




Relationship Talk With Partners and Friends During Emerging Adulthood: The Role of Relationship Satisfaction


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Abstract

Research indicates that discussing one's romantic relationship with one's partner benefits individual well-being and reduces uncertainty about the future of the relationship. Implications of relationship talk with friends remain less clear, though talking with friends may actually increase uncertainty about the relationship (e.g., by making one's partner jealous of these friends), particularly for emerging adults. Relationship talk with friends may be especially likely to promote relational uncertainty for couples who are already unsatisfied in their relationships. In this study, we explored whether relationship talk with one's partner and one's friends would each be uniquely associated with depressive symptoms and uncertainty about the relationship, specifically in the form of perceived partner jealousy of one's friends and whether these associations would be moderated by relationship satisfaction. Results from a series of path models using data from 202 romantically involved emerging adults in the United States revealed that associations between relationship talk and outcomes were indeed moderated by relationship satisfaction. For example, only in unsatisfied relationships was relationship talk with friends positively associated with a partner's jealousy and negatively associated with depressive symptoms. This research expands our understanding of

relationship talk by differentiating between talk with partners versus friends, while considering the contextual role of relationship satisfaction.

Keywords: social networks, communication, relationship maintenance, emerging adults, relational uncertainty, romantic jealousy

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Introduction

“Relationship talk” was first studied in the context of relationship maintenance, conceptualized by Braiker and Kelley (1979), and further studied by Acitelli (1988, 1992) as ways in which couples communicate with each other to sustain intimacy. Research indicates that discussing one’s relationship with one’s partner benefits both relationship satisfaction (Badr & Acitelli, 2005) and mental health (e.g., lower depression; Acitelli, 2002). Considering the growing research on the role of social networks in shaping romantic relationships (Sinclair et al., 2015), it may also be important to examine the implications of disclosing relationship issues to friends. Talking to friends about one’s romantic relationship may be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, talking to friends may ease distress associated with relationship issues. On the other hand, confiding in friends about the relationship might cause the partner to be jealous of those friends, which may threaten the relationship (Stein et al., 2019) and thereby increase relational uncertainty. Thus, the purpose of the present study was two-fold. First, we examined whether relationship talk with both partners and friends would be associated with uncertainty stemming from partner’s jealousy, as well as with depressive symptoms. Second, since the nature of relationship talk with both partner and friends may depend on the context of the relationship itself, we examined whether relationship satisfaction moderated these associations. We explored these questions in a sample of emerging adults, given the developmental task of seeking long-term romantic relationships and the importance of friendship in emerging adulthood.

Literature Review

Relationships in the Context of Emerging Adulthood

Emerging adulthood is defined as the years from the late teens to the late 20s (18 to 29) that constitute a distinctive period of experiences in social relationships (Arnett, 2000). The developmental tasks of emerging adulthood include establishing one’s identity and establishing intimacy (Barry et al., 2009; Erikson, 1968). Both friendships and romantic relationships can help emerging adults accomplish this latter task, with most emerging adults gaining skills in initiating and maintaining romantic relationships by first learning to meet the need for intimacy in friendships (Collins & van Dulmen, 2006).

In fact, friends have been shown to significantly influence continuation or dissolution of romantic relationships in emerging adulthood (Felmlee & Sinclair, 2018), perhaps in part because of instability in romantic relationships at this stage (Arnett, 2006). For example, literature suggests that individuals in newer, more casual relationships experience more romantic jealousy than those in committed, more stable

relationships (Aylor & Dainton, 2001). Compared to adolescents who are likely dating more casually (Lantagne & Furman, 2017) or to middle-aged or older adults who are likely in more long-term committed relationships, emerging adults may be questioning whether their significant other could be a potential long-term partner and may therefore grapple more seriously than other age groups with feelings of uncertainty about the romantic relationship (e.g., jealousy; Arnett, 2006). Thus, in the present study, we examined whether relationship talk (with partner and friends) predicted relational uncertainty stemming from romantic jealousy. In addition, we examined whether relationship talk predicted depressive symptoms, given their associations with relationship problems, formation, and dissolution (Sandberg-Thoma & Kamp Dush, 2014), as well as the high prevalence of depression in emerging adulthood (Fruehwirth et al., 2021).

