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Perceived general similarity and relationship satisfaction: The role of attributional confidence

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Abstract

Even though many studies have examined the link between individuals' perceived general similarity to their romantic partners and their own relationship satisfaction, there are not many studies focusing on the impact of perceived general similarity reported by the partner. The present work uncovers the potential mediating roles of one's and the partner's attributional confidence in the effects of one's and the partner's perceived general similarity on relationship satisfaction. To investigate the mechanisms, two studies were conducted at individual and dyadic levels. A total of 395 individuals (51.4% female) aged 17–67 (M = 22.06, SD = 4.68) in unmarried opposite-gender relationships were recruited in Study 1 and 227 unmarried opposite-gender couples were employed in Study 2. Across two studies, the indirect effect of perceived general similarity on relationship satisfaction via attributional confidence was significant. In particular, the actor effects of perceived general similarity on relationship satisfaction were mediated by the actor effects of attributional confidence. Moreover, the partner effects of perceived general similarity on relationship satisfaction were mediated by partner attributional confidence (i.e., one's partner's perceived general similarity on one's relationship satisfaction via one's partner's attributional confidence). The present findings shed light on the mechanisms through which perceived general similarity fosters relationship satisfaction among opposite-gender relationships.

KEYWORDS
actor–partner interdependence mediation model, attributional confidence, perceived similarity, relationship satisfaction

1 | INTRODUCTION

Scholars have long been interested in identifying factors promoting relationship satisfaction among romantic couples. A satisfying romantic relationship can contribute to better physical and mental health and greater longevity (Be et al., 2013; Holden et al., 2023; Whisman et al., 2018). Past studies have documented the impact of perceived couple similarity in various dimensions (e.g., religion, interest, behaviours) on romantic partners' relationship satisfaction (Lutz-Zois et al., 2006; Ohadi et al., 2018). Nonetheless, the indirect effect through which perceived general similarity influences relationship satisfaction has been less understood. Furthermore, little research has investigated the effect of the partner's perceived general similarity on one's relationship satisfaction and the mechanisms underlying this association. To

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bridge these research gaps, two studies were conducted. Study 1 aims to look into the potential mediating role of attributional confidence in the association between perceived general similarity and relationship satisfaction among individuals involved in unmarried opposite-gender relationships. Study 2 aims to investigate the effects of one's and the partner's perceived general similarity on relationship satisfaction and the possible mediating effects of one's and the partner's attributional confidence among unmarried opposite-gender couples.

1.1 | The effects of perceived general similarity on relationship satisfaction

Perceived similarity refers to the extent to which one believes oneself similar to another, irrespective of actual similarity (Montoya et al., 2008; Sprecher, 2014). The similarity-attraction effect (Byrne, 1969; Byrne & Griffitt, 1966) suggests that higher similarity with a target is related to greater attraction to the target (Montoya & Horton, 2013). This effect has also applied to existing relationships such as dating and married relationships (Gonzaga et al., 2007; Gonzaga et al., 2007). A study interviewing 41 dyads (i.e., 27 friendships and 14 romantic relationships) indicated that the perception of similarity resulted in effective and comfortable communication, pleasure and the ability to provide suitable support (Baxter & West, 2003). People who place importance on similarity in some dimensions (e.g., interests, religion and attitudes) will feel more satisfied with their relationships if they perceive that they are similar to their partners in those dimensions (Lutz-Zois et al., 2006).

Couple similarities vary across different features (Luo, 2017). For instance, romantic couples are strongly similar in demographic variables and attitudes (e.g., Schwartz & Graf, 2009; Watson et al., 2014), moderately similar in values, intelligence, interests and mental well-being (e.g., Hoppmann et al., 2011; Van Leeuwen et al., 2008) and weakly similar in physical characteristics and personality (e.g., Di Castelnuovo et al., 2008; Luo, 2009). Furler et al. (2014) found non-significant effects of perceived similarity in personality on relationship satisfaction after controlling for self- and partner-reported personality of both partners. Past studies have shown weak effects of actual personality similarity on satisfaction in couples (Dyrenforth et al., 2010; Weidmann et al., 2016). Political and religious attitudes in stable couples are more similar than in dissolved couples, whereas there are no differences in actual similarities in major personality traits between these two groups (Bleske-Rechek et al., 2009), suggesting that the effects of similarity hinge on the domains of commonality.

Although both actual and perceived similarity have been found to predict relationship satisfaction and adjustment (Decuyper et al., 2018; Murstein & Beck, 1972), studies have revealed the positive effect of perceived similarity on relationship satisfaction even without significant actual similarity effects, suggesting that the influence of perceived similarity surpasses actual similarity (Acitelli et al., 1993; Levinger & Breedlove, 1966). A meta-analysis by Montoya et al. (2008) found that interpersonal attraction was linked to both actual similarity and perceived similarity. Furthermore, the effect of actual similarity on attraction was large in no-interaction studies, smaller in short-interaction studies and non-significant in existing relationship studies, while perceived similarity in specific attributes (i.e., either personality traits or attitudes) presented a strong effect throughout no-interaction, short-interaction and existing relationship studies. Montoya et al. (2008) ascribed the difference in effects between actual and perceived similarity to the combined impacts of cognitive bias (Sillars, 1985), self-esteem maintaining forces (Ross et al., 1977) and beliefs in similarity to spouse (Morry, 2005). Perceived general similarity has shown stronger effects on romantic outcomes (e.g., attraction) compared with actual similarity or trait-specific perceived similarity such as physical attractiveness and career prospects (Tidwell et al., 2013). Given the prior evidence for the contribution of perceived similarity in terms of behaviours, religion and interests to relationship satisfaction (Acitelli et al., 1993; Lutz-Zois et al., 2006; Ohadi et al., 2018), this study hypothesizes that perceived general similarity would positively predict relationship satisfaction.

