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Companionship goals and marital goal concordance contribute to relationship satisfaction partly through dyadic coping in dating couples

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ABSTRACT

Background: Marital goals reflect individuals' understanding of the purpose of marriage and could influence the dyadic interactions and satisfaction in intimate relationships. The current study examines how each partner's marital goals and the concordance of marital goals between the partners influence dating couples' relationship satisfaction through dyadic coping.

Method: The sample consisted of 200 heterosexual dating couples from Hong Kong. Both partners completed a survey that assessed three types of marital goals, dyadic coping, relationship satisfaction, and other background variables. Path analysis was conducted to estimate the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM) with each partner's three types of marital goals and marital goal concordance between the two partners as the predictors, each partner's dyadic coping as the mediators, and each partner's relationship satisfaction as the outcomes.

Results: Women's dyadic coping significantly mediated the effects of women's companionship goals and marital goal concordance on both partners' marital satisfaction. Meanwhile, men's dyadic coping significantly mediated the effects of men's companionship goals and marital goal concordance on their own relationship satisfaction.

Conclusion: The current study offered the first evidence supporting the importance of marital goals, the goal concordance between the partners, and dyadic coping in dating relationships.

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actor-partner interdependence model; marital goal; partner similarity; relationship quality; romantic relationship

There are many drastically-changing trends relating to marriage in modern societies. The age of first marriage is delayed (Brown et al., 2022), cohabitation becomes more frequent and common (Rosenfeld & Roesler, 2019), and divorce rates continue to rise worldwide (Sheykhi, 2020). People are more hesitant to marry, and it seems to be more challenging to maintain a satisfactory marital relationship nowadays. These trends indicate that people's understanding of marriage and their prioritized goals

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for intimate relationships are changing. Marital goals reflect what people want from marriages, which originate from people's basic understanding about the meaning of marriage and intimate relationships (Li & Fung, 2011). It is conceivable that individuals' marital goals and the concordance of marital goals between romantic partners are essential factors affecting dyadic interactions and satisfaction in intimate relationships. However, the associations between marital goals and the dyadic processes in intimate relationships have not been well studied. Thus, the current study aimed to investigate how dating partners' individual marital goals and the concordance of marital goals between the partners were related to relationship satisfaction through altering the level of dyadic coping between the partners.

Marital goals and relationship satisfaction

Individuals' expectations and understanding regarding marriage are constantly evolving over time. Finkel et al. (2014) thoroughly examined the changes in the meaning of marriages in the United States in the past centuries and proposed the suffocation model of marital satisfaction. According to the model, individuals' expectations regarding marriage have gone through three phases, namely the institutional era, the companionate era, and the self-expressive era. Across the three eras, the meaning of marriage has changed substantially from marriage for economic and instrumental needs to marriage for intimacy and affectionate bonding, and then to marriage for personal growth and self-actualization. In other words, people expect marriage to fulfill different goals across the three eras. While traditional beliefs about marriage are related to more basic needs in Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943), more contemporary beliefs about marriage are related to higher-level needs (Finkel et al., 2014).

Similarly, the dynamic goal theory of marital satisfaction (Li et al., 2020; Li & Fung, 2011) proposes that there are three main categories of marital goals, namely instrumental goals, companionship goals, and personal growth goals. *The instrumental goals* are about the practical aspects of marriage, addressing individuals' physiological and safety needs. *The companionship goals* refer to intimacy and affectionate bonding between the partners, reflecting individuals' love and belongingness needs. *The personal growth goals* focus on support for each partner's personal development, focusing on individuals' needs for self-esteem and self-actualization. The three types of marital goals nicely echo the three eras specified in the suffocation model of marriage (Finkel et al., 2014), with the difference being that the three types of marital goals are believed to coexist to different degrees within individuals in contemporary societies.

Both the suffocation model of marriage and the dynamic goal theory of marital satisfaction emphasize that individuals' satisfaction in intimate relationships is largely determined by whether their prioritized relationship goals are achieved in the relationship. Specifically, the suffocation model of marital satisfaction argues that marriage can be a way for individuals to achieve their important goals in life, and whether the relationship could facilitate the fulfillment of these goals is directly related to the quality of the relationship (Finkel et al., 2015). Likewise, the dynamic goal theory of marital satisfaction suggests that the satisfaction of marital goals, and the match between the satisfied and the prioritized marital goals uniquely contribute to relationship quality (Li et al., 2020).

