happened to be the latter. We recruited 122 adults from Prolific Academic who were compensated with $2.00 for their participation and 472 undergraduate students from a university subject pool who were compensated with partial course credit for their participation.[4] For both channels of recruitment, people were prescreened to be single, and the Prolific sample was also prescreened to be between the ages of 18 and 29 years old. Per our preregistered exclusion criteria, 51 people were excluded because they requested that their data not be used in a reconsent form, 36 people were excluded for failing an attention check item, and 30 people were excluded for dropping out before the main dependent variables.[5]

This left a final sample of 477 people ($M_{age} = 20.29$, $SD_{age} = 3.19$; gender: 73.60% women, 24.50% men and 1.89% another gender; race: 68.30% White, 16.10% Black, 6.08% Asian, 5.66% Latinx, 2.52% multiracial, 0.84% another race and 0.42% Pacific Islander). The majority (80.70%) of the sample was straight (12.40% bisexual, 2.52% lesbian, 1.39% gay, 1.05% asexual, 0.63% pansexual and 1.47% another orientation), and while people were prescreened prior to recruitment to be single, and most (89.70%) participants did report being single, not everyone was (6.92% casually dating, 2.31% seriously dating, 0.21% divorced and 0.84% another relationship status).

Though lower than targeted, a power analysis indicated this obtained *N* provides approximately 90% power to detect simple



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between-condition effects of $d = 0.42$ or greater and 80% power to detect three-way interaction effect size of $\eta_p^2 = 0.013$ (Cohen's $f = 0.12$), and similarly sized two-way interaction effects (Cohen's $f = 0.12$) between rejection and relationship type (given that both those factors are between-subjects).

## 7.2 | Materials and Procedure

The study had a 2 (within: forecasted vs. experienced) × 2 (between: accepted vs. rejected) × 3 (control vs. romantic vs. platonic) mixed design. After consenting to participate in the study, participants were introduced to the task and told that they would be interacting with (based on condition) either people online (stranger control), potential romantic partners or potential friends. They then were broadly told about the interaction task (Ostracism Online) and reported their forecasted mood if their profile were to receive many likes (they get the impression people like them) as well as if their profile were to receive many dislikes (they get the impression that people do not like them). Next, they participated in the Ostracism Online paradigm. Afterward, they completed the measures of experienced mood, basic psychological needs and counterfactual thinking.

### 7.2.1 | Acceptance/Rejection Paradigm

We used the same romantic and platonic context of Ostracism Online that we used in Study 2. In this study, we also had a control stranger condition; therefore, participants were randomly assigned to the control, romantic or platonic condition. If in this condition, participants were told, 'This is an online social platform where people can connect and see if they have interests in common.' The rest of the Ostracism Online paradigm proceeded as in Study 2, including participants being randomly assigned to an acceptance or rejection condition.

## 7.3 | Measures

### 7.3.1 | Affect

Before the Ostracism Online paradigm, participants indicated how they would feel if their profile were to receive many likes and also if their profile were to receive many dislikes (counterbalanced) using the scale common in ostracism literature (Williams 2009). They rated their agreement with eight items on a 101-point sliding scale from *Not at all* to *Completely* (number increments were not shown to participants). Example items include 'happy' and 'angry (reversed)'. Although participants reported their forecasted mood for both being accepted and rejected, only their forecasted mood for the condition they are in is used as the measure of forecasted affect in analyses. Participants reported their actual mood during the Ostracism Online task using the same measure. We used a 101-point sliding scale attempting to minimize consistency bias between the two forecasted measures and the experienced measure. Greater scores averaged across the eight items indicate greater positive mood ($\alpha_{\text{forecast acceptance}} = 0.90$, $\alpha_{\text{forecast rejection}} = 0.85$, $\alpha_{\text{experienced}} = 0.95$).

### 7.3.2 | Basic Psychological Needs

Participants reported their basic psychological needs satisfaction using the same measure as in Study 2 ($\alpha = 0.93$).

### 7.3.3 | Counterfactual Thinking

Participants completed two measures of counterfactual thinking adapted from Sweeny and Vohs (2012) on a 1 (*Not at all*) to 7 (*Very much*) Likert scale. One item measured upward counterfactual thinking (Were you thinking about how things could have been better?), and one item measured downward counterfactual thinking (Were you thinking about how things could have been worse?) when asked to think back to their experiences during the social interaction task.

