

**PEOPLE ARE MOTIVATED TO ENTER AND MAINTAIN
ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS BECAUSE THEY ARE SOURCES OF
SIGNIFICANCE**

PhD Candidate: Federico Contu

Corso di dottorato in Psicologia sociale, dello sviluppo e ricerca educativa

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Dipartimento di Psicologia dei Processi di Sviluppo e Socializzazione
Sapienza Università di Roma

Supervisor:

Prof. Stefano Livi

Dipartimento di Psicologia dei Processi di Sviluppo e Socializzazione

Sapienza Università di Roma

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Abstract

Drawing on significance quest theory (Kruglanski et al., 2022) and its derived model of love (Kruglanski et al., 2023), the present dissertation argued that real or potential romantic partners should be chosen for both – entering and maintaining – romantic relationships to the extent they are perceived as able to enhance one’s sense of significance. Study 1a and 1b demonstrated that a) merit, and b) appreciation features of a potential partner increase the significance one expects to gain through a romantic relationship with that specific potential partner which, in turn, enhanced the likelihood to enter in a romantic relationship. Study 2, through a longitudinal methodology, showed that the same is true for relationship maintenance. Further, Study 3 demonstrated that the significance gained through love and the inclusion of the other in the self (Aron & Aron, 1986) are two distinct constructs, both associated with relationship’s maintenance intention among people engaged in a romantic relationship. Study 4 demonstrated that a partner’s merit features and appreciation features interact differently with an individual's sense of significance loss. Specifically, individuals experiencing feelings of significance loss were more sensitive to their partners’ merit features in terms of significance gained through the relationship. However, appreciation features had this effect only for women, not men. Study 5, conducted with real couples, confirmed that a partner’s appreciation features interacted with actor’s significance loss only for women. Meanwhile, for men, it was the actor’s appreciation features that interacted with actor’s significance loss. Additionally, these findings revealed that the appreciation factor could enhance an individual's sense of significance gained in a romantic relationship through the ‘actor’ effect as well. Results are discussed in the light of the rich social psychological literature on romantic relationships, and future directions are outlined.

Keywords: Quest for Significance; Romantic relationships; Partner’s merit; Partner’s appreciation

Introduction

Romantic relationships are a pivotal part of human experience of life. The tribulations, the emotions, and the extreme actions humans engaged associated with love and amorous relationships has been told from the first known myths. Widely known, for example, are the ancient Greek legends about the trojan war, caused by the intense love between the Princess Elena and the Prince Paris, or the canvas Penelope's ploy, which she came up with to wait her beloved Ulysses. Obviously, also within social psychology, romantic relationships have been extensively investigated. Important psychological work, indeed, aimed to define romantic relationships, love, and their phenomenology (Berscheid & Hatfield-Walster, 1978; Sternberg, 1986). Others, instead, focused on their functionality, studied romantic relationships as the key for humans' survival (Buss, 1999), and the base of the rise of civilizations (Freud, 1929; Michelet, 1858). Besides phenomenology and functionality, of central interest were the motivational underpinnings of romantic relationships (e.g., Aron & Aron, 1986; Mitchell, Cropanzano, & Quisenberry, 2012), which were basically referred to the exchange of resources between romantic partners. In the present paper, drawing on the love model derived from the significance quest theory (Kruglanski et al., 2022; Kruglanski & Raviv, 2022; Kruglanski et al., 2023), the present dissertation aimed to identify the basic factors that motivate people to a) enter in a romantic relationship, and b) maintain their romantic relationships.

Chapter 1.

Romantic Relationships and the Significance Quest Theory

Significance quest theory (Kruglanski et al., 2022) posits that people possess a universal motivation to feel significant, worthy, and respected (i.e., the need for significance). Historically, SQT was advanced to explain humans' extreme and violent behaviors. Indeed, before its theoretical formalization in 2022, SQT was created as a model of radicalization. In fact, one of the first publications explicitly mentioning and defining the quest for significance viewed it as the fundamental motivation for suicide attackers (Kruglanski et al., 2009). The original idea at the base of the theory's development was, in fact, to find what was common among the various motivations scholars listed as underlying terrorists' actions. The answer given by Kruglanski and colleagues (2009) was that it was the need for feeling significant *in the eyes of others, members of their ingroup*. By engaging for violent action for a hallowed cause, individuals sought to acquire the status of heroes or martyrs representing an appreciable boost to their significance

The theory also clarifies that while this motivation is universal, the quest for significance is also a relatively stable dimension of individual differences in that some people have a stronger need for significance than do others. Situations also differ in their ability to activate people's need for significance. Specifically, the need for significance can arise in situations of significance deprivation or *loss* (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1993), but also in situations that offer an incentive and an opportunity for considerable significance gain. That is, experiences that make people feel less significant, such as humiliation, (e.g., a teacher berates a student in front of the class), exclusion or rejection (e.g., John is the only one in the class who wasn't invited to Victoria's birthday), or failure (e.g., John is the only one in the class who failed and will have to repeat the year). In cases of *incentivization* instead, situations are perceived as affording fruitful opportunities for significance *gain*. For example, when a new managerial position opens at a company, employees who are

eligible to compete for that role perceive in it an opportunity to improve their status in the company, hence, to gain significance.

SQT also provides a way to systematically predict which actions are considered able to convey significance to their perpetrators. Importantly, SQT posits that significance is attained by confirming or representing in one's actions important cultural values that are accorded worthiness in one's reference group, culture, or sub-culture (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Depending on the cultural context in which one lives, the values which must be observed to achieve significance can vary. Consequently, the actions that confer significance also change. For example, in a religious culture, faith and devotion are highly esteemed values that, when observed, confer significance. In contrast, in a secular culture, logical and rational thinking may be the prominent values that, when upheld, convey significance. Building on the notion that all important cultural values represent a potential source of significance, SQT has been already applied to a variety of domains different from the one in which it was originally developed (i.e., violent extremism), including extremism at work (Contu et al., 2023b), self-care related behaviors (Contu et al., 2024), environmental activism (Molinario et al., 2020), and pro-social behaviors (Viola et al., 2023). Similarly, although SQT was originally developed to explain violent extremism, it can also explain highly positive interpersonal phenomena such as romantic love. Accordingly, the present studies were designed to explore romantic relationships phenomena from the SQT perspective. In what follows, the reasons why SQT should be fruitful in explaining romantic relationships are provided.

Firstly, scholars have recognized the importance of romantic relations as crucial for reproduction (Buss, 1999), and the offspring's successful education (Kim, 2011). Accordingly, cultural values often reflect rules that are (or were) strictly connected with survival (Jochim, 2013). And, aligned with this, Baumeister and Leary (1995), suggested that romantic relationships are fundamental for establishing a family and therefore represent a major life goal. Additionally, here another possibility, namely that phenomenologically romantic relationships are tied to people's

quest for significance since their initiation and maintenance are related to one's partner fulfillment of that need, is examined.

Specifically, being loved by a romantic partner makes one feel, and demonstrates to others, that they are worthy of admiration, thereby directly enhancing one's sense of significance. Indeed, being recognized as worthy of love and attention is necessary to healthy human development beginning in infancy (Bowlby, 1979). Further, showing love to an amorous partner is likely to communicate their importance to oneself, inviting their reciprocation of appreciation and warmth (Kruglanski et al., 2023). In line with this notion, Sedikides et al. (1994) found that participants reported high self-esteem as a benefit of being in a romantic relationship. As such, entering and maintaining romantic relationships, especially when romantic partners furnish warmth and support, and when the romantic partners themselves are respected and admired by others, bestows a sense of mattering, thereby making the romantic partner a *source of significance*.

Which Factors Make Someone a Source of Significance?

If romantic relationships are a major means to satisfy the need for significance and mattering, one should choose to enter or maintain romantic relationships with partners perceived as able to enhance one's sense of significance. Ergo, the more a given individual is viewed as a potential or actual source of one's own significance, the greater the motivation to enter or maintain a romantic relationship with them. Drawing on the motivational model of romantic relationships derived from SQT (Kruglanski et al., 2023), two primary factors that enhance the likelihood of one being seen a significance-bestowing romantic partner have been identified.

Kruglanski and colleagues (2023) defined these two factors with the aim of condensing the vast literature on romantic relationships into two parsimonious concepts related to SQT, namely, partner's merit and partner's appreciation. Partner's merit, as a relationship-independent factor, describes the qualities of a partner him or herself that have been documented in past literature as crucial features for succeeding in mating selection processes (see Zhou, Chelberg, & Aron, 2015 for

a review). These are features that are generally valued and admired in a person whether in a romantic relation or outside of it, such as attractive physical appearance, smarts, power, social status, popularity. By contrast, partner *appreciation, as a relationship-specific factor*, describes how an actor perceives the partner as valuing and caring him or her based on the shared experiences between the actor and the partner (Kenny et al., 2020). In other words, merit features, as evaluated by the actor, exist largely apart from the relationship between the actor and the partner. They represent what the partner *is* or seems to be in the actor's eyes. Although perceived partner merit is subjective, it is largely affected by social norms prevalent in the society of which one is a member and which reality one shares (Higgins, 2019). Thus, there is generally agreement among people about the degree to which a given individual is tall, good looking, smart, influential or from a respected family. In contrast, appreciation is relationship specific. It represents what the partner *does*, how it acts uniquely toward the actor.

Social merit

Social merit corresponds to the extent someone rates high on socially estimated dimensions (e.g., honesty, aesthetic beauty, social status). That is, the more individuals are perceived as owning socially cherished features, or as respectful of socially prescribed important values, the more they are significance bestowing partners. In this way, one's partner possessing social value, appearing powerful, rich, respected, beautiful, or famous provides one significance *by association*. Namely, people think they are viewed as significant and thus respected and admired by others because of their association with partners who possess socially cherished qualities.

In line with the concept of 'social merit', past research made clear that partners' desirable characteristics are one of the major predictors of initial interpersonal liking (see Zhou, Chelberg, & Aron, 2016, for a review). Moreover, several findings support the assumption that a partner possessing socially valuable features enhances one's sense of significance and importance. For example, in two studies, Rodeheffer, Proffitt Leyva, and Hill (2016) found that women see men

more desirable when they have attractive (vs. unattractive) romantic partners. Similarly, men report wanting to date with a woman who is paired with a more attractive partner (Moran & Wade, 2022). This is true also with respect long-term relationships, where both men and women are perceived as more attractive for long-term relationships when they are paired with an attractive partner (Little et al., 2008). Men are also perceived to have better leadership qualities when their partners are attractive (Kocoglu & Mithani, 2020). Similarly, women are perceived as more attractive, sociable, and likeable when they have an attractive rather than unattractive partner (Strane & Watts, 1977). And both men and women are seen as higher in status when they have an attractive partner (Winegard et al., 2017). Other studies suggest that being close to attractive people appears to enhance self-perceptions of attractiveness, and this is especially true when people have low self-esteem and thus may be pursuing significance (Brown et al., 1992). That is, having an attractive romantic partner enhance the others' perception about the desirable features that the actor has, thereby augmenting actor's sense of significance. Other socially valuable qualities seem to have similar effects. For example, Jones et al., (2007) suggested that popularity with women increases men's significance in the eyes of other women. Also, adolescents who were initially low in popularity became more attractive and popular (Simon et al., 2008) when they had a popular romantic partner.

Notably, features that are valued in one's specific culture are not necessarily valued to the same extent by other cultures (e.g., Joshanloo, 2014). Also, cultures consist of a variety of subcultures sorted by, for example, age or job domain professions. Each of those subcultures may refer to different values and, as a consequence, assign importance to different characteristics that are appreciated in a partner. For example, an athlete may particularly appreciate success meanwhile an extremely religious person the devotion. Indeed, despite there are values that are commonly perceived as socially desirable (Schwartz, 2012), preferences for beautiful partners and partners of high social class vary across gender, political orientation, level of education, and age (Doosje et al.,

1999). Partner's 'social merit' might also be context dependent. In this respect, the fit between the partner's characteristics and the prescriptive norms, which depend on the specific situation, impact attraction to the partner. For instance, people tend to feel embarrassed when their romantic partners use humor in inappropriate contexts (Hall, 2011), though they might value having a humorous partner in other contexts.

Appreciation

The 'appreciation' factor refers to the direct significance boost that a warm, affectionate, and supportive partner furnishes. As it has been mentioned before, indeed, partners' support and appreciation are evidence that one is worthy of love and that someone chooses to invest energy and resources in the relationship, thereby increasing individuals' significance through *admiration*. In other words, when people are supported and are recipients of amorous attentions, they feel to be important in the face of a significant other (i.e., the partner) and, thus, they gain significance (Kruglanski et al., 2022). Further, an appreciative partner furnishes significance to the actor through building and validating a shared reality (Rossignac-Milon & Higgins, 2018) in which the actor is significant. Notably, while a partner's merit features exist independently from the relationship between the actor and their partner (Kenny, 2020), a partner's appreciation is a relationship-specific factor, since it represents the partner's appreciation *specifically and uniquely for the actor*. Partners' appreciation (for the actor) is reflected in a variety of behaviors attesting that the actor matters and is significant to the partner. These include, for example, *positive regard and affection* (Murray et al., 2000), *adoration* (Schindler et al., 2015), *responsiveness* (Reis et al., 2004), *understanding* (Gordon & Chen, 2016), and *behavioral affirmation* (Rusbult, Finkel, & Kumashiro, 2009).

Supporting the existence of an 'appreciation factor', it is widely known that it feels good to be admired by others (Byrne, 1971), and that one of the main predictors of initial attraction is the perception that the other person likes you (Zhou, Chelberg, & Aron, 2016). Along this line, Riela et al. (2010), showed that people are likely to enter romantic relationships when a desirable other

expressed appreciation for the self. Other additional findings suggest that appreciative partners enhance actors' significance. For example, in a longitudinal study of dating relationships, people who felt more positively regarded by their partners reported greater self-esteem compared to those who felt negatively regarded 4 months and 12 months later (Murray et al., 2000). In line with this, it has been found that romantic rejection is accompanied by drops in self-esteem (Baumeister et al., 1993). Further, research that implemented experimental manipulation of partners' admiration showed that participants in the 'admiration' condition reported greater self-esteem compared to participants in the control condition (Marigold et al., 2007).

Other evidence about the consequences of having an appreciative and supportive partner came from past research related to the concept of 'partner behavioral affirmation' (Rusbult, Finkel, & Kumashiro, 2009). Specifically, partner behavioral affirmation represents the extent to which a partner consciously or unconsciously behaves in ways that enhance one's capability to reach a goal. That is, the extent to which a partner is supportive. Relevant to us, when a partner shows affirming behaviors, the actor gains enhanced personal well-being, including greater life satisfaction (e.g., Drigotas, 2002), and, thus, greater sense of significance. Moreover, when a partner serves as an ally in promoting growth, both the partner and the actor achieve enhanced couple well-being, including greater adjustment, probability of relationship's maintenance, and couple's functionality (e.g., Drigotas et al., 1999; Kumashiro, Rusbult, Finkenauer, & Stocker, 2007; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996).

Chapter 2.

The present research

Romantic relationships are essential for humans' survival (Buss, 1999), and culture (Freud, 1929; Michelet, 1858). Indeed, various research has been conducted to establish which factors enhance the likelihood to a) enter (e.g., Zhou et al., 2016), and b) maintain romantic relationships (e.g., Rusbult et al., 2009). Relevantly, Kruglanski and colleagues (2023), aiming to identify the motivational underpinnings of entering and maintaining romantic relationships, recently derived a 'love model' grounded on the significance quest theory (Kruglanski et al., 2022). However, the proposed love model has still not received empirical support and, thus, the present dissertation aimed to provide it. The present work central hypothesis refers to the fact that entering and maintaining romantic relationships are motivated by the humans' universal need for significance (Kruglanski et al., 2022). That is, the more a partner is perceived as a source of significance, the more the likelihood to enter and maintain a romantic relationship. In the light of this, Kruglanski and colleagues (2023) identified two factors that mainly determine if a person is perceived as able to enhance one's significance. The *social merit* factor corresponds to the extent someone rates high on socially estimated dimensions. Meanwhile, the *appreciation* factor pertains to the direct significance-boost that a supportive, warmth, loving partner provides.

This hypothesis was tested across 6 studies. The first two experiments tested whether a) social merit, and b) appreciation features of a potential partner increase the significance one expects to gain through a romantic relationship with that specific potential partner which, in turn, enhanced the likelihood to enter in a romantic relationship with them. The third study tested, in a sample of people engaged in a romantic relationship, this same hypothesis through a longitudinal methodology. The fourth cross-sectional study was designed to demonstrate that the significance gained through love and the inclusion of the other in the self (Aron & Aron, 1986) are two distinct

constructs, both associated with the intensity of love-feelings, and thus the propensity to maintain the proper relationship, among people engaged in a romantic relationship. The fifth study tested if men and women experiencing significance loss feelings are both, and in the same way, more sensitive, in terms of significance gained through their relationship, to their partners merit and appreciation features. The last study, relying on ‘real couples’ data, tested whether the appreciation factor can enhance one’s gained significance through their relationship also through the *actor* effect (and not only the *partner* one). Also, this last study tested if the ‘actor appreciation effect’, and the ‘partner appreciation effect’ interacted in the same way with the actor’s significance loss in men and women.

