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Honors Thesis

"WHAT'S GONNA HAPPEN WITH US?": HOW SOCIAL  
NETWORKS CHANGE AFTER MARRIAGE

by  
Madeleine Meldrum

Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of  
graduation requirements for University Honors

Department of Sociology  
Brigham Young University  
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Advisor: Jonathan Jarvis

Honors Coordinator: Michael Cope

How Social Networks Change After Marriage

ABSTRACT

"WHAT'S GONNA HAPPEN WITH US?": HOW SOCIAL NETWORKS  
CHANGE AFTER MARRIAGE

Madeleine Meldrum

Department of Sociology

Bachelor of Science

Marriage represents a significant life transition that brings with it changes in other relationships. Two of the most notable changes in social relationships after marriage are interdependence and dyadic withdrawal. These patterns have been repeatedly observed, but there is a lack of research into the reasons and mechanisms behind them. Using semi-structured qualitative interviews with nineteen recently married young adults, I examine the changes that took place in young adults' friendships following their marriage, as well as the reasons individuals gave for these changes. My results provide explanations for interdependence and dyadic withdrawal, finding that marriage changes individuals' perceptions and priorities surrounding friendship. Married couples merge their social networks due to a preference for spending time together and the convenience of combining their social interactions. Additionally, they lose friendships with single friends, opposite-sex friends, and casual friends due to the change in life stage as well as the time constraints that come with this new stage of life. Overall, findings provide a detailed insight into the reasons behind observed patterns and how individuals explain their changing social networks.

# How Social Networks Change After Marriage

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# How Social Networks Change After Marriage

### INTRODUCTION

A person's social network includes close and casual relationships with coworkers, friends, family, and romantic partners. These relationships come and go throughout a person's life, often in conjunction with significant life transitions such as marriage. When an individual gets married, they experience notable changes in their social networks, especially during the first year (Kearns and Leonard 2004). These changes include the combining of the two spouses' friend groups, represented by interdependence theory (Kalmijn 2003; Kearns and Leonard 2004; Milardo 1982; Sprecher et al. 2002), and a decrease in number of friends and contact with friends, represented by the dyadic withdrawal hypothesis (Gerstel and Sarkisian 2006; Johnson and Leslie 1982, Kalmijn 2003). While these effects have been repeatedly observed, there has been a dearth of studies examining the reasons for the shrinking and combining of friendship networks after marriage. Most of the reasons given in previous literature have been largely theoretical or speculative, so there is a need to understand the reasons for both increasing interdependence and dyadic withdrawal.

Understanding the factors that determine the extent and health of a person's social networks are important for predicting wellbeing. Positive friendships are associated with better health outcomes (Bagwell et al. 2005; Fiori et al. 2016) and healthier marriages (Keneski, Neff, and Loving 2017; Walen and Lachman 2000). Therefore, friendships should be desirable for married individuals, but the patterns of decreasing contact with friends persist nonetheless. This study investigates why this is the case and how friendships are lost or maintained following an individual's marriage.

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For this study I interviewed nineteen recently married young adults about how their friendship networks changed after they got married. I analyzed responses in the context of interdependence theory and the dyadic withdrawal hypothesis to uncover the reasons for interdependence and withdrawal and how married individuals viewed the changes in their own friendships. This research addresses the gap in knowledge about why interdependence and dyadic withdrawal occur, as well as how the individuals involved understand and explain the process. Additionally, I focus on a young and religious sample, which provides insight about this unique group, with implications for how changing friendship networks could impact young adults who get married earlier than average.

### BACKGROUND AND THEORY

The interaction between life stage and social networks is telling, as an individual's stage in life has a greater influence on their social networks than perhaps any other factor (Fischer et al. 1989). As life transitions place people in new settings and change their social needs, the size, composition, and quality of their social networks change as well (Elder 1998). Understanding not only these changes but also the forces behind them will pave the way to understanding how individuals meet their social needs as they transition to a new stage of life.

#### *Interdependence Theory*

Marriage can act as an opportunity to form new relationships with the friends and family of one's spouse and to strengthen relationships that will provide support for the couple during the transition to married life (Haggerty et al. 2023). Interdependence theory, as applied to romantic relationships, posits that the longer couples are together,

the more intertwined their social networks will become, translating to more mutual friendships and fewer separate friendships. Milardo (1982) was an important proponent of this theory of interdependence and found in his sample that the longer a romantic relationship went on, the greater the proportion of the couple's friends that were mutual rather than separate. Many studies since then have also found support for interdependence in romantic relationships (Kalmijn 2003; Kalmijn and Bernasco 2001; Kearns and Leonard 2004; Sprecher et al. 2002). A recent study by Chang and Fu (2022) found that half of men and women reported that they and their spouse knew almost all of each other's friends, and over 80% of men and women knew at least half of their spouse's friends. Despite this evidence for the existence of interdependence, there is a shortage of studies examining the reasons couples give for this increasing overlap.

Interdependence through overlapping social networks has important implications for relationships. One is that developing a joint social network increases a couple's investment in each other, as losing their romantic relationship would also entail losing many of their friends (Kalmijn 2003). Sharing a social network also increases a couple's sense of cohesion, as they engage in more activities together and are seen by others as a single unit (Milardo 1982; Sauter et al. 2022; Sprecher et al. 2002). For both men and women, knowing their spouse's friends and having their spouse know their friends is linked to higher marital satisfaction (Chang and Fu 2022). Finally, evidence suggests that more overlap between spouses' social networks is associated with more spousal support (Cornwell 2012). All of these effects may improve a couple's stability and satisfaction and decrease likelihood of separation.