Theoretical Background

Relational Turbulence Theory (RTT; Solomon et al., 2016) provided insight into how relationship talk—particularly with partners—can influence relational uncertainty. Relational uncertainty is conceptualized to include not only an individual’s own uncertainty about the future of the relationship (e.g., How committed am I to my partner?, i.e., self-uncertainty), but also their partner’s uncertainty (e.g., How committed is my partner to me?, i.e., partner uncertainty) and uncertainty about the future of the relationship (e.g., Will my relationship last?, i.e., relationship uncertainty). The theory suggests that relational uncertainty contributes to *relational turbulence*, defined as the heightened emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactivity to relationship circumstances (Solomon et al., 2016). RTT posits that positive communication attenuates relational uncertainty, whereas indirect communication can amplify relational uncertainty.

In line with RTT, studies have shown that relationship talk with partners is negatively associated with relational uncertainty (Theiss & Nagy, 2013). Though research and theory on relationship talk and relational uncertainty typically focus only on the romantic relationship, the literature on the influence of individuals’ larger social networks on their romantic relationships (i.e., the Social Network Effect) suggested that social networks may generate relational uncertainty, as well, through their facilitative and disruptive functions in developing relationships (Sinclair et al., 2015). For example, friends can provide support to an individual during difficult times but may also act as a threat to the romantic relationship by inducing partner jealousy.

To account for the potential role of social networks in relational uncertainty, Stein and colleagues (2019) developed a measure of network-based relational uncertainty focused on romantic partners’ degrees of confidence in their networks’ acceptance and support of their relationship’s development, as well as the perception of potential jealousy stemming from these networks. Stein et al. found that network-based relational uncertainty was negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction. For example, individuals who perceived their partner to be more jealous of their larger social network were less satisfied in their romantic relationships. Given that romantic jealousy may be particularly common and intense in emerging adulthood (Aylor & Dainton, 2001), in the present study we consider network-based relational uncertainty in the form of perceived partner jealousy of one’s larger social network (e.g., friends). Romantic jealousy, which is defined as a cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reaction that occurs when the quality and/or existence of a person’s romantic relationship is threatened by a real or imagined rival (i.e., an extra-dyadic relational threat; Guerrero & Andersen, 1998; White & Mullen, 1989), has been linked to negative relationship outcomes (e.g., Barelds & Dijkstra, 2006). Thus, one of the goals of the present study was to examine whether relationship talk with partners and with friends was linked to relationship uncertainty stemming from perceived partner’s jealousy of friends.

Relationship Talk With Partners and Friends

Consistent with Relational Turbulence Theory (RTT), research has focused on the positive implications of relationship talk with partners (Tan et al., 2012). For example, in a study examining emerging adult couples, researchers found that more frequent relationship talk with partners was associated with greater relationship satisfaction (Jensen & Rauer, 2014). Most studies on relationship talk with friends have focused on its role in moderating the association between relationship talk with partners and relational outcomes (Jensen & Rauer, 2014), although a few studies found a direct negative association between relationship talk with friends and relational well-being (Jensen et al., 2018).

Less is known about the individual mental health implications of relationship talk. The limited research on this topic shows that relationship talk with partners is associated with less depression for married couples (Acitelli, 2002) and greater life satisfaction among married women (Acitelli, 1992), as well as less psychological distress for both lung cancer patients and their partners (Badr et al., 2008). However, it remains unknown whether relationship talk with friends has similar implications for individual depressive symptoms. Given the increasing role of friends during emerging adulthood (Collins & van Dulmen, 2006) and the high prevalence rate of depressive symptoms in this population (Fruehwirth et al., 2021), an examination of how relationship talk with friends might be associated with individuals' depressive symptoms is developmentally meaningful.

