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# The Role of Similarity in Forming and Sustaining Interpersonal Relationships: A Survey Study

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**Abstract**

This study investigated how perceived similarity influences the development of platonic and romantic relationships. However, prior work has rarely compared the perceived similarity and conflict across clearly defined dissimilar-experience groups, leaving open how past dissimilar relationships relate to present perceptions of similarity and disagreement. Survey questionnaires were digitally administered to 183 participants recruited through Qualtrics and measured similarity in values, daily routines, and worldviews, as well as the frequency of conflict due to differences. Results indicated that participants consider shared values and interests as the dominant factors in friendship formation, while factors such as personality and time spent together were considered as dominant factors in maintaining relationships. One-way ANOVA tests revealed significant differences in worldview similarity, routine similarity, and conflict frequency across groups defined by past experiences with dissimilar romantic partners. Subsequent post hoc Tukey HSD comparisons showed that participants who reported preferring similar partners perceived significantly greater similarity and less frequent conflict compared to those who had experienced unresolved value differences. These results support the similarity-attraction principle but also signify that the extent of dissimilarity lies in how the differences are managed. Overall, the results suggest that while similarity facilitates communication and stability, unresolved differences can undermine closeness, whereas differences addressed constructively do not weaken relationships.

*Keywords: Perceived similarity, Relationship closeness, Conflict frequency, Similarity-attraction principle, Romantic and platonic ties*

## 1. Introduction

Human relationships, whether romantic or platonic, are central to physical and psychological well-being. Strong social bonds are correlated with better life satisfaction, improved mental health, and even longer life expectancy through various mechanisms such as stress regulation and social support (Umberson and Montez, 2010). Hence, understanding factors that promote relationship formation and maintenance is an important topic in social psychology.

One of the most prominent indicators of attraction and relational closeness is similarity. Similar values, interests, and communication styles between individuals provide a foundation for mutual understanding and trust, while dissimilarities can create conflicts. The similarity-attraction hypothesis proposes that individuals are drawn to others they perceive as similar (Byrne, 1971). Meta-analytic evidence in other studies confirms that perceived similarity is positively associated with attraction and satisfaction in relationships (Montoya, et al., 2008).

The importance in the role of similarity in forming and maintaining relationships is supported by two principles. First, consensual validation suggests that people seek affirmation of their beliefs and attitudes from others. Agreements provide reassurance that one's views are accurate or socially acceptable (Festinger, 1954; Morry and Kito, 2009).

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Second, cognitive evaluation suggests that people tend to create generalized similarities from minor points, assuming that shared interests or values expand into broader compatibility in relationships (Montoya and Horton, 2013). These principles together help explain why even small overlaps in hobbies, routines, or perspectives can foster a sense of closeness between individuals.

However, other studies indicate that similarity is not the only determinant of relational quality. Factors such as personality compatibility and time spent together often exert stronger influence in long-term satisfaction. The mere exposure effect suggests that repeated interaction increases liking and comfort, meaning that closeness can develop even in the absence of strong similarities (Zajonc, 1968). Moreover, some studies show that dissimilarities, when framed constructively, do not necessarily weaken relationships and may provide opportunities for reconciliations (Aron and Aron, 1996).

This study investigates how perceived similarity in various factors such as values, daily routines, and worldviews influence satisfaction and conflict in both platonic and romantic relationships. The study also examines the extent to which the prior experience with dissimilar partners influences the newly formed relationships. By applying the principles of similarity-attraction, consensual validation, and exposure effects, this research aims to clarify the extent to which similarity, including the perceived similarity, predict the relationship quality and formation. To guide this investigation, three research questions were formulated: (1) whether perceived worldview similarity with a closest friend differs across levels of past romantic dissimilarity experience (Q36), (2) whether perceived routine similarity with a closest friend differs across those same dissimilarity groups, and (3) whether the frequency of conflict due to value or belief differences varies by past romantic dissimilarity experience (Q36). These questions were designed to test whether individuals who reported different experiences with dissimilar partners also perceived differences in similarity and conflict within their current close relationships.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1 Survey Participants

A total of 200 responses were collected through Qualtrics, of which 183 were retained after screening for completion and validity. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 65 and older, with the majority falling between 18 and 29 years. The survey responses included 47% male, 53% female, and less than 1% non-binary respondents. Racial and ethnic representation included White (71%), Black or African American (12%), Asian (8%), Hispanic or Latino (15%), and other groups. Respondents were drawn from across the United States, with the South and Northeast most heavily represented. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained prior to data collection, and all participants provided informed consent before beginning the survey.