## 7.4 | Results

### 7.4.1 | Manipulation Checks

As a manipulation check, participants rated how rejected/disliked they felt during the interaction task on a 7-point Likert scale (administered after the dependent variables). Participants in the rejected condition ($M = 5.21$, SD = 1.92) felt significantly more rejected/disliked than the participants in the accepted condition ($M = 1.38$, SD = 0.80), $t(312.29) = -28.36$, $p < 0.001$, $d = -2.62$. Participants were also asked how many likes and dislikes they received during the interaction task. Accepted participants ($M = 5.61$, SD = 0.95) reported receiving more likes than those in the rejected condition ($M = 0.17$, SD = 0.73), $t(444.73) = 69.97$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 6.41$. Similarly, participants in the rejected condition ($M = 5.63$, SD = 0.94) reported receiving more dislikes than those in the accepted condition ($M = 0.08$, SD = 0.40), $t(317.86) = -83.55$, $p < 0.001$, $d = -7.70$. Finally, participants were asked what they believed was the purpose of the task with three potential answers, to interact with (1) potential romantic partners, (2) potential platonic friends or (3) people online for only one time. There was a significant effect of relationship type on participants' perception of the task purpose, $\chi^2(4) = 361.82$, $p < 0.001$, $V = 0.62$. Participants in the romantic condition were more likely to say the task purpose was to interact with potential romantic partners ($n = 154$) rather than potential platonic friends ($n = 2$) or people online for only one time ($n = 15$). People in the platonic condition were more likely to say the task purpose was to interact with potential platonic friends ($n = 128$) rather than potential romantic partners ($n = 3$) or people online for only one time ($n = 31$). Because the control condition is a bit more ambiguous, so were the responses for the participants in this condition, but still in the direction we would expect; they were most likely to say the task purpose was to interact with people online for only one time ($n = 63$) rather than interact with potential romantic partners ($n = 58$) or potential platonic friends ($n = 23$). Together, manipulation check results indicated that both manipulations were perceived as intended.



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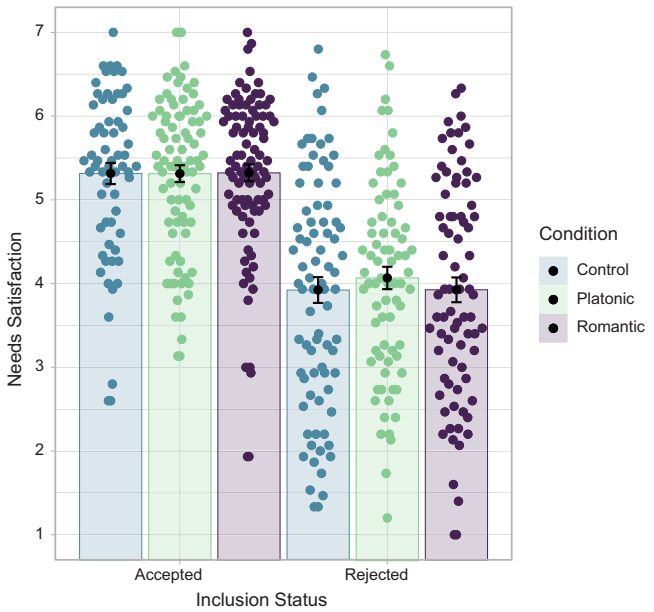



**FIGURE 4** | Effect of inclusion status and relationship type on needs satisfaction (Study 3). Each dot represents a participant. The black dot represents the mean, and the black bars represent ±1 standard errors.

### 7.4.2 | Overall Condition Effects

We conducted a 2 (accepted vs. rejected) × 3 (control vs. romantic vs. friend) factorial ANOVA on needs satisfaction (see Table 2 for descriptive statistics and Figure 4). There was a main effect of inclusion status on basic needs, $F(1, 471) = 163.68$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.26$, such that accepted participants reported greater needs satisfaction than rejected participants. There was not a main effect of relationship type on needs satisfaction, $F(2, 471) = 0.19$, $p = 0.825$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.001$. There was also not an interaction between inclusion status and relationship type, $F(2, 471) = 0.23$, $p = 0.797$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.001$.

We conducted a 2 (within: forecast vs. experienced) × 2 (between: accepted vs. rejected) × 3 (between: control vs. romantic vs. friend) mixed ANOVA on affect (see Table 2 for descriptive statistics and Figure 5). There was a main effect of inclusion status on affect, $F(1, 471) = 1594.98$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.77$, such that accepted participants reported greater (positive) affect than rejected participants. There was not a main effect of relationship type on affect, $F(2, 471) = 0.85$, $p = 0.428$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.004$. There was an effect of experience, $F(1, 471) = 12.52$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$, such that participants reported greater actual (positive) affect than forecasted (positive) affect. There was not a three-way interaction between inclusion status, relationship type and experience, $F(2, 471) = 0.26$, $p = 0.768$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.001$. However, there was a significant two-way interaction between inclusion status and experience, $F(1, 475) = 67.97$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.13$, showing evidence of affective forecasting errors. In particular, unplanned simple effects analyses show that accepted participants slightly overestimated the benefits of being included, $t(240) = 5.23$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.34$. And to an even greater extent, rejected participants overestimated the pain of exclusion relative to their actual experience, $t(235) = -6.55$, $p < 0.001$, $d = -0.49$.