The link between marital goals and relationship satisfaction is also supported by other empirical and theoretical work in the field. The research on the instrumentality of intimate relationships in achieving personal goals suggests that relationship evaluations are goal-dependent. Intimate relationships conducive to the achievement of personal goals are rated to be more satisfactory (Finkel & Fitzsimons, 2021; Fitzsimons & vanDellen, 2015). Previous research on newlyweds' marital expectations also suggests that achieving marital expectations is important for marital satisfaction both before and after marriage (e.g., Abbaspour et al., 2020; Kazim & Rafique, 2021). Similarly, the eudaimonic theory of marital quality (Fowers & Owenz, 2010) argues that the success of goal pursuit in marriages and the prioritization of different types of marital goals can significantly affect marital quality.

In addition to one's own marital goals, other studies have highlighted the cross-partner effects of marital goals on relationship satisfaction. For instance, Sanderson and Cantor (2001) found that

individuals with higher intimacy goals tended to perceive their partners to share the same pursuit of intimacy, which was further related to a higher level of marital satisfaction. One's relationship satisfaction can also be affected by the partner's marital goals because of the match between the two partners' marital goals (referred to as *marital goal concordance* in this article). Marital goal concordance reflects the consistency of priorities given to different types of marital goals between the two partners. It has been found that the more the couples' marital goals were shared and fulfilled, the greater their relationship satisfaction would be (Fawad et al., 2022).

Moreover, the importance of marital goals is not limited to marital couples but can also be applied to unmarried couples in a committed dating relationship. Unmarried individuals' marital goals can also reflect their understanding of marriage and influence their selection of the romantic partner and how they behave in the intimate relationship (Li et al., 2020). Despite the delay of marriage, marriage is still the common destination of a committed intimate relationship in modern societies. The great majority of individuals still want to get married regardless of their socioeconomic class (Kuo & Raley, 2016), and approximately 90% of young adults would eventually get married (Goldstein & Kenney, 2001). In most cases, marriages are preceded by a committed and exclusive dating relationship (Banks, 2007). Dating individuals' marital goals reflect the desired destination for their intimate relationship in the future, which would also be the prioritized areas to work on in their current relationship. Thus, individuals' behaviors and interactions with the partner in the dating relationship can be guided by their prioritized marital goals. Supporting the important role of marital goals in unmarried couples, Li et al. (2020) have demonstrated that the three types of marital goals can be reliably and validly measured in unmarried individuals. Other research has also reported that expectations about marriage can be reliably measured in unmarried dating couples (e.g., Brinton et al., 2021; Raymo et al., 2021).

Although previous research supported the importance of marital goals and the concordance of marital goals in close relationships, most studies focused on the *satisfaction* of marital goals in *married* couples. The current study aimed to extend the research to *dating* couples and the *priority* of different marital goals. We expect that the priority of different marital goals and the concordance of marital goals between the dating partners would influence their dyadic coping and subsequently affect their relationship satisfaction.

The mediating role of dyadic coping

Different from traditional models that view stress and coping as an individual process (Lazarus, 1993), dyadic coping emphasizes partners' joint effort in the process of stress coping. In particular, dyadic coping describes different strategies that the two partners use to cope with external stressors together, including stress communication between the partners, each partner's individual strategies to assist with the other partner's coping, and both partners' collaborative efforts to cope with joint stress (Bodenmann, 1995, 1997, 2005). In other words, dyadic coping can be conceptualized as the joint behavioral stress-reduction process between the two partners. Previous research suggests that dyadic coping is essential for close relationships. For example, it was found to mediate the effect of trait emotional intelligence on relationship satisfaction (Wollny et al., 2020). Dyadic coping is also affected by relationship-related goals. Partners' approach-avoidance goals for the relationship (Kuster et al., 2017) and the codependency between the partners (Happ et al., 2023) could both influence dyadic coping in couples. Thus, dyadic coping might be a pathway through which marital goals impact relationship satisfaction.

The influence of marital goals on dyadic coping

According to the Systemic-Transactional Model (Bodenmann, 1995, 1997, 2005), both individual and dyadic goals are important elements that shape dyadic coping. In the relationship context, when faced with external stressors, each partner's relevant relationship goals are activated based on

their initial perception of the stressful situation and available resources (Koranyi et al., 2017; Kuster et al., 2017). These goals would then guide the partners' coping behaviors. Thus, marital goals, as an important form of relationship goals, would affect the process of dyadic coping for both partners.

