

Examining Differences in Relationship Quality by Romantic Relationship Initiation Pathway

by

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Abstract

Recent research has highlighted that there are two distinct pathways to initiate a romantic relationship: *friends-first* initiation and *dating-initiation*. However, little research has explored potential differences between these two pathways. As friends-first initiators have a pre-existing relationship that dating-initiators do not possess, I predicted that friends-first initiators would have higher trust, satisfaction, and commitment, and lower uncertainty and jealousy compared to dating initiators. Therefore, I examined the differences in these relationship qualities between entering a romantic relationship as friends versus as strangers. Eight hundred and sixty-five university students and crowdsourced individuals (Prolific) who were in a romantic relationship at the time of the study were asked to complete an online survey about their current romantic relationship. Through multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), I found that individuals who were friends-first tended to have more trust, satisfaction, and commitment, and less self-uncertainty in their romantic relationships compared to dating initiators. This finding held constant even when adding individual differences, relationship length, and recruitment sample as covariates. Further, through exploratory mediation analysis, I uncovered that trust mediates the link between initiation pathway and these relationship qualities, meaning that having a pre-existing friendship prior to dating likely increases trust, and this trust leads to these other relationship quality benefits. These findings contribute to understanding how being friends-first may impact the subsequent romantic relationship, and also indicates that friends-first relationships may experience greater benefits that dating-initiators do not.

Keywords: Romantic relationship initiation, *friends-first*, *dating initiation*, relationship quality, trust

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Examining Differences in Relationship Quality by Romantic Relationship Initiation Pathway

Imagine two women named Sally and Suzie. Both women are open to starting a romantic relationship. Sally has a coworker she's been friends with for a while and has started to develop romantic feelings for them. She tells them her feelings and finds out they are mutual. Soon after, they start dating. In other words, Sally took what is called the *friends-first initiation* path to romance, meaning that they began as friends, and this friendship turned romantic over time (Stinson et al., 2022). Suzie, however, goes to a hockey game, meets the person sitting next to her for the first time, and they immediately connect. They exchange numbers and start dating the week after. Suzie took a pathway called *dating-initiation*, meaning that they met one another for the first time and shortly thereafter become romantically involved (Stinson et al., 2022). Knowing nothing else about these women and their partners, would their new romantic relationships look different from one another? Does the method by which people initiate a romantic relationship influence how that romantic relationship unfolds and is later experienced?

While media may portray dating-initiation as the more common route to romance, Stinson et al. (2022) found that about 2 out of every 3 people currently in romantic relationships report that they were friends before their relationship turned romantic. However, because this distinction in pathways has only recently been brought to light, little is known about whether these different pathways produce different respective outcomes. Therefore, I wanted to investigate whether there are differences in the relationships produced by these two different ways to initiate a romantic relationship. I have chosen to measure prominent relationship quality factors because they might be influenced by the presence of a previous friendship – namely,

trust, satisfaction, commitment, uncertainty, and jealousy. These five variables each carry their own consequences in their presence and absence, including but not limited to potentially destructive behaviors for both parties involved (e.g. for jealousy, see Guerrero & Anderson, 2013). However, the presence of an already established friendship could influence how a new couple experiences their romantic relationship, including navigating difficulties and building trust. In fact, being friends prior to lovers may better equip new couples to navigate relational difficulties and establish trust in one another, giving them an advantage when compared to those in the dating-initiation pathway. Therefore, in my thesis research, I examined potential differences in trust, relationship satisfaction, commitment, feelings of uncertainty, and jealousy between relationship initiation pathways to better understand romantic relationship initiation styles and their relative consequences for the ensuing relationship. Differences in any of these domains could have a significant impact on the kinds of romantic relationships one chooses to pursue.

Ultimately, I sought to understand the impact of friendship on romantic relationships with a specific focus on how pre-existing friendships may influence the quality of a subsequent romantic relationship. In the sections below, I explore what friendship is, what it produces, and how outcomes that arise from friendships could impact a romantic relationship. As I examine some of the key qualities that friendship produces, namely trust, satisfaction, and commitment, I demonstrate that the presence of friendship may reduce uncertainty and jealousy in a romantic relationship and improve the overall quality of the relationship. As this is an unexplored area, any contribution should enhance the understanding of these pathways and their implications for individuals approaching romantic relationship initiation.

Passion-Based Intimacy and Friendship-Based Intimacy

When diving into the research on intimacy, two distinct categories frequently emerge: friendship-based intimacy and passion-based intimacy (Guerrero & Mongeau, 2008). While not always using the same terminology, those seeking to dismantle the sources of intimacy often divide it into at least two terms – one term that describes an emotional connection and understanding (i.e., friendship-based intimacy), and another that describes a passionate sexual and/or romantic connection (i.e., passion-based intimacy). Many researchers have called these “companionate love” and “passionate/romantic love” respectively (Berscheid, 2010; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986; Sternberg, 1986). Some have simply used the term “intimacy” to describe emotional connectedness and “passion” to describe intense longing (Rubin & Campbell, 2012; Carswell et al., 2021) but ultimately are describing very similar phenomena.

These two forms of intimacy can form independently but also foster one another (Diamond, 2003). As such, beginning with passion-based intimacy can foster the emotional connectedness of friendship-based intimacy, and friendship-based intimacy can lead to passion-based intimacy. Despite this, the current heteronormative dating script dictates that men initiate relationships out of sexual attraction to a woman, and that women make themselves look nice to attract a man (Cameron & Curry, 2020; Laner & Ventrone, 2000; Rose & Frieze, 1989). This script heavily emphasizes that romantic relationships should begin with passion-based intimacy. However, recent research has demonstrated that when friendship forms first, increasing friendship-based intimacy is often associated with an increase in romantic attraction and passionate feelings (Dyck et al., 2024a). This indicates that there is another lesser known pathway to romance wherein two people are friends, develop friendship-based intimacy, and from there develop passion-based intimacy (Eaton & Rose, 2011). In examining these cultural

dating scripts, it is clear that friendship-based intimacy can foster romantic and passionate feelings towards another person.

Friendships and Romantic Relationships

The two main peer relationships where these forms of intimacy develop are friendship and romance. Friendship is a voluntarily entered relationship with another person, often characterized by intimacy, closeness, support, liking the other person, and a desire to spend time with them (Fehr, 1995). In a similar vein, romantic relationships are also voluntary relationships that are marked by intimacy, passion, and commitment (Sternberg, 1986). At first glance, romantic relationships and friendships are very similar. Both are mutual dyadic relationships characterized by closeness, reciprocity, and intimacy (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2013; Harris & Vazire, 2016). Friendships can be characterized by interdependence, commitment, and selectivity, but to a lesser extent than what is expected in a romantic relationship (Harris & Vazire, 2016). The differences between them do not simply lie in having a sexual component to the relationship (e.g. friends-with-benefits; Machia et al., 2020; Afifi & Faulkner, 2000), but rather in intensity and exclusivity, which are characteristic of passion-based intimacy (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986). In romance, the interdependence that develops can lead individuals to expect their partner to meet their needs to a greater extent than their friends. Romantic relationships often involve a greater degree of commitment than the average friendship wherein monogamy is often expected in romantic relationships but not friendships. Further, people tend to have more selection criteria for a romantic partner than for a friend (Harris & Vazire, 2016). However, these highlighted differences further demonstrate the interdependence of these two dyadic relationships. The characteristics of friendship could be seen as precursors to romance, or

perhaps romantic relationships are simply expected to possess the same characteristics as friendship (VanderDrift et al., 2016; Griffith, 2022).

Friends-First and Dating-Initiation

Although friendship is a critical component of romantic relationships, little is known about whether the timing of when that friend-based intimacy develops affects relationship outcomes. In friends-first relationships, partners were friends prior to their romance, and for dating-initiation relationships, the partners' friendship developed, or is still in development (if friendship does indeed develop), after entering into a romantic relationship (Stinson et al., 2022). In essence, those who are friends-first do not have the same "getting to know each other" phase as dating-initiation couples (Laner & Ventrone, 2000), meaning that the initial stages of their romantic relationship will look very different. Not surprisingly, the trajectories and timelines of relationships formed via these two pathways differ. When compared to dating-initiation couples, those who are friends-first often have their partner meet their family and friends earlier, engage in physical intimacy later, and experience greater sexual intimacy (Lowey et al., 2023). However, dating initiation couples experience greater emotional intimacy when introducing their partner to their friends, and greater romantic interest when introducing their partner to their family (Lowey et al., 2023). Even in light of these findings, nearly nothing is known about the *consequences* of forming relationships via these two initiation pathways on relationship quality. In other words, there has been no investigation on whether the relationship quality differs between these two pathways. Ultimately, research on initiation pathways should illuminate how to boost relationship quality.

Relationship Quality

Relationship quality is a term which encompasses various facets of a relationship which impact the benefits experienced by the partners within that relationship. Having good relationship quality has been shown to increase happiness (Myers, 2000), lead to better sleep (Chen et al., 2015), better quality of life, and less anxiety, depression, and stress (Pieh et al., 2020). It is difficult to narrow down all the components that impact relationship quality, as researchers often choose different combinations of factors to measure (Fletcher et al., 2000). In the sections that follow, I outline five components of relationship quality that I anticipated would differ between friends-first and dating-initiation relationships: trust, satisfaction, commitment, uncertainty, and jealousy.

