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## Partner Gender as a Predictor of Relationship Satisfaction, Sexual Satisfaction, Relationship Commitment, and Attachment Identity among Women

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PARTNER GENDER AS A PREDICTOR OF RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION, SEXUAL  
SATISFACTION, RELATIONSHIP COMMITMENT, AND ATTACHMENT IDENTITY  
AMONG WOMEN

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment  
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Doctor of Philosophy

in

The School of Social Work

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## **ABSTRACT**

Previous research examining overall relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, and sexual satisfaction among heterosexual women is well-documented. The theoretical foundation of attachment has also been well-established within relationship research among heterosexual women. However, little to no published reports examine such variables among women currently in same-sex relationships. Furthermore, virtually no reports assess for any differences in attachment identity based on the gender of women's romantic partners. This study therefore sought to identify any interrelationships between relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, sexual satisfaction, and attachment identity (measured using the dimensions of avoidance and anxiety) among two groups of women based on their partner's gender: (1) women partnered with women and (2) women partnered with men. This study also examined partner gender as a predictor of the aforementioned variables. One-hundred-sixty-six women currently in romantic partnerships completed an online survey. Partner gender was found to be independent of attachment dimensions. Significant, positive correlations emerged between relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, and sexual satisfaction between both groups of women. Attachment-related anxiety was found to be a successful predictor of overall lower levels of relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, and sexual satisfaction between both groups of women, whereas attachment-related avoidance was found to successfully predict lower levels of sexual satisfaction between both groups. These findings are further discussed in the context of previous research, limitations, and clinical implications for direct practice.

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

When transitioning from adolescence to adulthood, it is important to note that such a period is a unique and distinctive part of an individual's life regarding her or his network of platonic and romantic relationships. Extra-familial relationships become more central in an individual's social environment; thus, an individual's capacity for intimate relationships begins to develop with both friends and romantic partners (Allen & Land, 1999), with romantic partners quickly becoming the focus in one's relationship hierarchy (Collins & van Dulmen, 2006). Each emerging adult's relationship quality as well as her or his attachment bond with romantic partners constitutes a primary role in her or his transition into adulthood (Arnett, 2000), and it is also important in developing a key indicator of an individual's subjective well-being, such as life satisfaction (Ma & Huebner, 2008). Thus, attachment relationships with parents, peers, and romantic partners are primary indicators of both life satisfaction and well-being.

The concept of sexual satisfaction is also an important factor of determining an individual's overall well-being (Mulhall et al., 2008) and is arguably a necessary component of most romantic relationships, as it has been associated with a variety of important factors including relationship satisfaction and relationship commitment (Hally & Pollack, 1993). Given that approximately 50% of romantic unions end in divorce or separation in the United States, which subsequently increases the risk of psychosocial consequences in both partners (Amato, 2000), it is important to better understand any factors specifically related to both relationship satisfaction and sexual intimacy in romantic relationships.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Previous studies have indicated that sexual intimacy, or lack thereof, can be a source of instability or dissatisfaction in relationships. Romantic relationship instability is a common problem in western civilization, as evidenced by recent divorce rates across the nation (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2015). Approximately one half of all first marriages end in dissolution in the United States, and even higher rates of divorce are present for second marriages (Broman, 2002). Additionally, those who cohabit and are not married are more likely to separate than those who are married (Kiernan, 2000). However, rates of divorce tend to underestimate the problem relating to relationship distress and dissatisfaction given that some couples choose to remain in their relationships even when they perceive their relationship to be of poor satisfaction and/or stability (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

Interestingly enough, research examining non-sexual components of sexual-minority (lesbian, bisexual, queer, unlabeled, questioning, etc.) women's (SMW's) relationships is prevalent, yet sexual aspects of those relationships have received little to no attention within the research community (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000) despite the estimation that approximately 40% to 65% of SMW residing within the United States are currently in a same-sex relationship (Battle et al., 2002). Sexual satisfaction is considered to be an essential aspect of the overall success of a romantic relationship (Mark, Garcia, & Fisher, 2015), and research has shown that it is indicative of not only overall relationship satisfaction and relationship commitment, but also physical health and quality of life (Ma & Huebner, 2008). Similarly, attachment style has been shown in previous studies to successfully predict relationship quality and stability and is considered to be a useful theoretical model in explaining variances in relationship outcomes (Ridge & Feeney, 1998). However, the vast majority of published reports examining sexuality

within the context of a romantic relationship have been conducted using a heterocentric lens, with findings generalizable to only the heterosexual population. Similarly, research examining attachment, specifically as it relates to relationship and sexual satisfaction, largely focuses only on the heterosexual population. It is therefore pertinent to better understand the sexuality of SMW by investigating several aspects of their sexual experiences as well as overall relationship satisfaction and commitment within a diverse sample of SMW, while simultaneously using attachment as an underlying concept in order to understand any potential differences between the two groups (i.e., SMW and heterosexual women).

### **Purpose of the Study**

Although the use of attachment theory as it pertains to relationship satisfaction is well established within the literature, almost all of the studies previously completed on the topic have used only heterosexual samples. Previous studies assessing relationship satisfaction among sexual minorities have shown that there may be differences between LGB (lesbian, gay men, and bisexual) individuals' and heterosexual individuals' relationships with their parents (Evans, 2014). Specifically, previous research (Holtzen, Kenny, & Mahalik, 1995) indicates that gay men and lesbians tend to report their mothers and fathers as being more disapproving and less affectionate during childhood compared to their heterosexual counterparts, suggesting the possibility of adult attachment style differences among LGB individuals compared to their heterosexual counterparts. Noteworthy differences in gender roles occur within heterosexual and same-sex romantic relationships, as well as differences in the degree of validation that same-sex couples receive from society (Cabaj, 1988). Such differences in gender roles and societal validation may have an impact on attachment styles and/or relationship and sexual satisfaction rates among SMW couples. It is therefore important to establish if there is a link between

relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, sexual satisfaction, and current attachment styles and if it extends to non-heterosexual couples as well. Despite the empirical literature that examines these variables separately (attachment style, sexual orientation, sexual satisfaction, relationship commitment, and relationship satisfaction) in adults, limited published reports examine attachment styles, relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction while simultaneously assessing for any differences between women based on their romantic partner's gender. This study aims to fill that gap by identifying any interrelationships among attachment identity, sexual satisfaction, relationship commitment, and relationship satisfaction in adulthood between women currently partnered with women and women currently partnered with men.



## CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this study is to identify any interrelationships in attachment style, relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, and sexual satisfaction among heterosexual and SMW in adulthood. A search of the literature was conducted within the online research databases Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, PsycARTICLES, PsycINFO, SocINDEX with Full Text, Academic Search Complete, ERIC, Health Source Nursing, and Medline using various combinations of the following terms and phrases: partner gender, lesbians, women, bisexual women, attachment style, attachment theory, relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, sexual satisfaction. This chapter discusses the extant literature on relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and attachment identity among women with female partners and their male-partnered counterparts.

### **Theoretical Framework**

**Attachment theory.** Bowlby (1982) described attachment as being an intense bond that is shared between a child and her or his caregiver where the primary goal of that bond is rooted in protecting the infant from any potential danger. Researchers suggest that this theory derives from the evolutionary standpoint that a child is genetically predisposed and “programmed” (Palm, 2014, p. 283) to seek closeness and protection from her or his caregivers in order to make sure that the child’s basic needs are being met. Thus, in a biological sense, survival of the infant is the main goal of attachment given that she or he is born with the ability to acquire attention from her or his caregiver through means of communication such as crying when feeling distressed or smiling when feeling content (Palm, 2014). The infant is not the only one with such inherent capabilities; the caregiver also possesses the instinct to respond to these efforts of communication given by the infant. Thus, in a psychological sense, the main goal of attachment

for infants is to decrease the amount of stress that they perceive and to develop a secure environment in which the infants can thrive through their relationship with their caregiver (Palm, 2014). Thus, once mobile, the child healthily explores her or his surrounding environment before safely returning to her or his caregiver (Palm, 2014), or “secure base” (Hazan & Shaver, 1987, p. 511). The child will therefore be significantly less prone to fear when able to fully and safely explore her or his surroundings.

Furthermore, the formation of a healthy and secure parent-child dyad is dependent upon the caregiver’s sensitivity and responsiveness to the child’s needs, especially during the first year of the child’s life (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Inadequate or inconsistent responsiveness to the child’s signals causes infants to become generally more anxious and fearful compared to those infants with a receptive and readily responsive caregiver. Children without a responsive caregiver may subsequently express difficulty in clarifying their needs compared to children with a responsive caregiver. These crucial, early experiences in a child’s life shape and construct an individual’s internal working models of themselves and others in adulthood (Bowlby, 1973). These internal working models consist of various perceptions and emotions that influence an individual’s behavior by operating systematically and deliberately in order to guide the child’s expectation of care. These key models, or organizations of memories of a particular relationship, influence the continuity between behaviors and feelings experienced in childhood and later in adulthood. The activation of cognitive responses, or attachment dimensions, are utilized throughout an individual’s lifespan across various social settings in order to predict the behavior of others with respect to attachment-related concerns such as comfort, safety, and protection (Bretherton, 1985). Such lack of congruence in childhood need expression may result in maladaptive communication regarding needs in adult romantic relationships. It is therefore

suggested that an adult attachment style is consistent to that which has been initially formed in early childhood in that it guides an individual's psychological framework and the process of social adaptation in adulthood (Bowlby, 1969).

**Attachment identity and relationship satisfaction.** Hazan and Shaver (1994) describe romantic attachment as a process in which an actual bond formation occurs whereby an individual becomes romantically attached to another. This framework is relevant for understanding how an individual's attachment is associated with her or his intimate relationships in adulthood. Thus, the bond that is formed between a child and her or his caregiver is similar to that of the bond formed between romantic partners in adulthood (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). That is, if during adulthood, romantic partners provide the same emotional support similar to that of parents in childhood, similar attachment behaviors will then be transitioned from parents to romantic partners (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). Moreover, previous literature (Madey & Rodgers, 2009) has found that an individual's attachment identity can predict the success rate of romantic relationships as well as contextualize relationship quality and stability. However, it is important to note that while the correspondence between early attachment and attachment in adulthood is strong, it is not conclusive. That is, the internal organization of attachment evolves with new attachment-related experiences, indicating that growth in intimacy and dependability within the context of a romantic relationship is always possible.

Two separate dimensions of attachment identity are commonly utilized to explain differences among adult attachment as it relates to romantic relationships. The dimension of anxiety refers to how individuals perceive themselves within the relationship. Individuals with increased anxiety, for example, may classify their self-worth only within the context of their current romantic relationship and may therefore fear abandonment. They may exhibit reactions

that are emotionally excessive in nature in order to avoid rejection from their partner. The dimension of avoidance, on the other hand, surrounds an individual's perceptions regarding one's romantic partner. Individuals with a higher rate of avoidance, for example, may lack any desire to be romantically involved with another person and may therefore fear intimacy. As such, they may emotionally withdraw within the context of their romantic relationship (Meyer et al., 2015).

Specifically, attachment-related anxiety is characterized by the degree to which individuals are fearful of any type of rejection. Conversely, attachment-related avoidance is characterized by the extent to which individuals experience discomfort in regards to closeness with another person. Consequently, an anxiously-attached individual would exhibit a higher rate of anxiety and a lower rate of avoidance. An avoidantly-attached individual, on the other hand, would exhibit a decreased level of anxiety and an increased level of avoidance.

Disorganized attachment refers to an increased level of anxiety in addition to an increased level of avoidance and is considered to be the most severely disordered form of attachment as it relates to one's quality and stability of romantic relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Due to their fear of romantic relationships in general, those individuals with a disorganized attachment style exhibit contradictory behavior. Specifically, disorganized individuals seek out their romantic partners during stressful events; however, such attempts may be incomplete or seemingly incoherent because their fear of their partner may concurrently elicit trepidation and a desire to withdraw from the relationship (Paetzold, Rholes, & Kohn, 2015). Thus, individuals who display a high level of either or both dimensions are considered to exhibit an insecure level of attachment and are at risk of experiencing overall dissatisfaction with their romantic relationships. On the other hand, individuals who display a low level in both

dimensions are considered to exhibit a secure level of attachment and are therefore comfortable with both intimacy and dependency in romantic relationships, suggesting the heightened potential for experiencing overall romantic relationship satisfaction and stability (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

**Attachment identity and sexual satisfaction.** Studies have suggested that attachment security can create a positive and stable foundation for sexual engagement among couples (Brassard et al., 2007). Thus, children who express difficulty in clarifying needs to their caregivers may exhibit difficulty with communication skills in adulthood surrounding sexual needs in their romantic relationships. Shaver and Hazan (1998) theorized that the concept of insecure attachment may negatively impact an individual's perception of sexual attraction and arousal and would therefore affect the actual experience of various sexual encounters.

Moreover, more securely attached individuals who exhibit low anxiety and low avoidance tend to think that sex should occur only within the bounds of a committed relationship (Brennan & Shaver, 1995). Securely attached individuals also report experiencing fewer "one-night stand" sexual encounters (Cooper et al., 1998) as well as fewer "hook-ups" (i.e., sexual encounters with strangers or acquaintances; Paul et al., 2000). Further, securely attached individuals tend to experience more positive emotions and fewer negative emotions in sexual relationships compared to their insecurely attached counterparts (Birnbaum et al., 2006).

Both major components of attachment insecurity (i.e., anxiety and avoidance) are linked with lower levels of sexual arousal, pleasure, and overall sexual satisfaction (Fricker & Moore, 2002); higher rates of physical coercion by sexual partners; and more frequent engagement in non-consenting sex (Gentzler & Kerns, 2004). Specifically, Davis (2006) indicated that an individual who displays an anxious level of attachment tends to be more likely to become

sexually coercive when experiencing a threat to her or his relationship. Those individuals who exhibit anxious attachment in their primary intimate relationship may be more likely to experience sexual involvement with others as a means to reassure themselves that they are loved by their partner or to capture their partner's attention so as to avoid disapproval (Brassard et al., 2007). Individuals with anxious attachment therefore tend to experience "hyperactivation" (Birnbaum, 2007, p. 322) of their individual attachment style and cause them to be consistently seeking approval from their partner. Previous studies suggest that anxiously-attached individuals, for example, tend to report having sex in order to establish feelings of closeness while also experiencing lower frequency of orgasms and higher frequency of erotophobia, or the fear of being in love (Birnbaum, 2007).

On the other hand, Davis (2006) states that an avoidantly-attached individual is more likely to engage in the sexual coercion of strangers in new relationships. Individuals with an avoidant attachment tend to exhibit some level of discomfort with intimacy and closeness (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) and may therefore be interested in casual sexual encounters, which are usually less emotionally intimate, compared to individuals with low avoidance. Avoidantly-attached individuals will not necessarily enjoy sexual experiences compared to those with low avoidance due to their discomfort and drive to avoid any type of emotional closeness while in romantic relationships (Shacher & Shaver, 2002). Therefore, insecurely attached individuals experience distress in their relationships and display earlier relationship dissatisfaction and dissolution (Feeney & Noller, 1996).

**Attachment identity and relationship commitment.** The ability to successfully preserve and maintain a romantic relationship over time tends to be attributed to an individual's level of relationship commitment, regardless if that person reports a high level of satisfaction

within her or his relationship (Rusbult, 1983). Moreover, certain interpersonal dispositions, such as attachment styles, may impede the level of relationship commitment. That is, the process by which an individual develops a strong commitment to her or his partner within a romantic relationship is frequently shaped by individual attachment orientations (Hadden, Smith, & Webster, 2014). Previous research (Hadden et al., 2014) suggests that the ability to develop dependency and reliance within a relationship is associated with the degree of commitment within the relationship, which, subsequently, is associated with the ability to foster a relationship of high quality (Givertz, Woszidlo, Segrin, & Knutson, 2013). Moreover, the ability to establish dependency, trust, and closeness within a romantic relationship tends to be associated with an individual's level of attachment (e.g., secure vs. insecure). That is, individuals with more insecure levels of attachment tend to report lower levels of commitment within the relationship, whereas individuals with more secure levels of attachment tend to report higher levels of commitment within the relationship (Givertz, Segrin, Burke, & Woszidlo, 2016).

**Attachment identity and SMW.** Although the concept of attachment can be applied to both heterosexual individuals and their non-heterosexual counterparts, there is a paucity of research linking attachment theory to LGB individuals, especially SMW. However, a limited but growing body of literature (Kelecher, Wei, & Liao, 2010; Wang, Schale, & Broz, 2010) has recently shifted focus to support the application of attachment theory to SMW. Mohr (1999) suggested the importance of discussing adult attachment as it specifically relates to non-heterosexual individuals given that it might play a pertinent role in understanding sexual-minority individuals' reactions to any type of discriminatory rejection experienced from others due to their sexual orientation.

The way in which a SMW's overall psychological well-being is impacted by her attachment style is a particularly important topic to address. SMW often encounter more stressful societal barriers and constraints compared to their heterosexual counterparts due to their general lack of adherence to social and gender norms (Meyer, 2003). Furthermore, attachment orientations are triggered when an individual experiences some type of threat to her or his safety. Specifically, internalized homophobia (i.e., negative feelings towards one's own same-sex sexual orientation) and the fear of being judged by others constitute two main stressors experienced by SMW (Mohr & Fassinger, 1999). SMW are consistently at risk of exhibiting low self-esteem with regard to their sexual orientation as well as continually feeling uncertain of whether other individuals are supportive of their sexual identities. This heightened risk of SMW experiencing self-hatred surrounding their sexual orientation is often compounded and reinforced by acts of discrimination. This psychosocial stressor can produce a very profound sense of danger for many SMW. When this sense of danger is commingled with perceived threats of harm, the individual may actually feel a very acute sense of activation of attachment behavior, which may be difficult to manage and regulate. From a different perspective, having positive feelings about one's sexual identity in addition to feeling supported by one's social network and community would be likely associated with SMW's well-being (e.g., higher levels of overall life satisfaction and decreased depressive symptoms).

The potential negative view of self in addition to the difficulty in regulating such attachment behavior may cause negative feelings surrounding one's sexual identity. Such negative feelings may be more prevalent among SMW compared to their heterosexual counterparts. Some evidence for these linkages is found in previous studies (Mohr & Fassinger, 2003) that suggest that attachment anxiety is negatively associated with a positive identity as



well as comfort level with one's own sexual identity (Vanderschaaf, 2002). In addition, attachment anxiety has been positively associated with internalized shame about oneself (Wells & Hansen, 2003). Moreover, SMW with a high degree of attachment anxiety are more likely to feel ambivalent about whether they feel supported by others and are more likely to perceive lower levels of social support within their environment (Keleher, Wei, & Lioa, 2010) compared to SMW with a low degree of attachment anxiety.

Maladaptive perceptions of oneself may be employed by SMW who exhibit more avoidant styles of attachment compared to those with more secure styles of attachment. Specifically, SMW with a higher level of attachment avoidance may compulsively depend upon themselves for reassurance and affirmation regarding their sexual orientation and as a result may report positive feelings about being a sexual minority (Keleher et al., 2009). However, positive models of self employed by SMW with avoidant attachment dimensions are conceptually different than positive models of self displayed by SMW with secure attachment dimensions. Keleher et al. (2009) argue that denial as a defensive coping mechanism may contribute to positive feelings, or feelings that lack any negativity such as discomfort or pain, surrounding SMW's sexual identity. However, due to the daily stressors SMW experience, which stem from discriminatory, anti-LGB environments, internal negative feelings directed toward oneself may be unable to be suppressed. Thus, SMW may still possess negative feelings about being a sexual minority (Keleher et al., 2009). Previous research among sexual-minority individuals (Mohr & Fassinger, 2003) indicates that those with high levels of attachment avoidance tend to report negative views surrounding their sexual identities.