Preceding research has principally measured perceived similarity by calculating specific similarity or asking participants to indicate their general levels of similarity. For example, some researchers have calculated perceptual similarity in specific attributes by comparing individuals' self-ratings with their ratings of their partners, whereas other researchers have used some nonspecific items such as 'personality similar to mine' (McCroskey et al., 1975) to provide a rapid and holistic measure of perceived general similarity (Tidwell et al., 2013). This study measured perceived general similarity to the partner using a scale comprised of similarities in attitudes and values and overall similarity (Parks & Adelman, 1983).

A past study revealed that couples with higher actual similarity in relationship standards tended to engage in more constructive communication, which in turn was related to greater marital satisfaction (Chi et al., 2013). Anxiety/uncertainty management theory assumes that anxiety/uncertainty management directly impacts the effectiveness of communication in interpersonal relationships (Gao & Gudykunst, 1990; Gudykunst, 1988). Attributional confidence, the inverse of uncertainty, is positively associated with perceived effectiveness of communication (Gudykunst & Nishida, 2001). Despite past evidence that communication patterns can mediate the association between actual similarity in relationship standards and marital satisfaction, whether attributional confidence accounts for the link between perceived general similarity and relationship satisfaction has not been scrutinized. The current research seeks to further the literature by scrutinizing the mediating effects of attributional confidence for disentangling the underlying mechanisms through which perceived general similarity impacts relationship satisfaction.

1.2 | The effects of perceived general similarity on attributional confidence

According to Clatterbuck (1979), attributional confidence is the perceived sufficiency of information for making retroactive and proactive attributions about the behaviour of another person. Attributional

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confidence mitigates uncertainty, which is an attribution process that encompasses explanation and prediction elements. Individuals interpret the meaning of others' previous actions in the retroactive attribution process (explanation), while people define behavioural options for possible responses to social interactions in the proactive attribution process (prediction). People with high attributional confidence deem the information about others adequate to explain others' recent behaviours and predict others' behaviour in the future (Anderson & Emmers-Sommer, 2006). Uncertainty reduction theory (URT; Berger & Calabrese, 1974) proposes that individuals instinctively seek to diminish uncertainty and boost the predictability of behaviours of themselves and others in social interaction (Avtgis, 2000; Berger & Calabrese, 1974). According to Berger and Calabrese (1974), the similarity between two people shrinks uncertainty in a relationship, while dissimilarity heightens the uncertainty levels. Justifications are needed for negative affect towards others owing to social norms, whereas no explanation is required for liking (Koenig, 1971). People are more likely to make justifications for dissimilarity than similarity with another person (e.g., attitudes). For example, when participants listened to a conversation or read a transcription, they listed more possible explanations regarding dissimilarity than similarity (Clatterbuck, 1979). This implies that uncertainty, as indicated by the number of alternative explanations for behaviours, rises when people are dissimilar. Similarity may predispose people to understand better their partners (Leikas et al., 2018). Parks and Adelman (1983) revealed that participants reported significantly less uncertainty at Time 2 when they perceived high general similarity at Time 1. Another study found that the perceived general similarity between two individuals was positively correlated to low levels of uncertainty (Antheunis et al., 2010). Attributional confidence is the reverse of uncertainty (Gudykunst, & Nishida, 2001), implying that people with lower uncertainty are more capable of predicting the behaviour of their partners. Given that similarity can reduce uncertainty in a relationship (Berger & Calabrese, 1974), the present study hypothesizes that perceived general similarity would positively predict attributional confidence.

1.3 | The effects of attributional confidence on relationship satisfaction

A handful of research has looked into attributional confidence among partners in ongoing relationships such as dating and married couples (Avtgis, 2000; Gao & Gudykunst, 1995). People with uncertainty about their relationships are more likely to be less satisfied with the relationships (Imai et al., 2023; Theiss et al., 2013). When some uncertainty-provoking events (e.g., unfaithfulness and distance) prompt some relational turmoil in romantic relationships, people would adopt interactive strategies (e.g., relationship talks) to eliminate uncertainty for relationship maintenance (Emmers & Canary, 1996). More time and energy are needed for better understanding when people have high levels of uncertainty, which may impact the stability of the relationship (Berger & Roloff, 1982; Parks & Adelman, 1983). Uncertainty about the partner may influence satisfaction with the relationship (Anderson & Emmers-Sommer, 2006). Attributional confidence is positively related to perceptions of relational importance, perceived partner support and emotional closeness and is negatively related to perceived relational conflict among married people (Avtgis, 2000). Taking account of the synonymous nature between increasing attributional confidence and reducing uncertainty (Clatterbuck, 1979), perceiving information as enough to predict and explain the partner's behaviours lessens uncertainty to foster relationship satisfaction. This study hypothesizes that attributional confidence would positively predict relationship satisfaction.

1.4 | Overview of the current study

Two studies were performed to test the hypotheses. Study 1 recruited 395 individuals to provide initial evidence of the links among perceived general similarity, attributional confidence and relationship satisfaction. Study 2 recruited 227 couples, which complemented Study 1 by using a dyadic approach that captured the actor and partner effects. Previous studies have suggested that couple-level similarity may have greater impacts during earlier stages of relationships, compared with the later steady stage (Luo, 2009; Watson et al., 2004). Therefore, the present studies recruited unmarried dating couples to examine the role of similarity in the early stages of romantic relationships.

2 | STUDY 1

The similarity-attraction effect has been expanded from relationship initiation to development. Preceding evidence has supported that perceived similarity in various areas promotes relationship satisfaction (Lutz-Zois et al., 2006). The present research attempts to advance the literature through examining attributional confidence as a mediator of the link between perceived general similarity and relationship satisfaction. The following hypotheses were formulated:

H 1. *Perceived general similarity would positively predict relationship satisfaction.*

H 2. *Perceived general similarity would positively predict attributional confidence.*

H 3. *Attributional confidence would positively predict relationship satisfaction.*

H 4. *Attributional confidence would mediate the relationship between perceived general similarity and relationship satisfaction.*

Figure 1 presents the hypothesized mediation model. Individuals in opposite-gender dating relationships were recruited in Study 1, which analysed the mediation model at the individual level.

