

On-Again/Off-Again Dating Relationships: What Keeps Partners Coming Back?

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ABSTRACT. Building on research comparing on-again/off-again (on-off) relationships to other dating relationships, the current study focused on a unique feature of these relationships—renewals. A sample of 274 participants who had experienced an on-off relationship completed a survey about why they renewed their relationships, characteristics of their breakups and renewals, and what stressors and benefits they experienced. These characteristics were used to predict the occurrence of renewals, separately as well as in multivariate analyses. In addition to lingering feelings being a predominant reason for renewals, findings suggested uncertainty about what the preceding breakup indicated, not having dated others after breakups, and feeling the on-off nature improved the relationship were all related to an increased chance of renewals. Mutual initiations of breakups, as well as reporting uncertainty about the general nature of the relationship, were also related to a decreased chance of renewals.

Keywords: dating relationships, on-again/off-again relationships, relationship renewals, relational stability

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DATING RELATIONSHIPS ARE TYPICALLY CONCEPTUALIZED as either together or terminated (Karney, Bradbury, & Johnson, 1999). Couples, however, may repeatedly go through the process of relational development and dissolution with the same partner, or experience what is known as on-again/off-again relationships. In some studies, breaking up and renewing with the same partner were reported by as many as 40% of the samples (e.g., Cupach & Metts, 2002; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Palarea, Cohen, & Rohling, 2000). A recent study focusing on on-again/off-again relationships, found that over 60% of young adult respondents had experienced a relationship that broke up and renewed at least once, with 75% of those reporting at least two renewals with the same partner (Dailey, Pfiester, Jin, Beck & Clark, 2009, Study 1). Further, almost 40% reported that their current or most recent relationship was on-again/off-again (Dailey, Pfiester, et al., Study 2).

In addition to their prevalence, on-again/off-again (on-off) relationships entail certain differences as compared to dating relationships that have never broken up or have permanently ended (here termed non-cyclical). Reconciled relationships are characteristically different because partners have previous knowledge of each other as well as pre-established patterns of interaction (Patterson & O'Hair, 1992). In addition, on-off partners reported more negative aspects in the relationship (e.g., conflict ineffectiveness, relational uncertainty) and fewer positive aspects (e.g., relational maintenance, satisfaction, commitment) than partners from non-cyclical relationships (Dailey, Hampel, & Roberts, 2010; Dailey, Pfiester, et al., 2009).

Given these differences, we argue that the unique nature of on-off relationships warrants greater attention in theory and research regarding relational development, maintenance, and dissolution. It is important to understand why partners renew relationships, as there may be psychological and physical health consequences of repeatedly returning to an unsteady and lower quality relationship. Further, because extant relational theories do not specifically accommodate a cyclical nature in dating relationships, the current findings provide a foundation for theory-building regarding relationships with a cyclical nature as well as dating relationships in general. The current paper extends recent research to provide a broader picture of on-off relationships by focusing on features that make these relationships unique. Specifically, this paper explores why renewals occur by assessing the reasons partners reconcile and how characteristics of specific transitions (i.e., breakups and renewals) as well as general characteristics of on-off relationships are related to the occurrence of renewals.

Reasons for Relational Reconciliation

A defining feature of on-off relationships is the occurrence of at least one renewal. Most models of relational dissolution discuss the potential for reconciliation (e.g., Baxter, 1984; Conville, 1987). However, this reconciliation or negotiation takes place prior to an actual breakup and is discussed as a

preventative tactic rather than a proactive attempt to renew a previously terminated relationship. Further, whereas relational dissolution studies have assessed reasons for relational termination (e.g., Cupach & Metts, 1986; Sprecher, 1994), reasons for reconciliation have remained relatively unexplored.

A recent qualitative analysis of on-off relationships found that reasons for renewals included factors such as continued attachment, communicating more effectively, positive attributions regarding the self or partner, increased intimacy, and dissatisfaction with alternative partners (Dailey, Rossetto, Pfister, & Surra, 2009). Because the renewal reasons found in this analysis were based on a relatively small sample, and because these reasons were based on explaining increases in relational commitment rather than reconciliation, a broader assessment of reasons for renewals is needed. Hence, our first research question pertains to identifying what reasons on-off partners have for renewing their relationships (*RQ1*).

Characteristics of Transitions That May Predict Renewals

Initiation of transitions. Previous studies on relational dissolution have shown that the majority of breakups are not mutual (Sprecher, 1994; Sprecher, Felmlee, Metts, Fehr, & Vanni, 1998). Yet, on-off partners are even less likely to report a mutual decision (i.e., 15% of on-off partners, as compared to 43% of those who permanently ended their relationships, reported mutual breakups; Dailey, Pfister, et al., 2009). Because these data pertain only to the first breakup in on-off relationships, other questions regarding subsequent breakups and renewals remain. For example, if most on-off breakups are unilateral, are most renewals also initiated by one person? Are the rejected partners those who attempt reconciliation? Further, does a pattern develop across phases regarding who initiates the breakups and renewals? Our second research question thus asks whether the initiator of one relational transition is associated with the initiator of subsequent transitions (*RQ2*). We also hypothesized that renewals in on-off relationships would be more likely to occur after breakups that were unilaterally initiated (*H1*).

Impact of dating others after breakups on renewals. Research regarding interdependence theories suggests, in addition to satisfaction and investment factors, individuals tend to terminate relationships when they perceive better alternatives outside of the relationship (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). On-off partners do not report greater alternatives than do non-cyclical partners (Dailey et al., 2010), and they do not cite seeking or exploring alternatives as a factor leading to dissolution more frequently than partners whose relationships permanently ended (Dailey, Pfister, et al., 2009). However, one reason partners may renew may be a dissatisfaction with alternative partners (see Dailey, Rossetto, et al., 2009). Hence, the *experience* of these alternatives, rather than the attractiveness of alternatives, may be important in predicting renewals in on-off relationships.

