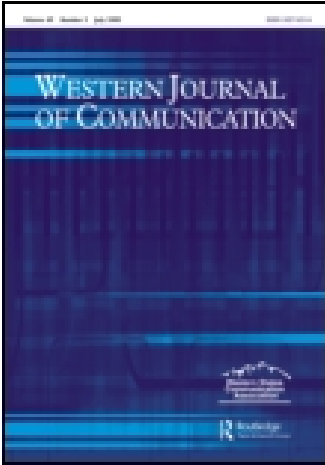


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Antecedents and Consequences of the Perceived Threat of Sexual Communication: A Test of the Relational Turbulence Model

Jennifer A. Theiss & Roi Estlein

This study applied the relational turbulence model to understand the dynamics of sexual communication between romantic partners. We conducted a cross-sectional, dyadic study in which both partners from 85 sexually active couples completed questionnaires about their romantic characteristics, sexual communication, and perceptions of their sexual relationship. Results showed that (a) relational uncertainty and interference from partners were positively associated with the perceived threat of sexual communication; (b) perceived threat of sexual communication was positively associated with both sexual topic avoidance and indirect communication about sexual intimacy; (c) both sexual topic avoidance and indirect sexual communication were negatively associated with sexual satisfaction for females, whereas only sexual topic avoidance was negatively associated with sexual satisfaction for males; and (d) for males only, there was a direct negative association between the perceived threat of sexual communication and sexual satisfaction. Our findings highlight the implications of relational turbulence for predicting cognitive and communicative reactions to sexual intimacy.

Keywords: Relational Turbulence; Relational Uncertainty; Sexual Communication; Topic Avoidance

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Countless studies attempt to understand the communication behaviors that predict relationship maintenance and success, as well as the communication patterns that are associated with dissatisfaction and termination (e.g., Canary & Stafford, 2001; Gottman & Silver, 1999; Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1993; White, 1983). Two related communication behaviors that are often characterized as potentially volatile to romantic relationships are indirect communication and topic avoidance (e.g., Canary & Danitton, 2006; Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004; Stafford & Canary, 1991; Theiss & Solomon, 2006b). *Indirect communication* refers to a lack of openness in one's messages. Forms of indirect communication are negatively associated with relationship satisfaction (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004; Roberts, 2000). *Topic avoidance* occurs when a person strategically withholds information from a partner on a topic that is considered taboo (W. Afifi & Guerrero, 2000). Topic avoidance is associated with decreased intimacy and can contribute to relational dissolution (W. Afifi & Guerrero, 2000; Baxter, 1982; Knapp & Vangelisti, 1992). Although there are times in relationships when indirectness and topic avoidance are beneficial, scholars tend to agree that open communication is one of the cornerstones of a healthy partnership.

One context in which indirect communication and topic avoidance can be particularly problematic is during the negotiation of sexual intimacy. Studies have shown that people are often indirect in negotiating sexual intimacy (e.g., Landry & Camelo, 1994; Metts & Spitzberg, 1996; Quina, Harlow, Morokoff, Burkholder, & Deiter, 2000; Seal & Ehrhardt, 2004), especially during the early stages of relationship development when ambiguity and uncertainty are high (Spitzberg, 2002). Sexual intimacy allows partners to connect interpersonally and express their passionate feelings for one another; thus, indirect communication and sexual topic avoidance may obscure the romantic connection with a partner (Theiss & Solomon, 2007). On the other hand, couples who communicate openly and directly about their sexual relationship tend to be more sexually and relationally satisfied (e.g., Byers, 2005; Byers & Demmons, 1999; Cupach & Comstock, 1990; Fowers & Olson, 1989). Given the negative consequences of sexual topic avoidance and the benefits of direct communication about sex, why do people tend to lack openness in this context? We suspect that the answer rests in how threatening that communicative encounter may be for relational partners. Thus, the goals of this study are to identify relationship characteristics that create conditions where direct sexual communication would be threatening and to explore the impact that perceived threat has on people's openness about sexual intimacy and their satisfaction with sexual events.

We draw on the logic of the relational turbulence model (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001, 2004; Solomon & Theiss, 2008) to identify the relationship characteristics that predict cognitive and communicative reactions to sexual intimacy. The relational turbulence model nominates *relational uncertainty* and *interference from partners* as two relationship characteristics that intensify reactions to relational circumstances. We suspect that these conditions in a relationship make the prospect of open communication about sex particularly threatening, which in turn compromises communication about sex and contributes to less sexual satisfaction. In the sections that

follow, we summarize the logic of the relational turbulence model as it pertains to sexual communication, we describe a study that was designed to test our proposed model, and we discuss the implications of our findings.

Assumptions of the Relational Turbulence Model

The relational turbulence model argues that the transition from casual involvement to serious commitment in dating relationships constitutes a period of relationship development that is vulnerable to turmoil and extreme reactions to interpersonal events. The variety of tumultuous experiences that may occur within romantic relationships during this transition are labeled *relational turbulence*, which is defined as intensified emotional, cognitive, and communicative reactions to relationship circumstances (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001, 2004). Reactivity to interpersonal events can be both negative and positive in valence. For example, compared to individuals in more stable relationships, people who are navigating the transition from casual to serious involvement are likely to be more intensely upset if their partner forgets to call them after work, but also more extremely happy when their partner expresses affection. In more established relationships these sorts of events are mundane, but for less intimate couples these events are especially significant in clarifying the status of the relationship. The relational turbulence model nominates two features of romantic relationships that are heightened during the transition from casual to serious involvement in dating relationships and contribute to heightened reactivity: relational uncertainty and interference from partners.

