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Applying relational turbulence theory to examine partner (under)accommodation during conversations about relational stressors

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Abstract

Utilizing the prepositions of relational turbulence theory (RTT), the present study proposes that relational uncertainty and partner interference assessed before the conversation about a relational stressor may polarize perceptions of partner (under)accommodation during the conversation, and those perceptions may further associate with global evaluations of relationships as turbulent measured post conversation. Fifty heterosexual couples (100 individuals) participated in the pre-survey, lab visit, and post-survey. Findings uncovered that for men, perceptions of partner (under)accommodation mediated the association between relational uncertainty and relational turbulence, and perceptions of partner accommodation mediated the association between partner interference and relational turbulence. Further, for women, perceptions of partner underaccommodation mediated the association between relational partner interference and relational turbulence. The results extend the utility of RTT in examining perceptions of partners'

Statement of Relevance: This study uniquely contributes to the literature by combining tenets from two different theories: relational turbulence theory (RTT) and communication accommodation theory to explore how perceptions of partner behaviors during a conversation about a relational stressor bridge the association between relational uncertainty/partner interference and relational turbulence. The findings from this study add to the broader RTT literature by examining a single conversation as examining a specific conversation is still relatively rare in this area.

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(under)accommodative behaviors during conversations about relational stressors.

KEYWORDS

accommodation, dyadic data analysis, relational stressors, relational uncertainty, romantic relationships, underaccommodation

1 | INTRODUCTION

Relational stressors, such as the everyday issues that cause stress in a close relationship, are inevitable in romantic relationships, and relational partners are often caught up in conversations about these stressors. In fact, 46%–82% of emerging adults' daily stressors are related to close relationships, such as romantic relationships or friendships, yet only 10% of studies have focused on relational stressors among young adults (Seiffge-Krenke, 2006). Relational turbulence theory (RTT) explains how qualities of romantic relationships polarize subjective experiences of specific communication episodes to further influence evaluations of relationships as turbulent (Solomon et al., 2016). More specifically, scholars argue that individuals grappling with relational uncertainty and goal interference from a partner have more extreme reactions to the relationship events in the form of biased cognitive appraisals and intense emotions (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001, 2004). Yet it is unclear whether biased appraisals owing to relational uncertainty of romantic partners would manifest in how they perceive communicative behaviors during conversations about relational stressors and whether such perceptions would further correspond with turbulence. Given that partners may engage in accommodative or nonaccommodative (under- or over-accommodative) behaviors during conversations about relational stressors (Dhillon et al., 2020; Speer et al., 2013), this study aims to explore whether relational uncertainty and partner interference assessed before conversations about stressors associate with individuals' perceptions of partner behaviors as accommodative/ underaccommodative during conversations about a relational stressor and whether these appraisals associate with relational turbulence after a conversation about a relational stressor.

1.1 | Relational turbulence theory

RTT has evolved from the relational turbulence model, which was originally developed to understand the underlying causes for frequent experiences of conflict, more intense negative emotions, and elevated levels of relationship thinking during the transition from casual to serious dating at moderate levels of intimacy (Knobloch, 2007; Knobloch et al., 2007; Solomon & Knobloch, 2001, 2004). However, later theorizing suggests that romantic partners encounter turbulence throughout the relational development trajectory (Knobloch & Theiss, 2010). The theory argues that when partners progress in relationships, they begin to question the relational involvement, and perceive a partner's influence as disruptive or interfering with corresponding increases in intimacy (Solomon et al., 2016). More specifically, RTT posits that romantic partners grappling with relational uncertainty and interference from a partner are more likely to experience turbulence in the relationship (Solomon et al., 2016).

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Relational uncertainty refers to the doubts and questions that people have about their relationships and emerges from three different sources: *self*, *partner*, and *relationship* (Solomon et al., 2016; Solomon & Knobloch, 2001, 2004). *Self uncertainty* is described as the doubts people have about their involvement in the relationship, *partner uncertainty* is defined as the doubts or questions that people have about their partner's involvement in the relationship, and *relationship uncertainty* is the extent to which partners are unsure about the nature or future of their relationship (Knobloch & Solomon, 2003; Solomon et al., 2016; Solomon & Knobloch, 2001). RTT proposes that "relational uncertainty undermines the comprehension of specific episodes", such that individuals who are unsure about relationship involvement form biased cognitive appraisals of specific episodes (Solomon et al., 2016, pp. 513). For example, previous work has found that relationally uncertain individuals evaluated hurtful interactions as more intensely hurtful, more intentional, and more damaging to the relationship (Theiss et al., 2009).

As relationships develop, partners begin to influence each other's daily activities and routines through interference or facilitation (Knobloch & Solomon, 2004; Solomon & Knobloch, 2001, 2004). For instance, planning a weekend getaway with friends becomes dependent on a partner's activities, or carpooling to go to work together may influence partners' established routines. Partner interference occurs when a relational partner prevents achieving goals or makes activities more difficult (Solomon et al., 2016). According to RTT, interference from a partner that interrupts everyday routines causes people to respond with more intense emotions to specific communication episodes (Solomon et al., 2016). Indeed, findings reveal that interference from a partner is associated with more negative appraisals of relational irritations and emotional jealousy (Theiss & Solomon, 2006a, 2006b). Furthermore, recent research suggests that, compared to facilitation, interference from a partner may have stronger effects on negative relational experiences (Solomon et al., 2016; Worley & Shelton, 2020). Hence, the current study exploring conversations about relational stressors (a negative relational experience) focuses primarily on interference, rather than facilitation.

Together, biased cognitions and intense emotions, due to the presence of relational uncertainty and partner interference respectively, cause relational partners to enact communicative behaviors that are less engaging and negatively-valenced (Solomon et al., 2016). When relational partners consistently experience such communicative episodes, where communication is less engaging and negative, they perceive the relationship to be chaotic, and therefore, evaluate it to be turbulent (Solomon et al., 2016). Relational turbulence refers to the extent to which individuals evaluate their relationship "as tumultuous, unsteady, fragile, and chaotic that arises from the accumulation of specific episodes" (Solomon et al., 2016, pp. 518). For instance, Brisini and Solomon (2019) found that marital partners reported greater turbulence as compared to dating partners owing to considerable turmoil that builds up over multiple episodes in marriages. In sum, relational turbulence is a global relational quality that indexes an overall sense of chaos in the relationship caused due to high relational uncertainty and partner interference (Solomon et al., 2016). To understand how relational uncertainty and interference lead to turbulence, it is relevant to consider romantic partners' perceptions of specific communication episodes.