Trust

Trust is a critical component of relationship quality. Trust is the confidence that another person will act in a manner consistent with past behaviour and their known character (Rempel et al., 1985), and it is one of the defining factors of close relationships (Larzelere & Huston, 1980; Rempel et al., 1985). Rempel et al. (1985) defined trust as comprising three distinct components: predictability, dependability, and faith. Predictability is the evidence from past behaviors than an individual is consistent across various scenarios, dependability is the knowledge of the person's character and traits, and faith is the belief that a person in future circumstances will act in a way consistent with their past behavior and character. Each of these three facets uniquely contribute to trust (Rempel et al. 1985).

In romantic relationships, trust tends to grow as the relationship matures and has been found to lead to various relational and personal benefits. These benefits include increased

commitment to the other person (Wieselquist et al., 1999), promoting cooperative behavior (Lyu & Ferrin, 2018), forgiveness of one's partner (Strelan, 2017), and interdependence (Johnson & Bradshaw, 2021; Murray et al., 2009). Trust also helps by acting as a buffer against stress (Carlander & Johansson, 2020; Guinot et al., 2014) and correlates positively with life satisfaction and positive affect (Baltatescu, 2009). In romantic relationships, the presence of trust also encourages working through conflict together (Balliet & Van Lange, 2013). Overall, the benefits of increased trust are significant.

Another relationship which is especially likely to generate trust, and therefore promote these benefits, is friendship. Trust is one of the key factors defining friendship (Policarpo, 2015) and close friendships are characterized by disclosure, warmth, and trust (Fehr, 2004; Fehr & Harasymchuk, 2019). Therefore, those who characterize their relationship as a friendship likely have some degree of trust established that strangers would not. Considering this, romantic relationships that began as friends would be more likely to have this bond already established, and this pre-existing trust could give them an advantage, both in having higher relationship satisfaction (Fitzpatrick & Lafontaine, 2017) as well as being better equipped for when relationship difficulties and disagreements arise (Balliet & Van Lange, 2013). As such, I expect trust to be higher in friends-first relationships than in dating-initiation relationships.

Relationship Satisfaction and Commitment

Relationship satisfaction refers to the satisfaction one feels with regards to their partner and the degree to which their needs are met in that relationship (Fitzpatrick & Lafontaine, 2017; Wieselquist et al., 1999). Romantic partners are happiest with their romantic relationships when they describe their bond as based in friendship (Helliwell & Grover, 2014; VanderDrift et al., 2016) and when they have greater trust in their partner (Fitzpatrick & Lafontaine, 2017;

Baltatescu, 2009; Wieselquist, 2009). Because I predicted friends-first relationships would have higher trust and because partners are happiest when they report higher friendship-based intimacy, I also expected that they would have higher satisfaction.

Related to both trust and satisfaction, commitment refers to the long-term orientation or persistence of a particular relationship (Wieselquist et al., 1999). Commitment is highly correlated with trust and relationship satisfaction (Teoh et al., 2023; Wieselquist et al., 1999). As such, I expected that those who were friends-first would report higher commitment than those who formed their relationship via dating initiation.

Uncertainty

Although trust, satisfaction, and commitment represent positive relationship qualities, uncertainty represents a precarious relationship quality. Uncertainty is the lack of confidence in something or someone due to the inability to predict an outcome (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). In the case of relational uncertainty, these feelings center around those engaged in the relationship. Uncertainty is conceptualized as having three distinct categories: uncertainty about the self, uncertainty about the partner, and uncertainty about the relationship (Knobloch et al., 1999). Self-uncertainty stems from the lack of confidence in one's own feelings or thoughts towards the relationship. Partner uncertainty comes from the lack of confidence in the partner's feelings towards the relationship. Finally, relationship uncertainty comes from the lack of certainty about the couple as a combined unit.

All three of these sources of uncertainty can affect romantic relationships (Kennedy-Lightsey & Booth-Butterfield, 2011; Knobloch et al., 2007) and can lead to negative outcomes, such as cognitive and emotional jealousy, negative affect (Solomon & Brisini, 2019), and

increased rumination (Aracı-İyiyaydın et al., 2022). Increased relational uncertainty can also lead to an unwillingness to talk about sensitive issues with one's partner (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004). Further, it also leads to decreased efforts to improve the relationship quality in terms of closeness, satisfaction, and commitment (Young et al., 2013). Taken together, the byproducts of relational uncertainty can lead to relational problems, potentially resulting in the termination of a romantic relationship.

However, the presence of a pre-existing friendship may decrease these feelings of uncertainty. Uncertainty is especially strong in the early phases of a romance as the individuals are still learning what to expect from one another and how committed they are to the relationship (Wieselquist et al., 1999). However, those who have a previously established friendship before becoming romantically involved already understand what to expect from the other person and thus likely experience less uncertainty, even in newer relationships. Due to the trust that friendship establishes, and the negative relationship between trust and uncertainty (Wieselquist et al., 1999), I predicted that those who were friends-first would have less uncertainty in all three aforementioned areas – namely, personal, partner, and relationship – than those in dating-initiation relationships.

Jealousy

Jealousy represents a negative relationship quality. Jealousy encompasses the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that result from a real or imagined threat to the relationship (Pfeiffer & Wong, 1989). These three dimensions of jealousy capture three distinct responses to jealousy. First, there is cognitive jealousy, which is the thoughts and ruminations that occur when faced with a real or imagined threat to one's relationship. Second, there is emotional jealousy, which is the affective response to real or potential threats to the relationship. Finally, there is behavioral

jealousy, which is the actions that one does in response to these feelings and thoughts in order to help protect and secure their relationship.

Unfortunately, jealousy is a common and frequent experience in romantic relationships (White, 2008). In fact, to one extent or another, most people have experienced jealousy (Mullen & Martin, 1994). Jealousy leads to suspicion of romantic partners (Attridge, 2013), decreased love and liking towards a romantic partner (Pfeiffer & Wong, 1989), and in some cases extreme physical and verbal violence and abuse (Branson & March, 2021; Pichon et al., 2020; Kar & O'Leary, 2013). With these alarming consequences, it is worthwhile seeking out various means by which jealousy can be better understood with the goal of decreasing it and subsequently, its harmful outcomes.

Preexisting friendship between romantic partners could serve to prevent jealousy from arising. There is an established negative correlation between jealousy and trust (Kemer et al., 2016; Rodriguez et al., 2015; Dainton & Aylor, 2001), and a positive correlation between uncertainty and jealousy (Knobloch et al., 2007; Dainton & Aylor, 2001), indicating that increased trust should reduce jealousy, and increased uncertainty should increase jealousy. Since high dyadic trust is characteristic of friendship (Fehr, 2004; Fehr & Harasymchuk, 2019), it stands to reason that those who took the friends-first initiation pathway would experience less jealousy than those who did not. Romantic relationships which began as friendships may have more security in their relationship, and therefore be less susceptible to developing jealousy in their relationship. Furthermore, friendships are characterized by disclosure (Fehr, 2004; Fehr & Harasymchuk, 2019), and therefore those in friends-first romantic relationships may be more likely to disclose feelings of jealousy as they arise and work through them together. Therefore, I

expected that friends-first relationships would report less jealousy in all three dimensions – cognitive, emotional, and behavioural – than dating-initiation relationships.

Other Variables to Consider

When examining these specific relationship quality factors, I want to consider the possibility of alternate explanations which could influence my findings. Specifically, I want to examine personality, self-esteem, attachment style, and relationship length differences because the existing literature suggests these variables may be related to relationship quality and initiation pathway. My previous work has found that personality factors such as extraversion are related to how people prefer to enter a romantic relationship (Dyck et al., 2024b), but no work has examined whether they are related to how people actually enter a relationship. Moreover, there is long history of research linking individual differences to the relationship qualities of interest in the present study. For example, attachment style can impact trust and satisfaction in relationships (Fitzpatrick & Lafontaine, 2017), and emotional stability can help explain differences in relational trust and jealousy (Richter et al, 2022). Further, past research has shown that length of relationship has an impact on relationship qualities (Hadden et al., 2014), and therefore I want to account for those differences to ensure it is initiation pathway and not relationship length that is explaining any findings that may present themselves. Specifically, I want to include these variables because I think they may be related to which initiation pathway an individual chooses to pursue as well as the relationship quality outcomes I am measuring. By controlling for these variables, I hope to test whether these variables might represent a third variable problem (Haig, 1992). Furthermore, if this does not end up being the case, including these variables shown to be related to my dependent variables may help account for the variance in my sample and give me a clearer picture of what is truly related to initiation pathway and what

is not. Either way, the inclusion of these variables will help increase the robustness of my findings.

Present Study

Due to the lack of research examining these two different romantic initiation pathways, my study aimed to compare the reported levels of trust, satisfaction, commitment, uncertainty, and jealousy in current romantic relationships that were formed through either friends-first or dating-initiation. Differences in the origin of the romantic relationship could potentially cause differences in the respective consequences for the relationship – some of which may be severe. To investigate this research objective, I conducted a cross-sectional correlational study via an online questionnaire. Participants currently involved in a romantic relationship were asked about their current trust, satisfaction, commitment, uncertainty, and jealousy in their romantic relationship in addition to their recall of how their relationship was formed (friends-first vs. dating-initiation). Those who identified as being friends prior to romance were compared to those who were not friends prior to dating. I predicted that those who report being friends-first would report higher levels of trust (H1), relationship satisfaction (H2), and commitment (H3), as well as lower levels of uncertainty (H4) and jealousy (H5) when compared to those who were dating-initiation.

