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Comments

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QUALITATIVE MANUSCRIPT

"Some days are much holier than others": Relational uncertainty and partner influence in Christian dating couples' sexual intimacy negotiation

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Abstract

When intrafaith couples' religion strictly prohibits premarital sexual intercourse, negotiating sexual intimacy can become a multilayered process of identity negotiation that compounds the difficulty of sexual communication. Through the lens of relational turbulence theory, this study explored how devout Christian couples negotiate sexual intimacy by reanalyzing qualitative interview data the first author collected in 2017 from 16 self-identified Christians (8 heterosexual couples). Seven themes revealed how relational uncertainty, partner interference, and partner facilitation manifested in the context of sexual intimacy negotiation. Themes of relational uncertainty experience and

prevention included *assumption of shared values, relationship talk*, and *sexual behaviors as an uncertainty catalyst*. Partner facilitation and interference emerged as themes of sexual escalation and de-escalation including *snowball effect, pinpointing underlying motivations for boundary violations, gatekeeping sexual temptation*, and *drawing from shared values of sacrifice and prayer*. These interpretive findings advance the literature on relational turbulence theory and provide Christian dating couples with practical advice for how to negotiate sexual intimacy in committed premarital relationships.

KEYWORDS

intimacy, partner facilitation, partner interference, Relational turbulence theory, relational uncertainty, religion/spirituality, sexual communication

1 | INTRODUCTION

Many people describe religion/spirituality as a key motivator for abstaining from sexual intercourse (Coffelt, 2018; Cooke-Jackson et al., 2015). While multiple religions, such as Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, teach that sexual intercourse should be reserved for marital relationships, the sociocultural aspects of Protestant Christianity in the United States make intrafaith dating a potentially difficult context for sexual intimacy negotiation.[1] The purity movement, which began in the 1990s and targeted adolescents within evangelical Protestant Christianity, produced challenges for young Christians navigating their sexual identities. For example, Christians were encouraged to make purity pledges and discouraged from casual dating in favor of "courting" (Gish, 2016). Consequently, findings indicate that Protestants are less likely to have casual sex than Catholics (Burdette et al., 2009), may pledge and/or desire to remain abstinent until marriage (Manning, 2017), and may experience greater pressures around how and whom to date (Leonard et al., 2022).

Christian millennials have reported that purity culture messaging has created uncertainty for them about how to pace the development of premarital relationships and where to draw sexual boundary lines, to the point that kissing a dating partner may be viewed as inappropriate or a slippery slope (Irby, 2014). As a result, they may experience relational turmoil, guilt, and identity conflict when sexual boundaries are crossed (Leonard et al., 2022). While recent studies have explored the way that people resist hegemonic religious discourses as they negotiate their sexual identities (Reese, 2023; Rubinsky, 2021), fewer studies have sought to uncover how devout Christians navigate sexual intimacy. Therefore, this qualitative study explores how Christian values shape sexual intimacy negotiation among unmarried couples currently in committed romantic relationships.

2 | SEXUAL INTIMACY NEGOTIATION AND CHRISTIANITY

Findings on sexual communication among religious individuals appear to be mixed. On the one hand, religious individuals may engage in communicative strategies to remain abstinent, such as establishing sexual boundaries, dating people with similar values, and maintaining support from religious community members (Kosenko et al., 2016). Coffelt (2018) found that those who have the goal to abstain or delay sex rely on specific sexual scripts, often with positive reception from their partners.

Other studies suggest that negotiating (i.e., communicating and coordinating) sexual intimacy boundaries can be difficult in practice, both generally and for Christian couples specifically. Dating partners often avoid explicitly discussing sexual topics for fear of threatening the stability of the relationship (Theiss & Estlein, 2014), and many people in committed heterosexual relationships engage in sexual compliance (i.e., consensual but unwanted sex; Impett & Peplau, 2003). Moreover, in Cooke-Jackson et al.'s (2015) study on memorable messages about abstinence, some "participants described how their commitment to abstain from sex until they were married presented some challenges, especially in ongoing committed relationships with individuals that they cared about" (p. 1205). Supporting this notion, Leonard et al. (2022) found that identity gaps, or perceived discrepancies between or among the various layers of one's identity, occurred in unmarried Christian relationships when couples violated their boundaries for sexual intimacy. Other recent studies have documented how identity gaps emerge for polyamorous individuals as they resist hegemonic Christian discourses (Reese, 2023) or when individuals in "non-normative" relationships engage in premarital sexual activity that contradict their religious values (Rubinsky, 2021). We argue that theoretical constructs from relational turbulence theory may further explain why some Christian individuals seem to experience distress when negotiating sexual intimacy while others do not.

3 | RELATIONAL TURBULENCE THEORY

Relational turbulence theory (RTT; Solomon et al., 2016) provides an explanation for why two couples could experience the exact same interaction in different ways, all else being equal. Relational turbulence, or perceived turmoil in a relationship, is often the result of the "perfect storm" of relational conditions that create a cycle of negative perceptions and heightened emotions that colors people's interpretations of communication events. This cycle can emerge during times of transition, or "a period of discontinuity between times of relative stability, during which individuals adapt to changing roles, identities, and circumstances" (Solomon et al., 2016, p. 510). The shift from casual to serious dating has been documented as such a transition, as partners navigate expectations for behavior and the changing nature of the relationship (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004).