1.2 | Relational uncertainty, partner interference, and (under) accommodation

The relational partners' intense cognitive and emotional reactions exhibited in their interaction behaviors leading to turbulence can be understood using (under)accommodation. Accommodation

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refers to those communicative behaviors that are appropriately adjusted to the needs of the interaction partner, whereas underaccommodation refers to communication that is insufficiently adjusted to the needs of the partner (Dragojevic et al., 2016; Giles, 2008). During conversations about relational stressors, accommodation can be evidenced by being respectful, sharing thoughts and feelings, being supportive and affectionate, and/or comforting the partner accommodation, as such behaviors indicate recognition of the partner's needs and interpersonal solidarity, and reduce the psychological distance (Cupach, 1982; Dragojevic et al., 2016; Speer et al., 2013). Whereas underaccommodation could be characterized by talking down to one's partner, saying hurtful things, engaging in criticism, being bossy, and/or controlling the conversation because these behaviors reflect that partners are more attuned to their own needs and less concerned about other partner's perspective (Cupach, 1982; Dhillon et al., 2020; Dragojevic et al., 2016). Nevertheless, Dragojevic et al. (2016) suggest that communication adjustments can be examined in either objective or subjective terms. Objective adjustments are observable and/ or measurable by a third party (Riordan et al., 2013), whereas subjective adjustments refer to recipients' perceptions of communicative behavior changes (Dhillon et al., 2020). Scholars argue that objective and subjective adjustments do not always align, such that the same objective adjustment can be experienced or interpreted differently by the recipient (Gasiorek & Dragojevic, 2017). Rather than the objective qualities, perceptions of behavioral adjustments qualify them as accommodative or underaccommodative (Dragojevic et al., 2016). Considering that the relational partners' subjective evaluations of behavioral adjustments may be tainted due to relational uncertainty and partner interference, the current study focuses on subjective (under)accommodation during conversations about relational stressors.

Research has found that accommodation is associated with positive outcomes and underaccommodation is associated with negative outcomes (Soliz & Giles, 2014). Moreover, recipients of accommodation perceive greater satisfaction, and appraise their partners more positively, whereas recipients of underaccommodation perceive disaffection, and appraise their partners negatively (Gasiorek & Giles, 2012; Soliz & Giles, 2014; Speer et al., 2013; Williams, 1996). Furthermore, individuals engage in accommodation and/or underaccommodation during a conversation based on interpersonal orientations, which are informed by their interpersonal history, goals, beliefs, and predispositions (Dragojevic et al., 2016; Giles & Soliz, 2015). Correspondingly, individuals' perceptions of their partner's accommodative and underaccommodative behaviors during a stressful conversation may also be informed by their interpersonal orientations. During conversations about relational stressors, partners may enact accommodation or underaccommodation, but how these behaviors are perceived by the other partner may be dependent on how confident they feel about the relationship and the extent to which they believe that their partner is interfering in their daily routines. As stated above, conceptions of specific episodes may be informed by biased cognitions and intense emotions that emanate from relational uncertainty and partner interference respectively (Solomon et al., 2016). Specifically, those who are unsure about the relationship and believe that their partner is hindering their daily routine or activities may take a negative approach during the specific conversation episode, and therefore, may perceive less engaging or more negative communication from a partner. As such, research has found that during difficult conversations (e.g., conflict conversation), relational uncertainty and partner interference predict perceived negativity of irritations, which further predict greater use of indirect communication (Theiss & Solomon, 2006a). Additional evidence suggests that for women, who perceived greater partner interference, intense emotions (anger, sadness) during a conversation about a stressor were associated with more negative communication with the spouse (as cited in Solomon et al., 2016). Given that relational uncertainty and interference promote negative orientation during difficult conversations, it is possible that they

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also predispose individuals to perceive partners' behaviors as more underaccommodative and less accommodative during conversations about relational stressors. That said, it may also be possible that both partners are enacting more underaccommodative behaviors due to experiences of uncertainty and partner interference, therefore, perceive more underaccommodation from the partner owing to the mutual influence in relational communication (Clark & Reis, 1988).

Previous findings indicate that individuals grappling with relational uncertainty report more topic avoidance and perceive relationship conversations as threatening to themselves as well as the relationship (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004; Knobloch & Theiss, 2011). Moreover, heightened partner interference is associated with greater topic avoidance, fewer assurances, and less relationship talk (Theiss & Knobloch, 2013, 2014). Furthermore, relational uncertainty and partner interference positively associate with direct confrontations of irritating partner behavior, aggressiveness in relationship talks, and destructive conflict management tactics (King & Theiss, 2016; Theiss & Knobloch, 2013, 2014; Theiss & Solomon, 2006a). Dating partners also tend to be disaffiliative in their messages to one another when they report greater relational uncertainty and partner interference (Knobloch, 2006). Together, these findings suggest that relational uncertainty and partner interference may prompt individuals to take a disaffiliative and/or aggressive approach (aka negative orientation) toward their partner during conversations about relational stressors. Such an approach may prompt individuals to perceive their partners' behaviors more negatively, therefore leading them to perceive greater underaccommodation and lesser accommodation from their partner. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1. Relational uncertainty before the conversation (a) negatively associates with perceptions of partner accommodation, and (b) positively associates with underaccommodation during a conversation about a relational stressor.

H2. Partner interference before the conversation (a) negatively associates with perceptions of partner accommodation, and (b) positively associates with perceptions of underaccommodation, during a conversation about a relational stressor.

1.3 | Relational turbulence and partner (under)accommodation

According to RTT, experiences of specific episodes characterized by relational uncertainty and partner interference shape individuals' evaluations of relational turbulence (Solomon et al., 2016). Partners' biased appraisals and intense emotions during specific episodes coalesce to form a global judgment of the relationship as unsteady, tumultuous, or in flux (Solomon et al., 2016). Taking this perspective, individuals' appraisals of their partners' communicative adjustments during conversations about relational stressors may lead to their relational turbulence.

Extant literature suggests that both accommodation and underaccommodation associate with communication and relationship qualities. Accommodation positively associates and underaccommodation negatively associates with relational closeness, intimacy, relationship satisfaction, conversation satisfaction, life satisfaction, relationship solidarity, involvement, affiliation, trust, sociability, responsiveness, immediacy, and affect (Dhillon et al., 2020; Gasiorek, 2013; Gasiorek et al., 2015; Giles & Soliz, 2015; Soliz et al., 2009; Soliz & Giles, 2014;

Speer et al., 2013; Williams, 1996, 1999). Accommodation may create a sense of similarity and solidarity between the relational partners, thereby enhancing the positive evaluations of the relationship and debilitating the negative relational outcomes. On the other hand, underaccommodation may exaggerate the feelings of disaffiliation and accentuate the differences between relational partners, consequently inflating the perceptions of chaos in the relationships. Taken together, relational partners' perceptions of underaccommodation during a conversation about a relational stressor may associate with relational turbulence positively after the conversation, and perceptions of accommodation may associate with turbulence after the conversation negatively. Hence, the following hypotheses are advanced:

H3. Perceptions of accommodation negatively associates with relational turbulence after the conversation about a relational stressor.