**TABLE 2** | Means and standard deviations by condition (Study 3).

| | Overall | | | Included | | | Rejected | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Control | Platonic | Romantic | Overall | Control ($n = 63$) | Platonic ($n = 86$) | Romantic ($n = 92$) | Overall | Control ($n = 81$) | Platonic ($n = 77$) | Romantic ($n = 79$) |
| Variable | *M* (SD) | *M* (SD) | *M* (SD) | *M* (SD) | *M* (SD) | *M* (SD) | *M* (SD) | *M* (SD) | *M* (SD) | *M* (SD) | *M* (SD) |
| Needs satisfaction | 4.53 (1.41) | 4.73 (1.22) | 4.68 (1.33) | 5.32 (0.96) | 5.32 (1.00) | 5.31 (0.93) | 5.32 (0.97) | 3.97 (1.29) | 3.92 (1.39) | 4.07 (1.17) | 3.93 (1.32) |
| Forecasted affect | 56.20 (33.40) | 61.30 (31.90) | 61.40 (32.70) | 88.40 (11.20) | 89.20 (10.50) | 87.80 (11.90) | 88.40 (11.00) | 30.60 (18.30) | 30.50 (19.60) | 31.40 (17.50) | 30.00 (18.00) |
| Experienced affect | 60.20 (28.60) | 65.50 (28.10) | 62.30 (28.20) | 84.40 (12.10) | 85.00 (11.30) | 86.20 (11.90) | 82.30 (12.70) | 40.60 (22.40) | 40.90 (22.50) | 42.10 (22.10) | 39.00 (22.80) |
| Upward counterfactual thinking | 4.10 (2.16) | 3.90 (2.22) | 3.88 (2.14) | 3.03 (1.95) | 3.14 (2.05) | 2.88 (1.86) | 3.10 (1.97) | 4.89 (1.97) | 4.84 (1.95) | 5.05 (2.03) | 4.80 (1.96) |
| Downward counterfactual thinking | 3.19 (1.92) | 3.24 (2.12) | 3.02 (1.96) | 3.46 (2.11) | 3.46 (1.96) | 3.60 (2.21) | 3.34 (2.11) | 2.83 (1.83) | 2.99 (1.87) | 2.83 (1.93) | 2.66 (1.69) |



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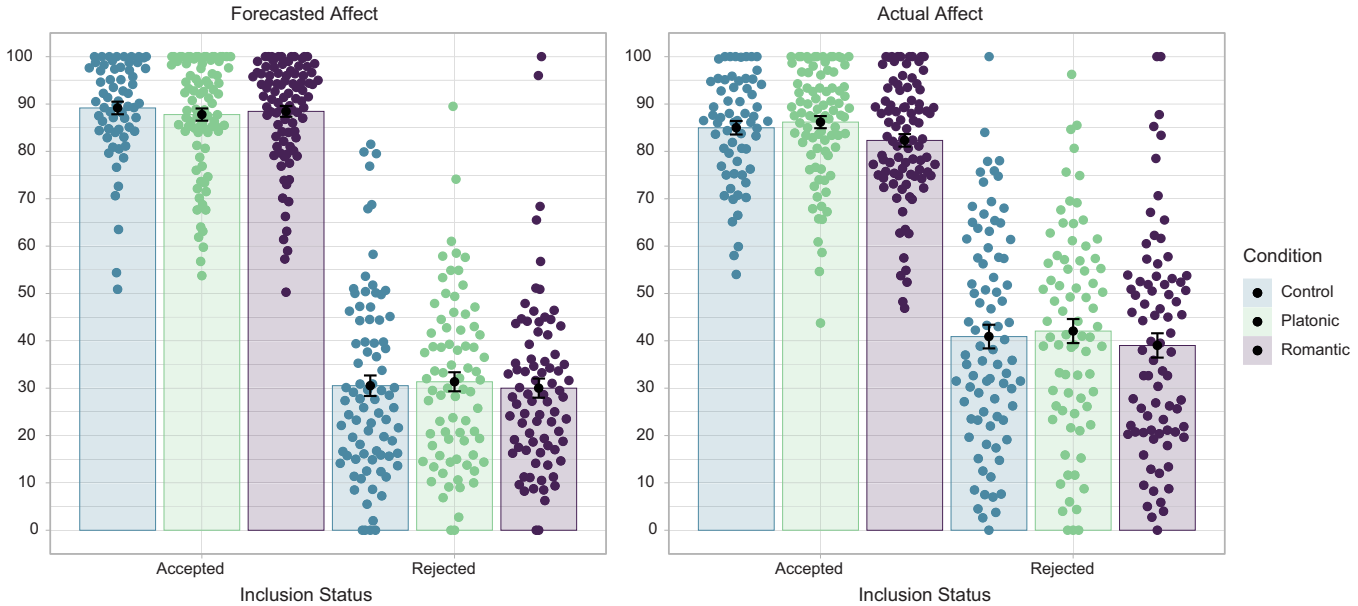



**FIGURE 5** | Effect of inclusion status and relationship type on affect (Study 3). Each dot represents a participant. The black dot represents the mean, and the black bars represent ±1 standard errors.