Exploratory Hypotheses

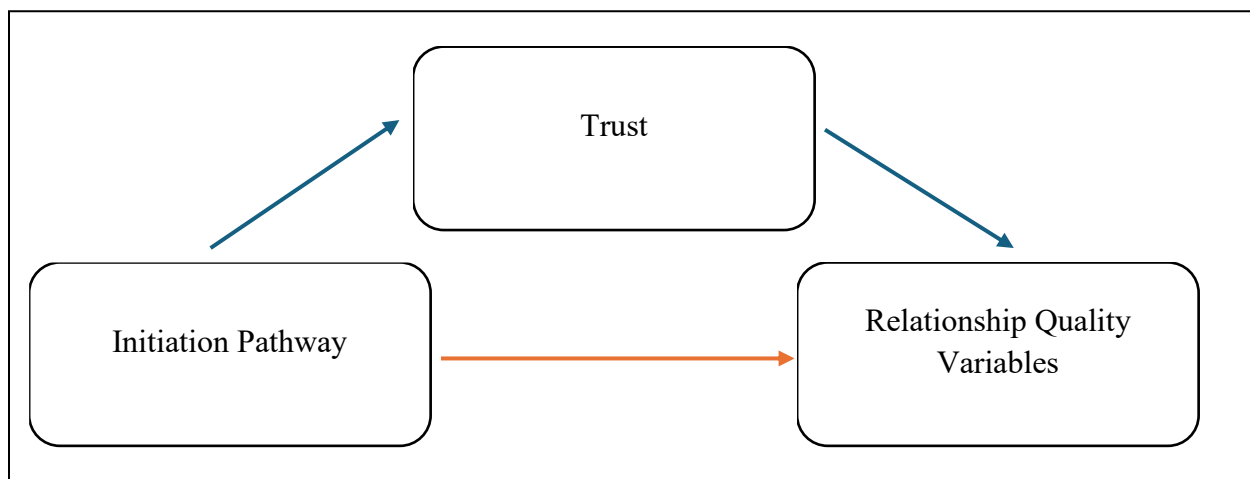
As an exploratory hypothesis, I also looked at relationship length as a moderator by initiation type. Those who take the dating-initiation path may develop high friendship-based intimacy with their partner over time, allowing them to experience the same benefits of friends-first relationships. This is supported by findings which indicate that long-term couples describe

their relationship as being high in friendship (Harris et al., 2016), and that as a whole relationship quality tends to change over time (Bühler et al., 2021). Consequently, I predicted that there would be a greater difference between the two initiation types (i.e. friends-first and dating-initiation) in newer relationships when compared to longer relationships.

As another exploratory hypothesis, I examined whether trust mediates the relationship between initiation pathway and the other relationship quality variables. Trust is associated with each of the relationship qualities that I am interested in (Fitzpatrick & Lafontaine, 2017; Teoh et al., 2023; Wieselquist et al., 1999; Kemer et al., 2016), and therefore it is plausible that being friends-first increases trust in the other person, and this increased trust produces the benefits to the other relationship qualities. Therefore, I explored through mediation analyses if this mediation model exists for any of the relationship quality factors.

Figure 1

Exploratory Mediation Model



Note. The orange line indicates the direct pathway, and the blue line indicates the indirect pathway.

Methods

Participants

Five hundred and forty-five ungraduated students from introductory psychology courses and 403 crowdsourced participants from Prolific residing in Canada and the United States consented to complete an online questionnaire about their current romantic relationship. As inclusion criteria, all participants had to be in a romantic relationship at the time of the survey and speak English fluently.

Of the original 953 participants, 88 were excluded for at least one of the following reasons: missed more than 75% of the survey data ($n = 61$; 6.4%), completed the survey after initially failing eligibility checks ($n = 28$; 2.9%), duplicate survey responses ($n = 12$; 1.3%), indicated that their responses should not be trusted ($n = 3$; 0.3%), and responded oddly to open-ended items ($n = 1$; 0.1%). The final sample was comprised of 865 participants with an average age of 28 years ($SD = 11.93$ years). Most of the sample identified as women, white, straight, and resided in Canada (see Table 1 for full demographics). After exclusions, just over half of my sample was recruited from introductory psychology classes (54.1%), with the rest being recruited through the Prolific online crowdsourcing platform (45.9%).

I conducted an a priori power analysis using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) to determine the minimum sample size required to test the hypotheses. To detect a small effect size with a power of .8 and an alpha of .05 when comparing friends-first to dating-initiation groups, I needed a sample of 788 and to explore a continuous moderator of relationship length, I would need a sample size of 395 to detect a small interaction effect. Therefore, since the primary hypotheses require 788 participants, the current sample size of 865 is sufficient to examine the hypotheses.

Table 1*Participant Demographic Information*

Relational Demographic	<i>N</i>	%	Personal Demographic	<i>N</i>	%
Reported Partner's Gender			Participant's Gender		
Woman	293	33.9	Woman	554	64.0
Man	553	63.9	Man	298	34.5
Non-binary	9	1.0	Non-binary	6	0.7
Gender diverse and undefined	10	1.2	Gender diverse and undefined	7	0.8
Relationship Status ⁺			Current Country of Residence		
Exclusive dating	373	43.1	Canada	617	71.3
Married	243	28.1	USA	248	28.7
Living together	154	17.8	Country of Origin		
Casual dating	139	16.1	Canada	359	41.5
Long distance	86	9.9	USA	204	23.6
Engaged	31	3.6	Nigeria	55	6.4
Dating multiple people	4	0.5	South Asia	54	6.2
Separated	3	0.3	Philippines	51	5.9
Divorced	1	0.1	African countries	50	5.8
Sexual Orientation			European countries	29	3.4
Heterosexual/straight	668	77.3	East Asian countries	23	2.7
Bisexual	100	11.6	Latin American countries	17	2.0
Pansexual	22	2.5	West Asian countries	9	1.0
Asexual	20	2.3	Other	15	1.7
Gay	19	2.2	Ethnic/Cultural Background ⁺		
Queer	14	1.6	White/European	486	56.2
Lesbian	10	1.2	Black	132	15.3
Written answers	12	1.4	South East Asian	96	11.1
Relationship Style			South Asian	81	9.4
Monogamous	814	94.1	Indigenous	48	5.5
Non-monogamous	22	2.5	Latinx	42	4.9
Questioning monogamy	26	3.0	East Asian	42	4.9
Something else	3	0.3	Arab/West Asian	18	2.1
			Other	13	1.5
			English as first language	724	83.7

Note. Categories are ordered by frequency.

⁺ Indicates participants were allowed to choose multiple options, and may add up to over 100.

Procedure

Participants from the introductory psychology course were recruited through the SONA platform with the remaining participants being recruited through the Prolific platform. Once participants consented, they were directed to the rest of the online survey (via Qualtrics). The survey included an assessment of relationship demographics, relationship initiation type (friends-first vs. dating initiation), trust, relational uncertainty, jealousy, satisfaction, commitment, and personal demographic measures. The survey took on average 15 minutes to complete. After reaching the end of the survey and receiving more information on the purpose of the survey and potential resources, participants from introductory psychology were directed back to the SONA website, where they received one credit for their introductory psychology class. Those who were recruited through Prolific were directed back to the Prolific platform, where they received £3.00 for their time.

Measures

Once participants successfully completed the eligibility question, which ensured that participants were currently in a romantic relationship, they completed the following measures in the order described below.

Relationship Demographics

To assess the relationship demographics, participants completed a series of questions about their relationship. Participants entered their partner's initials, and these initials were used in subsequent questions to ensure that participants were referring to the same person when answering all questions. Next, participants were asked their partner's gender, as well as the status and length of their current relationship.

Then participants were asked to report whether their romantic relationship began as friends or as strangers using Stinson et al. (2022) standard item. If participants indicated that they were friends before becoming romantically involved, they were asked whether they were best friends or not prior to dating, as well as to report on the length of the friendship prior to the relationship becoming romantic. Participants then indicated the situation that led to their friendship beginning using an adapted version of Stinson et al.'s (2022) relationship initiation question. If participants indicated that they were not friends before becoming romantically involved, they were asked how they met their partner. All participants were asked how long they knew their partner before becoming romantically involved.

Trust

To measure trust, participants were asked to complete the Fletcher et al. (2000) Trust Scale. This scale is based on the Rempel et al. (1985) Trust Scale. Participants were asked how much they agree with each of the three items in the scale (e.g. "How much can you count on your partner?") using a 7-point rating scale (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *extremely*). Item scores were aggregated to create a single trust score, with a higher score representing higher trust. The Trust Scale has good reliability ($\alpha = .74$) and validity evidence in previous samples (Fletcher et al., 2000). In the present sample, the internal consistency reliability was good ($\alpha = .86$).