Relational uncertainty is defined as the “degree of confidence individuals have in their perceptions of involvement in interpersonal relationships” (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002, p. 245) and it encompasses three interrelated sources of ambiguity that people have about their own relationship involvement (*self uncertainty*), their partner’s level of relationship involvement (*partner uncertainty*), and about the dyad as a unit (*relationship uncertainty*; Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). Studies have suggested that relational uncertainty is a persistent factor in both dating relationships (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999) and in committed relationships (Knobloch, 2008; Solomon & Theiss, 2008), and its presence contributes to intensified cognitive, emotional, and communicative reactions to relationship events (e.g., Knobloch, 2007; Knobloch, Miller, & Carpenter, 2007; Theiss & Solomon, 2006a, 2006b).

Interference from partners refers to the degree to which an individual perceives a partner is undermining personal actions (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001) and it manifests in situations where one person’s routine is interrupted by efforts to coordinate actions and establish interdependence with a relational partner (Berscheid, 1983). The process of establishing interdependence allows partners to have more influence in one another’s lives, which provides more opportunities for partners to either help or hinder one another’s goals (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004; Solomon, Weber, & Steuber, 2010). Influence from a partner can be experienced as facilitation when it helps individuals accomplish a goal (e.g., “Thanks for letting me borrow your car so that I wouldn’t be late for work today.”), or it can be perceived as interference

when it hinders goal achievement (e.g., “You always return my car with an empty tank of gas! Would it kill you fill it up once in a while?”). The relational turbulence model argues that a partner’s interference in personal goals and routines intensifies people’s emotional, cognitive, and communicative reactions to relationship events (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004; Theiss & Knobloch, 2009; Theiss & Solomon, 2006a, 2006b).

A variety of studies have documented the consequences of relational uncertainty and partner interference for people’s emotional, cognitive, and communicative reactions to relational episodes. With regard to emotional reactivity, relational uncertainty and interference from partners are associated with increased negative emotion (Knobloch, Miller, & Carpenter, 2007; Knobloch & Theiss, 2010), more intense feelings of hurt (Theiss, Knobloch, Checton, & Magsamen-Conrad, 2009), and increased emotional jealousy (W. Afifi & Reichert, 1996; Knobloch, Solomon, & Cruz, 2001; Theiss & Solomon, 2006a). As for cognitive reactivity, both mechanisms correspond with perceptions of irritations as more severe and relationally threatening (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004; Theiss & Knobloch, 2009; Theiss & Solomon, 2006b), perceptions of hurtful messages as more intentional and damaging to the relationship (Theiss et al., 2009), increased suspicion over third-party rivals (Theiss & Solomon, 2006a), heightened appraisals of turmoil (Knobloch, 2007), and decreased sexual satisfaction (Theiss & Nagy, 2010). Relational uncertainty and interference from partners are also associated with several communicative manifestations, such as the tendency to withhold private information from romantic partners (W. Afifi & Guerrero, 2000), to avoid talking about certain topics (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004), and to be more indirect in their communication about jealousy (Theiss & Solomon, 2006a) and irritations (Theiss & Knobloch, 2009; Theiss & Solomon, 2006b).

We expect that this pattern of reactivity will also emerge when predicting the perceived threat of sexual communication. The perceived threat of sexual communication is a cognitive appraisal of the conditions in a relationship that would render open communication about sex either appropriate or taboo. Communication about sexual intimacy, particularly in a developing relationship, can be a face-threatening prospect. For example, one study of sexual rejection messages found that highly direct and indirect rejections of sexual advances were perceived as more face-threatening than moderately direct rejection messages (Metts, Cupach, & Imahori, 1992). Furthermore, individuals may worry about threats to their own confidence, esteem, or image, or may be embarrassed to voice their own personal preferences with regard to sex (cf. Kunkel, Wilson, Olufowote, & Robson, 2003). Relationship partners might also be concerned about the potential threats that sexual communication could pose to their relationship, such as creating discomfort and embarrassment between partners or potentially damaging the relationship (cf. Wilson, Kunkel, Robson, Olufowote, & Soliz, 2009). According to the relational turbulence model, these concerns should be especially salient when partners are grappling with relational uncertainty and interference from partners. Relational uncertainty should render sexual communication particularly threatening because people cannot predict how their partner will respond under these relational conditions (cf. Berger, 1997).

Prior research demonstrates that individuals who are experiencing relational uncertainty perceive their date request messages as face-threatening (Knobloch, Satterlee, & DiDomenico, 2010); thus, communicating directly about sexual intimacy is likely to elicit similar discomfort and perceived threat. In addition, when a relationship partner is interfering in one's goals, the prospect of sexual communication may be threatening because it represents another aspect of relational life in which the partner might impede goal fulfillment. Thus, we predict the following:

- H1: Relational uncertainty is positively associated with the perceived threat of sexual communication.
- H2: Interference from partners is positively associated with the perceived threat of sexual communication.

Sexual Intimacy, Sexual Communication, and Sexual Satisfaction

Closeness in romantic relationships can be enhanced through sexual intimacy and sexual communication (Greeff, 2000). *Sexual intimacy* involves acts of physical union between relationship partners (i.e., passionate kissing, mutual stimulation, and intercourse) that allow them to connect interpersonally and express their passionate feelings and affection for one another (Theiss & Nagy, 2010). Although sexual intimacy can be a positive relational event that yields pleasant thoughts and feelings, prior research shows that sexual encounters lacking open communication can be a context for negative emotion and rumination (e.g., Theiss & Solomon, 2007). Many people are apprehensive to discuss sexual intimacy with their partner (Anderson, Kunkel, & Dennis, 2011), whether it is a specific request concerning the couple's sexual activity (North & Rothenberg, 1993) or more general concerns about their sexual relationship (Quina et al., 2000), out of fear that the partner will react negatively to such intimate topics of conversation. Not surprisingly, then, studies have shown that relationship partners are typically passive and indirect when discussing aspects of their sexual relationship (e.g., Metts & Spitzberg, 1996; Quina et al., 2000).