First, each partner's priorities on different types of marital goals would affect their own dyadic coping behaviors. In particular, we would expect one's companionship goals, but not instrumental or personal growth goals, to be positively related to individuals' better dyadic coping. Among the three types of marital goals, companionship goals are the only type that address the needs of the relationship instead of the needs of the individual. Instrumental goals focus on one's practical needs, and personal growth goals emphasize one's own growth in the relationship. In contrast, companionship goals attend to the affectionate bonding and the relationship between the two partners (Li & Fung, 2011). The emphasis on the relationship and the bonding with the partner makes the companionship goals the most relevant marital goals that align with the aim of constructive dyadic coping. The theory of implicit self-regulation suggests that when individuals feel highly committed to a particular goal, they will automatically adjust their cognitive and affective-motivational processes whenever a situation threatens their goal pursuit (Koranyi & Rothermund, 2012). For individuals who emphasize companionship goals, they are more intrinsically motivated to protect the belongingness and intimacy in the relationship, so they are more likely to adopt dyadic coping behaviors to intervene when they perceive that the external stressors are threatening their partner and/or the relationship.

Moreover, at the couple level, the marital goal concordance between the partners can also lead to more dyadic coping behaviors. Since the prioritized marital goals reflect individuals' understanding of marriage (Li & Fung, 2011), couples with the same prioritized marital goals share a similar understanding about what people should pursue in intimate relationships. Concordance within couples has been shown to be related to more positive spousal support in intimate relationships (Lewis & Yoneda, 2021). Meanwhile, dissimilarities in important domains of functioning between spouses are frequently seen as a risk factor for poor relationship quality (Schade et al., 2016). Thus, with similar aims about the relationship in mind, couples with a higher level of marital goal concordance are more likely to understand and interpret external stressors similarly, and in turn cope with external stressors in a more coordinated way, as reflected by more constructive dyadic coping behaviors.

To conclude, while each partner's emphasis on companionship goals was expected to be positively related to his/her own dyadic coping, the marital goal concordance between the two partners was also expected to be positively related to both partners' dyadic coping. The enhanced level of dyadic coping was then expected to further contribute to both partners' relationship satisfaction.

The influence of dyadic coping on relationship satisfaction

Dyadic coping has been shown to be a significant factor that maintains or enhances relationship satisfaction (Bodenmann, 2000, 2005). More importantly, one's dyadic coping can have a positive impact on both partners' relationship satisfaction. In an intimate relationship, one partner's unresolved stressor can affect both partners' well-being. Meanwhile, coping with the stress together relieves both partners' distress and signals mutual trust and support, hence benefitting both partners' relationship satisfaction (Falconier & Kuhn, 2019). Rusu et al. (2020) conducted a five-year longitudinal study and found that mutual supportive dyadic coping and common dyadic coping increased both partners' overall and yearly relationship quality (Rusu et al., 2020). Similarly, Mittinty et al. (2020) found in their six-month longitudinal study of couples living with chronic pain that patients' perceived supportive dyadic coping was positively associated with the relationship satisfaction of both partners. A meta-analysis of 72 studies further suggested that positive dyadic coping is related to higher relationship satisfaction and negative dyadic coping is associated with lower relationship satisfaction, even after controlling for gender, age, relationship length, education level, and nationality (Falconier et al., 2015). The technique of dyadic coping has also been seen as a resource couples could use in their daily lives to improve both partners' relationship satisfaction.

For example, Donato et al. (2023) reported that dyadic coping could moderate the relationship between partners' internal stress and both partners' relationship satisfaction. To conclude, dyadic coping is expected to have both beneficial actor and partner effects on relationship satisfaction. Moreover, it might serve as an important mediator, explaining the relationship between marital goals and both partners' relationship satisfaction.

The current study

The current study collected dyadic data from dating couples in Hong Kong. Hong Kong is a modernized metropolitan city. As in other developed societies, individuals in Hong Kong have postponed marriage to a later age in recent decades. The median age of marriage for women climbed from 23.9 years old in 1981 to 30.4 years old in 2020, and that for men increased from 27.0 years old in 1981 to 31.9 years old in 2020 (Census and Statistics Department, 2007, 2022). The delayed age of marriage makes it particularly important to study marital goals and its consequences for dating couples. Moreover, because of its colonial history, Hong Kong is heavily influenced by both western and traditional Chinese cultural values (Fu & Chiu, 2001). The great variation in people's understanding of marriage makes it a suitable context to study marital goals. In the current study, we examined how (a) each partner's evaluations of three types of marital goals and (b) the concordance of prioritized marital goals between the partners affected relationship satisfaction through dyadic coping. The Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (Kenny et al., 2006) was utilized to examine both the actor and partner effects among the variables (see Figure 1 for the conceptual model). The following hypotheses were tested:

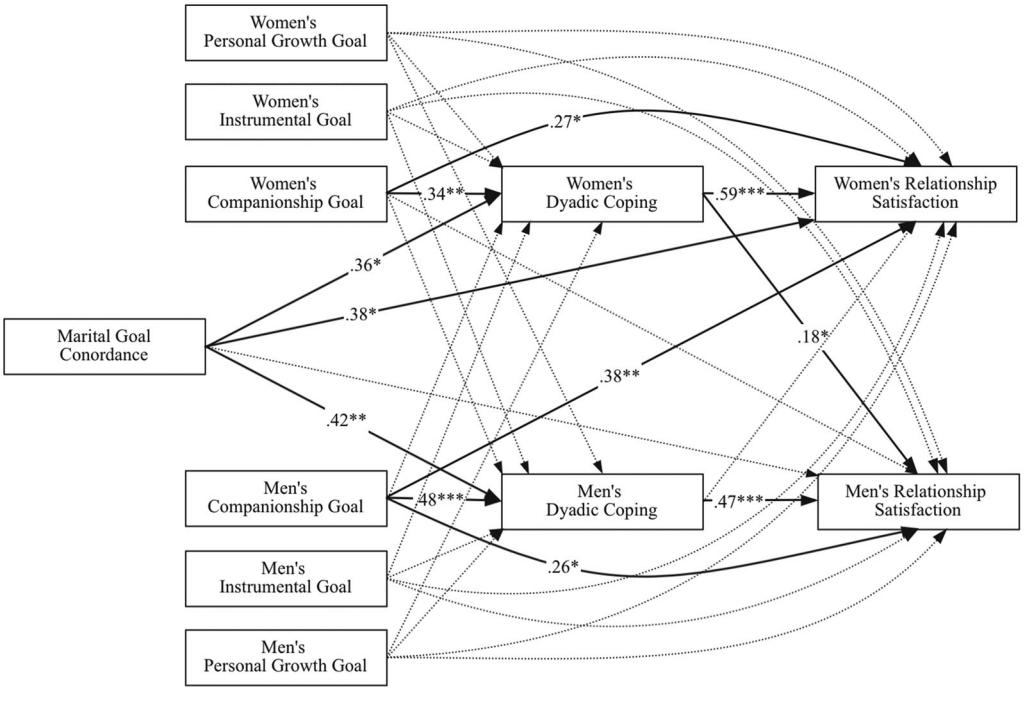


Figure 1. The Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM) among the Variables.

Notes: Standardized coefficients for the paths are presented. Solid lines indicate significant paths. Dotted lines indicate nonsignificant paths. The covariates (i.e., both partners' ages) and related paths, the covariances among the exogenous variables, the covariance between the two mediators, and the covariance between the two outcome variables are all omitted. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

Hypothesis 1: Each partner's companionship goals would be positively related to one's own dyadic coping.

Hypothesis 2: The marital goal concordance between the two partners would be positively related to both partners' dyadic coping.

Hypothesis 3: Each partner's dyadic coping would be positively related to both one's own and the partner's relationship satisfaction.

Hypothesis 4: Dyadic coping would mediate the positive effects of each partner's companionship goals and marital goal concordance on the two partners' relationship satisfaction.

Method

Participants and procedure

Unmarried couples were recruited through multiple channels, including recruitment emails to participants from a longitudinal study of beliefs and wellbeing, advertisements on campus, and mass-mailing in universities in Hong Kong. Interested individuals filled in an online registration form with screening questions related to the inclusion criteria, including continual, exclusive, non-cohabiting, heterosexual courtship for at least six months, residence in Hong Kong at the time of the survey, and ethnic Chinese with Chinese comprehension adequate for understanding the survey. All the scales originally in English were translated into Chinese following the standard back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1970). Recruited participants then provided their own and their partner's contact information upon their partner's consent, and both would receive a link to the online survey via email individually for their independent completion.

The study procedure was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of The Education University of Hong Kong. We reported how we determined our sample size and all measures related to the research question of the current study. All data and study materials for this study are available by emailing the corresponding authors.

