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Romantic Relationships as a Source of Significance

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on significance quest theory and its derived model of romantic relationships, we demonstrated that perceiving romantic partners as having socially valued qualities (partners' merit) and as admiring and caring (partners' appreciation) enhanced actors' significance gained through the romantic relationship which, in turn, increased the likelihood to enter (Studies 1A and 1B) and maintain (Study 2) romantic relationships. Further, Study 3 demonstrated that significance gained through romantic relationships and inclusion of the other in the self were independently associated with romantic partners' merit and appreciation and the likelihood of maintaining romantic relationships. Finally, Study 4 showed that people experiencing feelings of significance loss were more sensitive to their partners' merit and appreciation features. Findings are compared with the rich social psychological literature on romantic relationships and future directions are outlined.

1 | Introduction

Whether one is referring to the Bible or ancient myths, world literature and theatre or music and poetry that speak to the soul, romantic relationships are sure to arise as central themes of the human experience. It is no surprise, then, that social psychology has devoted much effort to investigating the phenomena of love and romantic relationships (Sternberg 1986). Indeed, romantic relationships have been posited to constitute the key to survival (Buss 1999). Their motivational underpinnings have also been examined, with some researchers explaining that romantic relationships serve as an exchange of resources (e.g., Aron and Aron 1986; Mitchell, Cropanzano, and Quisenberry 2012). A recent research stream exploring romantic relationships as motivated phenomena is derived from significance quest theory (SQT; Kruglanski et al. 2022; Kruglanski, Ellenberg, Yu, et al. 2023). Through the lens of SQT, we aim here to identify the basic motivational factors that motivate people to (a) enter into and (b) maintain those relationships.

1.1 | Romantic Relationships and SQT

SQT (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 behaviours. 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 et al. (2009) was that it was the need for feeling significant *in the eyes of others, members of their ingroup*. By engaging in violent action for a hallowed cause, individuals sought to acquire the status of heroes or martyrs representing an appreciable boost to their significance.

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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, Wotman, and Stillwell 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 was not 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*, 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 as an opportunity to improve their status in the company and, 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 and Cohen 2006). Depending on the cultural context in which one lives, the values that 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 (Resta et al. 2022), self-care related behaviours (Contu and Pierro, 2024), environmental activism (Molinario et al. 2020), and pro-social behaviours (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 relationship phenomena from the SQT perspective. In what follows, we provide the reasons why SQT should be fruitful in explaining romantic relationships.

First, 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 we examine also 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 fulfilment of that need.

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 for 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, Ellenberg, Yu, et al. 2023). In line with this notion, Sedikides, Oliver, and Campbell (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*.

Additionally, there is another important point of connection between SQT and the scientific literature on romantic relationships: the concept of sacrifice. SQT was originally developed to investigate the motivations underlying suicide bombers, who made the ultimate sacrifice to support the cause that gave meaning to their lives (Kruglanski et al. 2009). Interestingly, sacrifice is also a crucial construct in romantic relationships, defined as the willingness to promote the well-being of one's partner and relationship even before one's own (Van Lange et al. 1997). Sacrifice in close relationships has been linked to various motives, including approach-avoidance motives (Impett, Gable, and Peplau 2005) and self-, partner- and relationship-focused motives (Visserman et al. 2017). Aligned with Visserman et al. (2017) category of 'self-focused' motives, drawing on SQT, if romantic relationships are sources of significance, then individuals' activation of the need for significance should be positively associated with the tendency to sacrifice to maintain their proper relationship. This is exactly what Contu et al. (2023a) found in a cross-sectional and longitudinal study.

1.2 | Factors That Make a Romantic Partner 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, Ellenberg, Yu, et al. 2023), we identified two primary factors that enhance the likelihood of one being seen as a significance-bestowing romantic partner.

Kruglanski, Ellenberg, Yu, et al. (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, and 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 and 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, Kashy, and Cook 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 general 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* and how it acts uniquely towards the actor.

1.2.1 | Gaining Significance Through Partner's Merit

Through the 'merit' mechanism, people feel significant in the eyes of others because of their association with romantic partners who possess socially cherished qualities. In other words, the partner's meritorious qualities reflect on the actor and lend them significance.

Consistent with the concept of partner's 'merit', past research has found that partners' desirable characteristics are one of the major predictors of initial interpersonal liking (see Zhou, Chelberg, and Aron 2015 for a review). Moreover, several findings support our assumption that one's partner's merit enhances one's sense of significance. For example, Rodeheffer et al. (2016) found that women see men as more desirable when they have attractive (vs. unattractive) romantic partners. Similarly, men report wanting to date a woman who is paired with a more attractive partner (Moran and Wade 2022). Also in long-term relationships, both men and women are perceived as more attractive when they are paired with an attractive partner (Little et al. 2008). Similarly, women are perceived as more attractive, sociable, and likeable when they have an attractive rather than unattractive partner (Strane and Watts 1977). And, both men and women are seen as higher in status when they have an attractive partner (Winegard et al. 2017). To summarize, having an attractive romantic partner enhances others' perception of an individual's own desirable features, thereby possibly augmenting individual's sense of significance. Other socially meritorious qualities seem to have similar effects. For example, Jones et al. (2007) suggested that popular men increase their female partners' significance in the eyes of other women. Also, adolescents who were initially low in popularity became more attractive and popular when they had a popular romantic partner (Simon, Aikins, and Prinstein 2008).

As noted earlier, 'merit' qualities are culturally defined; they are features that are valued in one culture but may not be valued to the same extent by other cultures (e.g., Joshanloo 2014). Even within a single culture, different subcultures may adhere to different values and, consequentially, assign importance to different characteristics of romantic partners. For example, a banker may particularly appreciate a partner who is successful in business, while an extremely religious person may desire a partner who is known as very pious. Indeed, although 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, Rojahn, and Fischer 1999). A partner's merit might also depend on the fit between the partner's characteristics and the prescriptive norms of a specific situation. For instance, people tend to feel embarrassed when their romantic partners use humour in inappropriate contexts (Hall 2011), though they might value having a humorous partner in other contexts.