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Stadtfeld and Pentland (2015) investigated the process of triadic closure, in which a person introduces their friend to their romantic partner. They propose three reasons for this phenomenon, including the fact that the first partner's friend is more likely to come into contact with the second partner simply because couples often do social activities together, which could result in a new friendship forming. A second option is that partners tend to have similar preferences, including preferences for friends, and the third is that the partnership feels imbalanced when there is a friend that only one of them is connected to. The couple corrects the imbalance by either creating a friendship between the friend and the other partner, or by dropping the friendship entirely. This process of triadic closure, repeated for many or all of a couple's separate friends, results in increasing overlap and interdependence within their networks. However, while meeting a spouse's friends can expand the size of one's social network, it does not necessarily increase the quality, as friends that are met through one's spouse are usually less close than friends established separately (Kalmijn 2012).

As a romantic relationship progresses, partners are increasingly likely to do activities together and less likely to do them alone. When a couple begins dating seriously, they are more likely to do social activities with each other and their friends rather than with their friends alone (Surra 1985; Kalmijn and Bernasco 2001). Kearns and Leonard (2004) found that the most significant change in network interdependence occurred during the first year of marriage, when the number of mutual as opposed to separate friendships increased dramatically. After that, the level of interdependence remained fairly stable. This suggests that couples will be most likely to observe their social networks combining immediately before and after marriage, then they maintain

that joint network throughout the following years with few additional changes. In a study of the joint lifestyles of married couples, Kalmijn and Bernasco (2001) found that social contact was the only form of leisure that continued to become more jointed throughout the relationship, while other leisure activities were jointed at the beginning of the relationship but became more separate as spouses became more secure and established in their relationship. Evidently, once couples have begun to merge their social lives, they are unlikely to go back to being separate. While the phenomenon of increasing interdependence has been repeatedly observed, there is still a lack of understanding regarding why this is the case or how the couples involved perceive the merging of their social lives.

### *Dyadic Withdrawal Hypothesis*

The dyadic withdrawal hypothesis builds on interdependence theory to explain changes in social networks as a romantic relationship progresses. It posits that a person's friendship network shrinks when they enter a cohabiting relationship, and their friendship network becomes more overlapping with their partner throughout the relationship (Kalmijn 2003). When a person is cohabiting or married, they do not see their friends as often, and when they do see their friends, their partner is often with them (Surra 1985). This approach assumes that individuals have a finite amount of emotional, cognitive, and temporal resources to distribute among people, so greater investment in a romantic relationship would necessarily decrease investment in other relationships. However, some versions of dyadic withdrawal do not carry that assumption of finite resources from which all of a person's relationships draw and instead focus more on withdrawal from any other potentially romantic relationships (Johnson and Leslie 1982). By either



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definition of dyadic withdrawal, one would expect to see a decrease in number of individual friends, decrease in contact with friends, and increase in joint friendship networks following marriage (Kalmijn 2003; Kalmijn 2012).

Dyadic withdrawal may occur due to a variety of reasons. Culturally, romantic involvement brings with it an assumption of exclusivity and an expectation that the involved parties will distance themselves from other potentially romantic relationships. Romantic commitment also carries the expectation that an individual will meet most of their emotional needs within the romantic relationship and not seek out alternative sources of emotional involvement. Finally, the simplest reason is that romantic involvement is a time commitment and individuals are unable to spend as much time on their other relationships (Gerstel and Sarkisian 2006; Johnson and Leslie 1982; Kalmijn 2012). My study has the advantage of investigating the reasons individuals and couples give for their own experience of dyadic withdrawal.

The biggest declines in number of friends and contact with friends occur when people start dating, when they start cohabiting, and when they get married (Johnson and Leslie 1982; Kalmijn 2003; Sprecher et al. 2002; Surra 1985). This is cohesive with the finding that interdependence increased most sharply directly after marriage: as a person reaches milestones in their romantic relationship, their individual involvement with their friends decreases at the same time as their social networks become intertwined with their partner's. After marriage, friends were reported as less important than they were before, and the now-married individual talked less with their friends (Johnson and Leslie 1982; Kalmijn 2003; Kalmijn 2012). The decrease in number of friends and contact with friends was progressive as the relationship became more serious: the more involved a person

became with their partner, the less involved they were with their friends, to the point of losing some of their friendships.

The literature on whether there is a gender difference in the occurrence of dyadic withdrawal is mixed. One study found no difference between men and women (Johnson and Leslie 1982), another found that men's friendships were less likely to be impacted by marriage (Rose 1984), and more recent studies found that women appeared less prone to dyadic withdrawal (Haggerty et al. 2023; Kalmijn 2003; Stein et al. 1992). Looking at the specific reasons for withdrawal, men tended to report more friendships decreased or lost due to physical separation and diverging friend groups compared to women, while women reported more effect from lack of contact and changes in romantic relationships (Johnson et al. 2004; Rose 1984). Women's friendships are often based more on emotional intimacy and affection than men's friendships (Doherty 2021; Fehr 2004), so they may be more likely to attempt to maintain separate friendships, due both to a strong emotional attachment to their friend and the likelihood that their spouse cannot provide the same emotional services as those friends (Kalmijn 2012). At the same time, however, women's friendships may be more threatened by the introduction of a romantic partner with whom she shares emotional intimacy. Additionally, the studies establishing separation and lack of contact as reasons for withdrawal largely predate the popularity of social media and virtual networking, which may change the effects that physical distance or lack of in-person contact has on a friendship. Today, people are more capable of keeping in touch with others even over considerable distance and even when they are rarely or never able to see each other in person. This study will be able to investigate the

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reasons that modern young adults give for the changes in their friendships following marriage, including the role of technology in keeping in touch.