### 2.2 Survey Design and Measures

With a total of 36 questions, the survey was designed to investigate the role of similarity in the development of platonic and romantic relationships. Drawing from prior research on the similarity-attraction hypothesis and the homophily principle, the instrument included a mix of multiple choice, Likert scale, and open-ended items. Several questions focused on the formation of friendships, such as Q17, which asked participants, *"Which of the following qualities allow for you to develop your closest friendships?"* with response options including interests and hobbies, values and morals, background (culture, religion, family history, struggles), sense of humor, and communication style. These measures captured the qualities participants believed most influential in initiating close social ties.

To assess perceived similarity in ongoing relationships, participants responded to items such as Q31, *"How similar or different are your worldviews with your closest friend?"* and Q32, *"How similar or different are your daily routines compared to your closest friend's?"* Both were rated on a five-point scale, where lower scores indicated higher levels of perceived similarity. Relational conflict was captured using Q34, which asked, *"How often do differences in values or beliefs play a role in disagreements in your relationship?"* with response options ranging from "very often" to "never." Finally, romantic dissimilarity experience was measured with Q36, *"Have you ever been in a relationship with someone who had different values or beliefs from you?"* Participants selected from

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categories such as “yes, strengthened,” “yes, worked through,” “yes, unresolved conflict,” “no, prefer similar,” and “other.” These core questions served as the basis for both descriptive analysis and statistical tests.

### 2.3 Procedure

The survey was administered online using Qualtrics. Participants were recruited through multiple routes to broaden reach and reduce selection bias, including social-media postings on Instagram and Reddit communities related to relationships and psychology, distribution through email lists within school and community networks, and classroom announcements in which instructors shared a voluntary participation link. No incentives were offered. Individuals accessed the survey through a public link, reviewed an information sheet, and provided informed consent before beginning. Responses were anonymous, and participants were permitted to skip any item.

### 2.4 Data Preparation

To minimize selection bias and ensure data quality, we applied a transparent, rule-based screening process prior to analysis. Responses were excluded if they lacked consent, constituted invalid submissions such as entirely empty responses, or were identified as duplicate entries based on identical time stamps combined with identical IP-hash values. Cases were also removed if they exhibited substantial missing data, which was operationalized as missing more than 20% of the core analytic items (Q17, Q31, Q32, Q34, and Q36), missing all demographic items, or completing fewer than 50% of the total survey questions. These exclusion criteria ensured that the retained sample contained sufficient information for both descriptive and inferential analyses while limiting the risk of systematic bias introduced through listwise deletion. These rules were pre-specified to reduce the likelihood that exclusions disproportionately reflected any single recruitment route or participant subgroup, thereby addressing potential selection bias. After applying all screening criteria, the final analytic dataset consisted of N = 183 valid cases.

### 2.5 Statistical Analyses

Descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation, and frequency distribution, were computed for all variables. Graphical representations such as bar charts were generated to illustrate the relative importance of friendship and relationship factors. For inferential analyses, one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) were performed to test whether perceived similarity (Q31, Q32) and conflict frequency (Q34) differed by dissimilar romantic experience group (Q36). ANOVA was appropriate because the independent variable was categorical with five levels, while the dependent variables were measured on five-point Likert-type scales and were treated as approximately continuous for ANOVA, consistent with common practice in survey-based social science analyses. In ANOVA, the F statistic reflects the ratio of between-group variability to within-group variability, and the p-value indicates the probability that observed differences occurred by chance, with values below .05 considered statistically significant. When overall group differences were detected, Tukey’s Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) test was conducted to determine which specific pairs of groups differed significantly. This post hoc procedure was chosen because it controls for familywise error while providing pairwise comparisons across all groups. Effect sizes were calculated using eta squared ($\eta^2$) to quantify the proportion of variance explained by group membership.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Demographics

Out of 200 participants, a total of 183 valid respondents were analyzed. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 65 and above, with the largest in the 18-29 age group. Gender distribution was as follows: 47% male, 53% female, < 1% non-binary. Respondents’ ethnic background was as follows: White (71%), Black/African American (12%), Asian (8%), Hispanic/Latino (15%), and other groups. Geographically, participants came from all U.S. regions, with the South and Northeast most heavily represented.