The required sample size was determined by the APIMPowerR app (Ackerman & Kenny, 2016). A large-scale meta-analysis about social psychology studies over one hundred years revealed an average effect size at .21 (Richard et al., 2003). With this reference, we estimated a small to medium effect size for the actor effects at 0.25 and a slightly smaller effect size for the partner effects at .20. A minimum of 185 dyads were needed to reach the desired power of .80 for detecting both actor and partner effects. A total of 532 individuals responded to the survey and 220 couples (i.e., 440 respondents) were successfully matched. However, 20 couples were excluded because they failed to meet one or more inclusion criteria (e.g., in a homosexual relationship, cohabiting, etc.). The final sample consisted of 200 couples (400 individuals), with a mean age of 22.9 years ($SD = 2.58$, ranging from 18 to 30) for women and 23.4 years ($SD = 2.85$, ranging from 18 to 30) for men. The average duration of the current dating relationship reported by men was 32.0 months ($SD = 23.61$), and that reported by women was 31.7 months ($SD = 23.28$). Most of the participants were university students (56.5% of the men, 70.4% of the women), whereas others were working (39.5% of the men, 26.1% of the women), or unemployed (4.0% of the men, 3.5% of the women). Most participants reported their education level to be undergraduate (83.1% of the men, 88.4% of the women), followed by postgraduate or above (10.3% of the men, 10.6% of the women). Most men reported a monthly family income of 50,000 HKD or above (26.0%; equivalent to 6,386 USD or above), followed by 30,000–39,999 HKD (23.0%; equivalent to 3,832–5,109 USD). Most women reported a monthly family income of 20,000–29,999 HKD (25.1%; equivalent to 2,555–3,832 USD), followed by 50,000 HKD or above (20.6%; equivalent to 6,386 USD or above).

Measures

Marital goals

Marital goals were measured by the Marital Goal Scale (Li et al., 2020). The 23-item scale measured three different types of marital goals, including 10 items for personal growth goals (e.g., "Partner can

help me become a better person"), six for instrumental goals (e.g., "Partner and I can support each other financially and accumulate wealth together"), and seven for companionship goals (e.g., "Partner and I can confide in each other about the needs deep in our hearts"). Participants rated each item from 1 (*not important at all or slightly important*) to 4 (*extremely important*) based on their general understanding about marriages. The reliabilities of all three subscales were high in the present sample (personal growth goals: Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$ for men and .94 for women; instrumental goals: Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$ for men and .88 for women; companionship goals: Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$ for men and .92 for women). The average of all item ratings for each subscale was calculated for each participant. Higher scores indicated higher endorsement of that type of marital goals.

Marital goal concordance between each couple was calculated as follows: First, the ipsatized score of each item rating was calculated by subtracting the within-individual mean across the 23 items. The ipsatized scores reflected the relative importance of each item within each individual (Horowitz et al., 1988). Then, for each couple, we calculated the absolute difference between the two partners' ipsatized ratings for each item to indicate the discrepancy in the relative importance given to each goal between the partners. The discrepancy index was widely used in the literature to indicate the discordance between two partners (e.g., Kenny et al., 2006; Siminoff et al., 2020; Watson et al., 2004). The discrepancy scores of the 23 items were averaged for each couple. Lastly, to reflect marital goal concordance, instead of discordance, we calculated the opposite number of the averaged discrepancy score so that a higher number indicated less goal discrepancy between the partners and a higher level of marital goal concordance.

Dyadic coping

Dyadic coping was measured by the 15 items about one's own dyadic coping behaviors from the Dyadic Coping Inventory (DCI; Bodenmann, 2018). Each item was rated from 1 (*very rarely*) to 5 (*very often*). Following the practice in previous studies (e.g., Kuster et al., 2017), the ratings for the negative dyadic coping behaviors (e.g., "I blame my partner for not coping well enough with stress") were first reversed and then averaged with the ratings for the positive dyadic coping behaviors (e.g., "I express to my partner that I am on his/her side") to form a composite score of dyadic coping. Higher scores indicated a higher quality of dyadic coping. The DCI has been shown to have satisfactory internal consistency and concurrent validity in Chinese samples (Xu et al., 2016). The reliability was high in the present sample as well (Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$ for men and .88 for women).

Relationship satisfaction

Relationship satisfaction was measured by the Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, 1988), which is a widely-used and validated measure of relationship satisfaction. The RAS consisted of seven items on a 5-point scale. Sample items are "In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship" and "How many problems are there in your relationship (reversed)". After recoding the reversed items, the average of all item ratings was calculated (Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$ for men and .88 for women). Higher scores reflected greater satisfaction.

Data analysis

The preliminary analyses were conducted by IBM SPSS Statistics 26. We examined the means and standard deviations of the background and main variables, as well as the intra-person and cross-partner correlations among the variables. There was no missing data for the main variables.

