What is Network Support? Computational Insights from Communicated Tensions Between Friends and Romantic Partners

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Abstract

Network support remains an underexplored type of social support. We address this gap by exploring how people tell personal stories about challenges in network support processes. Specifically, we focus on the "friend problems", in which a romantic relationship is hindered by friends. Mixed-methods analyses of 900 Reddit posts revealed three major themes: challenges in gaining support from a partner's friends, in intermediating between one's partner and friends, and in approving a friend's relationship; significant differences in gender and couple type (i.e., different-sex vs. same-sex) were found. Linguistic and qualitative analysis revealed three narrative roles: the rejected newcomers, torn middlepersons, and judgmental friends. The findings show network support is a contested communicative process of managing exclusion, negotiating power, and sustaining relational legitimacy.

Keywords: social support; network support; relationship; social network

What is Network Support? Computational Insights from Communicated Tensions Between Friends and Romantic Partners

Social support is a fundamental mechanism for exchange of economic, social, psychological, and health resources (Burt, 1995; Cohen, 2004; Granovetter, 1976; Lin, 1999). One of the most important support types for such resource exchange has been network support—briefly conceptualized as helping another person to be integrated into social networks in the extant literature (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992)—because resources and help essentially flow through the pipelines of connections and ties in these networks (Burt, 1995).

However, network support remains one of the least studied support types in mainstream communication research. Whereas theories and research of emotional (e.g., Burleson, 2003; Dailey, 2010; Holmstrom & Burleson, 2011) and informational support (e.g., Feng, 2009; MacGeorge & Hall, 2014) have dominated supportive communication research, little research published in flagship communication journals (e.g., *Journal of Communication*, *Communication Research*, *Human Communication Research*, *Communication Monographs*) is solely devoted to network support. One plausible reason is that network support appears less verbal than the other support types mentioned above. Nevertheless, we believe that network support can be studied from verbal communication perspectives, if we flip the lens to focus on how people communicatively make sense of the *roadblocks* in network support.

Take a common (counter) scenario of network support where a relationship is disapproved by a common type of social network members—friends (e.g., Felmlee, 2001; Jensen & Rauer, 2016). On the internet, people can talk about relational stressors (Entwistle et al., 2021), for example, concerning gaining approval from their partner's *friends* (Fiori et al., 2018; Sprecher & Felmlee, 2000), marshaling support from their *friends* to accept their partner (Besikci

et al., 2016; Bradford et al., 2020; Crowley & Faw, 2014; Gillian et al., 2022; Jenson et al., 2021; Sigler & Forest, 2025), or communicating to a *friend* about problems they see in their friend's romantic relationship (Etcheverry et al., 2013; Jenson et al., 2021). These "friend problems" in romantic relationships, as we call them, represent roadblocks in network support processes. The communicated narrative sensemaking theory (CNSM; Kellas, 2017) suggests that the stories that people tell about such experiences reveal how they make sense of relational and social tensions. These narratives provide valuable insight into how people understand, interpret, and manage disruptions in network support.

The current study seeks to understand network support by exploring how individuals make sense of "friend problems" through storytelling text available in online forums. We analyzed posts from relevant posts from major relationship-focused subreddits using a mixed-method design that combined quantitative, human-AI collaborative content analysis with qualitative interpretations of prototypical posts of each theme. Findings contribute to the communication theorizing of network support by illuminating how people narratively process and communicate about challenges to social integration. Below, we conceptualize challenges in network support, discuss how people may manage it, put the questions in the context of friend problems, and propose specific research questions.

Network Support and Potential Challenges

Network support involves fostering a sense of belonging among people with similar interests and concerns ("We'd like you to join our support group"; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992, p. 225). Cutrona and colleagues' definition drew upon Weiss's (1974) research of social integration support (Cutrona & Russell, 1990, p. 321). Therefore, network support is essentially support to help people to be integrated into social network contexts they are not yet in. For example,

network support can be introducing a co-author to one's own academic group that does not know this coauthor yet, taking a newly-made friend to a family trip, or making a relationship endorsed by friends of people in that relationship.

Network support has a few characteristics. First, network support is purposeful. Support itself is defined as help on a specific problem (MacGeorge et al., 2011), and so is network support. For example, Xu and Burleson's (2001) operationalized network support as connecting someone to other contacts that can give them the resources they need. Second, the target of social integration in network support is often though not always a close group or a strong tie (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992), as exemplified above. The definition of network support that emphasizes purposeful social integration has been widely adopted by later research (e.g., (Holmstrom et al., 2021; McLaren & High, 2019). Based on these two characteristics, we derive a third characteristic of network support that it involves three agents, the newcomer to be integrated, the middle person, and the target of integration. Take a dating scene where a person A wants to include their partner B into their friend group C to strengthen their relationship as an example. In this case, B would be the newcomer, A the middle person, and C the target. The goal is to strengthen this relationship. Therefore, we define network support as the *coordinated communication process* between the three agents of newcomers, middle persons, and the target of integration; for network support to be successful, all three agents need to try.

Challenges then arise when one of the three agents hesitate to facilitate the network support process for the given purpose. For example, the newcomer may not be motivated to blend in the target group or connection (Fiori et al., 2018); the middle person may want to keep the other two agents separate (Crowley & Faw, 2014; Sigler & Forest, 2025); or the target of integration (i.e., social network members) may not see the newcomer as a valuable addition to

the group or connection, but a threat (Jenson et al., 2021). This may then lead to a deficit of network support to other agents in this process that wish a successful integration. Given the roadblocks, it is valuable to understand how people make sense of and manage the challenges.

Managing Challenges in Network Support

People's reactions to and management of challenges in network support have been studied in specific contexts and agents (i.e., newcomers, middle persons, or the target connection). Take the friend problems for example. Research has explored how perceptions of disapprove of one's marriage from the spouse's friends predict the probability of divorce at a later time point through friend interference of marriage (e.g., Fiori et al., 2018). Research also examined communication strategies in response to one's own friends' disapproval of one's partner, categorizing them into passive vs. active and direct vs. indirect (e.g., Crowley & Faw, 2014; Sigler & Forest, 2025). Works also showed that a third-party friend can struggle to balance between communicating their concern about a relationship and keeping the connection between them and the person in love not being hurt from the warning (e.g., Etcheverry et al., 2013; Gillian et al., 2022). These studies accumulated rich evidence of communication strategies people use to manage challenges in network support—though rarely explicit under such a label.