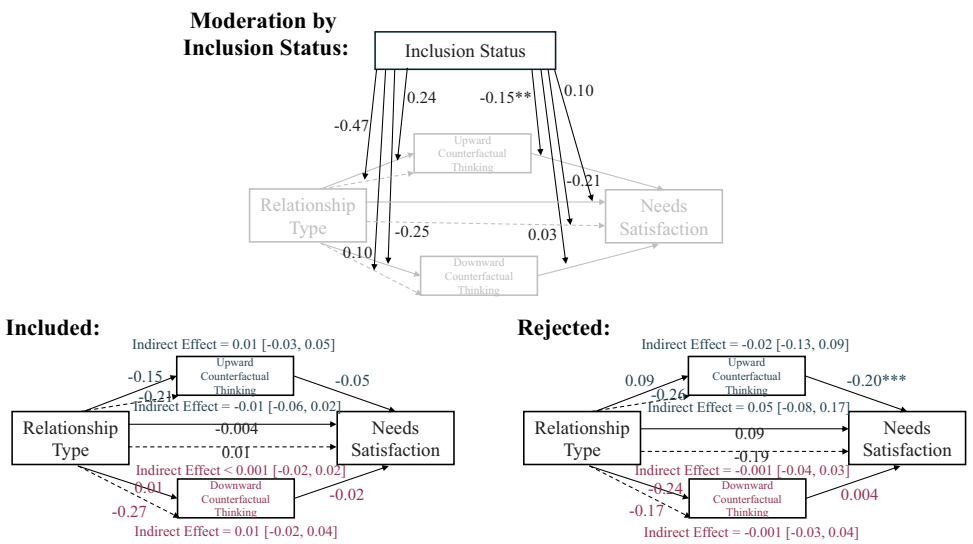



**FIGURE 6** | Indirect effect of counterfactual thinking on needs satisfaction (Study 3). Solid line between relationship type and counterfactual thinking refers to the control versus platonic and romantic contrast. The dotted line between relationship type and counterfactual thinking refers to the platonic versus romantic contrast. Coefficients in the top panel refer to interaction effects. *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

### 7.4.3 | Indirect Effects

To examine our moderated mediation hypothesis that the relationship between relationship type and needs satisfaction is mediated by counterfactual thinking depending on inclusion status, we conducted Process model 59 (Hayes 2018) with relationship type as the predictor, inclusion status as the moderator and upward and downward counterfactual thinking as parallel mediators.

**7.4.3.1 | Basic Needs.** The regression model predicting basic needs satisfaction was significant, $F(9, 467) = 23.07$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.31$ (see Figure 6).

**7.4.3.1.1 | Upward Counterfactual Thinking.** The index of moderated mediation for upward counterfactual thinking was not significant, $b = 0.06$, SE = 0.07, 95% CI [−0.07, 0.20], indicating that the magnitude of the overall upward counterfactual thinking pathway was similarly small across accepted and rejected individuals. Specifically, in both groups, relationship type did not significantly affect the degree to which participants thought about how things about have been better during the interaction (see blue *a*-paths in lower panels of Figure 6). Although the overall indirect effects were not significant (since relationship type did not elicit different upward counterfactual thinking), the way in which upward counterfactual thinking predicted needs did differ between those in the rejected group (for whom thinking things