According to the dynamic goal theory of marital satisfaction (Li et al., 2020), age is an important factor that shifts individuals' prioritized marital goals. Moreover, among all the background variables, age significantly correlated with the main variables in the current study (Tables S1 & S2). Thus, we controlled for both partners' age in the following path analysis. The actor-partner interdependence model was estimated using path analysis with R (Kenny, 1996; Kenny & Cook, 1999). Both partners' three types of marital goals and marital goal concordance were the predictors, both partners' dyadic

coping were the mediators, and both partners' relationship satisfaction were the outcomes. The covariances between corresponding endogenous variables and the significant covariances between exogenous variables were estimated (see Figure 1 for the details of the model). Bootstrapping with 1000 samples was conducted to examine the significance of indirect effects. We attributed the results as significant if the 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (BCCI) did not cover zero.

Results

Preliminary analyses

The means and standard deviations of the background and main variables are presented in Table 1. Men reported significantly older age ($M = 23.4$, $SD = 2.86$) than women ($M = 22.9$, $SD = 2.59$) $t = -4.17$, $p < .001$, higher family income ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 1.50$) than women ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 1.53$), $t = -2.80$, $p = .006$, lower instrumental goals ($M = 2.78$, $SD = 0.70$) than women ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 0.71$), $t = 2.68$, $p = .008$, and lower companionship goals ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 0.65$) than women ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 0.54$), $t = 4.32$, $p < .001$. Gender differences in other variables were not significant.

The intra-person correlations among the variables were presented in supplementary Table S1. For both men and women, all three types of marital goals significantly correlated with own dyadic coping, $rs = .24$ to $.63$, $ps < .001$, and relationship satisfaction, $rs = .19$ to $.49$, $ps < .006$. Marital goal concordance was also significantly related to both partners' relationship satisfaction, $rs = .15$ and $.20$, $ps < .040$, and both partners' dyadic coping were significantly related to own marital satisfaction, $rs = .64$ and $.64$, $ps < .001$.

The cross-partner correlations among the variables were presented in supplementary Table S2. For both men and women, all three types of marital goals significantly correlated with the partner's dyadic coping, $rs = .15$ to $.26$, $ps < .029$, and relationship satisfaction, $rs = .17$ to $.38$, $ps < .019$, except for men's instrumental goals and women's dyadic coping, $r = .09$, $p = .189$. Both partners' dyadic coping were also significantly related to the other partner's relationship satisfaction, $rs = .37$ and $.42$, $ps < .001$.

Among the background variables, both partners' age was significantly related to the main variables, $rs = -.18$ to $-.16$, $ps < .020$, so age was controlled in the subsequent path analyses.

Path analysis

Results of the path analysis indicate that the data fit the model very well, $\chi^2 (12) = 10.76$, $p = .55$, CFI = 1.00, TLI = 1.01, SRMR = 0.03, and RMSEA = .00. Supporting Hypothesis 1, women's companionship goals, $\beta = .34$, $SE = .10$, $p = .001$, but not the personal growth goals, $\beta = .16$, $SE = .10$, $p = .096$, nor

Table 1. Means and standard deviations (SDs) of the background and main variables.

	Men ($n = 200$)		Women ($n = 200$)		
Variables	*Mean*	*SD*	*Mean*	*SD*	*t*
Age (years)	23.4	2.86	22.9	2.59	−4.17***
Education[a]	2.03	0.39	2.09	0.33	1.87
Family income[b]	4.14	1.50	3.74	1.53	−2.80**
Relationship duration (months)	31.8	23.46	31.7	23.28	−0.21
Personal growth goal	3.12	0.64	3.23	0.63	1.77
Instrumental goal	2.77	0.70	2.94	0.71	2.68**
Companionship goal	3.29	0.65	3.51	0.54	4.32***
Marital goal concordance[c]	−0.55	0.27	−0.55	0.27	–
Dyadic coping	3.85	0.59	3.94	0.53	1.96
Relationship satisfaction	4.05	0.62	4.02	0.62	−0.72

Notes: [a]1 = below bachelor's degree, 2 = undergraduate, 3 = postgraduate or above; [b]1 = less than 10,000 HKD per month, 2 = 10,000-19,999 HKD per month, 3 = 20,000-29,999 HKD per month, 4 = 30,000-39,999 HKD per month, 5 = 40,000-49,999 HKD per month, 6 = more than 50,000 HKD per month; [c]The score for marital goal concordance was the same for each couple. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

Table 2. Specific indirect effects, standard errors, and the confidence intervals for each path.