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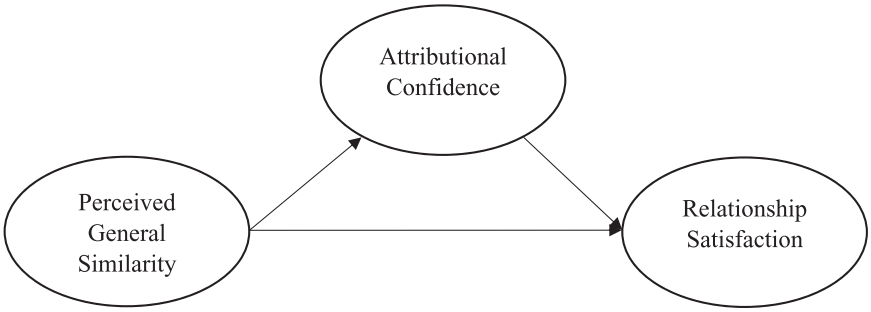


FIGURE 1 The hypothesized mediation model.

2.1 | Methods

A total of 395 individuals (51.4% female) aged 17–67 (M = 22.06, SD = 4.68) in unmarried opposite-gender relationships were recruited. Around 43% of participants (n = 168) were recruited through the psychology participant pool (Sona system) and obtained course credits after completing the survey. Approximately 57% of participants (n = 227) were recruited through online invitations (mass emails in a university and social media) and received HK$100 (approximately US$12.75) upon completion of the questionnaire. Only people who were able to read Chinese and were currently in an unmarried opposite-gender relationship were included in the study. Participants provided informed consent prior to starting the online survey. The mean of relationship duration was 1.83 years (SD = 2.04). This study was not preregistered. The data, materials and analysis code are available at the Open Science Framework (OSF): https://osf.io/4pqye

2.1.1 | Measures

Perceived general similarity. Perceived general similarity to the partner was evaluated via a 5-item measure developed by Parks and Adelman (1983). Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Chinese translation and back-translation were utilized to establish the Chinese version so as to ensure conceptual equivalence.[1] The five items are, 'My dating partner and I like a lot of the same things', 'We share a lot of the same attitudes about things', 'The two of us have very different values', 'The two of us are very similar' and 'The two of us have a similar outlook on life'.' The Cronbach's alpha based on the present sample was .76.

Attributional confidence. Attributional confidence (i.e., perceived level of certainty about the relationship) was measured by the 7-item Clatterbuck Uncertainty Evaluation Scale (CL7; Clatterbuck, 1979). The CL7 only assesses proactive attributions (confidence in predicting the behaviour of the partner) and does not measure retroactive attributions (explanations regarding the past events in the relationship). Retroactive attributions can be measured by the 65-item Clatterbuck Uncertainty Evaluation Scale (CL65). A slider at the leftmost position initially was used to record participants' responses per 1% unit from 0% to 100%. The CL7 has been more extensively utilized than the CL65, as it has stronger conceptual and empirical bases and consistently demonstrated excellent Cronbach alphas (Graham, 1994; Rubin et al., 2020; Wagner, 2018). The Chinese version was created via Chinese translation and back-translation to ensure conceptual equivalence. A sample item is 'How well can you predict his/her feelings and emotions?' The internal consistency reliability was .89 in the current study.

Relationship satisfaction. Relationship satisfaction was assessed with seven items using the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988). The Chinese RAS (Lee & Ng, 2023), rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = low to 5 = high, was adopted. A sample item is 'To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?' The coefficient α was .86 in this study.

2.1.2 | Statistical analysis

The mediation model was analysed using structural equation modelling (SEM) with Mplus. The method of item parcelling was utilized for all measures (i.e., perceived general similarity, attributional confidence and relationship satisfaction) on grounds of the small sample size relative to the number of items (Little et al., 2002; Lo et al., 2021). Following the item-to-construct balance approach (Little et al., 2002), the three items with the highest loadings were adopted to anchor the three parcels, then the three items with the next highest loading were inserted into the anchors in an inverted order and so forth. The Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), comparative fit index (CFI), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) were adopted to assess the goodness of fit of the model (Ng et al., 2023). A good model fit is represented by TLI > 0.95, CFI > 0.95, RMSEA < 0.06 and SRMR < 0.08 (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The effects of recruitment method (1 = monetary incentive, 0 = Sona system), gender (1 = male, 0 = female), age and relationship length on the mediator (attributional confidence) and the outcome (relationship satisfaction) were controlled for. The bootstrapping analysis with 5000 resamples was applied to generate the 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (BCCIs) to test the significance of the indirect effects.

2.2 | Results and discussion

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations and bivariate correlations between the study variables. Perceived general similarity

[1] A total of two bilingual people (native Chinese speakers) were involved in the translation process. One translated the scale from English into Chinese. The Chinese version was back-translated into English by the other. Afterwards, the author compared the back-translated English version with the original scales to ensure a similar meaning. These items were not piloted.

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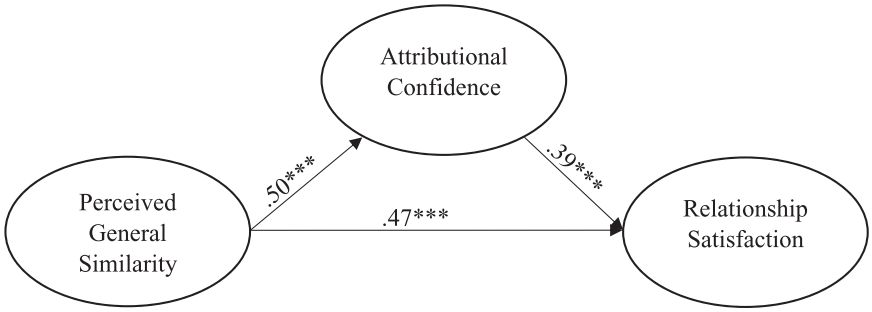


FIGURE 2 The mediation model results. The effects of recruitment method, gender, age and relationship length on the mediator (attributional confidence) and the outcome (relationship satisfaction) were controlled for. ***$p < .001$.

TABLE 1 Means, standard deviations, and correlations for study 1.