All the studies embedded in the present dissertation were approved by the Ethics Committee of Department of Social and Developmental Psychology at ‘La Sapienza’ University of Rome (protocol N. 572).

Chapter 3.

Merit, Appreciation, and Romantic Relationships Entrance

Study 1A

Methods

Participants, Design, and Procedure

To estimate the minimum sample size needed to test the hypotheses, a medium effect size has been assumed. Indeed, given the nature of the appreciation and merit manipulations that have been designed, a large effect on the expected significance gain was expected. However, since this was the first empirical test of these hypotheses, following a conservative strategy, a medium effect size was assumed. Hence, assuming a medium effect size ($r = .30$), one mediator, power = .80, and alpha=0.05, the online tool 'Monte Carlo Power Analysis for Indirect Effects' (Schoemann, Boulton, & Short, 2017) suggested a minimum N of 154 participants to detect the indirect effects of a) partner's social merit, and b) partner's appreciation on the likelihood of entering the romantic relationship via the expected significance gain. To test the hypothesis, 214 Italian heterosexual adults (110 men; 104 women; $M_{age}=27.47$ yrs; $SD_{age}=6.25$ yrs) were enrolled in a 2 (high vs. low social merit) x 2 (high vs. low appreciation) full experimental design. Inclusion criteria were to be single, to have more than 18 years, and to fluently speak Italian. Participants were contacted through a paid procedure provided by Prolific, and they were requested to participate in a study about people's perception of potential partners. Once they gave their informed consent, participants provided basic demographic information (i.e., age, gender). Subsequently, they completed a second part of the questionnaire aimed at manipulating social merit and appreciation features of a potential partner. The last part of the questionnaire was dedicated to the measurement of the variables of interest as described below. Lastly, participants were carefully debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Materials and Measures

Social Merit and Appreciation Factors Manipulation. To manipulate social merit and appreciation factors of a potential partner, participants were required to vividly imagine themselves in a given situation. Specifically, participants were asked to imagine that they were invited for a dinner by a close friend, and that once they arrived at their friend's house, they met a new person of the gender to which they are attracted. Subsequently, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (low vs. high merit). In the low merit condition, participants were told that the person they met was aesthetically unattractive, had a bad reputation among the other dinner guests, and was unemployed. In the high merit condition, by contrast, the person participants met was an aesthetically attractive doctor with a good reputation among the other dinner guests. Then, participants were randomly assigned to one of two additional conditions (low vs. high appreciation). In the low appreciation condition, participants were told the person they met was not warm and supportive at all toward their previous partner. In the high appreciation condition, by contrast, participants were told that the person they met was very warm and supportive toward their previous partner. The order of presentation of merit and appreciation manipulations was randomized to control for possible order effects.

Expected Gain. The significance that participants expected to gain from a relationship with a person like the one described in the scenario was measured through a five-item scale that was constructed relying on the definition of significance given by Kruglanski et al. (2022). Participants responded on a Likert scale from 1 ('Totally Disagree') to 7 ('Totally Agree'). Items were: 'being in a relationship with someone like the one I met at my friend's house would make me proud'; 'being in a relationship with someone like the one I met at my friend's house would make me feel important'; 'being in a relationship with someone like the one I met at my friend's house would give meaning to my life'; 'being in a relationship with someone like the one I met at my friend's

house would make me valuable’; ‘being in a relationship with someone like the one I met at my friend’s house would make me feel strong’. ($\alpha=0.94$).

Relationship start index. Participants’ perceived likelihood that the person described in the scenario could become their stable partner was measured on a scale ranging from 1 (‘none’) to 100 (‘a lot’).

Results

To test the hypothesis, firstly two 2 (low vs. high social merit) x 2 (low vs. high appreciation) univariate ANOVA on a) expected gain, and b) relationship start index were performed. Subsequently a model in which the social merit factor, and the appreciation factor (experimentally manipulated) were the two main predictors, expected gain was the mediator, and the relationship start index was the dependent variable was tested. Also, participants’ age and gender were inserted as covariates. This model was tested through the software Jamovi (2021; PATHj jamovi package, Gallucci, 2021; Rosseel, 2019). Descriptives and bivariate correlations are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptives and bivariate correlations (Study 1a; N=214)

	MERIT	APPR.	EXPGAIN	ENTER	Age	M(SD)
MERIT	—					—
APPR.	-0.017	—				—
EXPGAIN	0.464***	0.374***	(0.94)			2.89(1.51)
ENTER	0.453***	0.281***	0.651***	—		27.0(26.0)
Age	0.044	0.049	0.047	0.011	—	27.5(6.25)
Gender	-0.001	0.049	-0.209**	-0.055	-0.023	—

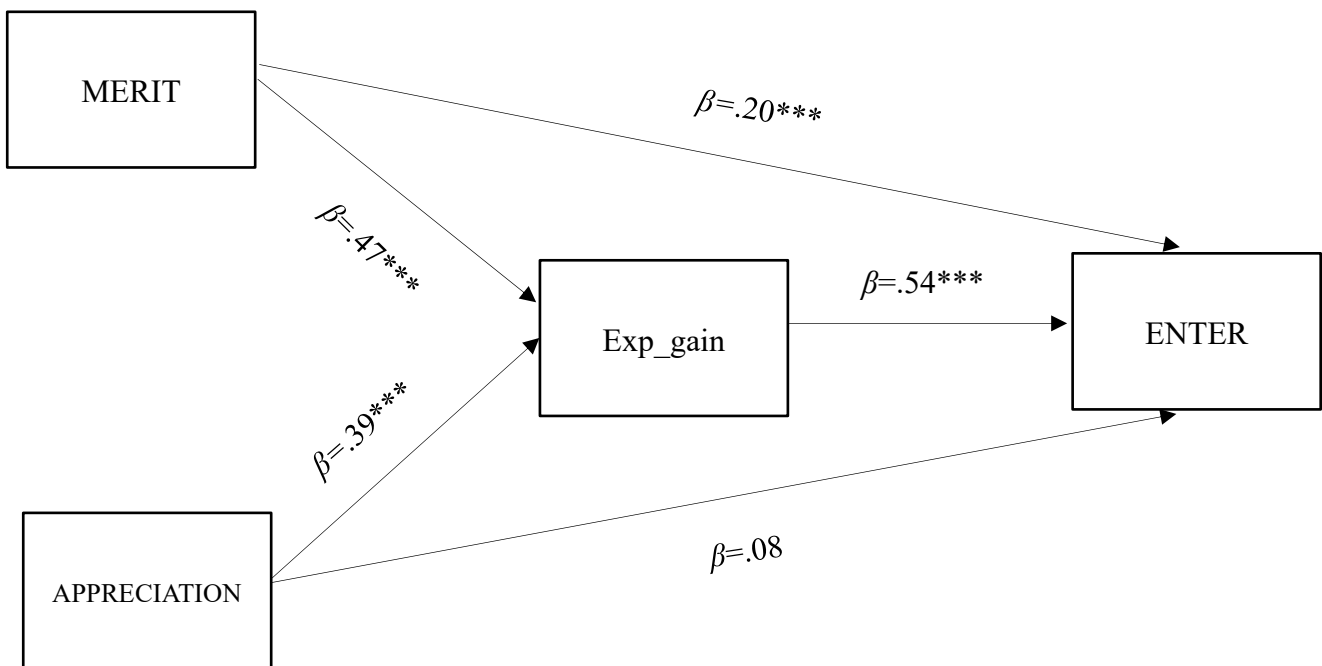
Note. In bracket (Cronbach’s Alpha). MERIT=Experimental conditions (-1=low; 1=high); APPR.=Appreciation experimental conditions (-1=low; 1=high); EXPGAIN=expected gained

significance [1 (lowest score) to 7 (highest score)]; ENTER=Probability of relationship entrance [0 (lowest score) to 100 (highest score)]. Gender (0=men; 1=women).

Univariate ANOVAs revealed a significant main effect of a) the social merit factor [$F(1,210)=72.761, p<0.001$], and b) the appreciation factor [$F(1,210)=48.054, p<0.001$] on expected gain. Further, non-significant effect of the interaction between social merit and appreciation factors on expected gain was found, $p=0.841$. With respect the relationship start index, analyses revealed a significant main effect of a) the social merit factor [$F(1,210)=149.681, p<0.001$], b) the appreciation factor [$F(1,210)=48.439, p<0.001$], and a non-significant effect of the interaction between the appreciation and the social merit factor, $p=0.589$.

As shown in Figure 1, results revealed significant positive effects of a) partner's merit [$b=1.42, \beta=0.47, SE=0.16, z=8.98, p<0.001, (95\%CI=1.11,1.73)$], and b) partner's appreciation conditions [$b=1.19, \beta=0.39, SE=0.16, z=7.49, p<0.001, (95\%CI=0.87,1.50)$] on the significance participants expected to gain through a romantic relationship with the potential partner described in the experimental scenarios. Also, expected gain positively and significantly predicted the likelihood to enter in a romantic relationship with them [$b=9.24, \beta=0.54, SE=1.12, z=8.21, p<0.001, (95\%CI=7.03,11.44)$]. Importantly, analyses also revealed positive and significant indirect effects of a) partner's merit [$b=13.12, \beta=0.25, SE=2.16, z=6.06, p<0.001, (95\%CI=8.88,17.36)$], and b) partner's appreciation [$b=10.99, \beta=0.21, SE=1.99, z=5.35, p<0.001, (95\%CI=7.10,14.88)$] on the likelihood to enter in a romantic relationship with the potential partner via expected gain. With respect to the covariates, the only significant relationship was that between gender (1=men; 2=women) and expected gain [$b=-0.69, \beta=-0.23, SE=0.16, z=-4.34, p<0.001, (95\%CI=-0.99;-0.38)$]. The model had an $R^2_{adj.} = 0.413$ with respect to expected gain, and an $R^2_{adj.} = 0.686$ with respect to the tendency to enter the romantic relationship.

Fig. 1 A path-analysis model showing the effect of a potential partner’s merit and appreciation on the perceived likelihood to enter a romantic relationship via the expected significance gain.



Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. MERIT = Experimental conditions coded as -1 = low and 1 = high; APPRECIATION = Experimental conditions coded as -1 = low and 1 = high; Exp_gain = expected gained significance; INDEX = Probability index of relationship entrance. Covariates are not included for the sake of clarity.

Study 1B

Study 1B was conducted for two reasons. First, given the broad definitions of partner merit and appreciation, Study 1B aimed to replicate the results obtained in Study 1A using different merit and appreciation operationalizations. Hence, the primary objective was to achieve a conceptual replication of the results from Study 1A. Secondly, Study 1B sought to increase the generalizability of findings by testing the hypotheses in a different cultural context.

Methods

Participants, Design, and Procedure

Based on the power analyses that has been performed for Study 1A, to test the hypothesis, 160 American heterosexual adults (65.5% men; $M_{\text{age}}=35.17$ yrs; $SD_{\text{age}}=11.53$ yrs) were enrolled in a 2 (high vs. low merit) x 2 (high vs. low appreciation) full experimental design. Inclusion criteria were to be single, to be at least 18 years old, and to be fluent in English (data were collected in the U. S.). Participants were contacted through a paid procedure provided by Prolific, and they were requested to participate in a study about people's perception of potential partners. The procedure was the same implemented in Study 1A, varying only in manipulations of the potential partner's merit and appreciation features.

Materials and Measures

Social Merit and Appreciation Factors Manipulation. To conceptually replicate the results of Study 1A, in Study 1B, different operationalizations of the merit and appreciation factors were implemented. Specifically, participants were asked to imagine being invited to a friend's company's holiday party, and that, while there, they met a person of the gender to which they are attracted and had a brief conversation. Then, participants were asked to imagine that the day after the party, they had lunch with their friend, and their friend gave them (the participant) two items of information about the person they met at the party. At this point, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions, namely of low vs. high partner's merit. In the low merit condition, participants were told that nobody at their company respects the person they had met, and that it would be embarrassing to be known as this person's romantic partner. In the high merit condition, by contrast, participants were told that the person they met was the most respected person in their company, and that anyone would be proud to be known as this person's romantic partner. Then, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions of low vs. high appreciation. In the low appreciation condition, participants were told that the person said they (the participant) were not their type, and

that they would not want to go out with them. In the high appreciation condition, by contrast, participants were told that the person said they thought the participant was amazing, and that they would love to be in a romantic relationship with them. To control for possible order effects, the order of presentation of merit and appreciation manipulations was randomized.

Expected Gain. Significance that participants expected to gain if they were in a relationship with a person like the one described in the scenario was measured as did in Study 1A. ($\alpha = 0.95$).

Relationship start index. Relationship start index was measured as did in Study 1A.

Results

In Study 1B the same analysis strategy used in Study 1a was implemented. Descriptives and bivariate correlations are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptives and bivariate correlations (Study 1b; N=160)

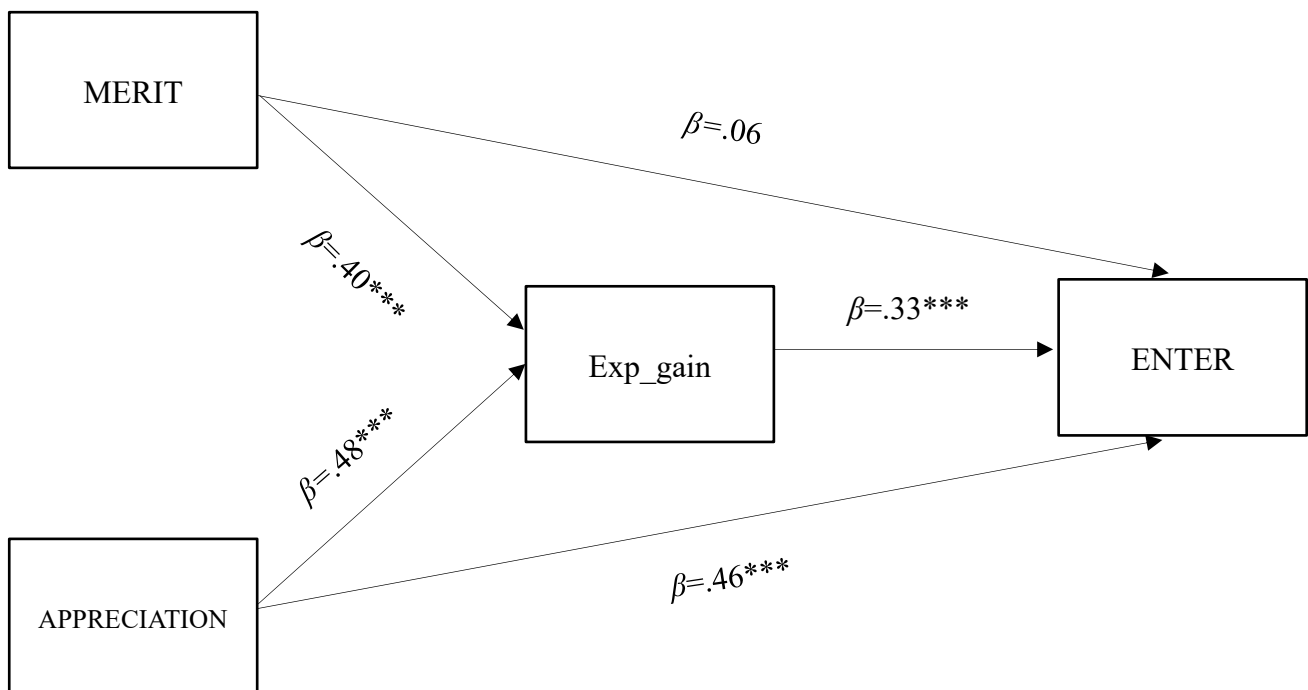
	MERIT	APPR.	EXPGAIN	ENTER	Age	M(SD)
MERIT	—					—
APPR.	0.049	—				—
EXPGAIN	0.408***	0.499***	(0.95)			3.63(1.66)
ENTER	0.137*	0.721***	0.607***	—		26.1(25.6)
Age	0.117	-0.056	-0.088	-0.146	—	35.2(11.5)
Gender	0.040	0.014	-0.183*	-0.074	0.281***	—

Note. In bracket (Cronbach's Alpha). MERIT=Experimental conditions (-1=low; 1=high); APPR.=Appreciation experimental conditions (-1=low; 1=high); EXPGAIN=expected gained significance [1 (lowest score) to 7 (highest score)]; ENTER=Probability of relationship entrance [0 (lowest score) to 100 (highest score)]. Gender (0=men; 1=women).