Path	Indirect effect	*SE*	95% BCCI
Women's companionship goal → Women's dyadic coping → Women's relationship satisfaction	.20	.08	[.071, .361]
Women's companionship goal → Women's dyadic coping → Men's relationship satisfaction	.06	.03	[.013, .147]
Marital goal concordance → Women's dyadic coping → Women's relationship satisfaction	.21	.11	[.015, .431]
Marital goal concordance → Women's dyadic coping → Men's relationship satisfaction	.06	.04	[.004, .170]
Men's companionship goal → Men's dyadic coping → Men's relationship satisfaction	.23	.08	[.107, .401]
Marital goal concordance → Men's dyadic coping → Men's relationship satisfaction	.20	.09	[.052, .397]

Notes: *SE* = standard error, *BCCI* = bias-corrected confidence interval.

instrumental goals, $\beta = -.09$, $SE = .06$, $p = .139$, were significantly related to their own dyadic coping. Similarly, men's companionship goals, $\beta = .48$, $SE = .12$, $p < .001$, but not the personal growth goals, $\beta = .18$, $SE = .13$, $p = .165$, nor instrumental goals, $\beta = -.13$, $SE = .07$, $p = .059$, were also significantly related to their own dyadic coping. None of the partner effects from marital goals to dyadic coping were significant, βs = −.10 to .21, *SE*s = .06 to .13, ps > .071.

On top of each partner's specific marital goals and supporting Hypothesis 2, marital goal concordance between the couple was significantly related to both women's, $\beta = .36$, $SE = .15$, $p = .020$, and men's, $\beta = .42$, $SE = .15$, $p = .006$, dyadic coping.

In support of Hypothesis 3, women's dyadic coping was significantly related to both their own, $\beta = .59$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$, and their partner's relationship satisfaction, $\beta = .18$, $SE = .08$, $p = .018$. However, men's dyadic coping was only significantly related to their own relationship satisfaction, $\beta = .47$, $SE = .08$, $p < .001$, but not their partner's, $\beta = .08$, $SE = .07$, $p = .267$.

Moreover, supporting Hypothesis 4, women's dyadic coping significantly mediated the effects of their own companionship goals and marital goal concordance on both partners' relationship satisfaction (see Table 2). Meanwhile, men's dyadic coping significantly mediated the effects of their own companionship goals and marital goal concordance on their own relationship satisfaction but not their partner's (see Table 2).

Lastly, the remaining direct effects from women's companionship goals, $\beta = .27$, $SE = .11$, $p = .012$, men's companionship goals, $\beta = .38$, $SE = .12$, $p = .002$, and marital goal concordance, $\beta = .38$, $SE = .16$, $p = .015$, to women's relationship satisfaction were all significant. The direct effect from men's companionship goals to their own relationship satisfaction remained significant as well, $\beta = .26$, $SE = .12$, $p = .036$.

We are aware that our data were cross-sectional and could not directly support the causal effect from marital goals to dyadic coping. Nonetheless, to provide more empirical information about the causal direction, we estimated an alternative actor-partner interdependence mediation model in which the roles of marital goals and dyadic coping were swapped. Both partners' dyadic coping were set as the predictors, both partners' three types of marital goals and marital goal concordance were set as the mediators, and both partners' relationship satisfaction were set as the outcomes. In the alternative model, the paths from both partners' dyadic coping to the couple's marital goal concordance were *not* significant ($\beta = .05$, $SE = .04$, $p = .237$ for women; $\beta = .04$, $SE = .03$, $p = .239$ for men). The results suggest that marital goal concordance is more likely to be an antecedent of dyadic coping (as tested in the original mediation model shown in Figure 1), instead of a consequence (i.e., as tested in the alternative model).

Discussion

Our findings reveal that holding companionship goals and marital goal concordance between the partners are related to dating couples' better dyadic coping, which is further related to a higher

level of relationship satisfaction. In addition to significant actor effects between the corresponding variables, women's dyadic coping is also significantly related to their partner's higher relationship satisfaction.

As expected, among the three types of marital goals, only companionship goals are related to dating couples' better dyadic coping and relationship satisfaction. While personal growth goals and instrumental goals focus more on individual gains in the relationship, companionship goals emphasize the relationship and the bonding between the two partners. When individuals prioritize companionship goals, it means that they value intimacy and affectionate bonding in relationships. Thus, they may spend more time together and communicate with their partner more frequently. With more shared experience and a stronger sense of we-ness, they would also be more likely to cope with stress together with their partner, resulting in a higher level of dyadic coping (Vedes et al., 2015). This result corroborated previous findings that individuals who placed a greater emphasis on intimacy pursuit and thought highly of companionship and communication in their relationships showed more positive supportive behavior towards their partner in a dating relationship (Overall et al., 2006).