H4. Perceptions of underaccommodation positively associates with relational turbulence after the conversation about a relational stressor.

RTT proposes that biased cognitions due to relational uncertainty and intense emotions caused by partner interference impact individuals' communicative responses, that are more or less engaged and positively or negatively valenced (Solomon et al., 2016). Also, experiences of specific episodes characterized by polarized communication may further lead to perceptions of chaos, that is, global evaluations of the relationship as turbulent (Solomon et al., 2016). As argued above, during conversations about relational stressors, relational uncertainty, and partner interference may influence individuals' perceptions of partner accommodation and underaccommodation due to relational uncertainty and partner interference. In addition, communication accommodation theory (CAT) stipulates that in any given communication episode, interpersonal orientation informs communicative adjustments, and the recipient's perceptions of (under)accommodation affect the conversational and relational outcomes (Dragojevic et al., 2016). As such, disaffiliative or negative orientation leads to greater underaccommodation and lower accommodation, which may further, predict negative relational qualities (Soliz & Giles, 2014). Considering the tenets of RTT and CAT, and the arguments presented above, perceptions of partner accommodation and underaccommodation during conversations about relational stressors may mediate the association between relational uncertainty/ partner interference and relational turbulence.

In other words, individuals grappling with relational uncertainty and perceiving greater partner interference may perceive their partners to be more underaccommodative and less accommodative during stressful conversations, which may further associate with greater relational turbulence. Thus, the following hypotheses are advanced.

H5. The association between relational uncertainty and relational turbulence is mediated by perceptions of partner (a) accommodation and (b) underaccommodation, such that individuals reporting greater relational uncertainty will perceive less accommodation and more underaccommodation, and report more relational turbulence.

H6. The association between partner interference and relational turbulence is mediated by perceptions of partner (a) underaccommodation and (b) accommodation, such that individuals perceiving greater partner interference will perceive less accommodation and more underaccommodation, and report more relational turbulence.

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Given that the close relationships are interdependent and mutually influential (Clark & Reis, 1988) and that prior research on RTT has examined both actor and partner effects, all hypotheses were tested for both actor (effect of a person's independent variable on their dependent variable) and partner (effect of person's independent variable on their partner's dependent variable) effects (Ledermann et al., 2011). Knobloch and Theiss (2011) found that both the actor and partner's relational uncertainty positively associated with actor's appraisals of relationship threat and avoidance of relationship talk, suggesting that the partner's relational uncertainty may affect individuals' orientation toward their partner's behaviors during conversations about relational stressors. Other research also found that a partner's anger and anxiety-related emotion elicited by partner interference predicts the actor's conflict behaviors (such as compromise, separation, submission, etc.) during such conversations (King & La Valley, 2019). Furthermore, Dhillon et al. (2020) revealed that men's (partner) perceptions of partner nonaccommodation (nonaccommodation is characterized as under and over-accommodation; Giles, 2008) predicted women's (actor) satisfaction from the conversation about a relational stressor. Together, these findings warrant the examination of partner effects of relational uncertainty and partner interference on perceived (under)accommodation, and of perceived (under)accommodation on relational turbulence. Thus, the following research questions are proposed:

> RQ1: Does the partner's (a) relational uncertainty and (b) partner interference assessed before conversation associate with the actor's perceptions of accommodation and underaccommodation during conversations about relational stressors?

> RQ2: Does the partner's perceptions of (a) accommodation and (b) underaccommodation during conversation associate with the actor's relational turbulence post-conversation?

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Participants

This study was embedded within a larger project, investigating intimate communication, and stress, approved by the University of Connecticut's institutional review board. The study participants were recruited from undergraduate communication and sociology courses at a large public university in Spring, 2018. Undergraduate participants from introductory communication courses were compensated with research credit, whereas undergraduate participants from other communication and sociology courses were compensated with extra credit and $15 per participant. Participants were informed that they must currently be in a committed, monogamous, romantic relationship of at least 3 months that involved weekly sexual activity with their partner to be eligible for the study.

The sample consisted of 50 heterosexual couples ($N = 100$). The total sample included 50 women and 50 men, who ranged in age from 18 to 31 years old ($M = 19.91$, $SD = 1.81$). The majority of participants identified as white ($n = 61$), followed by Hispanic and Latina/o ($n = 17$), Asian ($n = 11$), mixed race ($n = 8$), Black or African American ($n = 2$), and "other" ($n = 1$). The average relationship duration of couples was 16 months (range = 3–70 months).

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2.2 | Procedure

Participants, who were eligible for the study, signed up through an online link and were assigned a code to keep track of multiple measurements. Participants were then asked to complete an initial online survey, which consisted of demographics, relational information, and other items unrelated to this study. After completing the initial survey, participants were asked to schedule a time to visit the lab and all lab appointments lasted 1 h. Before their lab visit, each participant completed an online pre-survey within 24 h of their arrival at the lab. The pre-survey included health-related items, items about relational uncertainty and partner interference, and other items unrelated to the current study.

Participants were seated in the interaction rooms upon arrival in the lab, lab procedures were explained, and consent was obtained. After providing saliva samples (irrelevant to the study), participants were asked to list three issues on a topic listing sheet that they felt comfortable discussing in the lab and that have caused stress in their relationship over the past month (Afifi et al., 2013). Participants then shared their list of issues and were instructed to choose one of the issues that have caused the most stress and that they were comfortable discussing in the lab. Couples engaged in 10-min conversations about the chosen topic (in line with previous research, e.g., Aloia & Solomon, 2015) and all couples were able to choose a topic. After completing the conversation about a relational stressor, participants independently completed a post-conversation survey assessing perceptions of partner behaviors during the conversation and relational turbulence.

2.3 | Measures

2.3.1 | Demographics

Participants were asked demographic items regarding their sex, age, sexual orientation, relationship duration, and race/ethnicity in the initial survey.