Univariate ANOVAs revealed a significant main effect of a) the social merit factor [$F(1,156)=38.302, p<0.001$], and b) the appreciation factor [$F(1,156)=59.598, p<0.001$] on expected gain. Further, a non-significant effect of the interaction between social merit and appreciation factors on expected gain was found, $p=0.727$. With respect to the relationship start index, analyses revealed a significant main effect of a) the social merit factor [$F(1,156)=16.213, p<0.001$], b) the appreciation factor [$F(1,156)=158.855, p<0.001$], and a non-significant effect of the interaction between the appreciation and the social merit factor, $p=0.265$.

As shown in Figure 2, results revealed significant positive effects of a) partner's merit [$b=1.32, \beta=0.40, SE=0.20, z=6.69, p<0.001, (95\%CI=0.93,1.71)$], and b) partner's appreciation conditions [$b=1.59, \beta=0.48, SE=0.20, z=8.08, p<0.001, (95\%CI=1.20,1.97)$] on the significance participants expected to gain through a romantic relationship with the potential partner described in the experimental scenarios. Also, expected gain positively and significantly predicted the probability of relationship entrance [$b=5.12, \beta=0.33, SE=1.02, z=5.13, p<0.001, (95\%CI=3.12,7.12)$]. Importantly, analyses also revealed positive and significant indirect effects of a) partner's merit [$b=6.76, \beta=0.13, SE=1.68, z=4.01, p<0.001, (95\%CI=3.46,10.06)$], and b) partner's appreciation [$b=8.12, \beta=0.16, SE=1.91, z=4.26, p<0.001, (95\%CI=4.38,11.86)$] on the probability of relationship entrance via expected gain. With respect to the covariates, the only significant effect was that of gender (1=men; 2=women) on expected gain [$b=-0.66, \beta=-0.19, SE=0.21, z=-3.10, p<0.001, (95\%CI=-1.08;-0.24)$]. The model had an $R^2_{adj.} = 0.441$ with respect to expected gain, and an $R^2_{adj.} = 0.698$ with respect to the tendency to enter the romantic relationship.

Fig. 2 A path-analysis model showing the effect of a potential partner’s merit and appreciation on the perceived likelihood to enter a romantic relationship via expected significance gain.



Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. MERIT = Experimental conditions coded as -1 = low and 1 = high; APPRECIATION = Experimental conditions coded as -1 = low and 1 = high; Exp_gain = expected gained significance; INDEX = Probability index of relationship entrance. Covariates are not included for the sake of clarity.

Discussion

Studies 1A and 1B provide initial support for the present conceptualization of romantic relationships as motivated by humans’ need for significance. As expected, potential partners’ merit and appreciation features increased the expectation that one would gain significance through a romantic relationship with that potential partner which, in turn, increased the perceived likelihood of entering into a romantic relationship with that person. Importantly, Studies 1A and 1B provided support for the hypotheses using two different manipulations of partners’ merit and appreciation. In Study 1A, the merit factor was manipulated by varying the potential partner’s aesthetic

attractiveness, reputation, and occupational prestige. In Study 1B, the merit factor was manipulated solely by varying the potential partner's reputation. Furthermore, in Study 1A, the appreciation factor was manipulated by varying the potential partner's supportive and affectionate qualities. In Study 1B, appreciation was manipulated by varying the positive regard the potential partner had for the actor and the potential partner's desire to initiate a relationship with the actor. Taken together, Studies 1A and 1B provided consistent results regarding the role of potential partners' appreciation and merit in motivating individuals to pursue new romantic relationships. They serve as conceptual replications of each other.

Interestingly, the different manipulations of the potential partner's merit and appreciation features also led to varying results. In Study 1A, the potential partner's merit had a direct effect on the likelihood of initiating a romantic relationship, whereas the direct effect of appreciation was not significant. In contrast, Study 1B revealed the opposite pattern. Upon closer examination, these differences seem to become clearer. In Study 1A, merit was manipulated by varying the potential partner's reputation, attractiveness, and occupational prestige simultaneously. In Study 1B, however, merit was manipulated by varying only the potential partner's reputation. This difference in manipulation strength might explain the variations in the direct effects of merit observed between Study 1A and Study 1B. Regarding the manipulation of appreciation, Study 1A involved varying the supportive and affectionate qualities of the potential partner, which were estimated based on their behavior towards an ex-romantic partner. In Study 1B, appreciation was manipulated by explicitly evaluating the actor's (participants') desirability for initiating a romantic relationship. Again, this likely difference in manipulation strength could account for the variations in the direct effects of appreciation observed between Study 1A and Study 1B. Beyond those differences, Studies 1A and 1B confirmed the hypotheses within samples from two different cultures (i.e., Italy and the United States), thus enhancing the generalizability of findings. However, the research thus far

considered only entrance into romantic relationships, and not their maintenance. To address the latter issue, an additional study was carried out.

Chapter 4.

Study 2 – Social Merit, Appreciation, and Romantic Relationships Maintenance

Study 2 aimed to expand the findings of Studies 1A and 1B to the maintenance of romantic relationships. Specifically, it was hypothesized that participants' perception of their partners' merit and appreciation features would positively predict the significance they gained through their romantic relationship, which, in turn, would predict participants' willingness to maintain their romantic relationships. The willingness to maintain one's romantic relationship was operationalized through the commitment and intimacy components of love (Sternberg, 1987), which are strongly associated with relationship maintenance and stability (Rusbult et al., 2001; Sumter et al., 2013). To specify, a measure of the 'passion' component of love (Sternberg, 1987) was not included because this is essentially a measure of attraction which, in the proposed model, is an independent variable (attraction is one of the factors that determine the partner's merit).

Moreover, of course, within romantic couples, people already have a stable and accurate idea of their partners' characteristics, including those related to merit and appreciation. Therefore, manipulation of these characteristics was not an applicable strategy. Hence, to establish causality between a) partners' merit and appreciation and significance gained through the relationship, and b) significance gained through the relationship and the love components (i.e., intimacy and commitment) directly linked to relationship maintenance, the hypothesis was tested using a longitudinal methodology (Gollob & Reichardt, 1987). Indeed, when testing mediational models, the way to prove the causal mediation effect is to use longitudinal models to analyze different moments in time and then exclude alternative (than those hypothesized) causal orders among the considered variables (Maxwell & Cole, 2007; Selig & Preacher, 2009).

Methods

Participants, Design and Procedure

Sample size determination was made regarding indirect effects of merit and appreciation features on the intimacy and commitment components of love via the perception of gaining significance through the romantic relationship. Since this study represented the first test of this hypothesis within a sample of participants already engaged in romantic relationships, the large effect sizes gleaned in the first two studies were disregarded and a medium effect size was assumed ($r=.30$; Cohen, 1992). Hence, to determine the minimum sample size to detect the indirect effects of a simple mediation model, it was used the online tool ‘Monte Carlo Power Analysis for Indirect Effects’ by Schoemann, Boulton, and Short (2017). Assuming medium effect sizes ($r=.30$), the confidence level set at 95 percent, power = 0.80, 5,000 Monte Carlo simulations indicated a minimum N of 154 participants. Since a minimum dropout rate of about 10% is typical for longitudinal studies (e.g., Weiss, 2005), a minimum of 230 participants was aimed.

All data were collected on January 20, 2023 (the first wave), and February 20, 2023 (the second wave) through a paid procedure provided by Prolific. Given the nature of the present research, inclusion criteria were to be in an ongoing romantic relationship, to be older than 18 years old, and to be fluent in Italian. To test the hypothesis, 238 were enrolled participants in a two-wave longitudinal study. Between the first and the second wave of measurements, there was a high drop-out rate among participants¹. Hence, at the second wave, the total sample included 195 Italian adults engaged in a heterosexual relationship (47.4% men; $M_{age}=31.10$, $SD_{age}=9.34$). Among these

¹ Given that there was a drop-out rate of the 18.06%, an attrition check was performed to ensure that the sample was not biased. To do it, I regressed, through a logistic regression, a dichotomic variable (completed vs. not completed) on all the variables measured in the first wave of measurement. None of the considered variables (i.e., age, gender, relationship duration, type of relationship, partner’s merit, partner’s appreciation, and gained significance) revealed a significant association with the drop-out ratio.

participants, the mean relationship duration was 72.20 months (SD=82.70). Moreover, 2.6% of participants were dating (they were not dating their partner exclusively), 76.8% were in a stable relationship, 3.1% were engaged, and 17.5% were married. After giving their informed consent, each participant filled out an online questionnaire aimed at assessing the measures of interest (see below). Finally, participants were thanked and carefully debriefed.

Measures

Appreciation factor. Participants' perception of their partners' appreciation features was assessed through a five-item measure, based on the definition of partner appreciation provided by Kruglanski and colleagues (2023) and adapted from items from the Partner Behavioral Affirmation Scale (Drigotas et al., 1999). Participants were asked to respond on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ('absolutely not') to 7 ('absolutely yes'). Items were: 'My partner is supportive'; 'My partner encourages me to become who I want'; 'My partner helps me to become who I want'; 'My partner makes me feel loved'; 'My partner treats me in a way that helps me becoming who I want'. (first wave: $\alpha=.95$; second wave: $\alpha=.96$).

Merit factor. Participants' perception of their partners' socially valued characteristics was measured through a seven-item scale, based on the definition of partner merit provided by Kruglanski and colleagues (2023). Participants were asked to respond on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ('absolutely not') to 7 ('absolutely yes'). Items were: 'My partner has socially valued features'; 'My partner is physically attractive'; 'My partner is popular'; 'My partner is intelligent'; 'My partner is an estimated person'; 'My partner is a respected person'; 'My partner has an important role within our community'. (first wave: $\alpha=.87$; second wave: $\alpha=.88$).

Gained significance. Participants' perception of gaining significance through their romantic relationship was measured using a five-item scale, adapted from Studies 1A and 1B, and based on the definition of significance provided by Kruglanski and colleagues (2022). Participants responded on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ('absolutely not') to 7 ('absolutely yes'). Items were:

'My relationship makes me proud'; 'My relationship makes me feel important'; 'My relationship gives meaning to my life'; 'My relationship makes me feel a valued person'; 'My relationship makes me feel strong'. (first wave: $\alpha=.93$; second wave: $\alpha=.94$).

Relationship maintenance index. The likelihood of relationship maintenance was measured through assessing participants' intimacy and commitment components of love, which have been shown to be strongly associated with relationship maintenance (Sumter et al., 2013). It was used a six-item scale adapted from the Triangular Love Scale (TLS; Sternberg, 1997). Participants were asked to respond on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ('absolutely not') to 7 ('absolutely yes'). Example items: 'I never want to have another partner'; 'I want my relationship to be never-ending'. The items showed excellent reliabilities for both the first and the second wave of measurements and thus they were averaged to create one aggregated measure (first wave: $\alpha=.92$; second wave: $\alpha=.93$).

Results

To test the hypothesis, three different path analysis models were tested using Jamovi (The jamovi project, 2021) and, specifically, the PATHj jamovi package (Gallucci, 2019; Rosseel, 2019). Through the models, the time-sequencing among all the examined variables was examined, controlling for age, gender, relationship duration, and measure stability (Model 2 and 3; Marsch & Hau, 1996). First, the hypotheses were tested by analyzing data on all participants involved in the first wave (Model 1; N=233). Subsequently, the second model (Model 2) aimed to establish causality between partner's merit and appreciation, and the significance participants gained through the romantic relationships. Hence, the model included partners' merit and appreciation factors at time 1, and significance gained through the relationship and the relationship maintenance index at time 2. Eventually, in the third model (Model 3), the aim was to establish causality between gained significance and the relationship maintenance index. Hence, in this model, were included partners' merit and appreciation factors at time 1, significance gained through the relationship at time 1, and

the relationship maintenance index at time 2. Notably, all the models were tested both with and without the covariates (i.e., age, gender, relationship duration). Results are summarized in Table 3 (descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations), and Table 4 (fit indices).

Table 3. Descriptives and bivariate correlations (Study 2; N=195).

	T1_MERIT	T1_APPR.	T1_GAIN	T1_LOVE	T2_MERIT	T2_APPR.	T2_GAIN	T2_MAIN	Age	Gender	M(SD)
T1_MERIT	(0.87)										5.17(1.00)
T1_APPR.	0.704***	(0.95)									5.77(1.35)
T1_GAIN	0.629***	0.760***	(0.93)								5.24(1.32)
T1_LOVE	0.693***	0.784***	0.777***	(0.92)							5.76(1.23)
T2_MERIT	0.861***	0.708***	0.642***	0.666***	(0.88)						5.15(1.02)
T2_APPR.	0.650***	0.857***	0.703***	0.701***	0.745***	(0.96)					5.74(1.35)
T2_GAIN	0.632***	0.732***	0.828***	0.740***	0.712***	0.771***	(0.94)				5.25(1.34)
T2_MAIN	0.625***	0.718***	0.707***	0.823***	0.716***	0.781***	0.825***	(0.93)			5.64(1.28)
Age	-0.212**	-0.337***	-0.196**	-0.242***	-0.138	-0.315***	-0.150*	-0.185*	—		31.1(9.34)
Gender	0.148*	0.125	0.089	0.037	0.166*	0.110	0.059	0.048	-0.081	—	—
Relationship duration	-0.208**	-0.233**	-0.124	-0.179*	-0.126	-0.202**	-0.088	-0.095	0.682***	0.059	72.2(82.7)

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. In bracket (Cronbach's Alpha). T1_MERIT=Partner's merit (time 1); T1_APPR.=Partner's appreciation (time 1); T1_GAIN=Significance gained through the relationship (time 1); T1_MAIN=Relationship maintenance index (time 1); T2_MERIT=Partner's merit (time 2); T2_APPR.=Partner's appreciation (time 2); T2_GAIN=Significance gained through the relationship (time 2); T2_MAIN=Relationship maintenance index (time 2); Gender (0=men; 1=women).

Model 1

As hypothesized, analyses revealed a significant and positive effect of partner a) merit [$b=0.32$, $\beta=0.24$, $SE=0.08$, $z=4.00$, $p<0.001$, (95%CI=0.16;0.47)], and b) appreciation [$b=0.54$, $\beta=0.55$, $SE=0.06$, $z=9.41$, $p<0.001$, (95%CI=0.43;0.65)] on significance gained through the romantic relationship. Moreover, gained significance was positively and significantly associated with the relationship maintenance index [$b=0.48$, $\beta=0.52$, $SE=0.05$, $z=10.05$, $p<0.001$, (95%CI=0.39;0.58)]. Also relevant, both the indirect effects of partner a) merit [$b=0.15$, $\beta=0.12$, $SE=0.04$, $z=3.72$, $p<0.001$, (95%CI=0.07;0.23)] and b) appreciation [$b=0.26$, $\beta=0.29$, $SE=0.04$, $z=6.87$, $p<0.001$, (95%CI=0.19;0.34)] on the likelihood to maintain the relationship via gained significance were positive and significant. Notably, the same model was also tested with age, gender, and relationship duration covaried with gained significance and relationship maintenance. None of the covariates showed significant associations with the examined outcomes. Hence, the model without covariates was accepted. Model 1 had an $R^2_{adj.} = 0.540$.

Model 2

Model 2 had an acceptable fit to the data, $\chi^2(4)=14.00$, $p=0.007$, $\chi^2/df=3.50$, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA)=.114 (.053;.182), comparative fit index (CFI)=.981, model Akaike's information criterion (AIC)=784, and root mean square residual (SRMR)=.014. Importantly, as predicted, analyses revealed a significant and positive effect of partner a) merit [$b=0.16$, $\beta=0.12$, $SE=0.07$, $z=2.15$, $p=0.032$, (95%CI=0.02;0.30)] and b) appreciation [$b=0.18$, $\beta=0.18$, $SE=0.06$, $z=2.70$, $p=0.007$, (95%CI=0.05;0.30)] at time 1 on significance gained through the romantic relationship at time 2. Moreover, gained significance at time 2 was positively and significantly associated with the relationship maintenance index at time 2 [$b=0.45$, $\beta=0.48$, $SE=0.04$, $z=10.07$, $p<0.001$, (95%CI=0.36;0.54)]. Also relevant, both the indirect effects of partner a) merit [$b=0.07$, $\beta=0.06$, $SE=0.03$, $z=2.10$, $p=0.036$, (95%CI=0.05;0.14)] and b) appreciation [$b=0.08$, $\beta=0.09$, $SE=0.03$, $z=2.61$, $p=0.009$, (95%CI=0.02;0.14)] at time 1 on relationship

maintenance index at time 2 via gained significance at time 2 were positive and significant. The same model with age, gender, and relationship duration covaried with gained significance and the relationship maintenance index at time 2 was also tested (i.e., Model 2B). That model showed a poorer fit to data than that of the model estimated without covariates $\chi^2(3)=12.70, p=0.005, \chi^2/df=4.23$, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA)=.130 (.062;.207), comparative fit index (CFI)=.982, model Akaike's information criterion (AIC)=792, and root mean square residual (SRMR)=.018. Moreover, none of the covariates showed significant associations with the examined outcomes. Hence, the model without covariates was also tested.