The relational turbulence model (RTM; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004) suggested that following transitions, partners may experience *relational uncertainty* and *partner influence*, conditions which can foster biased cognitive appraisals and intensified emotional reactions in response to communication events where relational information is salient. For example, if partners discuss sexual boundaries (communication event) when one partner has significant doubts about where they stand in the relationship (uncertainty), their perception of the conversation may be negative. The accumulation of these types of interactions can create turbulence.

Although RTT does not position transitions as a prerequisite for uncertainty and interference, transitions may still be relevant (Solomon et al., 2016). While dating relationships generally may be a site of transition, the aforementioned research suggests that Christian dating partners may experience shifting identities and circumstances as they contend with their individual and joint espoused sexual values. Given the identity conflict Christians experience with premarital sexual activity, it is possible that the very expression of sexual intimacy could promote uncertainty or be conceived of as an interreference with one's sexual goals.

3.1 | Relational uncertainty

Relational uncertainty derives from one or more of three sources (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). *Self uncertainty* occurs when an individual has doubts about their own involvement or feelings in the relationship. *Partner uncertainty* occurs when an individual has doubts or questions about their partner's feelings or involvement in the relationship. *Relationship uncertainty* refers to an individual's questions about relationship feelings, behaviors, and/or definitions.

For unmarried Christian partners who are unsure about expectations for appropriate sexual behavior, uncertainty about behavioral norms may be particularly salient (Kosenko et al., 2016; Manning, 2017). For example, couples may wonder how much and what type of touch is appropriate. Indeed, Knobloch and Solomon (1999) argued that as partners begin to develop relational cultures or identities, "[t]he right way to act, the appropriateness of particular behaviors, and the boundaries for action are questions that may arise when individuals do not understand the rules for behavior within the specific dyad" (p. 265). Thus, relationship uncertainty may occur as partners negotiate expectations for sexual intimacy.

Theoretically, there is reason to believe that identity conflict sets the stage for relational uncertainty. Yoon and Theiss (2022) found that women who experienced a change in identity as they coped with infertility experienced identity uncertainty, or "ambiguity about one's sense of self and relational roles" (p. 672), which functioned as an antecedent to relational uncertainty in their romantic relationships. The authors called for further exploration of identity discrepancies in various relational contexts and how they impact relationships. Uncovering how Christian couples experience relational uncertainty as they grow in intimacy may help clarify the link between identity and uncertainty in RTT theorizing. Thus, we asked:

> **RQ1.** How does relational uncertainty emerge in unmarried Christian couples′ negotiation of sexual intimacy?

3.2 | Partner interference and facilitation

Along with relational uncertainty, partner influence—which includes partner interference and facilitation—can create conditions that foster or mitigate relational turbulence. *Partner interference* occurs when an individual's partner makes it more difficult for them to achieve their goals, whereas *partner facilitation* occurs when the partner acts in ways that helps the individual achieve their goals (Solomon et al., 2016). Theiss and Estlein (2014) found that partner interference predicted perceived threat of sexual communication. Since partner interference is common in dating relationships, a time when partners are becoming more interdependent, it is logical they would experience difficulty with sexual communication in general (Theiss &

Estlein, 2014). However, since abstinence is a "goal" (Coffelt, 2018), interference could also occur when a partner acts in a way that does not facilitate this goal. In other words, it is possible that one or both partners may experience partner interference when a partner violates expectations for sexual intimacy.

Partner interference and facilitation have been found to diverge in their associations with biased cognitions, heightened emotions, and subsequent communication (e.g., McLaren et al., 2011). However, much less research has been done on partner facilitation than on interference (e.g., Bevan et al., 2021). Christian partners may facilitate explicit conversation about their sexual intimacy boundaries (Kosenko et al., 2016; Leonard et al., 2022). They also may prioritize dating other Christians, which helps promote shared values and sets clear expectations (Irby, 2014; Leonard et al., 2022). However, little is known about how individuals perceive their partners as facilitating or interfering with sexual goals within committed Christian relationships. Following studies that have looked at context-specific partner facilitation and interference (Bevan et al., 2021), a second research question was posed:

> **RQ2.** How do partner interference and facilitation emerge in unmarried Christian couples' negotiation of sexual intimacy?

4 | METHOD

The first author, a self-identified Christian, collected the data in this study during 2017 in Southern California as part of a larger project investigating relational turbulence and identity gaps within intrafaith Christian romantic relationships.[2] Guided by an interpretive approach, the study employed qualitative interview methods, which enhance quantitative data and "honors participants' local meanings" (Tracy, 2020, p. 7). Qualitative methods extend the largely quantitative work on relational turbulence (e.g., Bevan et al., 2021; Theiss & Estlein, 2014), which addresses Solomon et al.'s (2016) invitation to explore RTT through varying epistemological frameworks. Thus, RTT acted as a sensitizing concept that guided the interview questions, enriched the data analysis process, and allowed for more nuanced extensions of existing theory (Tracy, 2020).

4.1 | Participants

Participants included eight heterosexual Christian couples (8 women, 8 men, total $n = 16$) in committed, premarital romantic relationships (see Table 1). Participants ranged in age from 21 to 37 years ($M = 26$, $SD = 4.46$) and more than half ($n = 9$) had completed some graduate school or earned a master's degree. Participants described their ethnicity as White or Caucasian ($n = 9$); Hispanic, Mexican-American, Mexican-White, or Latin American ($n = 4$); Iranian/Armenian ($n = 1$); Asian ($n = 1$); and Chinese ($n = 1$). Couples' relationship length ranged from 1.5 months to 7.5 years. Most participants described their relationship as "seriously dating" or "boyfriend/girlfriend," and two couples were engaged. Although they described their religious affiliation in multiple ways (e.g., Christian, Non-denominational), all participants identified with some form of Protestant Christianity. Notably, *all* participants rated the importance of their faith as 7 on a 7-point Likert-type scale, with 1 being "not important" and 7 being "very important."

