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**Self-Expansion within Sexual Minority Relationships**

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### Abstract

According to the self-expansion model, people increase their positive self-concept content when they form and maintain romantic relationships, and self-expansion is an important predictor of relationship outcomes. Although thought to be universal, no prior research has examined self-expansion among sexual minority individuals. In the current study, sexual minority ( $N = 226$ ) and heterosexual ( $N = 104$ ) participants completed measures of self-expansion and relationship outcomes, and sexual minority participants completed measures of sexual minority stress.

Overall, sexual minorities reported similar levels of self-expansion as heterosexuals, and sexual minority status did not moderate the association between self-expansion and relationship satisfaction, investments, or quality of alternatives. However, sexual minority status moderated the association between self-expansion and commitment. For sexual minority participants, self-expansion negatively correlated with sexual minority stressors (i.e., internalized homonegativity, concealment, inauthenticity) and moderated the association between internalized homonegativity and relationship satisfaction and commitment, as well as concealment and relationship satisfaction and commitment, such that the negative association between sexual minority stressors and relationship outcomes was weaker in relationships characterized by high (vs. low) levels of self-expansion.

*Keywords:* self-expansion, sexual minority relationships, sexual minority stress, LGBTQ relationships, investment model

### **Self-Expansion within Sexual Minority Relationships**

People in romantic relationships want their relationships to not only meet physical and belongingness needs, but also want their relationships to promote goal-fulfillment and personal growth needs (Finkel et al., 2014). But how do romantic relationships help people grow? For nearly 40 years, the self-expansion model (Aron & Aron, 1986; Aron et al., 2022) has articulated the means by which individuals achieve self-growth via the formation and maintenance of romantic relationships. In particular, the self-expansion model proposes that people increase the size of their self-concepts via romantic relationships when they include aspects of a romantic partner into their own sense of self (i.e., inclusion of other in self; Branand et al., 2019), or when they complete novel, shared activities with a romantic partner (e.g., Harasymchuk et al., 2021). By increasing the size of their self-concepts, individuals increase their sense of self-efficacy and develop resources they can use to confront challenges (Aron et al., 2022, McIntyre et al., 2023). Myriad studies – including correlational, longitudinal, and experimental – indicate that self-expansion yields numerous relationship benefits, such as increased satisfaction and commitment (e.g., Aron et al., 2000; Cloutier & Peetz, 2017), relationship maintenance behaviors (McIntyre et al., 2015), and sexual desire (Goss et al., 2022). Self-expansion is also associated with decreased attention to alternatives (McIntyre et al., 2015; VanderDrift et al., 2011), reduced likelihood of infidelity (Lewandowski & Ackerman, 2006; VanderDrift et al., 2011), and reduced likelihood of dissolution (Mattingly et al., 2019).

Recently, Aron and colleagues proposed that self-expansion is a universal and fundamental relational process that should occur across sociodemographic groups (Aron et al., 2022). However, while this idea has received support cross-culturally (e.g., Dincer et al., 2018), in interracial and intercultural relationships (e.g., Caselli & Machia, 2021; West et al., 2022), and

across different age groups (e.g., Tomlinson et al., 2020), no prior research has examined self-expansion within sexual minority relationships. The aim of the current research, therefore, was to close this gap in the literature and to further test the universality of the self-expansion model by examining self-expansion among individuals who identify as sexual minorities (e.g., lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals). Specifically, we addressed three novel questions: 1) Do sexual minorities experience similar levels of relational self-expansion relative to heterosexuals?; 2) Does self-expansion predict relationship outcomes similarly for sexual minorities and heterosexuals?; and 3) Is self-expansion associated with sexual minority stressors?

### **The Self-Expansion Model in the Context of Sexual Minority and Heterosexual Relationships**

According to the self-expansion model, individuals experience a cognitive reorganization of their sense of identity through their involvement in romantic relationships (Aron et al., 2013; Mattingly et al., 2020). Self-expansion occurs when people add new or augment existing aspects of their self-concepts (e.g., Gordon & Luo, 2011). For example, an individual may invite their partner to attend a concert of their favorite musical act. As a result, their partner may begin to become a fan of the artist, thereby adding a new identity to their sense of self. Self-expansion is thought to occur at its highest levels early in relationships, as individuals become increasingly committed to their partner (Aron et al., 2022).

Self-expansion is thought to be universal and occur similarly for a wide variety of sociodemographic groups because, according to the model, all people are fundamentally motivated to acquire new identities, resources, and perspectives to help them achieve goals (Aron et al., 2022). People should experience self-expansion whenever they grow closer to a romantic partner and begin to merge identities and engage in novel, shared activities with their

partner. However, despite this theorizing that self-expansion should be universal, no research has directly examined self-expansion among sexual minorities.