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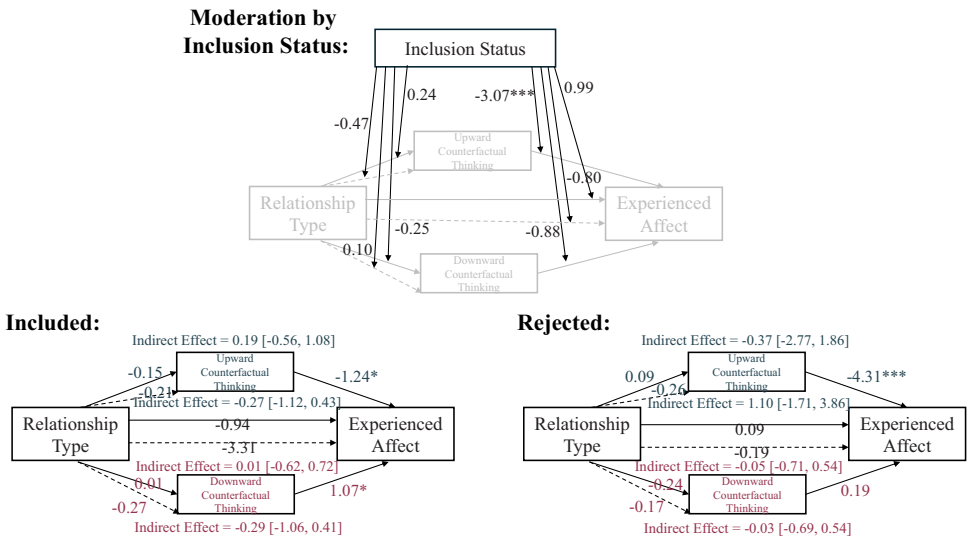



**FIGURE 7** | *Indirect effect of counterfactual thinking on experienced affect (Study 3).* Solid line between relationship type and counterfactual thinking refers to the control versus platonic and romantic contrast. The dotted line between relationship type and counterfactual thinking refers to the platonic versus romantic contrast. Coefficients in the top panel refer to interaction effects. *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

could have been better predicted better needs satisfaction) versus the accepted group (for whom upward counterfactual thinking did not predict needs satisfaction; see the blue *b*-paths in lower panel of Figure 6).

**7.4.3.1.2 | Downward Counterfactual Thinking.** The index of moderated mediation for downward counterfactual thinking was not significant, $b = -0.01$, SE = 0.02, 95% CI [−0.05, 0.04], indicating that the magnitude of the overall downward counterfactual thinking pathway was similarly small across accepted and rejected individuals. Specifically, in both groups, relationship type did not significantly affect the degree to which participants thought about how things about have been worse during the interaction (see blue *a*-paths in lower panels of Figure 6).

**7.4.3.2 | Affect.** We conducted the same moderated mediation model on experienced affect. The regression model predicting experienced affect was significant, $F(9, 467) = 96.77$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.65$ (see Figure 7).

**7.4.3.2.1 | Upward Counterfactual Thinking.** The index of moderated mediation for upward counterfactual thinking on experienced affect was not significant, $b = 1.37$, SE = 1.45, 95% CI [−1.49, 4.26], indicating that the magnitude of the overall upward counterfactual thinking pathway was similarly small across accepted and rejected individuals. Although the overall indirect effects were not significant (since relationship type did not elicit different upward counterfactual thinking), the way in which upward counterfactual thinking predicted experienced affect was greater for those in the rejected group (for whom thinking things could have been worse predicted lower experienced) than those in the accepted group (for whom downward counterfactual thinking predicted experienced affect to a smaller extent; see the blue *b*-paths in lower panel of Figure 7).

**7.4.3.2.2 | Downward Counterfactual Thinking.** The index of moderated mediation for downward counterfactual thinking was not significant, $b = 0.25$, SE = 0.45, 95% CI [−0.65, 1.16], indicating that the magnitude of the overall downward counterfactual thinking pathway was similarly small across accepted and rejected individuals.

## 7.5 | Discussion

Replicating the results from Study 2, interacting with potential friends or romantic partners did not impact the benefits of acceptance or pain of rejection. Expanding on the previous study, this result holds for people with whom a potential relationship is not likely: Acceptance is just as satisfactory for strangers as it is for potential close others, and rejection is just as painful for strangers as it is for potential close others. This finding suggests that the impact of exclusion is powerful regardless of the source. Against our hypotheses, though, there was no difference between forecasted and experienced affect as a function of relationship type. All accepted participants, regardless of who they were about to meet in the interaction task, believed it would feel good to be accepted by others, and they reported it did feel this way. Similarly, all rejected participants, regardless of who they were about to meet, believed it would feel bad to be rejected by others, which matches their actual experience of rejection. However, participants did overestimate the benefits of acceptance and the pain of rejection, suggesting that affective forecasting errors still play a role in the experience of social exclusion.

We examined 'what could have been' counterfactual thinking as potential mechanisms in the effect of relationship type on needs and experienced affect for accepted and rejected participants. Unlike the previous finding in Study 2 with partner instrumentality, relationship type did not impact counterfactual thinking, so people who interacted with potential close others (friends or romantic partners) were no more likely to think about what could have been than those who interacted with people with whom a potential relationship was unlikely. Of note though, rejected participants were more likely to think about how things could



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have been better in the interaction task, which lead to lower needs satisfaction and affect.