TABLE 1 Participant demographic information.

Participant	Sex	Age	Length of Relationship
Adam	Male	27	9 Months
Amber	Female	23	9 Months
Brittany	Female	25	7½ Years
Bryan	Male	25	7½ Years
Candice	Female	37	11 Months
Carlos	Male	34	11 Months
Daisy	Female	22	2½ Years
Daniel	Male	22	2½ Years
Felicia	Female	21	3 Years
Forrest	Male	21	3 Years
Gabriela	Female	27	1½ Months
Garrett	Male	27	1½ Months
Kenneth	Male	25	2½ Years
Kylie	Female	25	2 Years 5 months
Lawrence	Male	30	4 Months
Linda	Female	26	3 Months

Note: Couples are indicated by pseudonyms that starts with the same letter (e.g., "Adam and Amber"). All information is stated as reported in the participants' own words.

4.2 | Procedures and data collection

Upon IRB approval from California State University Fullerton, the first author used convenience and snowball sampling to recruit participants, posting information about the study on social media accounts and providing flyers to churches. Interested individuals were screened for recruitment criteria during initial contact. To participate, individuals were required to be at least 18 years old, able to participate in individual interviews, identify as a Christian, and currently be involved in a (heterosexual) romantic relationship of at least three months[3] with a partner who also identified as Christian. Partners were also invited to participate, resulting in eight couples total.

The researcher (first author) conducted in-depth, individual interviews face-to-face at a quiet location convenient for participants. To ensure self-reflexivity, the researcher kept analytic memos throughout the data collection process and took detailed fieldnotes before and after each interview. Despite the benefits of joint interviewing (Polak & Green, 2016), partners were intentionally interviewed separately to avoid social desirability bias, given the fragility of courting relationships (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004) and the nature of the study. After informed consent, the researcher followed a semi-structured interview guide. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. All identifying information was removed, and names were replaced with pseudonyms. Interviews ranged from 36 to 124 min in duration ($M = 83$ min). Transcripts ranged from 10 to 29 single-spaced pages in length ($M = 20.38$, $SD = 4.79$).

The interview process began with an explanation of the study's purpose and a brief questionnaire garnering demographic information and study-relevant information (e.g., relationship

length, relational satisfaction, importance of faith, participation in faith-related activities). In keeping with constant comparative methods (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), the interview guide was slightly modified throughout the data collection process to capture and explore emergent themes (Tracy, 2020).

After introductory rapport-building questions (e.g., "How did you and your partner meet?"), participants read a story of an imaginary couple's intimacy dilemmas and were asked to choose the best solution(s). The story drafts were guided by extant research on RTT (e.g., Solomon et al., 2016), Christian dating (Irby, 2014), and sexual boundary communication (Kosenko et al., 2016). This elicitation approach was meant to prompt valuable discussion (Tracy, 2020), and for many participants, became the focal point of the remainder of their interviews. Follow-up questions were asked (e.g., "What compelled you to select the X option as the best way to handle the situation?"). Then, questions guided by the study's purpose were asked (e.g., "What has caused you the most distress within your relationship, up to this point?"). To conclude, participants were asked if they wished to add anything and were informed that they could contact the researcher to expound on anything they felt was unclear or share something they had forgotten. Participants received a $10 Starbucks gift card for participation.

4.3 | Thematic analysis

Since time had passed since the initial data collection, the first author first highlighted key terms relevant to our research questions (e.g., *boundaries*, *sex*, *intimacy*) prior to rereading the transcripts. This drew our attention to moments within participants' accounts that specifically focused on sexual intimacy negotiation. Following an iterative approach to data analysis (Tracy, 2020), the first author then reread each transcript multiple times, analyzing them individually and comparatively for first-level codes or themes and noting similarities and differences within and across dyads. Consistent with constant comparative methods (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), first-level codes were then organized into hierarchical codes when the data reached saturation and the researcher felt that the themes sufficiently answered the research questions (Tracy, 2020). The first author then compared themes with one another and with interview data, adjusting the wording until the themes best reflected the data.

Owen's (1984) three criteria for thematic analysis were used to determine themes: (1) *repetition* (repeated use of words or phrases throughout different interview segments, indicating symbolic significance); (2) *recurrence* (participant reiterates a similar underlying meaning but with slight word variations); and (3) *forcefulness* (emotion conveyed through tone, or other nonverbal messages that reflect the importance of what is said). The authors discussed thematic interpretations and collaborated in the writing phase.

5 | INTERPRETIVE FINDINGS

The interpretive analyses generated seven themes. For RQ1, three themes emerged that reveal the ways participants simultaneously prevented and experienced uncertainty as they navigated their sexual relationships and experiences. In response to RQ2, two themes emerged that capture and provide context for behaviors that promoted or hindered participants' sexual goals. Each are discussed below, featuring exemplars from pseudonymous participants.

5.1 | RQ1: Themes of relational uncertainty experience and prevention

The first three themes reveal the great care participants took to prevent relationship uncertainty concerning sexual behavior and the uncertainty that resulted from sexual boundary violations. Additionally, these themes exhibit the cultural meanings ascribed to uncertainty.