1.2.2 | Gaining Significance Through Partner's Appreciation

A partner's 'appreciation' refers to the direct significance boost that a warm, affectionate, and supportive partner furnishes specifically to the actor. Like the merit factor, too, judgements of appreciation depend on actor's perception of partner's behaviours. As previously noted, appreciation from one's partner is evidence that one is worthy of love and that someone has chosen to invest energy and resources in the relationship, thereby increasing individuals' significance. Further, an appreciative partner should furnish significance to the actor through building and validating a shared reality based on the actor's positive self-view (Rossignac-Milon and Higgins 2018). As noted earlier, while a partner's merit features exist independently from the relationship between the actor and their partner (Kenny, Kashy, and Cook 2020), a partner's appreciation is a relationship-specific factor, since it represents the partner's appreciation *specifically for the actor*. Partners' appreciation (for the actor) is reflected in a variety of behaviours attesting that the actor matters and is significant to the partner. These include, for example, *positive regard and affection* (Murray, Holmes, and Griffin 2000), *adoration* (Schindler, Paech, and Löwenbrück 2015), *responsiveness* (Reis, Clark, and Holmes 2004), *understanding* (Gordon and Chen 2016) and *affirmation* (Rusbult, Finkel, and Kumashiro 2009).

It is common knowledge that it feels good to be adored by others (Byrne 1971) and that one of the main predictors of initial attraction is the individual's perception they are liked by the other person (Zhou, Chelberg, and Aron 2015). Further, Riela et al. (2010) showed that people were likely to enter romantic relationships when a desirable other expressed appreciation for the self. Other findings suggest that a partner's appreciation enhances actors' significance. For example, those who felt more positively regarded by their partners reported greater self-esteem compared to those who felt negatively regarded (Murray, Holmes, and Griffin 2000). Similarly, romantic rejection is accompanied by drops in self-esteem (Baumeister, Votman, and Stillwell 1993). Further, research that experimentally manipulated partners' admiration showed that admired participants reported greater self-esteem compared to participants in the control condition (Marigold, Holmes, and Ross 2007). Also, when a partner displays affirming behaviours (i.e., behaves in ways that enhance one's capability to reach a goal), the actor gains enhanced personal well-being, including greater life satisfaction (e.g., Drigotas 2002), suggesting a greater sense of significance. Moreover, when a partner serves as an ally in promoting growth, and hence the sense of one's significance, both the partner and the actor

achieve enhanced couplehood well-being, including an increased probability of relationship maintenance and couple functionality (e.g., Drigotas et al. 1999).

1.3 | The Present Research

The aim of the present research is to empirically examine the romantic relationships model derived from the SQT (Kruglanski et al. 2022; Kruglanski, Ellenberg, Yu, et al. 2023). The central tenet of the model is that love and romantic relationships are motivated by humans' universal need for significance (Kruglanski, Ellenberg, Yu, et al. 2023). That is, the more a partner is perceived as a source of significance, the greater the likelihood to enter and maintain a romantic relationship with that person. In this light, we identified and examined two factors that determine if a person is perceived as likely to enhance one's significance: (a) the *partner's merit* and (b) the *partner's appreciation*.

We ran a total of five studies. Studies 1a and 1b independently manipulated the levels of merit and appreciation of a potential partner to see whether they changed the level of significance one expected to gain through a romantic relationship with that specific potential partner and whether this sense of gained significance could, in turn, enhance their perceived likelihood of entering into a romantic relationship with that person. Study 2 tested this same hypothesis longitudinally in a sample of participants who were already engaged in romantic relationships. Study 3 was designed to demonstrate that significance gained through love and inclusion of the other in the self (Aron and Aron 1986) are two distinct constructs, both associated with relationship maintenance among people engaged in romantic relationships. Finally, Study 4 tested if people experiencing significance loss feelings, and hence had a stronger desire for significance, were more sensitive and more attuned to their partner's significance-affording merit and appreciation qualities. All the studies were conducted online, and the analyses were performed using Jamovi (2021; PATHj jamovi package; Gallucci 2021). The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of 'La Sapienza' University of Rome (protocol N. 572).

2 | Study 1A

2.1 | Methods

2.1.1 | Participants, Design and Procedure

To estimate the minimum sample size needed to test our hypotheses, we assumed a medium effect size. Indeed, given the nature of the appreciation and merit manipulations that we designed, we expected a large effect on the expected significance gain. However, since this was the first empirical test of our hypotheses, following a conservative strategy, we decided to assume a medium effect size. Hence, assuming a medium effect size ($r = 0.30$), one mediator, power = 0.80 and alpha = 0.05, the online tool 'Monte Carlo Power Analysis for Indirect Effects' (Schoemann, Boulton, and Short 2017) suggested a minimum N of 154 participants to detect the indirect effects of (a) partner's merit and (b) partner's appreciation on the likelihood of entering the romantic relationship via the expected significance gain.

To test our hypothesis, we enrolled 214 Italian heterosexual adults (51.4% males; $M_{age} = 27.47$ years; $SD_{age} = 6.25$ years) in a 2 (high vs. low merit) \times 2 (high vs. low appreciation) full experimental design. Inclusion criteria were to be single, to be at least 18 years old and to speak Italian fluently. 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 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.

2.1.2 | Materials and Measures

2.1.2.1 | Manipulation of Potential Partner's Merit and Appreciation. To manipulate merit and appreciation of a potential partner, we requested participants to vividly 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 towards their previous partner. In the high appreciation condition, by contrast, participants were told that the person they met was very warm and supportive towards their previous partner. We randomized the order of presentation of merit and appreciation manipulations to control for possible order effects.

2.1.2.2 | Expected Gain. We measured the significance that participants expected to gain from a relationship with a person like the one described in the scenario through a five-item scale that we constructed relying on the definition of significance given by Kruglanski et al. (2022). Participants responded on a 7-point 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' and 'being in a relationship with someone like the one I met at my friend's house would make me feel strong' ($\alpha = 0.94$).

2.1.2.3 | Likelihood of Entering Romantic Relationships. We measured participants' perceived likelihood that the person described in the scenario could become their stable partner on a scale ranging from 1 ('none') to 100 ('a lot').

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). Gender (0 = males; 1 = females).

Abbreviations: APPR., appreciation experimental conditions (-1 = low; 1 = high); ENTER, probability of relationship entrance [0 ('lowest score') to 100 ('highest score')]; EXPGAIN, expected gained significance [1 ('lowest score') to 7 ('highest score')]; MERIT, experimental conditions (-1 = low; 1 = high).