The Moderating Role of Relationship Satisfaction

Some research has indicated that the implications of relationship talk were not always positive and may depend on individual and/or relationship characteristics (Knoblock & Theiss, 2011; Solomon et al., 2016). For example, the effects of relationship talk may depend on how individuals appraise the talk (i.e., as more or less threatening to themselves and/or to their relationship; Knoblock & Theiss, 2011). From the perspective of RTT, Solomon et al. (2016), and Theiss and Solomon (2006) suggest that relationship characteristics can modify reactions to various relationship issues through biased cognitive reappraisals. For example, in less intimate relationships, individuals are likely to have negatively biased cognitive reappraisals of their interactions with each other, thereby experiencing more romantic jealousy and being less direct about communicating the jealousy within the dyad.

One of the goals of the present study was to extend Theiss and Solomon's (2006) work beyond the dyad to understand the role of relationship satisfaction in moderating effects of relationship talk—not just with partners but also with friends—given that romantic jealousy derives from an extra-dyadic relational threat. We suspected that the effects of relationship talk may depend not only on who the individual communicates to about the relationship (partner versus friend) but also on the level of satisfaction of the relationship. For individuals in satisfied relationships, relationship talk (with partner and with friend) may tend to have more positive content and thus may have different implications for depressive symptoms and uncertainty stemming from perceived partner jealousy than for individuals in unsatisfied relationships. For example, relationship talk with friends may induce more uncertainty about the partner's romantic jealousy for individuals in unsatisfied relationships (perhaps in part through biased cognitive appraisals) compared to those in more satisfied relationships. In the present study, we therefore examined relationship satisfaction as a moderator of the association between relationship talk and outcomes (depressive symptoms and perceived partner jealousy).

The Present Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate: (1) the associations of both partner and friend relationship talk with relational uncertainty (specifically, perceived partner jealousy of one's friends), as well as with depressive symptoms (RQ1); and (2) whether relationship satisfaction moderates these associations (RQ2). In light of existing research, we proposed four hypotheses related to RQ1. First, we hypothesized that more relationship talk with partners would be linked to less relational uncertainty (H1). Second, we hypothesized that more relationship talk with friends would be linked to increased uncertainty (H2). Finally, we hypothesized that relationship talk with both partner (H3) and friends (H4) would each be associated with lower levels of depressive symptoms. We further explored whether the implications of relationship talk (with partner and friends) for perceived partner jealousy, as well as for depressive symptoms, would be moderated by relationship satisfaction (RQ2). Due to the relatively exploratory nature of the second research question, we did not posit specific hypotheses about moderation.

Methods

Participants

Eligible individuals, who were between the ages of 18 and 29 and in dating relationships of 6 months or longer, were asked to complete an online survey in Qualtrics from 09/11/2018 to 01/16/2019. The participants were recruited via solicitation flyers posted at two universities (one in the Northeast, the other in the Southwest), social media posts, and a psychology subject pool (at the university in the Northeast) with IRB approval (ASU: STUDY00008582; Adelphi: 081018). The final sample ($N = 202$) was primarily female (81.2%, $n = 164$), with a mean age of 21.32 years ($SD = 2.82$). Of the 202 participants, most (87.6%) were non-Hispanic/Latino. The majority were also Caucasian (75.7%), with the rest of the sample identifying as either Asian (11.9%), African American (5.9%), American Indian (1.5%), or "other" (5%). The average relationship length was 2.27 years ($SD = 1.87$), and a majority (76.7%) of these relationships were geographically close (i.e., not long-distance). The majority of our participants reported at least some college education (83.7%). Participants completed an online survey in Qualtrics, including the initial page of informed consent and a number of self-report questionnaires. At the conclusion of the study, participants were offered the opportunity to provide their email address to be entered into a raffle to receive a \$50 Amazon gift card.