5.1.1 | Assumption of shared values

Fundamentally, almost every participant assumed that sexual intercourse was prohibited, which generally subverted the possibility of relationship uncertainty. This was reflected in the language and intonation participants used and the accounts of their conversations with their partners. For example, reflecting on her conversations with Daniel (whom she had not kissed) about intimacy boundaries, Daisy surmised, "We didn't talk about sex directly, but I think it was kind of implied, just like us being Christians, where it's like, that's just something you don't do." In fact, participants' word choice with both their partners (via their recollections) and the interviewer reflected this assumption. Multiple participants used such terms as "obviously" when referring to their choice not to have premarital sex. As Linda asserted, "We do kiss, but only to say bye or whatever. I told him I'm fine with that, but there's a line obviously, and I made that known to him. And he was very respectful and he shared the same view."

However, several participants noted that Christians entering relationships should not assume their partner shares this value. Amber speculated,

> I think when you get into a Christian relationship, it's kind of understood, in a lot of ways. Which is not always the best case because I think that with Christians, when you know that the other person is Christian, it's almost like, "Oh, I don't need to explain things to you because you're a Christian and you get it." But I almost feel like there should be a conversation.

Other participants concurred with Amber, particularly those who described going further than they had wanted to past or current relationships, or who had assumed a previous partner shared this value only to be pressured into sexual behavior. In this way, the *assumption of shared values* could also catalyze uncertainty when a partner violated an individual's expectations for sexual behavior. Thus, while it was generally safe to assume a Christian partner shared values regarding premarital sex, participants indicated the importance of clear communication, as detailed in the following sub-theme.

5.1.2 | Relationship talk

A second aspect of preventing (or in some cases, mitigating) uncertainty involved relationship talk (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011) that either occurred very early in relationships or upon (re) negotiation of sexual intimacy boundaries. Half of the couples engaged in explicit, early initial conversations about physical intimacy boundaries and set clear expectations that would set them up for premarital abstinence. Some participants reported conversations that were more serious and intentional, such as Linda, who shared with Lawrence on their third date that she

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is okay with kissing but nothing more. Interestingly, Lawrence recounted feeling "a *little* interrogated" during this conversation, but noted that "it was still *great*," as Linda was an excellent listener.

Others described how they negotiated boundaries for the first time after they had crossed "a line" or renegotiated established boundaries. As Bryan, who began dating Brittany in high school, recounted:

> I think on one of those first three dates we talked about physical boundaries. I even drafted a document of what we will not do or what we will do or where we're okay. And we did that, but I don't think we ever looked at it until there was a time in college where we were like, "Crap. We should revisit this because I think we probably have gone too far compared to what we had initially set up."

Again, these participants did not indicate high levels of uncertainty, as they were clear about the fact that they did not want to have sexual intercourse. Notably, several participants believed that sexual communication is important and crucial (hence the early conversations), but that it should also be "casual," to normalize sexuality. As Adam noted,

> We talked about stuff early on but it wasn't like, "Hey we've been dating for two weeks. Let's sit and let's make these rules." ...We talked about how in so many ways that *can* be helpful, but it starts you with a conversation that sexuality's bad.

Engaging in these explicit conversations, whether early in a relationship or after a boundary had been crossed, helped couples obviate uncertainty or prevent further uncertainty or hurt. On the whole, an assumption of shared values and relationship talk helped couples jointly prevent uncertainty by allowing them to establish clear rules for their physical relationships. In fact, whether participants had crossed these boundaries or not, their recollection of the boundary construction revealed high levels of certainty for behavior in the dating context. However, as the next theme illustrates, participants did not always follow these "rules," which prompted some to experience relational uncertainty.

5.1.3 | Sexual behaviors as an uncertainty catalyst

Participants described relational uncertainty when their partner engaged in sexual behavior that did not align with their values about sexual activity or their desired timeline for physical intimacy development. For example, when asked what caused Brittany to have doubts or uncertainty in her relationship with her fiancé Bryan, she recalled:

> Well, definitely the pornography because there's always those doubts of, what if he's still doing it and he's been lying this whole time again? Or, what if he goes back into it once we're married? Because I've heard that when you get married, porn becomes tempting because you're having sex. And then, if you can't have sex, then porn is kind of like sex in a way. So, there's just a lot of doubts that I have there, like, what if he goes back to it?

Thus, Bryan's pornography use, exacerbated by his concealment of it, was a sexual behavior that created relational doubts for Brittany.

Additionally, some participants experienced uncertainty about their involvement in the relationship if they perceived a partner's sexual initiation negatively, especially early in their dating relationships. For example, after Felicia described challenging times in her relationship with Forrest, the researcher asked what her gut instinct or response was if something was wrong in the relationship. She described the doubt that arose when she and Forrest are in conflict, or if they are struggling with crossing their sexual boundaries:

> My gut reaction is just kind of scared that—I don't know, honestly I am such a doubtful person. I mean, that's been such a big thing with my relationship with God is trusting him and not doubting him. But also with Forrest, I still—I doubt that—a lot of times, I don't think we're gonna make it or I don't think that he's the man of God that I need. I mean I hate to say it like that, but there's a lot of doubts that go on.