Close friendships are less likely than casual friendships to fade due to distance or lack of contact, and when close friendships do dissolve, it is more likely to be due to changes in friendship quality rather than changes in the situation (Vieth, Rothman, and Simpson 2022). While single people report more contact with their social networks than married people, studies have found that married people report more close-knit networks than single people and that close friendships are maintained through the marriage transition (Haggerty et al. 2023; Shulman 1975; Sprecher et al. 2002). This suggests that while married people may have fewer friends and spend less time with those friends, the friends they do keep are closer and form a more cohesive network, perhaps due to interdependence with the spouse's network. For this reason, some refer to dyadic withdrawal instead as dyadic *realignment*, as the couple interacts less with acquaintances and casual friends, but continues to interact with their close friends and the overlapping network the couple shares (Sprecher et al. 2002). A potential explanation for this pattern lies with socioemotional selectivity theory, which argues that as individuals and couples progress through life, they actively select their relationships to focus more on those that are emotionally meaningful (Carstensen 1992; Sprecher et al. 2002). The theory is often applied to aging adults who are approaching the end of their lives and has not previously been applied to young adults. However, while recently married young adults may anticipate many more decades of life ahead, they may also experience a decrease in available time due to their change in life stage and thus must be selective about what friendships are worth their limited time. My study will evaluate these theories by

exploring which friendships, if any, are lost or diminished, as well as the reasons recently married people give for the changes.

### *Composition of Social Networks*

The composition of social networks in adulthood reveals the significance of life stage on other relationships. Same-sex friendships are far more common than opposite-sex friendships in adulthood, and this difference is even larger among married people. In fact, married people frequently report no opposite-sex friends beside their spouse, and when they do have such friends, they are often “couple friends,” or friends that are shared by both spouses (Mehta and Strough 2009). These trends suggest that it is difficult or unacceptable for an individual to maintain platonic relationships with the opposite sex after they are married, but sharing the friend with one’s spouse makes it more acceptable. A potential explanation for this is that opposite-sex friends could be viewed as potential romantic partners, making it inappropriate for a married person to seek out their company unless accompanied by their spouse. Notably, this and related studies have exclusively examined different-sex marriages and there is a lack of research about whether this pattern applies to other types of marriage.

A couple’s mutual friends most often start as the individual friends of one member of the couple, then get to know the other partner and come to be considered a mutual friend (Babchuk and Bates 1963; Stadtfeld and Pentland 2015). In these cases, the initial friendships tend to be same-sex: the two respective spouses of the same sex will become friends first, then they will introduce their spouses to each other (Stadtfeld and Pentland 2015). This explains in part the tendency for married people to only have

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opposite-sex friends that are shared with their spouse: they likely met these friends either through their spouse or through the friend's spouse.

Gender is not the only area in which adult friendships tend to be homogeneous. People also tend to have friends of similar race, age, religion, education level, and socioeconomic status (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001; Volker 2022). Adults generally befriend people that are similar to them, due both to a greater likelihood of proximity and the appeal of having things in common. A few studies (Haggerty et al. 2023; Kalmijn and Vermunt 2007) have found that friendships also tend to be homogeneous in marital status, with people of different marital statuses less likely to interact with each other. However, they were unable to establish the reasons for this homogeneity, whether it was due to preference or to people of similar demographics experiencing marital status transitions at the same time. This study will investigate the presence of and reasons for marital status homogeneity.

### *Friendship and Wellbeing*

Milardo and Wellman (1992) argue that any relationship between two people will be affected by their relationships with others. A person's social networks inevitably influence their individual relationships, especially romantic ones. Social networks can contribute to romantic relationships by being a method of meeting people, providing information or advice to enhance the relationship, and supporting the individuals or the couple (Sprecher et al. 2002). Receiving positive support from both one's own social network and one's spouse's network is related to increased marital satisfaction and marital stability, while opposition from one's social network is related to marital problems (Holman 2001; Sprecher et al. 2002). This may be due to friends' support

helping the marriage to thrive, or to the fact that close friends are less likely to express support for a relationship that they see as unstable or unhealthy.

There are two schools of thought around the need for married individuals to have friends. One is that strong marital relationships won't require the spouses to have as many friends or as much contact with friends because their needs are being met by their spouse. The other is that having other friends may strengthen the marital bond. Together, these suggest that a separate friend network is beneficial up to a certain size, but networks larger than that may become detrimental to the marriage due to competing time demands. Thus, moderately-sized networks will be most conducive to couple interdependence (Burger and Milardo 1995). Research seems to support this, and there is evidence that having both separate and mutual friendships is the most beneficial to a couple, as separate friendships provide support to the individual and mutual friendships increase the sense of stability and cohesion within the couple (Fiori et al. 2016; Fiori et al. 2017; Milardo 1982; Stein et al. 1992). Interdependence does not seem to have a significant effect on relationship quality before marriage, but after marriage, more interconnected networks are associated with higher marital quality (Kearns and Leonard 2004).

On an individual level, those with few social ties tend to do worse psychologically (Fiori et al. 2016). On the other hand, close friendships with many positive features and fewer negative features predict better adjustment. In a study of close friendships and wellbeing, positive features such as support and intimacy predicted higher self-esteem, while negative features like conflict predicted psychopathological symptoms, with the effect of negative features proving stronger than the effect of positive ones (Bagwell et al. 2005). Additionally, married individuals with strong positive friendships outside of their

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marriage were less negatively impacted by marital conflict than those without strong friendships, or with negative friendships (Keneski, Neff, and Loving 2017; Walen and Lachman 2000). This adds to the argument that maintaining separate friendships can improve marital quality, provided those friendships are positive.

### *Current Study*

Previous research has established that married couples experience a combining of their social networks as well as a withdrawal from some relationships following marriage. Adult friendships also tend to be homogenous by gender and marital status, suggesting that, as people advance through different life stages, they select for certain relationships over others. However, the reasons for this selection are still largely theoretical, as are the explanations for the phenomena of interdependence and dyadic withdrawal.