## 8 | General Discussion

What happens when we are excluded by someone who we thought could become a close relationship partner? Sometimes after asking someone out on a date or to hang out they accept the invitation, but other times they convey a rejection. The present work examined people's lay beliefs about the experience of being excluded by a potential friend or romantic partner, and their actual reactions to this experience. In Study 1, we asked people which experience—being excluded by a potential friend or romantic partner—would hurt more. About twice as many people indicated that being excluded by a potential romantic partner would hurt more than a potential friend.

In Study 2, participants actually experienced potential close other rejection. We hypothesized that romantically rejected participants would have lower needs satisfaction than platonically rejected participants, and that romantically accepted participants would have higher needs satisfaction than platonically accepted participants. However, our hypotheses were not supported. Because people have more to lose when rejected by a potential romantic partner than friend and might view romantic rejection as the result of who they are, we examined perceived partner instrumentality and internal attribution of the experience as mechanisms of this effect. Yet, neither of these perceptions clearly and consistently mediated the effect of relationship type on needs satisfaction in our hypothesized direction.

In Study 3, we directly compared forecasting these experiences and actually experiencing them. Unlike the seeming difference between the lay beliefs in Study 1 and the actual experience of Study 2, when directly compared forecasted and actual experiences of acceptance and rejection were relatively similar across relationship types. It seems the experience of being accepted is so positive and the experience of being rejected is so negative that it does not matter who is doing so. However, people are not good at forecasting what these experiences will feel like: They thought being accepted will feel better than it did and, to an even greater extent, they thought being rejected would feel worse than it did. Further, who someone interacts with does not impact their counterfactual thinking of the interaction, but being rejected leads to more thinking about how things could have been better, which leads to worse outcomes.

Like the research on the effect of exclusion within current close relationships, the effect of being excluded by potential close others is also not clear-cut. Past work on expectations, greater value and instrumentality of romantic partners, and larger self-other overlap with a romantic partner led us to hypothesize that being excluded by potential romantic partners would hurt more than being excluded by potential friends, and that both of which would hurt more than being rejected by people with whom no future relationship was likely (in Study 3). Although we used a needs measure with reflective/present-tense wording (i.e., how participants felt in the current moment), participants responded to the scale immediately after the interaction task. Despite the effect of exclusion being strongest in the reflexive stage, perhaps participants needed to reflect even more on the experience for it to have the hypothesized effect. For the same reasons why we thought being rejected by potential romantic partners would be more painful, it may be the case that people who are romantically rejected would ruminate about the experience more than those who are platonically rejected. Indeed, rumination is generally harmful to ostracism recovery (Hales et al. 2016), and distress after a romantic breakup is associated with greater rumination (Marshall et al. 2013). Therefore, there may be differences in the experience of being excluded by a potential romantic and platonic partner—in line with people's lay beliefs—but greater time needs to elapse between the experience and the needs satisfaction measurement, though our current study is not designed to test this possibility.

A key finding from these studies is the difference between forecasted and actual experiences of exclusion. However, this finding only occurred when relationship type was measured within-person (Study 1) but not between-persons (Study 3). Because exclusion is common in everyday life (Bernstein et al. 2021; Nezlek et al. 2012) and it has large effects on basic needs and negative affect (Williams 2009), one might expect more accuracy in predicting how one would feel in the situation. When looking at the valiance of affect, this seems to be the case when people are forecasting how they would feel when being accepted and rejected and can compare how these experiences would feel: Compared to *being rejected*, being accepted would feel good (and vice versa). In line with past work, these experiences are so powerful that the source does not appear to matter.

However, a rich literature on affective forecasting demonstrates that people are not often accurate at predicting how they will feel in a certain situation as our thinking is littered with biases leading us to exaggerate our future affect (Wilson and Gilbert 2003). This is consistent with our results when people were comparing *who* was doing the rejection (not *if* they were being rejected): Although people believe that being excluded by a potential romantic partner would hurt more than being excluded by a potential friend, the actual experience did not match with these lay beliefs. Past work (*not* comparing exclusion to inclusion) suggests that people *under*estimate the harm of exclusion (e.g., O'Reilly et al. 2015), especially when not actively experiencing exclusion (Nordgren et al. 2011), but perhaps participants in the present work *over*estimated the harm of romantic rejection when directly comparing it to platonic rejection due to the importance placed on romantic relationships, increasing affected forecasting biases. In Study 1, participants might have been thinking about past romantic and platonic rejections, which were likely painful when experienced, and not both rejections and acceptances, leading them to forecast romantic rejection being a more painful experience compared to platonic rejection. And, although participants were accurate in their forecast that acceptance would feel good and rejection would feel bad, they were inaccurate in their forecast of the degree of the affect: Participants overestimated how bad being rejected would feel compared to how it actually did. This might be the case because they were mentally comparing the experiences of being included and excluded. Compared to the expectation of inclusion, one may think being rejected would be exceptionally painful. This is in line with past work suggesting affective forecasting errors are common with negative events (e.g., Eastwick et al. 2008).