Given that the attachment system is considered to be the most salient with regard to emotion regulation in stressful situations (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), it is important to take

into consideration the heightened risk of experiencing discriminatory events and stressors among SMW compared to their heterosexual counterparts. This increased probability of experiencing discriminatory acts is particularly relevant when discussing how SMW's individual attachment affects intimacy in adult romantic relationships. It is also pertinent when discussing any potential differences in attachment between SMW and heterosexual women, especially given that virtually no published reports assess for differences in adult attachment between the two groups.

**SMW and sexual satisfaction.** Compared to heterosexual women, SMW tend to be more sexually expressive, regardless of any negative internal perceptions they may have related to their sexuality (Cusack et al., 2012). Specifically, SMW tend to be more sexually assertive, arousable, and comfortable using sexually explicit language with a romantic partner compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Iasenza, 2002). This disparity in sexual expression suggests the potential for SMW to report higher levels of sexual satisfaction compared to heterosexual women (Iasenza, 2002).

However, some researchers have theorized that the concept of gender is more influential and predictive of sexual attitudes and behavior compared to sexual orientation alone (Sprecher, 2002). That is, as some researchers have argued, heterosexual women and SMW are more similar in their sexual attitudes and behaviors due to their shared gender, compared to the differences in sexual attitudes and behaviors between SMW and gay men or SMW and heterosexual men (Bailey et al., 1994; Sprecher, 2002). This argument stems from the concept of evolution theory (Darwin, 1859), which posits that all species develop through the natural selection process whereby a species' ability to survive and compete with its surroundings are increased via inherited biological and environmental variations. Thus, as previously discussed, Bowlby's (1969) initial interest in attachment derived from the act of observing the sequence of

emotional reactions from infants and young children followed by the prolonged absence of their caregiver. Similar reactions are noted when observing most primate species being separated from their caregivers (Simpson & Belsky, 2016). Thus, evolution theory proves to be a central underlying groundwork to understanding Bowlby's attachment theory. Both psychological and biological researchers agree that one's attachment system operates similarly in both parent-child dyads and in adult romantic relationships (Del Giudice & Belsky, 2010), especially given that more modern evolutionary approaches (Chisholm, 1993) suggest the reason for the attachment system's evolution in humans is due to survival and reproduction. Del Giudice and Belsky (2010) discuss the importance of romantic attachment as it relates to sex differences and how this, in turn, relates to evolution theory. Similarly, previous research (Schmitt et al., 2003; Del Giudice, 2011) on adult romantic attachment suggests the presence of biological sex differences, with males reporting greater avoidance and less anxiety compared to females. This sex difference in attachment is rather intuitive given that avoidant attachment is related to characteristics such as hostility, aggression, and enhanced self-esteem, traits commonly displayed in men, whereas the role of anxiety for females is less certain in empirical research. Some researchers (Campbell, 2009) suggest that the presence of anxious attachment in females may be associated with relational aggression due to the common occurrence of peer competition in females.

Previous literature has also assessed the frequency of sexual activity among SMW. Studies suggest that SMW engage in sexual intercourse less frequently compared to gay male or heterosexual couples (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). In fact, sexual frequency rapidly declines within SMW relationships (Loulan, 1984), a phenomenon colloquially known as "lesbian bed death." Lever (1995), for example, found that SMW engage in sex less frequently after only 2

years together compared to married heterosexual partners after 10 years together. These findings are often interpreted as SMW having lower sexual desire and are therefore less sexual than heterosexual individuals (Peplau et al., 2004); however, few studies assess SMW's cognitive sexual responses despite the notion that sexual thoughts and feelings are shown to be pertinent components of women's sexuality (Dove & Wilderman, 2000). Biss and Horne (2005) suggest, for example, that women may infrequently engage in sexual intercourse and still experience sex in a positive manner, indicating low sexual anxiety and high sexual satisfaction. In order to fully understand the sexuality of SMW, then, it is important to identify multiple elements of their individual sexual experiences (Cohen & Byers, 2014).

**SMW and relationship satisfaction.** Previous literature focuses on issues concerning various demographic characteristics (e.g., socioeconomic status and educational attainment) that affect overall relationship satisfaction among couples. Specifically, low-income couples tend to report lower levels of relationship satisfaction (Karney, Garvan, & Thomas, 2003), significantly higher rates of divorce and/or dissolution (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002), and increased rates of substance abuse and infidelity (Trail & Karney, 2012) compared to higher-income couples. Similarly, previous research (Woszidlo & Segrin, 2013) reveals a significant association between educational attainment and relationship quality in that married couples with low levels of education tend to report lower rates of problem solving and commitment as well as higher levels of divorce proneness. However, such research generally focuses on heterosexual, married couples, whereas studies examining such demographic characteristics among SMW couples is virtually nonexistent.

Other components affecting overall satisfaction in SMW couples have been studied, however. Although all couples, regardless of sexual orientation, face the challenge of

maintaining a healthy distinction between closeness and distance, SMW couples, in particular, report struggling with enmeshed, fused, and symbiotic relationships (Schreurs & Bunk, 1996). SMW tend to report a desire to be as physically and emotionally close to their partner as possible, which may threaten their individual autonomy (Elise, 1986). This high degree of symbiosis in SMW relationships may be due to the possibility that intimate relationships are considered by many women to be an important aspect of their identity (Chodorow, 1978). In some cases, a high degree of closeness and intimacy is developed within SMW romantic relationships at the expense of both women's autonomy, which could create distress and challenges within the relationship (Schreurs & Buunk, 1996).

Research is scarce when assessing for any differences in relationship satisfaction between sexual-minority and heterosexual women. However, previous studies (Brashier & Hughes, 2012) indicate that there are differences in communication between SMW couples and heterosexual couples, suggesting that communication may play a moderating role when determining levels of relationship satisfaction between the two groups. Thus, effective communication is considered to be a central component when assessing for overall relationship satisfaction (Gottman & Levenson, 1992), as it is considered by relationship experts to be necessary in order to maintain a healthy and satisfying relationship over time. Researchers suggest that a demonstrated association between communication and satisfaction exists in romantic relationships, regardless of sexual orientation (Regan, 2011). That is, those individuals who lack effective communication skills often report heightened dissatisfaction within their relationships (Markman, 1979) compared to those individuals who are effective communicators. SMW couples, in particular, tend to fare better at verbally communicating compared to heterosexual couples (Bell & Weinberg, 1978). This is rather intuitive given that women tend to

use language more frequently in order to interact compared to men (Leaper, 1994). Some research also points to stronger domestic communication (e.g., discussing the division of household-related chores) within SMW relationships compared to heterosexual relationships (Brashier & Hughes, 2012), suggesting the likelihood that this type of communication may extend to more romantic topics, such as communication about the relationship. As such, Brashier and Hughes (2012) argue that heterosexual women may be more likely than SMW to identify words of affirmation, or the expression of positive feelings towards one's partner, as a more desirable characteristic within a relationship, given that SMW tend to already report satisfying rates of verbal communication within their relationships. Thus, words of affirmation may matter less for SMW because they are a component of the relationship that is already satisfying. On the other hand, Brashier and Hughes (2012) theorize that non-sexual physical touch as a form of communication is particularly important among SMW relationships compared to heterosexual relationships given the lower frequencies of sex among SMW couples compared to heterosexual couples. That is, physical touch as a form of communication may be a more desirable component with regard to sexual satisfaction among SMW.

**SMW and relationship commitment.** Not surprisingly, the vast majority of published research examining predictors of commitment and stability within romantic relationships were conducted almost exclusively with heterosexual couples. For instance, 96% of participants within a meta-analysis (Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010) of 137 studies assessing for predictors of romantic relationship dissolution were involved in heterosexual relationships. The scant amount of empirical literature investigating relationship commitment among sexual-minority couples is problematic. That is, variables associated with overall relationship well-being among heterosexual couples cannot necessarily be attributed or generalized to sexual-minority

couples due to the unique stressors related to sexual orientation that same-sex couples tend to experience. Although the general components and processes of romantic relationships are similar for both sexual-minority couples and heterosexual couples (Balsam, Beauchaine, Rothblum, & Solomon, 2008), same-sex couples tend to experience environmental stressors (e.g., internalized homophobia, discrimination) related to their sexual-minority status that their heterosexual counterparts do not experience. Such distinct stressors may potentially affect sexual-minority couples' relationship persistence and commitment. For example, previous research (Frost, 2011) suggests that stressors specifically related to being a sexual minority, such as internalized homophobia, sexual identity concealment, and antigay discrimination, tend to negatively impact relationship stability and commitment among lesbian couples, in particular.

Furthermore, sexual-minority individuals, particularly SMW, are more likely to report higher rates of sexually traumatic events compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Balsam, Rothblum, & Beauchaine, 2005). Previous studies' findings (Birkley, Eckhardt, & Dykstra, 2016), although conducted using heterosexual samples only, suggest that exposure to trauma, specifically sexual trauma, tends to be associated with lower relationship functioning and commitment. Existing literature (Sullivan, Marshall, Feinstein, & Mustanski, 2017) also suggests that trauma exposure may exacerbate the negative effects that sexual minority discrimination, in particular, poses on overall relationship functioning and commitment. Thus, discrimination related to one's sexual-minority status may be correlated with an overall lower level of relationship commitment, especially among those with more severe histories of trauma. Conversely, previous research (Taylor, 2006) suggests that environmental stressors may affect relationships in a positive light. That is, the tend-and-befriend stress response theory (a theory based on the notion that human beings affiliate with one another in response to stress; Taylor et

al., 2000) purports that experiencing stressful events is associated with seeking and/or providing social support in order to combat perceived threats, which may subsequently improve overall relationship functioning and commitment. However, it remains unclear if exposure to trauma impacts the relationship between discrimination and relationship commitment, particularly among sexual-minority couples.

**Relationship commitment and relationship satisfaction.** Regardless of one's sexual orientation, empirical literature (Rusbult, Agnew, & Arriaga, 2011) indicates that relationship commitment is one of the most significant predictors of relationship stability and satisfaction. Moreover, relationship commitment tends to be highest among those who report higher levels of satisfaction (Le & Agnew, 2003) compared to those who report lower levels of satisfaction within the relationship.

Nevertheless, virtually all romantic relationships tend to encounter problems that may lead to dissatisfaction within those relationships, yet previous published reports (Meltzer, McNulty, Jackson & Karney, 2014) suggest that many individuals choose to remain in their romantic relationships despite reporting declining rates of satisfaction. The decision to remain in a relationship despite current levels of dissatisfaction may prove to be advantageous to the relationship, as those with higher levels of commitment may be motivated to partake in processes that may improve the relationship (Baker, McNulty, & VanderDrift, 2017). However, not all endeavors taken to enhance the relationship will be successful; therefore, the consideration of the future of the relationship is necessary for deciding whether or not to dissolve a romantic union. That is, some scholars (Baker et al., 2017) argue that partners may base their commitment to the relationship on their expectations of whether or not they will be satisfied in the future rather than solely on their current levels of satisfaction within the relationship.



**Relationship commitment and sexual satisfaction.** Sexual satisfaction is also widely considered (Sprecher, 2002) to be a predictor of relationship stability and longevity, as well as a benchmark for determining the overall quality of one's relationship. One theory in particular commonly used within the literature for understanding why sexual satisfaction may be positively associated with overall relationship commitment is social exchange theory. This theoretical framework refers to any conceptual model or approach that emphasizes the exchange of tangible or symbolic resources between two members of a dyad (Sprecher, 1998). To this end, the level of one's sexual satisfaction can be attributed to a healthy balance of costs and rewards within the sexual component of the relationship. That is, the more rewards within a significant aspect of the relationship (e.g., the sexual relationship), the higher the overall quality and commitment of the relationship. Additionally, the more equitable the exchange between costs and rewards within the sexual relationship, the more likely it is for both partners to report a higher level of relationship satisfaction and stability (Sprecher, 2002). Thus, an overall rewarding sexual relationship subsequently leads to higher levels of relationship quality (e.g., commitment).

Previous research (Sprecher, 2002) has examined how the longitudinal effects of sexual satisfaction, including its changes over time, are associated with relationship stability (i.e., relationship commitment); findings suggest sexual satisfaction to be positively related to relationship commitment. Additionally, a change in one's level of sexual satisfaction has also been found to be correlated with change, in the same direction, in one's level of relationship commitment over time. These findings suggest that sexual satisfaction is not only related to overall relationship commitment, but that such an association is also indicative of overall satisfaction within the relationship.

Another commonly referenced concept within previous research surrounding the association between sexual satisfaction and relationship commitment concerns the personality dimension known as sociosexual orientation (SO; Gangestad & Simpson, 1990). SO (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948) refers to the differences in individuals' willingness to engage in uncommitted sex. Specifically, those who fall at the low end of this dimension tend to exhibit a *restricted* SO and are subsequently less likely to engage in sex outside of the current relationship and are more likely to prefer feeling committed to their romantic partner before having sex. Conversely, those individuals who fall at the high end of this dimension tend to exhibit an *unrestricted* SO and are therefore more likely to engage in sex outside of the current relationship as well as to feel more comfortable having sex without commitment (Markey & Markey, 2013).

The vast majority of studies examining gender differences in SO have been conducted utilizing solely heterosexual samples; an extremely limited number of published reports (Markey & Markey, 2013) assessing variability in SO according to sexual orientation has been conducted. Such findings indicate that women, in general, tend to exhibit lower levels of SO compared to their male counterparts, and that lesbian and heterosexual women tend to have overall similar levels of SO. Further, results generated from the same study suggest that lesbians with a restricted SO, or those who are less likely to engage in uncommitted sex, tend to report significantly higher levels of relationship commitment compared to unrestricted lesbians. Given the dearth of literature examining variables that contribute to relationship experiences among same-sex couples, future studies that consider the significance of sexual components among SMW are warranted in order to successfully predict relationship outcomes (e.g., relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, etc.)

## Conceptual Framework

**Sexual identity and orientation.** Muise et al. (2010) distinguish *sexual identity* as the process of identifying oneself as a sexual being, a process that includes broader elements of sexual orientation. *Sexual orientation* is commonly referred to in the literature as an internal mechanism that guides sexual and romantic expectations and interests (Rosario & Schrimshaw, 2014), and it is frequently conceptualized on a single continuum with *exclusively heterosexual* and *exclusively gay/lesbian* categorizations occurring at polar opposite ends of the spectrum (Savin-Williams, 2010), with such categories encompassing aspects of identity, attraction, and behavior (van Anders, 2015). These elements may include different variations of sexual activities, desires, and needs from sexual partners. Vrangalova (2012) explains that women who self-identify as lesbian are attracted to women as opposed to men.

**Partner gender.** The gender of one's romantic partner may be indicative of an individual's sexual orientation in that same-sex couples tend to be perceived as gay and/or lesbian, and, conversely, opposite-sex couples tend to be perceived as heterosexual. As such, an individual's partner's gender may function as a readily-identified characteristic used to infer assumptions of hetero- and homosexuality (Ross, Dobinson, & Eady, 2010). That is, those women within same-sex relationships tend to report that they are often assumed to be lesbians, whereas those women within opposite-sex relationships tend to report that they are often assumed to be heterosexual. Prior reports indicate that these assumptions based on partner gender are made by both the heterosexual and the sexual-minority community (Ross et al., 2010).

**Relationship satisfaction.** *Relationship satisfaction* is defined as the degree to which an individual is satisfied with her or his current romantic relationship (Cusack, 2012). Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love (1988) posits that relationship satisfaction consists of three separate

aspects--intimacy, passion, and commitment--and are necessary for the experience of complete love. Intimacy is defined as “closeness, connectedness, and bondedness” (Sternberg, 1997, p. 23), passion refers to romance and physical attraction, and commitment involves the decision to maintain that love with one’s partner for the long term (Sternberg, 1986).

**Sexual satisfaction.** *Sexual satisfaction* is defined as the “affective response arising from one’s evaluation of her or his sexual relationship, including the perception that one’s sexual needs are being met, fulfilling one’s own and one’s partner’s expectations, and a positive evaluation of the overall sexual relationship” (Offman & Mattheson, 2005, p. 48). Within prior literature, the conceptualization of sexual satisfaction generally focuses on positive feelings. That is, researchers (Sprecher & Cate, 2004) have previously assessed the degree of satisfaction or happiness surrounding just the sexual components of her or his relationship when determining one’s overall level of sexual satisfaction. Other researchers (Lawrance & Byers, 1995) have focused on the overall equity of positivity and negativity with regard to one’s sexual relationship. The underlying theme linking the definitions of relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction together involves the premise of satisfaction as subjective, where the evaluation of one’s satisfaction arises from her or his distinct experiences (McClelland, 2011).

**Attachment identity.** Bowlby (1973) conceptualizes *attachment* as the “propensity of human beings to make strong affectional bonds to particular others” (p. 201). A commonly used conceptualization of adult attachment consists of the two-dimensional, four-category model developed by Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991). Four prototypical adult attachment patterns are commonly identified in the literature: secure and three insecure styles consisting of dismissing, preoccupied, and fearful types. The securely attached individual sees herself or himself and others in a positive light and is not threatened by intimacy or autonomy. The dismissing

individual views herself or himself in a positive light and others in a negative light and therefore maintains a sense of invulnerability by consistently being disappointed by others. A dismissing style of attachment corresponds to avoidant attachment, which is described in the child literature. An individual with a preoccupied attachment style perceives herself or himself negatively and therefore continuously strives for the acceptance of ones whom she or he regards as being valuable. Preoccupied attachment is the adult manifestation of the childhood ambivalent attachment. Last, the individual with a fearful attachment style sees both herself or himself and others negatively and therefore experiences conflict between her or his desire for intimacy and her or his simultaneous fear of rejection (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Adult fearful attachment is conceptually the same pattern as disorganized attachment found in childhood.

Previous research examining individual differences in attachment can be conceptualized with regard to two specific dimensions: anxiety and avoidance (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Attachment-related anxiety can be conceptualized as the extent to which individuals are fearful of rejection or abandonment. This dimension is frequently characterized by an increased level of hyperarousal and fear of abandonment particularly by one's attachment figures. On the other hand, attachment-related avoidance has been conceptualized within previous published reports as the degree to which individuals are comfortable relying on others for emotional support during times of distress. This dimension is often characterized by denial of one's attachment needs (e.g., security, comfort, and protection), as well as lack of trust and dependability on others to effectively respond to such needs. Conversely, with regard to this dimensional conceptualization model of attachment, an individual with a secure attachment style would theoretically have low levels of both attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance.

It should be noted that attachment researchers have previously conceptualized and measured attachment using categorical measures consisting of a combination of anxiety and avoidance (i.e., attachment styles); however, attachment researchers (Fraley & Shaver, 2000) have recently purported that adult attachment is most accurately measured using the continuous dimensions of anxiety and avoidance. This recent trend in previous research is due to continuous measures being more reflective of individual differences in attachment as opposed to the categorical measures (Mohr & Fassinger, 2003).

A vast amount of adult attachment research (Ravitz, Maunder, Hunter, Sthankiya, & Lancee, 2010) confirms the accuracy of self-report measures in predicting one's attachment identity. However, some researchers choose interviewing as a method to examine adult attachment styles, a model that is frequently regarded as the gold standard when assessing attachment identity, given that the method of interviewing tends to reduce response bias and increase the activation of attachment when discussing current relationships (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Specifically, the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; George, Kaplan, & Main, 1996) explores an individual's internal working models while simultaneously assessing childhood experiences through a series of discussions. Transcribed descriptions of such experiences with each caregiver as well as the overall clarity of the transcript are coded when using the AAI. Participants are subsequently categorized as secure/autonomous, dismissing, preoccupied, or "cannot classify" (Ravitz et al., 2010, p. 424). However, an intensive 2 weeks of training is required in order to learn how to conduct the interview as well as how to appropriately code the data, which can prove to be timely and costly, thus limiting its feasibility in some settings. Self-report measures, on the other hand, examine conscious beliefs towards attachment memories of experiences in current relationships. Some researchers therefore criticize self-report

instruments for being passive in that such attitudes toward attachment are not detectable unless such attachment phenomena are manifested through activation (Ravitz et al., 2010). Different methods of examining attachment identities exhibit various attachment phenomena. Whereas the AAI and other interview measures are considered to be effective methods of assessing an individual's capability of examining her or his own internal working models of self and others, self-report attachment measures, on the other hand, may be appropriate to use when attachment is a primary focus within a study and interview measures are not feasible (Ravitz et al., 2010).