This study has the benefit of exploring interdependence theory and the dyadic withdrawal hypothesis in the context of recently married couples and to obtain a qualitative understanding of why these processes occur and how they affect the individual and couple experiencing them. I examine not only how friendships and friendship networks change, but also the reasons recently married individuals give for the changes. Due to the qualitative nature of the study, I am able to gain descriptions of the gradual process of both interdependence and dyadic withdrawal and explanations of how and why these phenomena occur, including why some friendships are lost while others are maintained.

## METHODS

This study draws from semi-structured interviews drawing from a sample of recently married men and women. Participants were recruited by flyers shared through social media and several email newsletters at a local university, which directed them to an eligibility survey that asked for demographic information, how long they had been married, and their contact information if they were willing to be interviewed. Interested participants were contacted by email to set up an interview time, and all interviews were conducted over Zoom. Participants also had the option to refer their spouses to be interviewed as well, and everyone who completed the interview was compensated with a virtual gift card. The study was reviewed and approved by the Brigham Young University Institutional Review Board, and informed consent was obtained for all participants.

I interviewed nineteen participants, including six couples in which I interviewed both spouses separately. Interviewees included 10 women and 9 men, with ages ranging from 19 to 26 years old. The young age of the sample allows for a unique examination of interdependence and dyadic withdrawal for couples that were married younger than is average for the United States, which may reveal different tendencies than older samples have. Thirteen participants were white, three identified as mixed, and three identified as Hispanic or Latinx. Time married ranged from 1.5 months to 28 months, and four participants had moved to a different city since getting married. Sixteen of the participants were living in Utah at the time of the study, two were in Idaho, and one was in Pennsylvania. Additionally, three participants (including one couple) had children, and one participant had been previously married and divorced before her current marriage. None of the participants had cohabited or had children with their spouse before getting



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married. Eighteen of the participants identified as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), allowing this study to gain a unique insight into how members of a relatively conservative religion navigate the transition of marriage. All participants were in different-sex marriages.

**Table 1: Participant Demographics**

	Female	Male	Total
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b> <i>White</i>	6	7	13
<i>Hispanic/Latinx</i>	2	1	3
<i>Mixed</i>	2	1	3
<b>Age</b> <i>18-20</i>	1	0	1
<i>21-23</i>	5	8	13
<i>24-26</i>	4	1	5
<b>Time married</b> <i>0-6 months</i>	3	4	7
<i>6-12 months</i>	1	2	3
<i>12-18 months</i>	4	2	6
<i>18-24 months</i>	1	0	1
<i>More than 24 months</i>	1	1	2
<b>Has children</b> <i>Yes</i>	2	1	3
<i>No</i>	8	8	16

The interviews followed a semi-structured format and were recorded and transcribed using a professional transcription service. The interview included questions about participants' friendships before their marriage and how those friendships had changed, whether they had made new friends, which friends they spent the most time

with currently, to what extent participants' spouses were involved with their social network, and how participants felt about any changes that had taken place. Specific questions included: "Have you seen your friendships change after you got married? How so? Are there friendships you would say are over at this point? Why? How much do you think your social network overlaps with your spouse's? How would you describe your satisfaction with your social life now compared to before you were married?" Following transcription, participants' names and any names of friends or family that they shared were replaced with pseudonyms.

Following transcription and de-identification, I read each interview twice and open-coded them to observe common themes and instances of reported interdependence and dyadic withdrawal, specifically focusing on the causes that participants identified for the changes in their relationships. I created codes based on the common themes observed and my research questions, then coded the transcripts using NVivo. The resulting codes were analyzed for patterns, frequency, and quotes. Due to the homogenous nature of the sample, which was primarily college-educated, LDS young adults, I reached saturation after 19 interviews, at which point little or no new information or insight was emerging from subsequent interviews.

## RESULTS

### *Combining social networks*

*Increasing interdependence.* Participants experienced increasing interdependence as their romantic relationships progressed. They reported that their social networks overlapped significantly as both spouses got to know each other's friends. For most of the participants, this overlap began when they were dating their spouse, particularly when the

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relationship began to get more serious. Sasha (19) described how the process of increasing interdependence happened for her and her husband:

I would say after we started more seriously dating, like talking about getting engaged, getting engaged, that's kind of when we started merging things a little bit more. When we were still more casually dating, exclusive, but still kind of like, 'Hmm, I don't know if this is going anywhere quite yet,' I would say that was still pretty separate, but the more serious that we got, the more overlap that we had.

Her experience was representative of the participants as a whole. Consistent with Milardo's (1982) study, the more serious the relationship became, the more the interviewees merged their social networks. Fifteen participants saw this process begin during dating and engagement, but for four participants, the combining of their social networks began when they got married then proceeded throughout the following months.

Participants explained several reasons for this interdependence. One of the most prominent reasons was simply that they liked having their spouse with them during social interactions. Consistent with Surra's (1985) observations, participants were less likely to do leisure activities with their friends alone as their relationship progressed and they got married. Instead, they made a habit of bringing their spouse with them whenever they got together with friends, and they would also accompany their spouse in their social activities. Aiden (21) summarized how he and his wife spent time with friends together: "Yeah, she most commonly joins me and she's friends with my friends and we all really enjoy each other and spending time with one another when we can." This was a common sentiment, and fifteen participants attributed it to the fact that they preferred spending time with their spouse and enjoyed social activities more when they were together.

An additional reason for bringing their spouse with them was that participants didn't feel they had enough time to devote separately to their friends and their spouse.

Becca (23) explained,

Well, I'll tell you this, it makes it a lot easier when you have the same friends, because if we both have two separate friend groups that weren't friends with each other then we would never see each other, ... so it does help that we have very similar friend groups, because then we'll be with our friends, but we're also with each other.