2.3.2 | Relational uncertainty

The extent to which partners were uncertain about their relationship was measured using a shortened version of Knobloch and Solomon's (1999) measure of relational uncertainty (Ellis & Ledbetter, 2015; Theiss & Solomon, 2006a). Participants were asked to indicate how certain they were regarding several characteristics of the relationship. The measure consisted of three dimensions, *self uncertainty* consisting of 6 items (e.g., "How much you like your partner?"; $\chi^2 = 5.32$, $p = .07$, TLI = 0.98, CFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.12; $\alpha = .93$), *partner uncertainty* (e.g., "how important this relationship is to your partner?"; $\chi^2 = 1.97$, $p = .37$, TLI = 1.00, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = 0.00; $\alpha = .96$), and *relationship uncertainty* (e.g., "whether you and your partner will stay together"; $\chi^2 = 5.63$, $p = .06$, TLI = 0.96, CFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.00; $\alpha = .91$). The anchors ranged from 1 (*completely uncertain*) to 6 (*completely certain*). Given that the three dimensions of relational uncertainty were highly correlated, self-partner ($r = .80$, $p < .001$), self-relationship ($r = .87$, $p < .001$), partner-relationship ($r = .85$, $p < .001$), a second-order CFA was conducted (King & Theiss, 2016). The CFA revealed that the three sources of relational uncertainty successfully load onto a single latent variable reflecting relational

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uncertainty, $\chi^2 = 2.46$, $p = .25$, TLI = 0.99, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = 0.04. A composite score was created by averaging the items together such that the higher scores indicate greater relational uncertainty ($M = 1.81$, $SD = .90$, $\alpha = .98$).

2.3.3 | Partner interference

Participants' perceptions of their partner interfering with their daily activities and routines were assessed using existing measures (Knobloch & Solomon, 2004), consisting of 5 items anchored from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Example items include "My partner disrupts my daily routine", "My partner interferes with the plans I make". Higher scores indicated greater partner interference ($M = 2.19$, $SD = .82$, $\alpha = .87$).

2.3.4 | Perceived partner (under)accommodation

Perceptions of a partner's accommodative and underaccommodative behaviors during a conversation about a relational stressor were measured using the modified version of the scale developed by Speer et al. (2013). Participants were asked to assess their partner's behavior during a conversation with a list of items preceded by the stem, "During the conversation that I just had with a partner, my partner...". The items were presented on a Likert scale with 1 = "*strongly disagree*" and 7 = "*strongly agree*." Higher scores indicated a greater perception of the partner's (under)accommodation. Perceived partner accommodation ($M = 5.50$, $SD = 1.02$, $\alpha = .86$) consisted of 9 items (e.g., "showed respect for me", "let me express my own opinions"). Perceived partner underaccommodation ($M = 2.15$, $SD = 1.17$, $\alpha = .93$) consisted of 10 items (e.g., "made angry complaints", "treats me like an amateur").

2.3.5 | Relational turbulence

The extent to which participants evaluated the relationship to be turbulent after the conversation about a relational stressor was measured using a modified version of the scale developed by Knobloch (2007). Participants responded to 8 items on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1(*strongly disagree*) to 5(*strongly agree*), a higher score indicated greater turbulence. The participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed that their relationship is "chaotic", "tumultuous", and so forth. ($M = 1.93$, $SD = .76$, $\alpha = .92$).

2.4 | Data analysis

Bivariate correlations were run using SPSS version 27.0. Table 1 contains the correlations among all variables used in the study separately for men and women. The hypotheses were tested using Coutts et al. (2019) MEDYAD macro for SPSS 27.0, which is an OLS-based computational tool for dyadic mediation analysis. It uses the actor–partner interdependence model extended to mediation (Ledermann et al., 2011). The confidence intervals were examined through 95% confidence intervals, which demonstrate significance if the two data points do not cross a zero axis. Additionally, bootstrap analysis was used to test the indirect effects of relational uncertainty and partner interference on relational turbulence through a perceived

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TABLE 1 Correlations between the key variables.

	M, *SD* (women)	*M*, *SD* (men)	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. Relational uncertainty	1.68, 0.80	1.95, 0.98	–	.28	−.35*	.37**	.39**
2. Partner interference	2.10, 0.74	2.28, 0.89	.41**	–	−.49**	.45**	.52**
3. Partner accommodation	5.66, 1.00	5.35, 1.03	−.54**	−.29*	–	−.74**	−.59**
4. Partner underaccommodation	1.97, 1.07	2.32, 1.23	.41**	.31*	−.71**	–	.60**
5. Relational turbulence	1.88, 0.66	1.98, 0.82	.54**	.58**	−.50**	.47**	–

Note: Values above the diagonal indicate women's scores; values below the diagonal indicate men's scores. $^{**}p < .01$, $^{*}p < .05$.

partner (under)accommodation during the conversation about a relational stressor, using 5000 bootstrap resamples.

Given the dyadic data and to test for proposed partner effects, actor–partner mediation models were utilized to test all hypotheses and research questions. Prior to hypotheses testing, a test of distinguishability was conducted to check whether the actor and partner effects are distinct among men and women using Kenny's (2015) web application. There are three ways in which sex can make a difference. They are differences between the variables in their means, in their variances, and differences between the correlations of variables. A significant χ^2 indicates that the test has failed, meaning that there is significant evidence to reject the null hypothesis that the dyads are indistinguishable. The evidence revealed that for men and women, variable means are unequal χ^2 (7) = 16.05, $p = .03$ correlations between variables are unequal χ^2 (42) = 17.44, $p = .03$, and variances are unequal χ^2 (7) = 17.44, $p = .01$. Because all the models that assume indistinguishability have a poor fit (both in terms of the chi-square test & RMSEA: RMSEA for distinguishable model = .16 and for indistinguishable = .19), and because the SABIC (i.e., the badness of fit where the smaller value indicates better fit) is lowest for the model of complete distinguishability (SABIC = 104.04), it seems reasonable to assume that the dyad members are fully distinguishable by sex.

3 | RESULTS

The first actor–partner mediation model tested whether perceptions of partner accommodation mediated the association between relational uncertainty and relational turbulence (Figure 1). Men's relational uncertainty was negatively associated with men's perceptions of partner accommodation (actor effect, $b = -.43$, $p < .05$, $SE = .16$, [CI = −0.75 to −0.12]). Women's perceptions of partner accommodation were negatively associated with women's relational turbulence (actor effect, $b = -.26$, $p < .05$, $SE = .10$, [CI = −0.46 to −0.07]). Men's relational uncertainty before the conversation was positively associated (actor effect, $b = .31$, $p < .05$, $SE = .13$, [CI = 0.04–0.57]), and men's perceptions of partner accommodation during the conversation were negatively associated (actor effect, $b = -.32$, $p < .05$, $SE = .14$, [CI = −0.60 to −0.04]) with relational turbulence assessed after the conversation. Also, the indirect effects model revealed that men's perceptions of partner accommodation mediated the association between men's relational uncertainty and men's relational turbulence (actor–actor effect, $b = .14$, $SE = .07$, [CI = 0.01–0.30]). To summarize, (H1a) and (H5a) were supported for men only, and H3 was supported for both men and women. No partner effects were revealed.