If self-expansion is universal, it should play a similar role in sexual minority and heterosexual relationships. Supportive of this notion, several fundamental relationship processes occur similarly for sexual minority and heterosexual couples (de Jong & Reis, 2015; Kurdek, 2007). For example, research has revealed that sexual minority and heterosexual individuals have similar attraction preferences and relationship initiation behaviors (e.g., Lawson et al. 2014). Moreover, sexual minority and heterosexual individuals have relationships of equal intimacy levels (Frost, 2011) and experience similar attachment processes (e.g., Mohr et al., 2013). Lastly, sexual minority and heterosexual individuals exhibit similar benefits of pro-relationship biases (e.g., idealization; Conley et al., 2009).

If self-expansion is *not* universal, there are various ways that sexual minorities and heterosexuals may differ with respect to self-expansion. One potential difference is that sexual minorities may experience different *mean levels* of self-expansion relative to heterosexuals. On the one hand, self-expansion could be higher for sexual minorities versus heterosexuals because sexual minorities may be able to capitalize more effectively on relational strengths. In some research, sexual minorities tend to report higher levels of relationship quality and compatibility relative to heterosexual individuals (Balsam et al., 2008), which may in turn facilitate higher levels of self-expansion. However, self-expansion could be lower for sexual minorities because external and internal stressors may inhibit self-expansion pursuit (e.g., Guschlbauer et al., 2019). For example, external prejudices may reduce sexual minorities' sense of social safety (Diamond & Alley, 2022), which may reduce opportunities for self-expansion.

In addition to potential mean-level differences, sexual minorities may exhibit different patterns of associations between self-expansion and relationship outcomes compared to heterosexuals. In other words, sexual minority status may *moderate* the association between self-expansion and relationship constructs. Specifically, while self-expansion should positively correlate with relationship satisfaction, investments and commitment, and negatively correlate with quality of alternatives, across different types of relationships (e.g., Agnew et al., 1998; McIntyre et al., 2015), the strength of these associations may differ based on sexual minority status. In support of this possibility, prior work reveals that sexual minority status moderates the association between relationship investments and commitment, such that investments were weaker predictors of commitment for sexual minorities (in particular, gay men) relative to heterosexuals (Le & Agnew, 2003; Lehmler, 2010; Tran et al., 2019). Other research reveals that sexual minority status moderates the association between alternatives and commitment, such that alternatives were stronger predictors of commitment for sexual minorities (in particular, lesbians) than for heterosexuals (Le & Agnew, 2003). Thus, beyond possible mean-level differences between sexual minorities and heterosexuals for self-expansion, another avenue for potential differences between individuals is the magnitude or direction of the association between self-expansion and relationship outcomes.

### **Extending the Self-Expansion Model: Does Self-Expansion Buffer Against Sexual Minority Stress?**

Examining potential differences between sexual minorities and heterosexuals with respect to the role of self-expansion is important for understanding the universality of the self-expansion model, but it is also important to test the possibility that self-expansion is associated with variables specific to sexual minorities. Because being a member of a stigmatized group

often results in experiences of prejudice and discrimination (Meyer, 2003), sexual minorities are subject to stressors that heterosexuals are not. Specifically, sexual minority stress contributes to a variety of identity-related challenges including *internalized homonegativity* (i.e., the endorsement of negative attitudes and beliefs regarding one's own sexual orientation; Meyer 2003; Mohr & Daly, 2008), *concealment* (i.e., actively hiding one's sexual minority status from others; Riggle et al., 2017), and *inauthenticity* (i.e., behaving in ways that are inconsistent with one's true self; Newheiser & Barreto, 2014; Riggle et al, 2017). In turn, these identity-based sexual minority stressors strain relationships by reducing relationship quality (e.g., Li & Samp, 2019; Mohr & Daly, 2008; Pepping et al., 2019). For example, internalized homonegativity and concealment are associated with reduced emotional intimacy and relationship satisfaction (Guschlbauer et al., 2019). We argue that these challenges may be ameliorated if relationships foster self-expansion. Not only is self-expansion associated with benefits for relationships (e.g., increased relationship quality; Cloutier & Peetz, 2017) and self and identity (e.g., increased self-esteem; Aron et al., 1995), but recent theorizing also suggests that self-expansion helps combat psychological distress (McIntyre et al., 2023). Thus, when they have additional psychological resources afforded by self-expansion, sexual minorities may be less susceptible to psychological distress. If this is the case, then the negative association between sexual minority stressors and relationship quality should be weaker when self-expansion is high (vs. low).