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

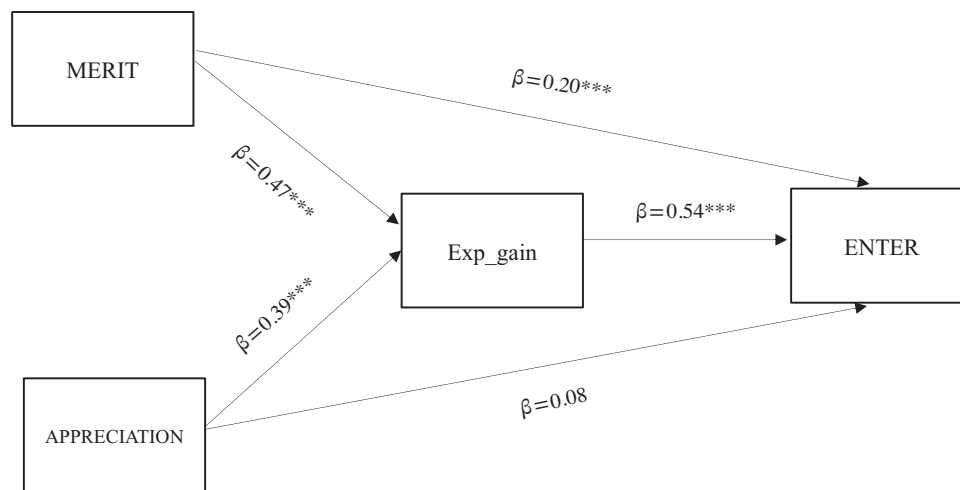


FIGURE 1 | A path-analysis model showing the effect of a potential partner's merit and appreciation on the perceived likelihood to enter a romantic relationship via the expected significance gain (Study 1A). * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$. APPRECIATION, experimental conditions (-1 = low; 1 = high); ENTER, probability of relationship entrance; Exp_gain, expected gained significance; MERIT, experimental conditions (-1 = low; 1 = high). Covariates are not included for the sake of clarity.

2.2 | Results

To test our hypothesis, we tested a mediation model in which partner's merit and appreciation (experimentally manipulated) were the two main predictors: the expected gain was the mediator, and the likelihood of entering the romantic relationship was the dependent variable. We included participants' age and gender as covariates. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations are shown in Table 1.

As shown in Figure 1, results revealed significant positive effects of 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 partner's appreciation [$b = 1.19$, $\beta = 0.39$, $SE = 0.16$, $z = 7.49$, $p < 0.001$ (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 = males; 2 = females) and expected gain [$b = -0.69$, $\beta = -0.23$, $SE = 0.16$, $z = -4.34$, $p < 0.001$, (95% CI = -0.99, -0.38)].

3 | Study 1B

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

TABLE 2 | Descriptives and bivariate correlations (Study 1b; $N = 160$).

	MERIT	APPR.	EXPGAIN	ENTER	Age	M (<i>SD</i>)
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). Gender (0 = males; 1 = females).

Abbreviations: APPR. = Appreciation experimental conditions (-1 = low; 1 = high); ENTER = Probability of relationship entrance [0 (lowest score) to 100 (highest score)]; EXPGAIN = expected gained significance [1 (lowest score) to 7 ss(highest score)]; MERIT = Experimental conditions (-1 = low; 1 = high).

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

3.1 | Methods

3.1.1 | Participants, Design and Procedure

Based on the power analyses that we performed for Study 1A, to test our hypothesis, we enrolled 160 American heterosexual adults (65.5% males; $M_{\text{age}} = 35.17$ years; $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.53$ years) in a 2 (high vs. low merit) \times 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 United States). The procedure was the same as implemented in Study 1A, varying only in manipulations of the potential partner's merit and appreciation features.

3.1.2 | Materials and Measures

3.1.2.1 | Manipulation of Potential Partner's Merit and Appreciation. To conceptually replicate the results of Study 1A, in Study 1B, we chose to implement different operationalizations of the merit and appreciation factors. 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 pieces 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 versus 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 versus 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, we randomized the order of presentation of merit and appreciation manipulations.

Expected gain ($\alpha = 0.95$) and *likelihood to enter the romantic relationship* were measured as in Study 1A.

3.2 | Results

We implemented the same analysis strategy used in Study 1a. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations are shown in Table 2.

As shown in Figure 2, results revealed significant positive effects of 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 partner's appreciation [$b = 1.59$, $\beta = 0.48$, $SE = 0.20$, $z = 8.08$, $p < 0.001$, (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, the 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 = males; 2 = females) on expected gain [$b = -0.66$, $\beta = -0.19$, $SE = 0.21$, $z = -3.10$, $p < 0.001$, (95% CI = -1.08, -0.24)].

3.3 | 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

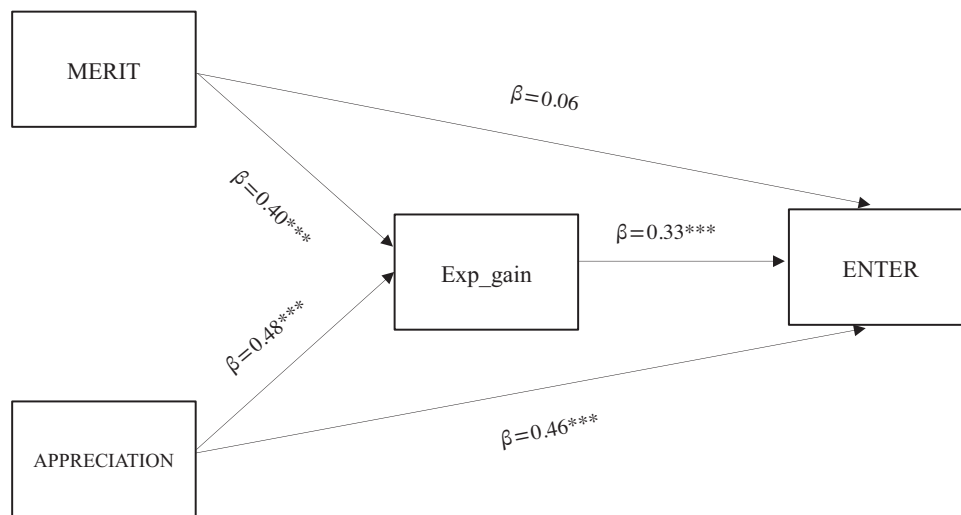


FIGURE 2 | A path-analysis model showing the effect of a potential partner's merit and appreciation on the perceived likelihood to enter a romantic relationship via expected significance gain (Study 1B). * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$. APPRECIATION, experimental conditions (−1 = low; 1 = high); ENTER, probability of relationship entrance; Exp_gain, expected gained significance; MERIT, experimental conditions (−1 = low; 1 = high). Covariates are not included for the sake of clarity.

person. Importantly, Studies 1A and 1B provided support for our 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 behaviour 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 our hypotheses within samples from two different cultures (i.e., Italy and the United States), thus enhancing the generalizability of our findings. However, our research thus far considered only entrance into romantic relationships and not their maintenance. To address the latter issue, we carried out an additional study described below.