Model 3

The model had an acceptable fit to the data, $\chi^2(2)=4.72, p=0.094, \chi^2/df=2.36$, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA)=.084 (.000;.185), comparative fit index (CFI)=.996, model Akaike's information criterion (AIC)=1308, and root mean square residual (SRMR)=.013. As shown in Figure 3, analyses revealed a significant and positive effect of partner a) merit [$b=0.24, \beta=0.18, SE=0.08, z=2.87, p=0.004, (95\%CI=0.08;0.41)$] and b) appreciation [$b=0.62, \beta=0.63, SE=0.06, z=9.77, p<0.001, (95\%CI=0.49;0.74)$] at time 1 on significance gained through the romantic relationship at time 1. As predicted, importantly, gained significance at time 1 positively and significantly predicted relationship maintenance at time 2 [$b=0.16, \beta=0.17, SE=0.06, z=2.68, p=0.007, (95\%CI=0.04;0.29)$]. Also relevant, both the indirect effects of partner a) merit [$b=0.04, \beta=0.03, SE=0.02, z=2.17, p=0.030, (95\%CI=0.004;0.08)$] and b) appreciation [$b=0.10, \beta=0.11, SE=0.03, z=3.15, p=0.002, (95\%CI=0.04;0.16)$] at time 1 on the relationship maintenance index at time 2 via gained significance at time 1 were positive and significant. Notably, the same model with age, gender, and relationship duration covaried with gained significance and the relationship maintenance index at time 1 and love intensity at time 2 was also tested (i.e., model 3B). That model showed a poorer fit to data than that of the model tested without covariates $\chi^2(2)=5.98, p=0.050, \chi^2/df=2.49$, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA)=.101 (.000;.200),

comparative fit index (CFI)=.994, model Akaike's information criterion (AIC)=1318, and root mean square residual (SRMR)=.010. Moreover, none of the covariates showed significant associations with the examined outcomes. Hence, the model without covariates was accepted.

Fig. 3 A path-analysis model showing the effect of partner's merit and appreciation features at time 1 on the relationship maintenance index at time 2 via the significance gained through the relationship at time 1 (Model 3).

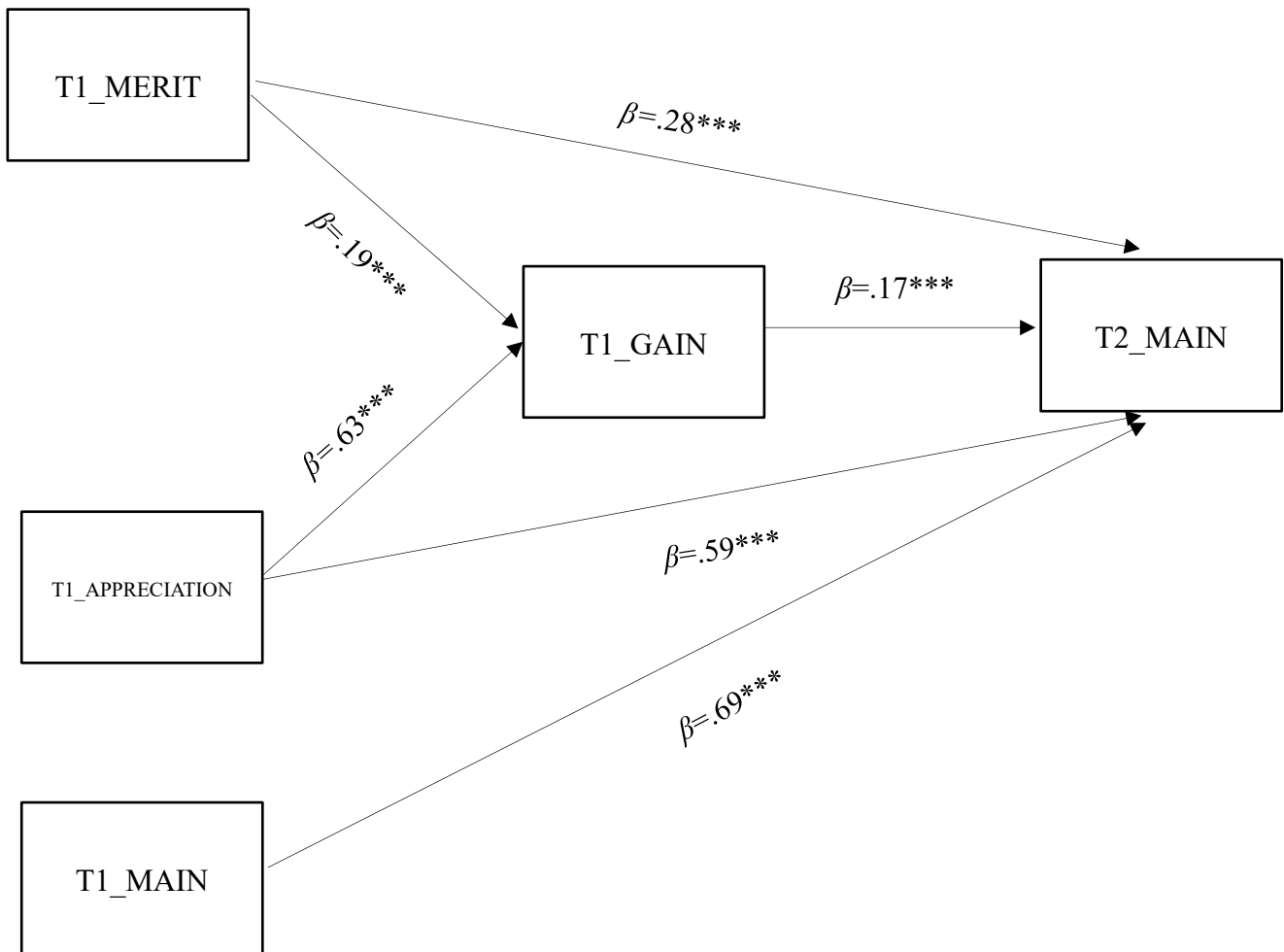


Figure 3. Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. T1_MERIT=Partner's merit (time 1);

T1_APPRECIATION=Partner's appreciation (time 1); T1_GAIN=Significance gained through the relationship (time 1); T1_MAIN=Relationship maintenance index (time 1);

T2_MAIN=Relationship maintenance index (time 2).

Table 4. Goodness of fit indices of the four tested path-analysis models (Study 2).

Model	R ² adj.	$\chi^2(df)$	χ^2/df	CFI	SRMR	RMSEA	RMSEA(CI)	AIC
2	0.715	14.0(4)	3.50	0.981	0.014	0.114	(0.053;0.182)	784
2b	0.720	12.7(3)	4.23	0.982	0.018	0.130	(0.062;0.207)	792
3	0.690	4.72(2)	2.36	0.996	0.013	0.084	(0.000;0.185)	1308
3b	0.691	5.98(2)	2.49	0.994	0.010	0.101	(0.000;0.200)	1318

Note. R²adj. = Adjusted R-squared; CFI=comparative fit index; SRMR=standardized root-mean-square residual; RMSEA=root-mean-square error of approximation; CI=confidence interval; AIC=Akaike's information criterion.

Discussion

To summarize, results from Studies 1A, 1B, and 2 demonstrate that a potential or existing partner's merit and appreciation features enhance the expected and the perceived significance gained through a romantic relationship which, in turn, enhances the a) perceived likelihood of entering into an amorous relationship with a potential partner, and b) the intimacy and commitment components of love, which are the bases for romantic relationships maintenance. Further, these first three studies showed some interesting differences with respect to the merit and appreciation direct effects on relationship entrance and maintenance. Indeed, recalling the prior Studies, merit had a direct effect on relationship entrance only in Study 1A, appreciation had a direct effect on relationship entrance only in Study 1B, and in Study 2 they both had a direct effect on relationship maintenance. This may be because, in Study 2, the measurement approach captured more of the nuances of these broad constructs. In fact, in Study 2, merit and appreciation were measured through multiple-item scales, whereas in Studies 1A and 1B, they were manipulated through operationalizations that focused on specific aspects of merit and appreciation. For this reason, the merit and appreciation measures were conceptually more comprehensive in Study 2 compared to

the manipulations implemented in Studies 1A and 1B. Consequently, this increased the likelihood of observing direct effects of the merit and appreciation factors on the relevant dependent variable.

Chapter 5.

Study 3 – The Comparison between the Self-expansion Model and

The SQT's Model of Romantic Relationships

Given the wealth of prior social psychological literature on romantic relationships, it is prudent to examine the findings and model as they compare to other influential models of romantic relationships. To that end, Study 3 was designed to ensure that the concept of ‘gained significance’ (Kruglanski et al., 2022) had a unique effect on relationship maintenance compared to another important construct, Aron and Aron’s (1986) *inclusion of other in the self* principle, which is defined within the perspective of the self-expansion model (Aron & Aron, 1986). Importantly, the self-expansion model also assumes that romantic relationships are motivated, but that the ultimate driving force that motivates them is enhancing people’s potential self-efficacy in accomplishing their goals (i.e., the need for self-expansion). To pursue this aim, one way humans seek to augment their potential self-efficacy is by expanding the self through close relationships (such as romantic relationships). This is because when people enter into a close relationship, they experience others’ resources, characteristics, and perspectives as their own (i.e., the inclusion-of-the-other-in-the-self principle). In contrast, the perspective offered by SQT (Kruglanski et al., 2022) holds that the enhancement of one’s significance is the ultimate goal.

Similarly to the concept of partner merit, Aron and Aron’s (1986) model of close relationships posits that people are motivated to enter and maintain relationships as a function of their partners’ desirability, defined as the desirability of characteristics the other possesses. However, Aron and Aron’s (1986) ‘inclusion of the other in the self’ principle holds that people in romantic relationships *effectively* incorporate their partner’s desirable qualities into their own self-view, thus increasing their self-efficacy. By contrast, Kruglanski and colleagues (2023) posit that the effect of partner merit is distinct in that the individual does not perceive to effectively possess

such qualities, but rather that they possess social worth because they are in a romantic relationship with someone whose traits are socially valued.

Further, Aron and Aron's (1986) self-expansion model posits that one factor motivating people to enter and maintain romantic relationships is the perceived likelihood of forming and sustaining a close relationship with a specific individual (i.e., a potential partner). This concept aligns somewhat with the notion of partner appreciation. One might argue that the more appreciation one shows toward a person, the more likely that person perceives as likely the formation and maintenance of a romantic relationship. However, there is a significant distinction. In the self-expansion model, appreciation features of a potential partner are used to estimate the likelihood of achieving enduring self-expansion with them. In contrast, in the love model derived from the SQT, appreciation serves the ultimate goal of enhancing one's sense of significance.

As these notions suggest, Aron and Aron's (1986) self-expansion model and its inclusion-of-the-other-in-the-self principle share some important insights with the present formulation, primarily, the idea of benefitting from the other's desirable characteristics. However, the two models have a fundamental difference. That is, they differ in their assumptions about the underlying motivation for forming a relationship. From this difference arise all the remaining distinctions regarding which factors in romantic relationships satisfy the need for significance versus the need for self-expansion (i.e., those factors that motivate people to initiate and maintain a romantic relationship). It was thus conducted a fourth study to assess the unique effect of gained significance on relationship maintenance compared to the effect of the tendency to include the other in the self to show points of convergence and divergence between these two constructs.

Methods

Participants, Design, and Procedure

Sample size determination was made regarding the indirect effects of partner merit and appreciation on relationship maintenance via a) the perception of gaining significance through the romantic relationship, and b) the tendency to include the partner in the self (IOS). Since this was the first time of including the IOS measure in the analyses, results from Study 2 were not used to determine the effect size and thus to assume a medium effect size ($r=.30$; Cohen, 1992). Hence, to determine the minimum sample size to detect the indirect effects of a parallel mediation (two mediators) model, it was used the online tool ‘Monte Carlo Power Analysis for Indirect Effects’ by Schoemann et al., (2017). Assuming medium effect sizes ($r=.30$), the confidence level set at 95 percent, power = 0.80, 5,000 Monte Carlo simulations indicated a minimum N of 212 participants.

To test the hypothesis, 217 Italian adults engaged in a heterosexual relationship ($M_{\text{age}}=27.45$ years; $SD_{\text{age}}=9.77$ years; 29.8% females; $M_{\text{dur}}=67.87$ months; $SD_{\text{dur}}=106.48$ months) were enrolled in a cross-sectional design. Inclusion criteria were to be engaged in a romantic relationship, to be older than 18 years old, and to be fluent in Italian. All participants were contacted online, through social media platforms (large Facebook groups, Telegram groups, WhatsApp groups, and Instagram), and participated in the study on a voluntary basis. Once participants gave their informed consent, they filled out a questionnaire constructed on Google Forms aimed at collecting the research measures of interest. Finally, participants were thanked and carefully debriefed.

Measures

Appreciation factor. Participants’ perception of their partners’ appreciation features was measured as did in Study 3. Reliability was good $\alpha = .89$.

Merit factor. Participants’ perception of the socially estimated characteristics their partners got was measured as did in Study 3. Reliability was good $\alpha = .83$.

Gained significance. Participants' perception of gaining significance through their romantic relationship was measured as did in Study 3. Reliability was excellent $\alpha = .91$.

IOS. The extent to which participants perceived their partners as included in their self was measured through the Inclusion of the Other in the Self Scale (IOS; Aaron et al., 1992), which is a single-item, pictorial measure. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate the perceived degree of overlap between themselves and their partner on a seven-point scale where each point is represented by two circles increasingly overlapping. That is, the first point of the scale represented two circles completely divided (i.e., no overlap). These two circles increasingly overlap until the seventh point (i.e., complete overlap).

Relationship maintenance index. Participants' intentions to maintain the proper romantic relationship was measured as did in Study 3. Reliability was good $\alpha = .87$.

Results

To test the hypothesis, a path-analysis model was tested using Jamovi (The jamovi project, 2021) and, specifically, the PATHj jamovi package (Gallucci, 2019; Rosseel, 2019). The merit and appreciation factors were the two main predictors, IOS and gained significance the two mediators, and the relationship maintenance index the dependent variable. Further, participants' age, gender, and relationships' duration were considered as covariates. Descriptive statistics are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Descriptives and bivariate correlations (Study 3; N=217).

	MERIT	APPR.	GAIN	IOS	MAIN	Gender	Age	M(<i>SD</i>)
MERIT	(0.83)							5.30(0.94)
APPR.	0.493***	(0.89)						6.10(1.12)
GAIN	0.482***	0.660***	(0.91)					5.59(1.24)
IOS	0.303***	0.309***	0.402***	—				4.31(1.38)
MAIN	0.477***	0.606***	0.696***	0.424***	(0.87)			5.99(1.12)
Gender	0.056	0.164*	0.191**	0.082	0.145*	—		—
Age	-0.156*	-0.215***	-0.114	-0.005	-0.202**	-0.223***	—	27.4(9.77)
Relationship duration	-0.145*	-0.156*	-0.109	0.013	-0.206**	-0.137*	0.890***	67.9(106)

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. In bracket (Cronbach's Alpha). MERIT=Partner's merit; APPR.=Partner's appreciation; GAIN=Significance gained through the relationship; IOS=Tendency to include the partner in the self; MAIN=Relationship maintenance index; Gender (0=men; 1=women).

As shown in Figure 4, analyses revealed a significant and positive effect of partner a) merit [$b=0.28$, $\beta=0.21$, $SE=0.07$, $z=3.64$, $p<0.001$, (95%CI=0.13;0.42)], and b) appreciation [$b=0.62$, $\beta=0.54$, $SE=0.06$, $z=9.47$, $p<0.001$, (95%CI=0.49;0.75)] effects on significance gained through the romantic relationship. Moreover, gained significance was positively and significantly associated with relationship maintenance [$b=0.40$, $\beta=0.43$, $SE=0.06$, $z=6.98$, $p<0.001$, (95%CI=0.28;0.51)]. Further, partner a) merit [$b=0.29$, $\beta=0.20$, $SE=0.11$, $z=2.73$, $p=0.006$, (95%CI=0.08;0.50)], and b) appreciation [$b=0.23$, $\beta=0.18$, $SE=0.09$, $z=2.51$, $p=0.012$, (95%CI=0.05;0.41)] were positively and significantly associated with IOS, which, in turn, was positively and significantly associated with relationship maintenance [$b=0.13$, $\beta=0.16$, $SE=0.04$, $z=3.29$, $p=0.001$, (95%CI=0.05;0.21)]. Also relevant, the indirect effects of partner a) merit [$b=0.11$, $\beta=0.09$, $SE=0.03$, $z=3.23$, $p=0.001$, (95%CI=0.04;0.18)] and b) appreciation [$b=0.25$, $\beta=0.24$, $SE=0.04$, $z=5.62$, $p<0.001$, (95%CI=0.16;0.33)] effects on relationship maintenance via gained significance were positive and significant. The same results were obtained for the indirect effects of partner a) merit [$b=0.04$, $\beta=0.03$, $SE=0.02$, $z=2.10$, $p=0.036$, (95%CI=0.003;0.07)] and b) appreciation [$b=0.03$, $\beta=0.02$, $SE=0.03$, $z=1.99$, $p=0.046$, (95%CI=0.001;0.06)] on relationship maintenance via IOS. Notably, none of the covariates showed a significant association with gained significance, love intensity, or IOS. The model had an $R^2_{adj.} = 0.108$ with respect to IOS, an $R^2_{adj.} = 0.447$ with respect to gained significance, and an $R^2_{adj.} = 0.564$ with respect to the intention to maintain the proper relationship.