Satisfaction

To measure satisfaction, participants completed the Couples Satisfaction Index (Funk & Rogge, 2007). Participants were prompted to answer four questions using three different response scales. One of the questions used a 7-point scale (0 = *extremely unhappy*, 6 = *perfect*), whereas the rest used a 6-point scale. However, of the remaining 3 items, one used slightly

different anchors (0 = *not at all true*, 5 = *completely true*) than the other two questions (0 = *not at all*, 5 = *completely*). Due to the different scales used, the item with 7-points was scaled down to the 6-point scale (e.g. 0 = 0, 1 = 0.86, 2 = 1.71). After rescaling this item, scores from all four questions were aggregated into one averaged score so that higher scores indicate higher satisfaction in the relationship. In previous work, this scale has shown excellent reliability ($\alpha = .94$; Funk & Rogge, 2007) In the present study, this scale also had excellent reliability ($\alpha = .94$).

Commitment

To measure commitment, participants completed the Commitment Scale developed by Fletcher et al. (2000). Participants were asked to respond to three items (e.g. “How dedicated are you to your relationship?”) on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*). Items were aggregated to create a total score where higher scores indicate higher levels of commitment. This scale also demonstrated excellent reliability, both in past research ($\alpha = .94$, Fletcher et al., 2000) and in the present study ($\alpha = .96$).

Uncertainty

To measure uncertainty, participants completed a shortened version of Knobloch and Solomon’s (1999) Relational Uncertainty Scale developed by Knobloch and Knobloch-Fedders (2010). Participants were given the prompt “How certain do you feel about...” followed by various statements (e.g. “how you feel about your relationship.”). Participants indicated how certain they feel on a 6-point rating scale (1 = *completely or almost completely uncertain*, 6 = *completely or almost completely certain*). Then, all scores were reversed and aggregated to create three scores representing the three subscales such that higher scores indicate higher levels

of uncertainty. The three subscales (self-uncertainty, partner-uncertainty, and relationship uncertainty) were kept separate because earlier confirmatory factor analysis indicates that while correlated, these three are separate constructs (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999; Priem & Solomon, 2011). Each subscale has four items for 12 items in total. The shortened version had excellent validity and reliability in each of the subscales: self-uncertainty (men, $\alpha = .83$; women, $\alpha = .89$), partner-uncertainty (men, $\alpha = .88$; women, $\alpha = .93$), and relationship uncertainty (men and women, $\alpha = .86$; Knobloch & Knobloch-Fedders, 2010). In the present study, these scales also demonstrated excellent reliability for self-uncertainty ($\alpha = .91$), partner uncertainty ($\alpha = .94$), and relationship uncertainty ($\alpha = .86$).

Jealousy

To measure jealousy, participants completed a shortened version of Pfeiffer and Wong's (1989) Multidimensional Jealousy Scale (Diotauti et al., 2022). This measure contains 15 items evenly divided into three subscales: cognitive jealousy, emotional jealousy, and behavioral jealousy. For the cognitive jealousy scale, participants are prompted "How often do you have the following thoughts about X?" followed by statements (e.g. "I suspect that X may be attracted to someone else."). The emotional subscale asks, "How would you emotionally react to the following situations?" followed by a set of five statements (e.g. "Someone is trying to get close to X all the time."). The behavioral subscale asks participants "How often do you engage in the following behaviors?" which also prompts participants with a set of statements (e.g. "I question X about their telephone calls and text messages."). For these questions and items, the initials that participants wrote in the relationship demographics section were used to replace "X" in all the prompts. Participants responded to each of the items on a 7-point rating scale, though the subscales differ in their anchors. The cognitive and behavioral subscales use a separate rating

scale (1 = *never*; 7 = *all the time*) from the emotional jealousy subscale (1 = *very pleased*; 7 = *very upset*). I aggregated item scores by subscale, leading to three jealousy scores. These subscales have shown acceptable reliability in past work: cognitive jealousy ($\alpha = .76$), emotional jealousy ($\alpha = .82$), and behavioral jealousy ($\alpha = .70$; Diotauiti et al., 2022). In the present study, all these subscales have good reliability: cognitive jealousy ($\alpha = .88$), emotional jealousy ($\alpha = .78$), and behavioral jealousy ($\alpha = .77$).

Personality

To assess the Big Five personality traits (extraversion, emotional stability, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness), participants then completed the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (TIPI; Gosling et al., 2003). Participants indicated the degree to which 10 sets of traits (e.g. “Extraverted, enthusiastic.”) applied to them on a 7-point scale (1 = *Disagree Strongly*, 7 = *Agree Strongly*). Each of the five personality traits had two items in this scale which were aggregated to create a score for each trait, such that higher scores indicated a higher degree of each respective trait. Past studies have found that this scale possesses adequate psychometric qualities (Gosling et al., 2003).

Self-esteem

To assess self-esteem, participants completed a single item self-esteem measure (Robins et al., 2001). Participants indicated the degree to which the statement (“I have high self-esteem.”) applied to them on a 7-point scale (1 = *Disagree Strongly*, 7 = *Agree Strongly*).

Attachment

To assess attachment style, participants completed a short form of the ECR attachment measure (Wei et al., 2007). This measure is comprised of 12 statements, with six items for

anxious attachment (e.g. “I need a lot of reassurance that I am loved by my partner.”) and six for avoidant attachment (e.g. “It helps to turn to my romantic partner in times of need.”).

Participants indicate the degree to which each statement applied to them on a 7-point scale (*1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree*). Scores within each subscale were aggregated to create a score for anxious attachment and a score of avoidant attachment, such that higher scores indicated a greater degree of this attachment style. This scale has been found to have good reliability in past work (Anxious: $\alpha = .77-.86$; Avoidant: $\alpha = .78-.89$; Wei et al., 2007) Both the anxious attachment subscale ($\alpha = .70$) and the avoidant subscale ($\alpha = .76$) have acceptable reliability in the present sample.

Personal Demographics and Integrity Questions

Finally, participants completed a demographic measure for personal demographics including age, gender (Cameron & Stinson, 2019), sexual orientation, and ethnic and cultural background. They were also asked a series of questions about the reliability of their answers before completing the survey. Due to the potentially distressing nature of the questions and confidentiality of the survey, I provided resources at the end of the survey for those who would like additional support.

Results

Preliminary Analysis

Before conducting my main analyses, I examined the general trends of my sample. I found that the proportion of those who reported being friends-first (62.2%) and those who reported being dating-initiators (37.8%) was around what I expected based on previous research in this area (Stinson et al., 2022). Of those who indicated they were friends-first, about half indicated that they were best friends prior to dating, while the other half indicated that they were not (see Table 2). Further, around half of those who were friends-first reported that either them or their partner had romantic or sexual attraction to the other at the start of their friendship. Even with this high proportion, very few of the participants reported that they used to have a friends-with-benefits relationship with the person who was now their romantic partner. Of those who were dating-initiators, the most common methods of relationship initiation was through online communication and platforms.

Table 2*Initiation Type and Descriptive Frequencies*

	<i>N</i>	%
Initiation Type		
Friends-first initiation	538	62.2
Best friends	275	31.8
Not best friends	263	30.4
Dating initiation	327	37.8
Friendship Initiation Intentions (only friends-first)		
Participant sexually attracted to partner	52	9.7
Participant romantically attracted to partner	102	19.0
Partner sexually attracted to participant	37	6.9
Partner romantically attracted to participant	69	12.8
No romantic/sexual intentions	278	51.7
Dating Initiation Circumstances (only dating initiators)		
Blind date	4	1.2
Online	124	37.9
At a bar	15	4.6
At a social gathering	43	13.1
An acquaintance	12	3.7
A classmate	31	9.5
A co-worker	22	6.7
A family friend	11	3.4
A friend of a friend	43	13.1
Through a shared hobby/interest	8	2.4
Other	14	4.3
Friends-with-benefits		
Yes	105	12.1
No	760	87.9

Note. *N* = 865.

Main Analysis: Relationship Qualities by Initiation Pathway

To investigate whether the relationship qualities of interest were impacted by initiation type, I conducted a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with initiation type (friends-

first vs. dating-initiation) as the between subjects variable and the relationship quality factors (trust, satisfaction, commitment, uncertainty, and jealousy) as the dependent variables. However, as all dependent variables within a MANOVA must be correlated (Haase & Ellis, 1987) and the subscale of emotional jealousy was only correlated with three of the 8 remaining variables (see Table 3), it was excluded from the MANOVA and probed individually in a one-way ANOVA. Further, when conducting the MANOVA, I found that several of the variables violated the homogeneity of variance assumption required in these analyses. Therefore, I reported the results using the results from Pillai's trace, which is robust against this kind of violation (Finch, 2005).

Table 3

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations between Relationship Qualities (Dependent Variables)

	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Trust	6.18 (.99)	—							
2. Satisfaction	5.01 (.92)	.73**	—						
3. Commitment	6.46 (.91)	.59**	.66**	—					
4. Self- uncertainty	1.71 (.88)	-.63**	-.71**	-.71**	—				
5. Partner uncertainty	1.79 (.95)	-.54**	-.63**	-.46**	.68**	—			
6. Relationship uncertainty	1.75 (.86)	-.58**	-.69**	-.58**	.81**	.76**	—		
7. Cognitive jealousy	2.43 (1.27)	-.36**	-.21**	-.17**	.24**	.28**	.29**	—	
8. Emotional jealousy	4.84 (.97)	-.02	.03	.08*	-.01	-.03	-.02	.22**	—
9. Behavioural jealousy	1.98 (.93)	-.20**	-.12**	-.11**	.15**	.14**	.10**	.44**	.21**

*Correlation is significant at the .05 level.