Forrest and Felicia, along with many other couples, appeared to use relationship talk to resolve these doubts when they arose, though not without distress. Other couples appeared to have some distance from their relational uncertainty after sexual boundary violation but could recall with vivid detail the impact it had on their relationship. Kenneth and Kylie, who were engaged, had gone through several periods of relational doubt and dissolution but had worked hard to repair the relationship. Kenneth self-reflexively recalled: "I think the sexual thing—when she came on [to me], I kind of used that as evidence that I'm more spiritual than her." When asked about how the communication was in said conversation, he laughingly replied:

> Oof. Uh. Awful [*laughs*]. It was just like we hit a wall every conversation. She would get really mad, I would get really anxious, although I was really mad inside. But I would turn away. And she would just come in and start yelling at me, because she wanted me to open up, because I was not being authentic with her. But I was afraid, if I started yelling, then we would just destroy each other.

In all, questions about their involvement or where to draw boundary lines emerged for many because of their Christian values. Like Kenneth, Bryan recounted how early in his relationship, "Brittany was kind of pushing the boundaries and I was kind of freaking out," which flips the gendered script that suggests men push women's boundaries and reveals the role of religious values in perceptions of sexual intimacy negotiation.

A few things are important to note. First, the larger interview data sets revealed other accounts of relational uncertainty not exclusively related to sexual intimacy negotiation; however, couples who seemed the most uncertain about their relationship also seemed to struggle the most with their sexual intimacy boundaries. Moreover, relational doubt itself (whether regarding sexual intimacy or other issues) appeared to be tied to religious/spiritual values. Participants often viewed their doubts as coming from Satan, and still others believed that their reservations reflected a lack of trust in God. When asked what it meant for Kylie to have doubts in her relationship with Kenneth, she exasperatedly contemplated,

> When I had those doubts, the first thing was, Why am I having doubts? [*laughs*] I shouldn't be! The guilt of—I shouldn't be! He's a great guy. Why am I having

doubts? Again, the isolation thing of—who do I ask? If I ask anyone, I'm fearful they're just gonna say, "Oh, then break up. Oh, you shouldn't have any doubts. You should know, and you should know, and you should know." Um. [*sighs*]

Simultaneously, they recognized that doubt is a normal part of any relationship, as was the desire for sexual intimacy—however, the goal was clearly premarital abstinence.

It is important to note that participants delineated clear sexual goals that provided context for why uncertainty was particularly troubling, as well as why various forms of partner interference and facilitation emerged. Their overarching goals appeared to be (1) reserving intercourse and other forms of sexual activity (i.e., generally anything more than kissing) for the "covenant" of marriage, and (2) normalizing sexuality, given the shameful messages the purity movement propagated. Seven participants used the term "covenant" or "covenantal" unsolicited when describing marriage, explaining their belief that sexual intimacy is enhanced by the permanence of marriage and the joy of waiting for sex in this context. This belief was particularly emphasized by participants who had been sexually active in previous relationships. Participants also described the importance of normalizing and understanding sex(uality). They believed God had wired and created humans for sex, which was inherently good if it was in the "right context" (i.e., marriage). Their sexual goals set the stage for the remaining themes, described below.

5.2 | RQ2: Themes of sexual escalation and de-escalation

The themes that emerged in response to RQ2 all in some way reflected themes of sexual intimacy escalation or de-escalation. In general, when participants believed that they or their partners accelerated or escalated sexual intimacy, elements of partner interference emerged, whereas partner facilitation manifested when one dyad member *de*-escalated sexual intimacy. Importantly, the interpretive findings allowed us to uncover ways that participants themselves believed they were engaging in partner interference or facilitation, which is why we include examples of both below.

5.2.1 | Snowball effect

Participants believed that sexual intimacy could easily be escalated, given that both verbal (i.e., self-disclosure) and nonverbal (i.e., kissing) actions could move couples into deeper intimacy; as Daniel put it, "It's like a snowball effect." Some participants perceived that their partners allowed sexual intimacy to escalate past an agreed-upon boundary or past a point that would clearly lead them away from their goal to be abstinent. Others perceived that their own actions escalated intimacy. Brittany recalled how she and Bryan formed certain boundaries because of their escalation experiences:

Some of them [i.e., boundaries] were just from experience of just like, okay when we cuddle really late at night, then it's not a good idea. It just escalates the physical-ness of the relationship. Even like—I've changed in front of him before, just putting on a different shirt. And it's obviously not smart to do that because it's just like, okay, if I do that, I'm just tempting him.

Brittany's quotation reveals a pattern observed in many participants' accounts, in that they could recognize how their own actions may be classified as partner interference by their partners.

Partner facilitation occurred when one or both partners acted to deescalate sexual intimacy, whether "taking a step back" (a recurrent phrase) or renegotiating boundary lines. As Gabriella recalled,

> Then there are times when we're like, "Okay, this is the line. Hey we're getting close." Usually he'll be like, "Hey [*makes a gentle prodding face*]. Okay." And I'm like, "Oh! Okay." And there isn't really guilt, from either party. We're like, "No, we just *really* enjoy each other." And so, okay. Let's take a step back.

Gabriella's remark reveals how partners could simultaneously facilitate the sexual goals of covenant marriage and normalizing human sexuality.