However, so far, these findings are produced in separate contexts and from separate agents' perspectives. Also, it is unclear how these agents tell stories of challenges in network support to make sense of the setbacks. An integrated perspective that compares narrated experiences from all three agents will contribute to the extant literature. In the current paper, we aim to profile experiences of the three agents in coordinating amid challenges of network support for romantic relationships.

A Communicated Narrative Sensemaking Lens

Failures in network support create precisely the kind of ambiguity that requires sensemaking, the process of turning confusing events into a plausible theory that can guide action (Weick, 1995). The central problem is not merely what happened, but what it means. Building on this, Bietti, Tilston, and Bangerter (2019) argue that storytelling is the specific, adaptive mechanism for collective sensemaking. They further propose that telling stories allows communities to collaboratively manage uncertainty and reinforce social cohesion. This positions the Reddit forums in our study not as collections of individual vents, but as public arenas whether users collaboratively construct narratives to manage relational threats.

The Communicated Narrative Sensemaking (CNSM) framework provides the specific vocabulary to analyze this process as a communicative phenomenon (Kellas, 2017). The CNSM framework provides the tools to analyze sensemaking through its communicative form: storytelling. To operationalize this, our study focuses on the core components of any narrative: the plots that define the conflict, the characters involved, and the themes or morals that reveal how meaning is made. This framework is not just descriptive; it provides the analytic tools to decode how these stories function. By examining these elements, we can map the distinct ways people interpret and communicate about the failure of network support, moving from a summary of topics to an interpretation of their meaning.

Online communities are where people collectively negotiate social rules. Research on platforms from Wikipedia to TikTok shows users publicly debating everything from community policy to relational norms, effectively co-authoring social scripts for conduct (Mendelson, 2023; Nagar, 2012). This public negotiation creates a vocabulary for private struggles. Individuals draw on these shared frameworks to make sense of their own lives, a process Zhang and Wang (2025) observed as users managed romantic relationships by taking advantage of collective astrological

narratives. The public narrative that deals with what is acceptable provides the raw material for managing one's private crisis.

Taken together, these studies show that people use online storytelling to make sense of relational problems and manage their identities. CNSM offers an overarching epistemological tool for systematically explicating this process. It allows us to move beyond simply documenting that people talk about the friend problems and instead ask how these narratives are constructed and what they reveal about the challenges of network support.

The Current Study

In the current work, we use the "friend problems" in romantic relationships as a proxy to understand how people make sense of network support. This is because network support is crucial for couples and individuals in a romantic relationship to flourish. As relationship research shows, interference and support from social network members (e.g., friends), potentially solicited through marriage work (Felmlee, 2001) and relationship work (Jensen & Rauer, 2016), have important effects on relational and personal well-being (Afifi et al., 2016; Brisini & Solomon, 2022; Manning et al., 2011; Proulx et al., 2009; Sprecher, 2011). It is critical to understand the "friend problems" from the perspectives of the three agents. Additionally, it will be valuable to explore demographic differences in different stories. Furthermore, we explore how people make sense of these friend problems through linguistic traits and specific content of stories from different perspectives. Taken together, we propose three research questions:

RQ1: What are common themes and subthemes in "friend problems"?

RQ2: Who are more likely to report friend problems of different themes?

RQ3: How do the thematic and linguistic features of narratives in each theme reveal the distinct ways people make sense of challenges in "friend problems"?

Methods

Data Collection and Processing

We collected posts from four major relationship subreddits, including r/relationship, r/relationship advice, r/dating, r/dating advice, because (1) they are often studied in relationship-related support stories (e.g., Entwistle et al., 2021), offering relevant support content, and (2) they require post titles to contain age and gender of people involved, offering demographic information. Using the PMAW API and PMAW library, we extracted a total of 1,329,672 Reddit posts from four subreddits generated in the year of 2024: 273,247 from r/relationships, 655,111 from r/relationship_advice, 203,123 from r/dating_advice, and 198,191 from r/dating. To refine our dataset, we applied a keyword-based filtering approach, identifying 1,898 relevant posts. The filtering process required both "friends" and "partners" (or related terms such as "boyfriend," "girlfriend," "bf," or "gf") to appear together in either the post title or selftext. This ensured that the extracted data focused on discussions explicitly involving both friendship and romantic relationships.

Human-AI Collaborative Coding

Both authors qualitatively explored main relationship types with 100 random posts, and reached an agreement that there three main themes: integrating self into partner's friend network, integrating partner into one's own friend network, and supporting a friend and their partner as a third person; each post fell into one of the themes. This was then verified with another 100 random posts. We then turned to collaborating with state-of-the-art large language models (LLMs) at the time, ChatGPT 4o, as recent advancements show that LLMs can be used to expedite content analysis of common social phenomenon under clear prompts (Peng & Yang, 2025). We asked ChatGPT 4o to identify posts in the four relationship subreddits that are

relevant to the three themes identified by both authors, and give them corresponding code (1-3, respectively). We arrived at 1583 posts after dropping posts with removed content. Next, we randomly drew 100 posts, summarized nine subthemes under the three major themes, gave each detailed coding criteria, and tried manual coding for another 100 posts. Within 100 posts, thematic saturation was reached, and no new theme emerged. After addressing differences between authors, we prompted ChatGPT with the updated coding scheme to code the 1583 posts into subthemes. The coding scheme was refined based on trial coding by ChatGPT and fed to ChatGPT for final coding (Appendix). 683 posts were further dropped because they were coded as irrelevant or presenting positive interactions—which are beyond the scope of the current study. Two authors separately coded roughly 11% of the remaining 990 posts that were randomly drawn from the total sample (98 posts), addressed differences and unified code, compared human coding results to machine coding results, and found a higher intercoder reliability, indicated by a Krippendorff's alpha of .93.

In our collaboration with ChatGPT, to ensure structured and reproducible outputs for our content analysis, we configured the model to generate responses in json_object format. We set the temperature to a low value of 0 to produce highly deterministic text, minimizing random variation between runs. The Top P parameter was maintained at 1.00, allowing the model to consider the full probability distribution of tokens during generation.