**Relationship commitment.** According to Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love, there are three distinct components of love that are separate but interactive with each other (e.g., intimacy, passion, and commitment). Sternberg (1988) described the commitment component of love as comprised of a short-term and long-term aspect. With regard to the short-term, *relationship commitment* refers to the decision that one loves another person, whereas in the long-term, it refers to the degree to which an individual chooses to maintain a relationship over time (Sternberg, 1997).

## **Background**

**Attachment identity and sexual satisfaction.** Brassard et al. (2015) completed a study examining the role of three specific sexual mediators (i.e., "sexual self-esteem, sexual anxiety, sexual assertiveness"; p. 110) between romantic attachment insecurities (e.g., anxiety-related attachment and avoidance-related attachment) and women's overall sexual functioning and satisfaction. Participants were 556 French Canadian women who exhibited an anxious or avoidant style of attachment, the vast majority of whom were within heterosexual relationships and were between 18 and 30 years of age ( $M = 22.91$ ,  $SD = 3.01$ ). Participants were recruited by a professional survey firm using random-digit dialing. Inclusion criteria for the study consisted

of being married or cohabiting for at least 6 months. Couples had been living together for an average of about five years ( $SD = 3.82$ ), and about half of the sample (51%) reported having children. The overwhelming majority self-identified as heterosexual (95.7%), 5% were married, 45.1% were currently cohabiting with their partner, 45.3% were in a committed and monogamous relationship, 2.2% were nonexclusively dating, and 2.3% were either separated or divorced but had been romantically involved with someone else in the past year. Romantic attachment was measured using the Experiences in Close Relationships scale (ECR; Brennan et al., 1998), a 36-item Likert-type scale assessing both anxiety-related attachment and avoidance-related attachment. Higher scores on anxiety and avoidance items were indicative of greater attachment insecurity. Sexual satisfaction was assessed using the Index of Sexual Satisfaction (ISS; Hudson, Harrison, & Crosscup, 1981), a 25-item Likert-type scale. Higher scores were suggestive of a greater level of sexual satisfaction. Sexual functioning was measured using the Arizona Sexual Experiences Scale (ASEX; McGahuey et al., 2000), a six-item Likert-type scale assessing for five separate sexual experiences and potential difficulties of sexual functioning within the past week. Examples of sexual difficulties included “sex drive, arousal, vaginal lubrication, ability to experience an orgasm, and one’s level of satisfaction from orgasm” (Brassard et al., 2015, p. 250). Higher scores were reflective of better overall sexual functioning. Lastly, the three mediator variables within the study (i.e., sexual self-esteem, sexual anxiety, and sexual assertiveness) were measured by three separate subscales of the Multidimensional Sexuality Questionnaire (MSQ; Snell et al., 1993). Each subscale consists of five items that were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale. Higher scores suggest greater overall sexual self-esteem, anxiety, and assertiveness. Findings indicated that the attachment variables were not significantly correlated with sexual assertiveness, suggesting that sexual assertiveness is not a



mediator, which was thus removed from further analysis. The authors conducted a path analysis in order to test for the role of mediation of sexual self-esteem and sexual anxiety in the association between attachment insecurities (i.e., anxiety-related attachment and avoidance-related attachment) and both sexual function and satisfaction. The model explained 38% of the variance in sexual satisfaction and 28% of the variance in sexual function. The preliminary regression analysis revealed that the interaction of anxiety and avoidance weakly predicted sexual satisfaction. Avoidance-related attachment was more strongly related to lower sexual satisfaction when anxiety-related attachment was low, apart from sexual self-esteem and anxiety. Attachment-related anxiety, on the other hand, was associated with lower sexual satisfaction among participants through the mediating variables, specifically lower sexual self-esteem and higher sexual anxiety. Findings also indicated that more anxiously-attached women tended to exhibit a decreased level of sexual confidence in addition to an increased level of sexual anxiety, resulting in an overall lower level of sexual satisfaction. With these results taken together, more avoidantly-attached women tended to exhibit a lower level of sexual confidence and a higher level of sexual anxiety. This finding translates into lower levels of sexual functioning and overall satisfaction among avoidantly-attached women. Specifically, women high in avoidance-related attachment and low in anxiety-related attachment were the least sexually satisfied of the two groups.

**Relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction.** Previously published reports have examined the association between relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction. Birnie-Porter and Hunt (2015) conducted a study that sought to identify any effects of relationship status on sexual satisfaction along five types of sexual relationships. Participants included 1,828 males and females who classified their individual relationships as one of the following: friends with

benefits (i.e., individuals who engage in sexual activity with each other and consider themselves friends, not exclusive intimate partners/significant others;  $n = 95$ ), casually dating ( $n = 117$ ), exclusively dating ( $n = 1,259$ ), engaged ( $n = 115$ ), or married ( $n = 242$ ). To match the size of the lowest populated subsample (i.e., friends with benefits), the authors randomly chose 24 males and 71 females from each of the other four relationship types, resulting in a sample size of 475. According to each relationship type, exclusiveness with a sexual partner varied; however, the vast majority of participants reported having only one current sexual partner: married (89.5%), engaged (92.6%), exclusively dating (96.8%), casually dating (67.4%), and friends with benefits (83.2%). Participants were recruited via social media advertising and in-class university advertising. Participants' willingness to engage in uncommitted sex was assessed utilizing the Sociosexual Orientation Inventory-Revised (SOI-R; Penke & Asendorpf, 2008), a nine-item Likert-type scale containing three specific components of sociosexuality, such as past sexual behavior, individual attitudes and beliefs regarding casual sex, and sexual desire. Low scores indicate more restricted sociosexuality and more conservative attitudes toward uncommitted sex, while high scores suggest a more unrestricted sociosexual orientation and more liberal attitudes toward uncommitted sex. Individuals who exhibit unrestricted sociosexuality tend to report higher frequencies of sexual activity in addition to a higher number of sex partners throughout her or his lifespan. Relationship intimacy was measured using a 13-item scale developed by the author (Birnie, 2009) in order to examine intimacy constructs characterized by Reis and Shaver (1988). The first seven questions assess the extent to which the respondent feels loved and cared for by her or his current sexual partner in addition to the extent to which the two disclose their personal thoughts and feelings to one another. The remaining six questions within the measure assess intimacy by instructing the respondents to choose characteristics most closely resembling

their current sexual relationship. Preliminary analyses revealed no significant differences in sexual satisfaction between males and females. Sexual satisfaction was also only weakly negatively correlated with sociosexuality across the entire sample, indicating that an individual with more unrestricted sociosexuality tends to report lower sexual satisfaction rates. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed significant differences in sexual satisfaction between the five relationship subtypes. Mean level of sexual satisfaction was higher among engaged couples compared to friends with benefits, casual dating, or individuals who were married. Mean level of sexual satisfaction among exclusively dating (non-engaged) individuals did not reveal significant differences from engaged participants. The association between relationship intimacy and sexual satisfaction in the exclusive dating relationship type, the engaged type, and the married relationship type was higher than in the friends with benefits type.

**Attachment identity in SMW and heterosexual women.** Little research has been conducted that directly examines differences in attachment styles between heterosexual and SMW. Published studies that do assess for attachment differences between both groups are contradictory in their findings. A study conducted by Ridge and Feeney (1998) explored the association of homosexuality and attachment to parents. A total of 177 individuals who identified as homosexual (77 gay males and 100 lesbians) completed a survey. Participants' ages ranged from 17 to 50 years with a mean age of 26 ( $SD = 6.80$ ), and all but 26 were enrolled in an undergraduate university. Individual attachment styles were assessed using a four-group forced-choice measure, which contained paragraphs describing the four styles: secure, fearful, preoccupied, and dismissing. Participants were instructed to select the style that best described their feelings about close relationships. Early relationships with parents were measured using an adjective checklist, adopted from Hazan and Shaver, which consisted of 16 adjectives assessing

the parent-child dyad and 12 adjectives assessing the parents' relationship with each other. Attachment style distributions between men and women were compared in two analyses and were nonsignificant. Specifically, men and women generally reported similar patterns of attachment style, although there was a higher proportion of preoccupied attachment among men. A discriminant analysis was conducted relating attachment style to the items assessing early relationships with parents and was shown to be nonsignificant. There was a gender effect only for positivity of mothering, with gay males ( $M = 7.09$ ) reporting more positivity than lesbians ( $M = 3.92$ ). (Standard deviations were not provided for the gender effect results.) Thus, it appears that retrospective reports of parental history is not strongly associated with current attachment style for gay men and SMW.

An additional study (Rosario et al., 2014) examined disparities in depressive distress as it relates to individual sexual orientation and the mediation effects of attachment. Data were used from the Growing Up Today Study (GUTS) and Nurses' Health Study II (NHSII). GUTS is a longitudinal study consisting of children of women who participated in NHSII, a cohort study of over 116,000 female registered nurses residing within the United States. Invitations were mailed to mothers in NHSII in order to enroll their 9- to 14-year-old children/adolescents in GUTS. Eligible children were subsequently provided a questionnaire in 1996 containing health-related topics. Participants reported sexual orientation, gender nonconforming behaviors (GNBs), attachment orientation to their mother, and symptoms of depression. The total sample included 6,122 participants ( $M = 20.6$  years old,  $SD = 1.50$ ; 64.6% female), with 1.7% self-identifying as lesbian/gay (LG), 1.7% bisexual (BI), 10.0% mostly heterosexual (MH), and 86.7% completely heterosexual (CH). No participants self-identified as "mostly homosexual." In order to assess for sexual orientation, an item was adapted from the Minnesota Adolescent Health Survey

(Remafedi, Resnick, Blum, & Harris, 1992): “Which of the following best describes your feelings? (mark one answer) 1 = completely heterosexual, 2 = mostly heterosexual, 3 = bisexual, 4 = mostly homosexual, 5 = completely homosexual, 6 = not sure” (p. 904). Attachment and the quality of the relationship with the parent were assessed using the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987), a 5-point Likert-type scale consisting of 25 items for the mother, 25 items for the father, and 25 items for the participant. IPPA is a measure considered by the authors to be an “indirect marker” (Rosario et al., 2014; p. 905) of attachment. Although the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; George, Kaplan, & Main, 1996), a semi-structured interview conducted and scored by highly trained coders, is frequently regarded as the “gold standard” (Rosario et al., 2014; p. 905) of attachment measures given its strong validity (Shaver, Belsky, & Brennan, 2000), research also shows IPPA to be similar to that of other measures commonly used in attachment research given its acceptable reliability and construct validity (Guarnieri, Ponti, & Tani, 2010). GUTS participants reported their level of parent-child dyad satisfaction across nine items, and each item was scored using a 5-point Likert-type scale. Higher scores were reflective of a more secure attachment style. Similarly, mothers reported their level of relationship satisfaction with their child using the same nine items completed by their children on the IPPA. Higher scores were also indicative of greater affection. Finally, depressive distress was measured using the 10-item Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression (CES-D 10) Scale. Possible scores ranged from 0 to 30, with higher scores suggesting higher distress. Sexual minority (i.e., LG, BI, and MH) participants were compared to their CH counterparts using a paired *t*-test analysis. Findings indicated that sexual-minority youth reported a significantly less secure attachment style compared to CH youth, which subsequently predicted more depressive distress in the final model. Specifically, a stronger

association between GNBs and depressive distress was present for BIs compared to CHs. However, maternal discomfort with homosexuality had little impact on depressive distress for sexual-minority youth.

**Relationship satisfaction in SMW and heterosexual women.** Previous research, although contradictory in findings, has examined differences of overall relationship satisfaction between SMW and heterosexual women. One study (Kurdek, 2008) showed that the highest levels of relationship satisfaction were reported by SMW couples as compared to both gay male and heterosexual couples. Kurdek's (2008) first sample included heterosexual people who were in a relationship, recruited from one or more Introductory Psychology classes at a public university in Ohio. Most of the participants identified as female (72%) and white (71%), with a mean age of 19.43. They had been in their relationship an average of 1.50 years. The second sample consisted of 99 gay male and 252 lesbian couples. Partners in the gay/lesbian couple sample were recruited using public records within the State of Vermont. Most of the partners were white (90%), with a mean age of 41.01 years, and they lived together a mean of 8.73 years. (Standard deviations of mean ages for the heterosexual couple sample and the gay male/lesbian couple sample were not provided within the study). Surveys were anonymously completed via the Internet on a university campus. Partners from both samples were provided the 32-item Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976) in order to assess relationship quality. Findings indicated that the gay male and lesbian partners reported a stronger commitment to each other than the heterosexual dating partners, although a potential limitation within the current study regarding this significant finding may be due to the age difference between the two samples (heterosexual vs. LG). Kurdek (2008) theorized that lesbian couples might experience a higher degree of relationship satisfaction due to characteristics that facilitate sustaining levels of appeal,

such as higher levels of expressiveness (Kurdek, 1987), which is known to positively contribute to heightened levels of relationship quality. This higher level of expressiveness may be used when constructively resolving relationship conflicts (Gottman et al., 2003).

Cusack, Hughes, and Cook (2012) conducted a study assessing for overall relationship satisfaction specifically among SMW compared to the heterosexual female population. Specifically, the authors examined whether Sternberg's (1997) components of love (i.e., commitment, passion, and intimacy) had any direct effect on SMW's and heterosexual women's overall relationship satisfaction. The study's sample consisted of 101 SMW and 233 heterosexual women currently in a committed relationship. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 55, and the majority of participants were currently cohabiting with their partners. Each participant was recruited via snowball sampling and was instructed to complete an online survey. Sternberg's (1988) 45-item Triangular Love Scale was used in order to measure each component of love within the relationship. Higher scores were indicative of a higher level of commitment, passion, and intimacy. Relationship satisfaction was determined using the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988), a seven-item Likert-type scale, with higher scores indicative of a greater level of overall relationship satisfaction. Findings indicated that commitment, passion, and intimacy were not significantly correlated with sexual orientation, and sexual orientation was not significantly related to relationship satisfaction. Moreover, there were no differences in relationship satisfaction or in each individual love component between heterosexual women and SMW. Findings did suggest, however, that length of relationship was a significant predictor of relationship satisfaction for SMW but not for heterosexual females. Specifically, a longer duration of the relationship predicted a decreased level of relationship satisfaction among SMW. Additionally, intimacy and passion were significant predictors of

relationship satisfaction between both heterosexual women and SMW, whereas commitment was not.

**Sexual satisfaction in SMW and heterosexual women.** Henderson, Lehavot, and Simoni (2009) conducted a study assessing differences in sexual satisfaction between SMW and heterosexual female populations. Participants consisted of 139 married heterosexual women and 114 partnered SMW. The study was conducted online, and participants were recruited primarily via social media outlets. Inclusion criteria stipulated that heterosexual women needed to be married and cohabitating with their husbands a minimum of one year. SMW, on the other hand, had to be living with their partner for a minimum of one year and identify their relationship as monogamous. The Brief Index of Sexual Functioning for Women (BISF-W; Taylor, Rosen, & Leiblum, 1994), a 22-item self-report measure designed to assess current levels of female sexual functioning, was provided to each participant. An overall composite score of sexual functioning in addition to seven subscale scores (i.e., “desire, arousal, frequency of sexual activity, receptivity/initiation, pleasure/orgasm, relationship satisfaction, and problems affecting sexual function”; p. 153) was calculated. Additionally, the Global Measure of Sexual Satisfaction (GMSEX; Lawrence & Byers, 1998) was provided to each participant and measures an individual’s overall level of sexual satisfaction. Findings indicated that sexual functioning, and in particular sexual pleasure/orgasm and frequency, was a common factor that successfully predicted sexual satisfaction for both SMW and their heterosexual counterparts. Moreover, SMW scored significantly higher on overall sexual satisfaction ( $M = 28.62$ ,  $SD = 6.57$ ) compared to heterosexual women ( $M = 26.69$ ,  $SD = 7.21$ ).

A study completed by Cohen and Byers (2014) explored predictors of SMW’s perception of their sexuality. Participants consisted of 527 SMW from the United States and Canada,



ranging from 18 to 72 years of age ( $M = 34.5$ ,  $SD = 10.7$ ), who had been in a relationship for a minimum of 12 months. Participants were recruited through social media outlets in addition to an email announcement. The Brief Index of Sexual Functioning for Women (BISF-W; Taylor, Rosen, & Leiblum, 1994) was adapted for lesbians and same-sex-attracted women by Salisbury (2003). Participants were asked to rate the frequency of engagement in various sexual behaviors within the previous month on a 7-point scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 6 (*more than once a day*). Three separate items described non-genital sexual activity (i.e., kissing, hugging, cuddling), while four additional items described genital sexual activity (i.e., oral sex, vaginal penetration). Each participant was also asked to indicate how long she usually engages in these activities. The Global Measure of Sexual Satisfaction (GMSS; Lawrance, Byers, & Cohen, 2011) was used to measure overall sexual satisfaction. Participants were instructed to rate their individual sexual relationship with their partner on five 7-point dimensions – *good-bad*, *pleasant-unpleasant*, *positive-negative*, *satisfying-unsatisfying*, and *valuable-worthless*. Scores ranged from 5 to 35, with higher scores indicative of greater overall sexual satisfaction. Cohen and Byers (2014) suggest that the GMSS lacked validation given that it has not been previously tested exclusively among SMW. Thus, some of the items within the instrument could resonate differently for SMW as opposed to their heterosexual counterparts. Nonetheless, hierarchical multiple regression was completed in order to identify characteristics of SMW's sexuality in relation to their overall sexual satisfaction. In order to ensure that the association between the predictors and sexual satisfaction did not occur secondary to any indirect effects of age and relationship status, age was treated as a control variable during the analysis. Findings suggested that relationship length was significantly negatively related to sexual satisfaction. Thus, a lengthier duration of committed relationships for SMW resulted in a lower level of sexual satisfaction. Moreover, the study's

control variable (i.e., age) was significantly negatively associated with overall sexual satisfaction, indicating that SMW are more likely to report lower levels of sexual satisfaction as the relationship ages, and so do its partners (and vice versa). SMW who reported more frequent sexual engagement involving genital activity, a higher level of sexual desire, a lower level of sexual anxiety, and a lower frequency of negative thoughts indicated a higher level of sexual satisfaction.

**Attachment identity and relationship satisfaction.** A study completed by Meyer, Jones, Rorer, and Maxwell (2015) examined associations and predictions between attachment identity and romantic relationship satisfaction among the heterosexual population. Participants consisted of 572 females and males ranging from 18 to 78 years of age ( $M = 36.60$ ,  $SD = 13.66$ ). The majority of participants were recruited from social media sites, while the remaining were recruited from community centers and outpatient mental health clinics and support groups. Forty-three individuals were currently in a non-committed or non-monogamous relationship, 116 individuals were in a committed relationship, 88 individuals were in a committed relationship and were cohabitating, and 325 individuals were currently married or in a civil union. The Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECR; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998) was used in order to measure each participant's attachment orientation. The instrument consists of 36 items assessing avoidant or anxious attachment. The anxiety subscale measures an individual's need for acceptance and potential fear of rejection in romantic relationships, while the avoidance subscale measures an individual's potential need for self-reliance and fear of dependency in romantic relationships (Meyer et al., 2015). Romantic relationship satisfaction was measured using the Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS; Busby, Christensen, Crane, & Larson, 1995), which includes 14 self-report items. A series of regression analyses with maximum-

likelihood estimation to estimate the parameters was performed. Romantic relationship satisfaction was regressed on attachment dimensions (i.e., avoidant and anxious; Meyer et al., 2015). Findings suggested that both types of attachment were directly related to romantic relationship satisfaction. Specifically, negative correlations emerged between avoidant and anxious attachment orientations and romantic relationship quality, suggesting that as insecure attachment behavior increases, overall relationship satisfaction decreases.