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### 3.2 Friendship Formation

Participants were asked, *"Which of the following qualities allow for you to develop your closest friendships?"* with five choices: (1) interests and hobbies, (2) values and morals, (3) background (culture, religion, family history, struggles), (4) sense of humor, and (5) communication style. The most frequently endorsed factors were interests and values, while humor, background, and communication style were selected less often (Figure 1).

In a related question *"What initially drew you to your closest friend?"*, most participants selected shared humor, proximity, and personality traits. Across these responses, participants most frequently selected shared humor, proximity, and personality traits as initial reasons for closeness.

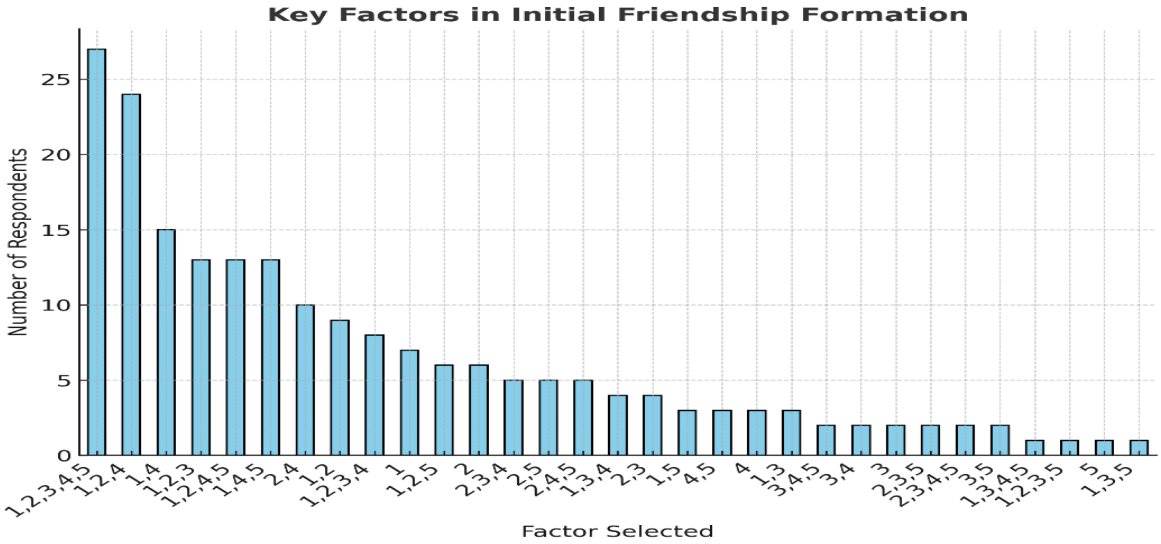


Figure 1. Bar representation showing the frequency of factors participants selected as most important in initially growing closer to a friend. Response options were coded as: (1) Interests and hobbies, (2) Values and morals, (3) Background (culture, religion, family history, struggles), (4) Sense of humor, and (5) Communication style. Interests/hobbies and values/morals were selected most frequently, though other interpersonal qualities such as humor and communication also contributed to friendship development.

### 3.3 Friendship Deepening

To assess closeness in relationship, participants were asked *"How similar or different are your worldviews with your closest friend?"*, with a 1-5 scale response (1 = very similar, 5 = very different). As shown in Figure 2, the majority selected very similar or somewhat similar, highlighting the role of worldview similarity in maintaining friendships.