Fig. 4 A path-analysis model showing the effect of partner’s merit and appreciation features on relationship maintenance via the a) significance gained through the relationship, and b) the tendency to include the other in the self.

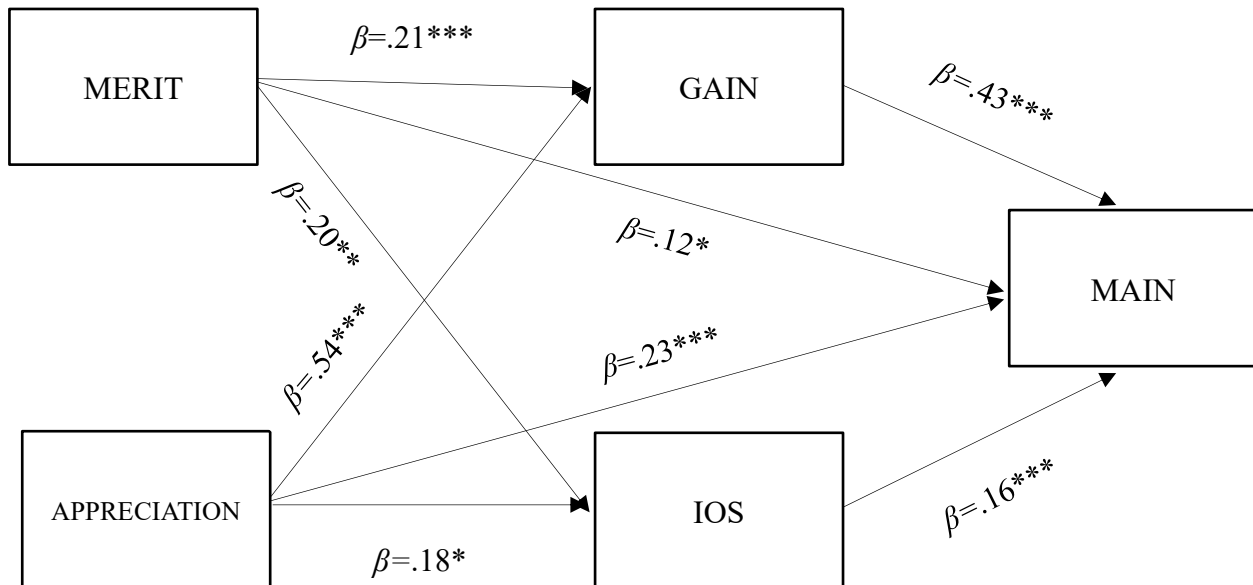


Figure 4. Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. MERIT=Partner’s merit; APPRECIATION=Partner’s appreciation; GAIN=Significance gained through the relationship; IOS=Tendency to include the partner in the self; MAIN=Relationship maintenance index.

Discussion

In line with the hypothesis, Study 3 demonstrated that, although they were moderately correlated ($r = .402, p < 0.001$), the inclusion of the other in the self principle (Aron & Aron, 1986) and the significance gained through a romantic relationship (Kruglanski et al., 2023) are two distinct constructs both *independently* associated with one’s partner’s merit and appreciation features, and with relationship maintenance. Hence, these both represent important yet distinct motivational constructs within the romantic relationships arena. Further, and interestingly, in Study 3, both the direct effects of partner’s appreciation and merit on relationship maintenance were significant. In my view, this suggests, in line with what was claimed in the discussion of Study 2, that the multiple item measurement approach implemented in Studies 2 and 3 for assessing merit

and appreciation permitted to detect these two constructs in a more comprehensive way compared to the manipulations implemented in Studies 1A and 1B.

Admittedly, the results from Study 3, obtained through a correlational methodology, are limited as they do not establish causal relationships between the variables considered. Therefore, experimental studies are necessary to confirm the causality of the effects, particularly those related to IOS. While Study 2 established causality among merit, appreciation, gained significance, and relationship maintenance, the effects related to IOS have only been tested cross-sectionally and thus lack established causality.

Chapter 6.

Study 4 – Gender Differences in the Interactions between a) Significance Loss and Appreciation, and b) Significance Loss and Social Merit

In Study 4, drawing on significance quest theory (Kruglanski et al., 2022) and the model of love derived from it (Kruglanski et al., 2023), it is argued that partners' social merit and appreciation features efficacy depends also on the magnitude of the actors' quest for significance. As for all other needs, indeed, people's need for significance can vary in strength both across persons and across situations (Kruglanski et al., 2022). Not everyone is equally ambitious or eager of significance, and one's momentary level of significance quest may fluctuate depending on various factors such as the strength of the need's inducing situation, the relative magnitude of other needs, and one's general level of energy and resources (Kruglanski, Pierro, & Sheveland, 2011). Further, as a reminder, an actor's momentary magnitude of significance quest depends jointly on their stable individual degree of that need, and the situational conditions that elicit or inhibit its activation.

In line with significance quest theory predictions, the more one's quest is activated, the more one strives to convey significance (Kruglanski et al., 2022). That is, the more one is eager of significance, the more the need for significance is experienced as impending and urgent. Assuming that romantic relationships are an outstanding way to convey significance, it seems reasonable to posit that if actors are experiencing a strong and urgent need for significance, then they should be more sensible to their partners' social merit and appreciation features compared to a situation in which they do not urgently need to satiate their need for significance. In other words, they should be more dependent on their partners' social merit and appreciation features because those specific features are significance bestowing. This reasoning is aligned with findings by Brown and colleagues (1992), who found that being close to attractive people appears to enhance self-

evaluation especially when people self-esteem is low. Hence, it was hypothesized that the more actors are experiencing sensations of significance loss (i.e., high quest for significance), the more they are sensitive, in terms of gained significance, to their partners' social merit and appreciation values. Further, the possibility that the hypothesized interactions effect between a) social merit and significance loss, and b) appreciation and significance loss were different for women and men was investigated too.

Methods

Participants, Design, and Procedure

The minimum sample size needed to test the hypothesis was computed through the sample size estimation software G*power v3.1 (Faul et al., 2007). Since it was the first time that significance loss was considered in the model, following a conservative approach, it was assumed a small to medium effect size ($f^2 = .05$; Cohen 1992). Moreover, Study 4 aimed also to investigate gender differences with respect to the interactions between a) partners' appreciation features and significance loss, and b) partners' social merit features and significance loss. Thus, to investigate if those interactions were different in men vs. women, two multiple regression models where participants' gender was made to interact with significance loss and partners' appreciation features (model 1), and with significance loss and partners' social merit features (model 2) were estimated. Hence, the first model had as independent variables a) the triple interaction among gender, significance loss, and appreciation, b) the double interaction between gender and significance loss, c) the double interaction between gender and partners' appreciation features, d) the double interaction between significance loss and partners' appreciation features, e) the significance loss, f) participants gender, g) the appreciation factor, h) participants' age, and i) relationship duration. The same was applied to model 2, with the only difference that the appreciation factor was substituted by the social merit factor. Further, the social merit factor was included as a covariate in model 1, and, specularly, the appreciation factor was included as a covariate in model 2. Hence, with a total

of ten predictors for each model, the power set to .80, and $\alpha=0.05$, G*power suggested an N of at least 335 participants.

To test the hypothesis, 407 Italian participants engaged in a heterosexual relationship ($M_{\text{age}}=28.50$ years; $SD_{\text{age}}=8.77$ years; 51.7% women; $M_{\text{dur}} = 63.20$ months; $SD_{\text{dur}} = 77.20$ months) were enrolled in a cross-sectional design. Inclusion criteria were to be engaged in an ongoing romantic relationship, to have more than 18 years, and to fluently speak Italian. Further, within the sample, 3.4 percent of participants were dating (they were not dating their partner exclusively), 83.6 percent were in a stable relationship, 2.5 percent were engaged, and 10.5 percent were married.

All participants were contacted through an online and paid procedure provided by Prolific. Once participants gave their informed consent, they filled out a questionnaire aimed to collect research measures of interest. Firstly, participants demographic data were collected. Subsequently, participants' significance loss feelings, their perception of the socially estimated characteristics their partner got, their perception of the support they received by their romantic partner, and the significance they gained through their relationship were measured. Eventually, participants were thanked and carefully debriefed.

Measures

Appreciation factor. Participants' perception of their partners' appreciation features was measured as did in Study 3 and 4. Reliability was excellent $\alpha = .94$.

Social merit. Participants' perception of the socially estimated characteristics their partners got was measured as did in Study 3 and 4. Reliability was good $\alpha = .79$.

Significance loss. General feelings of significance loss were assessed with a 5-item measure used by Contu and colleagues (2023a). Participants had to respond on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (do not agree at all) to 7 (very strongly agree). The five items were: 'I feel

humiliated’, ‘I feel insignificant’, ‘I feel powerless’, ‘I feel as nobody care about me’, and ‘I feel disrespected.’ Reliability was excellent ($\alpha = .90$).

Gained significance. Participants’ perception of gaining significance through their romantic relationship was measured as did in Study 3 and 4. Reliability was good ($\alpha = .88$).

Results

Descriptives and bivariate correlations are reported in Table 6.

Table 6. Descriptives and bivariate correlations (Study 4; N=411).

	APPR.	MERIT	LOSS	GAIN	Gender	Age	M(SD)
APPR.	(0.94)						5.73(1.18)
MERIT	0.454***	(0.79)					5.30(0.80)
LOSS	-0.409***	-0.169***	(0.90)				2.10(1.17)
GAIN	0.533***	0.487***	-0.305***	(0.88)			5.46(1.18)
Gender	0.082	0.031	0.020	-0.038	—		—
Age	-0.178***	0.086	0.000	-0.039	-0.089	—	28.5(8.77)
Relationship duration	-0.204***	-0.011	0.074	-0.047	0.021	0.683***	63.2(77.2)

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. In bracket (Cronbach’s Alpha). MERIT=Partner’s merit; APPR.=Partner’s appreciation; LOSS=Significance loss; GAIN=Significance gained through the relationship; Gender (0=men; 1=women)

Model 1

To test model 1, a multiple regression model using PROCESS v4.0, Model 3 (Hayes, 2018) was tested, and bias corrected confidence intervals were obtained with 5000 bootstrap samples. All regressions’ parameters can be found in table 7. As expected, analyses revealed a significant and

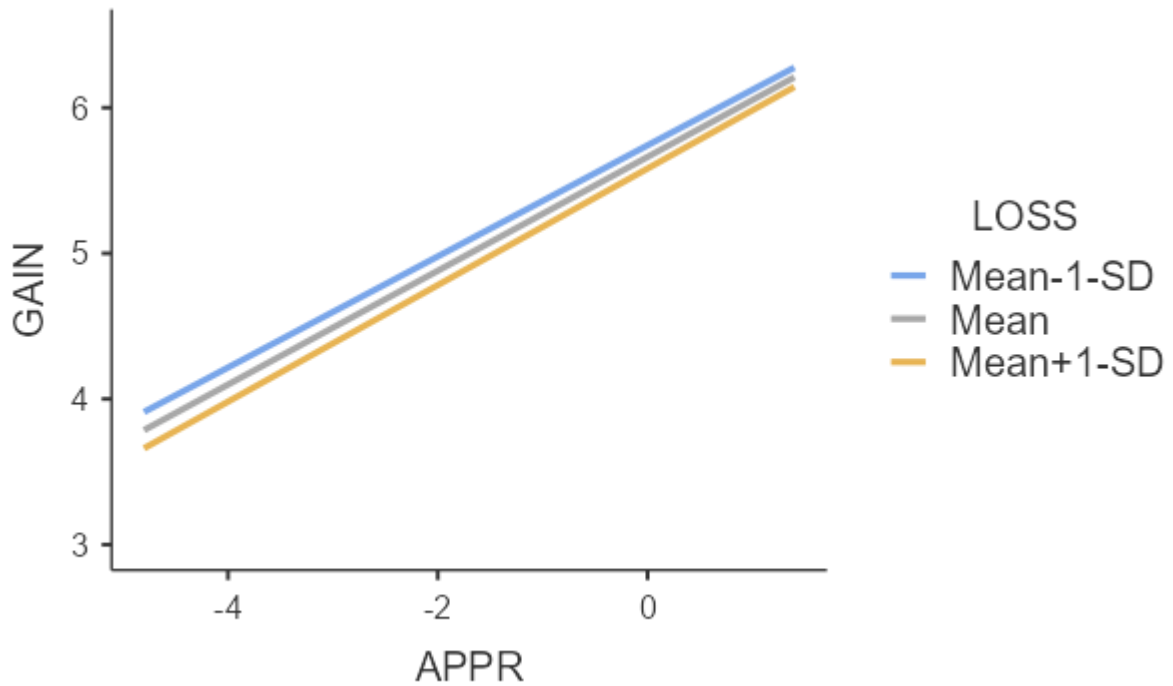
positive main effect of the appreciation factor on gained significance [$b=0.33$, $\beta=0.34$, $SE=0.05$, $z=7.06$, $p<0.001$, (95%CI=0.24;0.42)]. Moreover, a negative and significant main effect of significance loss on gained significance was found [$b=-0.09$, $\beta=-0.09$, $SE=0.04$, $z=-2.24$, $p=0.026$, (95%CI=-0.17;-0.01)]. By contrast, it was not found any main effect of gender on gained significance, $p = 0.290$. Also, a significant and positive effect of the interaction between the appreciation factor and significance loss on significance participants gained through their relationship was found [$b=0.08$, $\beta=0.10$, $SE=0.03$, $z=3.24$, $p<0.001$, (95%CI=0.03;0.13)], which can be better interpreted by decomposing the triple interaction among the appreciation factor, significance loss, and participants' gender, which was found to be positive and significant [$b=0.15$, $\beta=0.18$, $SE=0.11$, $z=2.94$, $p=0.004$, (95%CI=0.08;0.50)]. Indeed, the simple slopes analysis revealed that there was a positive and significant effect of interaction between the appreciation factor and significance loss levels on gained significance among women [$b=0.16$, $\beta=0.15$, $SE=0.09$, $z=2.70$, $p=0.009$, (95%CI=0.09;0.45)], but not among men, $p = .837$. More specifically, as shown in figure 5 and 6, women with high levels of significance loss (+1SD) depended on their partners' cheerleading characteristics in terms of significance gaining [$b=0.46$, $\beta=0.47$, $SE=0.06$, $z=7.144$, $p<0.001$, (95%CI=0.33;0.58)]. Meanwhile, in the same terms, women with low levels of significance loss (-1SD) did not actually depend on their partners' cheerleading characteristics, $p = .349$. Model 1 had an $R^2_{adj.} = 0.335$.