Participants felt they had a limited amount of time to spend on social interactions and that devoting a large amount of time to spend with friends alone would take too much away from spending with their spouse. Participants also reported spending some time with friends or spouse alone, but eighteen of them said that their spouse was present at least half of the time they were with friends. This supports the rebranding of dyadic withdrawal as dyadic realignment (Sprecher et al. 2002): recently married individuals have less time to spend with their friends, but they resolve this conflict by combining the two social demands into one and spending time with friends and spouse at the same time.

*Balancing shared and separate friends.* As mentioned previously, participants tended to spend time with their friends and spouse together, but most also had activities that they would do with friends without their spouse present. This created a dynamic where participants considered a portion of their friends to be “shared” friends, or friends that were also friends with their spouse, and the rest to be “separate” friends. The proportions of shared and separate friends varied considerably; when asked to estimate how many of their friends were shared with their spouse, participant responses ranged from 30% to 100%. Interestingly, of the six couples in which both spouses were interviewed, half of the couples had very different perspectives on their social overlap. In

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these three couples, one spouse gave a much higher estimate of how much of their friendship network overlapped with their spouse's, but these discrepancies did not follow gender differences. For example, one wife said that a little over half of her and her husband's friends were shared, while her husband estimated the overlap was 95%. In another couple, the husband said 60% while his wife claimed it was 80-90%. These discrepancies arose primarily when participants tried to estimate how many of their spouse's friends they knew; they tended to over- or underestimate how many separate friends the spouse had, either assuming that they knew everyone their spouse spent time with or that their spouse had a much larger social network than they actually did.

Regardless of the estimated ratio of shared to separate friends, most participants agreed that having a balance of both was ideal. Eighteen of the nineteen participants preferred having more shared friends than separate, and the one remaining claimed that having half shared and half separate was ideal. Some of the reported benefits of having shared friends were: "it's good to have time all together...with our friends (Joshua, 22), "you both get to meet new people" (Lorenzo, 22), "it makes it a lot simpler for both of us to have more of that social interaction" (Emilia, 21) and "we're both on the same page with them and they know us" (Irene, 25). Overall, participants liked having shared friends because it was enjoyable to be with their friends and their spouse at the same time, they felt that getting to know each other's friends expanded the couple's social network, it was easier to coordinate hanging out with shared friends, and having shared friends helped create a sense of cohesion within the couple. Milardo (1982) and Sprecher et al. (2002) posited that social interdependence helps a couple strengthen their joint identity, and the current study shows that the couples themselves are aware of this benefit.

The reported benefits of having separate friends were that “we can go do things that we enjoy with them, even if [my wife] doesn’t enjoy something I do” (Milo, 22), “if I just need to vent... I can go to my other separate friends” (Becca, 23), and “it’s really nice to just... remember that, hey, we are individuals still in a relationship. We’re not just this combined hodgepodge” (Ryan, 25). Maintaining separate friends allowed participants to have outlets for the interests they did not share with their spouse, to have someone to turn to when they were experiencing marital difficulties, and to maintain their individualism at a time that their lives were becoming increasingly intertwined with their spouse’s. This helped them both personally and in their marriage, supporting the research that having separate friends can improve both personal psychological wellbeing and marital satisfaction (Fiori et al. 2016; Milardo 1982; Stein et al. 1992).

### *Losing Friendships*

*Diminishing relationships with single friends.* Along with interdependence, participants also reported high levels of dyadic withdrawal as many of their friendships ended or declined. One of the most common reasons participants gave for a decrease in friendships was the fact that they had difficulty connecting to single friends after getting married. Several participants used the phrase “a different stage of life” when describing the differences between them and their still-single friends. All participants except one felt that being single had been a connecting bond with their friends, and now that they are married they do not have that bond anymore. For example, Sasha (19) explained,

We were just in different places in our lives at that point, so it was like, we still care about each other and we still want to know what's going on in each other's lives, but we don't have as much to connect with on a day-to-day basis.

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Sasha and other participants identified a lack of things to talk about, differences in social priorities, and an inability to relate to each other as some of the most prominent reasons for the growing distance between them and their single friends. Some participants were unable to articulate exactly why marriage created a boundary between them and their single friends, but described their interactions with those friends as “different” (Madison, 24), “awkward” (Aiden, 21), or “weird” (Irene, 25) compared to how they were before marriage. This phenomenon was not identified in previous literature’s explanations for dyadic withdrawal, which focused primarily on decreases in available time and shifting emotional investments (Gerstel and Sarkisian 2006; Johnson and Leslie 1982).

Additionally, six participants mentioned that their single friends invite them out less often, which suggests a two-way feeling of disconnect. From the perspective of these participants, single friends don’t seem to think about their married friends as much once the friend has entered this new phase of life, or they assume that the married friend does not want to spend time together anymore. One barrier to going out with single friends that participants identified is the fact that married people have more restricted schedules and are less likely to be able to go out on a whim or in a spontaneous activity because “that’s not really realistic” (Madison, 24). Their single friends often know this and don’t bother to invite them out if they don’t think the married friend will be able to join them; instead, “they [only] invite me when they think I can come” (Madison, 24). However, the decrease in invitations from single friends is not only due to time constraints, but also from those single friends’ perceptions of married life. Autumn (22) tried to imagine her friends’ perspective:

I feel like my friends were way more willing to reach out to me before I got married to hang out. But now it's nearly always like I'm the one

reaching out to them if I want to hang out with them, with my single friends specifically. And so I almost wonder if because I got married they were like, 'Well she's busy 'cause she's married or...' I don't know. But it felt a little bit more like a two-way street before I got married and now it's like, if I want to hang out with them, it's a lot more one-way.