Additionally, we used RE in RStudio 2022.07.0 to retrieve age, gender, and couple type (i.e., different-sex vs. same-sex) from the titles of the posts. The mean age was 23.6 years for posters (based on 676 posts), 24.6 years for the partners in question (based on 526 posts), and 24.11 years for the friends in the scenarios (based on 392 posts). As for gender: around 65% of posters were man and the rest were woman (n=436; based on 676 posts) and the rest were

woman; around 42% partners in question were woman (*n*=220) and the rest were man (based on 524 posts); around 58% friends in the scenarios were women (*n*=228) and the rest were man (based on 392 posts). For couple type, around 76% posts were about different-sex couples (*n*=294) and the rest were about same-sex couples (based on 386 posts).

Linguistic Marks

We leveraged the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) package developed by Boyd et al. (2022) to analyze linguistic traits of posts. We selected a few categories to examine for their relevance, including general characteristics (e.g., word count) to understand general patterns, language complexity (e.g., big words) and cognitive process (e.g., cognition) to gauge cognitive characteristics, affective process (e.g., negative tone, sadness) to capture emotional responses, and pronounce use (e.g., I, we) and social and relational processes (e.g., conflict, moral) to understand relational references and interplays in narratives.

Data Analysis

We ran multinomial logistic regressions and Chi-square tests to address the research question of demographic differences between different themes (RQ2) and one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) using LWIC to answer the research question of linguistic traits associated with distinct themes (RQ3). In the analyses addressing RQ2, demographics were the predictors and likelihood for a post to fall under a certain theme the outcomes. In the analyses addressing R3, post theme was the predictor, and linguistic traits were the outcomes. We only ran analyses for the three main themes but not the subthemes because many of them have sparse cases, which would severely threaten the validity of tests. Given the extensive number of LIWC measures tested in answering RQ3, the *p* values were adjusted using Benjamini-Hochberg correction to control false discovery rate (FDR; Lydersen, 2021). Sensitivity tests were conducted with

demographics controlled to cross-validate results about RQ3. LIWC related computations were completed in R Studio 2025.05.1+513. Other analyses were completed in SPSS 22.0.

Results

RQ1: Types of "Friend Problems" in Relationships

The analysis shows that reported friend-related problems most frequently concern a poster's platonic friend and that friend's romantic partner (Table 1). This category accounted for the majority of posts (n = 680, 75.6%). In comparison, problems involving the poster's own romantic partner and that partner's friends were far less common (n = 152, 16.9%). The least frequent type of conflict involved the integration of the poster's partner with the poster's own friends (n= 68, 7.6%). These findings show that individuals are substantially more likely to report issues originating from a friend's romantic relationship than to report issues involving their own partner and their respective social circles.

Within the situation where poster reported issues between a poster's friend and that friend's romantic partner, the leading issue was the poster's concern for their concern for their friend's well-being due to that friend's partner (n = 277, 30.8%). Following this were direct conflicts between the poster and the friend's partner (n = 203, 22.6%) and disruption to the poster-friend relationship (n = 200, 22.2%). For issues concerning the poster's partner and their friends, the most common complaint was the partner's inadequate handling of the situation (n = 60, 6.7%). Finally, when the conflict was between the poster's own friends and the poster's partner, the problem was most often caused by the partner's negativity towards the friends (n = 36, 4.0%). This was followed by the poster's challenges in managing the relationship between the two sides (n= 19, 2.1%) and the friends' negativity towards the partner (n = 13, 1.4%).

RQ2: Demographic Differences Between Themes

Multinominal regressions (Table 2) treating "the problems with a friend's partner" (Code 3) as the reference group showed no significant age differences in posters or the partner involved between the three major types of problems reported. However, the data revealed significant differences related to gender and the type of relationship (Table 2). The poster's gender ($\chi^2(2) = 6.53$, $p = .038$), the partner's gender ($\chi^2(2) = 10.59$, $p = .005$), and the couple's relationship type ($\chi^2(2) = 7.32$, $p = .026$) all showed a significant association with the kind of friend-related problem reported.

Planned comparisons with Bonferroni corrections ($p < 0.016$) showed that women were more likely than men to report problems relevant to being included in their partner's friend network (Code 1) than managing the relationship between their own friends and their partner (Code 2) and vice versa, $\chi^2(1) = 6.43$, $p = .011$. Similarly, posters with man partners (23%) were more likely than posters with a woman partner to report problems with their partner's friends (Code 1) rather than managing the relationship between their own friends and their partner (Code 2), $\chi^2(1) = 10.41$, $p = .001$. Finally, posts about different-sex relationships were significantly more likely than posts about same-sex relationships to report issues with their partner's friends (Code 1) rather than judging a friend's partner or romantic relationship (Code 3), $\chi^2(1) = 6.35$, $p = .012$.

RQ3: How Do People Make Sense of Friend Problems in Romantic Relationships?

Our analysis of the narratives identified three distinctive linguistic profiles: the rejected newcomers, the torn middle person, and the judgmental friends. Each profile suggests a unique authorial perspective and psychological state. We compared the linguistic features of these groups using a series of one-way ANOVAs. Because Levene's test indicated that variances were unequal across groups for many linguistic markers, we applied Welch's robust F-test for all

comparisons. Where a significant overall difference was found, we conducted post-hoc tests with a Bonferroni correction to identify which specific groups differed. The full results of these analyses are detailed in Table 3, followed by summary of demographic and linguistic characteristics for three profiles in Table 4. Sensitivity tests controlling demographics (e.g., age, gender) showed that the results in Table 3 were robust.

Rejected Newcomers: Shifting Blame Away from Self

The rejected newcomers wrote posts using a tongue of personal testimony and justification. Their posts contained more words (M = 630.13, SD = 346.19) than those of friends who judged romantic relationships (M = 473.68, SD = 325.13; $p < .001$) and were characterized by a strong focus on personal experience, evident in a higher frequency of I-words (M = 8.52, SD = 1.97) than in the posts of judgmental friends (M = 7.67, SD = 3.01; $p = .002$). This justificatory stance was further reinforced by the highest rate of Discrepancy words (M = 2.05, SD = 0.77) among all three roles, suggesting efforts to outline perceived injustices in detail.