4 | Study 2

Study 2 aimed to extend the findings of Studies 1A and 1B to the maintenance of romantic relationships. Specifically, we hypothesized that participants' perception of their partners' merit and appreciation features would positively predict the significance they gained through their romantic relationships, which, in turn, would predict participants' willingness to maintain their romantic relationships. To operationalize the willingness to maintain one's romantic relationship, we used the commitment and intimacy components of love (Sternberg 1986), which are strongly associated with relationship maintenance and stability (Sumter, Valkenburg, and Peter 2013).

Note that 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 a feasible strategy. Hence, to establish causality between (a) partners' merit, 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, we decided to test our hypothesis using a longitudinal methodology (Gollob and Reichardt 1987) in which variables are measured at different moments in time and alternative causal orderings (other than those hypothesized) are excluded (Maxwell and Cole 2007).

4.1 | Methods

4.1.1 | 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 our hypothesis within a sample of participants already engaged in romantic relationships, we decided to disregard the large effect sizes gleaned in the first two studies and to assume here a medium effect size ($r = 0.30$; Cohen 1992) which via Monte Carlo simulations indicated a minimum N of 154 participants to be included in the study. Since a minimum dropout rate of about 10% is typical for longitudinal studies (e.g., Weiss 2005), we aimed at recruiting a minimum of 230 participants.

All data were collected on 20 January 2023 (the first wave) and 20 February 2023 (the second wave) through a paid procedure provided by Prolific. Given the nature of our 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 our hypothesis, we enrolled 238 participants in a two-wave longitudinal study. Between the first and the second wave of measurements, we experienced a high drop-out rate among participants¹ such that at the second wave, the total sample included 195 Italian adults engaged in a heterosexual relationship (47.4% males; $M_{\text{age}} = 31.10$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 9.34$). Among these participants, the mean relationship duration was 72.20 months ($SD = 82.70$). Moreover, 2.6% of participants were dating (they were not dating one 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 our measures of interest (see below).

4.2 | Measures

4.2.1 | Partner's Appreciation

Participants' perception of their partners' appreciation features was assessed through a five-item measure, based on the definition of partner appreciation provided by Kruglanski, Ellenberg, Yu, et al. (2023) and adapted from items from the Partner Behavioral Affirmation Scale (Drigotas et al. 1999). Participants were asked to respond on a 7-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' and 'My partner treats me in a way that helps me becoming who I want' (first wave: $\alpha = 0.95$; second wave: $\alpha = 0.96$).

4.2.2 | Partner's Merit

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, Ellenberg, Yu, et al. (2023). Participants were asked to respond on a 7-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' and 'My partner has an important role within our community' (first wave: $\alpha = 0.87$; second wave: $\alpha = 0.88$).

4.2.3 | Gained Significance

We measured participants' perception of gaining significance through their romantic relationship using a five-item scale, adapted from Studies 1A and 1B and based on the definition of significance provided by Kruglanski et al. (2022). Participants responded on a 7-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' and 'My relationship makes me feel strong' (first wave: $\alpha = 0.93$; second wave: $\alpha = 0.94$).

4.2.4 | Relationship Maintenance index

We measured the likelihood of relationship maintenance through assessing participants' intimacy and commitment components of love, which have been shown to be strongly associated with relationship maintenance (Sumter, Valkenburg, and Peter 2013). We used a six-item scale adapted from the Triangular Love Scale (Sternberg 1997). Participants were asked to respond on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ('absolutely not') to 7 ('absolutely yes'). Example items were 'I never want to have another partner' and '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 we averaged them to create one aggregated measure (first wave: $\alpha = 0.92$; second wave: $\alpha = 0.93$).

4.3 | Results

To test our hypothesis, we tested three different path analysis models through which we tested the time-sequencing among all the variables we examined, controlling for age, gender, relationship duration and measure stability (Models 2 and 3; Marsch and Hau 1996). First, we tested our hypotheses by analysing data on all participants involved in the first wave (Model 1; $N = 233$). Subsequently, in the second model (Model 2), we aimed to establish causality between partner's merit and appreciation and the significance participants gained through the romantic relationships. Finally, in the third model (Model 3), our aim was to establish causality between gained significance and relationship maintenance. 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).

4.3.1 | Model 1: Cross-Sectional Associations

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 [$b = 0.48$, $\beta = 0.52$, $SE = 0.05$,

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)
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: In bracket (Cronbach's alpha). Gender (0 = males; 1 = females).

Abbreviations: T1_APPR., partner's appreciation (time 1); T1_GAIN, significance gained through the relationship (time 1); T1_MAIN, relationship maintenance index (time 1); T1_MERIT, partner's merit (time 1); T2_APPR., partner's appreciation (time 2); T2_GAIN, significance gained through the relationship (time 2); T2_MAIN, relationship maintenance index (time 2); T2_MERIT, partner's merit (time 2).

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

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

Model	χ^2 (df)	χ^2/df	CFI	SRMR	RMSEA	RMSEA (CI)	AIC
2	14.0 (4)	3.50	0.981	0.014	0.114	(0.053, 0.182)	784
2b	12.7 (3)	4.23	0.982	0.018	0.130	(0.062, 0.207)	792
3	4.72 (2)	2.36	0.996	0.013	0.084	(0.000, 0.185)	1308
3b	5.98 (2)	2.49	0.994	0.010	0.101	(0.000, 0.200)	1318

Abbreviations: AIC, Akaike's information criterion; CI, confidence interval; CFI, comparative fit index; RMSEA, root-mean-square error of approximation; SRMR, standardized root-mean-square residual.

$z = 10.05$, $p < 0.001$, (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, we also tested the same model 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, we decided to accept the model without covariates.

4.3.2 | Model 2: Prospective Associations Between Partner's Appreciation and Merits and Significance Gain

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) = 0.114 (0.053, 0.182), comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.981, model Akaike's information criterion (AIC) = 784 and root mean square residual (SRMR) = 0.014. 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 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 at time 2 via gained significance at time 2 were positive and significant. We also tested the same model with age, gender and relationship duration covaried with gained significance and the relationship maintenance at time 2 (i.e., Model 2B). That model showed a poorer fit to data than that of the model estimated without covariates $\chi^2(3) = 12.70$, $p = 0.005$, $\chi^2/df = 4.23$, RMSEA = 0.130 (0.062, 0.207), CFI = 0.982, model AIC = 792 and SRMR = 0.018. Moreover, none of the covariates showed significant associations with the examined outcomes. Hence, we decided to accept the model without covariates.