Why do people tend toward indirect communication about sexual intimacy? We believe that people's avoidance of sexual communication stems from the amount of threat they visualize in that encounter. Studies have found that relationships characterized by low levels of intimacy and high levels of relational uncertainty are marked by more indirect communication and more topic avoidance (e.g., T. Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004). Relational uncertainty makes it difficult to predict how a relationship partner might respond to interaction and to establish a plan for communication (Berger, 1997). When people cannot establish a plan for interaction, their self-efficacy to enact appropriate communication behaviors under these conditions will likely be compromised (W. Afifi & Weiner, 2004), thereby making the prospect of interaction particularly daunting. In the case of sexual communication, relationship partners must also deal with a topic that has the potential to be quite face-threatening. When the potential for face threats is high, people tend to communicate in more passive and indirect ways (Brown & Levinson, 1987;

Holtgraves, 1991). Thus, we expect that the perceived threat of sexual communication should correspond with more passive and indirect behaviors. Formally stated:

- H3: The perceived threat of sexual communication is positively associated with sexual topic avoidance.
 H4: The perceived threat of sexual communication is positively associated with indirect communication about sex.

Sexual topic avoidance and indirect communication about sex have negative implications for achieving sexual satisfaction. *Sexual satisfaction* refers to the evaluations that people make regarding the quality of their sexual involvement with a partner (Theiss & Nagy, 2010). Studies have shown that there is a strong positive correlation between sexual satisfaction and relational satisfaction (LePoire, 2006) and that both relational and sexual satisfaction are higher when romantic partners engage in more open communication about sexual intimacy (Greeff, 2000; Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997; Montesi, Fauber, Gordon, & Heimberg, 2011). More specifically, partners who maintain effective, direct communication about sex have been found to have enhanced sexual arousal (Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997) and higher frequencies of sexual activity and orgasm (Huberle, 1991). In other words, studies suggest that an ability to engage in open communication about sex corresponds with increased sexual satisfaction. In contrast, people who report indirect communication about sex are likely to experience more negative emotional and cognitive reactions to sex (Theiss & Solomon, 2007) and decreased sexual satisfaction (Theiss, 2011). Thus, we anticipate that individuals who avoid the topic of sexual intimacy or communicate about sex using indirect strategies are less sexually satisfied. Thus, our final set of hypotheses predicts:

- H5: Sexual topic avoidance is negatively associated with sexual satisfaction.
 H6: Indirect communication about sexual intimacy is negatively associated with sexual satisfaction.

The hypotheses in this study are summarized in the predicted model in Figure 1. As a starting point, we predicted that relational uncertainty (H1) and interference from partners (H2) are positively associated with the perceived threat of sexual communication. Next, we predicted that the perceived threat of sexual communication is positively associated with indirect sexual communication (H3) and sexual topic avoidance (H4). Finally, we expect that indirect communication about sex (H5) and sexual topic avoidance (H6) are negatively associated with sexual satisfaction.

As a final consideration, we examine the potential for sex differences in the associations predicted above. Research suggests that men and women may have different attitudes, goals, and reactions when it comes to sexual intimacy. Studies show that women tend to use more direct communication strategies in the form of assurances and romance strategies to support relational functioning, whereas men are more likely to avoid direct relational maintenance strategies (Shea & Pearson, 1986; Simon & Baxter, 1993). Given that sexual communication functions to promote romance and maintain the relationship, men and women may vary in terms of the degree of threat they perceive in conversations about sex. In addition, men's sexual satisfaction

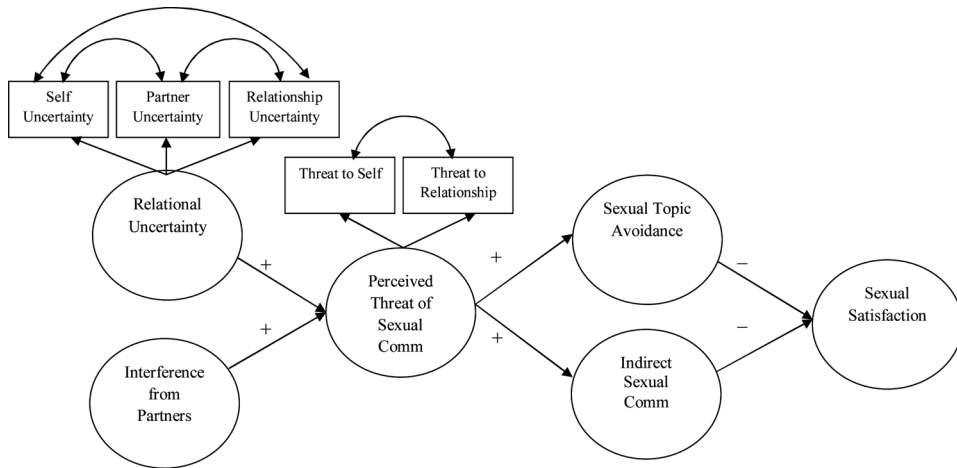


Figure 1 Predicted Model. This structural model was used to test all hypothesized associations. It includes all hypothesized paths and relevant covariances.

is predicted by the frequency of sexual contact and orgasm, whereas women are more likely to find their sexual satisfaction in the emotional and relational closeness that contextualize sexual behavior (Hurlbert & Apt, 1993; Hurlbert, Apt, & Rabehl, 1993). Thus, the implications of indirect sexual communication may be more severe for women than they are for men. We offer a final research question that queries the potential for sex differences in the predicted model:

RQ1: Do the predicted associations in the model differ for males and females?