** Correlation is significant at the .01 level.

The planned MANOVA was significant (Pillai's trace = .021, $F(8,856) = 2.34$, $p = .017$, $\eta^2 = .021$; see Table 4). Therefore, I probed each relationship quality variable individually in separate one-way ANOVAs. Of the relationship quality variables, trust, satisfaction, commitment, self-uncertainty, and behavioural jealousy all significantly differed by initiation type. For these five variables, those reporting friends-first initiation reported higher trust, satisfaction, commitment, and behavioural jealousy, and lower self-uncertainty than did those who reported dating-initiation. Partner uncertainty, relationship uncertainty, and cognitive jealousy were not related to initiation type. The one-way ANOVA with emotional jealousy yielded non-significant results as well. These results provide some support for my hypothesis, but also suggest that some of the relationship quality variables may be unrelated or even related in the opposite direction of what I predicted, as is the case for behavioural jealousy. Regardless, there is evidence to suggest that these two initiation pathways have differential impacts on most relationship qualities studied here.

Table 4

Means, Standard Deviations, and MANOVA Statistics for Friends First vs. Dating Initiation across Relationship Qualities

	FFI	DI	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	ηp^2
Trust	6.24 (.95)	6.09 (1.03)	4.76	.029*	.005
Satisfaction	5.07 (.88)	4.90 (.98)	7.42	.007*	.009
Commitment	6.51 (.88)	6.37 (.96)	4.61	.032*	.005
Self-uncertainty	1.66 (.84)	1.79 (.93)	5.13	.024*	.006
Partner uncertainty	1.77 (.92)	1.81 (1.00)	.39	.535	.000
Relationship uncertainty	1.70 (.80)	1.82 (.94)	3.72	.054	.004
Cognitive jealousy	2.49 (1.30)	2.35 (1.22)	2.41	.121	.003
Behavioural jealousy	2.02 (.97)	1.90 (.93)	3.90	.049*	.005
Emotional jealousy ⁺	4.84 (.99)	4.85 (.95)	.02	.894	.000

Note. *df* = 1, 863. FFI = Friends-First Initiation (*n* = 538), DI = Dating Initiation (*n* = 327).

⁺ Examined independently as it was not correlated with all the other dependent variables.

* Indicates difference is significant at the .05 level.

Alternate Explanations

In light of these findings, I wanted to ensure that these results were not driven by other factors such as individual differences, recruitment sample differences, and relationship length differences. I will address each in turn.

Individual Differences

To ensure that my findings could not be entirely explained by participants' individual differences, I first examined whether any of the individual differences were related to the initiation pathways. In my previous research, certain individual differences, like extraversion, were related to *preferring* certain pathways (Dyck et al., 2024b), but no research had looked at whether these preferences made certain individuals more likely to choose one pathway over

another. Therefore, I conducted a MANOVA with initiation type as the between subjects variable and the Big 5 personality traits, self-esteem, and both anxious and avoidant attachment as the dependent variables. However, extraversion was not consistently correlated with the other variables (see Table 5), so to be cautious, extraversion was probed individually in a one-way ANOVA.

Table 5

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for Individual Differences

	<i>M (SD)</i>	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Extraversion	3.68 (1.59)	—						
2. Conscientiousness	5.31 (1.21)	.10**	—					
3. Openness	5.17 (1.16)	.26**	.18**	—				
4. Emotional Stability	5.02 (1.11)	-.01	.20**	.26**	—			
5. Agreeableness	4.23 (1.41)	.12**	.31**	.14**	.28**	—		
6. Self-esteem	4.59 (1.65)	.26**	.29**	.26**	.14**	.46**	—	
7. Anxious Attachment	3.76 (1.17)	-.03	-.25**	-.04	-.21**	-.40**	-.21**	—
8. Avoidant Attachment	2.43 (.99)	-.08*	-.22**	-.15**	-.22**	-.14**	-.11**	.39**

*Correlation is significant at the .05 level

** Correlation is significant at the .01 level

When I examined whether individual differences were related to initiation pathway, both the univariate ANOVA with extraversion ($F(1,863) = .46, p = .498, \eta^2 = .001$) and the MANOVA with the individual differences were not significant (Pillai's trace = .005, $F(7, 857)$

= .58, $p = .769$, $\eta^2 = .005$; see Table 6). In light of this, I concluded that these individual differences were not linked to initiation types, meaning that people's personalities are not related to which pathway their romantic initiation follows. Overall, although people high on extraversion might prefer friends-first initiation (Dyck et al., 2024b), they are not more likely to have their current romantic relationship formed through this pathway compared to dating initiation.

Table 6

Means, Standard Deviations, and MANOVA Statistics for Friends First vs. Dating Initiation across Individual Differences

	FFI	DI	F	p	ηp^2
Conscientiousness	5.32 (1.22)	5.29 (1.19)	.179	.672	.000
Openness	5.20 (1.17)	5.14 (1.14)	.451	.502	.001
Emotional Stability	5.02 (1.12)	5.03 (1.09)	.023	.881	.000
Agreeableness	4.19 (1.44)	4.30 (1.38)	1.147	.284	.001
Anxious Attachment	3.80 (1.17)	3.69 (1.16)	1.913	.167	.002
Avoidant Attachment	2.43 (1.02)	2.42 (.95)	.014	.905	.000
Self-esteem	4.56 (1.70)	4.65 (1.57)	.681	.409	.001
Extraversion ⁺	3.65 (1.57)	3.72 (1.61)	.460	.498	.001

Note. $df = 1, 863$. FFI = Friends-First Initiation ($n = 538$), DI = Dating Initiation ($n = 327$).

⁺ Examined independently in an ANOVA as it was not consistently correlated with all the other dependent variables.

* Indicates difference is significant at the .05 level.

Although these individual differences were largely unrelated to initiation pathway, they might still account for my results due to an association with the relationship qualities measured. Therefore, I next examined the zero-order correlations between the individual differences and

relationship qualities. For the majority of these correlations, they were less than $\pm.21$, and therefore considered small according to Cohen's (1988) rubric (see Table 7). However, for both anxious and avoidant attachment, there were several moderate-to-strong correlations with the relationship qualities factors. In light of this, I decided to include these as covariates in separate MANOVAs to ensure that they were not driving any of my findings. I ran these covariates in separate analyses because they are highly correlated ($r = .39$) and I wanted to reduce the amount of shared variance between them.

Table 7*Correlations between Individual Differences and Dependent Variables*

	Extraversion	Conscientiousness	Openness	Emotional Stability	Agreeableness	Self-esteem	Anxious Attachment	Avoidant Attachment
Trust	.01	.09*	.11**	.12**	.15**	.11**	-.28**	-.45**
Satisfaction	.03	.10**	.12**	.10**	.07*	.11**	-.22**	-.48**
Commitment	-.01	.13**	.12**	.14**	.03	.03	-.13**	-.52**
Self-uncertainty	-.00	-.15**	-.13**	-.11**	-.07*	-.07	.22**	.53**
Partner uncertainty	-.01	-.13**	-.07*	-.11**	-.09*	-.15**	.29**	.40**
Relationship uncertainty	.01	-.13**	-.09**	-.11**	-.06	-.09*	.26**	.53**
Cognitive jealousy	-.00	-.10**	-.05	-.09**	-.18**	-.08*	.42**	.25**
Emotional jealousy	.02	.03	-.05	-.11**	-.19**	-.07*	.20**	-.09*
Behavioural jealousy	.10**	-.12**	-.09**	-.20**	-.21**	-.06	.37**	.16**

*Correlation is significant at the .05 level

** Correlation is significant at the .01 level

Individual differences as covariates. When I included anxious attachment as a covariate in the MANOVA, the overall effect was still significant (Pillai's trace = .020, $F(8,855) = 2.20$, $p = .026$, $\eta^2 = .020$). In this MANOVA, four of the five originally significant relationship qualities were still statistically significant: Trust ($F(1,862) = 7.17$, $p = .008$, $\eta^2 = .008$), satisfaction ($F(1,862) = 9.65$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .011$), commitment ($F(1,862) = 5.51$, $p = .019$, $\eta^2 = .006$), and self-uncertainty ($F(1,862) = 6.92$, $p = .009$, $\eta^2 = .008$), such that friends-first was associated with higher trust, satisfaction, and commitment, and lower self-uncertainty. However, behavioural jealousy was no longer significant in this analysis ($F(1,862) = 2.49$, $p = .115$, $\eta^2 = .003$). In addition, relationship uncertainty was now significant ($F(1,862) = 5.65$, $p = .018$, $\eta^2 = .007$).

When I added avoidant attachment as a covariate, the MANOVA again was significant (Pillai's trace = .025, $F(8, 855) = 2.70$, $p = .006$, $\eta^2 = .025$), and all five of the original relationship qualities were statistically significant: Trust ($F(1,862) = 6.26$, $p = .013$, $\eta^2 = .007$), satisfaction ($F(1,862) = 10.06$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .012$), commitment ($F(1,862) = 6.66$, $p = .010$, $\eta^2 = .008$), self-uncertainty ($F(1,862) = 7.49$, $p = .006$, $\eta^2 = .009$), and behavioural jealousy ($F(1,862) = 3.93$, $p = .048$, $\eta^2 = .005$). Again, relationship uncertainty was significant in this analysis ($F(1,862) = 5.51$, $p = .019$, $\eta^2 = .006$). Thus, my main finding about trust, satisfaction, commitment, and self-uncertainty remains, even when accounting for attachment styles despite the moderate association between attachment and relationship quality variables.