Measures

Relationship Talk

Relationship talk was assessed using the scale adapted from the Relationship Work Scale (Jensen et al., 2018). This self-report scale consists of four items (relationship communication, decision making, relations with the partner's family, and social life and leisure) from the original 5-item scale, excluding an item on finances that was likely not relevant for our non-cohabiting emerging adult sample. Participants were prompted to think about how often they bring up concerns that arise in these four areas of their romantic relationship by talking it through with either their (a) partner or (b) close friend(s). For example, participants were asked, "How often do you bring up how well you and your partner talk over important and unimportant issues?" separately for (a) partner and (b) friend(s). All items were responded to on a scale from 1 (*never*) to 9 (*always*), and a mean scale was created from the 5 items. The original scale (Jensen et al., 2018) was found to have high reliability (partners; $\alpha = 0.75$, friends; $\alpha = 0.85$), and the scale demonstrated good internal consistency in the present study, as well (partners; $\alpha = 0.77$, friends; $\alpha = 0.83$).

Network-Based Relational Uncertainty: Jealousy

Network-based relational uncertainty was defined as the degree to which individuals perceived that their partners were jealous of their wider social network. It was measured using the jealousy subscale of Network Uncertainty Measure (NUM; Stein et al., 2019). The NUM consists of five subscales (network-to-self acceptance, negative judgment from partner's network, third-party threat, network-to-partner acceptance, and partner jealousy) and is designed to measure the degree of confidence in the networks' acceptance and support of the relationship's development. The jealousy subscale consists of four items (e.g., "Your partner does not feel threatened by any of your network members") to which participants are asked to respond using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*completely or almost completely uncertain*) to 7 (*completely or almost completely certain*). Items were summed to create a total score ranging from 4 to 28, but we recoded the items so that higher scores would indicate higher levels of network-based relational uncertainty (in this case, partner jealousy). For the jealousy subscale, Cronbach's alpha for the present study was 0.85, indicating good internal consistency.

Relationship Satisfaction

Relationship satisfaction was assessed using a single item from the Couple's Satisfaction Index (CSI-16; Funk & Rogge, 2007). Specifically, participants were asked, "Please indicate the degree of satisfaction—all things considered—of your relationship" on a scale from 1 (*extremely unhappy*) to 7 (*perfect*). This single item was used rather than the complete scale due to potential overlap between couples' satisfaction as assessed by the CSI and relationship talk (i.e., communication). Studies show that a single-item measure of relationship satisfaction is a robust indicator that is highly correlated with more lengthy measures (e.g., .71 – .77 with ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale in Fowers & Olson, 1993).

Depressive Symptoms

To assess depressive symptoms, participants completed the Center for Epidemiologic Studies-Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977). This 20-item measure is a self-report scale designed to measure depressive symptomatology in the general population. Participants were asked to rate a series of statements (e.g., "I felt that I could not shake off the blues even with the help of my family and friends") using a 4-point scale ranging from 0 (*rarely or none of the time [<1 day]*) to 3 (*most or all of the time [5–7 days]*). Items were summed to create a total score ranging from 0 to 60, with higher scores indicating higher levels of depressive symptoms. Cronbach's alpha for the CES-D in the present study was 0.91, indicating excellent internal consistency.

Analytic Strategy

To test the hypotheses associated with our first research question, we estimated a series of path models utilizing Mplus Version 8.1. Because our model was fully saturated (wherein all exogenous variables were allowed to covary), we do not report model fit information. We first estimated two path models that included the main effects from relationship talk with partners and friends to (1) depressive symptoms; and (2) network-based relational uncertainty (depressive symptoms and uncertainty were allowed to covary). In these models, we controlled for age, gender, race, ethnicity, relationship length, and relationship satisfaction. We controlled for the length of the relationship given that couples who have been together longer may engage in more relationship-focused disclosure (Tan et al., 2012).