Method

We recruited students in communication classes at a large university in the northeastern United States to participate in a study with their current sexual partner. The dyads were instructed to come to the research lab at a designated time to complete questionnaires about their relationship. The students earned a small amount of extra course credit for their participation and the partners were entered in a drawing for a gift card to the university bookstore.

Participants

Respondents in this study were 170 individuals who were part of 85 sexually active heterosexual dyads (85 males and 85 females). The participants ranged in age from 18 to 31 years old ($M = 19.72$; $SD = 1.79$). The sample was predominantly Caucasian (61.8%), with the remainder of the sample representing 20.6% Asian, 11.8% Hispanic, 2.8% African American, and 2.4% Indian. Participants characterized the status of their relationship as friends with a romantic interest (15.5%), casual dating partners (20%), serious dating partners (63.5%), or married spouses (1%). Relationships ranged in length from 3 weeks to 12 years ($M = 14.11$ months, $SD = 16.63$ months).

Procedures

When participants arrived at the research lab, each person was asked to read and sign an informed consent form. Then, the individuals were each given a copy of the survey and asked to sit on opposite sides of the room while they answered the questions. When they were finished, they were instructed to return the survey to the researcher, at which point the students gave their name and indicated the course in which they wanted extra credit, the partners filled out a form to be entered in the drawing for the gift card.

Measures

A variety of closed-ended Likert-type questions were used to operationalize the variables used in this study. Confirmatory factor analyses were conducted on all multi-item scales to ensure that they met the criteria of face validity, internal consistency, and parallelism (Hunter & Gerbing, 1982). Criteria for a good fitting model were $\chi^2/df < 3.0$, $CFI > .90$, $RMSEA < .10$ (Bollen, 1989; Kline, 2010). After confirming the scales and their reliability, composite scores were created by averaging the responses to the individual items.

Relational uncertainty

Based on Knobloch and Solomon's (1999) scale to measure self, partner, and relationship uncertainty, participants responded to items prefaced by the stem "How certain are you about . . . ?" (1 = *completely or almost completely uncertain*, 6 = *completely or almost completely certain*). All items were reverse-scored such that higher values represented more relational uncertainty. Four items formed a unidimensional measure of *self uncertainty*: (a) whether or not you want the relationship to work out in the long term; (b) whether or not you want the relationship to last; (c) how important the relationship is to you; and (d) whether or not you are ready to commit to your partner ($M = 2.24$; $SD = 1.05$; $\alpha = .85$). *Partner uncertainty* included four items: (a) How committed your partner is to the relationship; (b) whether or not your partner wants to be with you in the long run; (c) whether or not your partner wants the relationship to work out in the long run; and (d) how much your partner is attracted to you ($M = 2.37$; $SD = 1.18$; $\alpha = .88$). *Relationship uncertainty* included four items: (a) Whether or not the relationship will work out in the long run; (b) whether or not you and your partner feel the same way about each other; (c) Whether or not you and your partner will stay together; and (d) Whether or not the relationship is a romantic one ($M = 2.47$; $SD = 1.05$; $\alpha = .87$).

Partner interference

We used Solomon and Knobloch's (2001) scale to measure partner interference. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which their current romantic partner interferes with their everyday activities by indicating their agreement with five items

on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*): (a) this person interferes with whether I achieve the everyday goals I set for myself; (b) this person interferes with the amount of time I spend with my friends; (c) this person interferes with my ability to use my time well; (d) this person interferes with how much time I devote to my school work; and (e) this person interferes with the things I need to do each day ($M = 2.8$; $SD = 1.13$; $\alpha = .88$).

Perceived threat of sexual communication

On a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*), participants were asked to evaluate how threatening a conversation about their sexual relationship might be for themselves and for the relationship. All items were preceded by the stem "Having a conversation about the nature of our sexual relationship would . . ." Five items formed a unidimensional measure of *Perceived threat to self*: (a) be embarrassing for me; (b) be threatening to me; (c) make me feel vulnerable; (d) damage my image; and (e) make me feel embarrassed ($M = 1.96$; $SD = .95$; $\alpha = .78$). Five other items formed a unidimensional measure of *Perceived threat to the relationship*: (a) have a negative effect on the relationship; (b) make the relationship better (reverse coded); (c) damage the relationship; (d) threaten the relationship; (e) have a positive effect on the relationship (reverse coded) ($M = 1.87$; $SD = .83$; $\alpha = .77$).

Sexual topic avoidance

To understand the degree to which topics concerning the sexual relationship between the partners are present in their talk, participants used a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *actively avoided*, 6 = *actively discussed*) to report how much these topics were discussed or avoided during the week before the study. All items were reverse-scored such that higher values represented more topic avoidance. The composite variable consisted of four items prefaced by the stem "During the past week, we have actively avoided or actively discussed . . .": (a) our view of this sexual relationship; (b) our sexual desires; (c) our feelings for each other; and (d) our satisfaction with our sexual relationship ($M = 2.63$; $SD = 1.06$; $\alpha = .79$).