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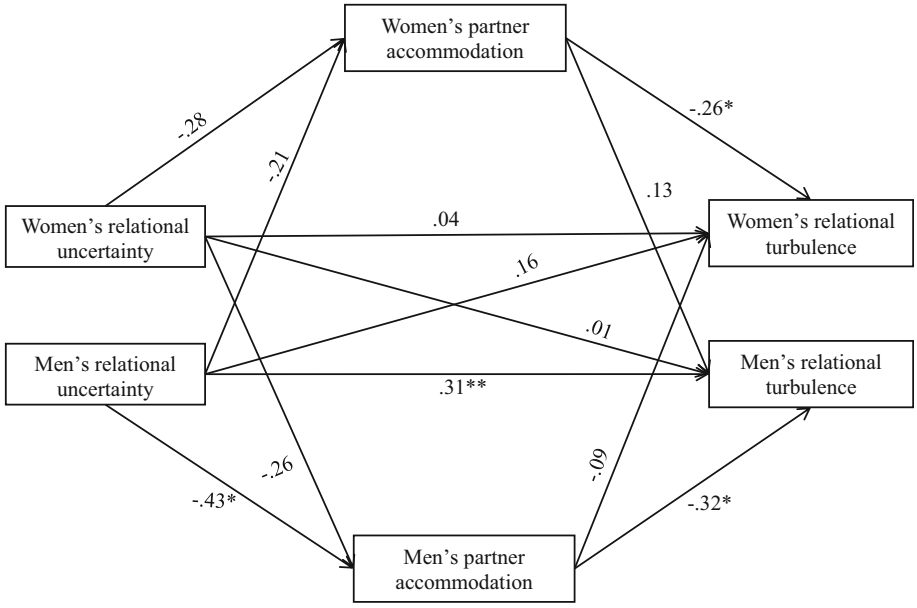


FIGURE 1 Actor–partner mediation model with perceptions of partner accommodation mediating the association between relational uncertainty and relational turbulence. Men's Accommodation mediates the association between men's relational uncertainty and men's relational turbulence, $b = .14$, $SE = .07$, [CI = 0.01–0.30]).

The second actor–partner mediation model tested whether perceptions of partner underaccommodation mediated the association between relational uncertainty and relational turbulence (Figure 2). Model testing revealed that men's relational uncertainty (actor effect, $b = .45$, $p < .05$, $SE = .21$, [CI = 0.03–0.86]) was positively associated with men's perceptions of underaccommodation. Men's relational uncertainty (partner effect, $b = .21$, $p < .05$, $SE = .10$, [CI = 0.02–0.40]) and women's perceptions of partner underaccommodation (actor effect, $b = .30$, $p < .01$, $SE = .10$, [$CI = .14$ to $.46$]) positively associated with women's relational turbulence. Additionally, men's relational uncertainty (actor effect, $b = .33$, $p < .05$, $SE = .13$, [CI = 0.07–0.59]) and perceptions of partner underaccommodation (actor effect, $b = .19$, $p < .05$, $SE = .10$, [CI = 0.00–0.38]) positively associated with men's relational turbulence. The model also revealed a positive indirect effect of men's relational uncertainty before the conversation on men's relational turbulence after the conversation about a relational stressor through men's perceptions of partner underaccommodation (actor –actor effect, $b = .08$, $SE = .06$, [CI = 0.00–0.21]). To summarize, (H1b) and (H5b) were supported for men, whereas H4 was supported for both men and women. The model also revealed the partner effect of men's relational uncertainty on women's relational turbulence. In other words, for women, higher uncertainty of their male partners was associated with greater turbulence experienced by women in their relationships.

The third actor–partner mediation model assessed whether perceptions of accommodation mediated the association between partner interference and relational turbulence (Figure 3). The results revealed that women's partner interference was negatively associated with women's perceptions of partner accommodation (actor effect, $b = -.67$, $p < .001$, $SE = .17$, [CI = −1.01 to −0.33]). Both women's (partner effect, $b = -.42$, $p < .001$, $SE = .18$, [CI = −0.79 to −0.05])

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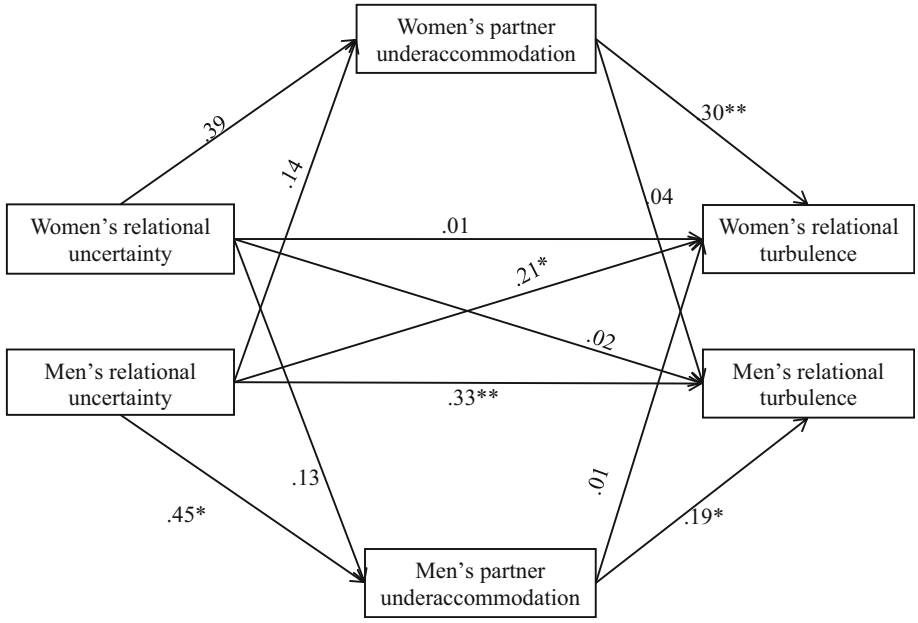


FIGURE 2 Actor–partner mediation model with perceptions of partner underaccommodation mediating the association between relational uncertainty and relational turbulence. Men's underaccommodation mediates the association between men's relational uncertainty and men's relational turbulence, $b = .08$, $SE = .06$, [CI = 0.00–0.21]).