A follow up question *"How similar or different are your daily routines compared to your closest friend's?"* with the same 1-5 scale response, showed most participants rating themselves on the similar side. Ratings for both worldview similarity (Q31) and routine similarity (Q32) were concentrated toward the "similar" end of the scale.

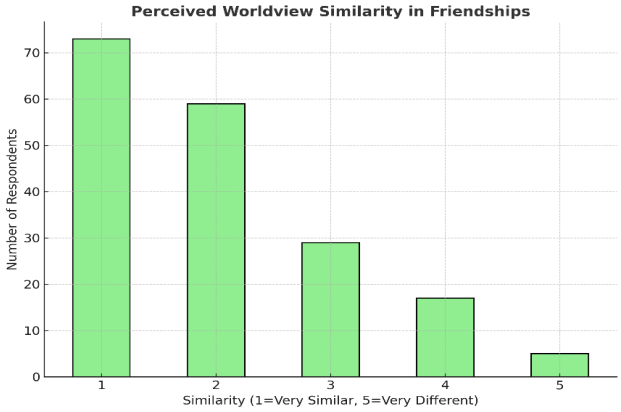


Figure 2. Distribution of participant ratings on the similarity of their worldview with their closest friend. Response options ranged from (1) very similar to (5) very different. The majority reported high levels of similarity (1 and 2), suggesting that perceived worldview alignment plays a role in sustaining long term friendships.

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### 3.4 Importance of Similarities (Across Relationships)

Participants rated the importance of different types of similarity in relationships (Q 22 and 23), including shared interests, values/morals, background, humor, and communication style. On a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not important, 5 = very important), values/morals received the highest mean ratings, followed by interests/hobbies and communication style. Background and humor were rated as the lowest. Higher ratings of shared values were associated with greater reported closeness in both platonic and romantic relationships.

### 3.5 Romantic Relationships and Similarity

Responses to Q36 were distributed across all five categories (Figure 3), and these categories were used as the grouping variable in the ANOVA models.

Participants also rated the importance of similarities for romantic relationship strength. Personality was most frequently ranked as "very important," followed closely by shared values, underscoring that dispositional traits may weigh more heavily than situational commonalities.

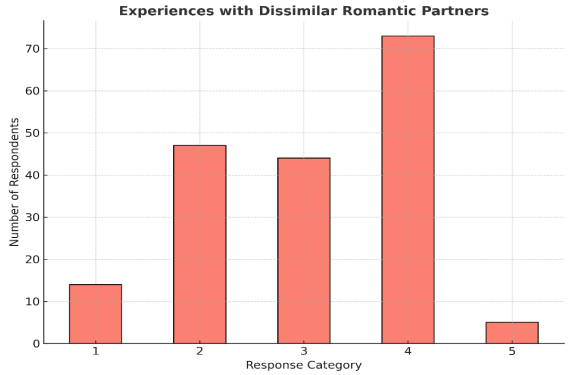


Figure 3. Bar chart illustrating participants' self-reported history of romantic relationships with dissimilar values. Response options included: (1) yes, strengthened relationship, (2) yes, challenges but worked through, (3) yes, significant conflicts unresolved, (4) no, prefer similar values, and (5) other. These responses were collapsed into groups for ANOVA to test the effect of dissimilar experience on perceived similarity.

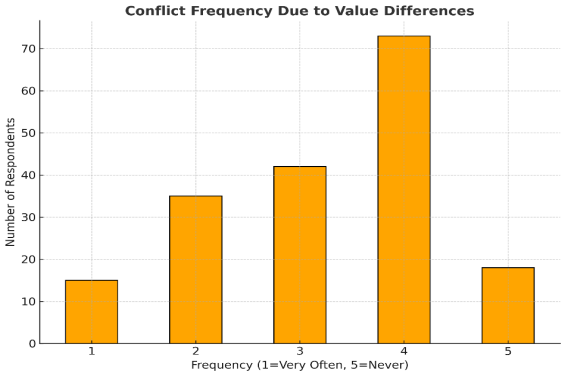


Figure 4. Bar graph of responses to how often participants disagreed with romantic partners due to value differences. Response options ranged from (1) Very often, (2) Somewhat often, (3) Occasionally, (4) Rarely, to (5) Never. Results indicate that many participants reported conflicts occasionally or rarely, suggesting that value differences do not universally result in high levels of relational strain.