Horne and Biss (2009) conducted a similar study exclusively among SMW couples examining the mediating effects of anxious and avoidant attachment behaviors, in particular, in relation to overall relationship satisfaction. Participants identifying themselves as being born and raised as female and currently in a committed, same-sex relationship with another woman for at least 6 months were eligible to participate in the study. Participants were recruited via social media outlets that specifically served SMW. Both members of the SMW couple had to complete the survey in order to be included in the sample, and both had to report living together. The final sample included 79 cohabitating SMW couples (158 total participants). In order to assess different components of relationship quality among participant couples, the Current Relationship Equality Subscale (CRES; Kurdek, 1995) was provided to participants, a measure consisting of eight items on a 9-point Likert-type scale, with high scores suggesting heightened levels of current relationship equality. Item scores were summed to create an overall composite measure, with possible scores ranging from 8-72. The mean CRES score of the study sample was 63.55 ( $SD = 9.56$ ), suggesting relatively high perceptions of equality within their relationships. The authors calculated absolute differences scores for equality discrepancy ( $M = 6.63$ ,  $SD = 7.3$ ) in order to test their hypotheses, with lower scores suggesting an overall lower perceived level of equality discrepancy between partners. The Marital Adjustment and Prediction Test (MAPT;

Locke & Wallace, 1959), a 15-item self-report inventory, was provided to participant couples in order to assess relationship adjustment. Scores were calculated by summing the 15 items, with higher scores suggesting heightened levels of satisfaction. Possible scores ranged from 7 to 77. Finally, the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECRS; Brennan et al., 1998), a 36-item measure assessing anxiety and avoidance aspects of adult attachment, was provided to participants. Participants rated each item on a 7-point scale, with possible scores ranging from 18 to 126 for each subscale. The authors conducted a multiple regression analysis in order to determine if equality discrepancy predicted participants' relationship dissatisfaction. Findings indicated that equality discrepancy significantly negatively predicted relationship satisfaction among SMW couples. Thus, less equality discrepancy—that is, more equality within the relationship—was associated with heightened levels of relationship satisfaction. Findings also indicated that equality discrepancy was a significant predictor for both anxious and avoidant attachment orientations. Thus, as equality discrepancy increased, anxious and avoidant attachment behaviors also increased among SMW couples, which, in turn, were associated with a reduced level of relationship satisfaction.

**Relationship commitment in SMW and heterosexual women.** Empirical literature surrounding relationship commitment is limited, and prior studies have predominantly been conducted solely utilizing a heterocentric lens. One particular study conducted by Cusack, Hughes, and Cook (2012) investigated differences in various components of relationship quality (e.g., relationship commitment) among women in heterosexual and same-sex relationships. The sample was comprised of 101 self-identified lesbians and 233 self-identified heterosexual women in relationships, all of whom were recruited to participate in an online survey via snowball sampling and other convenience-based sampling techniques. The vast majority of

participants were White (78.1%) and well-educated, with 64% of participants having a bachelor's degree or higher. In order to assess for overall relationship commitment between both groups, participants completed Sternberg's Triangular Love Scale (Sternberg, 1988). Participants were instructed to rate their responses using a 9-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*extremely*), with higher scores reflective of higher levels of commitment. An example item for commitment is, "I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner." In order to examine effects of sexual orientation on commitment, independent samples *t* tests were computed. Contrary to the authors' predictions, no significant mean differences in commitment were revealed between lesbians and heterosexual women,  $t(301) = .16, p = .87, d = 0.02$ , suggesting that both SMW and heterosexual women tend to report similar levels of commitment within romantic relationships.

Doyle and Molix (2015) conducted a more recent meta-analytic review of extant published reports in order to assess the moderating effects of social stigma and overall relationship functioning among sexual minorities, with relationship commitment being one of the dimensions of romantic relationship functioning. Inclusion criteria for the meta-analysis required each study to identify relevant independent (e.g., social stigma) and dependent (e.g., relationship functioning) variables among those sexual minorities currently in a romantic relationship with someone of the same sex. Weighted average effect sizes for the relationship between social stigma and relationship functioning were conducted across all studies. A total of 35 studies were included in the review, resulting in 130 total effect sizes, with samples mainly comprised of White participants (92%). An equal number of studies included samples consisting of exclusively sexual-minority men (41%) and sexual-minority women (41%), leaving the remaining 18% consisting of samples of mixed sex. Findings revealed a small, negative

relationship between social stigma and relationship functioning ( $r = -.17, p < .001$ ).

Additionally, effects of social stigma significantly varied according to each dimension of relationship functioning, with social stigma having the largest inverse association with more affective dimensions (e.g., passion) compared to more cognitive dimensions (e.g., commitment) of relationship functioning. That is, higher levels of social stigma among sexual-minority couples led to lower levels of passion and higher levels of overall commitment of the relationship.

**Relationship commitment and attachment identity.** Previous research surrounding the association between relationship commitment and attachment identity is particularly scarce when examining such variables among SMW couples. However, one exploratory study (Kurdek, 1997) involving heterosexual, gay, and lesbian couples assessed for attachment style dimensions as mediators between relationship commitment and neuroticism, a personality trait commonly found in previous research to be closely linked to negative relationship outcomes. Kurdek (1997) operationally defined neuroticism as the heightened probability of experiencing distress or the inability to effectively cope with stressful situations, and he conceptualized neuroticism as six complementary personality facets (e.g., anxiety, hostility, impulsivity, depression, self-consciousness, and vulnerability). Attachment dimensions were separated into two distinct categories (e.g., positivity of self and positivity of other). Positivity of self refers to the extent to which individuals perceive their own self-worth, while positivity of the other refers to the extent that romantic partners are expected to be consistent and supportive (Kurdek, 1997) within the relationship. Relationship commitment was also categorized into two separate dimensions (e.g., attraction commitment and constraint commitment). Attraction commitment was conceptualized by the external factors that draw one to the relationship (e.g., rewards, satisfaction), whereas constraint commitment was conceptualized by the external factors that prevent one from leaving

the relationship (e.g., financial investments, barriers). Participants included both partners from 33 gay couples, 40 lesbian couples, and 70 heterosexual couples, all of whom were cohabitating. Same-sex couples were recruited via participant study requests in gay and lesbian periodicals, whereas heterosexual couples were recruited from a listing of marriage licenses published in a local newspaper. Mediation analyses revealed that an individual's own depression was significantly, negatively associated to one's attraction commitment ( $\beta = -0.34$ ), one's positivity of self ( $\beta = -0.35$ ), and one's positivity of the other ( $\beta = -0.19$ ). With the addition of both positivity of self and positivity of the other, the unstandardized coefficient representing one's level of depression was nonsignificant at 0.00, indicating that both attachment dimensions (e.g., positivity of the self and positivity of the other) successfully mediated the association between one's depression and one's attraction commitment (Kurdek, 1997). Furthermore, random-effects regressions were conducted in order to examine partner gender variability. Findings indicated that lesbian partners reported significantly higher levels of attraction commitment ( $B = 3.36$ ) as well as significantly higher rates of positivity of the other ( $B = 1.64$ ) compared to heterosexual (both men and women) participants. Taken together, these findings are consistent with the view that when an individual experiences depression, she or he is more likely to develop dysfunctional and unhealthy internal working models of the self and of others. These negative internal working models subsequently diminish one's overall motivation to maintain the relationship over time (Kurdek, 1997). Moreover, these findings suggest that SMW may perceive higher levels of commitment as an attraction compared to heterosexual women. That is, SMW may be more likely to choose to stay within the relationship due to love and closeness rather than a sense of obligation (i.e., constraint commitment), indicating the possibility of exhibiting overall higher levels of relationship commitment compared to their heterosexual counterparts.

A more recent study (Madey & Rodgers, 2009) investigated whether individual attachment style is mediated by variables found within empirical literature that successfully predict relationship maintenance and satisfaction, such as relationship commitment. The same study also tested whether individual attachment style (i.e., secure vs. insecure) predicts overall relationship satisfaction or is an antecedent for overall relationship outcomes. Participants were 55 undergraduate students currently in romantic relationships, 15 of whom were male and 40 of whom were female. Individual attachment styles were measured using the Relationship Scales Questionnaire (RSQ; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994), whereas relationship commitment was measured using Sternberg's Triangular Love Scale (Sternberg, 1988). Relationship satisfaction was measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale developed by the authors, which demonstrated high internal reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .82$ ). Hierarchical regression analyses revealed that the effects of individual attachment style on overall relationship satisfaction are mediated by relationship commitment. That is, a more secure level of attachment successfully predicts relationship commitment, which subsequently predicts a greater level of relationship satisfaction. These results indicate that exhibiting a secure attachment style fosters the ability to commit to a romantic relationship without the fear of rejection or abandonment (Madey & Rodgers, 2009), leading to a greater probability of reporting higher rates of relationship satisfaction. Further investigation of such associations is warranted among SMW couples.

**Relationship commitment and relationship satisfaction.** Findings derived from prior studies (Baker, McNulty, & VanderDrift, 2017) reveal strong associations between relationship commitment and satisfaction among couples. Such research has investigated whether future expectations of satisfaction successfully predict overall commitment within the relationship more accurately than current relationship satisfaction rates. Specifically, Baker, McNulty, and



VanderDrift (2017) recruited 111 participants using the Mechanical Turk (MTurk) recruiting service on amazon.com. The sample was comprised of 35 men, 75 women, and one individual who self-identified as transgender. All participants were currently involved in romantic relationships of at least 3 months, the vast majority of whom self-identified as heterosexual (91%), while the remainder (9%) self-identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or questioning. Participants' overall relationship commitment was measured using the commitment subscale within the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998), while their current relationship satisfaction was assessed using a modified version of the Quality Marriage Index (QMI; Norton, 1983). Participants' expected relationship satisfaction was assessed using a modified version of the QMI that was developed for this particular study, which instructed participants to rate their relationship expectations for the future. Findings revealed mean differences in relationship commitment with regard to gender. That is, women ( $M = 53.27$ ,  $SD = 11.82$ ) reported significantly higher rates of relationship commitment compared to men ( $M = 47.66$ ,  $SD = 12.53$ ). Additionally, women ( $M = 39.23$ ,  $SD = 7.94$ ) tended to report higher rates of expectations of future satisfaction compared to men ( $M = 36.03$ ,  $SD = 9.82$ ). Participants' overall commitment scores were regressed onto their current and expected relationship satisfaction scores in order to identify if expectations for future relationship satisfaction was a stronger predictor of overall commitment within the relationship. As the authors expected, expectations for future satisfaction was significantly associated with commitment,  $b = 0.81$ ,  $SE = 0.16$ ,  $t(106) = 5.02$ ,  $p < .01$ . Findings further revealed that expectations for future satisfaction was a significantly stronger predictor of commitment compared to current satisfaction levels ( $z = 3.09$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

**Relationship commitment and sexual satisfaction.** Previous relationship research (Markey & Markey, 2013) also points to the association between overall sexual satisfaction and relationship outcomes and satisfaction rates between heterosexual and SMW romantic partners. Specifically, Markey and Markey (2013) conducted a study examining lesbian couples' sociosexual orientation (SO), a personality dimension referring to dispositional differences with regard to partaking in uncommitted sexual activities. Participants were recruited via nearby advocacy groups, as well as through diverse periodical advertisements distributed within a northeastern university setting. The study sample consisted of 144 women (72 couples), who were required to have been involved in a monogamous relationship for at least 6 months, with the vast majority (69%) self-identifying as Caucasian. Participants' SO was measured using the Sociosexual Orientation Inventory – Revised (SOI-R; Penke, 2010), whereas individual relationship commitment was assessed using the Multiple Determinants of Relationship Commitment Inventory (MDRCI; Kurdek, 1995). Multilevel modeling was utilized in order to test Actor-Partner Interdependence Models (APIM; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2008) to predict relationship commitment. Findings revealed those women who exhibited a more restricted SO (i.e., those who are less likely to engage in uncommitted sex) were more likely to report higher levels of commitment within the relationship compared to women with an unrestricted SO (i.e., those who were more likely to engage in uncommitted sex).

Prior relationship research among heterosexual couples has also shown a positive association between sexual satisfaction and overall relationship satisfaction within different time periods in the development of relationships. That is, certain subjective components of sexuality (e.g., sexual intimacy, sexual satisfaction) have been found to be correlated with specific indicators of relationship satisfaction, stability, and outcomes (e.g., commitment) at different

developmental relationship stages among dating couples. Specifically, Sprecher (2002) examined how sexual satisfaction impacted overall relationship quality and commitment among heterosexual couples over time. Participants were 101 dating couples (202 individuals), the vast majority of whom were recruited through classroom announcements in a Midwestern university setting. The original sample completed self-administered questionnaires at Time 1 in 1988; follow-ups were conducted in 1989, 1990, 1991, and 1992. By Time 5 in 1992, 59% ( $n = 60$ ) of the couples within the study sample had terminated their relationship. Each participant completed a two-item Likert-type index implemented by the author to gauge individual sexual satisfaction at each wave of the study. For example, one specific item within the index asked, “How sexually satisfying is the relationship to you?” Additionally, overall relationship quality was assessed using the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988). Finally, in order to measure commitment within the relationship, four Likert-type items from Lund’s (1985) commitment scale were included in the questionnaire, with one example item asking, “How likely is it that your relationship will be permanent?” Separate regressions for men and women were conducted in order to determine if there was any evidence of a causal relationship between sexual satisfaction and each variable indicative of relationship quality (e.g., relationship satisfaction and commitment). Findings suggested that sexual satisfaction at Time 1 did not account for any significant variance of any relationship quality variables at Time 2, nor did any relationship quality variables at Time 1 account for any significant variance in sexual satisfaction at Time 2. That is, there was no evidence to suggest that one’s level of sexual satisfaction contributes to a change in one’s overall relationship quality, or vice versa, within one year. Additionally, in order to determine if sexual satisfaction was correlated with relationship maintenance over time, scores on sexual satisfaction, measured at Time 1, for couples who

terminated their relationship by Time 2 ( $n = 17$ ), were compared to couples who remained together ( $n = 84$ ). Both partners' scores on sexual satisfaction at Time 1 were significantly higher for couples who remained together over the 6-month period compared to those couples who terminated their relationship (male satisfaction:  $M = 6.17[SD = 1.01]$  VS.  $5.44[SD = 1.59]$ ,  $t(98) = 2.43$ ,  $p < .05$ ; female satisfaction:  $M = 6.43[SD = .74]$  VS.  $5.97[SD = .93]$ ,  $t(97) = 2.22$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Thus, those individuals who were more likely to rate their overall sexual satisfaction as high were also more likely to report their overall commitment to the relationship as high. Such findings suggest that sexual satisfaction is associated with relationship commitment in couples who are dating, including at various times within the relationship, further indicating that healthy and balanced exchanges of sexual intimacy are correlated with satisfaction, commitment, and maintenance within relationships.

### **Summary**

Despite there being empirical evidence that attachment theory is a useful underlying concept to understand and predict stability and quality within romantic relationships, there has been a paucity of research examining such variables (e.g., relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, sexual satisfaction, and attachment identity) among SMW, or more generally women with same-sex partners. However, there are published reports examining the relationship of such variables separately, the vast majority of which utilized only heterosexual samples. For example, prior studies (Birnie-Porter & Hunt, 2015) found positive associations between relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction among heterosexual couples. Such reports suggest a significant relationship between the two variables, indicating that as one's relationship satisfaction increases, her or his sexual satisfaction also increases, and vice-versa. Prior research (Baker, McNulty, & VanderDrift, 2017), although limited in quantity, also indicates the presence

of gender differences in relationship commitment, such that women tend to rate their commitment more highly compared to men.

Studies of relationship satisfaction among SMW do exist (Cusack et al., 2012; Kurdek, 2008); however, findings are contradictory in nature and the number of published reports are limited. For example, some studies' findings indicate that SMW tend to report a stronger commitment to their partners compared to heterosexual women, suggesting that SMW couples might experience a higher degree of relationship satisfaction, whereas other studies' findings suggest that sexual orientation among women does not account for any variance in commitment nor overall relationship satisfaction. Previous relationship research (Sprecher, 2002) conducted among heterosexual samples also suggests a positive association between sexual satisfaction and relationship commitment, such that those women who rate their sexual satisfaction as high are also likely to rate their commitment to the relationship as high. Additional research (Cohen & Byers, 2014; Henderson et al., 2009), also limited in quantity, examines sexual satisfaction among SMW; however, findings are also contradictory. Some findings indicate that SMW tend to rate their sexual satisfaction more highly compared to their heterosexual counterparts, perhaps due to their tendency to use more emotionally expressive language and effective communication techniques during conflict resolution, while other findings suggest no evidence of significant differences between the two groups. One common theme across studies examining sexual satisfaction among the SMW population, however, involves relationship length. That is, a lengthier duration of relationships in addition to the influence of aging tends to result in lower levels of sexual satisfaction for SMW (Cohen & Byers, 2014) among SMW couples.

Although research examining associations between all four variables (attachment style, relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, and sexual satisfaction) using sexual-minority

samples is still lacking, there has been a recent uptick in attachment research examining such associations among heterosexual relationships. Specifically, prior studies (Brassard et al., 2015; Horne & Biss, 2009; Meyer et al., 2015) indicate that exhibiting anxious- and avoidant-attachment styles, in particular, is directly associated with a decrease in both relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction. One study (Horne & Biss, 2009) assessing the mediation of anxious- and avoidant-attachment styles within a romantic relationship context among SMW couples suggests that equality discrepancy, in particular, successfully predicts insecure attachment among SMW, which is subsequently associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction for such couples.

Studies examining these variables (attachment style, relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, and sexual satisfaction), although limited in number, add depth to the argument that SMW may interpret their relationship quality and sexual satisfaction in a different light compared to heterosexual women, perhaps due to less equality discrepancy and more emotional expressiveness among SMW couples. However, there are virtually no published reports assessing differences in attachment style between SMW and heterosexual women, or women with female partners and women with male partners, more generally, within relationship contexts. Moreover, studies assessing relationship and sexual satisfaction among SMW and heterosexual women are contradictory in findings and limited in quantity. As a result, additional research is warranted in order to examine differences in relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, and sexual satisfaction between the two groups while using the theoretical application of attachment as an underlying concept to understand such differences.

## Hypotheses

Given the gaps and contradictions in the extant literature, this study is driven by the following hypotheses:

H1: Women's attachment dimensions will be independent of their partner's gender. Women will report non-significant differences in attachment dimensions based on the gender of their partner.

H2: Women's partner's gender will be predictive of relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and relationship commitment.

H2.1: Women partnered with women will report significantly higher rates of relationship satisfaction compared to women partnered with men.

H2.2: Women partnered with women will report significantly higher rates of sexual satisfaction compared to women partnered with men.

H2.3: Women partnered with women will report significantly higher rates of relationship commitment compared to women partnered with men.

H3: Attachment dimensions will be predictive of relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and relationship commitment in both groups.

H3.1: Attachment dimensions will be predictive of relationship satisfaction in both groups. Those women who score higher on attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance will report lower rates of relationship satisfaction compared to those who score lower on attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance.