She believed that her single friends did not invite her out as much because they incorrectly assumed that she was too busy or not interested in spending time with them anymore. Five other participants shared the same sentiment, and even those who did not specifically identify that their friends invited them out less admitted that they spent less time together after marriage. This suggests that the feeling of distance due to being in different stages of life is mutual: married people struggle to connect to their single friends, and single friends also struggle to maintain their relationships with married friends.

Due to the increasing distance with their single friends, seventeen of the nineteen participants said it was easier to connect with other married people, and they sought out married or "couple" friends. Because their marriage constitutes such a significant aspect of their lives, participants found it easier to connect with other people who were married and could relate to that experience. It was refreshing for them to be able to talk to other people who understood married life and could sympathize with its highs and lows. As Ivan (22) explained,

You're just going through a similar experience, you have just a lot more similarities than people who aren't married... You just get to know them a little bit more, it's easier to make new connections with being in a similar place in life, I guess.

Similarly, Flora (21) described her relationship with one of her married friends:

I've hung out with her once or twice just to have a talk 'cause we're both recently married... And so it's nice to just talk about our feelings of inadequacy of being a wife and like, 'I'm not doing enough, blah, blah



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blah.' It's just nice to be able to confide in someone 'cause my other girlfriends are single.

These examples capture what many other respondents expressed: a feeling that it was easier to talk to married people and connect over their shared experiences.

An additional benefit of spending time with married friends instead of single friends was the avoidance of “third wheel” situations. As previously explained, participants generally preferred to spend time with their spouse and their friends at the same time. However, they were less likely to do this with single friends, who may have felt left out doing an activity with a married couple, and instead opted for double dates or group activities with other married couples. Sasha (19) explained,

Kind of like we touched on before, it's a little bit easier to invite a couple to hang out with a couple than an individual to hang out with a couple. Especially if I'm inviting somebody over to my place, it's almost a given that my husband is going to be there, and I don't want to make him feel isolated, like, 'No, you have to stay back in the backroom, because I'm hanging out with my friend right now.' So, it's a little bit more easy and less awkward to hang out with couples.

Even though participants still cared for their single friends and wanted to spend time with them, they felt less able to do so without sacrificing time with their spouse, which was a sacrifice many were not willing to make.

*Losing relationships with opposite-sex friends.* Besides seeing their friendships with single friends fade, almost all participants also reported a sharp decline in their relationships with friends of the opposite sex, supporting Mehta and Strough's (2009) finding that married adults have fewer opposite-sex friends than unmarried adults. The reasons participants gave for this difference center on the fact that opposite-sex friendships could be construed as potentially romantic. Thirteen out of the nineteen participants said it felt wrong or inappropriate to spend time one-on-one with friends of

the opposite sex after getting married. Irene (25) explained that she had several good friends who were male before she got married, but that she did not get together with them anymore. She notes: “For me personally, it just feels a little off to hang out with a guy friend alone and for long periods of time. And, I don't know, to have that individual relationship.” While she still considered these men to be her friends, her expectations for the relationship had changed. This sentiment was shared by both male and female participants. Irene’s husband Joel (22) explained,

I'll just say with all of my female friends, whereas I would have spent time with them one-on-one before, now I would not. I honestly, I wouldn't even consider that. I would maybe give them a phone call, have a phone call one-on-one, but meeting up one-on-one, I really wouldn't. I don't feel like that's appropriate, that's just my take on it.

This perceived inappropriateness of opposite-sex friendships may be, at least in part, a product of these participants’ religion. As most participants were Latter-day Saints, which is a fairly conservative religion with a heavy focus on chastity and the importance of marriage, their faith may influence their concern over avoiding any potential inappropriateness.

Notably, only three of the participants had discussed this subject with their spouse, and only one of them had a spouse who had expressed discomfort with their opposite-sex friends. Even then, the spouse did not request that the participant cut off his female friends, only that he let her know when he was texting them. All of the other participants had independently reached the conclusion that it would be culturally inappropriate to continue spending time with opposite-sex friends, and they had each changed their interactions accordingly. As Ryan (25) described the process,

I don't think that we necessarily chose to do that or did it out of an obligation because we wanted to stay ‘faithful’ to each other, we didn't

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feel like we needed to do that. It was just because socially, it just didn't seem as right to us or as comfortable to us.

Similarly, participants did not communicate new boundaries with their opposite-sex friends, instead setting their own personal boundaries and rules to follow. In many cases, this meant that communication or interaction with the friend died out without either person officially ending the relationship.

*Letting go of casual friends.* A third source of network shrinkage that participants identified was the loss of their more casual relationships. After marriage, they were more likely to let go of friendships that they saw as less significant or close. One example is Emilia (21), who claimed,

Maybe those friends that weren't necessarily as close, they have kind of gone away a little bit more just because of priorities... I wouldn't say getting rid of debris, I guess, but those friendships that weren't necessarily as strong truly proved themselves to be not the strongest relationships that I had.

To explain this shift, ten participants referenced changing priorities: they didn't feel like they needed these peripheral friends anymore. Getting married and establishing a deep relationship with their spouse gave them a new standard for relationships, and they were not as invested anymore in relationships that were not as emotionally fulfilling. Ryan (25) explained,

I would say it's helped me to filter my friends because with my wife I understand how important a relationship can be... And so because of that aspect of my marriage, I've been able to look at friendships and say, 'Hey, is this friendship helping me as an individual or is it not?' And being able to kind of filter out the ones that aren't helping me and be able to retain the ones that are.

Getting married provided participants with the mindset to focus only on their closest relationships, as well as with the excuse to step away from relationships that were not as close. Due to the significant life transition that takes place during marriage, it was easy

for participants to distance themselves from friends that they did not wish to continue spending time with.

Often participants still cared for the friends they had drifted away from, but limited time and energy demanded that they be selective about who they spend time with.