	M	*SD*	1	2	3
1. Perceived general similarity	3.48	.67	–		
2. Attributional confidence	76.38	13.45	.44***	–	
3. Relationship satisfaction	3.96	.65	.57***	.57***	–

***$p < .001$.

was positively correlated to attributional confidence and relationship satisfaction. Attributional confidence was positively associated with relationship satisfaction.

The mediation model illustrated a good fit ($\chi^2(48) = 94.65$, $p < .001$, TLI = 0.97, CFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.05, SRMR = 0.03). The latent variables' standardized factor loadings ranged from .64 to .93. Figure 2 illustrates the mediation model results. The total effect of perceived general similarity on relationship satisfaction was significant ($\beta = .66$, $p < .001$). Perceived general similarity positively predicted attributional confidence ($\beta = .50$, $p < .001$) and relationship satisfaction ($\beta = .47$, $p < .001$). Attributional confidence positively predicted relationship satisfaction ($\beta = .39$, $p < .001$). The results of bootstrapping showed that the indirect effect of perceived general similarity on relationship satisfaction via attributional confidence was significant and small in size ($\beta = .19$, 95% BCCI = [0.138, 0.264]).

Study 1 provided preliminary support for the hypotheses that perceived general similarity positively predicted relationship satisfaction and attributional confidence and attributional confidence positively predicted relationship satisfaction. Moreover, Study 1 revealed that attributional confidence mediated the link between perceived general similarity and relationship satisfaction.

3 | STUDY 2

Study 1 yielded initial evidence for the links among perceived general similarity, attributional confidence and relationship satisfaction at the individual level. Interdependence theory (Kelley et al., 2003; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) indicates that people in the same dyad mutually influence each other (Wickham & Knee, 2012). Taking account of the interdependent nature of couples, Study 2 seeks to extend the previous findings at the dyadic level by examining the actor (i.e., one's predictor on his or her own outcome variable) and partner effects (i.e., one's predictor on the partner's outcome variable). Unmarried opposite-gender couples were employed in Study 2.

3.1 | The actor and partner effects of perceived general similarity on relationship satisfaction

Prior studies have found that perceived similarity in different domains promotes relationship satisfaction (Acitelli et al., 1993; Lutz-Zois et al., 2006). Decuyper et al. (2012) found that perceptual personality similarity (i.e., profile similarity between one's ratings of the self and the partner) in females was significantly associated with females' relationship satisfaction. Muraru et al. (2017) revealed significant actor and partner effects of perceived ideal similarity on relationship satisfaction. Perception of similarity may facilitate understanding, enjoyable interactions and better communication between partners, which may in turn contribute to relationship satisfaction (Burleson & Denton, 1992; Furler et al., 2014; Luo, 2009; Murray et al., 2002). Positive communication predisposes people to view their partner as responsive (Choi & Toma, 2022; Reis & Gable, 2015), showing understanding and care as regards partner's needs and goals (Fonseca et al., 2021; Itzchakov et al., 2021). Past studies have revealed actor and partner effects of communication patterns on relationship satisfaction (Chi et al., 2013). The understanding, validation and acceptance of the partner are the core components of relationship satisfaction (Candel & Turliuc, 2021). Similarity plays a beneficial role in advancing communication, and improved communication may in turn promote one's own and the partners' relationship satisfaction. The following hypotheses were proposed:

H 5a. *Perceived general similarity would positively predict own relationship satisfaction (paths A1 and A2 in Figure 3).*

H 5b. *Perceived general similarity would positively predict the partner's relationship satisfaction (paths B1 and B2 in Figure 3).*

3.2 | The actor and partner effects of perceived general similarity on attributional confidence

Perceived general similarity has been found to be positively correlated to low levels of uncertainty (Antheunis et al., 2010; Parks & Adelman, 1983), which may promote more understanding in respect of the partner (Leikas et al., 2018). As per the URT (Berger & Calabrese, 1974), similarity assuages uncertainty in a relationship and escalates the perceived adequacy of information to predict or explain the partner's behaviours. However, the partner effects of perceived

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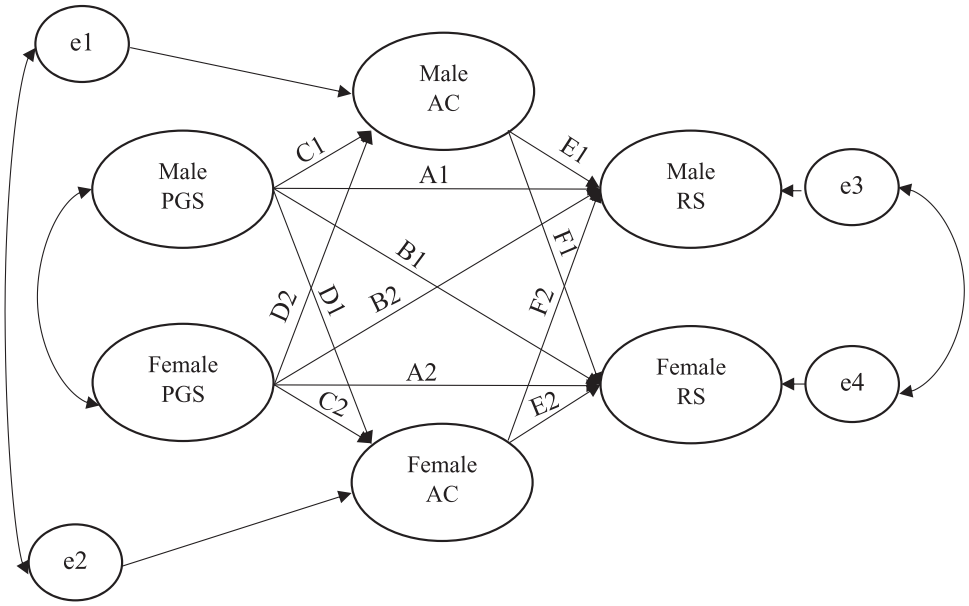