4.3.3 | Model 3: Associations Between Significance Gain and Relationship Maintenance

The model had an acceptable fit to the data, $\chi^2(2) = 4.72$, $p = 0.094$, $\chi^2/df = 2.36$, RMSEA = 0.084 (0.000, 0.185), CFI = 0.996,

model AIC = 1308 and SRMR = 0.013. 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 at time 2 via gained significance at time 1 were positive and significant. Notably, we also tested the same model with age, gender and relationship duration covaried with gained significance at time 1 and relationship maintenance at time 2 (i.e., model 3B). That model showed a poorer fit to data than that of the model tested without covariates $\chi^2(2) = 5.98$, $p = 0.050$, $\chi^2/df = 2.49$, RMSEA = 0.101 (0.000, 0.200), CFI = 0.994, model AIC = 1318 and SRMR = 0.010. Moreover, none of the covariates showed significant associations with the examined outcomes. Hence, we decided to accept the model without covariates.

4.4 | 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 real 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, our 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

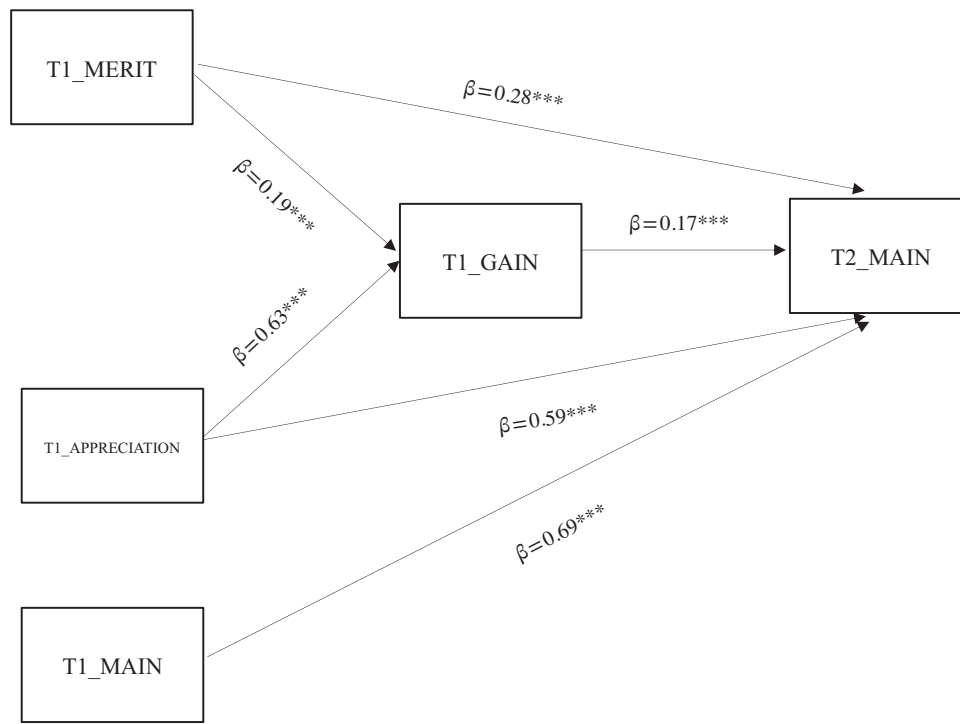


FIGURE 3 | A path-analysis model showing the effect of partner’s merit and appreciation features at time 1 on the relationship maintenance index at time 2 via the significance gained through the relationship at time 1 (Study 2; Model 3). * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$. T1_APPRECIATION, partner’s appreciation (time 1); T1_GAIN, significance gained through the relationship (time 1); T1_MAIN, relationship maintenance index (time 1); T1_MERIT, partner’s merit (time 1); T2_MAIN, relationship maintenance index (time 2).

1B. Consequently, this increased the likelihood of observing direct effects of our merit and appreciation factors on the relevant dependent variable.

5 | Study 3

Given the wealth of prior social psychological literature on romantic relationships, however, it is prudent to examine our 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 others in the self* principle, which is defined within the perspective of the self-expansion model (Aron and 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 our 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, we 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.

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 our notion of partner appreciation. One might argue that the more appreciation one shows towards 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.

TABLE 5 | Descriptives and bivariate correlations (Study 3; $N = 217$).

	MERIT	APPR.	GAIN	IOS	MAIN	Gender	Age	<i>M (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: In bracket (Cronbach's alpha). Gender (0 = males; 1 = females).

Abbreviations: APPR., partner's appreciation; GAIN, significance gained through the relationship; IOS, tendency to include the partner in the self; MAIN, relationship maintenance index; MERIT, partner's merit.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

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). We thus decided to conduct 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.

5.1 | Methods

5.1.1 | 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 'Inclusion of the other in the self' (IOS) * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$, measure in our model, we decided not to use the results from Study 2 to determine the effect size and thus to assume a medium effect size ($r = 0.30$; Cohen 1992). Hence, to determine the minimum sample size to detect the indirect effects of a parallel mediation (two mediators) model, we used the online tool 'Monte Carlo Power Analysis for Indirect Effects' by Schoemann et al. (2017). Assuming medium effect sizes ($r = 0.30$), the confidence level set at 95%, power = 0.80, 5000 Monte Carlo simulations indicated a minimum N of 212 participants.

To test our hypothesis, we therefore enrolled 217 Italian adults engaged in a heterosexual relationship ($M_{age} = 27.45$ years; $SD_{age} = 9.77$ years; 29.8% females; $M_{dur} = 67.87$ months; $SD_{dur} = 106.48$ months) 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 that we constructed on Google Forms aimed at collecting the research measures of interest. Finally, participants were thanked and carefully debriefed.

5.2 | Measures

Partner's appreciation ($\alpha = 0.89$), merit ($\alpha = 0.83$), gained significance ($\alpha = 0.91$) and relationship maintenance index ($\alpha = 0.87$) were measured as in Study 2.

5.2.1 | Inclusion of the Other in the Self

We measured the extent to which participants perceived their partners as included in their self-concept through the Inclusion of the Other in the Self Scale (IOS; Aron, Aron, and Smollan 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 7-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).

5.3 | Results

To test our hypothesis, we estimated a model in which partner merit and appreciation features were the two main predictors, IOS and gained significance the two mediators and relationship maintenance the dependent variable. Further, we considered participants' age, gender and relationships' duration as covariates. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations are shown in Table 5.