For rejected newcomers, storytelling served as a critical tool for sensemaking, enabling them to justify intense feelings of exclusion and relational threat. The narrative often functions to frame a partner's friend as a direct antagonist. For example, one author (P1; 18, female) explicitly concluded, "He's (partner friend) ruining my relationship and my trust." However, the blame doesn't stop with the friend; it often extends to the romantic partner for failing to act. For instance, another author (P2; 20, female) felt she and her boyfriend were being collectively "walked all over by his roommate," illustrating how the justification for anger can stem less from a friend's initial hostility and more from the partner's subsequent failure to defend the relational dyad.

In positioning themselves as outsiders, these narrators were highly attuned to the risk of negative social labels. This identity-work was evident in preemptive justifications, such as one author's (P1; 18, woman) plea, "I dont wanna seem toxic," which immediately followed an outburst of anger. This conflict also manifested as strategic inaction, as another narrator (P3; 28, woman) feared that setting a boundary would simply "validate all the things they've been saying about me." Both narratives thus reveal a sophisticated negotiation with social norms that can pathologize such protective relational impulses.

Ultimately, this sensemaking process often shifted the locus of blame from the friend to the partner, enabling a re-evaluation of the relationship itself. This sensemaking process shifted the locus of blame toward the partner, prompting a re-evaluation of the relationship itself. The narratives functioned as a normative appeal, testing the partner against an implicit script of loyalty, which one author (P4; 28, woman) articulated as wanting "someone who will be in my corner." When this script was violated, the partner's failure became the central injury, powerfully captured in another's (P5; 29, woman) conclusion: "now I feel like every time he's with B, he's choosing him over me." The initial "friend problem" is thereby reinterpreted as a fundamental failure of the partnership, a critical turning point in the narrator's assessment of the relationship's viability.

Torn Middle Persons: Balancing Critique and Empathy

In stark contrast, the torn middle persons painted a picture of internal turmoil, uniquely defined by the combination of the highest Authenticity ($M = 66.51$, $SD = 22.12$) and the lowest Clout (i.e., confidence; $M = 41.10$, $SD = 19.05$). This internal focus was further reflected in the language, which, despite being of the highest word count ($M = 648.76$, $SD = 479.34$), contained the fewest references to others, both through the lowest other-focused

She/He pronouns (M = 5.47, SD = 2.09) and general Social Words (M = 20.04, SD = 3.21). Interestingly, authors appeared to grapple with their anxiety through cognitive complexity, employing the most Big Words (M = 14.54, SD = 3.02) among all three roles.

Narratives by the torn middle persons reveal a pattern of internal conflict, as participants grapple with competing desires and obligations. Rather than portraying a linear or decisive path, many accounts involve careful weighing of options and emotional ambivalence. In one post, the author (P6; 28, woman) shares, “I want to be there for her wedding but at the same time, I need to respect my partner because I feel super disrespected.” In another post, the poster (P7; 26, man) said, “She said that it’s either I’m friends with him and we break up, or her and I stay together and I drop him.” Both highlight the emotional strain of balancing long-standing loyalty to a friend with commitment to a romantic partner.

At the heart of this struggle lies a self that feels constrained. The disruption of personal rhythms, for example, “missed many Saturday morning hikes... because she wants to spend the whole weekend at my place on a 3 day bender” (P8; 33, woman), illustrates how external forces limit autonomy. Middle persons’ uncertainty, such as “I think he may be right but idk if it’s some sort of manipulation tactic or if he’s legit worried and concerned about me” (P9; 21, woman), reveals a hesitant self, unsure how to navigate the blurred lines between care and control.

Across these narratives, many narrators manage internal conflict and constrained agency by balancing critique with empathy. For example, one narrator acknowledged his friend’s flaws while also valuing their long-term loyalty. For example, one poster (P7; 26, man) commented about his friend, saying “He says blatantly offensive things like racist and misogynistic comments… but he is… charismatic and intelligent”. Another narrator (P8; 33, woman) reflected on doubt about her boyfriend’s intentions, saying, “I think he may be right but idk if it’s some

sort of manipulation tactic or if he's legit worried and concerned about me." This balancing act allows torn middle persons to navigate feelings of powerlessness by holding multiple, sometimes contradictory perspectives, reflecting the complex emotional work involved in maintaining relationships amid tension.

Judgmental Friends: Self-Distancing

Finally, the posts from judgmental friends reflect social observation and judgment. Reinforcing this detached stance, these narratives were the most common (>70%) yet also the shortest, showing the lowest levels of both Authenticity ($M = 48.81$, $SD = 20.68$) and Self-Focus ($M = 7.67$, $p < .001$). Instead of personal narrative, their focus was external and authoritative. They wrote with the highest level of Clout ($M = 52.99$, $SD = 26.36$) and a strong focus on others (She/He pronouns: $M = 6.89$, $SD = 3.15$). The friend authors' goal of seeking moral judgments was evident in their significantly higher rates of Moral Words ($M = 0.42$, $SD = 0.51$) than the posts of middle persons ($M = 0.27$, $SD = 0.25$).

Qualitatively, the stories of judgmental friends highlight significant challenges in network integration, particularly the presence of a central figure who acts as a social disruptor. These narratives are characterized by a mounting sense of frustration and moral indignation as the author recounts a series of perceived slights or inappropriate behaviors from an "other." The primary challenge articulated is the inability to resolve conflict and maintain harmony within the broader friendship circle, often because the problematic individual is the partner of a close friend or family member. For example, one user (P10; 32, man) describes the escalating conflict with his wife's friend's boyfriend, Ted, who makes a series of inappropriate comments, including, "your mother is exactly how I imagined her, a divorced woman who acts like a man." This

creates a strained dynamic where the author feels disrespected and unheard by both the friend and their partner, leading to a sense of social isolation within the triad.