Recruitment Sample Differences

To ensure that my findings were consistent across the two different recruitment samples (Introductory Psychology students vs. Prolific recruited), I examined whether there were any meaningful differences between the introductory psychology students and the crowdsources

participants. I began by seeing if there was any relationship between recruitment sample and initiation pathway. To do this, I ran a crosstabs analysis and a chi-square analysis. The crosstabs revealed that those recruited from Prolific were significantly more likely to be in dating-initiated relationships than the undergraduate students, and that undergraduate psychology students were more likely to be in friends-first relationships, $X^2(1, N = 865) = 14.35, p < .001$ (see Table 8). Therefore, I conclude that recruitment sample group is related to initiation pathway.

Table 8

Crosstabs for Recruitment Sample by Initiation Pathway

	FFI		DI	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Undergraduates	318	67.9	150	32.1
Prolific	220	55.4	177	44.6

Note. FFI = friends-first initiation, DI = dating initiation.

Therefore, I next wanted to test for potential differences between recruitment samples on my dependent variables. To do this, I conducted ANOVA/MANOVAs with recruitment sample as the factor on all the variables measured, including the relationship quality variables and the individual differences variables using. This analysis revealed several significant recruitment sample differences. Specifically, for relationship qualities, the Prolific sample was higher in trust and commitment and lower in all three jealousy types than the undergraduate sample (see Table 9). Moreover, for individual differences, the Prolific sample was higher in emotional stability and agreeableness, and lower in anxious attachment, avoidant attachment, and extraversion than

the undergraduate sample (see Table 10). These results are perhaps not surprising given that the two recruitment samples differ in overall age ($F(1,863) = 753.71, p < .001, \eta^2 = .466$; see Table 11) and relationship length ($F(1,861) = 299.22, p < .001, \eta^2 = .258$), and that differences between recruitment samples on variables such as personality are common and even expected in research (e.g. Colman et al., 2018).

Table 9

Means, Standard Deviations, and MANOVA Statistics for Recruitment Sample Across Relationship Quality Variables

	Undergraduates	Prolific	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2
Trust	6.08 (1.05)	6.29 (.90)	9.456	.002*	.011
Satisfaction	5.06 (.90)	4.94 (.95)	3.776	.052	.004
Commitment	6.38 (.99)	6.55 (.79)	7.174	.008*	.008
Self-uncertainty	1.76 (.93)	1.65 (.81)	3.396	.066	.004
Partner uncertainty	1.77 (1.00)	1.81 (.90)	.251	.616	.000
Relationship uncertainty	1.78 (.90)	1.71 (.81)	1.790	.181	.002
Cognitive jealousy	2.71 (1.34)	2.11 (1.11)	49.405	< .001*	.054
Behavioural jealousy	2.11 (.96)	1.82 (.86)	20.611	< .001*	.023
Emotional jealousy ⁺	5.02 (.96)	4.63 (.94)	36.594	< .001*	.041

Note. Undergraduates = Introductory psychology students ($n = 468$), Prolific = crowdsourced participants ($n = 397$).

⁺ Examined independently in a one-way ANOVA as it was not correlated with all the other dependent variables.

* Indicates difference is significant at the .05 level.

Table 10

Means, Standard Deviations, and MANOVA Statistics for Recruitment Sample Across Individual Difference Variables

	Undergraduates	Prolific	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	ηp^2
Conscientiousness	5.26 (1.22)	5.37 (1.20)	1.680	.195	.002
Openness	5.23 (1.14)	5.10 (1.18)	2.694	.101	.003
Emotional Stability	4.89 (1.03)	5.18 (1.17)	15.381	< .001*	.018
Agreeableness	3.99 (1.33)	4.51 (1.46)	29.646	< .001*	.033
Self-esteem	4.62 (1.62)	4.56 (1.69)	.245	.621	.000
Anxious Attachment	3.95 (1.11)	3.53 (1.19)	27.827	< .001*	.031
Avoidant Attachment	2.51 (1.04)	2.33 (.93)	7.374	.007*	.008
Extraversion ⁺	3.87 (1.52)	3.45 (1.63)	14.730	< .001*	.017

Note. Undergraduates = Introductory psychology students ($n = 468$), Prolific = crowdsourced

participants ($n = 397$).

⁺ Examined independently in an ANOVA as it was not consistently correlated with all the other dependent variables.

* Indicates difference is significant at the .05 level.

Table 11*Participant Demographic Information*

Demographic	Undergraduates		Prolific	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Participant's Gender				
Woman	355	75.9	199	50.1
Man	104	22.2	194	48.9
Non-binary	3	0.6	3	0.8
Gender diverse and undefined	6	1.2	1	0.3
Reported Partner's Gender				
Woman	106	22.6	187	47.3
Man	358	76.5	195	49.4
Non-binary	—	—	9	2.3
Gender diverse and undefined	4	0.8	6	1.6
Relationship Status ⁺				
Exclusive dating	265	56.6	108	27.2
Married	30	6.4	213	53.7
Living together	35	7.5	119	30.0
Casual dating	128	27.4	11	2.8
Long distance	64	13.7	22	5.5
Engaged	4	0.9	27	6.8
Dating multiple people	1	0.2	3	0.8
Separated	2	0.4	1	0.3
Divorced	1	0.2	0	0.0
Sexual Orientation				
Heterosexual/straight	363	77.7	305	76.8
Bisexual	48	10.3	52	13.1
Pansexual	10	2.1	12	3.0
Asexual	17	3.6	3	0.8
Gay	5	1.1	14	3.5
Queer	10	2.1	4	1.0
Lesbian	4	0.9	6	1.5
Written answers	10	2.1	2	0.6
Relationship Style				
Monogamous	450	96.2	364	91.7
Non-monogamous	3	0.6	19	4.8
Questioning monogamy	12	2.6	14	3.5
Something else	3	0.6	0	0.0
Current Country of Residence				
Canada	467	99.8	149	37.5
USA	1	0.2	248	62.5

Country of Origin				
Canada	265	56.6	94	23.7
USA	2	0.4	202	50.9
Nigeria	47	10.0	8	2.0
South Asia	12	2.6	42	10.6
Philippines	44	9.4	7	1.8
Africa	15	3.2	35	8.8
Europe	22	4.7	7	1.8
East Asia	14	3.0	9	2.3
Latin America	13	2.8	4	1.0
West Asia	2	0.4	7	1.8
Other	6	1.3	9	2.3
Ethnic/Cultural Background ⁺				
White/European	209	44.7	277	69.8
Black	79	16.9	53	13.4
South East Asian	80	17.1	16	4.0
South Asian	64	13.7	17	4.3
Indigenous	38	8.1	10	2.5
Latinx	14	3.0	28	7.1
East Asian	20	4.3	22	5.5
Arab/West Asian	14	3.0	4	1.0
Other	11	2.4	2	0.5
English as first language	372	79.5	352	88.7
Age ^a	20.57 (5.82)		36.90 (11.21)	
Romantic Relationship Length ^a	2.20 (3.51)		10.24 (9.29)	

Note. Tables are ordered by frequency. Undergraduates = Introductory Psychology Students ($n = 468$), Prolific = Crowdsourced Participants ($n = 397$).

⁺ Indicates participants were allowed to choose multiple options.

^a Reported in years as mean (standard deviation) of recruitment sample.

Recruitment sample as a covariate. Knowing that recruitment samples differed in the prevalence of initiation type, personality, and relationship quality, I then conducted a MANOVA with initiation type as the between-subjects variable, the relationships quality variables as the dependent variables, and recruitment sample as a covariate, and a similar ANOVA with

emotional jealousy. The MANOVA was still significant (Pillai's trace = .020, $F(8,855) = 2.13$, $p = .031$, $\eta^2 = .020$), with four of the five original relationship qualities still being significant: trust ($F(1,862) = 6.83$, $p = .009$, $\eta^2 = .008$), satisfaction ($F(1,862) = 6.23$, $p = .013$, $\eta^2 = .007$), commitment ($F(1,862) = 6.37$, $p = .012$, $\eta^2 = .007$), and self-uncertainty ($F(1,862) = 6.39$, $p = .012$, $\eta^2 = .007$). In a similar pattern to the earlier MANOVA with anxious attachment as a covariate, behavioural jealousy was no longer significant in this analysis ($F(1,862) = 2.02$, $p = .155$, $\eta^2 = .002$) and relationship uncertainty became significant ($F(1,862) = 4.50$, $p = .034$, $\eta^2 = .005$). The ANOVA with emotional jealousy was not significant ($F(1,862) = .851$, $p = .357$, $\eta^2 = .001$). Thus, controlling for recruitment sample did not erase the influence of initiation type on relationship quality.