It is noteworthy that the couples who had been together longer described how their individual and joint facilitation of intimacy boundaries ebbed and flowed. Kylie laughingly articulated the challenge of de-escalating sexual intimacy because even the act of de-escalation had been wrapped up in "shame and guilt." She explained,

> Kylie: With our couple's counselor, bless her heart [*giggles*], we are working on like, "Hey, no it's not bad. Just in a different context. How can we rewire that and actually look forward to it and *be* excited and encourage each *other*?... Again where is it coming from? Are we telling each other "just stop" because it's like, [*judgmental voice*] "No you sinful being. Don't touch me!" Or is it like—again, the noble answer, "I love you. So much. I want to honor you and I think the best way we can honor each other is in marriage."
>
> Interviewer: Wow. That's so hard. So how successful do you feel you've been at doing some of that rewiring?
>
> Kylie: Um. More successful now. Yeah. I mean, I would say—again, some days are much holier than others [*laughing boisterously*]. Other days, it's just like, "Screw it! Lock the door, close the windows! ... Other days it's like, you know, we're really excited and we're really happy that we are waiting as frustrating as it is.

The messages in this theme display the dyadic nature of partner interference and facilitation in the context of negotiating sexual intimacy; participants who used "I" or "he/she" often used "we" in the same breath when describing instances of interference or facilitation. This dynamic, dialectical nature of sexual intimacy negotiation was reflected in many of our findings.

5.2.2 | Pinpointing underlying motivations for boundary violations

Participants overwhelmingly described how underlying motivations could drive sexual intimacy escalation. Two participants used the exact phrase "underlying reasons" while several conveyed a similar idea. When partners helped each other identify motivations for sexual escalation or identified their own motivations, this seemed to have a more sustainable effect on sexual goal

facilitation. For example, Felicia described how Forrest helped her facilitate the goal of normalizing sexuality, after they became more sexually intimate than they had intended:

> I was kind of viewing it as a negative thing. I was like, "I've never been like this, I've always been a good, pure girl, so what is going on!" And he's like, "Felicia. This is how we're made. We're falling in love more and more." So he made me understand it more, of like, "God designed sex, but for marriage. But it's not a weird thing to be more and more physically attracted to each other so don't beat yourself up."

Thus, sometimes participants' partners reminded them that a normal sex drive could escalate sexual intimacy.

The importance of pinpointing underlying motivations was implied when several participants, after reading the elicitation activity, noted how they would have liked to know more about the imaginary couple's past and motivations before advising them how to proceed with their intimacy dilemma. Brittany speculated, "Obviously, they're doing it because they love each other and they're physically attracted and they've been dating for a while, but there could be other reasons too, and there could be things that they need to work out in their own lives." Participants believed that couples who intentionally violate their sexual boundaries despite valuing abstinence must have done so for reasons such as selfishness, looking for fulfillment in their partner more than God, questioning their Christian values, or fear of losing a partner. In sum, "underlying reasons" driving sexual intimacy escalation could range from normal human desire, to (Christian) identity uncertainty, to unprocessed emotions. When a partner helped a participant identify these motivations, they seemed to facilitate sexual goals. When a participant perceived their partner was unaware of these motivations, they experienced interference.

5.2.3 | Gatekeeping sexual temptation

Facilitation also occurred through "gatekeeping" sexual temptation. Several participants indicated that both partners had a responsibility to deescalate sexual intimacy, maintain boundaries, and prevent tempting situations. At the same time, both male and female participants implied that the man should carry more of the burden as the "spiritual leader" of the relationship. As Linda expressed, "I want to be with someone who will lead me and who will *uphold* my *values* ... that are incredibly important for me! And for somebody to not do that? I think would just be debilitating to my faith, you know, to me as a woman."

However, in practice, couples often reported that the female partner was the one to decelerate in the heat of the moment, which is consistent with existing research that positions women as sexual gatekeepers (Terán et al., 2022). Forrest and Felicia's story illustrates the gendered nature of this sub-theme. Forrest reflected:

> Felicia is very, very strong in that. And that's one of my favorite things—when I tell it to my fr- my other Christian friends, who are dating—that's tough to find that in a girl and so I'm very thankful for her. And she's kept us out of a lot of sticky situations. But we've prayed about it a lot and talked about it a lot. And we've even had to push back [i.e., constrict] the boundaries a lot. But it's always been a struggle for me to not get to that physical level where I want to do more. It's tough.

Forrest's account reveals how partner facilitation may not just be an individual process of facilitating goals but may involve joint negotiation of goals. However, what Forrest perceived as facilitation from Felicia, Felicia perceived as interference from Forrest:

> I felt like there was a time that it was mostly me having to be the one to be like, "No, no, no Forrest, we shouldn't be doing this" or "We shouldn't go in a car—we shouldn't be doing—" And he was kind of like, "Ugh." It wasn't like, "Yeah Felicia you're right," like "Mm this is hard." But it was kind of like, "ugh," like disappointment? ... It was hard and I was like, "He's not leading me in this way." I don't know, I just felt like I didn't know where to go with the relationship.

It is noteworthy that Forrest repeatedly expressed feeling guilt and shame for escalating sexual intimacy with Felicia, which indicates the layered and complex nature of partner facilitation and interference in the context of sexual gatekeeping. Although participants explicitly expressed that both partners should prevent temptation, narratives of disappointment after boundary violations from both men and women indicate that many participants believed men should be the sexual gatekeepers.