The way judgmental friends manage this tension is linguistically evident in their detached and moralistic storytelling. The narratives are characterized by low Authenticity and Self-Focus, indicating that the authors are not grappling with internal doubt or emotional conflict, but rather presenting a finished case. Instead of internalizing the problem, they manage their frustration by externalizing the conflict and framing the "other" as a moral transgressor. This is underscored by the highest use of Other-Focus pronouns and Moral Words in their stories. This linguistic pattern suggests that they see themselves as a moral authority or "gatekeeper" and their inability to enforce a social boundary is the primary source of their frustration. Their high use of Question Marks, as seen in the final lines of the user post ("Am I not worth defending? Do my feelings not matter?"; P10; 32, man), serves not as a search for personal understanding, but as a rhetorical appeal to the community, inviting others to validate their judgment and affirm the moral rightness of their position.

Discussion

This study challenges the conventional view of network support as a straightforward act of social inclusion. Instead, our findings compel a reconceptualization of network support as a dynamic and often contested communicative process of relational negotiation. By analyzing narratives from the newcomer, the middle person, and the target of integration, we reveal that network support is not merely a resource to be given, but also a form of legitimacy to be won. The stories people tell about these dynamics show that this process is defined less by the simple act of inclusion and more by the communicative work of managing exclusion, negotiating legitimacy, and sustaining power imbalances across relational roles.

RQ1: Theme and Subthemes

Friends On the Side Do More Sensemaking Work Than People in Love

Stories in our dataset most often came from friends who felt threatened or excluded from a peer's romantic relationship, rather than from those in the romantic dyad themselves. This asymmetry suggests that friendships are often at a structural disadvantage in network support: they occupy the "lower hand" and therefore must do more communicative sensemaking work to preserve their legitimacy. These dynamics reflect cultural norms of marital primacy or singlism (DePaulo & Morris, 2005), which privilege romantic relationships over friendships. Such privileging is counterproductive for network support, as it frames integration as replacement and makes inclusion feel threatening. Health research suggests that the loss or weakening of friendships can increase loneliness, stress, and depressive symptoms (Hu, 2025; Hu et al., 2025), highlighting the significance of this imbalance for well-being.

Friendships and romantic relationships as competing ties

The data also reveal that friendships and romantic relationships could function as competing rather than complementary ties. Though friends have been conceptualized as a potential resource of support for romantic relationships (Felmlee, 2001), they can also compete with romantic partners for attention, investment, and care from the middle persons. The privileging of romantic ties over friendships (DePaulo & Morris, 2005) pressures individuals to constantly negotiate which relationships to prioritize, further straining integration efforts. Though the legitimacy of prioritizing partners over friends is challenged by recent research (e.g., Hu, 2025), our finding shows that such practice and mindset remain present in society and can impede the healthy functioning of the romantic relationship itself.

RQ2: Demographic Differences in Themes

Patterns in demographic differences indicate that these tensions are not isolated to one group but cut across social categories. First, problems appear universal across age groups, suggesting that network support challenges are a recurring feature of relational life. Second, women more often described difficulty being accepted into a partner's friend group, while men more often reported strain in intermediating between partners and friends. Third, same-sex relationships were more likely to be judged on legitimacy compared to different-sex relationships, underscoring cultural scripts that scrutinize queer partnerships more harshly. Together, these demographic patterns suggest that network support dynamics are socially patterned, shaped by intersecting norms of gender, sexuality, and cultural legitimacy.

RQ3: Communicated Narrative Sensemaking in Themes

Applying a communicated narrative sensemaking lens (CNSM; Kellas, 2017), we find that narratives function not just as accounts of difficulty but as interpretive strategies that assign value, responsibility, and legitimacy.

Rejected Newcomers

These individuals tell stories as outsiders, portraying themselves as needing to justify their value and exonerate themselves from blame. Their stories often question the legitimacy of the relationship itself, suggesting a mechanism by which friends gatekeep romantic ties—by making a partner doubt whether their relationship is valid. This dynamic reflects communicative strategies of justification and sensegiving. Such boundary-negotiating communication strategies are consequential to one's romantic relationships. Research (Fiori et al., 2018) has shown that husbands' perception of wives' friends' disapproval of their relationships was predictive of divorce in the future. Our study further specified the communicative process that bridges

perceiving one's partner's friends' disapproval and dissolving the romantic relationship among rejected newcomers.

Torn Middle Persons

Positioned structurally as brokers, these individuals narrate feelings of powerlessness and stress. Rather than leveraging their brokerage role for authority, they balance critique and empathy to manage tensions less hostily than rejected partners. These stories highlight the emotional labor of brokerage and point to constructive—but taxing—communication strategies for sustaining relational harmony. Our finding cross-validates findings from Crowley and Faw's (2014) research that examined how individuals advocate for their romantic partner and marshal support from their friends. Mapping out various reactions to friends' disapproval of one's own romantic relationship by direction (approach vs. avoidance) and directedness (direct vs. indirect), Crowley and Faw identified most strategies under the approach-indirect quadrant: for example, highlighting positives, increasing relationship talk (i.e., conversations about one's relationship), and asking other people to encourage the opposed friend to be more supportive. These strategies show torn middle persons may try to maintain harmony between their partner and their own friends with less confrontational, constructive communication strategies. On top of that, we reveal the psychological burden of doing such middle person work—posts from middle persons highlight the psychological burnout in intermediating conflicting relationships. Sometimes, it is plausible that burnout leads to dissolution of the friendship (Gillian et al., 2022) and/or the romantic relationship (Jenson et al., 2021). The communicative ramification of such fatigue warrants more future investigations.

Judgmental Friends

The most common role, these narrators distance themselves rhetorically while simultaneously presenting themselves as moral authorities. In real life, people often turn to their friends to complain about problems in their romantic relationships (Julien et al., 2000; Lind Seal et al., 2016; Vallade et al., 2016). In response, friends in the current study appear "cold" and objective, which can be interpreted in at least two ways. One, friends' may be more clear-minded judges about a romantic relationship as an outsider to the love affair—most of the time presumably. Etcheverry et al. (2013) showed that friends often use perceived satisfaction and quality of alternatives as benchmarks for judging whether a romantic relationship of their friends' is worth of pursuing, but not perceived investment. It seems that friends care more about whether one is happy in one love affair (and maybe one can be happier in another romantic relationship), but not so much the sunken cost—the ignorance of sunken cost is often considered rational for important decisions in real life. Two, however, the distanced stance may also reflect friends' thinking that they are not qualified to be too involved in and interfere a romantic relationship. Such narratives reveal how friends may internalize cultural norms that privilege romantic ties (DePaulo, 2014; DePaulo & Morris, 2005), thereby treating themselves as secondary by default. This role may explain how the formation of romantic ties reduces investment in friendships, reproducing cultural hierarchies (DePaulo, 2014, pp. 71–72).