To address the second research question, we examined the moderating role of relationship satisfaction for both models by including interaction terms between (1) relationship talk with partner and relationship satisfaction; and (2) relationship talk with friends and relationship satisfaction. Depressive symptoms and network-based relational uncertainty were each regressed on both of these interaction terms

simultaneously (though we present results separately for ease of interpretation). In these models, we controlled for age, gender, race, ethnicity, and relationship length. In addition, we used bootstrapping (10,000 replications) and reported 95% confidence intervals in all of our models. We probed significant interactions using the Johnson–Neyman technique, which is an extension of the simple slopes approach that utilizes confidence intervals (Preacher et al., 2006).

Results

Relationship Talk and Outcomes: Main Effects

Correlations among all study variables are shown in Table 1. As seen in Table 2, after accounting for demographic covariates and relationship length and satisfaction, consistent with our first hypothesis (H1), there was a trend-level negative association between relationship talk with partners and network-based relational uncertainty ($b = -.13, p = .072, 95\% CI = -.27 - .01$). However, in contrast to our second hypothesis (H2), there was no association between relationship talk with friends and network-based relational uncertainty ($b = .08, p = .157, 95\% CI = -.03 - .19$). Among the covariates, relationship satisfaction was significantly negatively associated ($b = -.27, p = .008$) and depressive symptoms were significantly positively associated ($b = .04, p = .001$) with network-based relational uncertainty.

Table 1. Summary of Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Between Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Age (Years)	-									
2. Gender (% Female)	-.14*	-								
3. Ethnicity (% Caucasian)	-.10	.09	-							
4. Race (% Non-Hispanic/Latino)	.01	.05	.10	-						
5. Length of Relationships	.19**	-.03	.13	-.04	-					
6. Relationship Talk With Partner	.01	-.15*	.02	-.04	.04	-				
7. Relationship Talk With Friends	.06	-.12	.06	-.03	.04	.53**	-			
8. Relationship Satisfaction	-.02	-.17*	.01	-.07	-.04	.27**	-.01	-		
9. Depressive Symptoms	-.19**	.11	-.07	.05	-.06	-.24**	-.10	-.28**	-	
10. Network-Based Relational Uncertainty	-.12	.22**	.08	.12	-.02	-.24**	-.01	-.37**	.38**	-
<i>M/%</i>	21.32	81.2%	75.7%	87.6%	2.27	6.78	5.44	5.38	15.06	2.60
<i>SD</i>	2.82	-	-	-	1.87	1.64	1.91	1.28	10.62	1.47

Note. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; Range: Relationship Talk with Partner (1–9), Relationship Talk With Friends (1–9), Relationship Satisfaction (1–7), Depressive Symptoms (0–53), Network Uncertainty Jealousy (1–7).

Table 2. Models for Relationship Talk With Partner and Friends as the Predictors of Network-Based Relational Uncertainty and Depressive Symptoms (N = 202)