H3.2: Attachment dimensions will be predictive of sexual satisfaction in both groups. Those women who score higher on attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance will report lower rates of sexual satisfaction compared to those who score lower on attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance.

H3.3: Attachment dimensions will be predictive of relationship commitment in both groups. Those women who score higher on attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance will report lower rates of relationship commitment compared to those who score lower on attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance.

H4: Three of the study's variables—sexual satisfaction, relationship satisfaction, and relationship commitment—will be significantly, positively correlated in both groups. Women who report a higher level of relationship satisfaction will also report a higher level of sexual satisfaction and relationship commitment.



## CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

### Study Design

The current study, while predictive and correlational in nature, used a cross-sectional research design as well as nonprobability sampling techniques in order to examine partner gender and attachment dimensions as predictors. Specifically, the study examined partner gender as a predictor of attachment dimensions, relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment and sexual satisfaction, in addition to assessing attachment dimensions as a predictor of relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, and sexual satisfaction between both groups. Associations between relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, sexual satisfaction, attachment dimensions, and partner gender were also examined.

### Participants

**Description.** This study was open to women born as a female, 18 years or older, and currently in a romantic relationship of at least 6 months. Previous research (e.g., Horne & Biss, 2009) examining the association between relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction among women commonly used a 6-month mark as a cut-off point when establishing inclusionary criteria for the sample. Those respondents who were not currently in a relationship of at least 6 months were excluded. Moreover, those women who identified as transgender were also excluded from the study. Sexuality perception, relationship quality, and attachment may be experienced differently by transgender women, who were born and likely raised male, which would possibly subsequently affect the outcome and generalizability of the findings.

The study was available to women who have Internet access given that the survey was administered online. Online survey instruments are accompanied by disadvantages, such as lack of probability samples, the possibility of Internet glitches, and ethical concerns regarding

informed consent and confidentiality. With regard to consent and confidentiality in online survey research, it is not possible to verbally explain the underlying concept of the study to participants, nor is it possible to obtain verbal consent from study participants. (Regmi, Waithaka, Paudyal, Simkhada, & van Teijlingen, 2016). In order to ensure that informed consent is successfully obtained, information regarding the study and participant rights were provided on the first page of the survey. Participants were required to check “I agree” before they were able to proceed to the survey questions. With the use of a secure online survey program like Survey Monkey, participants’ responses were kept secure given the software’s enacted security measures required by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). Due to its low cost, its guaranteed anonymity that allows participants to answer with more candid and unambiguous answers, and its economic and timing convenience for both respondents and researchers alike, the benefits of utilizing an online survey tool outweigh the disadvantages and risks for this particular study.

**Human Subjects Protection.** Approval was obtained from the Louisiana State University (LSU) Institutional Review Board. Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was indicated by participants’ submission of a completed survey that began with a brief explanation of the study and her rights as a study participant. Due to the sensitive nature of the present study’s survey items and the vulnerability of the population (e.g., SMW, or more generally, female-partnered women), it is pertinent to consider the unlikely possibility that some participants may experience some level of distress while completing the survey. Information on mental health supportive services and organizations that are appropriate to serve both heterosexual women and SMW was therefore offered. Direct links to services were provided both at the end and beginning of the survey in case some participants experienced

distress prior to completion of the instrument. The survey therefore employed “back” buttons so participants could easily retrieve such information if they were halfway through the survey and decided to quit secondary to experiencing distress. Overall, the study posed minimal physical, psychological, and social risks from survey questions to participants. No identifying information was asked of the participants; thus, their identity remained anonymous. Data were kept secure, private, and confidential when using Survey Monkey for data collection, specifically by utilizing the cookie disabling option. Cookies are used to identify individuals using a particular website in order to obtain their personal, identifying information (Hash & Spencer, 2009). By disabling cookies on Survey Monkey, participants’ identities remained anonymous and secure. In addition, Internet Protocol (IP) addresses, which are distinct sequences of numbers that can be traced back to specific computers, were prevented from being recorded within the survey results by making the responses anonymous within Survey Monkey’s collector settings.

## **Procedures**

A survey was administered via the Internet in order to collect data pertaining to the study variables. Participants were recruited utilizing snowball and other convenience sampling techniques through various networking media such as word of mouth, local LGBTQ organizations such as Capital City Alliance (Baton Rouge), social media sites such as Facebook, and e-mail announcements through the LSU School of Social Work. Convenience sampling techniques were used in order to recruit study participants, as this type of sampling technique is commonly used when participants are selected, in part, due to their feasible accessibility (Rubin & Babbie, 2011). Snowball sampling technique was primarily used when attempting to recruit SMW participants given that this type of sampling technique is particularly useful when locating members of an oppressed population (e.g., sexual-minority individuals) in order to recruit

individuals who live beyond the bounds of heteronormativity. However, disadvantages are associated with this type of sampling technique. Specifically, snowball sampling can be considered to be a biased sampling method due to its nonrandom approach of selecting individuals on the basis of community networks. This leads to the possibility of obtaining a sample with questionable representativeness. Similarly, convenience sampling may lead to the underrepresentation or overrepresentation of particular subpopulations within the sample. Since the sampling frame is not chosen at random, the inherent bias following a convenience sampling approach implies that the sample may not be representative of the target population being studied and may undermine the researcher's ability to infer generalizations from the sample to the population being studied (Rubin & Babbie, 2011). Despite the associated risks of both, some studies employing such techniques can yield useful preliminary findings, especially when no conspicuous forms of bias are readily detectable within the sampling method and when the researcher is careful not to overgeneralize her or his findings.

The full survey took approximately 15 to 20 minutes to complete and was administered to all participants via the online survey site [surveymonkey.com](https://www.surveymonkey.com). The URL to the survey was posted on social media sites and was distributed through e-mail announcements where the participants were able to click on the link and easily access and complete the survey. The survey consisted of five main sections—attachment identity, relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, sexual satisfaction, and demographics—with a total of 79 questions.

## **Measures**

**Sexual identity and partner gender.** In order to assess sexual orientation, participants were instructed to check off the sexual identity term with which they most identify: *lesbian*, *gay*, *bisexual*, *queer*, *same-sex attracted*, or *heterosexual/straight*. A dummy variable was created that

distinguished heterosexual women from SMW by combining “lesbian, gay, queer, and same-sex attracted” responses into one sexual identity category (i.e., sexual-minority women). Best practice for self-selection survey items concerning sexual orientation generally includes ensuring that the response items “lesbian” and “bisexual” are separated into distinct categories in order to allow the potential for grouping the two items together or splitting the two items by orientation (Williams Institute, 2009). This technique can be attributed to significant cultural and economic composition differences between the two identities (Carpenter, 2005), which is important to consider when interpreting and generalizing any findings. Bisexual individuals should therefore be analyzed separately whenever subgroup sample size allows for such disaggregation. In regards to the current study, if a significant proportion of the sample included bisexual women, preliminary analyses would be computed assessing for any differences in the study variables between lesbian women and bisexual women as well as any such differences between bisexual women who are currently dating/married to another woman and bisexual women who are currently dating/married to a man. If there were no significant differences, bisexual women would be treated as their own sexual identity group. If no significant differences emerged between bisexual women currently dating/married to another woman and bisexual women currently dating/married to a man, the former group would be included in the “women partnered with women” category, while the latter group would be combined with “women partnered with men” category. Lastly, if there was not a significant proportion of bisexual women participants within the sample, they would be excluded from the study. Those women who self-identified as “heterosexual/straight” were classified as simply heterosexual.

**Relationship satisfaction.** Participants’ overall relationship satisfaction was measured using the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988). This seven-item Likert-type

scale was initially designed to measure relationship quality among married individuals; it has since been adapted for individuals who are in a committed, non-marital relationship (Renshaw, McKnight, Caska & Blais, 2010). After substituting the word “relationship” in place of all terms involving the word “marriage,” the revised version continues to show high convergent validity. When measured against the more commonly utilized Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976), the RAS revealed a .80 correlation in previous studies. Hendrick (1988), the author of the scale, reported an alpha reliability coefficient of .86 in previous research. An example item within the measurement is as follows: “How good is your relationship compared to most?” Participants were instructed to rate their responses on a scale from 1 (*not very*) to 5 (*very*). The RAS is scored by reversing two items and summing the seven item scores. The total RAS possible scores range from 7 to 35, with higher values indicative of higher relationship satisfaction and lower scores indicative of lower relationship satisfaction.

**Sexual satisfaction.** In order to assess for participants’ sexual satisfaction, the Sexual Satisfaction Scale for Women (SSS-W; Meston & Trapnell, 2005) was utilized. The SSS-W is a 30-item Likert-type scale composed of five domains (i.e., contentment, communication, compatibility, relational concern, and personal concern) of overall sexual satisfaction among women, with six items per domain. An example of one of the items within the measure is as follows: “I often feel that my partner and I are not sexually compatible enough.” Participants were instructed to rate their responses on a scale from 5 (*strongly disagree*) to 1 (*strongly agree*). Overall scores range from 30 to 150, with higher scores suggesting greater levels of satisfaction and lower scores suggestive of lower levels of satisfaction. The total score of the SSS-W demonstrates a high level of reliability, or internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ), with each domain value exceeding 0.80 for all scales except Communication ( $\alpha = 0.74$ ). In regards to the scale’s

convergent validity, associations between the SSS-W and the Female Sexual Function Index's (FSFI; Meston, 2005) domains varied considerably. That is, convergent validity of the SSS-W was assessed in previous studies (Meston & Trapnell, 2005) by comparing the five SSS-W domain scores to the domain scores of the FSFI, a previously validated 19-item self-report measure with five separate domains (i.e., desire, arousal, orgasm, pain, and satisfaction) that examines overall sexual functioning among women. Pearson correlations revealed higher associations between scales for sexually functional women ( $r = 0.29-0.70$ ) compared to sexually dysfunctional women ( $r = 0.22-0.46$ ). The highest correlations emerged within the Contentment domain, whereas the lowest correlations were shown in the Relational Concern domain among both sexually functional and dysfunctional women. The remaining domains revealed only weak correlations with the FSFI in sexually functional and dysfunctional women. Moreover, the SSS-W's discriminant validity was examined by assessing correlations with domains of the Locke Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (MAT; Locke, 1959), a 15-item self-report measure assessing overall marital satisfaction. Pearson correlations revealed low-to-moderate associations for all SSS-W domains except that of Personal Concern among sexually dysfunctional women. Consequently, among sexually functional women, significant correlations emerged for all SSS-W domains except the Relational Concern and Personal Concern domains. Future research is therefore warranted for the development of more comprehensive measures of sexual satisfaction. However, the distinction between affective and relational aspects of sexual satisfaction was supported through divergent patterns of relations for each domain within the SSS-W, which was revealed through regressions on global marital satisfaction and global sexual satisfaction. These results indicate that although future research in a clinical sample is needed to test whether the sexual satisfaction distinctions are effective in providing more insight into clinical components

of women's sexual satisfaction, the scale exhibits sound psychometric properties overall and shows a demonstrated ability to discriminate between clinical and nonclinical populations.

**Attachment identity.** The Revised Adult Attachment Scale (RAAS; Collins, 1996) was used in order to assess for participants' individual attachment identity. The RAAS can be used to assess two attachment dimensions (i.e., attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance) as well as the four adult attachment styles (i.e., secure, dismissing, preoccupied, and fearful) introduced by Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991). The RAAS consists of 18 Likert-type items and measures three separate attachment dimensions (e.g., close, depend, and anxiety), relative to being secure versus insecure, identified by a factor analysis (Collins & Read, 1998). The close dimension refers to the extent that an individual is comfortable with intimacy within a relationship. The depend dimension refers to the extent to which an individual feels comfortable depending on her or his partner during a time of need. Lastly, the anxiety dimension refers to the extent to which an individual is fearful of rejection within the context of a romantic relationship. Theoretically, a person with a secure level of attachment should score high on both the close and depend dimensions (e.g., above the midpoint on a 5-point scale), and low on the anxiety dimension (e.g., below the midpoint on a 5-point scale). Conversely, an individual with an insecure level of attachment should score high on the anxiety dimension and low on both the close and depend dimensions, using the same midpoint cutoff on a 5-point scale. Those individuals who score at the midpoint will therefore be excluded from the sample only when assessing for individual differences in attachment utilizing categorical measures (i.e., secure, fearful, preoccupied, and dismissing). The RAAS has shown acceptable internal consistency for the three dimensions, close, depend, and anxiety ( $\alpha = 0.72, 0.76, \text{ and } 0.87$ , respectively). Scoring protocol converts the dimensional scores (i.e., attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related



avoidance) into four separate classifications of the adult attachment styles (i.e., secure, preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful) by reverse coding the appropriate items, computing the three attachment dimensions (i.e., close, depend, and anxiety), combining the close and depend dimensions into a single composite, and finally computing a variable that assesses an individual's categorical attachment style by using cutoff scores above or below the midpoint. An example of one of the items within the measure is as follows: "I am nervous when anyone gets too close." Participants were instructed to rate their responses on a scale from 1 (*not at all characteristic of me*) to 5 (*very characteristic of me*).

**Relationship commitment.** In order to examine one's overall level of commitment, the Commitment subsection of Sternberg's Triangular Love Scale (STLS; Sternberg, 1988) was administered. In its original form, the STLS is a 45-item Likert-type scale comprised of three domains (e.g., Intimacy, Passion, and Commitment) with 15 items comprising each domain. Participants were instructed to rate the extent to which they agree or disagree with each statement, with possible scores for each ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*extremely*). An example of one of the items within the measure is as follows: "I am committed to maintaining my relationship with \_\_\_\_\_," whereby the participant is instructed to fill in the blank for each item with their partner's name. Higher scores reflect a greater level of relationship commitment, whereas lower scores represent a lesser level of commitment. Possible subscale scores of the STLS range from 85 to 135.

Internal consistency analyses have revealed each subscale within the STLS to be highly correlated with one another, with an average correlation of .75 (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1989). Specifically, the STLS's commitment subscale has been shown to serve its purpose generally well, with the median coefficient for the entire set of 15 items being 0.61 (Sternberg, 1997).

Previous research (Sternberg, 1997) has also assessed the STLS's external validity by examining intercorrelations of the STLS with the Rubin Liking and Loving scales, as well as correlations of both of these scales with overall relationship satisfaction. The STLS and Rubin scales have been shown to be highly correlated, with median correlations for the commitment subscale being 0.61 and 0.65 for liking and loving, respectively (Sternberg, 1997). The STLS's correlation with an external criterion, specifically with overall relationship satisfaction, has been shown to be more highly correlated with satisfaction than either of the two Rubin scales for all individual items and for overall scores, indicating that the STLS measures constructs more predictive of overall relationship satisfaction compared to the Rubin scales. Specifically, correlations with the satisfaction scale were 0.59 for the Rubin Love Scale, 0.36 for the Rubin Liking Scale, and 0.75 for the STLS commitment subscale (Sternberg, 1997).

**Demographics.** Questions concerning socio-demographic information were asked, including age, whether or not the participant has children, gender identity, race/ethnicity, relationship length (in months), marital status, and zip code.

### **Analytic Strategy and Hypothesis Testing**

Data were analyzed using PASW v.23. A power analysis for a multiple regression with nine predictors was calculated using an online sample size calculator, which revealed that in order to detect a medium effect size (.15) at the .05 level of significance with a power of .80, a sample size of at least 77 participants was needed to comprise of the total sample. In order to compensate for potential group size differences in the sample that might have occurred due to the utilization of choice-based sampling techniques, weights were statistically adjusted in the estimation of parameters of interest.

**Univariate analysis.** Frequencies and percentages were calculated for non-parametric variables (i.e., sexual identity, partner gender, attachment style [secure, fearful, preoccupied, and dismissing], and race/ethnicity), while measures of central tendency (e.g., means) and measures of dispersion (e.g., standard deviations) were calculated for parametric variables (i.e., relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, sexual satisfaction, attachment dimensions, relationship length, and age).

**Bivariate and multivariate analysis.** A correlation matrix was computed in order to examine interrelationships among study variables, as well as to identify correlates of the dependent variables (i.e., attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety). In order to assess for the association between relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, and sexual satisfaction between both groups, an ANOVA was computed to identify any correlations between continuous-level (i.e., relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, and sexual satisfaction) variables. In order to determine appropriate grouping of women for future analyses, five individual correlational analyses were conducted to identify differences in interval-level variables (i.e., relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, sexual satisfaction, attachment avoidance, and attachment anxiety) between groups of self-identified bisexual women. In addition, five individual ANOVAs were conducted among women partnered with women and women partnered with men (regardless of their self-identified sexual identity) in order to identify any mean differences in the same five variables. Three separate simple linear regression analyses were computed in order to assess attachment dimensions as a predictor of interval-level variables (i.e., relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, and sexual satisfaction) between the two groups. Five separate ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analyses were computed in order to assess predictions between the nominal (i.e., partner gender) variable and the five continuous

variables (i.e., relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, sexual satisfaction, attachment avoidance, and attachment anxiety). Finally, two correlational analyses were conducted between two independent groups (e.g., women partnered with women and women partnered with men) to compare mean differences in relationship commitment, sexual satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction.

The goal of OLS regression is to minimize the sum of the squared errors between the observed responses produced from the sample and those predicted by a linear model derived from a set of variables. It is therefore considered to be an adequate statistical test when using a nominal-level (e.g., partner gender) variable to predict the outcome of an interval-level (e.g., relationship satisfaction) variable (Hinkle, Wiersma, & Jurs, 2003). Alternatives to OLS regression exist, such as an ANOVA; however, OLS regression generally has the best properties given that it is considered to be an extension of the sample mean, thereby exhibiting more beneficial properties than an ANOVA.

An important caveat in utilizing OLS regression is to control for the effect of potential confounding variables when a real linear relationship is hypothesized between the study variables. When conducting OLS regressions between the nominal-level (i.e., partner gender) variable and continuous-level (i.e., relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, sexual satisfaction) variables, attachment dimensions (i.e., attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance) and demographic variables (e.g., relationship length, children, marital status, and age) were therefore treated as control variables in order to control for covariate effects. In order to test this, hierarchical regression was conducted between partner gender and relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and relationship commitment while controlling for both attachment dimensions and demographic variables for each analysis. When computing the hierarchical

regression, all demographic variables were entered into the first step of the model using the forced entry method, following by the key variables of interest (i.e., partner gender, attachment avoidance, and attachment anxiety), an appropriate approach if there is an insufficient theoretical or empirical basis for employing an alternate method of entering variables (Tabachinick & Fidell, 2012).

### **Tests of Assumptions of OLS Multiple Regression**

Assumptions for OLS multiple regression are concerned with characteristics of model variables and about the portions of obtained scores not accounted for by the multivariate analysis (i.e., residuals) (Tabachinick & Fidell, 2012). In order to achieve the best linear estimation, these assumptions must be met; otherwise, the data may be biased (Tabachinick & Fidell, 2012).

**Examination of residual scatterplots.** The examination of residual scatterplots is recommended by Tabachinick and Fidell (2012) in order to assess potential departures from the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity. Normality refers to the assumption that scores are normally distributed along a bell curve; linearity refers to the assumption that a straight linear relationship occurs between variables; and homoscedasticity refers to the assumptions that the variability in scores for one continuous-level variable is generally the same at all values of another continuous variable (Tabachinick & Fidell, 2012). It is subsequently expected that the points on the residuals plots would cluster along a horizontal line in a rectangular pattern if there are no violations of normality, linearity, or homoscedasticity (Tachachinick & Fidell, 2012).

**Multicollinearity.** The correlation matrix was computed to preliminarily diagnose multicollinearity, an issue that occurs where independent variables are highly correlated ( $r > .80$ )

with one another (Tabachinick & Fidell, 2012). Variance inflation factors (*VIFs*) were also computed while conducting the OLS multiple regression in order to assess multicollinearity.