Theoretical Implications

Network support has been briefly conceptualized as structural acts of inclusion (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992), but not quite systematically explored as a communication process. We refine the conceptualization to specify network support as a coordinated, negotiated communication process between different roles in the three-party relationships, including newcomers, middle persons, and judgmental friends. We further show

how agents in different roles employ distinct communication strategies to manage setbacks in the support process. The insights extend social support theory in the communication literature (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992) by emphasizing that support is not only structural (who is included) but also communicative (how legitimacy and belonging are negotiated). Integrating CNSM (Kellas, 2017), our findings show that storytelling itself is a form of relational work through which people justify, negotiate, and assign meaning to support failures. Briefly summed up, our integrated comparisons showed that rejected newcomers withdraw and question their relationship, torn middle persons try to coordinate, and judgmental friends stand afar and offer reflective advice—all three forming a coordinated dynamics of network support as a communication process that is worth more future investigation and theorizing. More broadly, the results highlight how cultural norms of marital primacy shape network support, underscoring that social support processes are deeply embedded in cultural scripts and relational power dynamics. Future research may consider incorporating broader socio-cultural models in theorizing network support.

Practical Implications

These findings offer several practical takeaways for improving relational health and well-being. First, because friendships often bear the communicative burden in integration challenges, interventions could encourage individuals to maintain investments in friendships while developing romantic partnerships. Programs in relationship education or counseling might explicitly teach strategies for balancing friendships and romantic ties without framing them as mutually threatening. Second, the struggles of middle persons highlight the need for support resources that address the stress of brokerage roles. Communication training could help individuals in these roles articulate boundaries, balance loyalties, and reduce emotional overload.

Third, the finding that same-sex couples face more legitimacy judgments points to the importance of promoting inclusive support practices, particularly among friend groups and families. Developing messages that normalize queer relationships in social support contexts may reduce exclusion and stress. Finally, our results suggest that health practitioners and counselors should view network support as a communicative process, not only a structural one. Helping clients reframe negative narratives—whether as rejected newcomers, torn brokers, or judgmental friends—may promote healthier integration and reduce the stress associated with exclusionary dynamics.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study is limited in several ways. First, the data are cross-sectional and drawn from Reddit, which prevents causal inferences and may bias the narratives shared. Second, sparse cases limited our ability to fully probe all subthemes, reducing nuance in some areas. Future research should move beyond descriptive data to test how messages designed to facilitate network support are produced and interpreted across different roles. Experimental approaches could examine the effects of communicative strategies such as justification, empathy-balancing, and moral appeals on integration outcomes. By identifying effective message strategies, research can advance theory and inform interventions to improve network support processes.

Conclusion

This study highlights that network support is not only a structural resource but also a contested, coordinated communicative process shaped by narratives of newcomers, middle persons, and friends. These stories reveal the asymmetry of friendships and romantic ties, the communicative labor required to sustain legitimacy, and the cultural norms that prioritize some relationships over others. By situating these findings within communication and social support

theories, we demonstrate that network support involves not only fostering inclusion but also managing exclusion, negotiating power, and sustaining relational legitimacy.

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Table 1

*Types of Friend Problems in Relationships (*N*= 900)*

Problem Type	***n***	%
1. Problems with partner's friends	152	16.9
1.1 Friends' negativity towards poster	43	4.8
1.2 Partner's handling of friend-related situation	60	6.7
1.3 Friend group's influence/nature	49	5.4
2. Problems between one's own friends and partner	68	7.6
2.1 Friends' negativity towards partner	13	1.4
2.2 Partner's negativity towards friends	36	4.0
2.3 Managing between partner and friends	19	2.1
3. Problems with friends' partner	680	75.6
3.1 Direct conflicts between poster and friend's partner	203	22.6
3.2 Concern for friend regarding their relationship	277	30.8
3.3 Disruption of poster-friend relationship	200	22.2

Table 2

Demographic Differences in Main Themes

Problem Type	**Age**		**Gender**				**Couple**	
	Poster	Partner	Man Poster	Woman Poster	Man Partner	Woman Partner	Different-Sex	Same-Sex
1-Integrating self into partner's friend network	23.73 (6.43)	24.92 (5.23)	36 (15.2)	92 (21.1)	70 (23.0)	32 (14.5)	83 (28.2)	15 (16.3)
2-Intermediating between partner and friends	23.92 (5.91)	23.82 (7.31)	29 (12.2)	34 (7.8)	21 (6.9)	29 (13.2)	39 (13.3)	9 (9.8)
3-Supporting a friend's relationship	23.59 (6.58)	24.64 (6.09)	172 (72.6)	310 (71.1)	213 (70.1)	159 (72.3)	172 (58.5)	68 (73.9)
Test Statistic	$\chi^2(2) = 2.03$	$\chi^2(2) = 1.96$	$\chi^2(2) = 6.10$*		$\chi^2(2) = 10.07$**		$\chi^2(2) = 7.29$*	
Effect Size (Cohen's *d*)	0.01-0.02	0.00-0.02	0.2		0.28		0.28	

Note. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$. Test statistics for age are from multinominal regressions and those for gender and relationship type are from Chi-square tests.