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 [$b = 0.62$,

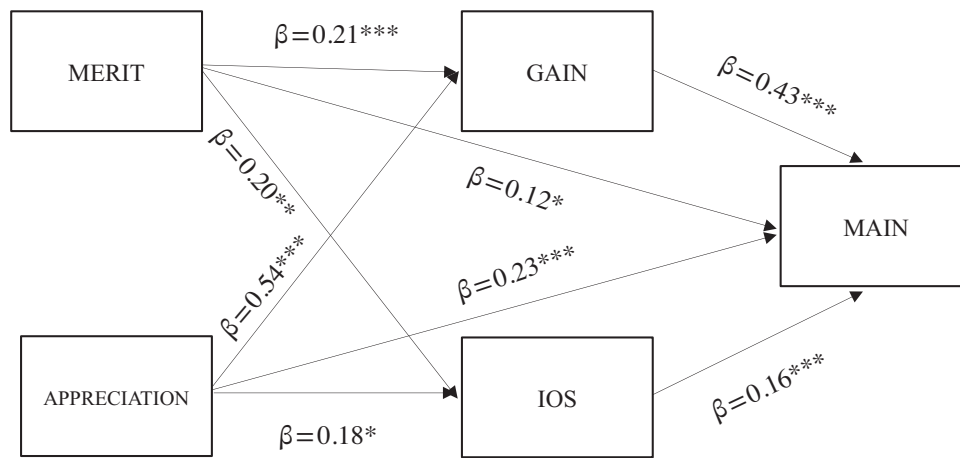


FIGURE 4 | A path-analysis model showing the effect of partner's merit and appreciation features on relationship maintenance via the (a) significance gained through the relationship, and (b) the tendency to include the other in the self (Study 3). * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$. APPRECIATION, partner's appreciation; GAIN, significance gained through the relationship; IOS, tendency to include the partner in the self; MAIN, relationship maintenance index; MERIT, partner's merit.

$\beta = 0.54$, $SE = 0.06$, $z = 9.47$, $p < 0.001$, (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, relationship maintenance or IOS.

5.4 | Discussion

In line with our hypothesis, Study 3 demonstrated that, although they were moderately correlated ($r = 0.402$, $p < 0.001$), the inclusion of the other in the self principle (Aron and Aron 1986) and the significance gained through a romantic relationship (Kruglanski, Ellenberg, Yu, 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 our view, this suggests, in line with what we 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 us 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.

6 | Study 4

In Study 4, we hypothesized that the importance of one's partner's merit and appreciation features depends on the magnitude of the actor's quest for significance. As with all other needs, people's need for significance is not stable, but it can vary in strength as a function of individual differences and situations that elicit or inhibit its activation (Kruglanski et al. 2022). It follows that the more one's quest is activated, the more the need for significance is experienced as impending and urgent and the greater the motivation to behave in ways that will lead to increased significance (Kruglanski et al. 2022). Since romantic relationships are an important way to convey significance, if actors are experiencing a need for significance, they should be more sensitive to their partners' merit and appreciation features because those specific features are significance bestowing. In other words, we hypothesized that the more actors are experiencing feelings of significance loss (i.e., high quest for significance), the more they are sensitive, in terms of the possibility of significance gain, to their partners' merit and appreciation values.

More specifically, in Study 4, we focused on dispositional significance loss rather than situational one because the former captures individuals' chronic vulnerability to feeling insignificant, which can profoundly impact relationship dynamics and

TABLE 6 | Descriptives and bivariate correlations (Study 4; $N = 411$).

	APPR.	MERIT	LOSS	GAIN	Gender	Age	M (<i>SD</i>)
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(8.78)
Relationship duration	-0.204***	-0.011	0.074	-0.047	0.021	0.683***	63.2(77.2)

Note: In bracket (Cronbach's Alpha). Gender (0 = males; 1 = females).

Abbreviations: APPR., partner's appreciation; GAIN, significance gained through the relationship; LOSS, significance loss; MERIT, partner's merit.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

stability. Additionally, we decided to test our hypotheses with respect to the condition in which the need for significance is activated through significance loss feelings (and not through significance incentivization), since the former highlights the underlying deficiencies driving individuals to seek validation and connection through romantic relationships, providing a direct understanding of problematic relational behaviours.

6.1 | Methods

6.1.1 | Participants, Design and Procedure

We computed the minimum sample size we needed to test our hypothesis through the sample size estimation software G*power v3.1 (Faul et al. 2007). Since it was the first time we included significance loss as a variable in our model, following a conservative approach, we decided to estimate the required sample size assuming a small to medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.05$; Cohen 1992). Hence, with a total of eight predictors, power = 0.80 and alpha = 0.05, G*power suggested a minimum N of 309 participants.

To test our hypothesis, we enrolled 411 Italian adults engaged in a heterosexual relationship ($M_{\text{age}} = 28.50$ years; $SD_{\text{age}} = 8.77$ years; 51.7% females; $M_{\text{dur}} = 63.20$ months; $SD_{\text{dur}} = 77.20$ months) in a cross-sectional design. Inclusion criteria were engagement in a romantic relationship, being over 18 years old and speaking fluent Italian. Within our sample, 3.4% of participants were dating (they were not dating their partner exclusively), 83.6% were in a stable relationship, 2.5% were engaged and 10.5% were married. All participants were contacted through an online paid procedure provided by Prolific. Once participants gave their informed consent, they filled out a questionnaire aimed at collecting the research measures of interest (as listed below). Finally, participants were thanked and carefully debriefed.

6.2 | Measures

Partner's appreciation ($\alpha = 0.94$), merit ($\alpha = 0.79$) and gained significance ($\alpha = .88$) were measured as in Study 3.

6.2.1 | Significance Loss

General feelings of significance loss were assessed with a five-item measure used by Contu et al. (2023a), which they adapted from previous research published by Jasko et al. (2019). Participants were asked to respond on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ('do not agree at all') to 7 ('very strongly agree'). Example items were 'I feel humiliated' and 'I feel disrespected' ($\alpha = 0.90$).

6.3 | Results

To test the interaction between the actor's significance loss and their partner's (a) appreciation and (b) merit on significance participants gained through their relationship, we tested a multiple regression model. The actor's significance loss and partner appreciation and merit were the main predictors. Further, we included the interactions between the actor's significance loss and partner (a) appreciation and (b) merit as predictors in the model. We included gender, age and relationship duration as covariates. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations are reported in Table 6.