### **The Current Research**

The broad aim of the current research was to further examine the universality of self-expansion by examining self-expansion among sexual minorities and heterosexuals. We tested



the universality of self-expansion across five research questions.<sup>1</sup> First, we examined whether sexual minorities and heterosexuals would report similar or different levels of self-expansion within their current romantic relationships.

**RQ1:** *Are there mean-level differences in self-expansion between sexual minority and heterosexual relationships?*

We next examined the association between self-expansion and relationship outcomes for sexual minorities. In particular, we examined whether self-expansion is associated with outcomes specified by the investment model (i.e., satisfaction, investments, quality of alternatives, commitment; Rusbult et al., 1998) for sexual minorities.

**RQ2:** *Is self-expansion associated with relationship outcomes for sexual minority individuals?*

Next, because the strength or direction of the associations between self-expansion and relationship outcomes may differ between sexual minorities and heterosexuals, we tested whether sexual minority status moderates the association between self-expansion and investment model outcomes.

**RQ3:** *Does sexual minority status moderate the association between self-expansion and relationship outcomes?*

Finally, we examined whether self-expansion is associated with unique benefits for sexual minorities. In particular, we examined the association between self-expansion and sexual minority stressors (i.e., internalized homonegativity, concealment, inauthenticity), and whether

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<sup>1</sup> A preregistration document can be found at [https://osf.io/3fxmp/?view\\_only=4d8a1f2c471b4b9fa7864802221b6f90](https://osf.io/3fxmp/?view_only=4d8a1f2c471b4b9fa7864802221b6f90). We modified the names of the hypotheses/research questions. We also modified RQ5 from a test of mediation to a test of moderation.

the association between sexual minority stressors and relationship satisfaction and commitment is stronger or weaker among individuals experiencing high versus low levels of self-expansion.

**RQ4:** *Does self-expansion correlate with sexual minority stressors?*

**RQ5:** *Does self-expansion moderate the association between sexual minority stress and satisfaction and commitment?*

## Method

### Participants

We conducted an *a priori* power analysis to determine sample size with two considerations in mind. First, based on previous findings (e.g., Mattingly et al., 2020), we expected moderate to large correlations ( $r = .30$  to  $.50$ ) between self-expansion and relationship outcomes. Second, we wanted to ensure that we would have a sufficient sample to detect small to medium-sized mean-level differences between sexual minority and heterosexual participants. This analysis yielded a target sample size of at least 100 per group (i.e., 100 sexual minority participants and 100 heterosexual participants). Furthermore, we wanted to ensure diversity within the sexual minority status group, so we sought to recruit a minimum of  $N = 50$  participants identifying as gay, lesbian, and bisexual. Thus, we sought to collect at least  $N = 100$  heterosexual participants and  $N = 150$  sexual minority participants. This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the first author's university. All participants provided consent after being informed of the details of the study prior to their participation.

We recruited romantically-involved participants from Prolific.co and paid US-\$1.17 for their participation. Data collection occurred in April 2022. Across three recruitment phases, we recruited individuals who in prescreening indicated their sexual orientation as gay/lesbian or

bisexual (Recruitment 1), heterosexual (Recruitment 2), or gay/lesbian (Recruitment 3).<sup>2</sup> Eligible participants were required to be at least 18 years of age, in a relationship, engaged, married, or in a civil partnership (based on prescreening responses), and living in the United States, Canada, or the United Kingdom.

Our final sample consisted of 330 participants (231 women, 89 men, 7 non-binary, 1 trans-female, 1 genderqueer, and 1 prefer not to answer), and participants ranged in age from 18-71 years ( $M = 34.84$ ,  $SD = 11.34$ ). Participants identified their sexual orientation as heterosexual ( $N = 104$ ), lesbian ( $N = 61$ ), gay ( $N = 51$ ), bisexual ( $N = 107$ ), and other ( $N = 7$ ). Most participants were in dating relationships ( $N = 162$ ), followed by married ( $N = 121$ ), engaged to be married ( $N = 37$ ), civil partnership ( $N = 3$ ), cohabiting ( $N = 2$ ), polyamorous ( $N = 1$ ), long-distance relationship ( $N = 1$ ), and in a long-term relationship but living separately ( $N = 1$ ). Participants' relationship length ranged from 1 month to just over 45 years ( $M = 8.99$  years,  $SD = 7.96$ ). Participants identified their race/ethnicity as White ( $N = 287$ ), Asian ( $N = 23$ ), biracial/multiracial ( $N = 10$ ), Black ( $N = 6$ ), American Indian or Alaskan Native ( $N = 1$ ), and other ( $N = 4$ ). Additionally,  $N = 100$  had less than a high school degree, a high school degree, or some college;  $N = 157$  had an associate's or bachelor's degree; and  $N = 69$  had an advanced degree (e.g., master's, doctorate). Lastly,  $N = 102$  had an income less than \$30,000 USD,  $N = 108$  were between \$30,000-59,999, and  $N = 120$  earned \$60,000 or more.