Table 3

Linguistic Differences Between Groups for All Tested Variables (Using Welch's Tests)

Variable	Score 1 *M* (*SD*)	Score 2 *M* (*SD*)	Score 3 *M* (*SD*)	Welch's $F(df_1, df_2)$	$P_{adjusted}$	Post-Hoc Comparisons
General Characteristics & Style						
Word Count (WC)	630.13 (346.19)	648.76 (479.34)	473.68 (325.13)	$F(2, 143.48) = 16.07$	< .001	1 > 3***, 2 > 3***
Analytic Thinking	11.28 (8.18)	14.52 (8.95)	13.49 (10.79)	$F(2, 165.60) = 5.04$	.008	3 > 1*
Clout (Confidence)	47.74 (24.18)	41.10 (19.05)	52.99 (26.36)	$F(2, 168.43) = 12.27$	< .001	3 > 2***
Authentic	58.60 (24.61)	66.51 (22.12)	48.81 (29.68)	$F(2, 168.72) = 23.29$	< .001	1 > 3***, 2 > 3***
Tone	25.94 (18.43)	27.88 (17.94)	24.28 (19.59)	$F(2, 157.32) = 1.51$	.224	
Language Complexity						
Words Per Sentence (WPS)	24.56 (34.82)	22.49 (6.82)	21.93 (18.30)	$F(2, 226.87) = 0.48$	.621	
Big Words (>6 letters)	13.40 (2.34)	14.54 (3.02)	13.92 (2.99)	$F(2, 158.16) = 4.72$	.010	2 > 1*
Dictionary Words (Dic)	96.00 (1.76)	95.84 (1.83)	95.00 (2.98)	$F(2, 186.15) = 16.56$	< .001	1 > 3***, 2 > 3*
Pronoun Use						
I (i)	8.52 (1.97)	8.84 (2.15)	7.67 (3.01)	$F(2, 175.54) = 14.40$	< .001	1 > 3**, 2 > 3**
We (we)	1.29 (0.85)	1.25 (0.62)	1.21 (1.18)	$F(2, 195.25) = 0.56$	.573	
You (you)	0.30 (0.40)	0.38 (0.57)	0.36 (1.34)	$F(2, 206.66) = 0.96$	.384	
She/He (shehe)	6.28 (2.22)	5.47 (2.09)	6.89 (3.15)	$F(2, 178.44) = 14.30$	< .001	3 > 2***
They (they)	1.14 (1.06)	0.97 (0.88)	1.00 (1.12)	$F(2, 163.58) = 1.24$	.293	
Cognitive Processes						
Cognition	27.36 (2.88)	26.69 (2.60)	27.26 (3.43)	$F(2, 167.52) = 1.63$	.200	
All or None (allnone)	1.39 (0.74)	1.33 (0.65)	1.29 (0.84)	$F(2, 166.18) = 1.22$	.299	
Cognitive Processing (cogproc)	13.26 (2.46)	13.10 (2.45)	13.14 (2.87)	$F(2, 161.83) = 0.15$	.864	
Insight	2.95 (0.96)	2.85 (1.19)	2.99 (1.31)	$F(2, 162.73) = 0.42$	.656	
Cause	2.02 (0.80)	2.07 (0.80)	1.88 (0.92)	$F(2, 160.78) = 3.02$	.051	
Discrepancy (discrep)	2.05 (0.77)	1.72 (0.73)	2.00 (0.95)	$F(2, 168.22) = 5.03$	.008	1 > 2*
Tentative (tentat)	2.43 (1.17)	2.61 (1.29)	2.64 (1.42)	$F(2, 160.37) = 1.88$	.155	
Certainty (certitude)	0.66 (0.47)	0.63 (0.47)	0.72 (0.63)	$F(2, 170.62) = 1.43$	.242	
Differentiation (differ)	4.31 (1.29)	4.47 (1.24)	4.06 (1.31)	$F(2, 155.45) = 5.04$	.008	2 > 3*

Memory	0.04 (0.09)	0.05 (0.12)	0.05 (0.16)	$F(2, 176.81) = 0.44$	.648	
Affective Processes						
Affect	4.84 (1.57)	4.66 (1.83)	4.71 (1.77)	$F(2, 154.70) = 0.46$	.630	
Positive Tone (tone_pos)	2.38 (1.20)	2.43 (1.22)	2.22 (1.26)	$F(2, 155.21) = 1.80$	.168	
Negative Tone (tone_neg)	2.20 (0.95)	2.04 (0.99)	2.27 (1.27)	$F(2, 168.76) = 1.72$	.183	
Emotion	1.92 (0.86)	1.90 (1.09)	1.81 (1.01)	$F(2, 154.48) = 1.02$	.362	
Positive Emotion (emo_pos)	0.61 (0.44)	0.69 (0.57)	0.56 (0.54)	$F(2, 155.43) = 1.89$	.155	
Negative Emotion (emo_neg)	1.15 (0.67)	1.09 (0.69)	1.11 (0.85)	$F(2, 165.08) = 0.33$	.720	
Anxiety (emo_anx)	0.18 (0.25)	0.20 (0.29)	0.18 (0.32)	$F(2, 161.32) = 0.26$	.769	
Anger (emo_anger)	0.30 (0.37)	0.33 (0.36)	0.35 (0.49)	$F(2, 171.86) = 0.69$	.502	
Sadness (emo_sad)	0.18 (0.24)	0.19 (0.28)	0.16 (0.30)	$F(2, 159.38) = 0.31$	.736	
Swear Words (swear)	0.19 (0.38)	0.11 (0.24)	0.18 (0.41)	$F(2, 183.27) = 2.31$	.103	
Social & Relational Processes						
Social Words (Social)	21.29 (3.56)	20.04 (3.21)	21.61 (4.37)	$F(2, 169.74) = 6.84$	.001	3 > 2**
Social Behavior (socbehav)	5.95 (1.78)	5.74 (1.64)	6.16 (1.96)	$F(2, 161.58) = 2.42$	.092	
Prosocial	0.87 (0.72)	1.01 (0.97)	0.93 (0.98)	$F(2, 160.09) = 0.64$	.527	
Polite	0.17 (0.21)	0.22 (0.30)	0.18 (0.29)	$F(2, 158.89) = 0.54$	.582	
Conflict	0.47 (0.44)	0.38 (0.34)	0.53 (0.61)	$F(2, 190.08) = 4.91$	.008	
Moral	0.34 (0.36)	0.27 (0.25)	0.42 (0.51)	$F(2, 202.63) = 9.60$	< .001	3 > 2*
Communication (comm)	3.07 (1.30)	2.83 (1.19)	3.25 (1.59)	$F(2, 169.03) = 3.98$	.020	
Social References (socrefs)	15.26 (3.09)	14.19 (2.81)	15.43 (3.75)	$F(2, 168.56) = 5.62$	.004	3 > 2*
Family	0.46 (0.89)	0.41 (0.85)	0.38 (0.71)	$F(2, 144.46) = 0.57$	.568	
Friend	4.07 (1.93)	4.04 (1.88)	3.78 (2.12)	$F(2, 159.24) = 1.75$	.177	
Female References	3.66 (3.25)	4.15 (3.50)	4.51 (2.49)	$F(2, 140.74) = 4.74$	.010	3 > 1**
Male References	5.16 (3.13)	3.51 (2.91)	4.33 (2.44)	$F(2, 144.09) = 7.81$	.001	1 > 2***, 1 > 3***, 3 > 2*

Note. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$. Blank cells in the Post-Hoc Comparisons column indicate no significant pairwise comparisons using the Bonferroni post-hoc test. All variables from the specified analysis are included. Sensitivity tests controlling demographic covariates (e.g., age, gender) showed that the results in Table 3 were robust.