Indirect sexual communication

Based on measures developed by Theiss and Solomon (2007), participants were asked to record their agreement with statements characterizing their communicative indirectness about their sexual relationship on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*). Nine items were included in the composite variable: (a) I have openly discussed my sexual desires with my partner (reverse coded); (b) I have directly talked to my partner about appropriate sexual behaviors (reverse coded); (c) I have openly discussed my sexual desires with my partner (reverse coded); (d) I have been direct about sexual behaviors I find satisfying (reverse coded); (e) I can openly talk to my partner about our sexual relationship (reverse coded); (f) my partner and I have never openly discussed our sexual desires or preferences; (g) my partner and I

don't discuss our sexual relationship very often; and (h) my partner openly discuss his/her sexual desires with me (reverse coded) ($M=2.33$; $SD=.90$; $\alpha=.82$).

Sexual satisfaction

A 6-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*) was used to measure respondents' satisfaction with the quality of their most recent sexual encounter (Theiss & Nagy, 2010). Six items comprised the measure of *sexual satisfaction*: (a) My partner and I have a fulfilling sexual relationship; (b) I find the sexual contact that I have with my partner to be satisfying; (c) I am content with the sexual aspect of our relationship; (d) there are parts of our sexual relationship that need improvement (reverse coded); (e) I am generally dissatisfied with our sexual relationship (reverse coded); and (f) I am happy with my partner as a lover ($M=4.87$; $SD=.89$; $\alpha=.85$).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

As a preliminary step, we computed bivariate correlations among all of the variables in our model to provide initial insights to the predicted associations (see Table 1). The three sources of relational uncertainty showed positive intercorrelations. All three sources of relational uncertainty were each positively associated with self threat, relationship threat, sexual topic avoidance, and indirect sexual communication, but were negatively associated with sexual satisfaction. Partner interference was positively associated with self threat. Self threat was positively associated with relationship threat, and both sources of threat were positively associated with sexual topic avoidance and indirect sexual communication, but both were negatively associated with sexual

Table 1 Bivariate Correlations Among all Variables in the Model

1. Self Uncertainty								
2. Partner Uncertainty	.55***							
3. Relationship Uncertainty	.78***	.73***						
4. Partner Interference	.02	-.09	-.07					
5. Threat to Self	.20**	.26***	.25***	.23**				
6. Threat to Relationship	.28***	.38***	.31***	.14	.71***			
7. Sexual Topic Avoidance	.33***	.34***	.36***	.06	.37***	.41***		
8. Indirect Sexual Communication	.19*	.23**	.21**	.08	.54***	.49***	.48***	
9. Sexual Satisfaction	-.34***	-.35***	-.38***	-.05	-.45***	-.52***	-.46***	-.49***

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

satisfaction. Sexual topic avoidance was positively associated with indirect sexual communication but negatively associated with sexual satisfaction, and indirect sexual communication was negatively associated with sexual satisfaction.

We conducted paired sample *t*-tests to evaluate sex differences in our variables. Paired-sample *t*-tests revealed a significant difference between males and females on self uncertainty ($t_{(84)} = 2.55, p < .05$), such that males ($M = 2.40$) reported higher levels of self uncertainty than females ($M = 2.08$). There was also a difference in the perceived threat of sexual communication to the relationship ($t_{(84)} = -2.09, p < .05$), such that males ($M = 2.06$) perceived sexual communication as more threatening to the relationship than females ($M = 1.75$).

Substantive Analyses

We tested the hypotheses in our model using structural equation modeling with full maximum likelihood estimation. We set our threshold for a good fitting model at, $\chi^2/df < 3.0$, $CFI > .90$, $RMSEA < .10$ (Bollen, 1989; Kline, 2010). Due to the nonindependence in our data, we tested the model separately for males and females, which also enabled us to look for sex differences in the model. The final model for females is presented in Figure 2 and results indicated that the predicted model adequately fit the data for females ($\chi^2/df = 1.73$; $CFI = .95$; $RMSEA = .09$). The results of the female structural equation model were consistent with our hypotheses. As expected in H1, relational uncertainty was positively associated with the perceived threat of sexual communication. Consistent with H2, interference from partners was also positively associated with the perceived threat of sexual communication. As predicted, the perceived threat of sexual communication was positively associated with sexual topic avoidance (H3) and with indirect communication about sex (H4). Results also

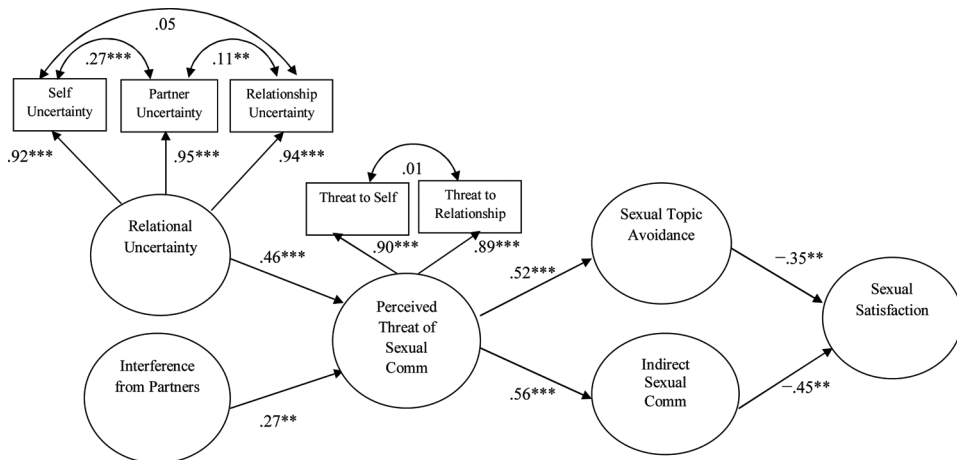


Figure 2 Final Model for Females. This structural model fit the data for females ($\chi^2/df = 2.01$; $CFI = .97$; $RMSEA = .07$). The significance level of all paths in the model were designated as ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

indicated that both sexual topic avoidance and indirect communication about sexual intimacy were negatively associated with sexual satisfaction. Thus, both H5 and H6 were supported.