### **Procedure and Measures<sup>3</sup>**

#### ***Self-Expansion***

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<sup>2</sup> Prolific.co uses the term homosexual in its prescreening for gay and lesbian participants. In the first recruitment phase, 72% of the sample identified as bisexual. To achieve our *a priori* sample size goals, we conducted the third recruitment phase in which we exclusively sampled gay and lesbian participants.

<sup>3</sup> Participants also completed other scales, in addition to those described. As stated in our preregistration document, these scales are not the focus of this investigation, and so we do not discuss them further.

First, participants completed the 14-item Self-Expansion Questionnaire (SEQ; Lewandowski & Aron, 2002). Sample items include “How much does your partner provide a source of exciting experiences?” and “How much do you feel you have a larger perspective on things because of your partner?” Participants responded on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). The scale demonstrated strong reliability,  $\alpha = .93$  ( $M = 5.13$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ).

### ***Relationship Outcomes***

Next, participants completed the 22-item Investment Model Scale (Rusbult et al., 1998) which assessed relationship satisfaction, commitment, investments, and quality of alternatives. Participants indicated their level of agreement on a 7-point scale (1 = *do not agree at all*, 7 = *agree completely*). The satisfaction subscale has five items (e.g., “Our relationship makes me very happy”) and demonstrated strong reliability,  $\alpha = .94$  ( $M = 5.55$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ). The commitment subscale has seven items (e.g., “I want our relationship to last for a very long time”), and demonstrated good reliability,  $\alpha = .88$  ( $M = 6.26$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ). The investment subscale has five items (e.g., “I have put a great deal into our relationship that I would lose if the relationship were to end”), and demonstrated acceptable reliability,  $\alpha = .77$  ( $M = 5.04$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ). The alternatives subscale has six items (e.g., “The people other than my partner with whom I might become involved are very appealing”) and demonstrated good reliability,  $\alpha = .84$  ( $M = 3.06$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ).

### ***Sexual Minority Stressors***

Next, participants who self-identified as being a sexual minority completed three scales assessing sexual minority stressors, described below.

***Internalized Homonegativity.*** Participants completed the 3-item internalized homonegativity subscale of the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identity Scale (Mohr & Kendra,

2011), which assesses internalized homonegativity in LGB participants. A sample item is “If it were possible, I would choose to be straight.” Participants responded using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*), and the scale demonstrated good reliability,  $\alpha = .89$  ( $M = 1.79$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ).

***Concealment.*** Participants completed the 6-item Sexual Orientation Concealment Scale (Jackson & Mohr, 2016), which assesses sexual orientation concealment behaviors over the prior two weeks. Sample items include “In the last two weeks, I have concealed my sexual orientation by telling someone I was straight or denying I was LGB.” Participants responded using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *all the time*), and the scale demonstrated acceptable reliability,  $\alpha = .79$  ( $M = 1.41$ ,  $SD = 0.61$ ).

***LGB Inauthenticity.*** Participants completed the 5-item authenticity subscale of the LGB-Positive Identity Measure (Riggle et al., 2014), which assesses feelings of authenticity specific to the LGB experience. Sample items include “I have a sense of inner peace about my LGBT identity” and “I embrace my LGBT identity.” Participants responded on a 7-point Likert-scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*), and the scale demonstrated strong reliability,  $\alpha = .91$  ( $M = 2.37$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ). We reverse-scored this measure, such that high scores reflect inauthenticity, which is a feeling of discomfort and conflict with one’s LGB identity.

### ***Demographics***

Finally, participants completed several demographic questions assessing sexual orientation, relationship status and length, gender identity of participant, gender identity of partner, income, education, age, and ethnicity. In addition, all participants completed and passed an attention check item.

### **Data Analysis**

We first performed an analysis comparing gay, lesbian, and bisexual participants on self-expansion and found a non-significant difference ( $p > .05$ ); therefore, and consistent with previous work (e.g., Baumel et al., 2021), we combined these three sexual minority groups into one. Additionally, for all analyses reported below, we performed parallel analyses that included participants' self-reported gender identity as a factor, and relationship length and age as covariates. The pattern of results in these parallel analyses was not substantively different from those reported below (see Supplemental Materials). Because we did not preregister analyses including these covariates, and for the sake of clarity, we do not discuss these parallel analyses further.