Variable	Main Effects			Moderation by Relationship Satisfaction		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE b</i>	95% <i>CI</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE b</i>	95% <i>CI</i>
Network-Based Relational Uncertainty						
Age	-.03	.03	-.09 – .04	-.02	.03	-.09 – .04
Gender	.45 [†]	.26	-.07 – .94	.40	.26	-.11 – .89
Ethnicity	.31	.31	-.26 – .93	.38	.32	-.22 – 1.03
Race	.28	.21	-.13 – .70	.25	.21	-.16 – .66
Length of Relationship	-.01	.06	-.11 – .11	.01	.06	-.09 – .12
Relationship Talk With Partner	-.13 [†]	.07	-.27 – .01	-.16*	.07	-.30 – -.01
Relationship Talk With Friends	.08	.06	-.03 – .19	.11 [†]	.06	-.01 – .22
Relationship Satisfaction	-.27**	.10	-.48 – -.09	-.21*	.10	-.43 – -.04
Depressive Symptoms	.04**	.01	-.02 – .06	.04***	.01	-.02 – .06
Relationship Talk With Partner x Relationship Satisfaction				.14*	.06	.02 – .25
Relationship Talk With Friends x Relationship Satisfaction				-.10 [†]	.06	-.20 – .02
Depressive Symptoms						
Age	-.64**	.23	-1.08 – -.17	-.61**	.23	-1.07 – -.15
Gender	-.34	2.16	-4.42 – 4.02	-.17	2.07	-4.09 – 3.98
Ethnicity	-3.11 [†]	1.88	-6.76 – -.55	-4.02*	1.96	-7.80 – -.09
Race	.19	1.60	-2.95 – 3.35	.38	1.61	-2.83 – 3.51
Length of Relationship	-.03	.42	-.78 – .87	-.13	.39	-.83 – .68
Relationship Talk With Partner	-.77	.55	-1.82 – .30	-.42	.58	-1.60 – .65
Relationship Talk With Friends	-.13	.47	-1.04 – .80	.42	.50	-1.33 – .64
Relationship Satisfaction	-1.22 [†]	.67	-2.56 – .08	-1.60*	.71	-2.93 – -.13
Network-Based Relational Uncertainty	2.03**	.59	.91 – 3.22	2.15***	.58	1.04 – 3.32
Relationship Talk With Partner x Relationship Satisfaction				-.77	.49	-1.68 – .23
Relationship Talk With Friends x Relationship Satisfaction				.97*	.48	-.07 – 1.80

Note. [†] $p < .10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

After accounting for demographic covariates and relationship length and satisfaction, there was no significant association between relationship talk with partners and depressive symptoms ($b = -.77, p = .161, 95\% CI = -.82 - .30$; contrary to H3) nor between relationship talk with friends and depressive symptoms ($b = -.13, p = .778, 95\% CI = -1.04 - .80$; see Table 2; contrary to H4). Among the covariates, age was significantly negatively associated ($b = -.64, p = .006$) and network-based relational uncertainty was significantly positively associated ($b = 2.03, p = .001$) with depressive symptoms.

Relationship Satisfaction as a Moderator

Next, we addressed our second research question regarding the moderating role of relationship satisfaction by adding two interaction terms to our model predicting network-based relational uncertainty: (a) relationship talk with partner \times relationship satisfaction; and (b) relationship talk with friends \times relationship satisfaction (see Table 2). We found a significant interaction between relationship talk with partner and relationship satisfaction predicting network-based relational uncertainty ($b = .14, p = .02, 95\% CI = .02 - .25$). Upon probing this interaction, we found that the association between relationship talk with partner and network-based relational uncertainty was not significant for individuals with high (+1 *SD*) relationship satisfaction ($b = -.02, p = .819, 95\% CI = -.17 - .13$) but was significant and negative for individuals with low (-1 *SD*) relationship satisfaction ($b = -.30, p = .007, 95\% CI = -.50 - .07$). In other words, for those who are satisfied in their relationships, there was no association between relationship talk with partner and network-based relational uncertainty. But for those who are unsatisfied, talking with a partner was associated with *lower* levels of network-based relational uncertainty.

There was also a trend-level interaction between relationship talk with friends and relationship satisfaction predicting network-based relational uncertainty ($b = -.10, p = .079, 95\% CI = -.20 - .02$). Upon probing this trend-level interaction, we found that the association between relationship talk with friends and perceived partner jealousy was not significant for individuals with high (+1 *SD*) relationship satisfaction ($b = .02, p = .808, 95\% CI = -.11 - .14$) but was significant and positive for individuals with low (-1 *SD*) relationship satisfaction ($b = .21, p = .031, 95\% CI = .01 - .39$). In other words, for those who are satisfied in their relationships, there was no association between relationship talk with friends and network-based relational uncertainty. But for those who are unsatisfied, talking with friends was associated with *higher* levels of network-based relational uncertainty.