FIGURE 3 The hypothesized actor–partner interdependence mediation model. AC , attributional confidence; PGS , perceived general similarity; RS , relationship satisfaction.

general similarity on attributional confidence are not well understood. Perceived similarity in attitudes is related to greater relational safety, lower uncertainty and higher trust (Prisbell & Andersen, 1980). Given the role of trust in regulating the risks in close relationships (Cavallo et al., 2014), it is theorized as the antecedent of relational uncertainty (Knobloch et al., 2021). People who trust their partners are more confident in predicting the future fate of their relationships, and the relationships will be less threatening and require less caution (Gagné, & Lydon, 2001; Murray et al., 2006). When one has greater trust in the relationship, both partners experience lower relational uncertainty, as an individual without the partner's trust may question the relationship status (Knobloch et al., 2021). The results have underpinned that a partner's relational uncertainty may be driven by one's risk regulation of romantic relationships. People with perceived general similarity have a positive view of the relationship (e.g., trust, relational safety) and may have better risk regulation in the relationship, associating with greater attributional confidence of both partners. The following hypotheses were formulated:

H 6a. *Perceived general similarity would have positive actor effects on attributional confidence (paths C1 and C2 in Figure 3).*

H 6b. *Perceived general similarity would have positive partner effects on attributional confidence (paths D1 and D2 in Figure 3).*

3.3 | The actor and partner effects of attributional confidence on relationship satisfaction

The role of attributional confidence in existing relationships such as couples has been less investigated (Avtgis, 2000). People who experience high uncertainty are required to invest greater time and energy to understand better their partner, which may affect relationship stability (Berger & Roloff, 1982; Parks & Adelman, 1983). Perceived sufficient information lowers uncertainty (Clatterbuck, 1979) and is positively related to positive relational outcomes among married people (Avtgis, 2000). However, the partner effects of attributional confidence on relationship satisfaction are still little known. Knobloch and Knobloch-Fedders (2010) found negative actor and partner effects of relationship uncertainty on relationship quality. People who experience relational uncertainty may engage in negative social interactions (e.g., refraining from communication of sensitive issues and destructive conflict; Dainton et al., 2017; Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004), which may exacerbate their partner's relationship distress (Knobloch & Knobloch-Fedders, 2010). People with doubts about their partner's commitment also render their partner dubious about the future benefits of the romantic relationship, which might elicit relationship dissatisfaction (Imai et al., 2023). As per social exchange theory, relationship satisfaction depends upon the balance between the benefits and costs of the relationship such as the quality of interactions and partners' attributes in comparison with other available relationships (Lee & Ng, 2023; Sabatelli, 1988; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). People with lower uncertainty are more confident in predicting their partners' behaviours, and attributional confidence may lead to more positive social interactions and foreseeable benefits in the relationship that enhance both partners' relationship satisfaction. Two hypotheses were made as follows:

H 7a. *Attributional confidence would positively predict relationship satisfaction of oneself (paths E1 and E2 in Figure 3).*

H 7b. *Attributional confidence would positively predict relationship satisfaction of the partner (paths F1 and F2 in Figure 3).*

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TABLE 2 Means, standard deviations and paired *t*-tests for Study 2.

	Males ($n = 227$)		Females ($n = 227$)				
Variables	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*p*	Cohen's *sd*
Perceived general similarity	3.60	0.66	3.48	0.67	2.62	.009	.17
Attributional confidence	78.21	14.64	77.86	11.36	0.34	.731	.02
Relationship satisfaction	4.10	0.63	4.01	0.65	1.89	.060	.13

3.4 | Actor–partner interdependence mediation model

In view of the non-independence of couples (Kenny, 1996), the actor and partner effects can be explored via the actor–partner interdependence model (APIM; Kenny, & Ledermann, 2010). While attributional confidence has been found to mediate the association between perceived general similarity and relationship satisfaction in Study 1, how one's perceived general similarity promotes the partner's relationship satisfaction via attributional confidence remains unknown. An actor–partner interdependence mediation model (APIMeM; Ledermann et al., 2011) was adopted to dig into the mechanisms underlying the actor and partner effects of perceived general similarity on relationship satisfaction. The proposed APIMeM is depicted in Figure 3. A mediation hypothesis was formed as follows:

H 8. *Attributional confidence of oneself and the partner would mediate the relationship between one's and the partner's perceived general similarity and relationship satisfaction.*

3.5 | Methods

Two hundred and twenty-seven unmarried opposite-gender couples were employed for the dyadic sample of Study 2, including 227 individuals in Study 1 and their partners who did not participate in Study 1. The age range of male participants was 18–67 years ($M = 24$; $SD = 5.39$), and the age range of female participants was 18–48 years ($M = 22.45$; $SD = 3.58$). Prior to participation, informed consent and recruitment forms encompassing one's and the partner's e-mail addresses and relationship status were received. A specific survey link was sent to participants individually via e-mail. Male and female participants were matched into dyads based on the e-mail addresses in the recruitment forms. Only unmarried and opposite-gender couples who were able to read Chinese were included. The mean of couples' relationship duration was 2.18 years ($SD = 2.24$). In total, each dyad was reimbursed HK$200 (approximately US$25.50) for participating in the study. This study was not preregistered. The data, materials and analysis code are available at the OSF: https://osf.io/4pqye

3.5.1 | Measures

The scales used in Study 2 were the same as those used in Study 1. The measure of perceived general similarity for males ($\alpha = .75$) and females ($\alpha = .81$), attributional confidence (CL7) for males ($\alpha = .93$) and females ($\alpha = .86$), and relationship satisfaction (RAS) for males ($\alpha = .87$) and females ($\alpha = .88$) have demonstrated good internal consistency reliability.