5.2.4 | Drawing from shared values of sacrifice and prayer

One facilitative way partners de-escalated sexual intimacy was through sacrifice and prayer, whereas interference occurred when partners did not draw from these values. Participants repeatedly described the importance of sacrificing their sexual desires for the sake of honoring their partner's desires and goals. Multiple participants indicated the importance of consensual intimacy. Kylie, who indicated that she had experienced sexual coercion in a previous relationship, vehemently expressed:

> Who cares whether or not he believes in premarital sex. It's not about him, you know? I think he needs to grow up [*laughing*]. There's a lot of projection right now. He needs to grow up! And think, "I love this girl, and if this is someone that I truly love and that I claim to love, then I'm gonna sacrifice my boner to control myself. Because she's not comfortable with it. And if she's having doubts, then I want to see *her* for where she's at, see her for who she is. Not gonna mention it all the time. Not gonna pressure her into it. This is something I *can* wait for, so why pressure? You know, it's not like I'm gonna DIE if I don't have sex with her today!"

Importantly, participants also indicated that sacrificing and honoring the other were inextricably linked to their Christian values and required working together. As Adam noted,

> [Amber and I] are just saying, "Okay let's start with the formula ... or the paradigm of saying sexuality is a good thing by God that's been warped and been changed to—in many ways become sinful, selfish, self-serving. It's ultimately supposed to be all about the other person." Early on we said, "basically the moment that I start taking instead of giving, *that's* the moment that it becomes sinful."

Adam's account of negotiating sexual intimacy captures the values embedded in this sub-theme.

In addition to sacrifice, participants repeatedly described times when a partner initiated joint prayer to God for strength to maintain boundaries and insight to identify underlying reasons for boundary violations. Many participants indicated prayer should be the first step in preempting sexual escalation or after a boundary had been crossed. For example, Felicia explained how her sexual negotiation with Forrest changed when they got closer to God and engaged in joint spiritual conversation, thereby facilitating each other's goals:

> [I]t also got *easier* because the second one of us would be like trying to kiss each other or get more touchy or anything, the second one of us would be like, "Hey, no we shouldn't—we shouldn't—we don't need to do this. Let's just pray," the other person would be like, [*tone of relief*] "Yeah, you're right."

However, multiple participants also emphasized that relying on God was not enough to maintain sexual boundaries. Some were explicit, such as Bryan: "I feel like prayer isn't good enough. It's an aspect of it? But if you just pray and then hope that your life choices are different, they won't happen." Other participants qualified the need for prayer by indicating that couples should share openly and honestly, seeking outside support if they are struggling.

Nonetheless, participants believed that God was the ultimate reason they could facilitate their sexual goals, which may explain why partners straying from their faith were perceived to be interfering with participants' goals. As Carlos noted, "if it wasn't for God, we probably would have had sex." Moreover, when asked how successful she felt she and Daniel were at maintaining their intimacy boundaries, Daisy (who mentioned she had "a past of a *lot* of impurity" prior to being with Daniel) confidently asserted, "Really successful. We've never—only because God—we've never really had trouble or fallen into any type of sin together or impurity." She went on to say:

> If we ever *are* struggling in our purity, we talk to the people in our lives. I talk to my mentor, the women closest in my life, like, "Hey, I'm struggling. I'm thinking about sex all the time." Or whatever! Because we're normal. We're college students with hormones. And so, that's totally normal. I've gone through periods of that. But, it's cool because I think when we work through it with God and the people in our lives, I feel like our relationship is successful.

Daisy's comment highlights how intertwined the role of God and community were for participants and their sexual goal facilitation. In all, showing honor through sacrifice and praying in a way that was helpful for healthy intimacy negotiation reflected partner facilitation, whereas the inverse was seen as interference.

6 | DISCUSSION

This study sought to illuminate the role of religion/spirituality when negotiating sexual intimacy by drawing from assumptions of relational turbulence theory (Solomon et al., 2016). Our interpretive findings revealed that couples desired to minimize or preempt uncertainty about norms for sexual intimacy through engaging in casual yet intentional conversations early in

their relationships, sometimes only after a boundary had been crossed. They also experienced heightened uncertainty when they or their partners engaged in sexual behavior that crossed a spoken or unspoken boundary. Shared values sometimes subverted uncertainty and other times catalyzed uncertainty when expectations were violated.

Moreover, participants articulated sexual goals (i.e., covenantal marriage and the normalization of sexual activity in the right context) that their partners either facilitated or interfered with. Partners appeared to facilitate goals by deescalating the snowball effect (which often began with seemingly innocuous behaviors such as cuddling or kissing), identifying underlying motivations for crossing sexual boundaries, (male) sexual gatekeeping, and drawing from shared values such as prayer. Interference occurred when partners escalated sexual intimacy or did not put their partners' needs and desires above their own. Below, we detail the implications of these findings and offer limitations that provide opportunities for future research.

6.1 | Theoretical implications

Theoretically, this study extends interpersonal communication research in at least four ways. First, the data revealed that, in this religious community, relational uncertainty and partner influence might be linked to other important theoretical constructs, such as memorable messages about sex(uality) learned in Christian contexts (Cooke-Jackson et al., 2015) and identity gaps (Leonard et al., 2022). These findings build on Yoon and Theiss's (2022) conclusion that identity conflict may precede relational uncertainty in certain relational contexts. Moreover, partner interference and facilitation may also be linked to sexual compliance (Rubinsky, 2020). Participants who engaged in consensual but unwanted sexual activity with past or current partners perceived their partners' sexual initiation as interference with their sexual goals. However, in some cases, participants felt conflicted, wanting to be intimate with their loving partner, but also wanting to uphold their Christian values. Moreover, many participants did maintain their sexual boundaries, aided by partner facilitation. The specific mechanisms linking identity gaps, memorable messages, and sexual compliance to relational turbulence constructs should be explored in future quantitative research studies.