Finally, we examined the moderating role of relationship satisfaction in the association between relationship talk and depressive symptoms by adding two interaction terms to our model predicting depressive symptoms: (1) relationship talk with partner \times relationship satisfaction; and (2) relationship talk with friends \times relationship satisfaction (see Table 2). The association between relationship talk with partner and depressive symptoms was not moderated by relationship satisfaction. However, there was a significant interaction between relationship talk with friends and relationship satisfaction predicting depressive symptoms ($b = .97, p = .043, 95\% CI = -.07 - 1.80$). The association was not significant for individuals with high (+1 *SD*) relationship satisfaction ($b = .55, p = .286, 95\% CI = -.46 - 1.55$) but was negative at the level of a trend for individuals with low (-1 *SD*) relationship satisfaction ($b = -1.38, p = .097, 95\% CI = -2.81 - .46$). In other words, for those who were satisfied in their relationships, there was no association between relationship talk with friends and depressive symptoms. But for those who were unsatisfied, talking with friends was associated with *lower* levels of depressive symptoms.

Discussion

Previous research on “relationship talk” has primarily focused on how discussing relationship issues with one’s partner is associated with relationship quality (Acitelli, 1992). The effects of discussing relationship issues with the wider social network (e.g., friends) has received less attention, though research on the “social

network effect” (Felmlee, 2001; Sinclair et al., 2015) has made it clear that the social network may play a powerful role in relationship development. In contrast to relationship talk with partners, which has been found to be generally positive (Tan et al., 2012), the outcomes of relationship talk with friends are more complex. On the one hand, through support provisions, discussing relationship problems with one’s friends could potentially benefit both the individual and, indirectly, the relationship. On the other hand, depending on its content, such relationship talk may generate relational uncertainty and jealousy, especially in emerging adults (Stein et al., 2019).

It may be that whether relationship talk with friends results in positive or negative outcomes for the individual and for the relationship depends, in part, on the level of satisfaction in the romantic relationship. The present study was among the first to investigate whether the effects of relationship talk with partner and friends are moderated by relationship satisfaction. In accordance with Relationship Turbulence Theory (RTT; Solomon et al., 2016), our findings suggest that links between relationship talk and outcomes are contextually dependent on relationship quality. We summarize our findings, below, and interpret our results in terms of existing theory and research.

Relationship Talk and Network-Based Relational Uncertainty: Satisfaction as a Moderator

In line with predictions stemming from RTT (Theiss & Solomon, 2006), we detected a trend-level negative association between relationship talk with partner and network-based relational uncertainty. However, this association was qualified by an interaction between relationship talk with partner and relationship satisfaction. Consistent with Theiss and Solomon’s (2006) suggestion that relationship characteristics can modify reactions to various relationship issues, we found that talking with a partner was associated with lower levels of network-based relational uncertainty in unsatisfied relationships only. In unsatisfied relationships, talking with the partner may provide opportunities to reassure them that the target individual’s social network is not a threat to the relationship, thereby lowering network-based relational uncertainty. In contrast, in satisfied relationships, there may be less uncertainty to begin with, such that the link between relationship talk with partner and uncertainty may be weaker.

Our findings regarding relationship talk with friends expand the scope of indirect communication in the RTT to include communication with social network members that could potentially amplify relational uncertainty. Although we did not find a main effect for the association between relationship talk with friends and network-based relational uncertainty, we found that relationship talk with friends was associated with increased network-based relational uncertainty among those in unsatisfied relationships only. This is consistent with prior research showing that people who make negative appraisals about their relationships report using more indirect communication, which is associated with greater relational uncertainty (Theiss & Nagy, 2013). This is also consistent with the possibility that in unsatisfied relationships, interactions with friends may be viewed as threatening to the partner. In satisfied relationships, it may be that individuals are engaging in more partner talk (consistent with our bivariate correlations), offsetting any potential negative effects of relationship talk with friends. In line with this possibility is research showing that relationship talk with friends is not associated with relational outcomes for individuals with high levels of relationship talk with partner (Jensen & Rauer, 2014). Our results indicate that the role of the social network in relationships may be dependent on the context of the relationship itself.