Table 7. Regression parameters' table – Model 1

IV	b	SE	95% Confidence Interval		β	df	z	p
			Lower	Upper				
Age	-0.008	0.007	-0.021	0.006	-0.060	397	-1.121	0.263
Relationship_duration	0.001	0.009	-0.009	0.003	0.074	397	1.433	0.153
LOSS	-0.092	0.041	-0.173	-0.011	-0.095	397	-2.236	0.026
Gender	-0.096	0.091	-0.274	0.0821	-0.085	397	-1.059	0.290
MERIT	0.440	0.061	0.320	0.560	0.311	397	7.228	< .001
APPR	0.330	0.047	0.238	0.422	0.344	397	7.058	< .001
LOSS * Gender	-0.048	0.082	-0.209	0.113	-0.050	397	-0.584	0.560
LOSS * APPR	0.084	0.026	0.033	0.135	0.102	397	3.239	0.001
Gender * APPR	-0.122	0.083	-0.285	0.041	-0.127	397	-1.473	0.142
LOSS * Gender * APPR	0.152	0.052	0.050	0.253	0.185	397	2.936	0.004

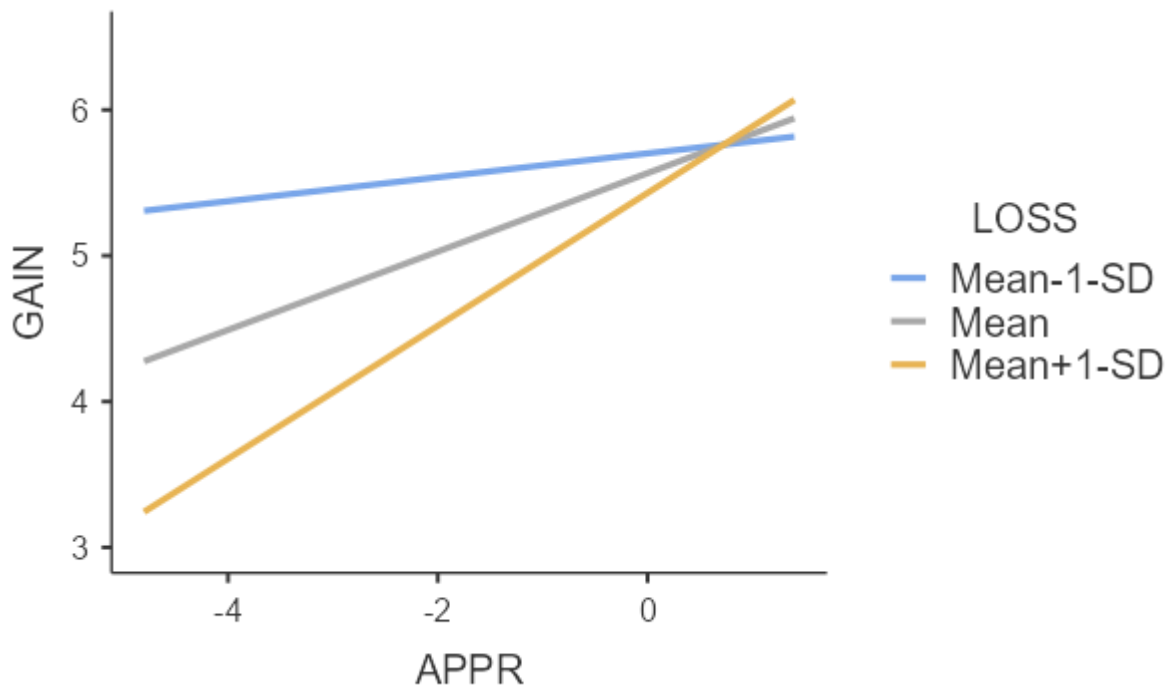
Note. MERIT=Partner's merit; APPR.=Partner's appreciation; LOSS=Significance loss; GAIN=Significance gained through the relationship; Gender (0=men; 1=women)

Fig. 5 The effect of the interaction between significance loss and partners' appreciation features on the significance participants gained through their relationship among men.



Note. APPR.=Partner's appreciation; LOSS=Significance loss; GAIN=Significance gained through the relationship.

Fig. 6 The effect of the interaction between significance loss and partners' social merit features on the significance participants gained through their relationship among women.



Note. APPR.=Partner's appreciation; LOSS=Significance loss; GAIN=Significance gained through the relationship.

Model 2

To test model 2, a multiple regression model using PROCESS v4.0, Model 3 (Hayes, 2018) was tested, and bias corrected confidence intervals were obtained with 5000 bootstrap samples. All regressions' parameters can be found in table 8. As expected, analyses revealed a significant and positive main effect of the social merit on gained significance [$b=0.44$, $\beta=0.31$, $SE=0.06$, $z=7.03$, $p<0.001$, (95%CI=0.31;0.56)]. Moreover, a negative and significant main effect of significance loss on gained significance was found [$b=-0.11$, $\beta=-0.12$, $SE=0.04$, $z=-2.77$, $p=0.006$, (95%CI=-0.19;-0.03)]. By contrast, it was not found any main effect of gender on gained significance, $p = 0.08$. Further, it was not found any significant effect of the interaction among trophy effect, significance loss, and gender on significance participants gained through their relationship $p = 0.053$. Notably,

however, as shown in figure 7, a significant and positive effect of the interaction between the social merit factor and significance loss on the significance participants gained through their relationship was found [$b=0.14$, $\beta=0.11$, $SE=0.05$, $z=2.99$, $p=0.003$, (95%CI=0.05;0.23)]. More specifically, the simple slopes analysis revealed that there was a strong positive and significant effect of the social merit factor on gained significance among participants with high (+1 SD) significance loss levels [$b=0.60$, $\beta=0.42$, $SE=0.08$, $z=7.37$, $p<0.001$, (95%CI=0.44;0.76)]. Among participants with low (-1 SD) significance loss levels instead, the effect of the social merit factor was less strong [$b=0.28$, $\beta=0.20$, $SE=0.08$, $z=3.33$, $p<0.001$, (95%CI=0.11;0.44)]. Model 2 had an $R^2_{adj.} = 0.335$.

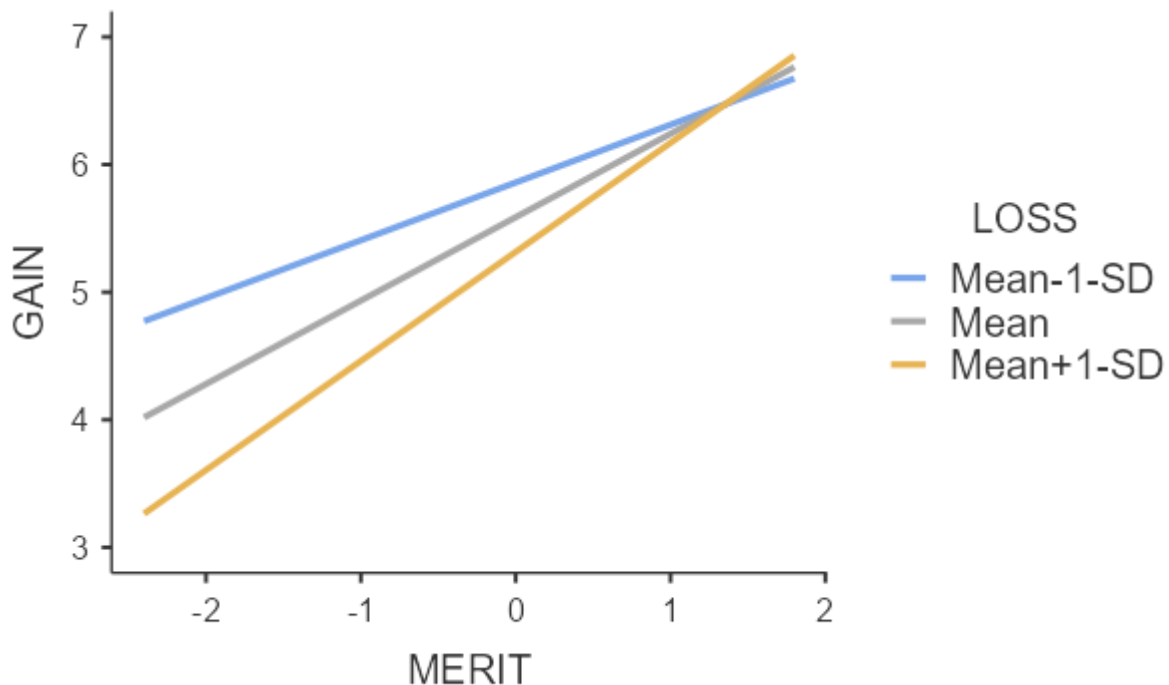
Table 8. Regression parameters' table – Model 2

IV	b	SE	95% Confidence Interval		β	df	z	p
			Lower	Upper				
Age	-0.001	0.007	-0.023	0.004	-0.075	397	-1.411	0.159
Relationship_duration	0.001	0.009	-0.009	0.003	0.079	397	1.503	0.134
LOSS	-0.113	0.041	-0.193	-0.033	-0.117	397	-2.771	0.006
Gender	-0.170	0.088	-0.343	0.002	-0.151	397	-1.942	0.053
MERIT	0.436	0.062	0.314	0.558	0.308	397	7.033	< .001
APPR	0.363	0.046	0.273	0.453	0.378	397	7.920	< .001
LOSS * Gender	-0.031	0.076	-0.181	0.118	-0.033	397	-0.415	0.679
LOSS * MERIT	0.137	0.046	0.047	0.227	0.113	397	2.988	0.003
Gender * MERIT	-0.112	0.111	-0.330	0.105	-0.080	397	-1.016	0.310
LOSS * Gender * MERIT	-0.023	0.091	-0.203	0.156	-0.020	397	-0.257	0.797

Note. MERIT=Partner's merit; APPR.=Partner's appreciation; LOSS=Significance loss;

GAIN=Significance gained through the relationship; Gender (0=men; 1=women)

Fig. 7 The effect of the interaction between significance loss and partners' social merit features on the significance participants gained through their relationship.



Note. MERIT=Partner's merit; LOSS=Significance loss; GAIN=Significance gained through the relationship.

Discussion

As hypothesized, results from Study 4 supported the idea that the more individuals feel sensation of significance loss (i.e., their quest for significance is highly activated), the more they are sensitive to their partners' social merit and appreciation features, which are utilized to satisfy the previously activated quest for significance. Further, results interestingly shed light on gender differences with respect to the interaction between the appreciation factor and significance loss in determining the significance one gains through the proper romantic relationship. That is, while among women the appreciation factor had a positive effect on gained significance when the significance loss levels were high (vs. low), among men the appreciation factor had always a positive effect, independently on the significance loss levels. Besides being in accordance with

significance theory prescriptions (Kruglanski et al., 2022) and its derived love model (Kruglanski et al., 2023), these results are also in line with previous research on self-monitoring. Self-monitoring, as discussed by Gangestad and Snyder (2000), focuses on the extent to which individuals regulate their behavior to fit social situations, emphasizing adaptability and social appropriateness, in order to navigate society, achieve social harmony, and build positive social relationships. In contrast, the need for significance, as defined by Kruglanski et al. (2022), centers on individuals' motivation to achieve a sense of personal importance and worth, often driving behaviors aimed at gaining respect and recognition from others. Given the differences between self-monitoring and the need for significance, individuals driven by high self-monitoring may prioritize social adaptability and impression management, whereas those motivated by the need for significance may seek actions and relationships that enhance their sense of personal meaning and importance, potentially leading to problematic and harmful behaviors too (e.g., Jasko et al., 2020). However, one could argue that self-monitoring serves the need for significance in that regulating one's behavior in social situations is crucial for achieving significance. Thus, significance and self-monitoring share important points of contact. Consistent with results, compared to low self-monitors, high self-monitors pay more attention to romantic partners' physical attractiveness, and choose more attractive partners (Snyder et al., 1985).

Further, also research on narcissists indicates that quest for significance promotes the seeking of significance-enhancing partners. Indeed, narcissists chronically pursue status (Zeigler-Hill et al., 2019), and, as such, they could be considered as individuals who has a chronic activation of the quest for significance. Hence, if partners that score high in the social merit and the appreciation factors are means to significance, narcissists should be more sensitive to such partners. Consistent with results, prior research suggests that narcissists are particularly likely to seek partners who are popular, good looking, accomplished, and admiring, and that, notably, their interests in these partners originated by expectations that these partners can enhance their social

status and self-esteem (Campbell, 1999). Eventually, also research on situations that entails significance loss inducing experiences of failure or humiliation showed that women expressed greater liking for a male confederate who asked them on a date (a clear sign of their positive regard) when the women received negative feedback about their personality (Walster, 1965).

Study 4 presented also some limitations. That is, focusing on dispositional significance loss presents limitations related to the differences between experimental and correlational methodologies. In fact, the correlational approach does not allow for causal inferences. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct additional experimental studies to establish the causality of the observed effects, and to generalize these findings to situational significance loss too. Further, in so far that in the present study the need for significance was activated through significance loss, it may be well in subsequent work to activate it through an opportunity for significance gain, that is, through incentivization, and measure the effect this has on actor sensitivity to partner merit and appreciation.

Chapter 7.

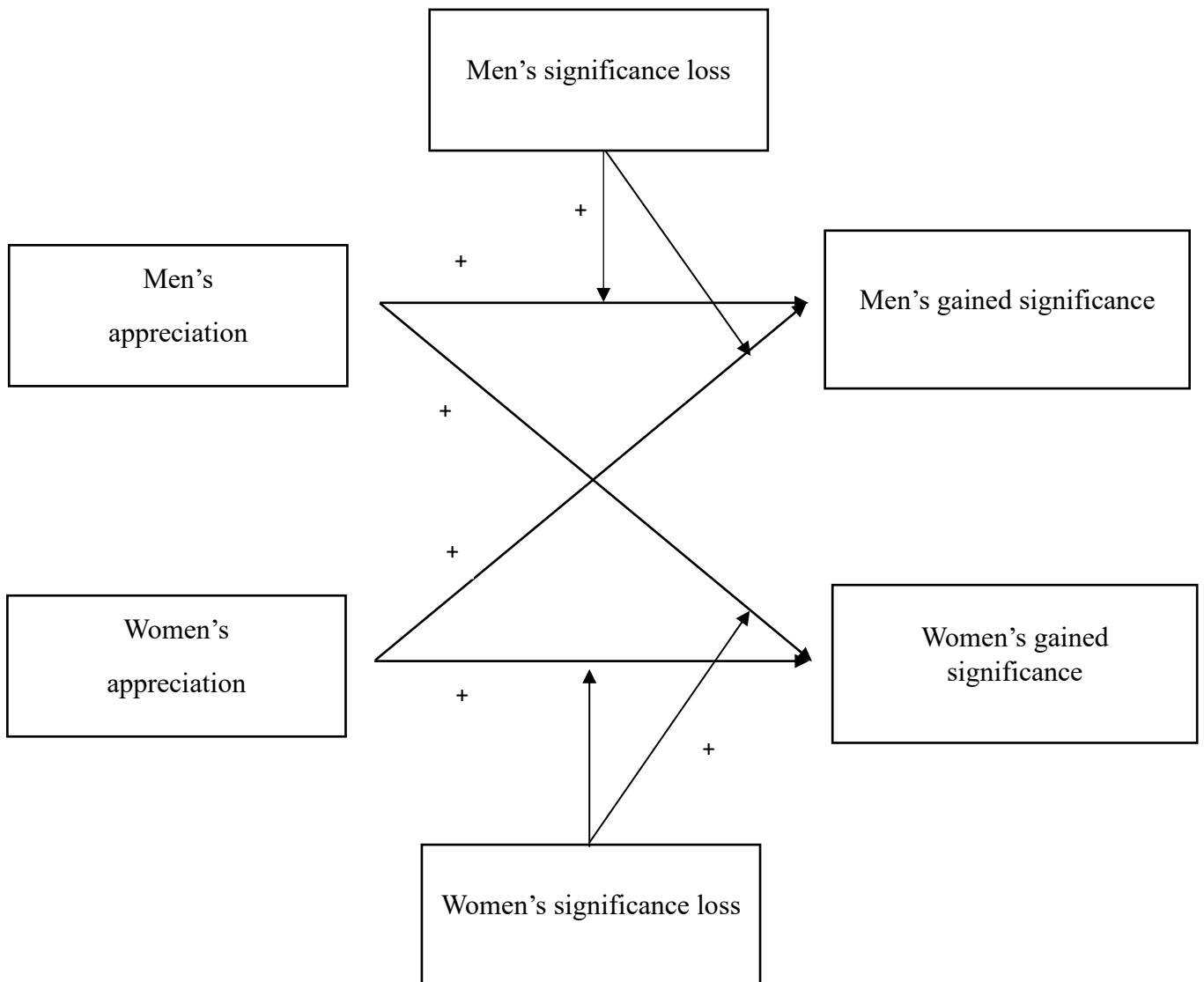
Study 5 – The Partner’s and the Actor’s Appreciation Effect and their Interaction with the Actor’s Significance Loss

Study 5 was conducted for three main reasons. First, it sought to investigate more deeply the different effects of the interaction between appreciation and significance loss for men and women. Second, the study aimed to confirm the appreciation effect using data not collected through self-report measures. In Studies 2, 3, and 4, the appreciation factor was linked to the significance an individual gained within their relationship, as measured by self-reports. However, Study 5 was designed to go further by examining the relationship between one partner's expression of appreciation and the significance gained by the other partner. This approach helped to minimize the limitations of relying solely on self-report methods. Third, it aimed to test whether the effect of appreciation was not limited to the appreciation received from one's partner, which enhances one's own sense of significance. Instead, it aimed to explore whether the appreciation effect could be related to the actor—namely, whether giving appreciation to one's romantic partner could also increase one's own sense of significance. This hypothesis aligns with significance quest theory (Kruglanski et al., 2022), which suggests that when one expresses appreciation to their partner, their sense of significance is enhanced through the perception of engaging in behavior that aligns with important cultural values and is therefore seen as admirable by others. Moreover, expressing appreciation towards one's partner can enhance the actor's sense of significance, as it fosters a feeling of being essential to someone else and creates a sense of the other person depending on them in some way.

To achieve these objectives, a methodology based on data collected from real couples, treating the couple as the unit of analysis was implemented. This approach allowed to match the levels of appreciation, significance loss, and gained significance for both partners in each couple.

Consequently, both the effects of appreciation received from one's partner (i.e., the partner effect) and the effects of appreciation given to one's partner (i.e., the actor effect) on both partners' gained significance, and the respective interactions with significance loss were tested.

Fig. 8 The hypothesized model – Study 5.