To examine RQ1, we conducted independent samples  $t$ -tests comparing sexual minority and heterosexual participants on reported self-expansion levels. To examine RQ2 and RQ4, we performed Pearson correlations. To test RQ3 and RQ5, we performed multiple regression analyses with moderation. For all moderation analyses, continuous predictor variables were mean centered.

## Results

### Does self-expansion vary by sexual minority status?

We first examined whether participants reported different levels of self-expansion as a function of sexual minority status (RQ1). Results revealed that sexual minority ( $M = 5.20$ ,  $SD = 0.99$ ) and heterosexual ( $M = 4.98$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ) participants did not significantly differ on self-expansion,  $t(328) = 1.84$ ,  $p = .07$ .<sup>4</sup>

### Is self-expansion associated with relationship outcomes for sexual minority individuals?

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<sup>4</sup> Sexual minority and heterosexual participants also did not differ on any investment model outcome (all  $t$ s  $< 1.87$ , all  $p$ s  $> .25$ ).

We next examined the associations between self-expansion and the investment model outcome variables for sexual minority participants (RQ2). We found that self-expansion was positively correlated with relationship satisfaction, investments, and commitment, and negatively correlated with quality of alternatives, for sexual minority participants (all  $ps < .001$ ). Table 1 reports the correlations among all study variables for sexual minority (above the diagonal) and heterosexual participants (below the diagonal).

**Table 1***Bivariate Correlations for Study Variables by Sexual Minority Status*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Self-Expansion	<b>.93</b>	.72***	.61***	.44***	-.40***	-.14*	-.18**	-.27***
2. Satisfaction	.74***	<b>.94</b>	.73***	.37***	-.48***	-.27***	-.21**	-.23***
3. Commitment	.55***	.72***	<b>.89</b>	.52***	-.54***	-.25***	-.31***	.21**
4. Investments	.41***	.34***	.38***	<b>.77</b>	-.29***	-.06	-.11	-.11
5. Quality of Alternatives	-.23*	-.48***	-.51***	-.24*	<b>.84</b>	.15*	.19**	.11
6. Internalized Homonegativity						<b>.89</b>	.29***	.45***
7. Concealment							<b>.79</b>	.48***
8. Inauthenticity								<b>.91</b>

*Note.* \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . Correlations above the diagonal present the bivariate associations for sexual minority

participants ( $N = 226$ ). Correlations below the diagonal present the bivariate associations for heterosexual participants ( $N = 104$ ).

Bolded values along the diagonal present the Cronbach's alpha for each scale using the entire sample ( $N = 330$ ), except for the sexual minority stress variables, which were calculated for sexual minority participants only.



Next, to test RQ3, we examined whether sexual minority status (coded -1 = sexual minority, 1 = heterosexual) moderated the association between self-expansion and relationship outcomes. As revealed in Table 2, we found a significant self-expansion  $\times$  sexual minority status moderation on commitment (sexual minority participants,  $\beta = .66, p < .001$ ; heterosexual participants,  $\beta = .47, p < .001$ ). The self-expansion  $\times$  sexual minority status moderation was non-significant for satisfaction, investments, and alternatives (all  $ps > .052$ ).

**Table 2**

*Sexual Minority Status as a Moderator of the Association Between Self-Expansion and Relationship Outcomes*

Predictors	Satisfaction	Commitment	Investments	Alternatives
Self-expansion	.73***	.57***	.41***	-.32***
Sexual minority status	.09	.19*	-.03	-.19
Self-expansion $\times$ Sexual minority status	.03	-.19*	-.13	.21

*Note:* \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . Values represent standardized regression coefficients.

Sexual minority status is coded as -1 = sexual minority, 1 = heterosexual.