Relationship Talk and Depressive Symptoms: Satisfaction as a Moderator

The associations between relationship talk with friends and depressive symptoms also depended on the level of relationship satisfaction. More specifically, relationship talk with friends was negatively associated with depressive symptoms at the level of trend for individuals in unsatisfied relationships only. These results are

consistent with prior research on the protective function of relationship talk for mental health (Badr et al., 2008), though this research was limited to relationship talk with partner. Our findings highlight the potential positive implications of relationship talk with friends for individuals' mental health—particularly for those in unsatisfied relationships—and is also notable in light of our findings for network-based relational uncertainty. That is, although friend talk has the potential to benefit individuals in unsatisfied relationships by reducing depressive symptoms, it may have negative implications for the relationship by increasing network-based relational uncertainty.

Interestingly, we found no interaction between relationship talk with partner and relationship satisfaction predicting depressive symptoms. Literature showing the positive implications of relationship talk with the partner for individual mental health is indeed limited (Badr et al., 2008). Furthermore, the negative implications of talking with one's partner about an unsatisfied relationship pertain primarily to men in marital relationships (Jensen & Rauer, 2015). It may be that among our younger, predominantly female (81.7%) sample, the negative implications of relationship talk with partner in unsatisfied relationships are less relevant.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The results of this study revealed the importance of discussing one's relationship with both the partner and the individual's wider social network, depending on the context of the relationship itself (i.e., relationship satisfaction). However, there were several notable limitations. For example, we did not collect data about the valence of the communication in our measures of relationship talk, which is likely different for people who are in satisfied versus unsatisfied relationships. That is, although the items are designed to focus on "concerns" that may arise in romantic relationships (e.g., how well they get along with each other's families, how they spend their free time, etc.), actual communications likely capture both positive and negative content. Future research should be focused on developing measures that differentiate between positive and negative content of relationship talk, and on more qualitative work, to better describe the content of relationship talk—especially with friends.

Also, as mentioned earlier, our sample was predominantly female (81.7%). Thus, our findings may not be generalizable to a broader sample. This may be especially true for our finding that relationship talk with friends was associated with decreased depressive symptoms for those in unsatisfied relationships. That is, given that women's friendships tend to depend more on emotional closeness, whereas men's tend to be focused more on shared activities (Liebler & Sandefur, 2002), and that women are more likely than men to mobilize social support as a means of coping with stress (Walen & Lachman, 2000), it may be that relationship talk with friends is particularly beneficial for *women* in unsatisfied relationships. More generally, given that research shows relatively consistent gender differences in the associations between relationship talk and outcomes (Jensen & Rauer, 2015), future research should examine whether gender moderates the association between relationship talk and its individual and relational outcomes.

Furthermore, the correlational nature of this study precluded us from drawing causal conclusions. For example, it is possible that for individuals in unsatisfied relationships, higher network-based relational uncertainty leads them to engage in more relationship talk with friends. Such an explanation, however, seems less likely for understanding our results for depressive symptoms; that is, although depressed people may focus more on the negative aspects of their relationships, our results showed that talking more with friends about one's unsatisfied relationship was actually associated with *decreased* depressive symptoms. Another limitation of the study is that the measure of network-based relational uncertainty is based on the participant's perceptions of their partner's jealousy. Thus, individuals in unsatisfied relationships may be more likely to overestimate their partner's jealousy than those in satisfied relationships, which may have confounded the association between relationship talk and the outcome. Also, there may be other confounding

network-associated factors that increase partner's jealousy (e.g., intimacy with friends) that should be examined in future studies.

Conclusion

Talking about one's romantic relationship can protect against both depressive symptoms and relational uncertainty (Theiss & Nagy, 2013). Expanding on the RTT (Solomon et al., 2016), findings from the current study highlight the importance of taking the broader social context into account when examining associations between relationship talk and individual and relational well-being. Findings add to the small but growing literature on social networks and romantic functioning and support the powerful role that friends can play in the functioning of romantic relationships—especially in emerging adulthood (Sinclair et al., 2015).

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