Methods

Sample Size Determination

To estimate the adequate sample size to test the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model, the online software APIMPowerR (Ackermann & Kenny, 2016) was used. Since measures and errors were expected to be highly correlated between men and women (i.e., between actors and partners), both the correlations were set at $r = 0.5$ (i.e., large effect size). The effect sizes obtained in previous studies were disregarded because in Study 5 participants' perception of their partner's appreciation features were assessed, but participants' self-evaluation in terms of appreciation characteristics towards their partners. Hence, both the partner's and the actor's appreciation effect were set at $\beta = 0.20$ (i.e., a small to medium effect size) for both men and women. In so doing, APIMPowerR thus suggested a minimum sample size of 236 dyads.

Participants, Design and Procedure

To test the hypothesis, dyadic data on 265 real, heterosexual couples were collected. All couples were formed for at least a month ($M_{dur} = 68.90$ months; $SD_{dur} = 79.60$ months). Given the nature of the present research, the sample was composed by 50% men ($M_{age} = 29.40$ years; $SD_{age} = 8.53$ years), and 50% women ($M_{age} = 28.20$ years; $SD_{age} = 8.65$ years).

All participants were contacted through an online procedure. Once participants gave their informed consent, they filled out a questionnaire aimed to collect research measures of interest. To assure to be able to pair the members of the same couples, a different numeric code was assigned to each couple. Firstly, participants demographic data were collected. Subsequently, participants' significance loss feelings, their self-evaluation in terms of the appreciation factor, and the significance they gained through their relationship were measured. Eventually, participants were thanked and carefully debriefed. All items were administered in Italian, the measures section

provides examples of those items in English. Couples' members answered to the same questions, as presented below.

Measures

Significance loss. Significance loss feelings were measured as did in Study 4. Reliability among men was good ($\alpha = .84$), and among women was good ($\alpha = .84$).

Appreciation factor. Participants' perception of the support and the warmth given to their partner was assessed through the following 5-item measure adapted from studies 2, 3, and 4. Participants had to respond on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (absolutely not) to 7 (absolutely yes). The items were: 'I support my partner'; 'I help my partner to reach his/her life goals'; 'I act in a way that helps my partner to become who he/she wants'; 'I love my partner'; 'I encourage my partner to become who he/she wants'. Reliability among men was good ($\alpha = .86$), and among women was good ($\alpha = .84$).

Gained significance. The significance participants gained through their romantic relationship was measured as did in previous studies. Reliability among men was good ($\alpha = .89$), and among women was excellent ($\alpha = .91$).

Results

Bivariate correlations and descriptive statistics are shown in table 9.

Table 9. Descriptives and bivariate correlations (Study 5; N=265 dyads).

	AGE_M	REL_DUR	LOSS_M	APPR_M	GAIN_M	AGE_F	LOSS_F	APPR_F	GAIN_F	M(SD)
AGE_M	—									28.40(8.53)
REL_DUR	0.739***	—								78.90/76.60)
LOSS_M	0.124*	0.014	(0.84)							1.87(0.93)
APPR_M	-0.077	-0.056	-0.351***	(0.86)						6.17(0.79)
GAIN_M	-0.010	0.098	-0.319***	0.436***	—					5.85(1.04)
AGE_F	0.916***	0.726***	0.171**	-0.125*	-0.075	—				28.20(8.65)
LOSS_F	0.091	0.017	0.353***	-0.186**	-0.155*	0.114	(0.84)			1.85(0.97)
APPR_F	-0.110	0.075	-0.250***	0.177**	0.227***	-0.162**	-0.263***	(0.84)		6.27(0.75)
GAIN_F	-0.045	0.019	-0.203***	0.261***	0.449***	-0.107	-0.350***	0.347***	(0.91)	5.73(1.17)

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. In bracket (Cronbach's Alpha). LOSS_M=Men's significance loss, APPR_M=Men's appreciation, GAIN_M=Men's gained significance, LOSS_F=Women's significance loss, APPR_F=Women's appreciation, GAIN_F=Women's gained significance, AGE_M=Men's age; AGE_F=Women's age; REL_DUR=Relationship duration.

Notably, data were nested in couples, and the hypothesis viewed the two members of the couples as distinguishable. Thus, to test the hypothesis, an actor-partner interdependence model (Kashy & Kenny, 2000) was estimated. This permitted to detect, at the same time, the effect of – both – the *given* (i.e. the actor effect), and the *received* (i.e., the partner effect) appreciation of each couples' member on their respective gained significance.

As showed in figure 8, the men's and the women's appreciation factors were the two main predictor. The men's and the women's significance gained through the relationship were the two dependent variables, and the men's and the women's significance loss feelings were added to the model as moderators. Specifically, the two terms of interaction between the men's significance loss and a) their appreciation factor, and b) the women's appreciation factor were added to the model as covariates predicting the men's gained significance. On the same line, the two terms of interaction between women's significance loss and a) their appreciation factor, and b) the men's appreciation factor were added to the model as covariates predicting women's gained significance. Eventually, the relationship duration, the men's age, and the women's age were added to the model as control variables.

To estimate this model, the statistical method of the path analysis was used. The software Jamovi (The jamovi project, 2021) and, specifically, the PATHj jamovi package (Gallucci, 2019; Rosseel, 2019) were implemented. All regressions' parameters estimated in this model can be found in table 10.

Table 10 – Regression parameters' table – Study 5

DV	IV	b	SE	95% Confidence Intervals		β	z	p
				Lower	Upper			
GAIN_M	AGE_F	-0.028	0.017	-0.060	0.005	-0.230	-1.669	0.095
GAIN_M	AGE_M	0.012	0.016	-0.020	0.044	0.010	0.734	0.463
GAIN_M	Relationship_duration	0.002	0.001	0.001	0.005	0.200	2.418	0.016
GAIN_M	LOSS_M	-0.064	0.074	-0.210	0.081	-0.057	-0.868	0.385
GAIN_M	LOSS_F	-0.044	0.063	-0.167	0.080	-0.041	-0.695	0.487
GAIN_M	APPR_M	0.420	0.081	0.261	0.579	0.316	5.186	<.001
GAIN_M	APPR_F	0.109	0.084	0.055	0.273	0.178	1.304	0.002
GAIN_M	APPR_M*LOSS_M	0.107	0.036	0.037	0.177	0.179	2.979	0.003
GAIN_M	APPR_F*LOSS_M	0.097	0.058	-0.017	0.209	0.097	1.670	0.095
GAIN_F	AGE_F	-0.034	0.019	-0.071	0.003	-0.254	-1.798	0.072
GAIN_F	AGE_M	0.031	0.019	-0.005	0.068	0.233	1.684	0.092
GAIN_F	Relationship_duration	0.009	0.001	-0.002	0.003	0.014	0.162	0.871
GAIN_F	LOSS_M	-0.020	0.078	-0.174	0.133	-0.016	-0.260	0.795
GAIN_F	LOSS_F	-0.284	0.070	-0.422	-0.147	-0.236	-4.051	<.001
GAIN_F	APPR_M	0.216	0.086	0.047	0.384	0.145	2.510	0.012
GAIN_F	APPR_F	0.344	0.091	0.165	0.523	0.220	3.759	<.001
GAIN_F	APPR_M*LOSS_F	0.236	0.079	0.081	0.391	0.156	2.987	0.003
GAIN_F	APPR_F*LOSS_F	0.068	0.077	-0.083	0.219	0.047	0.877	0.380

Note. LOSS_M=Men's significance loss, APPR_M=Men's appreciation, GAIN_M=Men's gained significance, LOSS_F=Women's significance loss, APPR_F=Women's appreciation, GAIN_F=Women's gained significance, AGE_M=Men's age; AGE_F=Women's age.

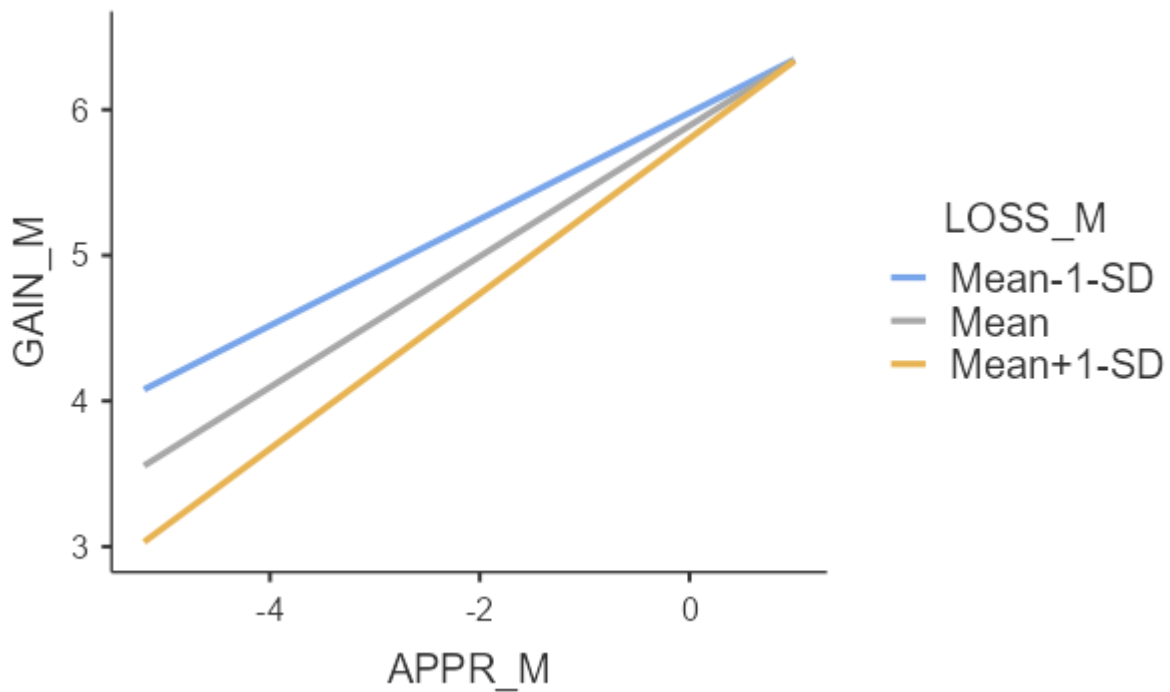
As expected, analyses revealed a significant and positive main effect of the men's appreciation factor on the significance gained by men [$b=0.42$, $\beta=0.32$, $SE=0.08$, $z=5.19$, $p<0.001$, (95%CI=0.26;0.58)], (i.e., the actor effect). Further, a significant and positive main effect of the women's appreciation factor on the significance gained by men was found [$b=0.11$, $\beta=0.18$, $SE=0.08$, $z=1.30$, $p=0.002$, (95%CI=0.06;0.27)], (i.e., the partner effect). The main effect of men's significance loss feelings on the significance they gained through the relationship was not significant, $p = 0.385$.

Again, as expected, analyses revealed a significant and positive main effect of the women's appreciation factor on the significance gained by women [$b=0.34$, $\beta=0.22$, $SE=0.09$, $z=3.76$, $p<0.001$, (95%CI=0.17;0.52)], (i.e., the actor effect). Furthermore, a significant and positive main effect of the men's appreciation factor on the significance gained by women was found [$b=0.22$, $\beta=0.15$, $SE=0.09$, $z=2.51$, $p=0.012$, (95%CI=0.05;0.38)], (i.e., the partner effect). The main effect of women's significance loss feelings on the significance they gained through the relationship was negative and significant [$b=-0.28$, $\beta=-0.24$, $SE=0.07$, $z=-4.05$, $p<0.001$, (95%CI=-0.42;-0.15)].

Further, a significant and positive effect of interaction between the men's appreciation factor and their significance loss on significance they gained through their relationship was found [$b=0.11$, $\beta=0.18$, $SE=0.04$, $z=2.98$, $p=0.003$, (95%CI=0.04;0.18)]. As shown in figure 9, in fact, the men's appreciation factor had a stronger significant effect on the significance they gained through the relationship at high (+1SD) levels of their significance loss [$b=0.52$, $\beta=0.39$, $SE=0.08$, $z=6.55$, $p<0.001$, (95%CI=0.36;0.67)], compared with the same effect at low (-1SD) significance loss levels [$b=0.35$, $\beta=0.27$, $SE=0.10$, $z=3.54$, $p<0.001$, (95%CI=0.16;0.55)]. By contrast, and recalling what was found in Study 4, it was not found any effect of interaction between the women's appreciation

factor and the men's significance loss on the significance men gained through their relationship, $p = 0.095$.

Fig. 9 The effect of the interaction between men's appreciation and men's significance loss on men's significance gained through the relationship.

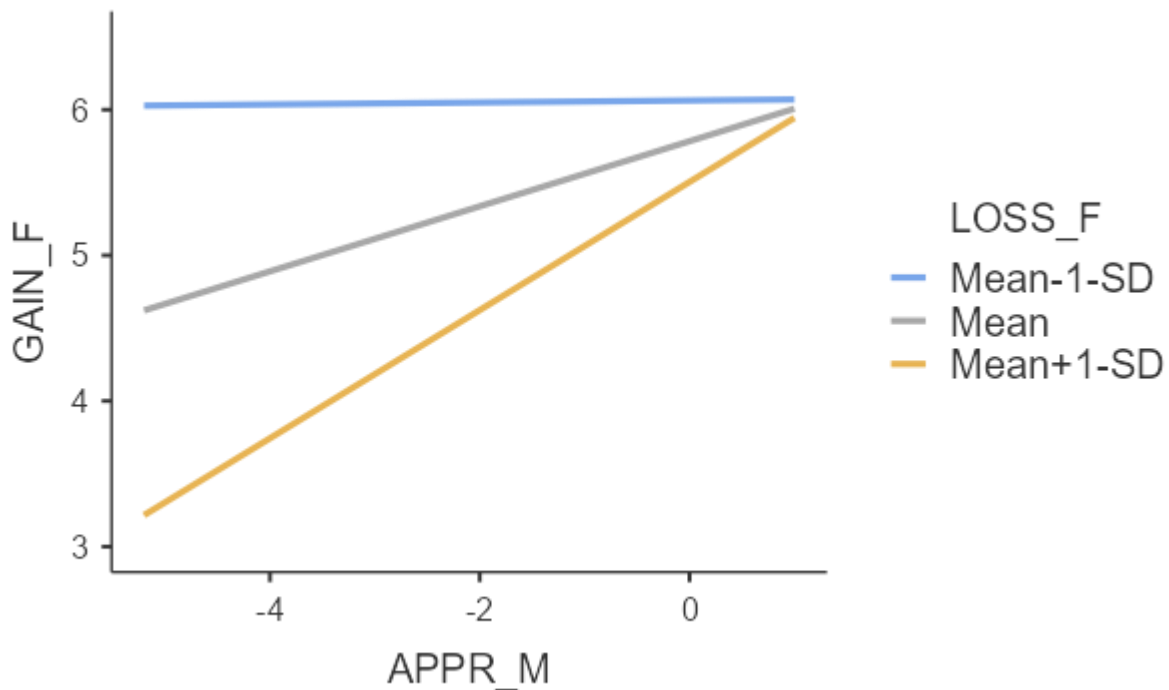


Note. LOSS_M=Men's significance loss, APPR_M=Men's appreciation, GAIN_M=Men's gained significance.

Specularly, a significant and positive effect of interaction between the men's appreciation factor and women's significance loss on the significance women gained through their relationship was found [$b=0.24$, $\beta=0.16$, $SE=0.08$, $z=2.99$, $p=0.003$, (95%CI=0.08;0.39)]. As shown in figure 10, in fact, the men's appreciation factor had a positive and significant effect on the significance women gained through their relationship only when women's significance loss was high (+1SD) [$b=0.44$, $\beta=0.30$, $SE=0.11$, $z=3.95$, $p<0.001$, (95%CI=0.22;0.66)], but not when it was low (-1SD), $p = 0.955$. By contrast, it was not found any effect of the interaction between the support women provided to

their partners and women's significance loss on significance women gained through their relationship, $p = 0.380$.

Fig. 10 The effect of the interaction between men's appreciation and women's significance loss on women's significance gained through the relationship.



Note. LOSS_F=Women's significance loss, APPR_M=Men's appreciation, GAIN_F=Women's gained significance.