3.5.2 | Statistical analysis

The APIMeM was analysed using SEM with Mplus. The effects of male age, female age and relationship length on the mediators (male and female attributional confidence) and the outcomes (male and female relationship satisfaction) were controlled for. All observed variables were standardized prior to the SEM analysis. To establish the dyadic invariance of the APIMeM, the factor loadings, actor and partner effects, effects of covariates on attributional confidence and relationship, factor variances and covariances of covariates with perceived general similarity were progressively constrained to be equal between males and females. Since the chi-square difference test is overly stringent and sensitive to sample size (Li et al., 2024), the change in CFI (ΔCFI) was used to assess dyadic invariance. A decrease in CFI > 0.01 represents a significant deterioration in the model fit (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002). The item parcelling method, the combination of fit statistics (i.e., TLI, CFI, RMSEA, SRMR) and the bootstrapping analysis with 5000 resamples were akin to Study 1. As three actor effects and three partner effects were analysed for each gender, the Bonferroni correction was performed to adjust for multiple testing (Chung et al., 2018). A p-value < .05/6 or .0083 was regarded as statistically significant. As four specific indirect effects were analysed for each gender, 99% BCCIs were used to provide more conservative tests of the indirect effects.

3.6 | Results and discussion

Table 2 depicts the means and standard deviations for the major variables including perceived general similarity, attributional confidence and relationship satisfaction. Male perceived general similarity ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.66$) was significantly higher than female perceived general similarity ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.67$; $t(226) = 2.62$, $p = .009$, Cohen's $d = .17$). There were no gender differences in attributional confidence and relationship satisfaction. As demonstrated in Table 3, all of the variables had significantly positive correlations with one another.

The APIMeM with no equality constraints across gender showed a good fit ($\chi^2(156) = 207.14$, $p = .004$, TLI = 0.98, CFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.04, SRMR = 0.04). Constraining the factor loadings

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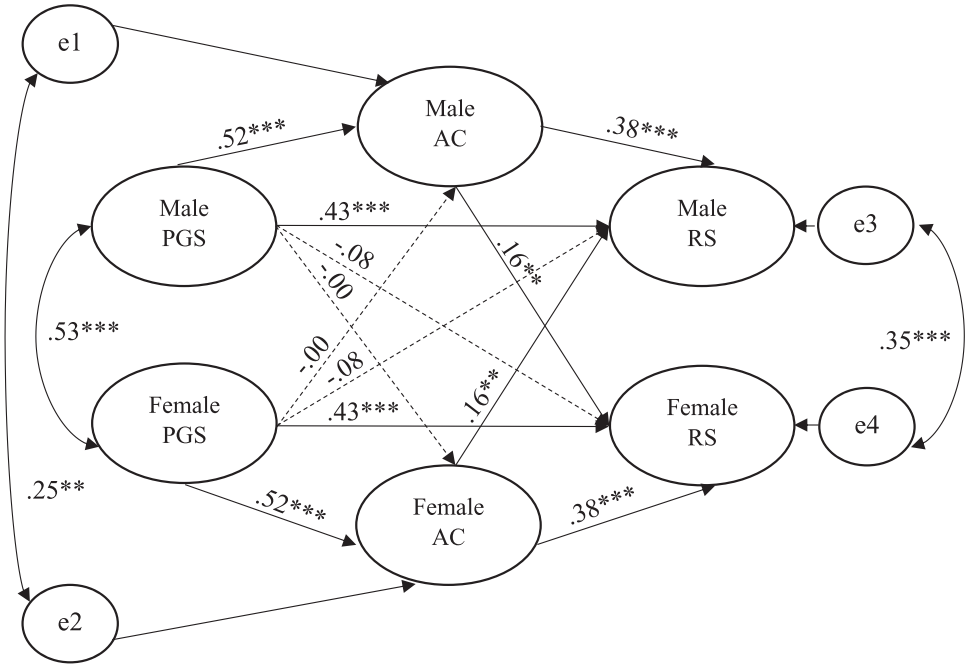


FIGURE 4 The actor–partner interdependence mediation model results. The actor effects and partner effects are constrained to be invariant across gender. The effects of male age, female age and relationship length on the mediators (male and female attributional confidence) and the outcomes (male and female relationship satisfaction) were controlled for. Solid lines represent significant paths; dotted lines denote non-significant effects. Standardized coefficients are reported. AC , attributional confidence; PGS , perceived general similarity; RS , relationship satisfaction. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$.

TABLE 3 Correlations between perceived general similarity, attributional confidence, and relationship satisfaction among men and women in Study 2.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Male PGS	–					
2. Female PGS	.45***	–				
3. Male AC	.48***	.21**	–			
4. Female AC	.28***	.40***	.32***	–		
5. Male RS	.60***	.30***	.61***	.33***	–	
6. Female RS	.31***	.49***	.33***	.55***	.45***	–

Abbreviations: AC, attributional confidence; PGS, perceived general similarity; RS, relationship satisfaction.
$^{**}p < .01$
$^{***}p < .001$.

TABLE 4 The standardized indirect effects of the APIMeM.

	β	99% BCCI
Actor PGS → Actor AC → Actor RS	.20	[0.140, 0.268]
Actor PGS → Partner AC → Actor RS	−.00	[−0.018, 0.015]
Actor PGS → Partner AC → Partner RS	−.00	[−0.040, 0.032]
Actor PGS → Actor AC → Partner RS	.09	[0.039, 0.137]

Note: The effects are constrained to be invariant across gender. The effects of male age, female age and relationship length on the mediators (male and female attributional confidence) and the outcomes (male and female relationship satisfaction) were controlled for. As four specific indirect effects were analysed, 99% biased corrected confidence intervals were used to provide more conservative tests. Abbreviations: AC, attributional confidence; BCCI, biased corrected confidence interval; PGS, perceived general similarity; RS, relationship satisfaction.

(ΔCFI = 0.001), actor and partner effects (ΔCFI = 0.001), effects of covariates on attributional confidence and relationship satisfaction (ΔCFI = −0.005), factor variances (ΔCFI = 0.001) and covariances of covariates with perceived general similarity (ΔCFI = −0.001) to be invariant across males and females did not significantly worsen the model fit. Hence, there were no significant gender differences in these parameters. The final model fitted the data well ($\chi^2(180) = 239.32, p = .002$, TLI = 0.97, CFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.04, SRMR = 0.05). The latent variables' standardized factor loadings ranged from .66 to .91. The covariates and predictors had no multicollinearity problem (VIFs < 5). Figure 4 demonstrates the findings of the APIMeM.