Irene (25) claimed,

It's kind of hard to balance 16 close friends. But that was my life before, I was just hopping, hopping, hopping, hopping. And so I came to the conclusion I can balance right now in my life and stay mentally sane with... maybe three or four close friends.

Irene and the other participants allotted their limited time to their spouse and closest friends, allowing the more casual friendships to fall by the wayside, even if they had enjoyed the relationship. This supports socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen 1992; Sprecher et al. 2002), suggesting that it is not only older adults that feel the need to select their most meaningful relationships to keep. Younger adults who find themselves with less time and energy to spend on relationships due to their marriage also must select the friendships that are most important to them, letting the others fade away.

#### *Maintaining Friendships through Communication*

While the marital status, gender, and closeness of friends determined in large part whether that friendship would last after participants got married, participants also identified specific actions that allowed them to maintain the friendships they still had.

The most prominent of these variables was communication with the friend on a regular basis. Lorenzo (22) explained,

“I feel like communication, like, ‘Hey, how's it going?’ And having maybe five minutes, two minutes texting back and forth, you're able to keep that up a little bit and maybe calling them once a month or so, you're able to keep those friendships. But if not, they kinda fade little by little...”

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When participants talked about losing friendships, they very rarely pointed to a specific event that ended the relationship, but rather described it as a gradual process that took place due to a lack of communication. An example of this is Sasha (19), who, when asked how her friendships ended, said, “I feel like everything happened pretty naturally and there wasn't any hard feelings, it just kind of happened over time. We just stopped texting as frequently.” Her experience is representative of the rest of the participants, who saw friendships “go down” (Emilia, 21), “dissipate” (Adele, 23), and “fade away” (Lorenzo, 22) rather than abruptly end when the participant got married. Johnson et al. (2004) attempted to find a gender difference in the means by which friendships ended and suggested that women were slightly more likely to lose friendships due to a decrease in communication and contact, but my study found no gender difference, as both men and women reported decrease in communication as the main factor for losing friendships.

On the other hand, those friendships that did not fade away were deliberately maintained through consistent communication. Madison (24) explained the effort she made to keep her friendships: “And I know on my end, I've tried to make a point of reaching out, and my friends do too, and make a point of talking.” One thing that helped several participants to maintain their important friendships was to have regular, scheduled activities that they could do together. One of these participants was Ivan (22), who had a weekly activity that he and his friends had established before he got married:

One thing I did with one of my good friends is we just play D&D together every week. So we have a set time of meeting up. And... it's just always good to know that, "Oh, I'll get to see my friend this week." And it's just good to have a little catch-up before we start. And so, I think setting up more things like that, I wish I would have done before getting married.

For Ivan, playing D&D provided him with an opportunity to see and catch up with his friends every week, which allowed him to keep those relationships strong. For other participants, classes, work, and club activities provided a similar opportunity for regular interaction. This helped avoid the loss of contact that ended many of the participants' other friendships.

### *Satisfaction with Social Life*

Participants' reported satisfaction with their social lives varied. When asked if there was anything they would change about their social networks, three male participants said they wished they had more male friends. Their social networks had come to consist primarily of female friends that they shared with their spouse, and they wanted to make more male friends, whether shared or separate.

Overall, twelve of the participants said that they were generally satisfied with their social lives, including five female and seven male participants. Three women and two men said they were unsatisfied with their social lives currently compared to how they were before marriage, and the two remaining female participants were unsure whether or not they were satisfied. Past research would suggest that participants with fewer separate friends would be more at risk for dissatisfaction with their current social state (Fiori et al. 2016), but there was no pattern in the proportion of shared and separate friends for participants who were dissatisfied compared to those that were satisfied.

## DISCUSSION

This study of recently married individuals found support for interdependence theory, as participants got to know each other's friends and saw increasing overlap in their social networks as their relationship progressed. Their experiences most closely

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match Stadfield and Pentland's (2015) first explanation of triadic closure, in which an individual meets their spouse's friends because they are engaging in social activity with their spouse. The convenience of joining together activities with one's spouse and friends leads to a combining of social networks (Kalmijn and Bernasco 2001). The participants in this study identified time constraints as a primary reason for bringing their spouse with them in social interactions: they were making the most of their limited time by spending it with their friends and spouse together rather than choosing one or the other.

My findings reinforced previous evidence that couples benefit most from having both separate and mutual friends (Fiori et al. 2016; Fiori et al. 2017; Milardo 1982; Stein et al. 1992). Participants were able to identify benefits of having shared friends, as it unified the couple and allowed them to spend more time together, but also of having separate friends, which helped them maintain their individuality and engage in activities that their spouse didn't enjoy. The reported proportion of shared and separate friends varied greatly, but in most cases, participants said that at least half of their friendships were shared with their spouse. This is in line with Chang and Fu's (2022) discovery that most married men and women in the US know at least half of their spouse's friends, and the fact that this sample is significantly younger and more recently married than Chang and Fu's sample suggests that this combining happens early on in a marriage and continues throughout.

Participants' responses also supported the dyadic withdrawal hypothesis, finding that participants' social networks shrank following marriage. Previously identified reasons for dyadic withdrawal include avoidance of other potential romantic partners, limited time and energy, and a decreased need for emotional intimacy outside of one's

romantic partner (Gerstel and Sarkisian 2006; Johnson and Leslie 1982). I found support for all three of these reasons through participants' quiet withdrawal from opposite-sex friendships and their prioritization of their spouse and close friends over their more casual friends. Unlike previous studies, however, the use of in-depth interviews allowed for an analysis of the processes behind these changes as well as more detailed explanations for withdrawal. One additional reason found for dyadic withdrawal following marriage is that newly married individuals see themselves at a different stage of life than their single friends and find it harder to relate to them as a result. Instead, married participants sought out other married people to be friends with because it was easier to connect and spend time with them. On the other hand, single friends also seemed to struggle to connect with their married friends, as participants reported being invited to spend time with single friends less frequently. This not only supports dyadic withdrawal, but also provides evidence for the reasons behind previously observed homogeneity in friendships by marital status (Kalmijn and Vermunt 2007), showing that homogeneity is due to preferences and personal comfort from both the married participants and their single friends.