As expected, analyses revealed a significant and positive main effect of partner (a) appreciation [$b = 0.32$, $\beta = 0.32$, $SE = 0.05$, $z = 6.31$, $p < 0.001$, (95% CI = 0.22, 0.42)] and (b) merit [$b = 0.47$, $\beta = 0.32$, $SE = 0.06$, $z = 7.14$, $p < 0.001$, (95% CI = 0.34, 0.59)] on gained significance. Moreover, we did not find a significant main effect of actor's significance loss on gained significance, $p = 0.063$. Importantly, we found a significant and positive effect of the interaction between partner merit and actor significance loss on the significance participants gained through their relationship [$b = 0.06$, $\beta = 0.09$, $SE = 0.03$, $z = 2.05$, $p = 0.040$, (95% CI = 0.002, 0.12)]. As hypothesized, simple slopes analysis revealed that there was a stronger positive and significant effect of partner appreciation on gained significance when the actor's significance loss was high (+1SD; $b = 0.39$, $\beta = 0.39$, $SE = 0.05$, $t = 7.22$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI = [0.28, 0.49]) than when it was low (-1SD; $b = 0.25$, $\beta = 0.25$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = 3.59$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI = [0.11, 0.38]) (Figure 5). Additionally, and consistent with our hypothesis, the interaction between actor significance loss and partner merit on significance gained through the relationship was positive and significant [$b = 0.12$, $\beta = 0.09$, $SE = 0.05$, $z = 2.29$, $p = 0.022$, (95%

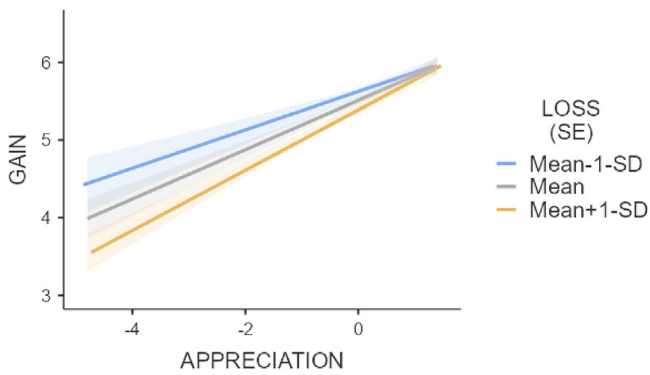


FIGURE 5 | Partner appreciation by the actor's significance loss feelings interaction on the actor's significance gained through the romantic relationships (Study 4). APPRECIATION, partner's appreciation; GAIN, significance gained through the relationship; LOSS, actor's significance loss.

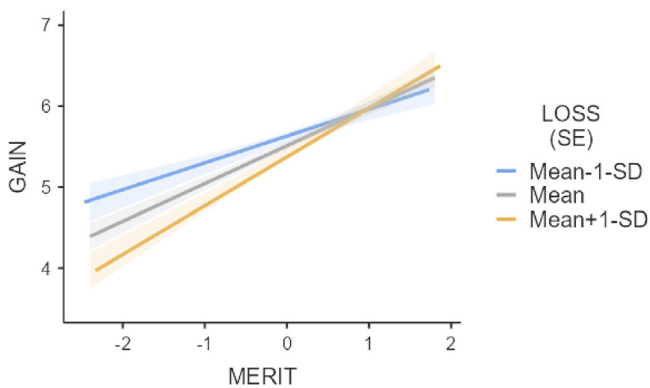


FIGURE 6 | Partner merit by the actor's significance loss feelings interaction on the actor's significance gained through the romantic relationships (Study 4). GAIN, significance gained through the relationship; LOSS, actor's significance loss; MERIT, partner's merit.

CI = 0.02, 0.21]). Indeed, partner merit had a stronger positive and significant effect on gained significance when the actor's significance loss was high (+1SD; $b = 0.60$, $\beta = 0.40$, $SE = 0.09$, $t = 7.01$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI = [0.43, 0.71]) than when it was low (-1SD; $b = 0.33$, $\beta = 0.22$, $SE = 0.09$, $t = 3.59$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI = [0.15, 0.51]) (Figure 6). None of the covariates showed a significant association with gained significance.

6.4 | Discussion

As hypothesized, the results from Study 4 support the idea that the more individuals feel insignificant (i.e., their quest for significance is chronically highly activated), the more sensitive they are to their partners' merit and appreciation, which are utilized to satisfy that quest for significance. Beyond its consistence with postulates of SQT (Kruglanski et al. 2022) and its derived model of romantic relationships (Kruglanski, Ellenberg, Yu, 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 behaviour 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), centres on individuals' motivation to achieve a sense of personal importance and worth, often driving behaviours 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 behaviours too (e.g., Jasko et al. 2020). However, we could argue that self-monitoring serves the need for significance in that regulating one's behaviour in social situations is crucial for achieving significance. Thus, significance and self-monitoring share important points of contact. Consistent with our results, compared to low self-monitors, high self-monitors pay more attention to romantic partners' physical attractiveness and choose more attractive partners (Snyder, Berscheid, and Glick 1985). Finally, research on situations that entail significance loss-inducing experiences 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, our 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 we activated the need for significance 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.

7 | General Discussion

As repeatedly stated in songs, poems and ancient myths, love is central to human life and the motivational value of both merit and appreciation characteristics are extensively acknowledged in popular culture, exemplifying the conception of love as a means to significance. The present research represents the first empirical support for the SQT-derived model of love (Kruglanski, Ellenberg, Yu, et al. 2023). Specifically, across five studies, we demonstrated that individuals tend to enter and maintain romantic relationships to the extent that their potential or real partners possess significance-enhancing qualities—namely, the partner's merit and appreciation. More specifically, the first two experiments demonstrated that a potential partner's (a) merit and (b) appreciation increase the significance one expects to gain through a romantic relationship with that specific potential partner which, in turn, enhanced the perceived likelihood of entering a romantic relationship with that person. The third longitudinal study supported the same hypothesis in a sample of people already engaged in romantic relationships and showed the effects of partner merit and appreciation on actors commitment to (i.e., readiness to maintain) the relationship. The fourth study

demonstrated that the significance gained through the romantic relationship and the inclusion of the other in the self (Aron and Aron 1986) are two distinct constructs, both associated with partners' merit and appreciation, as well as relationship maintenance. Finally, the last study confirmed that people experiencing significance loss feelings (i.e., high quest for significance) were more sensitive to their partners' merit and appreciation features, two major factors hypothesized to affect actor's sense of significance.