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But when actually experiencing romantic and platonic rejections from potential close others in Studies 2 and 3, the limitations of the manipulation like the contrived environment (see below) did not accurately represent the reality of being rejected by a potential close other. However, future research could explore the context in which exclusion-based affective forecasting is particularly common, and the potential downstream consequences of this bias, such as solitude seeking.

### 8.1 | Limitations, Implications, and Suggestions for Future Research

The present work used a sample of US residents, which might present a limitation in the generalizability of the findings. While the need to belong is universal (Baumeister and Leary 1995), there may be cultural differences in the experiences and expectations of exclusion and the impact of relationship type on this experience. Therefore, future studies could focus on romantic and platonic ostracism in different cultural contexts, specifically in more eastern cultures where societies are more interdependent or collectivistic. Although it has been observed that participants from collectivistic cultures are less affected by social exclusion overall (Pfundmair et al. 2015), lay beliefs about the experiences of ostracism from potential partners and friends could vary based on this interdependence and stronger social support system. For example, although we have seen a shift in expectations from romantic partners in the US (explained in the suffocation model; Finkel et al. 2015), whether this shift has occurred in eastern cultures has not yet been studied. These potential differences in relationship type values could impact perceived partner instrumentality which could then influence cultural differences in lay beliefs examined in Study 1, an ample opportunity for future research (perhaps with a sample of multicultural individuals). These beliefs could be measured longitudinally to see if they change depending on the time spent in a particular culture. For example, would someone raised in a collectivistic culture but currently living in an individualistic culture have different perceptions of romantic and platonic exclusion the longer they are living in the new environment? If there are differences in lay beliefs between culture relationship values and norms, it is also possible that the actual experiences of romantic and platonic exclusion differ as well.

There are many benefits to using Ostracism Online as an exclusion manipulation paradigm. Compared to other exclusion paradigms, like Cyberball (Williams and Jarvis 2006), Ostracism Online is more personal by allowing the participant to pick an avatar and write a bio about themselves to represent a profile within the interaction task. Furthermore, it allowed us to easily manipulate the relationship context and the potential close other feature by indicating that participants would be interacting with potential romantic partners in an environment like a dating app or with potential friends on a social media platform.

However, there are also limitations to Ostracism Online in the present work. We suggested to participants they were interacting with other people currently connected to the system at the same time. However, the paradigm is a somewhat contrived environment which might have decreased the believability of the interactions. Indeed, in Study 3, rejected participants believed they were actually interacting with other people to a lesser extent than those accepted, $F(1, 471) = 54.73$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.10$, and were less likely to think the other people were real, $F(1, 471) = 14.62$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$. However, this is likely a self-protection bias in rejected participants. After being rejected, people might like to believe the source of the rejection is not real in order to make themselves feel better. However, past ostracism research shows that exclusion still has a negative impact even when participants are told that the source is not a real person (Zadro et al. 2004). Although Ostracism Online can threaten needs to a similar effect as other exclusion paradigms thus making the inclusion status manipulation perceived as intended (Wicks et al. 2023; Wolf et al. 2015), the interaction task might have felt too engineered for the relationship type manipulation to have been processed sufficiently deeply to induce the feelings and concerns one would have in a real-life episode of romantic/friendship exclusion. Although our relationship type manipulation was perceived as intended, participants might not have believed that there was a legitimate opportunity for a relationship to develop from this single meeting. Because we did not find a difference between the stranger control and the potential relationship conditions, this might have been the case. Future research could use more ecologically valid manipulations of the relationship type, such as using an in-person speed dating task with either potential romantic partners or potential friends (Finkel et al. 2007), in which they could describe how a relationship could develop from the task (e.g., set up future meetings/dates). This context would also allow for acceptance/exclusion, perhaps through feedback after the speed dating task.

Because we relied upon past literature on self-other overlap and the suffocation model for our hypotheses on why exclusion by potential romantic partners would be more painful than potential friends, we tested internal attributions, perceived partner instrumentality (both in Study 2) and counterfactual thinking (Study 3) as mechanisms of the effect of relationship type on needs. While our results were not as clear cut as anticipated, we would be remiss if we did not mention the limitations of these mediation models. The effect of relationship type on internal attributions, perceived partner instrumentality and counterfactual thinking is experimental (*a*-paths), allowing us to make the causal claim that romantic partners are seen as more instrumental than platonic partners, but there is not a difference in internal attributions or counterfactual thinking made based on relationship type. However, the association between these mechanisms and needs (*b*-paths) is correlational and should thus be interpreted in a way that allows for the opposite directionality to be also plausible. Had the predicted indirect pathways been observed this would have been *consistent with* the causal mechanisms hypothesized, but certainly not definitive evidence. Future research could explore the causal effect of internal attributions, perceived partner instrumentality and counterfactual thinking on needs satisfaction. In that vein, examining the effect of perceived partner instrumentality on needs satisfaction would be an interesting test of the suffocation model and the people-as-mean theory (Orehek, Forest, and Barbaro, 2018).