Yet, dating others can be a barrier to relational quality in post-dissolution friendships (Busboom, Collins, Givertz, & Levin, 2002), which suggests dating others may decrease involvement with the former partner, and therefore, the chance for renewal. To test the role of dating others, our third research question pertains to how dating others after breakups relates to renewing with the on-off partner (*RQ3*).

Uncertainty regarding breakups. Relational uncertainty is a key feature of on-off relationships. Relationship uncertainty pertains to the questions individuals have about their relationship, including the definition, norms, and future of the relationship (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). Research regarding on-off relationships found that on-off partners report more uncertainty about the general nature of their relationships than do non-cyclical partners (Dailey et al., 2010; Dailey, Pfister, et al., 2009). More pertinent to predicting renewals, however, may be partners' uncertainty regarding specific breakup interactions. On-off partners are less certain that they are no longer dating following their first breakup as compared to non-cyclical partners' perceptions of their only breakup (Dailey, Pfister, et al., 2009). Uncertainty about breakups may occur because the partners are ambivalent about dissolving the relationship or because one partner is intentionally vague in his/her breakup strategy to leave the possibility of renewing open (Dailey, Rossetto, et al., 2009). Hence, uncertainty about what breakup interactions signify (e.g., broken up or on a break) may be one reason on-off partners renew. As such, we predicted that greater uncertainty (or less certainty) about whether the relationship has permanently dissolved is associated with a greater likelihood of renewals (*H2*).

General Characteristics of On-Again/Off-Again Relationships

Taking a more general perspective, we also wanted to understand the broader outcomes on-off relationships. Breakups can be distressing events, and the more partners are invested, satisfied, and committed to their relationships, the greater distress they experience (Frazier & Cook, 1993; Sprecher et al., 1998), particularly for the rejected partners (Sprecher, 1994). Because time does not necessarily heal all wounds of a breakup (Sprecher et al.), any lingering negativity or uncertainty of previous breakups may play a role in the nature of the relationship after reconciliations. Thus, we explored what specific stressors partners experience in on-off relationships and how these were related to the occurrence of renewals. Uncovering what on-off partners find particularly stressful would be helpful in not only understanding these relationships but also in determining which stressors are more likely to lead to permanent dissolution.

In addition, the positive outcomes related to breakups have not been widely examined. In one of the few studies to specifically assess positive outcomes, Tashiro and Frazier (2003) categorized positive characteristics of breakups

into four major factors: person, other, relational, and environmental positives. The most prevalent was relational positives (e.g., gaining relational wisdom). Individuals also report positive emotions (e.g., satisfaction, contentment) in addition to negative emotions following a breakup (Sprecher et al., 1998). Although on-off relationships may typically have a negative connotation, it is important to understand the benefits they offer and how these may facilitate renewals as well. Hence, to explore both positive and negative aspects of on-off relationships, our final research questions address what major stressors (*RQ4*) and benefits (*RQ5*) individuals in on-off relationships experience. More specific to the progression of on-off relationships, our final research question pertains to how these stressors and benefits are linked with renewals (*RQ6*).

Method

Participants

The sample included 274 undergraduate students from a larger study on dating relationships who reported having been involved in an on-off relationship, either currently or previously. Two-thirds of the sample were female ($n = 183$, 66.8%), and participants averaged 20 years of age ($M = 19.92$, $SD = 3.23$, range = 18 to 47 years). A little more than half of the sample was Caucasian ($n = 161$, 58.8%), 43 (15.7%) were Hispanic or Latino/a, 40 (14.6 %) were Asian or Pacific Islander, 17 (6.2%) were African-American or Black, 12 (4.4%) reported other or multiple ethnicities, and one declined to report ethnicity. The length of their total relationship ranged from one to 288 months, with a median and mode of 24 months ($M = 26.21$, $SD = 26.21$).

In terms of current relationship status, 60 (21.9%) reported they were not currently in the relationship and would never renew in the future, 67 (24.5%) were friends, 84 (30.7%) were dating, 21 (7.7%) were not dating but expected to renew in the future, 26 (9.5%) were uncertain whether they would renew, two (0.7%) were engaged, four (1.5%) were married, nine (3.3%) reported "other," and one person did not report current relational status. These categories were condensed into three groups: currently romantically involved ($n = 90$, 37.8%), uncertain and anticipating a renewal ($n = 47$, 17.2%), and not romantically involved ($n = 136$, 49.6%). Current relational status was not related to the number of renewals, where number of renewals was categorized as one, two, three, or four or more ($\chi^2 [df = 6, n = 270] = 5.03, p = .54$).

Procedures

Students in introductory communication courses participated in an on-line survey. An on-off relationship was defined to participants as a committed dating relationship that broke up and renewed at least once, but participants were allowed

to self-define what constituted a breakup as well as a renewal. Participants were asked to report on as many phases of their relationships as they experienced up to a third renewal. Phase was defined to participants as a cycle of their relationship including both an “on” stage and an “off” stage. Of the 274, 66 (24.4%) reported experiencing only one renewal, 81 (29.6%) reported two, and 59 (21.5%) reported three, and 64 (23.4%) reported four or more renewals.