### 3.6 Conflict and Value Differences

Conflict frequency (Q34) was rated on a five-point scale from "very often" to "never," and responses were most concentrated in the "occasionally" and "rarely" categories (Figure 4).

Most participants reported disagreements only "occasionally" or "rarely", with fewer reporting frequent conflict (Figure 4). A follow up question asked, *"How do you typically handle disagreements about values with your partner?"* Most respondents described compromise or respectful discussion, while fewer reported avoidance or unresolved conflict. These open-ended responses emphasized viewing such differences as complementary rather than divisive.

To examine whether past dissimilar relationship experience shapes present perceptions of similarity and conflict, one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted, with Q36 group membership as the independent variable and Q31, Q32, and Q34 as dependent variables. ANOVA compares the variability of group means against the variability within groups; the resulting F statistic is larger when between-group differences outweigh within-group variability. The accompanying p-value estimates the probability that such differences occurred by chance, with a value below 0.05 indicating statistical significance. Cohen's *f* was reported as a standardized measure of effect size for the omnibus ANOVA tests, with larger values indicating greater magnitude of group differences.

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Table 1. One-way ANOVA results examining differences in worldview similarity (Q31), routine similarity (Q32), and conflict frequency due to value or belief differences (Q34) across levels of past romantic dissimilarity experience (Q36). $\eta^2$ represents the proportion of variance explained by group membership, and Cohen's f represents standardized omnibus effect size.

| Dependent variables | DF (between groups, within groups) | F-value | p-value | $\eta^2$ value | Cohen's *f* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Worldview similarity (Q31) | 4, 178 | 6.43 | < 0.001 | 0.126 | 0.38 |
| Routine similarity (Q32) | 4, 178 | 3.16 | 0.0155 | 0.066 | 0.27 |
| Conflict frequency (Q34) | 4, 178 | 3.63 | 0.0071 | 0.075 | 0.29 |

Results showed significant differences across all three dependent variables: worldview similarity, $F(4, 178) = 6.43$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.126$; routine similarity, $F(4, 178) = 3.16$, $p = 0.016$, $\eta^2 = 0.066$; and conflict frequency, $F(4, 178) = 3.63$, $p = 0.007$, $\eta^2 = 0.075$. The omnibus ANOVAs indicated group differences in Q31, Q32, and Q34 by Q36 category (Table 1), and Tukey HSD tests identified the specific significant pairwise differences (Table 2).

Table 2. Tukey HSD post hoc comparisons for perceived similarity (Q31, Q32) and conflict frequency (Q34) across dissimilar romantic experience groups (Q36). Lower Q31/Q32 scores = greater similarity; higher Q34 scores = less frequent conflict. The 95% confidence intervals represent the estimated range in which the true mean difference between groups is expected to lie, providing information about the precision of each Tukey HSD comparison.

| Dependent variables | Pairwise comparison | Mean (Group 1) | Mean (Group 2) | Mean difference | 95% C.I. [lower, upper] | p-value |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Worldview similarity (Q31) | No, prefer similar vs. Yes, worked through | 1.56 | 2.38 | -0.82 | [-1.24, -0.31] | 0.0003 |
| | No, prefer similar vs. Yes, unresolved conflict | 1.56 | 2.25 | -0.69 | [-1.18, -0.21] | 0.0051 |
| Routine similarity (Q32) | No, prefer similar vs. Yes, worked through | 2.38 | 3.09 | -0.70 | [-1.18, -0.23] | 0.0065 |
| Conflict frequency (Q34) | No, prefer similar vs. Yes, unresolved conflict | 3.49 | 2.84 | 0.65 | [0.12, 1.18] | 0.0172 |

Because ANOVA indicates only that group differences exist, Tukey Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) tests were conducted to identify which pairs of dissimilar experience groups differed.