### **How is self-expansion related to sexual minority stress?**

To address RQ4, we conducted a series of correlation analyses. As displayed in Table 1, self-expansion significantly correlated with each of the sexual minority stressors. The directions of these correlations imply that higher levels of self-expansion were associated with lower levels of sexual minority stress. Finally, to test RQ5, we examined whether self-expansion moderated the association between the three sexual minority stress variables and relationship satisfaction and commitment. In particular, we examined whether the association between (1) internalized homonegativity, (2) concealment, and (3) inauthenticity on satisfaction and commitment were

weaker when self-expansion was high (vs. low). As revealed in Table 3, we found significant self-expansion  $\times$  internalized homonegativity interactions on both satisfaction (Figure 1, Panel A) and commitment (Figure 1, Panel B). Simple effects revealed that when self-expansion was high, the association between internalized homonegativity and satisfaction ( $\beta = -.05, p = .44$ ) and internalized homonegativity and commitment ( $\beta = -.002, p = .98$ ) was non-significant. However, when self-expansion was low, the association between internalized homonegativity and satisfaction ( $\beta = -.26, p = .001$ ) and internalized homonegativity and commitment ( $\beta = -.27, p < .001$ ) was significant, indicating that for low self-expansion relationships, satisfaction and commitment decrease when internalized homonegativity is higher.

**Table 3**

*Results of Analyses Examining Self-Expansion as a Moderator of the Association between Sexual Minority Stressors and Satisfaction and Commitment*

Predictors	Satisfaction	Commitment
<b>IV: Internalized Homonegativity</b>		
Internalized homonegativity	-.15***	-.14*
Self-expansion	.69***	.58***
Internalized homonegativity × Self-expansion	.10**	.13**
<b>IV: Concealment</b>		
Concealment	-.06	-.16**
Self-expansion	.69***	.56***
Concealment × Self-expansion	.09*	.15**
<b>IV: Inauthenticity</b>		
Inauthenticity	-.03	-.03
Self-expansion	.71***	.60***
Inauthenticity × Self-expansion	.03	.08

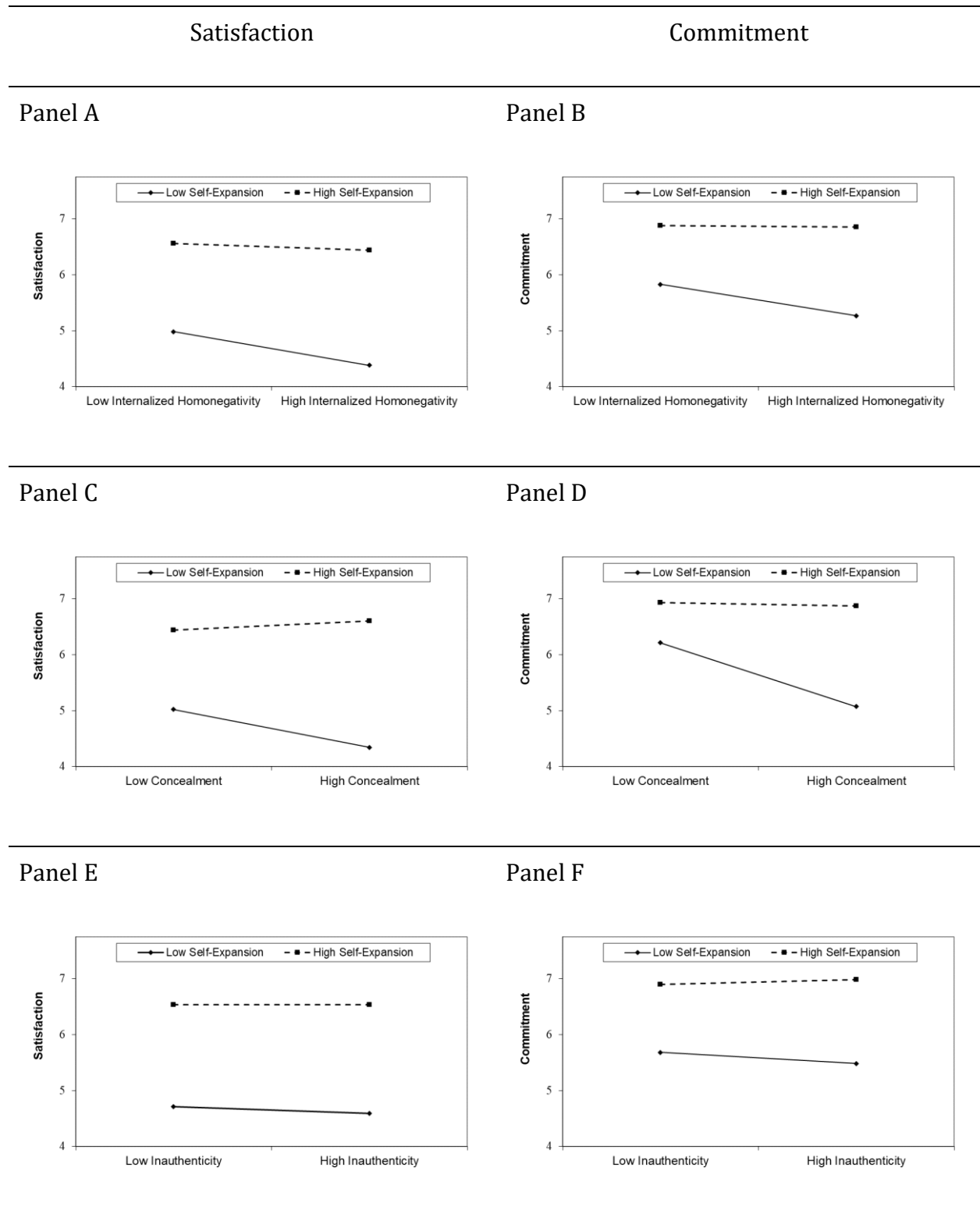
\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Next, we found significant self-expansion × concealment interactions on satisfaction (Figure 1, Panel C) and commitment (Figure 1, Panel D). Simple effects revealed that when self-expansion was high, the association between concealment and satisfaction ( $\beta = .04$ ,  $p = .63$ ) and concealment and commitment ( $\beta = -.02$ ,  $p = .82$ ) was non-significant. However, when self-expansion was low, the association between concealment and satisfaction ( $\beta = -.15$ ,  $p = .009$ ) and concealment and commitment ( $\beta = -.31$ ,  $p < .001$ ) was significant.