A series of closed- and open-ended questions assessed each stage (i.e., each breakup and renewal) in participants’ relationship in chronological order. Although an initial item on the questionnaire provided the number of renewals noted above, some participants did not describe the number of phases they reported in this initial question, which resulted in different sample sizes in the analyses. To address *RQ1*, an open-ended question was used in each phase to assess reasons for renewing the relationship (i.e., “Please describe why you wanted to get back together with your partner.”). For each breakup and renewal, participants were also asked to indicate who initiated the breakups and renewals (i.e., self, partner, or mutually initiated; *RQ2*, *H1*). Participants were also asked to indicate whether or not they dated other partners after each breakup (*RQ3*). To examine *H2*, participants’ certainty about each breakup was measured with one item on a 7-point scale: “Based on the breakup interaction, how sure were you that you were no longer dating?” The means for the second ($M = 6.06$, $SD = 1.50$) and third breakups ($M = 6.19$, $SD = 1.43$) were skewed so these variables were transformed (logarithm) resulting in a range of 0.15 to 1.00 (2nd breakup: $M = 0.81$, $SD = 0.27$; 3rd breakup: $M = 0.84$, $SD = 0.26$).

After completing questions specific to each stage, participants were additionally asked open-ended questions regarding the major stressors (i.e., “For you, what are [or were] the major stressors or frustrations, if any, in experiencing an on-again/off-again relationship?”; *RQ4*) and the benefits (i.e., “For you, what are [or were] the positive outcomes, if any, in experiencing an on-again/off-again relationship?”; *RQ5*) of being in an on-off relationship. Because we assessed participants’ relationships up to the third renewal, the questionnaire ended with asking if a third renewal occurred, but we did not inquire about the third renewal episode or their perceptions of the relationship after the third renewal.

Coding Open-Ended Questions

Three of the authors and an additional research assistant coded the three open-ended questions pertinent to the current research questions. Each question was coded by a pair of coders. Responses that appeared to reflect more than one idea were unitized by the first author into thought units (13.1% of responses across all three questions); any cases in which coders believed a response should be further unitized were resolved through discussion. Coders independently read through all responses for their respective questions to develop a list of potential categories. Coders then met with the first author to discuss and create a final

coding scheme for each question. A coding manual was provided to the coders along with a coding booklet. Categories within each question were considered mutually exclusive. An initial portion (approximately 20%) of each question was coded to calculate preliminary consistency among coders (using Cohen's kappa). If consistency was initially insufficient, coders met to clarify the categories before coding the entire set of responses. Once the independent coding was complete, coders met a final time to resolve any differences in the coding.

Reasons for renewals. For each renewal reported, participants were asked to describe why they wanted to renew the relationship. A total of 605 reasons were coded across the three phases; 359 in Phase 1 (from 247 individuals), 181 in Phase 2 (from 142 individuals), and 53 in Phase 3 (from 40 individuals) with 11 coded as miscellaneous and one coded as "do not recall." A total of 13 categories were used to code the responses ($\kappa = .58$). See Table 1 for descriptions, frequencies, and examples of each category. They are presented by phase although all reasons were coded without regard for phase.

Major stressors of on-off relationships. A total of 280 thought units pertaining to major stressors were provided by 241 participants. The majority of participants reported only one stressor ($n = 205$) and 36 reported two. The responses were coded into seven categories (see Table 2) with two coded into "do not recall" and three coded as miscellaneous ($\kappa = .62$).

Benefits of on-off relationships. A total of 258 thought units pertaining to positive outcomes provided by 239 individuals were coded. Most participants only reported one benefit ($n = 223$), 14 reported two, and two reported three. These responses were coded into seven categories (see Table 3) with four being coded as miscellaneous ($\kappa = .67$).

Results

Characteristics of Renewals

Reasons for renewals (RQ1). Of the 13 categories found in the data, four were most prominent across the stages (see Table 1). *Lingering feelings* was by far the most common category cited indicating that many participants had continued feelings for their partner or missed their partner after the breakups. Another common reason was that individuals felt their partners were "the one" or there was something special or unique about their relationship. Whereas some participants missed their specific partner, others listed *missing the general companionship* provided by a partner. Similarly, many desired the *familiarity* the relationship provided.

TABLE 1. Reasons for Renewal: Number and Percentage of Participants Reporting Each Category

Reason	Phase 1 (<i>n</i> = 359)	Phase 2 (<i>n</i> = 181)	Phase 3 (<i>n</i> = 53)	Examples
Lingering feelings	116 (47.0%)	65 (45.8%)	13 (32.5%)	“Because I really loved and cared about him.” “I missed her more than I ever imagined.” “I never lost interest in her. I still believed she [was] the greatest.”
Companionship	41 (16.6%)	16 (11.3%)	3 (7.5%)	“I think I was afraid to be alone.” “I missed having someone.” “I like being in relationships. It always feels good to have someone there for you.”
Familiarity	36 (14.6%)	13 (9.2%)	5 (12.5%)	“It was a comfortable situation.” “I wanted to get back with her because it was familiar.” “It was easy to fall back into old habits.”
Partner is “the one”	32 (13.0%)	23 (16.2%)	6 (15.0%)	“Knew he was the one for me.” “It was something that time couldn’t stop, and I simply couldn’t deny. We were made for each other!” “He was my soulmate.”
Wanted it to work	25 (10.1%)	9 (6.3%)	2 (5.0%)	“I felt like we could make it work.” “Felt that we could work out whatever problems we were having.” “We wanted to try it again and see if it could work.”
Perceptions changed	20 (8.1%)	5 (3.5%)	4 (10.0%)	“Took a while to realize that she was still important.” “We both had a chance to grow during those two years, and I learned to appreciate the relationship we had.”