**Independent variables.** Partner gender is a nominal-level independent variable that was coded as a dummy (binary) variable when utilizing an ANOVA in order to conduct all preliminary analyses. Partner gender was further treated as a nominal-level independent variable when conducting each OLS analysis as well as each hierarchical multiple regression analysis. Attachment identity is a continuous-level independent variable that was coded into separate dummy variables (i.e., attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety) when conducting each simple linear regression analysis. Lastly, race/ethnicity, marital status, geographical location, as well as assessing if the participant has children or not, were each treated as nominal-level independent variables, whereas age and relationship length were treated as ratio-level independent variables.

**Dependent variables.** Attachment dimensions (i.e., attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety) were both treated as continuous-level dependent variables when utilizing an ANOVA in order to conduct all preliminary analyses as well as when conducting each OLS regression. Relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, and sexual satisfaction were each treated as continuous-level dependent variables when conducting each OLS regression, the simple linear regression, as well as when computing each hierarchical multiple regression.

## CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

Two hundred two people started the survey, with one participant identifying as transgender. Given that the transgender participant could not be confirmed as a transgender man (i.e., born and, presumably, having living the first several years of his life as female), this individual was excluded from the study, leaving 201 respondents. Thirty-five additional participants were excluded from the study for not completing the survey, resulting in a final sample of 166 when conducting both the ANOVA and the regression analyses utilizing continuous-level variables (i.e., relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, relationship commitment, attachment anxiety, and attachment avoidance). However, a final sample of 159 participants was utilized when conducting correlational analyses between nominal-level variables (e.g., sexual identity, partner gender, race, children, geography, and marital status) and attachment *styles* (as opposed to attachment dimensions). That is, in order to assign participants to appropriate attachment style categories (i.e., secure, fearful, preoccupied, and dismissing), individuals who scored at the midpoint on the RAAS were excluded from the sample for the purpose of eliminating individuals who appear to fall on the boundary of more than one style, or those who do not clearly belong to any style. Frequency data for demographic and study variables are reported in Table 1.

### Sample Characteristics

Table 1. Demographic and Study Variables ( $N = 166$ )

Variable	%( $n$ )	$M(SD)$
Sexual identity		
Lesbian	13.3(22)	
Gay	.6(1)	

Bisexual	13.9(23)	
Queer	7.8(13)	
Same-sex attracted	.6(1)	
Heterosexual	63.9(107)	
Partner Gender		
Partnered with man	75.9(126)	
Partnered with woman	24.1(40)	
Relationship satisfaction		29.95(4.94)
Attachment dimensions		
Attachment-related avoidance		2.58(0.88)
Attachment-related anxiety		2.50(1.05)
Attachment style		
Secure	52.7(89)	
Preoccupied	8.9(15)	
Dismissing	13.6(23)	
Fearful	18.9(32)	
Relationship commitment		123(19.46)
Sexual satisfaction		92.34(22.22)
Age		36.72(11.60)
Relationship length (months)		112.52(109.19)
Women partnered with women		80.43(71.62)
Women partnered with men		122.71(117.06)
Ethnicity		



Caucasian	88.0(146)
African American	6.6(11)
Hispanic/Latina	.6(1)
Native American	1.2(2)
Asian American	1.8(3)
Biracial	1.8(3)
Children	
Yes	29.5(49)
No	70.5(117)
Geography	
Southern region	77.1(128)
Non-southern region	22.3(37)
Marital status	
Married	37.3(62)
Not married	62.7(104)

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Preliminary analyses were first conducted in order to determine the appropriate grouping of women for subsequent analyses. First, five separate ANOVAs were computed among bisexual women. That is, analyses were conducted in order to identify any mean differences in attachment-related avoidance, attachment-related anxiety, relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, and sexual satisfaction between bisexual women currently partnered with a woman and bisexual women currently partnered with a man. Results (reported in Table 2) revealed no significant mean differences between the two groups of bisexual women as it relates to overall relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, relationship commitment, attachment anxiety, nor

attachment avoidance. Additionally, five separate ANOVAs were computed among self-identified sexual-minority women. That is, analyses were conducted in order to identify any mean differences in attachment-related avoidance, attachment-related anxiety, relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, and sexual satisfaction between SMW currently partnered with a woman and SMW currently partnered with a man. Results (reported in Table 3) revealed no significant mean differences between the two groups of SMW as it relates to overall relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, relationship commitment, attachment anxiety, nor attachment avoidance.

Finally, five additional ANOVAs were conducted among women based on partner gender (i.e., women partnered with women and women partnered with men), regardless of their self-identified sexual identity, in order to identify any mean differences in the same five study variables (i.e., attachment-related avoidance, attachment-related anxiety, relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, and sexual satisfaction). Results (reported in Table 4) revealed no significant mean differences in attachment-related avoidance, attachment-related anxiety, relationship commitment, nor sexual satisfaction among women based on partner gender. As it relates to relationship satisfaction, however, results revealed significant mean differences between women currently partnered with another woman ( $M = 31.40$ ,  $SD = 3.17$ ) and women currently partnered with a man ( $M = 29.49$ ,  $SD = 5.31$ ),  $F(1, 164) = 4.63$ ,  $p < .05$ . That is, women in a romantic partnership with another woman tended to report significantly higher rates of relationship satisfaction compared to women in a romantic partnership with a man (regardless of self-identified sexual identity). Therefore, given that those self-identified bisexual women currently partnered with another woman did not report significant differences in key study variables compared to those self-identified bisexual women currently partnered with a

man, all respondents (regardless of self-identified sexual identity) were grouped according to their partner's gender in order to conduct further analyses.

Correlational analyses among attachment styles (style (i.e., secure vs. fearful vs. preoccupied vs. dismissing) and partner gender (i.e., women partnered with women vs. women partnered with men) were compared by first computing the three attachment dimensions (e.g., close, depend, and anxiety), and then using cutoff scores above or below the midpoint on the RAAS in order to identify the corresponding attachment styles. A chi-square analysis was then computed, with the results reported in Table 5. No significant correlations between attachment style and partner gender emerged,  $\chi^2(1, N = 159) = 2.982, p = .394$ .

Correlational analyses among additional non-continuous study variables (i.e., attachment style [secure, fearful, preoccupied, and dismissing], race [White vs. non-White], attachment style [secure vs. insecure], children [yes vs. no], geography [South vs. not South], and marital status [married vs. not married]) were computed among both groups of women and are reported in Tables 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11, respectively. The percentage of participants who self-identified as White did not differ by partner gender groups,  $\chi^2(1, N = 166) = 1.029, p = .310$ . The percentage of participants who exhibited a secure attachment style compared to an insecure attachment style also did not differ by partner gender groups,  $\chi^2(1, N = 159) = .189, p = .664$ . The percentage of participants who had children, however, did significantly differ by partner gender groups,  $\chi^2(1, N = 166) = 12.280, p < .001$ . That is, those women currently partnered with men were significantly more likely to have children compared to those women currently partnered with women. Furthermore, the percentage of participants who resided within southern regions compared to non-southern regions also did not differ by partner gender,  $\chi^2(1, N = 166) = .201, p = .654$ . Lastly, the percentage of participants who were married did significantly differ by partner

gender groups,  $\chi^2(1, N = 166) = 7.016, p < .001$ . That is, those women currently partnered with men were significantly more likely to report being married compared to women currently partnered with women.

Correlational analyses among key study variables (i.e., relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, sexual satisfaction, attachment-related avoidance, attachment-related anxiety, relationship length, age, children, geographic location, marital status, and race) were also computed among both groups of women and are reported in Table 12. Significant differences emerged on 10 out of the 11 variables of interest. Relationship satisfaction was positively correlated with sexual satisfaction ( $r = .682, p < .001$ ) and relationship commitment ( $r = .642, p < .001$ ) between groups. That is, women's overall relationship satisfaction tended to increase as their overall sexual satisfaction increased, regardless of their romantic partner's gender. Additionally, women's overall relationship satisfaction tended to increase as their overall relationship commitment increased, regardless of their romantic partner's gender. Conversely, relationship satisfaction was negatively correlated with attachment-related anxiety ( $r = -.319, p < .001$ ) between both groups. That is, women's overall relationship satisfaction tended to decrease as their attachment-related anxiety increased, regardless of their romantic partner's gender. No significant correlations emerged between relationship satisfaction and attachment-related avoidance ( $r = -.128, p = .102$ ). Additionally, sexual satisfaction was positively correlated with relationship commitment ( $r = .544, p < .01001$ ) and negatively correlated with attachment-related anxiety ( $r = -.390, p < .001$ ). That is, women's overall sexual satisfaction tended to increase as their overall relationship commitment increased, whereas their overall sexual satisfaction tended to decrease as their attachment-related anxiety increased, regardless of their partner's gender. Attachment-related avoidance was shown to be negatively correlated with

sexual satisfaction ( $r = -.179, p < .05$ ). That is, women's overall sexual satisfaction tended to decrease as their attachment-related avoidance increased, regardless of their partner's gender. A significant, negative correlation also emerged between relationship commitment and attachment-related anxiety ( $r = -.334, p < .001$ ). That is, women's overall relationship commitment tended to increase as their attachment-related anxiety decreased, regardless of their partner's gender. No significant correlation emerged between relationship commitment and attachment-related avoidance ( $r = -.089, p = .253$ ). Attachment-related anxiety was found to be positively correlated with attachment-related avoidance ( $r = .576, p < .01$ ) between both groups. That is, women's attachment-related anxiety tended to increase as their attachment-related avoidance increased, regardless of their partner's gender. Lastly, relationship length was negatively correlated with attachment-related anxiety ( $r = -.298, p < .001$ ) between both groups. That is, women's relationship length increased as their attachment-related anxiety decreased, regardless of their partner gender. Moreover, relationship length was not significantly correlated with relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, attachment-related avoidance, nor relationship commitment. Age was found to be negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction ( $r = -.169, p < .05$ ) between both groups. That is, women tended to report lower levels of relationship satisfaction as they increased in age, regardless of their partner's gender. Age was also found to be significantly negatively associated with overall sexual satisfaction ( $r = -.163, p < .05$ ) between both groups. That is, women tended to report lower levels of sexual satisfaction as they increased in age, regardless of their partner's gender. Age was also found to be significantly negatively associated with attachment-related anxiety ( $r = -.169, p < .05$ ) between both groups. That is, women tended to exhibit significantly lower rates of attachment-related anxiety as they increased in age, regardless of their partner's gender. On the other hand, age was found to be positively associated

with relationship length ( $r = .671, p < .000$ ) between both groups. That is, women tended to report longer durations of their relationship as their age increased, regardless of their partner's gender. Age was not significantly associated with relationship length nor attachment-related avoidance. Marital status was significantly correlated with children ( $r = -.254, p < .001$ ) between both groups. That is, women were more likely to report having children if they also reported being married, regardless of their partner's gender. Race (coded 0 for white and 1 for non-white) was significantly associated with geographic location (coded 0 for non-south and 1 for south) between both groups ( $r = .200, p < .01$ ). That is, women who self-identified as non-white were more likely to report residing within southern regions of the United States. Lastly, marital status (coded 0 for not married and 1 for married) was significantly negatively correlated with attachment anxiety between both groups ( $r = -.277, p < .000$ ). That is, women who reported higher levels of attachment-related anxiety were more likely to report not being married, regardless of their partner's gender.

Table 2. One-Way Analysis of Variance Summary of Key Study Variables among Self-Identified Bisexual Women Grouped by Partner Gender ( $n = 23$ )

Variable	Partner Gender		Mean	SD	F
	Male	Female			
Relationship satisfaction	31.21	30.00	4.00	5.05	.502
Relationship commitment	124.93	121.33	16.65	18.95	.112
Sexual satisfaction	96.82	96.33	25.34	25.89	.489
Attachment avoidance	2.79	3.11	.98	.93	2.22
Attachment anxiety	2.74	2.96	.93	1.20	1.62

Table 3. One-Way Analysis of Variance Summary of Key Study Variables among Self-Identified Sexual-Minority Women Grouped by Partner Gender ( $n = 60$ )

Variable	Partner Gender		Mean	SD	F
	Male	Female			
Relationship satisfaction	28.52	31.40	28.52	3.17	2.81
Relationship commitment	116.91	127.25	116.91	10.76	1.98
Sexual satisfaction	87.55	96.41	87.55	28.60	1.20
Attachment avoidance	2.81	2.68	2.81	.86	1.31
Attachment anxiety	2.97	2.48	2.97	1.00	2.82

Table 4. One-Way Analysis of Variance Summary of Key Study Variables among All Participants Grouped by Partner Gender ( $N = 166$ )

Variable	Partner Gender		Mean	SD	F
	Male	Female			
Relationship satisfaction	29.49	31.40	29.49	3.17	.033*
Relationship commitment	122.27	127.25	122.27	10.76	.215
Sexual satisfaction	91.09	96.41	91.09	20.18	.187
Attachment avoidance	2.56	2.67	2.56	.86	.547
Attachment anxiety	2.48	2.48	2.48	1.00	.995

Note: \* =  $p < 0.05$

Table 5. Crosstabulation of Attachment Style and Partner Gender (Male vs. Female) ( $N = 159$ )

Style	Partner Gender		$X^2$	$p$	Total
	Male	Female			
Secure	66 (-0.4)	23 (0.4)	2.982	.394	89
Fearful	26 (0.9)	6 (-0.9)			32
Preoccupied	13 (1.1)	2 (-1.1)			15
Dismissing	15 (-1.2)	8 (1.2)			23
Total	120	39			159

*Note.* Adjusted standardized residuals appear in parentheses below group frequencies.

Table 6. Crosstabulation of Race (White vs. Non-White) and Partner Gender (Male vs. Female) ( $N = 166$ )

Race	Partner Gender		$X^2$	$p$	Total
	Male	Female			
White	109 (-1.0)	37 (1.0)	1.029	.310	146
Non-White	17 (1.0)	3 (-1.0)			20
Total	126	40			166

*Note.* Adjusted standardized residuals appear in parentheses below group frequencies.



Table 7. Crosstabulation of Attachment Style (Secure vs. Insecure) and Partner Gender (Male vs. Female) ( $N = 159$ )

Attachment Style	Partner Gender		$X^2$	$p$	Total
	Male	Female			
Secure	66 (-0.4)	23 (0.4)	.189	.664	89
Insecure	54 (0.4)	16 (-0.4)			70
Total	120	39			159

*Note.* Adjusted standardized residuals appear in parentheses below group frequencies.

Table 8. Crosstabulation of Children (Yes vs. No) and Partner Gender (Male vs. Female) ( $N = 166$ )

Children	Partner Gender		$X^2$	$p$	Total
	Male	Female			
Yes	46 (3.5)	3 (-3.5)	12.280	.000***	49
No	80 (-3.5)	37 (3.5)			117
Total	126	40			166

*Note:* \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ . Adjusted standardized residuals appear in parentheses below group frequencies.

Table 9. Crosstabulation of Geographical Location (South vs. Non-South) and Partner Gender (Male vs. Female) ( $N = 165$ )

Geographical Location	Partner Gender		$X^2$	$p$	Total
	Male	Female			
South	98 (0.4)	30 (-0.4)	.201	.654	128

Non-South	27 (-0.4)	10 (0.4)	37
Total	125	40	165

*Note.* Adjusted standardized residuals appear in parentheses below group frequencies.

Table 10. Crosstabulation of Marital Status (Yes vs. No) and Partner Gender Groups (Male vs. Female) ( $N = 166$ )

Marital Status	Partner Gender Groups		$X^2$	$p$	Total
	Male	Female			
Yes	86 (2.6)	18 (-2.6)	7.016	.008**	104
No	40 (-2.6)	22 (2.6)			62
Total	126	40			166

*Note:* \*\* $p < .01$ . Adjusted standardized residuals appear in parentheses below group frequencies.

Table 11. Summary of Intercorrelations among Key Study Variables ( $N = 166$ )

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Relationship Satisfaction	--	.682**	.642**	-.319**	-.128	.007	-.169*	.063	.012	.048	-.143
2. Sexual Satisfaction	--	--	.544**	-.390**	-.179*	-.094	-.163*	.034	.133	-.075	.029
3. Relationship Commitment	--	--	--	-.334**	-.089	.142	-.043	-.069	.091	.150	.005
4. Attachment Anxiety	--	--	--	--	.576**	-.298**	-.169*	.059	.002	-.277**	.129
5. Attachment Avoidance	--	--	--	--	--	-.074	-.002	.054	-.044	-.095	.174*
6. Relationship											

Length	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	.671**	-.017	-.048	.469**	-.022
7. Age	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	.080	-.101	.302**	-.044	
8. Children	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	.032	-.254**	-.044	
9. Geographic Location	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	-.027	.200*	
10. Marital Status	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	.018
11. Race	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

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Note: \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .001$

Hypotheses 1 and 2 were tested using five separate OLS regression analyses in order to determine the ability of partner gender to predict (1) relationship satisfaction, (2) relationship commitment, (3) sexual satisfaction, (4) attachment-related avoidance, and (5) attachment-related anxiety. Partner gender was coded 0 for women currently partnered with a man and 1 for women currently partnered with another woman. Results of each analysis are reported in Tables 12, 13, 14, 15, and 16, respectively. Results revealed no statistically significant effects of any of the following key study variables: (1) relationship commitment,  $F(1, 164) = 1.55, p = .215, R^2 = .009$ , (2) sexual satisfaction,  $F(1, 164) = 1.75, p = .187, R^2 = .011$ , (3) attachment-related avoidance,  $F(1, 164) = .547, p = .461, R^2 = .003$ , or (4) attachment-related anxiety,  $F(1, 164) = .000, p = .995, R^2 = .000$ . However, a significant regression equation was found,  $F(1, 164) = 4.63, p < .05$ , with an  $R^2$  of .027. Results suggested that those women currently partnered with women (coded as 1) had a significantly higher score on the RAS compared to those women currently partnered with men (coded as 0). That is, the former group tended to rate their relationship satisfaction levels 1.91 units higher on the RAS scale, on average, compared to the latter group.