7.1 | Partner's Merit and Appreciation: A Look at Past Literature

Though the categories of partner merit and appreciation were first named by Kruglanski, Ellenberg, Yu, et al. (2023), our findings are in line with the vast literature on romantic relationships conducted over the past six decades. For example, Regan et al. (2000) found that in mate selection, both men and women focus their attention on potential partners' socially desirable attributes related to sexual attractiveness, health, athleticism and status. Further back in time, a study by Walster et al. (1966) showed that a date's physical attractiveness predicted the likelihood of meeting with the date. These results have been replicated with respect to dating situations in online forums, where people seek attractive partners (Lee et al. 2008) and in speed dating events, where people approach potential partners who are attractive and have good earning potential (Eastwick and Finkel 2008). Also, individuals report greater attraction to partners who are high in social status (i.e., occupational prestige, earning potential), relative to those who are low (Townsend 1993). Moreover, in a study implementing peer reports of targets' dating desirability, Speed and Gangestad (1997) found that physically attractive and trendsetting people were more popular dates.

Also, aligned with part of our results, several studies showed 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) (e.g., Fletcher and Simpson 2000). More specifically, results by Fletcher and colleagues (2000) are aligned with results from Studies 1A, 2 and 3 only, where the effect of appreciation on gained significance, relationship entrance (Study 1A), and relationship maintenance (Studies 2 and 3) is stronger than the effect of the merit factor. In Study 1B, however, the pattern of results was the opposite and in Study 4 the appreciation and the merit effects on gained significance were of the same magnitude. To some extent, this should mean that the appreciation factor is not always more important than the merit one and so that the relative importance of these two factors in determining romantic relationships should vary in function of specific—but yet unknown—elements, as discussed in a forthcoming section.

The results from the present research are aligned with other findings as well. For instance, Murray et al. (2002) experimentally demonstrated that reductions in one's perceptions of their romantic partner's regard for them reduced people's sense of closeness and positive regard for their partner and thus reduced the likelihood of relationship maintenance. Further, studies on dyadic reciprocity demonstrated that people tended to uniquely like their dates when their dates uniquely liked them (Eastwick et al. 2007).

Our results are also aligned with important research on partners' responsiveness. For example, past studies showed that people report more positive feelings in their relationships when they perceive their partners as responsive (i.e., understanding, validating and caring; Laurenceau, Barrett, and Pietromonaco 1998).

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, we do not claim that our finding that people prefer loving and/or good-looking and high-status partners is a novel one. Rather, our contribution is our argument, and subsequent empirical demonstration, that love serves as a means to attain significance and that where people experience a heightened need for significance they become more attuned to partner's significance bestowing characteristics. As demonstrated by our results, partner merit and appreciation increased the likelihood of relationship entrance and maintenance through increasing the actual or expected significance to be gained through the romantic relationship. This perspective offers numerous directions for future research on romantic relationships, pointing towards still unexplored aspects.

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

As noted earlier, SQT (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 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. Indeed, 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, Ellenberg, Szumowska, et al. 2023). In this respect, Jasko, LaFree, and Kruglanski (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 et al. (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 et al. (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.

7.3 | Limitations and Future Directions

Admittedly, the present research and the larger literature on romantic relations are limited by the 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, Ellenberg, Yu, 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. We also emphasize that the lack of validated scales in the context of SQT is a well-known issue, extensively discussed by Da Silva et al. (2024).

Furthermore, the present studies were carried out exclusively on (a) entering and (b) maintaining romantic relationships. However, the love model (Kruglanski, Ellenberg, Yu, et al. 2023) derived from SQT (Kruglanski et al. 2022) should apply to the phenomenon of exiting romantic relationships as well. In this respect, our predictions are that, to the extent that one’s partner’s merit and appreciation characteristics fall below one’s threshold for acceptability, one will ‘fall out of love’ and end the relationship. In line with SQT, our predictions also entail that the end of a romantic relationship should induce significance loss feelings, which, in turn, may change one’s future approach to potential partners (see Study 4) or motivate individuals to focus their energy on alternative significance-enhancing life-domains such as one’s career (e.g., Contu et al. 2023b; Contu, Ambrosio, et al. 2023; Sciara et al. 2023). The existing research on the topic is sparse, but the few studies that have been published seem consistent with these predictions. For instance, research by Sailor (2013) suggests that the end of a romantic relationship is accompanied by a negative sense of self. In line with this, Lopez-Cantero and Archer (2020) note that the process of romantic relationships ending constitutes an affectively negative experience, which we suggest

is tinged with significance loss. And Shah (2009) pointed out that romantic relationships ending instantiates perceptions that self-needs of love are not met appropriately, thereby eliminating that significance boost received through the once-appreciative partner.

Finally, and as another example of further roads that could be explored, one could aptly argue that one’s partner’s merit and appreciation qualities must be complementary to one’s own qualities. That is, it is possible that individuals would be particularly attracted to partners who excel in domains where they feel that they do not. This hypothesis was spurred by the idea that by falling in love with partners that represent their own ego-ideal, actors fulfil their own gaps and insecurities (Reik 1957). Further, research on the discrepancy between one’s actual and ideal self (Higgins 1987) seems to support this notion. Accordingly, Campbell, Sedikedes, and Bossom (1994) found that romantically involved participants reported to be closer to their ideal selves than romantically uninvolved individuals. Moreover, recalling past broken romantic relationships has been revealed to increase self-discrepancy (Green, Campbell, and Davis 2007). Supporting the idea of desired complementarity between an actor and their partner’s merit and appreciation features, research on partner preferences suggested that individuals desire to have partners who are higher than themselves in socially desirable attributes (Figueredo, Sefcek, and Jones 2006). Hence, the foregoing body of evidence suggests that desired qualities that an actor lacks are particularly appealing in a potential or existing romantic partner, the association with whom compensates for actor’s weaknesses.

Related to this point, the differences we found 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 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 our understanding of the dynamics involved in the initiation and maintenance of romantic relationships.

7.4 | 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 counselling 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 fulfil 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.

Author Contributions

Federico Contu: data analyses, data collection, drafting, writing, conceptualization. **Arie W. Kruglanski:** conceptualization, editing. **Molly Ellenberg:** conceptualization, editing. **Huixian Yu:** conceptualization, editing. **Antonio Pierro:** data analyses, conceptualization. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Ethics Statement

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Social and Developmental Psychology at “La Sapienza” University of Rome (protocol N. 572).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data are publicly available at https://osf.io/ypbqt/?view_only=c082ae4ea3bd4fa8b1a2alc57dc25284.

Endnotes

¹ Given that we registered a drop-out rate of the 18.06%, we performed an attrition check to ensure that our sample was not biased. To do it, we regressed, through a logistic regression, a dichotomic variable (completed vs. not completed) on all the variables we had at our disposal in the first wave of measurement. None of the variables we considered as possible risk factors for participants leaving the study (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.

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