Partner changed	17 (6.9%)	9 (6.3%)	4 (10.0%)	<p>“He seemed like he had really changed his ways.”</p> <p>“He’s got a new job and confidence back.”</p> <p>“He apologized and convinced me that he would change.”</p> <p>“I really disliked him, but I didn’t really know any other person that I wanted to be with.”</p> <p>“No one else seemed to compare to him and all the other relationships were very empty feeling.”</p> <p>“Believed I wouldn’t meet someone else like him.”</p> <p>“Realized I made a mistake.”</p> <p>“I felt like I made a decision out of anger and that the reason I broke up with him wasn’t a good one.”</p> <p>“I didn’t really want to get back with her.”</p> <p>“I felt bad for dumping him because he was so good to me.”</p> <p>“It was just difficult to walk away because we had been through many good times & memorable experiences together.”</p> <p>“Very emotionally invested.”</p> <p>“As the fall semester came around, we began to get back on similar schedules.”</p> <p>“I happened to move to where he was.”</p> <p>“I never wanted to break up in the first place.”</p> <p>“Even though he hurt me really badly, I didn’t WANT to break up, I didn’t want to be single.”</p>
No better alternatives	16 (6.5%)	4 (2.8%)	4 (10.0%)	
Breakup was a mistake	16 (6.5%)	5 (3.5%)	3 (7.5%)	
Sympathy for partner	14 (5.7%)	15 (10.6%)	5 (12.5%)	
Investment	10 (3.6%)	9 (6.3%)	3 (7.5%)	
Reduced barriers	9 (3.6%)	2 (1.4%)	–	
Didn’t want breakup	7 (2.8%)	5 (3.5%)	1 (2.5%)	

TABLE 2. Major Stressors of On-off Relationships: Number and Percentage of Participants Reporting Each Category

Stressor	Frequency	Examples
Doubt or disappointment	79 (32.8%)	"I am always disappointed at myself for being weak." "Each time, you think it'll be different, but when it ends, you just feel stupid, like you should've seen it coming again." "It is frustrating to always think that the other person will change, and yet they never do." "The fact that the trust had left after the first time, it was really hard to get things back to the way they used to be"
Emotional frustration	75 (31.1%)	"Emotional rollercoaster with the ups and downs and breaking up and getting back together." "It is emotionally exhausting for both people." "The major frustrations about experiencing this is just that takes your mind away and [you] can't concentrate. You think about the person when they are not even thinking about you."
Uncertainty of relational status	72 (30.0%)	"A big major stressor was the uncertainty. I wasn't even sure myself if we were really broken up or not." "Not knowing whether we were completely not dating, if it was okay to date someone else in that time." "The not being in control, the unknown of what was going to happen."
Ambivalence	29 (12.0%)	"Inconsistency. You care about the person, but you can't get along with them. You don't want anyone else, but that person isn't really a good partner at the time. When you break up with them, you miss them. When you get back with them, sometimes things don't change." "The same sort of excitement that was intoxicating at the beginning ended up being stressful in the long run."

(table continues)

TABLE 2. (Cont.)

Stressor	Frequency	Examples
Third party or external forces	12 (5.0%)	"I was continually guilt-ridden because I shouldn't be with him according to my friends and my parents." "I felt that other people viewed our relationship as a joke. People were less sympathetic when we broke up." "I hated the long distance issue of it."
None/minimal	5 (2.1%)	"My relationship was not particularly stressful." "There weren't really any."
Unbalanced expectations	3 (1.2%)	"Him being indifferent, non committal, me wanting more than he would give."

TABLE 3. Benefits of On-Off Relationships: Number and Percentage of Participants Reporting Each Category

Benefits	Frequency	Examples
Future relationship knowledge	57 (23.8%)	"I learned more about what I want from a relationship." "I learned that I *must* have a lot in common with my partner in order for us to really connect and last a long time." "I knew what I didn't want in a partner when I came out of it. More importantly, I knew how I wanted to be treated."
New perspective about relationship or partner	47 (19.7%)	"It gave us both a chance to see what else is out there and realized that no matter what we still want to be with each other." "Sometimes if you aren't sure about yourself or the relationship, some time apart may help you figure things out, while not wasting your partner's time."

(table continues)

TABLE 3. (Cont.)

Benefits	Frequency	Examples
Learn about/improve current relationship	40 (16.7%)	“Developing a strong base of trust and friendship, realizing that we can make it through anything, and really giving us the time necessary to understand that we really wanted to be together.” “We have experienced the best and worst of each other and made it work.”
Learn about self or self-enrichment	40 (16.7%)	“I learned more about myself and I learned that its ok to be alone. I also know what its like to truly love someone more than yourself.” “I became secure in myself. Knowing that I could make it with him or without him. I am a strong person, and I know that being on the verge made me much stronger.”
None/minimal	32 (13.9%)	“No positive outcomes. We never resolved anything and it was just a circle that we kept looping on.” “Nothing really, except the feeling you get when you first get back together because you missed each other so much.”
Open relationship/chance to explore alternatives	22 (9.2%)	“I got a chance to see what else was out there for me.” “I knew I could always fall back on my ex-boyfriend.” “I’m able to experience other things, have fun and not worry about ‘what my boyfriend thinks’ or ‘what my boyfriend will let me do’. I’m very unconstrained yet I get many of the same benefits of an official relationship.”
Familiarity/comfort	16 (6.7%)	“Just that its familiar and you already know that person. So its comforting.” “Every time we got back together it was like we never were apart. It was like having a best friend back.”

In this category, individuals noted that they liked the comfort of the relationship and that it was easy to fall back into old patterns. Although less prevalent, additional categories reflected less desire for the specific relationship such as having *no better alternatives* and having *sympathy for the partner*.

Certain categories found in the current study (e.g., *missing the partner*, *partner changed*, *no better alternatives*, *wanting the relationship to work*) align with reasons found in Dailey, Rossetto, et al.'s (2009) qualitative analysis (e.g., *lingering feelings*, *positive attributions*, *dissatisfaction with alternative partners*, and *renewed effort*, respectively). The current assessment also expands our understanding of why partners renew relationships. Reasons such as *familiarity*, *believing the relationship was "the one,"* and having *sympathy for the partner* were not found previously. Other categories also showed that some partners believed the breakup should not have occurred (i.e., *breakup was a mistake*, *did not want the relationship to end*).