The final model for males is presented in Figure 3. The initial model provided an adequate chi square value, but the CFI and RMSEA were not in the acceptable range ($\chi^2/df=2.32$; $CFI=.89$; $RMSEA=.13$). After adding a direct path from the perceived threat of sexual communication to sexual satisfaction, the model provided an adequate fit to the data ($\chi^2/df=2.11$; $CFI=.91$; $RMSEA=.10$). Results supported H1, such that relational uncertainty was positively associated with the perceived threat of sexual communication. The association between partner interference and perceived threat of sexual communication was nonsignificant; thus, H2 was not supported for males. The perceived threat of sexual communication was positively associated with sexual topic avoidance (H3) and indirect communication about sex (H4). Topic avoidance was negatively associated with sexual satisfaction for males (H5), but the association between indirect sexual communication and sexual satisfaction was nonsignificant (H6). Finally, the path that was added to the model showed that, for males, the perceived threat of sexual communication was negatively associated with sexual satisfaction.

As a final step, we conducted a multiple groups analysis in SEM to determine if the model fit was significantly different for males and females (RQ1). We started with the model that fit for the male sample since it included an additional path necessary for the model to fit the male data. We set up the multiple groups analysis so that the structural weights were constrained to be equal across both groups. After running the model, we compared the fit of the constrained model to the unconstrained model, which revealed that the models were not significantly different from each other ($\chi^2_{(6)}=6.30$, $p=.71$). Thus, even though the male model required an additional path to fit the data and showed that the path linking partner interference

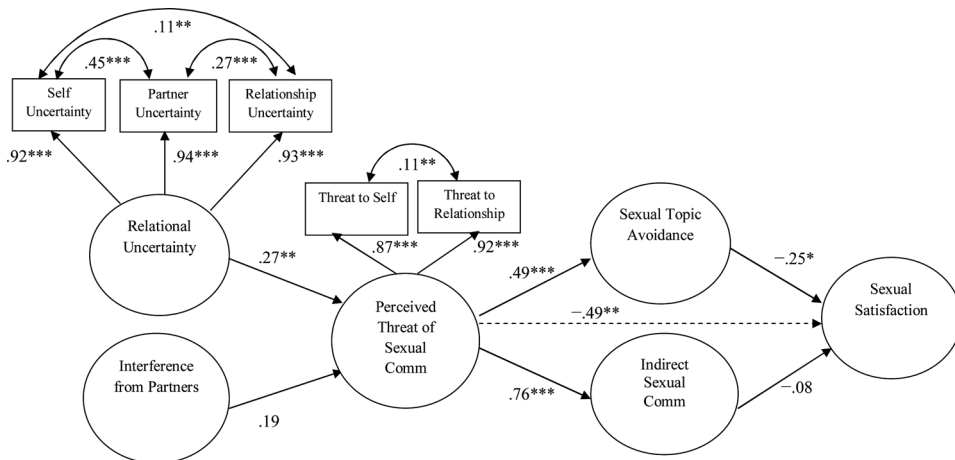


Figure 3 Final Model for Males. This structural model fit the data for males ($\chi^2/df=2.11$; $CFI=.91$; $RMSEA=.10$). The significance level of all paths in the model were designated as ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

to perceived threat of sexual communication and the path linking indirect sexual communication to sexual satisfaction were nonsignificant, the multiple groups analysis showed the path coefficients for the male model and the female model to be invariant.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to apply the relational turbulence model to understand the dynamics of sexual communication between romantic partners. We suggested a model in which relational uncertainty and interference from partners predicted the perceived threat of sexual communication, which in turn predicted sexual topic avoidance and indirect sexual communication, which corresponded with decreased sexual satisfaction. Our findings generally supported the predicted model, with a few exceptions in the male model. In this section, we discuss our findings in the context of the relational turbulence model and we consider the implications that our findings have for research on sexual intimacy.

Implications and Extensions for the Relational Turbulence Model

The relational turbulence model identifies relational uncertainty and interference from partners as relationship characteristics that give rise to more intense reactions to relationship events. Specifically, the model highlights relationship characteristics that promote cognitive, emotional, and communicative reactivity in relationships. In this paper, we focused on the direct association that relational uncertainty and partner interference share with cognition in the form of the perceived threat of sexual communication, and the indirect associations they share with behavioral reactivity in the form of sexual topic avoidance and indirect communication about sex. The results of this study revealed that increased relational uncertainty is positively associated with the perceived threat of sexual communication for both males and females (H1). The positive association between partner interference and the perceived threat of sexual communication, however, is only significant for females, so H2 was only partially supported.