Finally, we found a non-significant self-expansion × inauthenticity moderation on satisfaction (Figure 1, Panel E) and commitment (Figure 1, Panel F),  $ps > .05$ .

**Figure 1**

*Moderation of Sexual Minority Stressors by Self-Expansion on Commitment and Satisfaction.*



*Note.* Low/High values represent +/- 1 standard deviation. Panels A, B, C, and D depict significant moderations.

### **Discussion**

In this research, we sought to further test the universality of self-expansion by examining self-expansion among sexual minorities and heterosexuals. Overall, we found that sexual minorities and heterosexuals report similar mean levels of self-expansion. We also found that self-expansion was positively associated with relationship satisfaction, investments, and commitment, and negatively associated with quality of alternatives, for sexual minority individuals. These associations were similar to those found with heterosexuals, as sexual minority status did not moderate the link between self-expansion and relationship satisfaction, investments, or alternatives. However, sexual minority status did significantly moderate the association between self-expansion and commitment. These findings suggest that while self-expansion may be similarly associated with positive relational benefits for sexual minorities and heterosexuals, self-expansion may play an especially important role for commitment among sexual minorities.

The current findings also extend the self-expansion model by suggesting an additional way that self-expansion may provide benefits to relationships. In addition to promoting relationship commitment in line with the investment model, self-expansion is associated with reduced sexual minority stress. In particular, we found that self-expansion was negatively correlated with internalized homonegativity, concealment, and inauthenticity, such that participants reported lower levels of sexual minority stressors as their level of self-expansion increased. Moreover, self-expansion moderated the association between sexual minority stressors and relationship satisfaction and commitment, such that the associations between internalized

homonegativity and relationship satisfaction and commitment and concealment and relationship satisfaction and commitment were weaker when self-expansion was high rather than low. We did not find that self-expansion moderated the association between inauthenticity and relationship satisfaction and commitment, although there was a significant, negative correlation between self-expansion and inauthenticity. Overall, these findings build upon and extend recent work demonstrating that self-expansion is associated with individual-level benefits, such as fewer depression symptoms (McIntyre et al., 2023) and greater ability to respond to stressors (Jurek & Besta, 2021). The current study suggests that the harmful effects of some sexual minority stressors on relationship outcomes are weaker when self-expansion is high (vs. low).

More generally, these results have implications for our understanding of the universality of the self-expansion model and provide additional empirical support for the broader claim that self-expansion is a fundamental process that occurs across sociodemographic groups (Aron et al., 2022). The current research is the first to demonstrate that self-expansion is associated with positive relationship outcomes for sexual minorities and heterosexuals alike. This contributes to the growing body of literature demonstrating the benefits of self-expansion cross-culturally (e.g., Dincer et al., 2018), in interracial and intercultural relationships (e.g., Caselli & Machia, 2021; West et al., 2022), and across different age groups (e.g., Tomlinson et al., 2020). Undoubtedly, more research is needed to test the universality of self-expansion, as well as to identify relationship situations in which self-expansion may not be beneficial, or may even be detrimental (see Burris et al., 2013), to relationship functioning. Nevertheless, the current results align with prior work that self-expansion is beneficial for a diverse set of relationships and contexts.