Initiators of Relational Transitions

Although few dissolutions were mutual (16.5%, 21.9%, and 17.6% for the first, second, and third breakups respectively), almost half of renewals were mutual (47% and 45% for the first and second renewals respectively). We conducted chi-square analyses to determine if associations existed between who initiated the breakups and who initiated the renewals across the three phases (RQ2). For each transition, we assessed three possible initiations: by the participant, by the partner, or mutually initiated. In general, the person who dissolved the relationship at one phase tended to be the person who dissolved the relationship at the subsequent phase. Specifically, the initiator of the first breakup was more likely to be the initiator of the second breakup ($\chi^2 [df = 4, n = 174] = 15.10, p < .01$; Cramer's $V = .21$). Of the participants who said they initiated the first breakup, 60.0% also initiated the second breakup; when participants reported their partners initiated the first breakup, 44.6% were initiated by the partner in the second breakup; and when participants reported the first breakup was mutual, 35.7% were mutual in the second breakup. Also, the initiator of the second breakup tended to be the initiator of the third breakup ($\chi^2 [df = 4, n = 65] = 10.78, p < .05$; Cramer's $V = .29$), particularly when the participants dissolved the relationship. When participants reported they initiated the second breakup, 73.5% reported also initiating the third breakup; when partners initiated the second breakup, 31.8% of the third breakups were initiated by the partner; and when the second breakup was mutual, 22.2% of the third breakups were mutual.

A similar relationship was true for renewal initiations. Those who initiated the renewal after the first breakup were more likely to initiate the renewal after the second breakup ($\chi^2 [df = 4, n = 95] = 25.45, p < .01$; Cramer's $V = .37$); when the first renewal was initiated by the participant, 53.8% of the second renewals were also initiated by the participant, when the partner initiated the first renewal,

54.8% of the second renewals were also initiated by the partner, and when the first renewal was mutual, 60.0% of the second renewals were also mutual. (The initiator of a third renewal was not assessed.)

Additional chi-square analyses assessed the relationships between the initiator of one transition (e.g., first breakup) and the initiator of the immediately following transition (e.g., first renewal). None of these relationships, however, were significant ($\chi^2_s [df = 4] < 6.16, p_s > .18$). Together, these findings suggest that, at least from the participants' perspectives, partners tended to play the same role across the progression of these relationships: partners tended to either initiate dissolutions or initiate renewals.

H1 proposed that mutually initiated breakups would be less likely to result in renewals as compared to unilateral breakups. The first renewal was not assessed given that all on-off partners by definition renewed after the first breakup regardless of who initiated the breakup. Supporting the hypothesis, a second renewal was less likely to occur if the previous breakup was mutual (32.5% as compared to initiated by the participant (57.8%) or the partner (60.4%) ($\chi^2 [df = 2, n = 183] = 8.73, p < .05$; Cramer's $V = .22$). A third renewal was also less likely to occur if the previous breakup was initiated by the participant (33.3%) or was mutual (50.0%) as compared to initiated by the partner (81.8%) ($\chi^2 [df = 2, n = 60] = 8.27, p < .05$; Cramer's $V = .37$).

The Role of Dating After Breakups

We conducted chi-square analyses to determine if the act of dating other people was associated with the likelihood of on-off partners renewing their relationship in subsequent stages (*RQ3*). Again, the first breakup period was not assessed, given that all on-off partners renewed after the first breakup. For the second breakup period, if participants dated another partner, they were less likely to renew than those who did not date (40.0% vs. 65.7%, respectively), ($\chi^2 [df = 1, n = 190] = 12.51, p < .01$; Cramer's $V = .26$). The same was true for the third breakup period (28.1% vs. 62.5%, respectively) ($\chi^2 [df = 1, n = 64] = 7.63, p < .01$; Cramer's $V = .35$). Hence, dating alternative partners appears to decrease the likelihood of renewing with a former partner.

Uncertainty Regarding Breakups

The second hypothesis predicted that greater uncertainty (i.e., less certainty) about breakups would be related to a greater likelihood of renewals. We employed ANOVAs to assess whether those who renewed a second and third time were more certain that a breakup had occurred. The transformed versions of the certainty variables were used in the analyses, and we controlled for current relational status (i.e., whether they were currently together, currently broken up, or uncertain about their status). Those who renewed had less certainty that they were no longer dating

after the second breakup ($F [1, 188] = 4.36, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .02$). Those who renewed reported less certainty about the breakup ($M = 0.76, SD = 0.28$) than those who did not renew ($M = 0.87, SD = 0.23$). Although the means in certainty following the third breakup exhibited a similar trend for the third renewal, they did not significantly differ ($F [1, 61] = 1.31, p = .26, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .02$).

General Relationship Characteristics

Major stressors (RQ4). Six categories were found in the data regarding stressors related to on-off relationships in addition to a *none or minimal* category (see Table 2). Three were most prominent, each noted by almost a third of participants: *doubt/disappointment* in themselves, their partner, or their relationship, *emotional frustration*, and *uncertainty about relational status*. These stressors are related in that they reflect the cognitive and emotional distress that on-off relationships can present. Of the 241 individuals who responded to this question, including those who explicitly reported no stressors, 205 (85.1%) noted at least one of these three stressors. Other stressors noted include *ambivalence*, *third party or external influences*, and *unbalanced expectations*. Ambivalence reflects partners having contradictory feelings about the relationship; for example, some noted caring about the person who also causes them frustration. A few partners reported the influence of friends, family members, or geographic distances as well as the impact the on-off relationship had on their social network. The least prevalent category pertained to partners having different expectations about the relationship.