The findings for H1 add to the growing body of research that links relational uncertainty to cognitive reactivity in romantic relationships (e.g., Knobloch & Theiss, 2010; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004; Theiss & Solomon, 2006a, 2006b). In this study, we found that people appraise sexual communication as more threatening under conditions of relational uncertainty. When people are unsure about a partner's feelings for them, communicating about a taboo topic like sexual intimacy has the potential to be quite face-threatening because they cannot predict how the interaction will transpire (Berger, 1997). When we consider the relationship between partner interference and the perceived threat of sexual communication, the association is positive and significant for females but not males. We caution against reading too far into the differences between males and females given that the multiple groups analysis showed that the structural weights of the paths were not significantly

different for males and females and sex differences in communication behavior tend to be minor (Canary & Hause, 1993; Hyde, 2005). Thus, any sex difference in this association is likely to be rather small.

Although previous studies have suggested that relational uncertainty and interference from partners have direct effects on indirect communication and topic avoidance (e.g., W. Afifi & Guerrero, 2000; Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004; Theiss & Solomon, 2006a, 2006b), our findings suggest that these associations may be mediated by people's cognition. The results of this study supported our predicted model revealing positive associations between perceived threat of sexual communication and both sexual topic avoidance (H3) and indirect communication about sex (H4), but no direct association between these variables and relational uncertainty and partner interference. Thus, perhaps it is not relational uncertainty and partner interference per se that promote indirect communication and topic avoidance between romantic partners; rather, people's underlying cognitive reactions to conditions in the relationship may be more proximal predictors of communication behaviors in relationships. In other words, although previous findings have suggested direct effects of relational uncertainty and partner interference on communicative behaviors, our findings suggest a more complex process that may take place when considering sexual communication.

Previous tests of the relational turbulence model have also directly linked relational uncertainty and interference from partners with sexual satisfaction as a cognitive manifestation of turbulence (e.g., Theiss & Nagy, 2010). Our findings in this study suggest that passive sexual communication is a more proximal predictor of sexual satisfaction than overarching relationship characteristics. Although these results are consistent with previous findings suggesting that an ability to engage in open communication about sex corresponds with increased sexual satisfaction (e.g., Quina et al., 2000; Theiss, 2011) and that indirect communication corresponds with negativity and dissatisfaction (Theiss & Solomon, 2007), they also highlight a more complex pattern of associations linking the mechanisms of the relational turbulence model with specific outcomes in romantic relationships.

Although we do not dispute that relational uncertainty and interference from partners may have direct effects on people's communication in relationships, this study emphasizes the role of cognition and rumination in mediating those associations in the context of sexual communication. Recent tests of the relational turbulence model found that perceptions of turmoil in the relationship mediate associations between relational uncertainty and partner interference and other forms of reactivity in romantic relationships (e.g., Knobloch, 2007; Knobloch & Theiss, 2010; Solomon et al., 2010). In the current investigation, we nominate the perceived threat of sexual communication as another cognitive variable that renders people unwilling or unable to engage in open communication with their sexual partner. A recent study documented a similar pattern of associations in which the perceived threat of relationship talk mediated the association between relational uncertainty and open communication about the state of the relationship (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011). As a set, these studies suggest that cognitive reactivity may play a more central role in the relational

turbulence model than previously believed. Future research should investigate the mediating role of cognition more explicitly. Some scholars have nominated perceptions of relational turmoil as a potential mediator that should be added to the relational turbulence model (McLaren, Solomon, & Priem, 2012). Along these lines, we suggest that a variety of cognitive variables, such as perceived threat of communication or perceived partner response, be explored as potential mediators in the model.

Extensions of the Literature on Sexual Intimacy

The application of the relational turbulence model to the context of sexual intimacy provides a theoretically grounded approach to understanding this phenomenon. This study adds to the existing literature on sexual intimacy by relying on the relational turbulence model as a theoretical framework that identifies concrete relational mechanisms (i.e., relational uncertainty and interference from partners) that may explain negative reactions to sex. Although previous studies have highlighted some relationship characteristics that are linked to sexual outcomes (e.g., Byers, 2005; Christopher & Sprecher, 2000; Cupach & Comstock, 1990; Theiss & Solomon, 2007), this study provides a theoretical model of this process.

Although previous studies have documented negative associations between indirect patterns of communication about sexual intimacy and sexual satisfaction (e.g., Byers, 2005; Byers & Demmons, 1999; Greeff, 2000; Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997), our findings point to an explanation for why some romantic couples may employ more indirect communication patterns. Specifically, given that sexual communication is often perceived as a taboo topic in romantic relationships (Anderson et al., 2011; Baxter & Wilmot, 1985), this study points to the ways in which sexual communication can be perceived as threatening to one's self or the relationship (e.g., Kunkel et al., 2003; Metts et al., 1992). Our findings also suggest that this is especially true among couples who experience high relational uncertainty and interference from partners. Thus, focusing on the perceived threat of sexual communication as a mediating variable between the mechanisms in the relational turbulence model and sexual communication provides important insight into the reasons partners might avoid open dialogue about sex in less intimate and uncertain associations.

We are cognizant of the implications that these findings have for the population in which this model was tested. College students in particular are frequently engaged in the kind of borderline relationships where relational uncertainty and partner interference are expected to be problematic (see Solomon & Knobloch, 2004; Solomon & Theiss, 2008). Nearly half of the participants in this study characterized the relationship with their sexual partner as friends with a romantic interest or casually dating and almost 80% of the people who said they were seriously dating their partner had only been dating them for three months or less. According to the relational turbulence model, relationships in this stage of development should be rife with relational uncertainty and interference from partners. If these conditions were not enough to make sexual communication a threatening prospect, studies suggest that

college students lack sexual scripts that make directness a preferred strategy for negotiating sexual contact (e.g., Metts & Spitzberg, 1996), thereby making open communication about sex socially taboo and face-threatening. This perfect storm of variables suggests that college-aged individuals likely have difficulty engaging in direct communication with a sexual partner. The implications of this widespread indirectness suggest that college students in particular are vulnerable to increased coercive and nonconsensual sex, heightened potential for sexually transmitted infections, and dissatisfying sexual encounters. In order for this population to have safer and more satisfying sexual relationships, the threat and stigma associated with open sexual communication need to be lifted by educating college students about the importance of sexual communication and arming them with strategies to engage in open communication with their sexual partners.