Discussion

Taken together, these findings suggest that for women and men the significance gained through their amorous relationships depends on – both – a) giving appreciation to their partners (i.e., the actor effect), and b) receiving appreciation by their partners (i.e., the partner effect). As these results suggest, the significance men gained through their amorous relationship increased with the appreciation they received by their partners, independently from men's levels of significance loss. By contrast, the significance men gained increased with the appreciation they provided to their partners depending on men's significance loss levels. In other words, men with high levels of

significance loss depend on the appreciation they gave to their partners in terms of significance gaining. Meanwhile, in the same terms, men with low levels of significance loss does not actually depend on the appreciation they gave to their partners. Specularly, the significance women gained through their amorous relationship increased with the appreciation they provided to their partners, independently from women's levels of significance loss. By contrast, the significance women gained increased with the appreciation they received by their partners depending on women's significance loss levels. Indeed, women with high levels of significance loss depend on the appreciation they received by their partners in terms of significance gaining. Meanwhile, in the same terms, women with low levels of significance loss does not actually depend on the appreciation they received by their partners.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings confirm that one's sense of significance can be enhanced not only by receiving appreciation from one's romantic partner but also by giving appreciation to them. Notably, this effect holds true for both men and women. These results are consistent with the predictions of significance quest theory. If it is true that one's sense of significance is bolstered by receiving appreciation, then it is also true that appreciating one's partner (i.e., offering warmth and support) can similarly enhance one's sense of significance. This is due to the perception of engaging in a positive act that is valued within one's culture and deemed admirable by others. Further, it is also due to the fact that expressing appreciation towards one's partner fosters a feeling of being essential to someone else and creates a sense of the other person depending on them in some way.

Chapter 8.

General Discussion

Love and romantic relationships are pivotal experiences within humans' life, and, as such, received more and more attention since ancient legends have been handed down. Following this line, philosopher, writers, and poets tried to explain why humans are strongly motivated to initiate and then maintain romantic relationships. Obviously, also in social psychology, love and romantic relationships' phenomenology (Sternberg, 1987), their functionality (e.g., Buss, 1999), and motivational underpinnings (e.g., Aron & Aron, 1986) have been deeply investigated. In the present research, it is offered the first direct empirical support for a new motivational model of love which relies on the significance quest theory (Kruglanski et al., 2022; 2023). Across six studies, it was demonstrated that individuals tend to enter and maintain romantic relationships in function of the extent their – potential or real – partners possess significance-enhancing qualities. Particularly, two main factors that underlie the motivation to enter and maintain romantic relationships were identified. The social merit factor refers to the socially estimated features that one's partner got, meanwhile the appreciation factor entails a direct significance-boosting received from partners' unique admiration and support.

More specifically, the first two experiments demonstrated that a) the social merit, and b) the appreciation features of a potential partner increased the significance one expects to gain through a romantic relationship with that specific potential partner which, in turn, enhanced the likelihood to enter in a romantic relationship. The third study tested and demonstrated, in a sample of people engaged in a romantic relationship, this same hypothesis through a longitudinal methodology. The fourth cross-sectional study demonstrated that the significance gained through love and the inclusion of the other in the self (Aron & Aron, 1986) are two distinct constructs, both associated with partners' social merit and appreciation features, and the propensity to maintain the proper

romantic relationship. The fifth study confirmed that people experiencing significance loss feelings (i.e., high quest for significance) were more sensitive, in terms of significance gained through the relationship, to their partners social merit and appreciation features. Besides this, the fifth study showed also that, while the social merit factor had a higher effect on the gained significance when significance loss was high (vs. low) independently on participants' gender, the appreciation factor interacted in that way with significance loss only among men, but not among women. The sixth study, aligned with significance quest theory's prescriptions (Kruglanski et al., 2022), demonstrated that the appreciation factor can enhance the significance one gains through the proper relationship also through the *actor* (and not only the *partner*) effect. That is, both men and women gained significance through *being appreciative* towards the proper partner, and not only through *being appreciate* by the proper partner. Further, recalling the results obtained in the fifth study, this sixth study showed also that men's appreciation – but not the women's appreciation factor – interacted with men's significance loss in determining the men's gained significance through the proper romantic relationship. By contrast, women's appreciation – but not the men's appreciation factor – interacted with women's significance loss in determining the women's gained significance.

Social Merit and Appreciation Factors: A Look at the Past

Grounded on significance quest theory (Kruglanski et al., 2022), and according to its derived love model (Kruglanski et al., 2023), results from the studies showed that actors will seek, enter, and maintain love relationships with *socially meritorious* partners. Namely, partners who represent values that are important to the actors, their ingroups, and the community. As such, the findings are in line with a vast literature within the scope of romantic relationships. For example, Regan et al. (2000) found that in mate selection both men and women focused their attentions on partners' socially desirable attributes related to sexual attractiveness, health, athleticism and status. Going even further back in time, the seminal 'computer dance' study by Walster and colleagues (1966) showed that the date's physical attractiveness predicted the pursue of meeting with the date. These

results have been replicated with respect to more recent dating situations. For instance, in online forums, people seek attractive partners (Lee et al., 2008; Shaw Taylor et al., 2011) and, in speed dating events, people approach potential partners who are attractive and with good earning potential (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008). Again, in line with the results and concept of social merit, individuals report greater attraction to partners who are high in social status (i.e., occupational prestige, earning potential), related to who are low (Townsend, 1993), and rate social status as a somewhat important quality for their romantic partners to possess (Sprecher & Regan, 2002). Moreover, in a study implementing peer reports of targets' dating desirability and personal characteristics, Speed and Gangestad (1997) found that physically attractive people and people who were trendsetters, were more popular dates. Eventually, past literature informed us that people do not only want socially meritorious romantic partners to boost their sense of significance but also that individuals, within dating and marital relationships, want to be seen as socially estimated partners (e.g., physically attractive, athletic, socially skilled, intelligent) (Murray et al., 2000). Thus, there is ample empirical evidence for the notion that social merit qualities play an important role within the romantic relationships arena.

The same is true also for appreciation features. From the present perspective, the findings demonstrated that actors would seek and maintain love relationships with appreciative partners. Namely, partners who express positive regard, admiration, and support, thereby communicating a) directly to the actor, and b) to their reference group, that actors are worthy of love, care, and support. Aligned with the results, several studies suggested that warmth, commitment, and intimacy are the most desired partner qualities, relative to the other major dimensions examined (i.e., health, passion, attractiveness, status, or resources) (Fletcher et al., 1999; 2000). These qualities included support, consideration, and kindness (i.e., all appreciation qualities). These results have been replicated for both men and women, who were been found to desire partners who are warm, kind, affectionous, and loyal (Buss & Barnes, 1986; Sprecher & Regan, 2002). Following this line of

research, and consistently with the results, Murray et al. (2002) experimentally demonstrated that reductions in the perceptions of a romantic partner's regard for the self, reduce people's sense of closeness and positive regard for their partner. This is true also with respect to the perception that the other likes you, which has been found to be a strong determinant of romantic attraction (Sprecher, 1998). Moreover, studies on dyadic reciprocity demonstrated that people tended to uniquely like their dates when their dates uniquely liked them (Eastwick et al., 2007). Notably, results are aligned with important research on social support and partners' responsiveness. For example, past studies showed that people report more positive feelings (e.g., relationship satisfaction, improved intimacy) in their relationships, when they perceive their partners as responsive (i.e., understanding, validating, and caring; Crasta et al., 2021; Laurenceau et al., 1998). Likewise, people feel more satisfied in their relationships, and thus want to maintain the relationship with their partner, when they perceive that their partners provide social support and care for their wellbeing (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Lemay et al., 2007). Eventually, as suggested by the results from study 5, and such as for social merit qualities, people want to be seen by their partners as possessing appreciation qualities (e.g., warm, patient, understanding) (Murray et al., 2000).

Given such extensive literature on the psychology of love, particularly that which identified factors that motivate people to enter and maintain romantic relationships, one might argue that the present research simply reiterates past findings under new terms. Indeed, the present research aimed to condense the vast literature on romantic relationships into a comprehensive, parsimonious theoretical paradigm and to provide an empirical test of it. As such, it is not claimed that the finding that people prefer loving and/or good-looking and high-status partners is a novel one. Rather, the contribution is the argument, and subsequent empirical demonstration, that love and romantic relationships serve as a means to attain significance. As demonstrated by the present results, partner merit and appreciation increased the likelihood of relationship entrance and maintenance through

increasing the significance actually or expected to be gained through the romantic relationship. This perspective offers numerous directions for future research on romantic relationships, pointing toward still unexplored aspects.

Means Substitutability in Significance Restoration: The Relationship Between Violence and Romantic Relationships

As noted earlier, significance quest theory (Kruglanski et al., 2022) originated in the field of violent extremism, including suicide terrorism (Kruglanski et al., 2009), which, at first glance, could appear far afield from and largely unrelated to the romantic relationships arena. The finding that SQT can be well applied to both – violent extremism and romantic relationships –attests to the explanatory power of the theory, and its applicability across divergent domains of human endeavor. From a theoretical point of view, one’s need for significance can be fulfilled through various *alternative* means (Kruglanski et al., 2022). This suggests that violent means of gaining significance could be substituted for by pro-social means, and vice versa, primarily depending on the cultural context.

For example, it is possible that failures in the domain of romantic relationships can trigger violence and violent extremism. Difficulties in forming and maintaining romantic relationships can instantiate experiences of humiliation and/or social exclusion, which are major triggers of significance loss feelings that, in turn, can fuel violence and aggression (Kruglanski et al., 2022; Kruglanski et al., 2023b). In this respect, Jasko and colleagues (2017) demonstrated that significance loss feelings originating in romantic relationships were positively associated with violence. Further, it is also possible that significance loss feelings originating in one specific life-domain can bring people to act extremely in another life-domain in order to restore one’s proper sense of significance. Findings from Contu and colleagues (2023b; Study 1) showed that significance loss feelings originating in the context of romantic relationships (e.g., ‘My partner makes me feel insignificant’) were positively associated with extreme pursuit of professional

success. Interestingly, Contu and colleagues (2023b; Study 2) also demonstrated that the opposite was true. That is, significance loss feelings originating in the professional domain (e.g., ‘My job makes me feel insignificant’) were positively associated with extremely intrusive actions aimed at relationship maintenance.

Limits, Future Directions and Still Unexplored Roades

First, the present literature is limited by lack of diversity in the samples used, particularly with regard to sexual orientation. The present studies included only heterosexual participants, but the exclusion of non-heterosexual couples in research on romantic relationships represents a deficit in the literature. Future research should examine the SQT-derived model of love (Kruglanski et al., 2023) among individuals identifying as members of the LGBTQ+ community, as well as among people in non-traditional relationships, such as open marriages or polyamorous relationships. Also, although the manipulations in Studies 1A and 1B produced the a-priori hypothesized effects, the absence of a manipulation check in this research is a limitation. This issue should be addressed in future studies to ensure the reliability and validity of the manipulations. As another technical limitation, most of the measurement scales used in the present research, except for the IOS scale used in Study 3 and the scale for measuring relationship maintenance, are not validated in prior work. The scale measuring significance loss, although previously used in published research (Contu et al., 2023a; 2023b), and the scale measuring appreciation, partly based on a validated scale (Partner Behavioral Affirmation Scale; Drigotas et al., 1999), are not fully validated. Moreover, the merit and gained significance scales were created specifically for this research. This is not ideal, and validation of these scales should be a priority for future research that aims to further explore the extension of the SQT to romantic relationships. Also, the lack of validated scales in the context of SQT is a well-known issue, extensively discussed by Da Silva and colleagues (2023).

Furthermore, the present studies were carried out exclusively on a) entering into a romantic relationship and b) maintaining romantic relationships. However, the love model (Kruglanski et al.,

2023) derived from the significance quest theory (Kruglanski et al., 2022) should apply to exiting a romantic relationship' phenomenon too. In this respect, the predictions are that, to the extent that either the social merit or the appreciation factors fall below their respective thresholds of acceptability the end of the romantic relationship will take place. In line with the significance quest theory assumptions, the predictions entail also that the end of a romantic relationship should induce significance loss feelings, which, in turn, may change future approach to potential partners (see Study 4), or motivate individuals to focus their energy on alternative – significance-enhancing – life-domains (e.g., Contu et al., 2023b; Sciara et al., 2023; Steele, 1988). The existing research on the topic is sparse but the few available studies seem consistent with these predictions. For instance, research by Sailor (2013) suggests that feeling out of love is precipitated by loss of a) intimacy and the b) feeling of being loved and, importantly, that it is accompanied by a negative sense of self. In line with this, Lopez-Cantero, & Archer (2020) note that the process of falling out of love constitutes an affectively negative experience which could be tinged with a loss of significance. And Shah (2009) pointed out that falling out of love instantiate perceptions that self-needs of love are not being met appropriately, thereby eliminating that significance boost received through the precedent appreciative partner.

Further, it remains to be ascertained if people consciously and explicitly assess and signal 'social merit' and 'appreciation' attributes. Indeed, it could be reasonable that people glean and show information about these characteristics implicitly and unconsciously. Some past research furnished indirect support for this hypothesis. For instance, Willis and Todorov (2006) showed that individuals, in less than a second, can make reliable inference on facial appearance about targets' socially significant attributes (e.g., attractiveness, likeability, competence, trustworthiness). Kraus & Keltner (2009), interestingly, confirmed these results also with respect to the inference and the signaling through non-verbal behaviors of socioeconomic status. In line with this notion, it is noteworthy that among non-humans (e.g., Krebs, Davies, & Parr, 1993), and humans (Buss, 1987),

non-verbal displays and inference of the capacity to provide resources are important in mate selection. Moreover, some research indicated that people are not necessarily conscious that they gather such information to satiate their need for mattering and significance. Indeed, conscious awareness that one's love is dependent on such 'superficial factors' may be associated with lower feelings of love (Seligman et al., 1980). However, other studies suggest that individuals are aware of the significance boost that they can receive from an attractive partner. For example, in a seminal study by Sigall and Landy (1975), male participants anticipated that they would be viewed the most favorably when they presented themselves as affiliated with an attractive partner. Moreover, Andersson et al. (2001; 2006) showed that individuals are capable to consciously judge and accurately detect others' social status (i.e., influence, prominence, and respect). Admittedly, the present research is limited in this sense and, since past research provided uncoherent evidence about the possibility that social merit and appreciation features are unconsciously vs. consciously gathered and signaled, future research should fix this gap in knowledge.

Eventually, and as another example of further roads that could be explored, one could argue that social merit and appreciation are complementary to each other. That is, it is possible that individuals would be particularly attracted to partners who excel in domains where they feel low. This hypothesis has been anticipated by Freud's (1922/1959) idea that by falling in love with partner seen to represent their own ego-ideal, actors fulfill their needs for self-esteem or narcissism. Similarly, Reik (1944, 1957) suggested that through identification with someone who excelled in domains where one felt insecure, individuals solve their own gaps. Further, more recent research on actors' unreached ideal self, or the discrepancy between one's actual and ideal self (Higgins, 1987) seem to support this notion. And, also the self-expansion model theorized by Aron & Aron (1986) posits that the final aim of romantic relationships is to share resources and abilities between the partners. Accordingly, Campbell et al. (1994) found that romantically involved participants reported to be closer to their ideal selves than romantically uninvolved individuals. Too, recalling past

broken romantic relationships has been revealed to increase self-discrepancy (Green et al., 2007). Supporting the idea of the complementarity between the social merit factor and the appreciation factor, research on partner preferences suggested that individuals desire to have partners who are higher than themselves in socially desirable attributes (Figueredo et al., 2006; Watson et al., 2014). Hence, the foregoing body of evidence suggest that desired qualities that an actor lacks are particularly appealing in a – potential or real – romantic partner, the association with whom compensates for actor’s weaknesses.

Related to this point, the differences in the direct effects of merit and appreciation on relationship initiation and maintenance across Studies 1A, 1B, 2, and 3 suggest that the single facets of partner’s merit and appreciation do not always have the same weight in determining romantic relationship initiation and maintenance. These findings indicate that both merit and appreciation are multifaceted constructs, and the importance of their individual components can vary based on different factors. For instance, the centrality of specific aspects of merit (e.g., reputation, attractiveness) or appreciation (e.g., affection, support) might change depending on the actor’s deficiencies. Another possibility is that the relative importance of merit and appreciation’s aspects could vary according to cultural context or the actor’s significance loss. Future research should explore the complex composition of the merit and appreciation factors. This would enhance the understanding of the dynamics involved in the initiation and maintenance of romantic relationships.

Practical Implications

Understanding the factors that motivate humans to initiate and maintain romantic relationships has significant practical implications across various domains. In the field of clinical psychology, therapists can apply this knowledge to improve relationship counseling and interventions. By identifying specific aspects such as partner appreciation, therapists can tailor their approaches to address individual- and couple-level issues. For example, interventions can be designed to enhance appreciation between partners, thereby strengthening the emotional bond and

satisfaction within the relationship. Additionally, recognizing the importance of these factors can help therapists guide individuals in selecting partners who fulfill their specific needs, potentially leading to more stable and satisfying relationships.

Moreover, this research has valuable implications for relationship education programs and policymaking. Educational institutions could incorporate findings into their curricula to teach young adults about the essential elements of functional romantic relationships, fostering better relationship skills from an early age. Policymakers can use these insights to design public health campaigns aimed at promoting healthy relationships and reducing the prevalence of relationship-related issues such as domestic violence and divorce. Furthermore, understanding these motivational factors can help in creating support systems and resources for individuals experiencing relationship challenges by informing them which are the main areas to improve, thereby contributing to overall societal well-being.

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