Benefits (RQ5). Six categories of benefits were found in addition to a *none or minimal* category (see Table 3). A little more than a third of participants noted that the on-off nature of their relationship *helped or improved their relationship* or gave them a *new appreciation* for their partner or relationship. Similar to Dailey, Rossetto, and colleagues (2009) who found that individuals sometimes reported that the breakup improved the relationship, some individuals in the current study also noted that they gained a different perspective about their partner or that the breakup(s) allowed partners a chance to better appreciate what they had. Further, some also noted that having struggled through breakups and renewals reflected the strength of their relationship. Thus, for some individuals, the cycling nature was reportedly beneficial to their relationships.

Many on-off partners, however, reported benefits that were general lessons learned. The most frequent category pertained to learning what they wanted in relationships (i.e., *future relationship knowledge*); others noted the experience of an on-off relationship made them a stronger person (i.e., *self-enrichment*). These resemble Tashiro and Frazier's (2003) categories of relational and person positives, respectively. A few also reported the on-off relationship provided a certain

security. Some felt comfort in resuming a relationship in which the patterns were already established (i.e., *familiarity/comfort*), and some liked knowing they could return to the relationship if other relationships did not work out (i.e., *open relationship*). A perhaps important comparison of the stressors and benefits shows that more participants explicitly stated none or minimal benefits (13.9%) as compared to none or minimal major stressors (2.1%).

General characteristics and occurrence of renewals (RQ6). The more prevalent stressors (i.e., uncertainty, doubt/disappointment, and emotional frustration) and benefits (i.e., new appreciation, self-enrichment, current relationship improvement, and future relationship knowledge) were assessed in relation to the occurrence of second and third renewals. Dichotomous variables were created to reflect whether the participant had indicated these categories (1) or not (0). These variables were assessed in relation to whether participants had renewed (1) or not (0) for the second and third phases.

In terms of the stressors, those cited relational uncertainty were less likely to renew a second time than those who did not report uncertainty (20.4% vs. 43.7%, respectively) ($\chi^2 [df = 1, n = 188] = 11.95, p < .01$; Cramer's $V = .25$). This is in contrast to the earlier finding that uncertainty about specific breakups was more likely to lead to renewals. In addition, those who reported emotional frustration were *more* likely to renew a second time as compared to those who did not report frustration (38.8% vs. 23.3%, respectively) ($\chi^2 [df = 1, n = 188] = 5.48, p < .02$; Cramer's $V = .17$). Occurrence of a second renewal did not vary by doubt/disappointment ($\chi^2 [df = 1, n = 188] = 0.50, p = .48$; Cramer's $V = .05$). Further, occurrence of a third renewal did not vary by any of the prevalent stressors ($\chi^2_s [df = 1, n_s = 63] < 0.40, p_s > .52$).

In terms of positive outcomes, those who cited future relationship knowledge were less likely to renew a second time as compared to those who did not report this benefit (21.6% vs. 36.0%, respectively) ($\chi^2 [df = 1, n = 188] = 4.83, p < .05$; Cramer's $V = .16$). In addition, those who cited current relationship improvement were more likely to renew a second time as compared to those who did not cite this benefit (19.6% vs. 2.3%, respectively) ($\chi^2 [df = 1, n = 188] = 13.49, p < .01$; Cramer's $V = .27$). Those reporting a new appreciation were also more likely to renew a second time as compared to those who did not report a new appreciation (21.6% vs. 11.6%, respectively), although this only approached significance ($\chi^2 [df = 1, n = 188] = 3.27, p = .07$; Cramer's $V = .13$). Occurrence of a third renewal only varied by current relationship improvement: similar to the second renewal, those who cited this benefit were more likely to renew (27.6% vs. 5.9%) ($\chi^2 [df = 1, n = 63] = 5.52, p < .05$; Cramer's $V = .30$). No other positive outcomes were associated with a third renewal ($\chi^2_s [df = 1, n_s = 63] < 1.08, p_s > .30$).

Multivariate Analyses Predicting Renewals

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of what leads to renewals, we employed logistic regressions. All participants had renewed at least one time, and thus no analyses were conducted for the first renewal. For the second and third renewals, the dependent variables were the dichotomous variables denoting whether participants renewed at that phase or not (no = 0, yes = 1). Predictors were based on the predominant factors found in the current analyses. General factors included the three most prevalent stressors and the four most prevalent benefits (see above). We again used the dichotomous variables reflecting whether the participant had reported the category or not. In addition, variables related to the most recent breakup were included: whether they dated other partners after the breakup (no = 0, yes = 1), who initiated the previous breakup (self was the reference category for both partner initiation and mutual renewals), and their certainty of no longer dating after the breakup (the transformed continuous variable). The reasons from *RQI* could not be included as these were reported by only those who renewed.

Table 4 provides the logistic regression results for both the second and third renewals. Those who dated other partners were three times less likely to renew after the second breakup and eight times less likely to renew after the third breakup. In terms of previous breakup initiation, participants were four times less likely to renew when the second breakup was mutually initiated but almost 17 times more likely to renew a third time if their partner had initiated the third breakup. In addition, as participants were more certain that they were no longer dating after the breakup, they were less likely to renew; for every unit of increase in certainty, partners were three times less likely to renew. More generally, those noting the stressor of uncertainty were almost three times as unlikely to renew, yet conversely those reporting the stressor of emotional frustration were twice as likely to renew a second time (although the latter only approached significance). In terms of benefits, those noting a new perspective of the partner or the relationship (although this only approached significance) were almost three times as likely to renew a second time, and those who noted that the on-off nature had improved their relationship were 21 times as likely to renew a second time.

For the second renewal, factors both specific to each transition and general stressors or benefits were related to the likelihood of breakups and renewals. As such, general characteristics of on-off relationships as well as proximal factors should be assessed to more fully understand the cyclical nature of these relationships. The few significant predictors for the third renewal, however, could indicate that more proximal characteristics are stronger determinants of later renewals or that the sample size provided less power to detect the role of general factors.