Recruitment sample as a moderator. Would the effect of initiation type be stronger in one of the recruitment sample sources compared to the other? To answer this question, I conducted a two-way MANOVA with initiation pathway (friends-first initiation versus dating initiation) and recruitment sample (introductory psychology students versus crowdsourced participants) as the independent variables on the relationship quality variables, except for emotional jealousy which was analyzed in an individual two-way ANOVA. The results of the MANOVA indicated that the main effect of initiation pathway was still significant (Pillai's trace = .019, $F(8,854) = 2.12$, $p = .032$, $\eta^2 = .019$), the main effect of recruitment sample was significant (Pillai's trace = .120, $F(8,854) = 14.54$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .120$), but the interaction between initiation pathway and recruitment sample was not (Pillai's trace = .005, $F(8,854) = .51$, $p = .851$, $\eta^2 = .005$). For the two-way ANOVA for emotional jealousy, the main effects for initiation pathway was insignificant ($F(1,861) = .80$, $p = .348$, $\eta^2 = .001$), the main effect for recruitment sample was significant ($F(1,861) = 30.02$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .037$), and their interaction

was not significant ($F(1,861) = .81, p = .367, \eta^2 = .001$). This leads me to conclude that while the recruitment samples may differ in various areas, this does not have an impact on the main effect of initiation pathway.

Relationship Length

Finally, I wanted to explore whether relationship length might explain the difference between friends-first and dating-initiation on relationship qualities. First, I examined whether relationship length differed between these initiation groups. I found that dating-initiators' average romantic relationship length ($M = 7.07$ years, $SD = 9.52$) was 2 years longer than friends first couples ($M = 5.16$ years, $SD = 6.61$; $F(1,861) = 12.00, p < .001, \eta^2 = .014$). Next, I examined whether relationship length was related to the relationship qualities. I found that romantic relationship length was correlated with trust, satisfaction, and the three types of jealousy, but that these correlations were rather small (see Table 12).

Relationship length as a covariate. To be cautious, I decided to include romantic relationship length as a covariate in my main MANOVA to ensure that initiation type is unique and not simply a proxy of relationship length. When I included romantic relationship length as a covariate, the MANOVA was still significant (Pillai's trace = .019, $F(8,853) = 2.03, p = .041, \eta^2 = .019$). In this MANOVA, four of the five original variables were still significant: Trust ($F(1,860) = 6.27, p = .013, \eta^2 = .007$), satisfaction ($F(1,860) = 5.53, p = .019, \eta^2 = .006$), commitment ($F(1,860) = 5.53, p = .019, \eta^2 = .006$), and self-uncertainty ($F(1,860) = 6.35, p = .012, \eta^2 = .007$) were all still significant, such that friends-first was associated with higher trust, satisfaction, and commitment, and lower self-uncertainty. However, similar to previous analyses, behavioural jealousy was not significant ($F(1,860) = 2.19, p = .139, \eta^2 = .003$) and relationship uncertainty was significant ($F(1,860) = 4.57, p = .033, \eta^2 = .005$). This analysis

demonstrates again that my main findings for four of the relationship quality factors, namely trust, satisfaction, commitment, and self-uncertainty, remains consistent, even when controlling for romantic relationship length.

Table 12

Correlations for Relationship Length Variables on Dependent Variables

	Relationship length	Friendship Length	Known Pre-Dating Length
Trust	.08*	.01	.04
Satisfaction	-.13**	.02	.07
Commitment	.05	.06	.08*
Self-uncertainty	-.07	-.02	-.07
Partner uncertainty	.01	.04	-.01
Relationship uncertainty	-.05	.03	-.03
Cognitive jealousy	-.23**	.02	.03
Emotional jealousy	-.17**	-.08	.02
Behavioural jealousy	-.14**	.05	.04

Note. Relationship length $N = 865$, Friendship length $n = 395$, Known pre-dating length $n = 721$.

*Correlation is significant at the .05 level

** Correlation is significant at the .01 level

Length of acquaintanceship and friendship. I also wanted to examine whether the length of friendship before dating for those in friends-first relationships or the length of knowing the person before dating for all participants was related to the relationship qualities. However, when preparing the data to look at this question, I found that numerous participants gave conflicting answers when indicating how long they had known their partner before dating and how long they had been friends before dating (e.g. were friends for 2 years before dating, but knew each other only 5 months before dating). In light of this, I removed 144 participants from analysis. Further, for the friendship length analysis, the dating-initiators were excluded since

they had no friendship prior. This left me with a sample of 721 for the known pre-dating length and 395 for the friendship length. With these participants, I conducted zero-order correlations with both friendship length and known pre-dating length and my relationship quality variables. In both analyses, the largest correlation coefficient was .08 (see Table 12), leading me to conclude that these relationship length variables were not related to my relationship qualities of interest in any meaningful way and thus, further analyses were not conducted with these variables.

Exploratory Analyses

I conducted two exploratory analyses in addition to my main analyses. The first was examining whether there was an interaction between romantic relationship initiation pathway and relationship length, and the second was exploring the potential of trust being a mediator between initiation pathway and the other relationship quality outcomes. I will explain my findings for each below.

Relationship Length as a Moderator

As a planned exploratory hypothesis, I next examined whether initiation pathway interacted with romantic relationship length. Specifically, is the relationship quality advantage of friends-first initiators constant at various relationship lengths, or do dating-initiator eventually “catch-up” to friends-first couples? Therefore, I chose to conduct a hierarchical linear regression with friends-first initiation (dummy coded $DI = 0$, $FFI = 1$) and relationship length (mean centered; $M = 70.58$ months, $SD = 94.63$) in step 1, and their interaction in step 2. In light of the previously reported problems with friendship length and known length, I chose to only run this analysis with romantic relationship length (see Table 12). However, after running this analysis, I

found that the second step was insignificant in all regressions across the nine relationship qualities, suggesting that dating initiation couples did not “catch up” to their friends-first counterparts. Therefore, I only examined the main effects of relationship length and initiation type in step 1 of this regression. Further, two participants did not indicate their relationship length, so I conducted this analysis with a sample size of 863. The main effects of initiation type reflected the MANOVA results already reported and the main effects for relationship length repeated the correlations already reported, and thus, are not reported here again.

Trust as Mediator

Finally, to explore the mechanism that may enhance the relationship quality of friends-first initiated relationships, I examined whether trust mediated the relationship between initiation type and the other relationship quality variables. In previous research, trust has been shown to be related to each of the other relationship quality variables examined in the present study (Fitzpatrick & Lafontaine, 2017; Teoh et al., 2023; Wieselquist et al., 1999; Kemer et al., 2016), and that increasing trust often impacts these other factors. Therefore, I wanted to investigate whether trust mediates the relationship between initiation pathway and the impacted relationship qualities of satisfaction, commitment, self-uncertainty, and behavioural jealousy. Therefore, I conducted a simple mediation model using PROCESS (version 4.3; Hayes, 2018), with initiation type as the independent variable, trust as the mediator, and each relationship quality variable in turn as the dependent variable. In this mediation analysis, direct effects indicate the relationship of initiation pathway on the relationship quality variables accounting for trust added as a mediator, and indirect effects indicate the relationship of initiation pathway on the dependent variable *through* trust as a mediator. The total effect for each variable indicated the combined effect of both direct and indirect pathway on the relationship qualities. This analysis yielded

significant indirect effects for each relationship quality variable except for emotional jealousy (see Table 13). Indirect effects are considered significant when their confidence interval does not include zero. More importantly, initiation type was no longer a significant predictor for satisfaction, commitment, and self-uncertainty once trust was included as a mediator, which suggests that trust serves as a complete mediator for these two variables. Therefore, these results suggest that a pre-existing friendship increases trust, and this increased trust leads to increased relationship satisfaction and commitment, and decreased self-uncertainty.

Table 13

Mediation Pathways for Initiation Type on Relationship Quality variables with Trust as Mediator

Dependent	Effect	<i>B</i>	β	SE	Lower	Upper	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Trust	$X \rightarrow Y$	-.150	-.153	.069	-.286	-.015	-2.182	.029*
Satisfaction	$X \rightarrow Y$	-.073	-.080	.044	-.161	.014	-1.651	.099
	$X \rightarrow M \rightarrow Y$	-.102	-.111	.049	-.201	-.009	-2.175 ⁺	.030*
	$M \rightarrow Y$	.679	.725	.022	.636	.722	31.037	<.001*
	Total	-.176	-.190	.065	-.302	-.049	-2.724	.007*
Commitment	$X \rightarrow Y$	-.055	-.060	.052	-.156	.046	-1.064	.288
	$X \rightarrow M \rightarrow Y$	-.082	-.090	.038	-.173	-.011	-2.168 ⁺	.030*
	$M \rightarrow Y$	.543	.589	.025	.493	.593	21.38	<.001*
	Total	-.137	-.150	.064	-.262	-.012	-2.148	.032*
Self-uncertainty	$X \rightarrow Y$	.055	.063	.048	-.039	.149	1.146	.252
	$X \rightarrow M \rightarrow Y$	.084	.096	.039	.007	.160	2.171 ⁺	.030*
	$M \rightarrow Y$	-.557	-.627	.024	-.604	-.511	-23.658	<.001*
	Total	.139	.158	.061	.019	.259	2.264	.024*
Partner uncertainty	$X \rightarrow Y$	-.037	-.038	.057	-.147	.074	-.646	.518
	$X \rightarrow M \rightarrow Y$	.078	.082	.037	.006	.153	2.164 ⁺	.031*
	$M \rightarrow Y$	-.518	-.537	.028	-.573	-.464	-18.630	<.001*
	Total	.042	.044	.067	-.090	.172	.621	.535
Relationship uncertainty	$X \rightarrow Y$	.041	.047	.049	-.056	.138	.824	.410
	$X \rightarrow M \rightarrow Y$	.075	-.574	.036	.008	.152	2.167 ⁺	.030*
	$M \rightarrow Y$	-.500	-.574	.024	-.548	-.452	-20.582	<.001*
	Total	.116	.135	.060	-.002	.234	1.930	.054
Cognitive jealousy	$X \rightarrow Y$	-.209	-.164	.084	-.372	-.045	-2.497	.013*
	$X \rightarrow M \rightarrow Y$	.070	-.361	.033	.008	.136	2.135 ⁺	.033*
	$M \rightarrow Y$	-.466	-.361	.041	-.547	-.386	-11.341	<.001*
	Total	-.138	-.109	.089	-.313	.037	-1.551	.121
Behavioural jealousy	$X \rightarrow Y$	-.157	-.169	.064	-.282	-.032	-2.462	.014*
	$X \rightarrow M \rightarrow Y$	.029	-.203	.014	.001	.058	2.030 ⁺	.042*
	$M \rightarrow Y$	-.191	-.203	.031	-.253	-.130	-6.089	<.001*
	Total	-.128	-.138	.065	-.256	-.001	-1.975	.049*
Emotional jealousy	$X \rightarrow Y$	.006	.006	.069	-.129	.140	.087	.931
	$X \rightarrow M \rightarrow Y$	.003	-.021	.006	-.008	.018	.537 ⁺	.591
	$M \rightarrow Y$	-.021	.021	.034	-.087	.047	-.610	.542
	Total	.009	.009	.068	-.125	.143	.133	.894