These results may inform clinical practice for cases where clients fear or have experienced rejection. Clinical treatment, such as interpersonal psychotherapy (Law et al. 2022), often focuses on managing emotional reactions to rejection and lost relationships.



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Therapy providers can use these findings to inform how they teach clients to monitor and regulate maladaptive emotions about rejection, particularly any contrast between the client's *predicted* emotions and their true emotional reaction when rejection *actually* occurs. Providers' assessment of rejection sensitivity may also benefit from these results by helping them recognize friendship rejection as an equally valid presentation compared to romantic rejection. This distinction is relevant for accurate assessment and patient-centred treatment because rejection sensitivity has been tied to reduced mental well-being, negative self-directed emotions and maladaptive beliefs about others (Efeoglu and Sen 2022; Gao et al. 2017). Recognizing these concerns among people who have experienced friendship rejection can help providers validate the client's emotional experience and direct treatment toward it.

## 9 | Conclusion

We approach social interactions expecting to be included and often with the hope of the other person(s) becoming a close other after the interaction. But these interactions open us up to opportunities to be rejected by the potential relationship partner. Most of the existing literature on social exclusion involves strangers who will remain strangers with minimal research exploring the effect of exclusion within existing close relationships. The current work explored the effect of being excluded by a potential romantic partner and friend. When people are comparing the experience of being rejected by a *potential friend* or a *potential romantic partner*, they believe the latter would be more painful than the former. However, when just thinking about the experience of *rejection* and *acceptance*, people forecast that being rejected would hurt more than being accepted, and this did not depend on the source of the rejection/acceptance. It is this latter forecast that is consistent with actual experiences. Furthermore, internal attributions of the experience, perceived partner instrumentality and counterfactual thinking did not mediate the effect of relationship type on basic psychological needs satisfaction and affect in a meaningful way. These results show that there are interesting differences between people's forecast and experience of exclusion, but these differences are impacted by the experiences being compared. When thinking about being excluded (compared to included), one expects it to hurt, and it does. When thinking about being excluded by potential romantic partners (compared to potential friends), one expects it to hurt even more, but this is not necessarily the case when actually experienced. Regardless of the source, interpersonal rejection hurts. Because these experiences are common, when we exclude others, we should practice rejection strategies that mitigate this hurt by doing so in kind and thoughtful ways.


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### Disclosure

Any opinions, findings and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.

### Ethics Statement

This research was approved by the University of Mississippi's Institutional Review Board.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

Study materials are available at https://researchbox.org/3377.

### Endnotes

[1] We also measured hostility toward interactions partners as an outcome; the results are mainly consistent with basic psychological needs (see Supporting Information, including Table S1 and Figures S2 and S3). We explored the impact of gender (in all studies), the results of which are in the Supporting Information (see Figures S1, S4–S6).

[2] Participants completed the study in three steps, each with a different website link: an initial Qualtrics survey (including the consent form, introduction and perceived partner instrumentality), Ostracism Online and a second Qualtrics survey (including the remaining measures). We linked the survey data for the Prolific Participants with their Prolific IDs. Participants recruited through the university subject pool did not have an ID to link the surveys, so we matched them using times each survey was completed.

[3] One participant indicated that they received 999 dislikes. Because we believe this answer was not given in good faith, for this test only, the outlier was removed. Though this exclusion is a deviation from our preregistration, it is a more conservative test of the manipulation.

[4] The flow of the survey was the same as Study 2 (see Endnote 2). We matched participants recruited through the university subject pool using a reported ID. While doing so, we noticed some participants took the survey multiple times. When this occurred, we kept in their first response and manually deleted all subsequent responses.

[5] Unlike Study 2, we did not use Ostracism Online naivete as an exclusion criterion in Study 3. Prior to Study 3 data collection, we re-ran all analyses of Study 2 with people who had previously played Ostracism Online included in the analyses, and the results did not change in any meaningful way. Because we anticipated slow data collection in Study 3, we decided to keep Ostracism Online non-naive people in analyses to increase our sample size because having previously experienced this paradigm did not seem to impact results within the current project. We had an additional preregistered exclusion criterion of completing the study with an 'exceptionally fast' time, as determined by Prolific. No participants met this criterion, and thus no one was excluded because of it.

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## Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.

**Supporting File 1**: ejsp70066-sup-0001-SuppMat.pdf



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