TABLE 4. Logistic Regressions Predicting the Second and Third Renewals

Predictors	Second renewal			Third renewal		
	B (SE)	Wald	Exp (B)	B (SE)	Wald	Exp (B)
Previous breakup initiation overall		10.95**			7.18*	
Previous breakup initiation: self (0) vs. partner (1)	0.35 (0.45)	0.62	1.43	2.82 (1.06)	7.05**	16.83
Previous breakup initiation: self (0) vs. mutual (1)	-1.42 (0.50)	7.94**	0.24	-0.29 (1.00)	0.08	0.75
Certainty of no longer dating after breakup	-1.97 (0.74)	7.19**	0.34	1.23 (1.86)	0.44	3.42
Dated others after breakup: no (0) vs. yes (1)	-1.07 (0.38)	7.83**	0.14	-2.13 (0.76)	7.78**	0.12
Relational uncertainty: no (0) vs. yes (1)	-0.98 (0.49)	3.92*	0.38	0.20 (1.06)	0.04	1.22
Doubt/disappointment: no (0) vs. yes (1)	0.44 (0.47)	0.87	1.55	-0.25 (0.90)	0.08	0.78
Emotional frustration: no (0) vs. yes (1)	0.80 (0.47)	2.84 [†]	2.22	0.86 (1.04)	0.85	2.61
New perspective/appreciation: no (0) vs. yes (1)	1.00 (0.55)	3.30 [†]	2.72	0.18 (1.00)	0.03	1.20
Self-enrichment: no (0) vs. yes (1)	0.51 (0.49)	1.11	1.67	0.89 (0.83)	1.14	2.44
Current relationship improvement: no (0) vs. yes (1)	3.04 (0.87)	12.13**	20.96	2.01 (1.36)	2.19	7.44
Future relationship knowledge: no (0) vs. yes (1)	-0.26 (0.46)	0.31	0.77	0.09 (0.95)	0.01	1.10
Constant	1.82 (0.82)	4.95*	6.17	-1.45 (2.21)	0.43	0.24

Note. [†] $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. For predicting the second renewal ($n = 174$): Omnibus test $\chi^2(11) = 64.62$, $p < .01$; Hosmer and Lemeshow $\chi^2(8) = 10.61$, $p = .225$; Cox and Snell $R^2 = .31$. For predicting the third renewal ($n = 58$): Omnibus test $\chi^2(11) = 23.78$, $p < .05$; Hosmer and Lemeshow $\chi^2(7) = 4.09$, $p = .770$; Cox and Snell $R^2 = .34$.

Discussion

Building on the extant research that has assessed differences between on-off and non-cyclical relationships (Dailey et al., 2010; Dailey, Pfister, et al., 2009), the current study focuses on the unique features of these relationships. In particular, we assessed reasons for renewals, characteristics of specific transitions (e.g., who initiated transitions, dating after breakups), and general characteristics of on-off relationships (i.e., stressors and benefits). An additional purpose of this study was to identify predictors of renewals. Specifically, mutual breakups, dating others after breakups, and the on-off nature of the relationship eliciting general relational uncertainty or future relationship knowledge were related to decreased chances of renewing. Conversely, less certainty about what breakup interactions indicated as well as the on-off nature eliciting emotional frustration, relationship improvement, or a new appreciation of the relationship were associated with increased chances of renewal. Together, these findings provide an understanding of why partners renew previously terminated relationships.

Perhaps not surprisingly, a predominant reason for renewals may pertain to lingering feelings or a continued attachment to the partner. Almost half of the participants noted having missed their partner, still loving their partner, or feeling they could not be without their partner. These reasons suggest certain romantic beliefs, such as believing love overcomes any obstacles and that there is only one true partner for him/her (see Sprecher & Metts, 1999), may play a role in renewals. On-off relationships may also be similar to event-driven couples (Surra & Hughes, 1997) who tend to have relatively high levels of love and involvement in their relationships despite greater fluctuations in commitment, lower satisfaction, and greater conflict. Hence, continued feelings for their partners may draw some back to the relationship even if they are unable to manage the communication or behavior problems that led to previous dissolutions.

In addition, certain benefits related to on-off relationships predicted the likelihood of renewals. For example, renewals were more likely when the on-off nature yielded a new perspective of the relationship or improved the current relationship. This complements Dailey, Rossetto, et al.'s (2009) finding that breakups sometimes improved the quality of the relationship. In addition, and perhaps counter-intuitively, experiencing the general stressor of emotional frustration was related to a greater chance of a second renewal. This may reflect the negative association between the number of transitions and relational quality (Dailey, Pfister, et al., 2009, Study 2). Relatedly, if on-off relationships resemble event-driven couples (see Surra & Hughes, 1997), this emotional frustration may represent the correlates (e.g., greater conflict and negativity, less satisfaction) of their fluctuating relational trajectory. In other words, emotional frustration may be an indication, rather than a reason, of multiple renewals. For some, the emotional frustration may stem from isolated events in the relationship (rather than a general feeling about the relationship); and these events may induce an impulsive

termination, which lead to a subsequent renewal. Alternatively, partners who cite emotional frustration may have a greater commitment to the relationship and renew to regain investments lost despite the emotional toll the relationship causes.

On-off partners may also return primarily because their partners initiate a renewal when they have no better options (e.g., no alternative partners, do not want to be alone). Given that approximately half of the renewals were initiated unilaterally, some partners may yield to their partner's reconciliation attempt not because they intensely desire to be back together with the partner, but because they wanted the general companionship or the familiarity of the previous relationship. Although we could not directly test this with the current data, this supposition is corroborated by the impact of dating others on the likelihood of renewals. Dating after breakups was a significant, negative predictor of renewals even when controlling for other factors. As such, individuals may become less interested or invested in their previous romantic relationships once they form new romantic relationships (see also Busboom et al., 2002). Hence, in the absence of another relationship, partners may be more willing to reconcile with a former partner even if they do not have strong feelings for the other. These finding also suggest that, although Dailey, Rossetto, et al. (2009) concluded that some partners renewed relationships after dissatisfying experiences with alternatives, this factor may occur only for a minority of renewals.