In addition to the two partners' individual marital goals, our results also highlighted the importance of marital goal concordance between the partners. For dating couples, marital goal concordance reflects the consistency between the two partners' understanding of marriage. It does not only indicate shared values between the partners but also reflects a united expectation of where the current relationship is potentially heading. Guided by their shared goals, couples with a higher level of marital goal concordance are more likely to be more harmonized in their daily interactions and are motivated to engage in dyadic coping, leading to more satisfying relationships.

Partially supporting the hypothesis, women's dyadic coping was significantly related to both partner's relationship satisfaction, but men's dyadic coping was only significantly related to their own relationship satisfaction. This result seems to be in line with previous research that women are better at understanding others' emotions and expressing their own emotions than men (Cabello et al., 2016). Thus, women may provide more effective emotion-focused dyadic coping to their partner (Falconier & Kuhn, 2019). Moreover, Bodenmann (2005) proposed that the coping process follows a dynamic temporal order, where dyadic coping occurs after individual coping efforts fail. As women's social support systems are relatively richer and more sophisticated than men's (Reevy & Maslach, 2001), they may be more diversified in their coping mechanisms and support networks, rendering them less dependent on the partner's dyadic coping in dealing with stress. In contrast, with a less elaborate social support network, men can benefit more from the dyadic coping of their partners.

Relatedly, another interesting gender difference was that the direct effects of men's companionship goals and marital goal concordance on women's relationship satisfaction were significant, but the direct effects from women's companionship goals and marital goal concordance on men's relationship satisfaction were not significant. This intriguing pattern of findings might suggest that dating women care more about whether or not their partner values companionship goals, as well as whether they prioritize the same marital goals. Indeed, the higher companionship and instrumental goals observed in our women participants also supported the argument that dating women might ascribe more meaning to marital goals than their male counterparts. These results are also consistent with previous findings that women pay greater attention to their partners' engagement in the relationship (Bodenmann et al., 2006), and have a greater desire for relationship support from the partner (Perrin et al., 2011).

The current findings provide further support to the suffocation model of marital satisfaction (Finkel et al., 2014) and the dynamic goal theory of marital satisfaction (Li et al., 2020; Li & Fung, 2011), confirming the importance of marital goals and marital goal concordance in intimate relationships. Moreover, the current study extends previous research in the following two ways: First, the results suggest that marital goals are influential not only in married couples, but also in dating relationships. Second, in addition to the satisfaction of marital goals, how much individuals' value

each type of marital goals, especially the companionship goals, can also guide and affect dyadic processes in close relationships. The current findings also corroborate the arguments of the Systemic-Transactional Model (Bodenmann, 2005). Dyadic coping is proven to be a critical factor that contributes to dating couples' relationship satisfaction, but the mutual influence of dyadic coping can be asymmetric in a couple. Men may be more dependent on their partner's dyadic coping.

The current study had some limitations that pointed to future research directions. First, while we applied the APIM model to examine both the actor and partner effects based on our dyadic cross-sectional data, it was plausible that relationship quality might affect one's dyadic coping and even marital goals. Someone in a satisfying relationship might use more dyadic coping and be more drawn to companionship goals. Nevertheless, the opposite could be argued that someone in a dissatisfying relationship could yearn for companionship even more. Longitudinal dyadic data are required to conclude directional relations among the variables empirically, although this would be particularly challenging in this population due to the temporary nature of most dating relationships. Second, the measures are all based on individuals' self-report, which can be biased because of subjectivity and social desirability. Besides, although we stressed that the two partners should complete the surveys independently and not discuss the questions, we could not control the communication between the partners as the study was conducted online. Future studies may use ecological momentary assessments, behavioral observations, or other more objective measures of coping and relationship outcomes. Third, the study only focused on dating couples. As individuals' marital goals may change over time and be different before and after marriage (Fawad et al., 2022), future studies can collect longitudinal data about couples' marital goals and relationship dynamics across the transition to marriage. Lastly, the current results were based on a convenience sample from Hong Kong, which may not be representative of dating couples in general. Although we expect the importance of companionship goals, marital goal concordance, and dyadic coping to be robust across different social contexts and cultures, the generalizability of the findings still needs to be empirically tested in more representative samples.

To conclude, the present study was the first attempt to investigate the impact of marital goals and marital goal concordance on dyadic coping and relationship satisfaction in dating couples. Theoretically, the findings highlighted the importance of marital goals in unmarried intimate relationships. Each partner's emphasis on companionship goals and the marital goal concordance between the two partners were shown to be important factors contributing to dating couples' better dyadic coping and relationship satisfaction. Practically, understanding each partner's prioritized marital goals and the concordance of marital goals between the two partners can provide valuable information to inform both pre-marital and marital interventions.

Disclosure statement

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