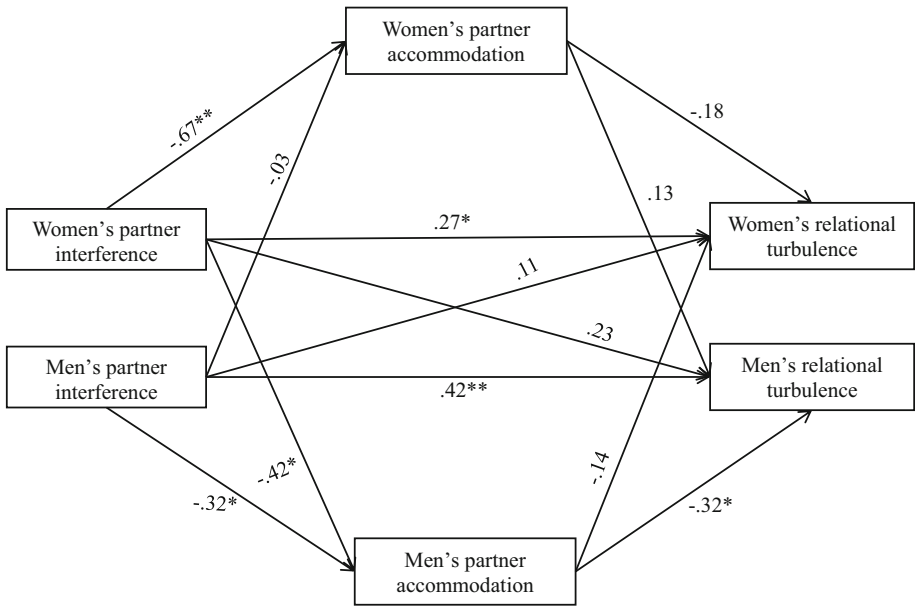


FIGURE 3 Actor–partner mediation model with perceptions of partner accommodation mediating the association between partner interference and relational turbulence. Men's accommodation mediates the association between men's partner interference and men's relational turbulence, $b = .10$, $SE = .05$, [CI = 0.02–0.21]). Also, men's accommodation mediates the association between women's partner interference and men's relational turbulence, $b = .14$, $SE = .08$, [CI = 0.00–0.32]).

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and men's (actor effect, $b = -.32$, $p < .001$, $SE = .15$, [CI = −0.63 to −0.01]) partner interference negatively associated with men's perceptions of partner accommodation. Next, women's perceptions of partner interference before the conversation (actor effect, $b = .27$, $p < .05$, $SE = .11$, [CI = 0.04–0.49]) were positively associated with relational turbulence after the conversation. Men's relational turbulence after the conversation was positively associated with men's perceived partner interference (actor effect, $b = .42$, $p < .001$, $SE = .10$, [CI = 0.21–0.63]) before the conversation about a relational stressor, and negatively associated with men's perceptions of partner accommodation (actor effect, $b = -.32$, $p < .05$, $SE = .12$, [CI = −0.57 to −0.08]) during the conversation. The indirect effect of women's partner interference on men's relational turbulence was significant through men's perceptions of partner accommodation (partner–partner effect, $b = .14$, $SE = .08$, [CI = 0.00–0.32]). Additionally, the men's perceptions of partner accommodation mediated the association between men's partner interference and men's relational turbulence after the conversation (actor–actor effect, $b = .10$, $SE = .05$, [CI = 0.02–0.21]). In sum, (H2a) was supported for both men and women, and H3 and (H6a) were supported for men only. Two partner effects were revealed as stated above.

The fourth actor–partner mediation model examined the association between partner interference and relational turbulence as mediated by perceptions of partner underaccommodation (Figure 4). The results revealed that women's partner interference positively associated with women's perceptions of partner underaccommodation (actor effect, $b = .64$, $p < .001$, $SE = .19$, [CI = 0.26–1.02]) and men's perceptions of partner underaccommodation (partner effect, $b = .57$, $p < .05$, $SE = .21$, [CI = 0.14–1.01]). Also, men's partner interference was positively associated with men's perceptions of partner underaccommodation (actor effect, $b = .40$, $p < .05$, $SE = .18$, [CI = 0.04–0.76]). Women's partner interference (actor effect, $b = .27$,

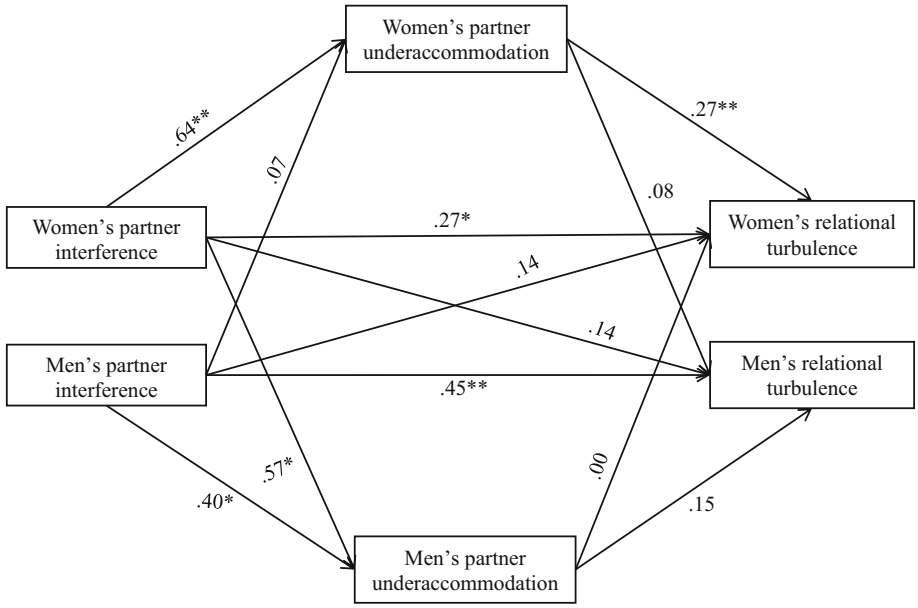


FIGURE 4 Actor–partner mediation model with perceptions of partner nonccommodation mediating the association between partner interference and relational turbulence. Women's underaccommodation mediates the association between women's partner interference and women's relational turbulence, $b = .17$, $SE = .08$, [CI = 0.04–0.33]).

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$p < .05$, $SE = .11$, [CI = 0.06–0.49]) and perceptions of partner underaccommodation (actor effect, $b = .27$, $p < .01$, $SE = .08$, [CI = 0.11–0.43]) positively associated with women's relational turbulence. Men's partner interference (actor effect, $b = .45$, $p < .01$, $SE = .11$, [CI = 0.24–0.67]) was positively associated with men's relational turbulence. The indirect effect revealed that women's perceptions of partner underaccommodation positively mediated the association between women's partner interference and women's relational turbulence (actor–actor effect, $b = .17$, $SE = .08$, [CI = 0.04–0.33]). No significant indirect effects were revealed for men. In sum, (H2b) was supported for both men and women, and (H4 and H6b) were supported for women only. Moreover, as outlined above the models revealed several partner effects as noted.