The actor effects of perceived general similarity on relationship satisfaction (paths A1 and A2) and attributional confidence (paths C1 and C2) were significant and in the medium range. The actor effects of attributional confidence on relationship satisfaction were significant and in the medium range (paths E1 and E2). The partner effects of perceived general similarity on relationship satisfaction (paths B1 and B2) and attributional confidence (paths D1 and D2) were non-significant. The partner effects of attributional confidence on relationship satisfaction were significant and in the small range (paths F1 and F2).

The standardized indirect effects of the APIMeM are manifested in Table 4. The indirect effects for actor perceived general similarity-relationship satisfaction via actor attributional confidence (path

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C1 × E1; path C2 × E2) were significant and in the small range. In addition, the indirect effects for the partner effects of perceived general similarity on relationship satisfaction mediated by the partner's attributional confidence (path C2 × F2; path C1 × F1) were significant and in the small range.

Study 2 extended the findings of Study 1 by further examining the underlying mechanisms through which perceived general similarity influences relationship satisfaction at the dyadic level and investigating the partner effects that were little known.

4 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

The similarity-attraction effect (Byrne, 1969; Byrne & Griffitt, 1966) has been extended to ongoing relationships such as couples. For instance, people who perceive similarity in emotions are more likely to have better relationship outcomes such as perceived love and responsiveness (Sels et al., 2019). The current research delved into the link of attributional confidence with perceived general similarity and relationship satisfaction at individual and dyadic levels. The findings provide evidence for the partner effects of attributional confidence on relationship satisfaction, which have been less explored. Furthermore, this study investigated attributional confidence as a mediating mechanism in the association between perceived general similarity and relationship satisfaction based on those actor and partner effects.

4.1 | The effects of perceived general similarity on relationship satisfaction

Consistent with the similarity-attraction effect (Byrne, 1969; Byrne & Griffitt, 1966) and previous findings that people are more likely to be satisfied with the relationship when the levels of perceived similarity (e.g., behaviours, religion, interests and traits) to their partners are higher (Acitelli et al., 1993; Hudson & Fraley, 2014; Lutz-Zois et al., 2006; Ohadi et al., 2018), the present results revealed that perceived general similarity positively predicted relationship satisfaction at the individual level in Study 1.

Contrary to prediction, only actor effects of perceived general similarity on relationship satisfaction were significant, the partner effects were non-significant in Study 2. A past study measuring perceived ideal similarity by rating each item on the Partner and Relationship Ideal Scales (Fletcher et al., 1999) (e.g., 'how similar do you think you and your partners' ideals are') revealed significant actor and partner perceived ideal similarity-relationship satisfaction paths (Muraru et al., 2017). In contrast, Decuyper et al. (2012) found that female perceptual personality similarity was unrelated to male relationship satisfaction, while male perceptual personality similarity was unrelated to female relationship satisfaction. Likewise, a prior study found that perceived similarity in personality did not predict partners' relationship satisfaction after controlling for personality mean levels (Furler et al., 2014). Baron and Kenny (1986) proposed that an unexpectedly weak or inconsistent relation may be contingent upon a moderator. The hypothesized partner effects of perceived general similarity on relationship satisfaction in this study were based on the assumption that perceived general similarity promotes communication in dating relationships. People perceive their partner's effective communication as important for upholding relationship values (Hou et al., 2018). It is speculated that other factors (e.g., communication skills and patterns) may influence the partner's perception of communication, resulting in the non-significant partner effects of perceived general similarity on relationship satisfaction. Future examination is warranted to evaluate this speculation.

4.2 | The effects of perceived general similarity on attributional confidence

The current finding revealed that perceived general similarity positively predicted attributional confidence at the individual level in Study 1. The finding was along the same lines as the uncertainty reduction theory concerning the diminution in uncertainty owing to similarity (Berger & Calabrese, 1974) and previous evidence for the positive association between perceived similarity in general and attributional confidence (Clatterbuck, 1979). People may understand more about their partner on grounds of perceived similarity (Iafrate et al., 2011) and may possess higher levels of attributional confidence based on a greater perceived understanding of their partner.

Contrary to the prediction, only significant actor effects of perceived general similarity on attributional confidence were found, and the non-significant partner effects were revealed in Study 2, which were inconsistent with the previous findings that one's trust in the relationship predicted lower relational uncertainty in both partners (Knobloch et al., 2021). One possible explanation for the non-significant partner effects of perceived general similarity on attributional confidence was that perceived general similarity may not serve as a component of risk regulation in the relationships, although perceived similarity in attitudes has been linked to relational safety and trust (Prisbell & Andersen, 1980). Another possible explanation was that perceived general similarity may be less relevant to trust in relationships compared with perceived similarity in attitudes. Further evidence is needed to evaluate the role of perceived general similarity and perceived similarity in specific areas of risk regulation in social relationships. Furthermore, the findings that perceived general similarity was not linked to the partner's outcomes (i.e., attributional confidence and relationship satisfaction) may stem from different approaches to measuring perceived similarity. Past studies have mostly assessed perceived similarity in specific attributes (e.g., personality traits) by calculating the difference or correlation between one's ratings of the self and the partner (Hudson & Fraley, 2014). This study only used a scale to capture perceived general similarity. Further research is needed to compare these two approaches.

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4.3 | The effects of attributional confidence on relationship satisfaction

The results of the positive effects of attributional confidence on relationship satisfaction fully support the hypotheses at the individual and dyadic levels (i.e., significant actor and partner effects for both genders). These findings were in line with the previous findings of the negative relationship between uncertainty and relationship satisfaction (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011; Theiss & Knobloch, 2014), along with the partner effects of uncertainty on relationship satisfaction (Imai et al., 2023). People with doubt as regards romantic relationships may prompt their partner to doubt the prospective interests in the relationship (Imai et al., 2023). Attributional confidence is the reverse of uncertainty (Gudykunst, & Nishida, 2001) and is related to to better relationship outcomes such as greater social and emotional support and interpersonal depth among married people (Avtgis, 2000). In line with social exchange theory, both individuals' own and their partners' attributional confidence may provide insights into future benefits of the relationship and serve as rewards that meet the expectations in the romantic relationship, which may facilitate people's and their partners' relationship satisfaction.