Table 12. Summary of Ordinary Least Squares Regression Analysis for Partner Gender  
Predicting Relationship Satisfaction among Women ( $N = 166$ )

Variable	B	SE(B)	$\beta$	$t$	Sig.( $p$ )
Relationship satisfaction	1.91	.886	.166	2.15	.033*

*Note:* \* =  $p < 0.05$   
 $R^2 = .027$

Table 13. Summary of Ordinary Least Squares Regression Analysis for Partner Gender  
Predicting Relationship Commitment among Women ( $N = 166$ )

Variable	B	SE(B)	$\beta$	$t$	Sig.( $p$ )
Relationship commitment	2.72	2.18	.097	1.25	.215

*Note:* \* =  $p < 0.05$   
 $R^2 = .009$

Table 14. Summary of Ordinary Least Squares Regression Analysis for Partner Gender  
Predicting Sexual Satisfaction among Women ( $N = 166$ )

Variable	B	SE(B)	$\beta$	$t$	Sig.( $p$ )
Sexual satisfaction	5.33	4.02	.103	1.32	.187

*Note:* \* =  $p < 0.05$   
 $R^2 = .011$

Table 15. Summary of Ordinary Least Squares Regression Analysis for Partner Gender  
Predicting Attachment-Related Avoidance among Women ( $N = 166$ )

Variable	B	SE(B)	$\beta$	$t$	Sig.( $p$ )
Attachment-related avoidance	.119	.162	-.058	.740	.461

*Note:* \* =  $p < 0.05$   
 $R^2 = .001$

Table 16. Summary of Ordinary Least Squares Regression Analysis for Partner Gender  
Predicting Attachment-Related Anxiety among Women ( $N = 166$ )

Variable	B	SE(B)	$\beta$	$t$	Sig.( $p$ )
Attachment-related anxiety	-.001	.192	-.000	-.006	.995

*Note:* \* =  $p < 0.05$   
 $R^2 = .000$

Hypothesis 2 was also tested using three separate sets of hierarchical multiple regression analyses in order to investigate partner gender as a predictor of (1) relationship satisfaction, (2) sexual satisfaction, and (3) relationship commitment, while simultaneously controlling for demographic variables (e.g., relationship length, age, children, geographical location, marital status, and race) as well as attachment dimensions (e.g., attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance) for each individual set of analyses. Prior to conducting a hierarchical multiple regression, the relevant assumptions of this statistical analysis were tested. Firstly, a sample of 166 was deemed adequate given nine independent variables to be included in the analysis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). An examination of correlations (Table 17) revealed the following significant associations emerged among the independent variables: (1) relationship

length was positively associated with age ( $r = .671, p < .01$ ) and positively associated with marital status ( $r = .469, p < .000$ ), and negatively associated with attachment-related anxiety ( $r = -.298, p < .000$ ) and partner gender ( $r = -.166, p < .05$ ); (2) age was positively associated with marital status ( $r = .302, p < .000$ ) and negatively associated with attachment-related anxiety ( $r = -.169, p < .05$ ); (3) children was negatively associated with marital status ( $r = -.254, p < .01$ ); (3) geographic location was positively associated with race ( $r = .200, p < .01$ ); (4) marital status was negatively associated with partner gender ( $r = -.206, p < .01$ ) and negatively associated with attachment-related anxiety ( $r = -.277, p < .000$ ); (5) and attachment-related anxiety was positively associated with attachment-related avoidance ( $r = .576, p < .01$ ). Moreover, as no correlation over .80 emerged between the predictor variables, and as the collinearity statistics (i.e., Variation Inflation Factors [VIFs], which quantifies the severity of multicollinearity within an OLS regression analysis) were all within accepted limits (i.e., less than 10), there was no evidence of multicollinearity within the study (Coakes, 2005).

Three individual sets of hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted using partner gender, attachment avoidance, attachment anxiety, relationship length, age, children, geographical location, marital status, and race as predictors in order to assess for relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and relationship commitment between both groups of women. Within the first set of hierarchical multiple regression analyses, *relationship satisfaction* was the dependent variable. At stage one, all demographic variables (e.g., relationship length, age, children, geographical location, marital status, and race) were entered. This model was not statistically significant,  $F(6, 150) = 1.879; p = .088$ , with an  $R^2$  of .070. That is, the demographic variables only explained 7.0% of the variance in relationship satisfaction (see Table 18). At stage two of the regression, partner gender, attachment anxiety, and attachment

avoidance were entered into the model, which explained an additional 10.3% of variation in relationship satisfaction, and this change in  $R^2$  was significant,  $F(9, 147) = 2.993, p < .01$ , with an  $R^2$  of .155. The most important predictor of relationship satisfaction was age as it recorded the largest Beta value ( $\beta = -.319, p < .01$ ), followed by attachment-related anxiety ( $\beta = -.285, p < .01$ ), and then partner gender ( $\beta = .159, p = .054$ ), although partner gender was technically not a statistically significant contributor to the model as it recorded a  $p$ -value of .054. Taken together, this model purports that, in particular, age and attachment-related anxiety accounted for more than 17% of relationship satisfaction in women, with the remaining predictor variables (e.g., children, geographic location, marital status, race, partner gender, and attachment-related avoidance) contributing little to that explanation. Variance inflation factors (VIFs) were also computed simultaneously with the hierarchical multiple regression to assess for issues concerning multicollinearity. Because no VIFs were over 10, multicollinearity was not considered a problem for these data (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2012).

Within the second set of hierarchical multiple regression analyses, *sexual satisfaction* was treated as the dependent variable. At stage one, all demographic variables (e.g., relationship length, age, children, geographical location, marital status, and race) were entered. This model was not statistically significant,  $F(6, 150) = 1.31; p = .257$ , with an  $R^2$  of .050. That is, the demographic study variables accounted only for 5% of the variance in sexual satisfaction (see Table 19). At stage two of the regression, partner gender, attachment avoidance, and attachment anxiety were entered into the model, which explained an additional 16.7% of variation in sexual satisfaction, and this change in  $R^2$  was significant,  $F(9, 147) = 4.47, p < .000$ , with an  $R^2$  of .215. The most important predictor of sexual satisfaction was attachment-related anxiety as it recorded the largest Beta value ( $\beta = -.478, p < .000$ ). Taken together, this model purports that, in

particular, attachment-related anxiety accounted for more than 26% the variance in sexual satisfaction in women, with the remaining predictor variables (e.g., children, geographic location, marital status, race, partner gender, and attachment-related avoidance) contributing little to that explanation. Variance inflation factors (*VIFs*) were also computed simultaneously with the hierarchical multiple regression to assess for issues concerning multicollinearity. Because no *VIFs* were over 10, multicollinearity was not considered a problem for these data (Tabachinick & Fidell, 2012).

Lastly, a two-stage hierarchical multiple regression was conducted with *relationship commitment* as the dependent variable. At stage one, all demographic variables (e.g., relationship length, age, children, geographical location, marital status, and race) were entered. This model was not statistically significant,  $F(6, 150) = 1.52; p = .175$ , with an  $R^2$  of .057. That is, the demographic study variables only accounted for 5.7% of the variance in relationship commitment (see Table 20). At stage two of the regression, partner gender, attachment-related anxiety, and attachment-related avoidance were entered into the model, which explained an additional 12.4% of the variation in relationship commitment, and this change in  $R^2$  was significant,  $F(9, 147) = 3.46, p < .001$ , with an  $R^2$  of .175. The most important predictor of relationship commitment was attachment-related anxiety as it recorded the largest Beta value ( $\beta = -.362, p < .000$ ), with the second most important predictor being partner gender value ( $\beta = .167, p < .05$ ). Taken together, this model purports that, in particular, attachment-related anxiety and partner gender accounted for more than 23% of relationship commitment in women, with the remaining predictor variables (e.g., children, geographic location, marital status, race, and attachment-related avoidance) contributing little to that explanation. Variance inflation factors (*VIFs*) were also computed simultaneously with the hierarchical multiple regression to assess for



issues concerning multicollinearity. Because no VIFs were over 10, multicollinearity was not considered a problem for these data (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2012).

Table 17. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Predictor Variables ( $N = 166$ )

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Relationship Length	--	.671**	-.017	-.048	.469**	-.022	-.166*	-.298**	-.074
2. Age	--	--	.080	-.101	.302**	-.044	-.006	-.169*	-.002
3. Children	--	--	--	.032	-.254**	-.044	.272**	.059	.054
4. Geographic Location	--	--	--	--	-.027	.200*	-.035	.002	-.044
5. Marital Status	--	--	--	--	--	.018	-.206*	-.277**	-.095
6. Race	--	--	--	--	--	--	-.079	.129	.174
7. Partner Gender	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	.000	.058
8. Anxiety	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	.576**
9. Avoidance	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
<i>Means</i>	112.52	36.72	1.71	.78	.63	.12	.24	2.48	2.58
<i>Standard Deviations</i>	109.19	11.60	.458	.418	.485	.327	.429	1.05	.89

Note. Statistical significance: \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

Table 18. Hierarchical Regression Model of Relationship Satisfaction ( $N = 166$ )

	$R$	$R^2$	$R^2$ Change	$B$	$SE$	$\beta$	$t$
<b>Step 1</b>	.264	.070					
Relationship Length				.005	.004	.126	1.118
Age				-.119	.041	-.314	.289**
Children				1.27	.825	.129	1.54
Geographic Location				-1.28	1.14	-.091	-1.13

Marital Status				-0.300	.231	-.123	-1.30
Race				-1.28	1.14	-.091	-1.13
<b>Step 2</b>	.394	.155	.164**				
Relationship Length				-.027	.021	-.138	-1.27
Age				-.249	.189	-.135	1.32
Children				2.52	3.81	.053	.660
Geographic Location				5.49	.388	.107	1.41
Marital Status				.152	1.07	.013	.142
Race				5.83	3.89	.107	1.41
Partner Gender				2.30	3.89	.047	.589
Anxiety				-9.73	1.20	-.468	-4.89***
Avoidance				2.00	2.22	.083	.895

*Note. Statistical significance: \*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001*

Table 19. Hierarchical Regression Model of Sexual Satisfaction ( $N = 166$ )

	$R$	$R^2$	$R^2$ Change	$B$	$SE$	$\beta$	$t$
<b>Step 1</b>	.226	.051					
Relationship Length				-.005	.022	-.025	-.221
Age				-.302	.203	-.163	-1.49
Children				3.68	4.05	.077	.909
Geographic Location				6.06	4.19	.118	1.45
Marital Status				-.723	1.13	-.061	-.637
Race				3.23	5.58	.047	.579
<b>Step 2</b>	.461	.215	.167**				

Relationship Length	.003	.004	.087	.772
Age	-.249	.187	-.135	-1.34
Children	.858	.813	.087	1.06
Geographic Location	-.163	.827	-.015	-.197
Marital Status	-.234	.228	-.096	-1.03
Race	-.886	1.13	-.062	-.785
Partner Gender	1.61	.828	.159	1.94
Anxiety	-9.94	2.00	-.478	-4.96***
Avoidance	.388	.499	.070	.778

Note. Statistical significance: \*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001

Table 20. Hierarchical Regression Model of Relationship Commitment (N = 166)

	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> Change	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>
<b>Step 1</b>	.239	.057					
Relationship Length				.042	.019	.249	2.20*
Age				-.368	.178	-.226	-2.06*
Children				-1.85	3.57	-.044	-.520
Geographic Location				2.19	3.69	.048	.595
Marital Status				-.744	.998	-.071	-.746
Race				1.43	4.91	.023	.290
<b>Step 2</b>	.418	.175	.124***				
Relationship Length				.033	.019	.196	1.76
Age				-.378	.171	-.231	-2.21*
Children				-3.74	3.45	-.089	-1.09

Geographic Location	2.24	3.51	.049	.638
Marital Status	-.380	.964	-.036	-.394
Race	2.95	4.78	.048	.616
Partner Gender	7.24	3.51	.167	2.06*
Anxiety	-6.65	1.80	-.362	-3.69***
Avoidance	2.39	2.01	.113	1.19

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*Note. Statistical significance: \*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001*

Hypothesis 3 was tested using simple linear regression analyses in order to predict relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, and sexual satisfaction based on two individual dimensions of attachment identity (i.e., attachment-related avoidance and attachment-related anxiety). Prior to conducting the linear regression analyses, the relevant assumptions of this statistical analysis were tested. Firstly, a sample of 166 was deemed adequate given two independent variables (e.g., attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety) to be included in the analysis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). Moreover, scatterplots (displayed in Figures 1 thru 6) were created to show linear relationships between the variables as well as homoscedasticity of the data in order to meet the necessary assumptions.

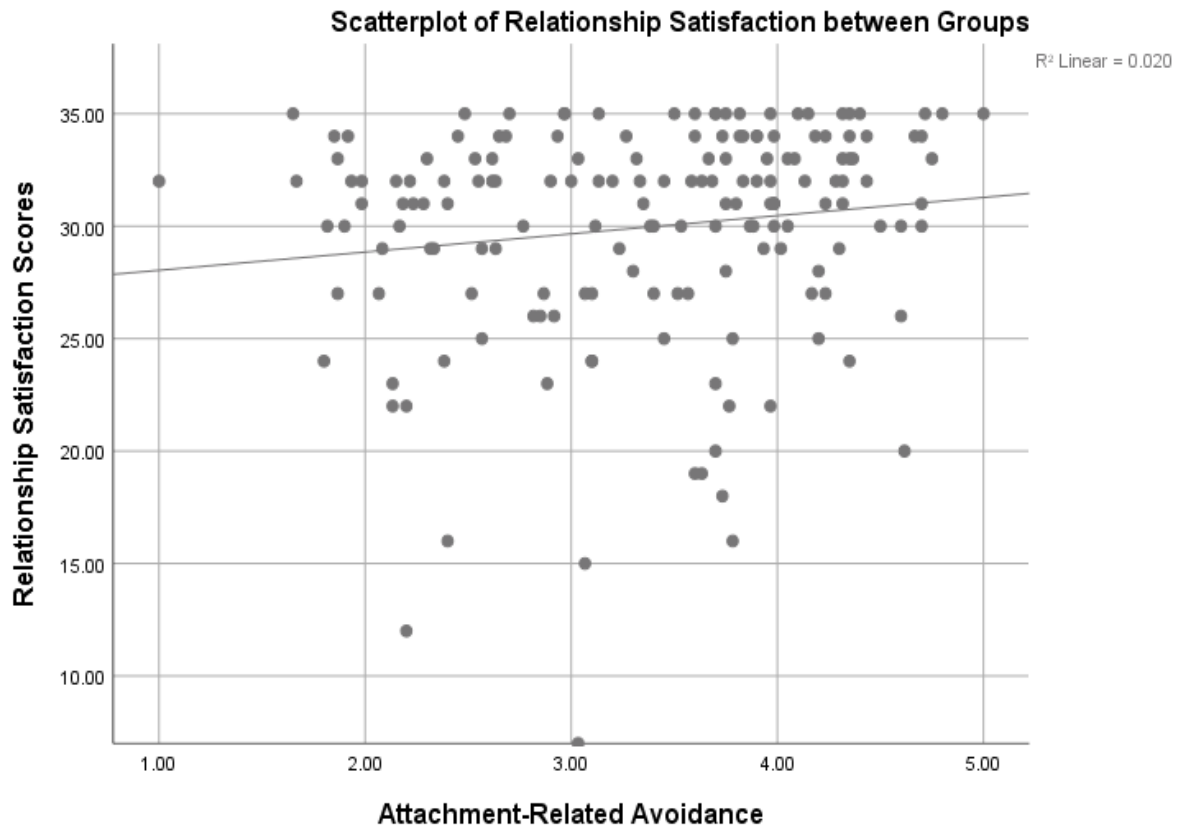
Attachment-related avoidance successfully predicted sexual satisfaction,  $F(1, 164) = 5.43, p < .05; R^2 = .179; 032$  (see Table 21) between both groups of women in that a negative correlation between sexual satisfaction and attachment-related avoidance emerged. That is, women tended to rate their sexual satisfaction about 4.48 points lower, on average, on the SSS-W for each unit increase in the avoidance dimension of the RAAS, regardless of their partner's gender. Attachment-related avoidance therefore explained almost 18% of the variance in sexual satisfaction in women, regardless of their partner's gender.. Attachment-related anxiety

successfully predicted sexual satisfaction ( $F(1, 164) = 29.36, p < .000; R^2 = .152$ ) between both groups of women in that a negative correlation between sexual satisfaction and attachment-related anxiety emerged. That is, women tended to rate their sexual satisfaction about 8.23 points lower, on average, on the SSS-W for each unit increase in the anxiety dimension of the RAAS, regardless of their partner's gender. Attachment-related anxiety therefore explained over 15% of the variance in sexual satisfaction in women.

Attachment-related anxiety successfully predicted relationship satisfaction,  $F(1, 164) = 18.56, p < .05; R^2 = .102$  (see Table 22) between both groups of women in that an inverse relationship between relationship satisfaction and attachment-related anxiety emerged. That is, relationship satisfaction decreased 1.50 points, on average, on the RAS for each unit increase in the anxiety dimension of the RAAS, regardless of the partner's gender. Attachment-related anxiety therefore explained over 10% of the variance in relationship satisfaction in women. Attachment-related avoidance, on the other hand, did not successfully predict relationship satisfaction ( $F(1, 164) = 2.71, p = .102; R^2 = .016$  among women).

Attachment-related anxiety also successfully predicted relationship commitment,  $F(1, 164) = 20.53, p < .000; R^2 = .111; 099$  (see Table 23) between both groups of women in that an inverse relationship between relationship commitment and attachment-related anxiety. That is, relationship commitment decreased 6.17 points, on average, on the STLS for each unit increase in the anxiety dimension of the RAAS, regardless of their romantic partner's gender. Women therefore tended to have lower levels of relationship commitment as their attachment-related anxiety increased, regardless of their romantic partner's gender. Attachment-related anxiety therefore explained over 11% of the variance in relationship commitment in women.

, (Attachment-related avoidance, on the other hand, did not successfully predict relationship commitment ( $F(1, 164) = 1.32, p = .253; R^2 = .008$  among women).



*Figure 1.* Scatterplot of relationship satisfaction based on attachment-related avoidance between both groups.

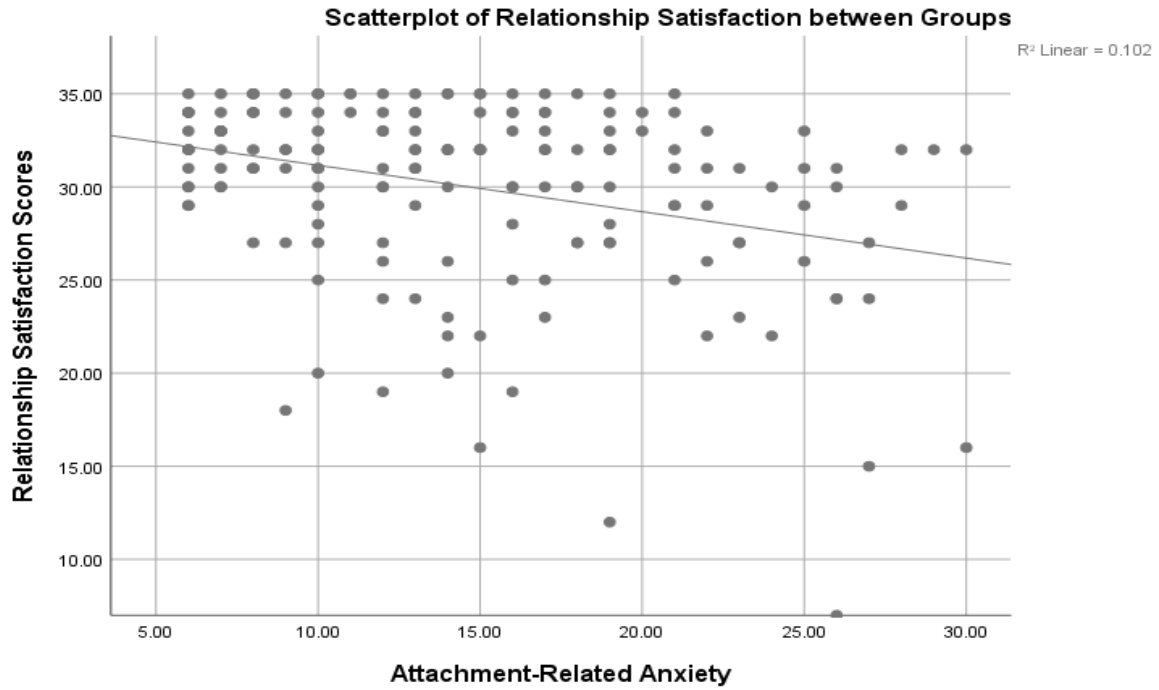


Figure 2. Scatterplot of relationship satisfaction based on attachment-related anxiety between both groups.