We also take note of the fact that sexual topic avoidance and indirect sexual communication were both significant predictors of sexual satisfaction for females, but that indirect communication about sex was a nonsignificant predictor for males. This finding was surprising given prior evidence that males, more so than females, are more sexually satisfied when they communicate openly about sex (Montesi et al., 2011). Why would sexual topic avoidance be a significant predictor of sexual dissatisfaction for males, but not indirect sexual communication? We suspect that sexual topic avoidance leaves men in an uncomfortable predicament where they are uncertain about consent, sexual history, or acceptable sexual behaviors, thereby making it difficult to fully appreciate a sexual encounter. Indirectness, on the other hand, implies that some information is being shared even if partners go about the interaction in more passive ways. Studies suggest that sexual partners often view nonverbal overtures of sexual interest to be as indicative of sexual consent as a verbal expression of agreement (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999). These findings suggest that indirect sexual communication may provide enough information to feel comfortable engaging in the sexual act, without putting sexual partners in the face-threatening predicament of having to communicate directly about sex. In spite of these potential explanations, we caution against placing too much emphasis on this difference given that the association was still in the predicted direction and that the multiple groups analysis showed that the models were not significantly different for males and females. Nevertheless, future studies should consider potential sex differences in indirect communication and sexual satisfaction.

Finally, we acknowledge the direct path between the perceived threat of sexual communication and sexual satisfaction in the male model. The results indicated that males were less sexually satisfied when they perceived sexual communication as threatening. Recall that the paired sample *t*-tests also showed that males perceived significantly more threat in sexual communication than females. Taken together, these findings suggest that males are particularly crippled by the prospect of open sexual communication. Along these lines, prior research has shown that individuals with high amounts of social anxiety, which is likely related to threatening perceptions of sexual communication, experience diminished sexual satisfaction (Montesi et al., 2013). On one hand, these results suggest that even the mere idea of an

uncomfortable conversation about sex is enough to diminish males' satisfaction with sexual intimacy. On the other hand, given that men find the threat of sexual communication and the avoidance of sexual communication dissatisfying, perhaps males would benefit from establishing a more comfortable and open connection with their partner before engaging in sexual contact. Additional data is needed to probe these associations, but the findings of this study and others like it suggest that future research should make a strong attempt to understand men's sexual experiences.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

This study has several strengths, as well as some limitations. A first strength stems from our efforts to apply a theoretical framework to predict the nature of sexual communication and reactions to sexual intimacy. Although our findings support some of the previously documented links between relationship characteristics and indirect patterns of communication, they also reveal a more complex model of the relational processes that are involved in the relational turbulence model and their possible implications and consequences.

A related strength was that we extended the relational turbulence model to the context of sexual communication and sexual intimacy. Although Theiss and Nagy (2010) also applied the relational turbulence model to the context of sexual intimacy, they looked at married couples, whereas we used this theoretical framework to study mostly dating couples. Our focus on dating couples is important given that relational uncertainty and interference from partners are more likely to be a factor for these dyads than for couples with more established commitments. Moreover, we broadened the relational turbulence model to focus on sexual communication as a behavioral manifestation of turbulence in the relationship. In doing so, we also add important insights to the relational communication literature by highlighting variables that predict patterns of communication between sexual partners.

Our study also has some limitations. First, there were several limitations related to the sample for this study. Our sample was composed of college students with more than 98% of participants ranging from 18 to 23 years of age. Although negotiating sexual intimacy is an especially relevant issue for college students, focusing exclusively on this population limits the generalizability of our findings. In addition, the vast majority of participants in this study were in casual sexual relationships or the early stages of romantic relationship development; thus, many of our findings may be attributed to the lack of intimacy or relationship experience that had been established in these young partnerships. Moreover, we limited the study to heterosexual dyads, so the results cannot be generalized to the experiences of sexual partners with other sexual orientations. Second, since our data were cross-sectional, we were not able to firmly establish the causal directions of the effects we found. This also limits our understanding of the developmental nature of the relational processes we studied. Thus, future studies should test the associations and the relational processes suggested in this study by using a more heterogeneous sample and by examining them longitudinally. Third, although we used a dyadic sample and controlled for

nonindependence in the data by analyzing males and females separately, we did not look into the possible interdependence between partners' perceptions of their sexual relationship. Future research should look into possible mutual influences that romantic partners may have on each other's perceptions of, and reactions to, the sexual relationship.

In sum, the findings of this investigation provide new insights to the relational processes suggested by the relational turbulence model. Specifically, it highlights cognition as more central to the experience of relational turbulence than previously believed. This study also extends the relational turbulence model by applying it to the context of sexual intimacy among dating couples. A test of the relational turbulence model in this context is significant because it maintains the original integrity of the model as it applies to relationships in limbo between casual involvement and serious commitment. The results of this study also point to possible reasons that college-aged sexual partners may avoid conversations about sexual intimacy. The perceived threat of these interactions is an important variable for understanding people's tendency toward indirect sexual communication and sexual topic avoidance. We encourage researchers to further examine the reasons that sexual communication is perceived as threatening and the implications that perceived threat has on sexual outcomes.

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