4.4 | The mediating role of attributional confidence in the association between perceived general similarity and relationship satisfaction

In respect of the hypotheses of the mediating role of attributional confidence in the link between perceived general similarity and relationship satisfaction, the present study found a significant mediation at the individual level, suggesting that people with high perceived general similarity to their partner would have elevated levels of attributional confidence, which in turn would be associated with higher satisfaction with the relationship. Furthermore, a significant mediation in the actor-route was revealed, indicating that actor attributional confidence mediated the relationship between actor perceived general similarity and actor relationship satisfaction. These findings further confirm the findings at the individual level, reaffirming that people's perceived general similarity would be positively associated with their attributional confidence, which would be further related to greater satisfaction with the relationship. In addition, a significant mediation in the partner-route was found, comprising the indirect effect of actor perceived general similarity on partner relationship satisfaction via actor attributional confidence. These results pointed out that people who deem their partners as similar to themselves would be more likely to perceive information as ample to predict their partner's behaviours, which would be positively associated with their partner's relationship satisfaction.

4.5 | Theoretical and practical implications

The current study adds evidence for the similarity effect in ongoing relationships (i.e., couples) that occasions greater relationship satisfaction and contributes to a better understanding of the mediating role of attributional confidence in such association. Especially, the results of this study revealed the indirect effect of perceived general similarity on relationship satisfaction via attributional confidence at individual and dyadic levels, which enhances the understanding of how perceived similarity among couples is related to positive relationship outcomes.

The present results underscore the importance of the beneficial role of perceived general similarity in maintaining positive relationships. An experimental study manipulating the perceptions of similarity on self-revealing attributes showed that the belief that one was similar to one's partner led one to experience less anxiety and greater interest in sustaining the relationship with the partner in different-race interactions (West et al., 2014). This study suggested that people constantly ponder the similarity rather than dissimilarity to their romantic partner, which may generate constructive emotions, cognition and behaviours in relation to the relationship, resulting in positive relationship outcomes.

4.6 | Limitations and directions for future research

Several limitations are required to be considered. First, our studies measured perceived similarity in general in spite of some items relating to the couple similarity in attitude and values, such as '*we share a lot of the same attitudes about things*' and '*the two of us have very different values*' (Parks & Adelman, 1983). Leikas et al. (2018) found that political attitude similarity was associated with relationship satisfaction, whereas personality similarity was unrelated to relationship satisfaction. The effects of similarity on romantic relationships may vary based on different dimensions of similarity. Further studies may focus on perceived similarity in specific dimensions such as attitudes, behaviours and personality. Second, the generalizability of current findings to same-sex or married couples remains unknown, as the sample in this study was comprised of opposite-gender unmarried couples. Past research has suggested that similarity is less influential in homosexual relationships, especially at the developmental stage in the coming out process (Peplau et al., 1982; Todosijevic et al., 2005). Becker (2013) found that actual similarity in personality had greater effects on relationship outcomes in partnerships of longer duration and suggested that similarity exerted a stabilizing impact in long-term couples. However, a study with dating couples and married couples demonstrated the same significant mediation effects of actual emotion similarity in the relationship between actual personality similarity and relationship quality in both samples (Gonzaga et al., 2007). The present findings may apply to married couples. Future studies should replicate the study by recruiting same-sex and married couples. Third, our studies only adopted the CL7 to measure attributional confidence pertaining to the predictability of the partner. Scholars have primarily used the CL7 rather than the CL65 because the CL7 has stronger conceptual and empirical bases and consistently demonstrated excellent Cronbach alphas (e.g., Baruh & Cemalcilar, 2018; Wagner, 2018). Further investigations into the component of attributional confidence that explains past actions in the relationship are needed. Fourth, our studies mainly used self-report measures without objective indicators of relationship outcomes. Future research may adopt objective measures such as an observational measure of relationship quality during a dyadic

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interaction between romantic couples (Holland & Roisman, 2008). Fifth, other studies have examined couple similarity by computing the similarities in one's self-ratings and the partner's ratings (Decuyper et al., 2012) taking the perception of the other partner's personality into account. The discrepancy may serve as a potential source of conflict (Decuyper et al., 2012). This approach can assess both actual and perceived similarity in specific variables. In addition, this avenue allows for the use of response surface analysis, an advanced method for analysing similarity effects (Kardum et al., 2023; Ye et al., 2023). Future researchers may further examine the relations among couple similarity, attributional confidence and relationship satisfaction by measuring each couple member's ratings of oneself and the partner. Sixth, despite the present findings of significant mediation effects of attributional confidence, it remains unclear how attributional confidence influences relationship satisfaction. Future research can examine the mechanisms underlying the link between attributional confidence and different relationship outcomes such as trust, which further contribute to relationship satisfaction. Seventh, the cross-sectional design in our studies hampered causal inferences. Additional study using longitudinal design is needed for stronger causal evidence (Ng & Lee, 2024).

5 | CONCLUSION

The current research endeavoured to contribute to the literature by inspecting the relationships among perceived general similarity, attributional confidence and relationship satisfaction among opposite-gender dating couples. This study found that attributional confidence mediated the relationship between perceived general similarity and relationship satisfaction. Specifically, the actor effects of perceived general similarity on relationship satisfaction were mediated by the actor effects of attributional confidence. Moreover, significant indirect effects at the partner level were found (i.e., actors perceived general similarity on partner relationship satisfaction via actor attributional confidence). This study provides a better understanding of how perceived general similarity is associated with greater relationship satisfaction among opposite-gender dating couples.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

This study was approved by the Lingnan University Research Ethics Committee (EC032/2122).

DATA TRANSPARENCY STATEMENT

The data, materials and analysis code that support the findings of this study are available at the Open Science Framework (OSF): https://osf.io/4pqye

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