4 | DISCUSSION

The present study utilized tenets of RTT and perceptions of partner (under)accommodation to examine romantic partners' conversations about a relational stressor (Giles, 2008; Solomon et al., 2016). The study investigated whether relational uncertainty and partner interference correspond with perceptions of partner behaviors during conversations about a relational stressor and whether perceptions of partner behaviors during such conversations associate with relational turbulence. This study adds to RTT literature by examining a specific conversation and outlining how relational partners' communicative perceptions might affect their global evaluations of relational turbulence. Findings were generally consistent with the proposed predictions based on RTT and CAT tenets, and actor–partner mediation models revealed both actor and partner effects. In the next section, the theoretical implications of these results are discussed.

4.1 | Relational uncertainty/partner interference and perceptions of partner behaviors

Supporting the tenets of RTT, the study results revealed that relational uncertainty and partner interference may accentuate the perceptions of partners' underaccommodating behaviors and debilitate the perceptions of partners' accommodating behaviors during conversations about relational stressors (Solomon et al., 2016). More specifically, men who reported being more doubtful about their female partner's relational involvement might be biased in their appraisals of their partner's communicative behaviors during the conversation about a relational stressor. Similarly, both men and women who perceived greater interruptions from their partner in daily routines might be experiencing more negative emotions resulting in perceiving lesser accommodation and greater underaccommodation from their partner during the stressful conversation. As such King and La Valley (2019) indicate that perceived partner interference positively associates with negative emotions, such as anger and anxiety. Furthermore, earlier work suggests that individuals with higher relational uncertainty and stronger perceptions of partner interference report greater feelings of hurt, attribute negative intentions to their partner, and perceive hurtful interactions as more damaging to the relationship (Theiss et al., 2009). In conversations about relational stressors, individuals grappling with relational uncertainty and perceiving more partner interference might attribute negative intentions to their partner. Prior research indicates that inferring negative motives for partner behaviors results in less positive evaluations of such behaviors (Gasiorek & Giles, 2012), suggesting that partner behaviors during conversations

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about stressors might be evaluated as more underaccommodative and less accommodative. Consistent with RTT (Solomon et al., 2016) and CAT (negative interpersonal orientation; Dragojevic et al., 2016), the results suggest that relational uncertainty and perceptions of partner interference may manifest in negative perceptions of partner (under)accommodation during conversations about relational stressors because of experiencing negative emotions and attributing negative intentions to partner.

Partner effects highlight that only women's perceptions of partner interference were associated with men's perceptions of (under)accommodation during conversations about relational stressors. Possibly, women's perceptions of partner interference might correspond with the enactment of their (under)accommodative behaviors during conversations, and thus, perceived as such by their male partners. Previous findings also indicate that women perceiving goal interference tend to feel dominated in conversations with their partner, and within the current context, women may be responding with disaffiliative behaviors in an attempt to achieve equity (McLaren et al., 2012). Nevertheless, further research is needed to understand how perceptions and enactment of (under)accommodative behaviors might be differentially impacted by relational uncertainty and partner interference among men and women during specific conversations about stressors.

4.2 | Perceptions of partner behaviors and relational turbulence

The findings of the study also revealed that women who perceived their partners to be more underaccommodative and men who perceived their partners to be less accommodative during conversations about a relational stressor evaluated their relationship as more chaotic and tumultuous after the conversation. Consistent with CAT tenets that proposed that (under) accommodation associates with relational outcomes, the present study found that accommodation negatively and underaccommodation positively associate with negative relational outcomes (Dragojevic et al., 2016; Soliz & Giles, 2014). Extending the assertions of RTT (Solomon et al., 2016), the mediation results indicate that relational uncertainty and partner interference might prompt individuals to negatively appraise partner behaviors during specific communication episodes to further influence relational turbulence and that experiences of specific episodes characterized by perceptions of partner's (under)accommodative behaviors may bridge the link between relational uncertainty and relational turbulence. In other words, individuals must check their perceptions of their partner's behaviors during a specific difficult conversation as they may amplify negative appraisals of relational qualities.

Interestingly, women's relational uncertainty was not significantly associated with either perception of partner behaviors or relational turbulence. Although, women with high relational uncertainty did perceive their male partners to be less accommodative and more underaccommodative during conversations about relational stressors (these results were not significant), but women's relational uncertainty had a very weak association with relational turbulence. Women's doubts or questions about their relationship were possibly not salient to their appraisals of the relationship as chaotic. Being a lab setting, it is possible that women's doubts about the relational involvement may not have been associated with relational turbulence after one stressful conversation but higher relational uncertainty leading to biased appraisals of several episodes in a naturalistic setting may have a scaffolding impact on relational turbulence (Brisini & Solomon, 2019) and the relationship. As King and Theiss (2016) noted, the nonsignificant results for women's relational uncertainty may reflect the limitation

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of operationalization. Considering that past research has found nuanced effects of three sources of uncertainty (e.g., Theiss & Solomon, 2006a), combining them into a single measure may have obscured some of the results. In the current context, partner uncertainty (doubts about a partner's involvement) may be more relevant to perceptions of partner (under)accommodative behaviors during conversations about relational stressors.

As such, men's greater perceptions of partner accommodation and women's lower perceptions of partner underaccommodation during the conversation corresponded with lower relational turbulence in the relationship assessed after the conversation. These findings are consistent with CAT (Giles, 2008), and considering the RTT perspective that relational turbulence arises from the accumulation of experiences across several communication episodes rather than just one particular episode (Solomon et al., 2016), individuals continuing to perceive less accommodation and greater underaccommodation across multiple episodes of stressful conversations due to higher relational uncertainty and partner interference may report a lot more chaos or turbulence in their relationship over time, which may further correspond with less satisfaction from the relationship (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011). Given that the prior work has found that the self-uncertainty of college students about their relationship with parents and relational turbulence negatively associate with their perceptions of support received from parents (Worley & Mucci-Ferris, 2021), partners should make a conscious effort to minimize the negative effects of relational uncertainty and interference on their relationship evaluations after difficult conversations by being aware of how these factors can influence their perception of support. Additionally, partners must develop emotional reserves by engaging in daily relationship maintenance that preserves the relationship during difficult times (Afifi et al., 2016). For instance, couples can engage in more pillow talk as it promotes relationship satisfaction and may compensate for increased chaos in the relationship (Denes et al., 2017, 2020).