Note. X = Initiation Type, Y = Dependent Variable, M = Trust. $X \rightarrow M \rightarrow Y$ = indirect effect.

⁺ indicates score from a z-test.

*indicates significance at the .05 level.

Discussion

Overall, results support my hypothesis that individuals who were friends with their romantic partner before dating would experience greater relationship quality benefits than dating-initiators. Specifically, friends-first initiators had significantly more trust, satisfaction, and commitment in their relationships, and significantly less uncertainty about themselves being in the romantic relationship. These findings held constant even when controlling for relationship length, recruitment sample, and attachment style, suggesting that the findings are robust. What is also worth noting is that not all of the relationship qualities examined in this project were significantly related to initiation pathway. Consistently, cognitive jealousy, emotional jealousy and partner uncertainty were unrelated to these pathways. Further, both behavioural jealousy and relationship uncertainty had inconsistent effects, with both these variables switching from significance to insignificance depending on the analysis and the covariates. What this demonstrates is that while there seem to be some very clear relationship quality outcomes associated with different initiation pathways, not all components of relationship quality were impacted by initiation type, and some factors were inconsistently related.

Trust as Mediator Between Initiation Pathway and Relationship Quality Outcomes

In my exploratory mediation analyses, trust mediated the link between relationship initiation pathway and satisfaction, commitment, and self-uncertainty. This finding begins to help explain why friends-first initiation leads to these relationship quality benefits. Friendship has been shown in numerous previous studies to increase trust (Policarpo, 2015; Fehr, 2004; Fehr & Harasymchuk, 2019), and trust has been shown to increase satisfaction (Fitzpatrick & Lafontaine, 2017) and commitment (Teoh et al., 2023; Wieselquist et al., 1999), and to decrease uncertainty (Wieselquist et al., 1999), and jealousy (Kemer et al., 2016; Rodriguez et al., 2015;

Dainton & Aylor, 2001). This finding is the first indication that being friends-first is beneficial. Further work should endeavor to replicate this finding, as well as investigate other relationship qualities which may be impacted by initiation pathway through trust.

Behavioural Jealousy

An inconsistent and surprising finding was that friends-first individuals had significantly more behavioural jealousy than dating-initiators. What makes this stand out is that all the other relationship quality factors associated with friends-first initiation were all very positive, while behavioural jealousy has been associated with detrimental consequences for relationships (e.g. Branson & March, 2021). However, this finding should also be taken with a grain of salt, as it was barely reaching significance ($p = .049$) and it was no longer significant when both anxious attachment and relationship length were included as covariates. This finding has led me to consider the implications of whether friends-first initiators indeed have more behavioural jealousy. My explanation is that participants who were friends-first may experience more fear of their partner leaving them for another one of their partner's close friends because that is how their relationship began, and therefore engage in these jealous behaviours. If they saw some of the same patterns emerging in other friendships that resembled their friendship before it turned romantic, that could prompt jealousy and protective behaviours to maintain the relationship. Other research has found that friendships can create this kind of jealousy in the face of third-party threats (Krems et al., 2021), so it is understandable that it could translate or even be heightened in a romantic relationship. If this explanation is the case, then there is a dark side to the friends-first pathway. However, these findings need further investigating and replication before any meaningful conclusions or applications are drawn from them.

Relationship Length and Initiation Pathway

Unexpectedly, relationship length did not interact with initiation pathway on any of the dependent variables. In each hierarchical regression, the main effects of both relationship length and initiation pathway were significant, but their interaction was not. This means that being friends-first led to relationship quality benefits independent of how long couples had been together. Further, friends-first initiators maintain higher trust, satisfaction, and commitment, and less self-uncertainty than dating-initiators even after they have been together for years. This suggests that in fact, dating-initiator couples do not seem to “catch-up” to the relationship quality of friends-first couples. The lack of convergence indicates that the implications of pursuing one pathway over another potentially have consequences for the entirety of the relationship, not just at the start. However, the present study was cross-sectional in nature, and future work should track couples over time to further investigate the impact of initiation pathway and relationship length on these relationship qualities.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

The present study has several strengths which should be noted. First, I was able to recruit a large sample size even with exclusions. This allowed me to examine my hypotheses with confidence in the results of my analyses as tests were not underpowered in any way. Second, I collected my sample from two distinct sources. Collecting from both introductory psychology students and crowdsourced participants allowed me to have greater confidence that my findings are not limited to one specific sample; although future work should endeavor to replicate these findings. Indeed, samples were diverse in terms of age and ethnicity and cultural background, a rarity in romantic relationship research (McGorray et al., 2023).

The present study also has several limitations. First, this study utilized self-reports from only one member of the couple. While this data gives helpful insights into their relationships, self-reports can often have a degree of bias (e.g. van de Mortel, 2008), and therefore future work should examine whether couple reports match up to ensure that both members of the couple experience the same benefits from friends-first romantic relationship initiation pathways (e.g. Reblin et al., 2020). Second, individuals often self-select into surveys on romantic relationships. Participants who have higher overall relationship quality are more likely to be willing to sign up for studies where they report on their romantic relationship (McKee et al., 2020). That effect is seen in this dataset, with the relationship qualities averaging on the high end of each scale. However, even with this being true, there were differences detected consistently between initiation pathways, suggesting that while most of the participants' relationships seem to have high relationship quality, those who were friends-first report higher quality consistently. Future work should sample groups which may include couples who may be less content in their relationships to see if these findings remain in other samples. Relatedly, the effects for initiation pathway were small. However, a small effect size does not mean that it is meaningless or unimportant; small effects can have large impacts (Hardy et al., 2021), especially when experienced daily over time. Third, the majority of the sample reported a heterosexual orientation, much like the lack of sexual diversity in standard romantic research samples (McGorray et al., 2023). Future research should study initiation pathways in diverse samples as previous research suggests that friends-first initiation is more common among sexual identity minority participants (Stinson et al., 2022). Fourth, the study is correlational in nature, meaning that I cannot make causal conclusions from this data. However, due to the nature of relationship research, an experiment attempting to manipulate initiation pathway would be unethical. Fifth, I

was unable to analyze various relationship lengths due to the confusion surrounding how long couples had known each other prior to dating and how long they had been friends. As such, I was only able to thoroughly investigate romantic relationship length. Future work should aim to capture more clearly the timelines of these relationships to see if the length of acquaintanceship or the length of friendship has an impact on relationship quality. Finally, the present study was cross-sectional in nature, meaning that the relationship qualities measured represent a specific time in the relationship for the participants. Future work should consider other designs, such as longitudinal studies following couples and tracking relationship quality as it changes over the course of months or years to see if these findings replicate over time.

Implications

The implications of these findings are that friends-first relationships experience overall more beneficial relationship quality outcomes than dating-initiators, at least to a small degree. One of the practical applications of this finding is increased awareness of the benefits of being friends-first. As past work has clearly shown, the majority of media portrays and promotes dating-initiation as the main way to begin romantic relationships, despite friends-first being the more common method of initiation (Stinson et al., 2022). Therefore, the first steps to take are to promote the friends-first initiation pathway and its benefits to the public. If this initiation pathway tends to lead to better relationship quality outcomes, then those interested in beginning a romantic relationship should know the potential consequences of the different initiation methods before beginning their pursuit. However, these findings do not indicate that dating-initiation relationships are poor in relationship quality, as these individuals still reported high on each variable of interest and the difference between these two groups was relatively small.

Rather, these findings indicate that friends-first initiators experience some additional benefit from taking this pathway that makes their relationship quality increase.

Finally, my findings suggest that being friends-first increases trust, and this trust provides the relationship quality benefits I examined. This is an exciting finding, because it helps answer the question of why friends-first is related to increased satisfaction and commitment and decreased self-uncertainty. Future work should attempt to replicate this finding. Overall, I conclude that friends-first relationships tend to have greater satisfaction, greater commitment, and decreased uncertainty than dating-initiation relationships, because friends-first relationships have a greater degree of trust from the pre-existing friendship.

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