In addition to extending the self-expansion model, these results have implications for the minority stress model (Meyer, 2003). Members of sexual minority groups experience unique

stressors related to their minority identity (e.g., stigma, discrimination, and even violence) which can negatively impact their romantic relationships (e.g., Li & Samp, 2019; Pepping et al., 2019). The current findings suggest that the harmful impacts of some sexual minority stressors on relationship quality are weaker when people expand the positive aspects of their self-concepts via their partner and relationships. Nevertheless, because the impact of stress on romantic relationships is complex, with stress originating both internally and externally and with effects that are both individual and dyadic (Bodenmann et al., 2016; Neff & Karney, 2004), additional research is needed to more fully elucidate the role that self-expansion plays in shaping the impacts of sexual minority stressors. For example, whereas the current research is correlational, future research may longitudinally and experimentally test the effect of self-expansion on sexual minority stress to determine the magnitude of buffering effect of self-expansion for sexual minority relationships.

Despite the advance in the conceptualization of the self-expansion model afforded by the current study's focus on sexual minorities, it is important to note that this study has some key limitations. This study recruited a sample of participants using an online participant pool and limited the sampling frame to WEIRD cultures (i.e., Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic; Heinrich et al., 2010). Moreover, our sample was largely comprised of white participants who reported being generally satisfied in their romantic relationships. Beyond raising issues of generalizability to non-WEIRD cultures, racially diverse populations, and less satisfied couples, our sampling approach may have impacted our participants' overall levels of sexual minority stress. Indeed, perceptions of sexual minorities varies across racial and cultural groups, which may affect overall levels of acceptance and stress (e.g., Baiocco et al., 2023). In Western cultures (such as the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada), the social and legal

environment for sexual minority individuals has improved substantially over the past decade (Frost et al., 2022), which may affect the prevalence and importance of sexual minority stressors among sexual minority individuals. For example, in the United States, distress associated with high internalized homonegativity decreased following the legalization of same-sex marriage (Ogolsky et al., 2019). Nevertheless, in the United States, there have been several recent laws enacted that restrict LGBTQ+ rights (Peele, 2023), which likely contribute to the experience of sexual minority stress. Indeed, evidence suggests that sexual minority stressors continue to be common among lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals (Frost et al., 2022) and so understanding the relational variables that are associated with reducing them remains important.

Another limitation of the current research is that we only sampled one member of a romantic relationship. It is possible that our participants had a biased view of their relationships, such that their perceptions misaligned with those of their partners (e.g., Lemay, 2014). Future research should examine whether self-expansion is associated with benefits for LGB couples by taking a dyadic approach. Moreover, our results may or may not extend to individuals in polyamorous relationships (cf. Balzarini et al., 2018).

Additionally, although we did not find any significant effects of participants' gender identity in the current research, future research should keep in mind that sexual minority status is best viewed through an intersectional lens. Individual identities and relationships are shaped by a wide range of cultural, racial, gender, sexual, and social contexts, with many individuals being subjected to minority stress as a result of multiple minority identities. As such, the manner by which self-expansion is associated with intra- and interpersonal outcomes may change due to the interplay of multiple aspects of individuals' identities. Moreover, future research may examine other variables that may influence the role that self-expansion plays in sexual minority



relationships, such as the social support provided by close others and the closeness and intimacy of the relationship.

Another limitation of the current research is that, although the Self-Expansion Questionnaire (Lewandowski & Aron, 2002) has been the most common method for assessing self-expansion over the past two decades (Mattingly et al., 2020), there is no scale validation paper published in a peer-reviewed journal examining its psychometric properties. Future research should focus on conducting a full-scale test of the psychometric properties of the SEQ, including convergent and discriminant validity, especially when using it for new populations such as sexual minorities.<sup>5</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Overall, research examining sexual minorities has increased in relationship science over the past 20 years (Pollitt et al., 2022), and the current findings highlight the importance of such research for theory building and refining. Future research should incorporate diverse samples and use findings based on these samples to develop more inclusive models of relational processes. As the current findings demonstrate, examining self-expansion among sexual minorities not only provides evidence of the universality of self-expansion, but also extends our understanding of the model by identifying previously unconsidered benefits of self-expansion that are specific to relationships involving sexual minorities.

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<sup>5</sup> Per the recommendation of an anonymous reviewer, research focusing on the psychometrics of the SEQ should present scales in a randomized order to prevent order effects.

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**Data Availability Statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available at

[https://osf.io/3fxmp/?view\\_only=4d8a1f2c471b4b9fa7864802221b6f90](https://osf.io/3fxmp/?view_only=4d8a1f2c471b4b9fa7864802221b6f90).

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