Furthermore, the sex differences found in the study align with the previous studies utilizing RTT, indicating that men and women might experience relational turbulence differently (McLaren et al., 2012; Miller & Roloff, 2005). For instance, McLaren et al. (2012) found that women and men differ in their experiences of hurt, such that men's relational turbulence was significantly associated with perceived dominance, whereas this association was not significant for women. Findings of the current study also indicate differential findings for men and women. Women reporting greater partner interference perceived their partner as more nonaccommodative during the conversation and reported experiencing more relational turbulence after the conversation. Given that women are more sensitive to hurt (Miller & Roloff, 2005), they may internalize greater partner interference, which manifests in perceiving more underaccommodation during the conversation and evaluating the relationship as more turbulent after the conversation.

The findings also reveal that women's perceived accommodation and men's perceived underaccommodation do not associate with relational turbulence in models relevant to partner interference. It is possible that when experiencing interference from a partner, women are less considerate about their partner's accommodation during one episode of stressful conversation and therefore, still report greater turbulence irrespective of their partner's accommodative behaviors during a difficult conversation. One possibility is that women experiencing interference may feel that their partner is trying to overpower them or take control of their daily routines/ activities (McLaren et al., 2012), and thus, not attribute partners' accommodation when appraising the turbulence in the relationship. As such, Buss (1995) argues that women are more responsive to threats that impede a stable commitment and therefore, may perceive partners' nonaccommodative behaviors during stressful conversations as more threatening to the

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relationship. Additionally, previous work indicates that women accommodate more than men (Dragojevic et al., 2016), it is possible that during a conversation about a relational stressor, women might have engaged in more accommodation and men might have engaged in more underaccommodation, resulting in their partners perceiving them as such when appraising the relationship as turbulent.

Although the findings for men and women may differ, the study's results underscore the utility of combining the tenets of RTT and CAT to examine the relational partners' behaviors during conversations about relational stressors. The study findings expand the literature on RTT by offering a unique lens on specific conversation episodes and highlighting that perceptions of partners' (under) accommodative behaviors during stressful conversations may bridge the link between relational uncertainty/ partner interference and relational turbulence. Not resolving relational uncertainty and addressing partner interference may continue to manifest in greater underaccommodative behaviors during several conversations, which may further make relationships more turbulent and lead to deterioration. In line with existing research on RTT, the results suggest that both men and women may attribute relational turbulence to distinct sources (Solomon & Brisini, 2019). Invariably, the study findings extend RTT by examining mediators in a specific conversation that might coalesce over several episodes to make the relationship more chaotic or turbulent, while extending CAT's utility to examine interactions among heterosexual romantic partners.

4.3 | Limitations and future directions

The results of the study contribute to the literature on conversations about relational stressors and extend RTT, yet the findings of the study must be contextualized by the limitations of the study. First, the study focused on perceptions of partner behaviors, however relational uncertainty and partner interference may manifest in individuals' own adjustments of communicative behaviors during conversations about relational stressors as well. Prior work reveals that relational uncertainty and partner interference are associated with conflict styles, and avoidant and confrontational message features during conflict conversations, indicating a potential for (under)accommodative behavioral adjustments during stressful conversations (King & La Valley, 2019; King & Theiss, 2016). Thus, future research may explore the mediating role of individuals' behavioral adjustments between their relational uncertainty/ partner interference and relational turbulence. Second, the study is limited in its ability to draw causal claims. Even though the variables were measured in a time order (relational uncertainty/ partner interference before the conversation & perceptions of (non)accommodation/ relational uncertainty after the conversation), but the possibility of bidirectional effects cannot be denied. Although RTT proposes that relational uncertainty and partner interference may lead to polarization in specific episodes, it also asserts that relational turbulence may shape individuals' relational inferences during conversations, such that it may disrupt dyadic synchrony, collaborative planning, and/ or supportive communication (Solomon et al., 2016). Relational turbulence may promote perceptions of relational messages as more dominating and disaffiliative (Solomon et al., 2016, pp. 521). Indeed, research has found that relational turbulence positively associates with perceived dominance during hurtful conversations (McLaren et al., 2012). Taken together, it is plausible that relational turbulence may increase the propensity of partners to perceive more underaccommodation and less accommodation during conversations about stressors with partners. However, the methodology of the current study does not allow us to determine causality or test such bidirectionality considering the order in which the variables were measured.

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Accordingly, it may be worthwhile to use longitudinal, observational, and experimental designs in the future to establish causality among relational uncertainty/ partner interference, perceptions of partner behaviors, and relational turbulence. Longitudinal designs may help assess the accumulated effect of partners' relational uncertainty/ partner interference and partners' (under)accommodative behaviors (over several communication episodes) on relational turbulence. Furthermore, it is also worthwhile to consider that individuals experiencing relational uncertainty and turbulence may enact less accommodative and more underaccommodative behaviors and are, therefore, being perceived as such. Alternatively, given the mutual influence, partners may be reciprocating each other's (under)accommodative behaviors rather than being biased due to relational uncertainty or partner interference. As such, these conundrums cannot be answered without objective evaluations of partner behaviors during stressful conversations. Therefore, future researchers may study the objective behaviors of relational partners to examine the tenets of RTT. Finally, the differential findings for men and women can be a consequence of a smaller sample size. It is possible that a larger sample size could have resulted in a greater power (power of current sample with .15 effect size is .87, calculated using SPSS) and might have revealed significant findings for women or stronger effect sizes for current findings. Despite these limitations, the study provides insights into how relational partners' uncertainty and partner interference associate with their behaviors during a conversation about stressors, and how these perceptions of partner behaviors affect relational qualities.

5 | CONCLUSION

In summary, the study combined the tenets of RTT and CAT to examine romantic partners' conversations about relational stressors. The findings revealed that partner interference assessed before the conversations about a relational stressor were associated with perceptions of partner (under)accommodation during conversations about relational stressors in the predicted direction, whereas relational uncertainty was associated with partner behaviors only for men. Additionally, for men, perceptions of partner underaccommodation mediated the association between relational uncertainty and relational turbulence, and perceptions of partner accommodation mediated the association between partner interference and relational turbulence measured post-conversation. Further, for women, perceptions of partner underaccommodation mediated the association between relational partner interference and relational turbulence. Overall, the present study reinforces the utility of combining communication theories to assess relational communication during conversations about relational stressors and offers practical implications for couple therapists.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There is no known conflict of interest to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data used in the research are available. The data can be obtained by emailing the corresponding author, Dr. Anuraj Dhillon (anuraj.dhillon@gmail.com). The materials used in the research are available. The materials can be obtained by emailing the corresponding author, Dr. Anuraj Dhillon (anuraj.dhillon@gmail.com).

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