More generally, these data may suggest an imbalance of interest in some on-off couples, which may also partially explain why partners tend to play the same role across relational transitions. Those who dissolved the relationship once were more likely to initiate dissolution in a subsequent phase, and a similar pattern was found for renewal initiations. Thus, for some couples, one partner may initiate renewals when a breakup occurs, and the other partner may yield to these attempts if no better options have emerged. Yet, these latter partners may later break off the relationship, perhaps repeatedly, because they have less interest in the relationship. Because partners with the least interest likely have more power in their post-dissolution relationships (Foley & Fraser, 1998), individuals who yield to their partner's renewal attempt may have more power in the progression of on-off relationships. As such, the roles partners assume may be driving the cyclical process for some couples.

The current data also provide a more specific understanding of the role relational uncertainty plays in on-off relationships. Similar to Dailey, Rossetto, and colleagues' (2009) findings, uncertainty of relational status emerged as one of the predominant stressors of on-off relationships. Experiencing this stressor was also related to a decreased chance of renewing a second time. Yet, conversely, greater *certainty* about the preceding breakup episode was related to a decreased chance of renewing. Hence, greater uncertainty about what specific breakups indicate may facilitate renewals, whereas more uncertainty about the general nature of the relationship may inhibit renewals. Given that general relationship uncertainty in on-off partners' post-dissolution relationships (i.e., the "off" stage) was related to

greater commitment to the relationship (Dailey et al., 2010), additional research is needed regarding how uncertainty about specific interactions as well as the general nature of the relationship may operate differently depending on the stage of the relationship.

Although the focus of this study is on predicting renewals, the data conversely provide insights on what factors may lead to permanent dissolution. In addition to dating others after breakups and having greater uncertainty about the relationship in general, mutual breakups appear to facilitate more enduring dissolutions. If both partners are in agreement that the relationship has run its course or that difficulties cannot be resolved, dissolutions appear more stable. This closure could also be reflected in the general benefit regarding future relationship knowledge, which was related to a decreased likelihood of renewing. Partners reporting that the on-off relationship provided them with general knowledge about what they prefer, or would like to avoid, in romantic relationships may have less interest in working on the on-off relationship and more interest in moving forward to other relationships.

The current data also suggest several avenues of future research regarding on-off relationships such as assessing power differences (i.e., dependence, lesser interest), the interplay between general relational uncertainty and uncertainty about specific transitions, and how stressors such as emotional frustration contribute to an increased chance of renewal. In addition, to more fully understand on-off relationships, future research should explore the nature of the post-dissolution/pre-renewal phases in on-off relationships. Examining how on-off partners define and negotiate their post-dissolution relationships as well as how much and what types of interaction partners have during these interim periods between breakups and renewals would be beneficial. Because on-off relationships are prevalent, at least among young adults (Dailey et al., 2010; Dailey, Pfister, et al., 2009), a greater understanding of these relationships will provide a greater understanding of dating relationships more generally.

Limitations

In the current study, we used a broad definition of on-off relationships including all relationships that had broken up and renewed at least once. Although previous data suggest number of renewals was negatively associated with relational quality (Dailey, Pfister, et al., 2009, Study 2), the current analyses did not assess differences based on partners' number of relational status transitions. Most analyses also did not distinguish current from past on-off relationships. In addition, we allowed participants to self-define breakup and renewal, but the experiences of these transitions may have varied widely. More generally, although different types of on-off relationships may exist, they were not distinguished here. The current sample also consisted of college students primarily between the ages

of 18 and 22; hence, a wider age range would be beneficial in determining whether the nature of on-off relationships varies by life stage.

Participants were also asked to provide retrospective reports of their relationships, and responses are thus subject to recall bias. Although Dailey, Pfiester, et al. (2009) suggested on-off partners' responses were not biased by relational status (i.e., whether currently together or not), self-presentation issues may have shaped participant responses in the current analyses. Further, additional research with larger sample sizes is needed to corroborate the current findings, specifically regarding the occurrence of three or more renewals. In particular, longitudinal assessments would provide partners' contemporaneous experiences of the multiple relational transitions, and thus, a greater understanding of the progression of breakups and renewals. In addition, assessing both partners' experiences in these relationships would be beneficial.

Many of the research questions entailed analysis of open-ended responses, which resulted in numerous dichotomous variables reflecting whether participants reported each category or not. These variables necessitated numerous statistical tests and did not reflect the variation that is likely experienced by partners in on-off relationships. Creating scales to quantitatively assess such aspects as stressors, benefits, reasons for renewals would provide a more nuanced understanding of these factors as well as how they are associated with relational characteristics such as uncertainty and satisfaction. In addition, although the larger survey tried to minimize fatigue effects, some missing data resulted towards the end of the survey which particularly impacted the data regarding the third renewal. Hence, more focused surveys with greater sample sizes are needed to substantiate the current results.

Although research has provided an extensive understanding of the progression of dating relationships, little attention has been paid to relationships that breakup and renew, or in other words, on-again/off-again (on-off) relationships. Extending on recent research comparing on-off and non-cyclical relationships (Dailey et al., 2010; Dailey, Pfiester, et al., 2009), the current analyses focused on a unique feature of these relationships—the renewals. Overall, analyses showed that general stressors (e.g., uncertainty about the nature of the relationship) and benefits (e.g., the on-off nature improved the relationship) as well as characteristics associated with specific transitions (e.g., dating others after breakups, mutual initiations of the preceding breakup) predicted renewals. These findings, in combination with previous analyses regarding on-off relationships, provide a more detailed picture of these relationships from which more theoretically guided questions can be constructed and tested.

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