Along with the reported awkwardness of interacting with single friends, participants also reported discomfort around their friendships with people of the opposite sex. They perceived it as inappropriate to spend time with opposite-sex friends after marriage and accordingly stopped doing so, without communicating this decision to either their own spouse or the friends they were cutting off. This perceived inappropriateness explains the previous finding that adults, especially married adults, are unlikely to have many opposite-sex friends (Mehta and Strough 2009). The LDS identity



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held by most participants may in part explain their extreme caution around relationships with people who could be viewed as potential romantic partners, as they would feel both a religious and cultural obligation to avoid any appearance of infidelity. Further study would benefit from comparing the perceptions of LDS participants with non-LDS participants regarding the appropriateness of opposite-sex friendships after marriage.

These interviews also revealed support for socioemotional selectivity theory in younger adults. Socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen 1992) has been used to explain why older adults withdraw from casual relationships to focus on those that are most meaningful. It posits that because older adults feel that their time is limited, they choose to only spend time on the relationships that are most fulfilling and important. Although all the participants in this study were between the ages of 19 and 26, they still felt the effects of limited time based on their obligations at work and at home, which led them to similarly prioritize their relationships, focusing on the ones they found most important.

Previous literature has been conflicted on whether or not there was a gendered difference in the occurrence of dyadic withdrawal or interdependence. I found no significant gender difference, with all but one male participant and all but one female participant experiencing a decrease in their number of friends or contact with friends following marriage. The lack of a gender distinction may be due in part to the limited sample size of this study, so further research would be needed to identify whether there are differences between men and women.

For all participants, the main reason for the loss of friendships, whether with single friends, opposite-sex friends, or casual friends, is a decrease or ceasing of

communication with those friends rather than a decision to end the relationship. Even if the communication ended abruptly after marriage, participants conceptualized the loss of the friendship as a gradual fading away. On the other hand, the friendships that endured through the transition to married life were those that participants made an effort to still see or communicate with regularly. At least from the interviewees' perspectives, communication was the most significant factor in determining whether a relationship endured or faded. A potential explanation for the importance of communication over other factors such as physical proximity is the fact that technology and social media enable most adults today to keep in touch with friends even when they do not live near each other anymore. While physical distance did make it more difficult to see their friends in person, participants did not identify that as the main reason for the friendship fading because they could still keep in touch with texting, phone calls, and other technological means of communication. It was when they stopped reaching out, whether in person or over technology, that participants believed the relationship had faded away.

Generally, the interviewees reported being satisfied with their current state of sharing friends, but if they were dissatisfied, it was always due to the desire for more separate friends. There was no difference in satisfaction with social life based on gender or on the proportion of shared and separate friends, although men were more likely to say they wanted at least one more separate friend of the same sex. However, satisfaction is a subjective measure and participants may have been influenced by a social desirability bias or a reluctance to admit that they are unsatisfied with their social lives, so it is possible that satisfaction was over- or underestimated.

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### *Limitations*

This study has several limitations. A small sample size prevents the identification of patterns based on gender, race, or ethnicity. A more broad and diverse sample would potentially reveal different patterns and be more generalizable to the overall population, as well as introduce the opportunity for comparison based on religious background, socioeconomic status, and other factors. Additionally, this study focused on a relatively young sample, so future studies could benefit from a sample that included people who were married at different ages, which may reveal different processes compared to those that were married in early adulthood. Finally, my sample only included people in different-sex marriages. There is a lack of studies examining dyadic withdrawal in same-sex couples or other family types, so research in those areas is warranted.

### CONCLUSION

The way participants described their changing social networks supports the theory of interdependence (Milardo 1982) as couples got to know each other's friends and engaged in more social activities together. Participants maintained both separate and shared friendships and identified benefits of both, reporting in most cases that they were satisfied with their current balance of separate and shared friends. The interviews provided a qualitative look into these processes and how they affected recently married individuals and couples.

Additionally, interviews found support for the dyadic withdrawal hypothesis (Kalmijn 2003). In line with previous studies, the current study found that social networks shrink after marriage as recently married individuals lose touch with single friends, opposite-sex friends, and friends that are less close (Kalmijn 2003; Johnson and

Leslie 1982). Unlike previous studies, however, these interviews identified the processes behind these patterns, including the effects of being at a different life course stage, perceptions of appropriateness, and changing priorities. The interviews also revealed that most friendships that were lost faded away due to lack of communication rather than any decision made by the participants or their friends.

This study has the benefit of examining the pattern of dyadic withdrawal specifically in young adults, and the clear presence of such withdrawal has significant implications for potential wellbeing. The participants in this study were all below the average age of marriage in the United States (Mayol-García, Gurrentz, and Kreider 2021), so they are experiencing the effects of dyadic withdrawal at a younger age than most married adults. While marriage has several benefits, including better physical health, greater overall happiness, and higher income for some men (Maasoumi, Millimet, and Sarkar 2009; Waite and Lehrer 2004), there may also be negative consequences for getting married and losing access to friendship networks at such a young age. Friendships and social ties have been found to have protective effects for both personal and marital wellbeing (Bagwell et al. 2005, Fiori et al. 2016; Fiori et al. 2017; Milardo 1982; Stein et al. 1992), so losing a large number of friendships after marriage may greatly affect individuals and their relationships. Further studies, including longitudinal studies, may reveal the consequences of losing friendships for young adults compared to those who get married at a later age.

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