Second, the qualitative data add to the relatively scant RTT findings on partner facilitation (e.g., Bevan et al., 2021) and add nuance to RTT constructs. Participants experiencing heightened uncertainty articulated this in relation to their sexual goals being interfered with. Scholars should continue to explore the links between partner interference, facilitation, and relational uncertainty in romantic relationships. Moreover, participants seemed aware of when they were interfering with a partner's goals, in that couples often described similar perceptions of a partner's certain act of interference or facilitation, as well as how one's own perception of their interference or facilitation with a partner's goals may affect perceptions of turmoil. Future research should explore the theoretical function of one's perception of their own interference or facilitation with a partner's goals.

Third, Solomon et al. (2016) suggested, "To the extent that partners use communication to promote cognitive reappraisal, regulate negative emotions, mitigate relational uncertainty, and enhance interdependence, communication can break the cycle that culminates in relational turbulence" (p. 522). Although the qualitative analysis precluded testing of RTT's propositions, many times, couples used communication, often shaped by their shared values, to reduce uncertainty and facilitate each other's sexual goals, offering some indication of what it might look like to thwart the process that leads to turbulence.

Finally, the study reveals how culture, in this case religion/spirituality, informs sexual communication for devout Christians during dating and engagement. Faith-based beliefs shaped whether and how uncertainty, interference, and facilitation occurred, lending support to studies that have suggested these constructs are often context-dependent (Bevan et al., 2021; Knobloch et al., 2015). Relatedly, Theiss (2018) discussed limitations with current measures of relational uncertainty, speculating that "people who hold religious beliefs that identify marriage as sacred and divorce as a sin would be prevented from holding any other view of their relationship aside from complete certainty" (p. 149). Our findings support this speculation and indicate that even unmarried religious couples may experience the need for certainty.

6.2 | Practical implications

The findings suggest that Christian dating couples negotiating sexual intimacy, especially those experiencing the long-term negative effects of the sexual purity movement (Manning, 2017), may benefit from establishing clear sexual boundaries with each other, having open communication that normalizes sexuality, and soliciting the support of trusted individuals such as friends, family, or therapists. For partners who feel tempted to push boundaries inconsistent with their or their partners' values, it may help to explore these underlying reasons with their partners or support networks. In all, these discussions may help them remain true to their values while mitigating the feelings of shame and guilt that come with sexual desire. The findings of this study may also be useful for developing therapeutic interventions informed by an individual's or couple's religious values (Kellogg et al., 2014). For example, therapists performing premarital counseling for Christian couples who are negotiating sexual intimacy might guide couples in normalizing sexuality, helping them identify their sexual values and boundaries, and working through identity conflicts that may inhibit boundary maintenance.

6.3 | Limitations and future directions

Three overarching limitations are important to note. First, although the interpretive findings are not meant to be prescriptive, the purposive sample may not reflect the universal experience of Christians in unmarried relationships. Relationship length varied significantly, which may temper the theoretical speculations presented above. Participants were predominantly White and highly educated, which is an ongoing limitation in interpersonal communication research (Afifi & Cornejo, 2020). Education and access to therapy may have afforded participants a degree of self-awareness that allowed them to engage in high levels of cognitive reappraisals, for example, the ability to normalize sexuality. The sample was also comprised of heterosexual Protestant couples. Future research should explore sexual intimacy negotiation in different religious relational contexts, such as interfaith dating relationships, interdenominational relationships (i.e., Protestant-Catholic couples), and religious couples who identify as LGBTQIA+.

Second, an elicitation technique was used to prompt conversation. Despite the rich and varied dialogues that followed the activity, providing such an in-depth and nuanced vignette so early in the interview may have primed participants to share about relational events and challenges related to sexual intimacy that may not have been as salient had they been probed more open-endedly.

Finally, the sample was comprised of unmarried couples. Communication scholars should investigate the potential negative ramifications of the sexual intimacy negotiation that occurred during dating or engagement for religious *married* couples. Though it did not emerge as a theme, two participants described hearing from other Christian married couples that they experienced shame or even physiological difficulty with sexual intimacy. This is consistent with findings from a survey of over 20,000 predominantly Christian women, in which one-fifth reported pain or difficulty with penetrative vaginal intercourse unrelated to childbirth (Gregoire et al., 2021). Communication scholars should consider asking religious women experiencing sexual pain (Hintz, 2019) or sexual (dis)satisfaction about their communication with their partners prior to and after marriage.

In sum, this study adds texture to sexual communication research by revealing how religious/spiritual values informed devout Christians' sexual intimacy negotiations. Christians who practice premarital abstinence attest to the purity movement's success in reaching its goal, but Christian couples may now struggle with developing physical intimacy in ways that must be monitored and managed via a variety of communication techniques. Scholars should continue investigating links between communication, sexual negotiations, and religion/spirituality so that practitioners can provide more culturally informed guidance for relationships in which commonplace activities like kissing or cuddling may be imbued with sociocultural significance.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Given that Protestants are more likely to classify themselves as "Christian," the term Christian is used in the remainder of this study to refer to Protestant Christians.

[2] Copies of the interview guide and elicitation activity story can be found on the OSF website.

[3] The recruitment criterion requiring participants to have been romantically involved for at least three months was mainly established to ensure there would be enough for them to discuss about their relationship during interviews, regardless of their current level of commitment. One couple had only been dating for about 1.5 months. Given their committed relationship and eagerness to participate, the researcher showed latitude and welcomed their participation.

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