Results showed that participants who preferred similar partners (*No, prefer similar* group) reported greater worldview and routine similarity than those who *worked through* or experienced *unresolved value conflicts* (all $p < 0.01$). For conflict frequency, the *no, prefer similar* group also reported less frequent disagreements compared to those with unresolved conflicts ($p = 0.017$). These findings support that past dissimilar experiences, particularly unresolved conflicts, are linked with diminished perceptions of similarity and greater relationship strain, while those who intentionally avoid dissimilarity perceive their relationships more harmoniously.

The results revealed significant effects across all three dependent variables. For worldview similarity, there were significant differences among the dissimilar experience groups, $F(4,178) = 6.43$, $p < 0.001$. For routine similarity, the effect was also significant, $F(4,178) = 3.16$, $p = 0.016$. Also, the conflict frequency showed significant group differences, $F(4,178) = 3.63$, $p = 0.007$. The F statistic in each case compares the variability between group means to the variability within groups; larger F-values indicate stronger evidence of group differences. The p-values represent the probability that such differences could have occurred by chance, with values less than 0.05 considered statistically significant.

## 4. Discussion

This study examined the influence of similarity on the development of platonic and romantic relationships. Consistent with the hypothesis and with the homophily principle (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1954), survey participants reported that shared experiences, values, interests, and backgrounds facilitated relational closeness. These findings cohere with the similarity-attraction hypothesis (Montoya, et al., 2008), which states that perceived similarities increase interpersonal attraction by developing mutual understanding and trust. The statistical analyses from this study reinforced this finding. One-way ANOVA results revealed significant group differences in perceived worldview and

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routine similarity, and Tukey HSD tests confirmed that participants who avoided dissimilar partners (*no, prefer similar*) reported significantly higher similarity than those who had worked through or experienced unresolved conflicts.

However, a deeper examination revealed that similarity was not the strongest predictor of closeness. Personality and time spent together emerged as more influential than any specific form of similarity. Particularly, personality was rated as the most important factor in romantic relationship formation, while time spent together was the strongest driver of friendship closeness. This descriptive analysis complements the ANOVA results. Although similar perceptions varied by dissimilar-experience group, participants still consistently prioritized personality and exposure. This suggests that repeated interaction and dispositional compatibility sustain closeness even when similarities are less common. This supports the mere exposure effect (Zajonc, 1968), which suggests that repeated interaction and contact increases familiarity and liking, and indicates that exposure can compensate for the lack of similarity by a gradual development of comfort and trust.

Importantly, this study's findings challenge the common assumption that differences inevitably weaken relationships. A large proportion of participants reported that differences did not strain their friendships or romantic partnerships. At the same time, statistical analyses showed that unresolved dissimilarities were associated with significantly lower similarity and greater conflict frequency. In contrast, when differences were resolved constructively, they did not predict higher conflict, underscoring that the impact of dissimilarity depends on how it is managed. These results emphasize the role of perceived similarity, rather than actual similarity. Prior research supports this distinction, showing that perceived similarity predicts satisfaction more strongly than objective measures of similarity (Morry and Kito, 2009). This implies that partners can structure their differences positively or even undermine them if their shared values remain consistent.

These findings carry theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, they suggest that relationship science must move beyond binary "similar vs. different" models to a layered approach: similarity may be crucial for initial attraction, but continued exposure and personality compatibility sustain long-term closeness in relationships. Practically, for counseling and therapy, the results suggest that focusing on fostering shared values and restructuring differences positively may strengthen relationships. Also, algorithms used in dating platforms that prioritize both similarity and structured opportunities for repeated interaction may better facilitate the formation of bonds. In friendship and group settings, interventions that increase meaningful shared experiences may cultivate closeness, even among initially dissimilar individuals. Nonetheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. The self-report surveys contain potential biases such as memory bias and social desirability. The cross-sectional design of the study also limits the explanation of the causality between closeness and perceived similarity. Additionally, the sample was relatively homogenous, reducing the generalizability of results across different cultural or demographic groups.

Future research should address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs to trace how perceptions of similarity change over time, recruiting more diverse and specific samples, and exploring additional predictors such as attachment style and conflict management. Such further studies will clarify the context under which similarity and dissimilarity exert their strongest effects, providing a more comprehensive understanding of relationship dynamics.

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