Table 4

Summary Of Demographic and Linguistic Characteristics for Three Conflict Types

Feature	Conflict Type 1: The Rejected Newcomer	Conflict Type 2: The Torn Middle Person	Conflict Type 3: The Judgemental Friend
Core Conflict	The post primarily focuses on how the partner's platonic friendships affect the poster's romantic relationship with the partner.	The post primarily focuses on the interaction and integration (or lack thereof) of the poster's partner into the poster's platonic friend group.	The post primarily focuses on how a platonic friend's partner impacts the friendship between the poster and that friend.
Typical Poster	A heterosexual woman writing about her male partner's friends.	Slightly more common among men; poster feels isolated and torn.	Most common post type (>70%) across all demographics.
Psychological Stance	Personal, detailed, and emotionally expressive (high Authenticity).	Vulnerable and anxious; lowest confidence (lowest Clout) but highest Authenticity.	Detached, judgmental, and confident (highest Clout); lowest Authenticity.
Narrative Style	Long and explanatory (high Word Count).	Cognitively complex (highest Big Words, Differentiation), but internally focused.	Concise, direct, and seeks moral validation (shortest Word Count).
Linguistic Focus	High Self-Focus (I-words); focus on male subjects (Male References).	High Self-Focus (I-words); lowest focus on others (She/He, Social Words).	Low Self-Focus (I-words); highest focus on others (She/He).
Key Linguistic Markers	**Highest in:** Male References, Discrepancy Words, Dictionary Words.	**Highest in:** Authenticity, Analytic Thinking, Big Words, Differentiation, I-words. **Lowest in:** Clout, She/He, Social Words.	**Highest in:** Clout, Social Words, Moral Words, Female References. **Lowest in:** Word Count, Authentic, I-words, Dictionary Words.

Note. Characteristics are derived from qualitative descriptions and significant differences found in chi-square tests and Welch's ANOVAs (Table 3). "Highest" and "Lowest" indicate statistically significant differences compared to at least one other group.

Appendix

Codebook of Relational Problems Involving Friends and Partners

Code	Focus	Definition
Integrating Self into Partner's Friend Network (Initial Score = 1)		
1.1	Friends' Negative Behavior	The post primarily details or centers on negative actions, attitudes, hostility, or exclusion initiated by the Partner's Friends towards the Poster. The problem originates directly with the friends' treatment of the poster.
1.2	Partner's Handling/Management	The post primarily details or centers on the Partner's inadequate handling of the situation involving their friends. This includes the partner failing to support/integrate/defend the poster, dismissing concerns, inappropriate prioritization, poor boundaries between partner and friends, or dishonesty related to friends. The problem originates with the partner's management.
1.3	Friend Group Influence/Nature	The post primarily details or centers on concerns about the negative influence or problematic behavior of the Partner's Friends on the Partner, or the unhealthy/toxic nature of the friend group itself. The problem originates with the nature of the friends or their impact on the partner.
1.0	Positive Situation	The post primarily describes a positive, supportive, or successfully integrated dynamic involving the partner's friends.
1.9	Other/Irrelevant	The primary problem described does not fit categories 1.1, 1.2, or 1.3, OR the post was misclassified as Score 1.
Intermediating Between Partner and Friends (Initial Score = 2)		
2.1	Friends' Resistance to Partner	The post primarily details or centers on negative reactions, attitudes, disapproval, or exclusion initiated by the Poster's Friends towards the Partner. The problem originates with the friends' reaction to the partner.
2.2	Partner's Resistance/Interference	The post primarily details or centers on the Partner's negative behavior or attitudes towards the Poster's Friends, or the Partner's interference with the Poster's friendships (e.g., dislike, conflict, jealousy, control). The problem originates with the partner's actions/attitudes regarding the friends/friendship.
2.3	Interface Management Challenges	The post primarily details or centers on the Poster's challenges in navigating the interactions, boundaries, or expectations between their Partner and Friends. This includes active mediation, balancing needs, dealing with awkwardness, or specific

		worries about the dynamic itself. The problem originates with the complexity of managing this interface.
2.0	Positive Situation	The post primarily describes successful, positive, or supportive integration of the partner.
2.9	Other/Irrelevant	The primary problem described does not fit categories 2.1, 2.2, or 2.3, OR the post was misclassified as Score 2.
Supporting the Relationship Between a Friend and Their Partner (Initial Score = 3)		
3.1	Direct Conflict [Poster vs. Friend's Partner]	The post primarily details or centers on direct conflict, boundary violations, negative interactions, or mutual dislike between the Poster and the Friend's Partner. The problem originates in the relationship between the poster and the friend's partner.
3.2	Concern for Friend [re: Their Partner]	The post primarily details or centers on the Poster's worry about their Friend's well-being, safety, or happiness due to the Friend's Partner's perceived negative actions, traits, or influence on the Friend. The problem originates from the perceived negative impact of the friend's partner on the friend.
3.3	Disruption of Poster-Friend Relationship	The post primarily details or centers on how the Friend's Partner is actively causing damage, interference, distance, or tension specifically within the Poster-Friend relationship. The problem originates with the friend's partner negatively impacting the friendship bond itself.
3.0	Positive/Neutral Situation	The post describes neutral coordination, positive interactions, or issues involving the Friend's Partner that are not the primary source of difficulty.
3.9	Other/Irrelevant	The primary problem described does not fit categories 3.1, 3.2, or 3.3, OR the post was misclassified as Score 3.

Note. This table presents the coding scheme used to categorize posts based on the primary focus of the relational problem described. The Initial Score identifies the overall problem domain.