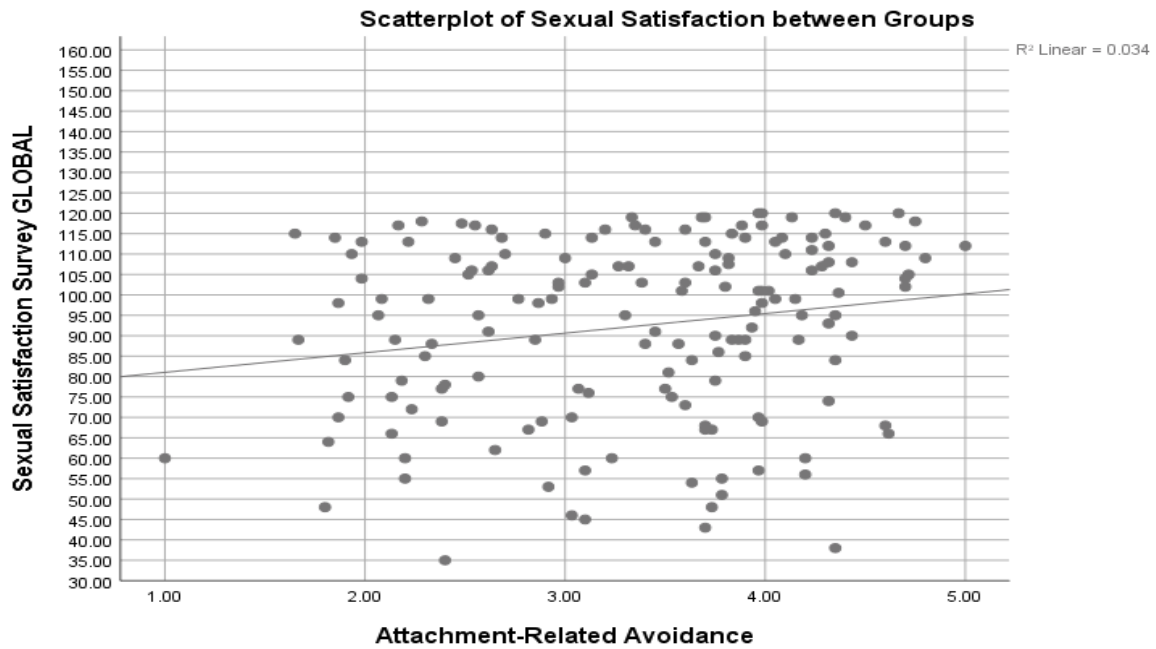


Figure 3. Scatterplot of sexual satisfaction based on attachment-related avoidance between both groups.

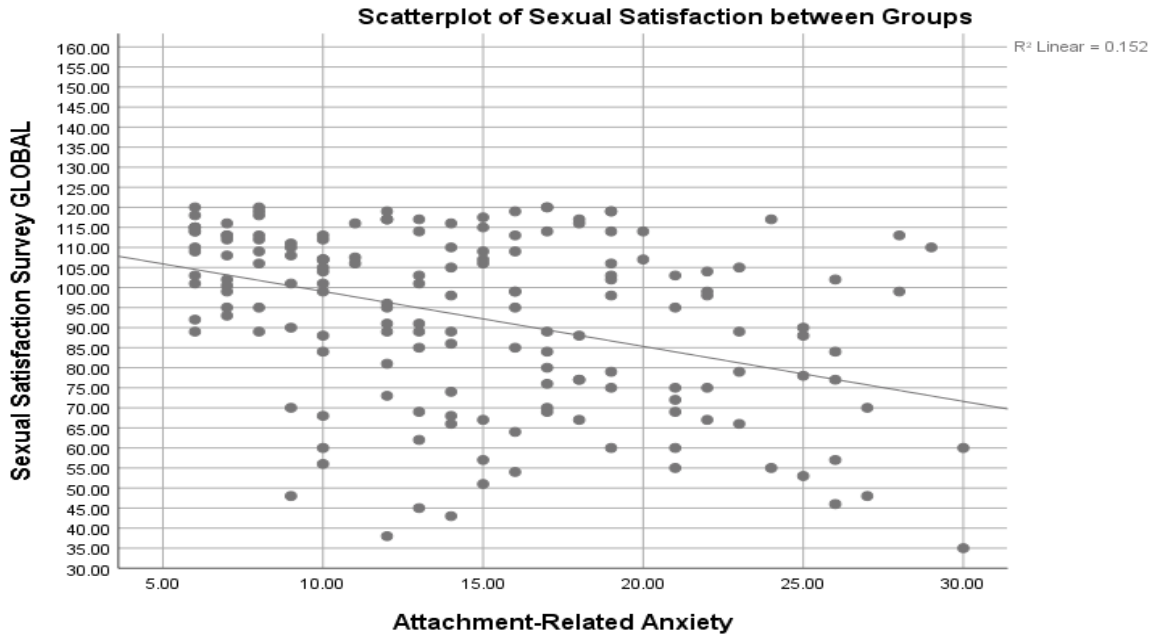


Figure 4. Scatterplot of sexual satisfaction based on attachment-related anxiety between both groups.



Figure 5. Scatterplot of relationship commitment based on attachment-related avoidance between both groups.



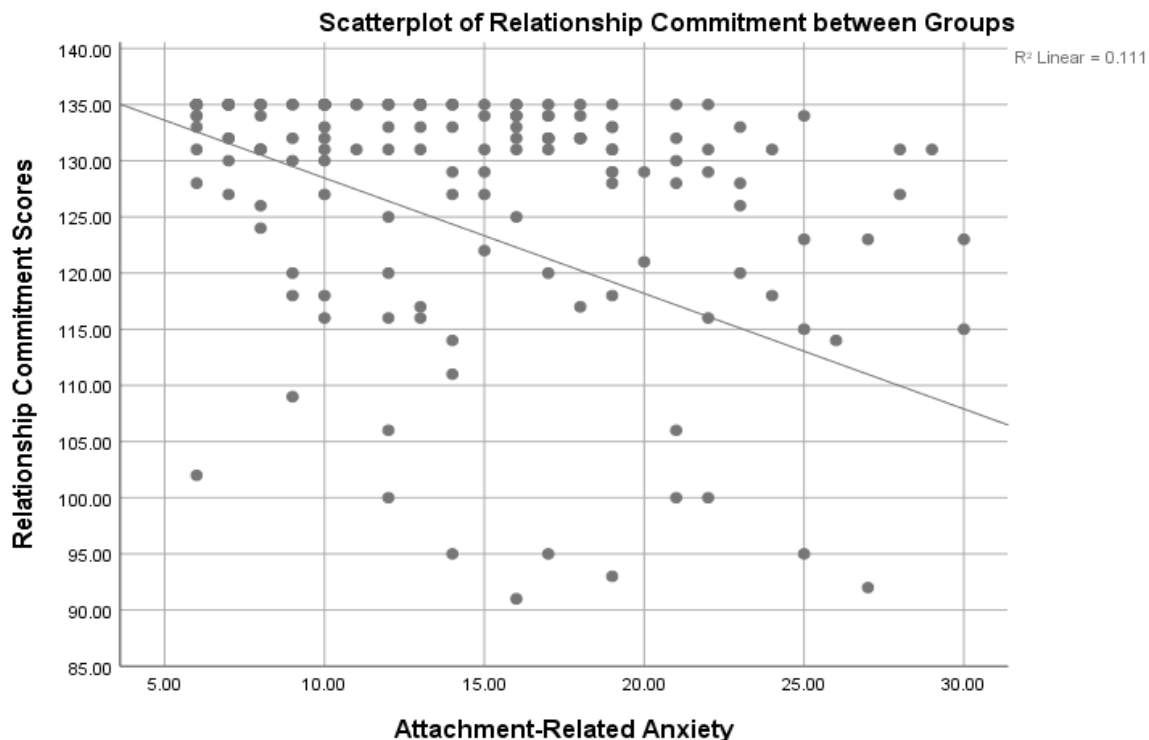


Figure 6. Scatterplot of relationship commitment based on attachment-related anxiety between both groups.

Table 21. Summary of Simple Linear Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Sexual Satisfaction among Women ( $N = 166$ )

Independent Variable	B	SE B	$\beta$	$t$	$p$
Attachment-related avoidance	-4.48	1.92	-.179	-2.33	.021**
Attachment-related anxiety	-8.23	1.52	-.390	-5.42	.000***

Note: \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

Table 22. Summary of Simple Linear Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Relationship Satisfaction among Women ( $N = 166$ )

Independent Variable	B	SE B	$\beta$	$t$	$p$
Attachment-related avoidance	-.708	.430	-.128	-1.65	.102
Attachment-related anxiety	-1.50	.350	-.320	-4.30	.000***

Note: \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

Table 23. Summary of Simple Linear Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Relationship Commitment among Women ( $N = 166$ )

Independent Variable	B	SE B	$\beta$	$t$	$p$
Attachment-related avoidance	-1.95	1.70	-.089	-1.15	.253
Attachment-related anxiety	-6.17	1.36	-.334	-4.53	.000***

Note: \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Hypothesis 4 was tested by conducting correlational analyses between two independent groups (e.g., women partnered with women and women partnered with men) to compare mean differences in relationship commitment, sexual satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction. Among women partnered with women, results (reported in Table 24) revealed that relationship satisfaction was significantly, positively associated with sexual satisfaction ( $r = .583, p < .01$ ) as well as with relationship commitment ( $r = .635, p < .01$ ). Sexual satisfaction was also positively associated with relationship commitment ( $r = .426, p < .01$ ) among women partnered with women. Among women partnered with men, on the other hand, results (reported in Table 25) revealed that relationship satisfaction was significantly, positively associated with sexual satisfaction ( $r = .701, p < .01$ ) as well as with relationship commitment ( $r = .637, p < .01$ ).

Sexual satisfaction was also positively associated with relationship commitment ( $r = .565, p < .01$ ) among women partnered with men.

Table 24. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Key Variables among Women Partnered with Women ( $n = 40$ )

Variables	1	2	3
1. Relationship satisfaction	--	.583**	.635**
2. Sexual satisfaction	--	--	.426**
3. Relationship commitment	--	--	--
<i>Means</i>	31.40	96.41	127.25
<i>Standard Deviations</i>	3.17	20.18	10.76

*Note. Statistical significance: \*\*p < .01*

Table 25. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Key Variables among Women Partnered with Men ( $n = 126$ )

Variables	1	2	3
1. Relationship satisfaction	--	.701**	.637**
2. Sexual satisfaction	--	--	.565**
3. Relationship commitment	--	--	--
<i>Means</i>	29.49	91.09	122.27
<i>Standard Deviations</i>	5.31	22.75	21.39

*Note. Statistical significance: \*\*p < .01*

## CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

This study investigated relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and relationship commitment among 166 women while simultaneously using attachment as an underlying concept in order to understand any differences between the two groups based on partner gender (i.e., women partnered with women vs. women partnered with men). The results of this study indicate that those women who reported higher rates of relationship satisfaction also tended to report higher levels of relationship commitment and sexual satisfaction, regardless of their partner's gender. While prior research documents an association between relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, and sexual satisfaction among heterosexual couples, this study's findings not only demonstrated that similar associations in relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, and sexual satisfaction occur among women within same-sex relationships, but also that women within same-sex relationships tend to rate their overall relationship satisfaction more highly compared to women within opposite-sex relationships. This study also investigated differences in attachment styles (secure vs. insecure) as well as attachment dimensions (anxiety and avoidance) among women based on their partner's gender (women partnered with women vs. women partnered with men). As expected, results revealed that partner gender was independent of attachment style as well as attachment dimensions. This study also examined the effects of attachment dimensions (e.g., attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance) on relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, and sexual satisfaction in both groups of women. The results of this study indicate that attachment-related anxiety, in particular, predicts overall lower levels of relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, and sexual satisfaction in both groups of women, whereas attachment-related avoidance predicts overall lower levels of only sexual satisfaction in both groups. While previous

research documents associations between attachment dimensions and relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, and sexual satisfaction among women within heterosexual relationships, this study's findings demonstrated that similar associations between relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, sexual satisfaction, and attachment dimensions, specifically, attachment-related anxiety, occur among women within same-sex relationships.

The rates of SMW within this study were relatively consistent compared to those rates found within previous reports and studies. That is, 36.2% ( $n = 60$ ) of the sample within the current study self-identified as either lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, or same-sex attracted, whereas samples within previously published reports on the same topic were comprised of approximately 35% to 45% of SMW (Brashier & Hughes, 2012; Cusack et al., 2012). However, it should be noted that categorizing women based on the gender of their romantic partner assigns a relatively lower percentage of women into the SMW category (i.e., 24% within the current study) compared to the average 35% to 45% of SMW samples utilized within previous studies (Cusack et al., 2012).

Furthermore, the frequencies of three styles of insecure attachment (e.g., preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful), in particular, were relatively consistent between both groups when compared to those rates found within previous reports that examined attachment style differences among SMW and their heterosexual counterparts (Ridge & Feeney, 1998). For instance, although extremely limited in number, previously published reports found relatively similar percentages of fearful attachment styles among heterosexual women compared to the current study's findings (23% vs. 21.7%, respectively). When compared to fearful attachment styles among SMW women, previous articles report about 22% of SMW exhibiting a fearful attachment style, compared to the current study's findings of 15.4% of SMW. Moreover,

previous reports suggest similar rates of preoccupied attachment styles among heterosexual women compared to the current study's findings (11% vs. 10.8%, respectively). When compared to preoccupied attachment styles among SMW women, previous articles (Ridge & Feeney, 1998) report about 11% of SMW exhibiting a preoccupied attachment style, compared to the current study's findings of 5.1% of SMW. Previous reports also found similar frequencies of dismissing attachment styles among heterosexual women compared to the current study's findings (19% vs. 12.5%, respectively). When compared to dismissing attachment styles among SMW women, previous articles found about 25% of SMW exhibiting a dismissing attachment style, compared to the current study's findings of 20.5% of SMW. However, the percentage breakdown in rates of secure levels of attachment was relatively inconsistent with previous literature specifically as it pertains to SMW participants but not as it pertains to heterosexual women participants. That is, previous reports suggest about 48% of heterosexual women exhibit secure styles of attachment compared to the current study's findings of 55% of heterosexual women, which is relatively consistent with previous published reports. Conversely, there was a relatively higher level of SMW participants exhibiting secure styles of attachment within the current study compared to previously published findings (59% vs. 41%, respectively).

As hypothesized, partner gender was independent of attachment styles (secure vs. insecure) and attachment dimensions (e.g., attachment-related avoidance and attachment-related anxiety; hypothesis 1). Specifically, women reported non-significant differences in attachment-related avoidance and in attachment-related anxiety based on the gender of their current romantic partner. Although previous research assessing for differences in attachment dimensions between SMW and their heterosexual counterparts is extremely limited in quantity, this non-significant finding appears to be consistent with those earlier reports (Ridge & Feeney, 1998). One reason

for this non-significant finding may be indicative of openness with regard to one's sexuality. Thus, it is important to note that the vast majority of the SMW sample within the current study was recruited via convenience-based sampling techniques. That is, women who were partnered with another woman may subsequently be less "closeted" than other SMW, and, therefore, may adopt an overall secure level of attachment. That is, previous research suggests that sexual minority individuals who are relatively open about their sexual identity within their everyday lives tend to report higher levels of emotional support from social networks and, subsequently, lower levels of attachment-related avoidance and attachment-related anxiety compared to sexual minority individuals who are less open regarding their sexuality (Mohr & Fassinger, 2003). Another reason for this non-significant finding within the current study may be due to the relatively high percentage of women (56%) within the sample who exhibited a secure attachment style. Indeed, both groups of women scored relatively low on both the attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance dimensions regardless of their partner's gender, suggesting that both groups of women tended to exhibit overall secure attachment styles.

The second hypothesis, that partner gender will predict relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and relationship commitment, was partially supported, as evidenced by a significant correlation that emerged between women's partner gender and relationship satisfaction (hypothesis 2.1). That is, those women currently partnered with another woman tended to rate their overall relationship satisfaction more highly compared to those women currently partnered with a man. Although the majority of relationship satisfaction research has been conducted within a heteronormative context and therefore utilized only heterosexual samples, this finding is consistent with the limited number of previously published reports that examine relationship satisfaction differences among lesbian and heterosexual couples (Kurdek, 2008). This finding

may be due to the notion that women tend to exhibit more effective communication styles as well as higher levels of stereotypically feminine dispositional characteristics (e.g., kindness, gentleness, and understanding) compared to their male counterparts. Utilizing positive communication as well as such dispositional characteristics, or “trait expressiveness” (Miller et al., 2003, p. 978), may be particularly effective when resolving relationship-based conflict (Gottman et al., 2003). Adopting these characteristics within romantic contexts has, indeed, been previously linked with higher levels of relationship satisfaction (Miller, Caughlin, & Huston, 2003). An additional explanation for the positive association found within the current study between partner gender and relationship satisfaction may be reflective of the various environmental stressors experienced by women within same-sex relationships. That is, some researchers (Taylor, 2006) argue that environmental stressors experienced by sexual minorities, such as discrimination and stigma, may actually affect their relationships positively. This extends to the tend-and-befriend stress response theory (Taylor et al., 2000), which purports that experiencing stressful events is generally associated with seeking and/or providing social support in order to combat perceived threats. This, in turn, may subsequently improve overall relationship functioning, particularly as it pertains to sexual minority groups.

Moreover, women partnered with other women did not report significantly different rates of sexual satisfaction compared to women partnered with men (hypothesis 2.2). This is both consistent and inconsistent with previously published reports (Flynn, Lin, & Weinfurt, 2017; Henderson, Lehavot, & Simoni, 2009; Sprecher, 2002), the findings of which are contradictory in nature. Specifically, some previous studies (Henderson et al., 2009) suggest SMW tend to score significantly higher on subscales relating to sexual desire, arousal, frequency, and pleasure compared to their heterosexual counterparts, indicating overall higher levels of sexual



satisfaction compared to heterosexual women. On the other hand, other previously published reports (Flynn et al., 2017) indicate no significant differences in sexual satisfaction between SMW and heterosexual women. The reason for the non-significant finding within the current study may be due to a number of theoretical and methodological reasons. First, both groups of women (e.g., women partnered with men and women partnered with women) rated their overall sexual satisfaction as moderately high on the SSS-W regardless of their romantic partner's gender. This may be one reason as to why there were no significant mean differences in sexual satisfaction between groups. Secondly, the current study did not assess for sexual traumatization histories of participants. Previous research (Balsam, Rothblum, & Beauchaine, 2005) indicates significant differences as it relates to lifetime victimization rates between LGB individuals and their heterosexual counterparts, where higher rates of both childhood sexual abuse (CSA) and physical victimization in adulthood occur among the former group. Moreover, previous studies (Birkley, Eckhardt, & Dykstra, 2016) suggest that exposure to sexual trauma tends to be associated with lower rates of sexual satisfaction. Thus, assessing for the prevalence of both groups' sexual victimization histories within the current study, and perhaps assessing such rates as moderators of sexual satisfaction, could prove to be helpful when understanding women's overall sexual satisfaction based on their partner's gender. Lastly, some theorists (Sprecher, 2002) argue that gendered identities, compared to sexual identities, are more influential and therefore predictive of sexual attitudes and behaviors. That is, some researchers purport that heterosexual women and SMW are more similar in their sexual attitudes and behaviors due to their shared gender, compared to the differences in sexual attitudes and behaviors between SMW and gay men or SMW and heterosexual men (Bailey et al., 1994). To that end, recent research (Barnett, Moore, Woolford, & Riggs, 2018) found sex differences as it relates to interest in

partner orgasm, an aspect within sexual relationships that is considered to be a predictor of overall satisfaction rates. That is, women tend to have higher interest and motivation to ensure their partner experiences an orgasm during sexual activity compared to their male counterparts (Barnett et al., 2008). Researchers attribute this explanation to both sociocultural factors and evolutionary theory. Specifically, from an evolutionary perspective, prior researchers argue that this higher interest may be indicative of reproductive motivation for women (who are partnered with men) given that, in the context of reproduction, the male orgasm is necessary for conception. Additionally, from a sociocultural standpoint, women have been socialized to seek higher levels of intimacy and assume caregiver roles (Fahs, 2011), which may, in turn, lead to prioritizing their partner's sexual needs, regardless of their partner's gender.

Women also did not report significant differences in relationship commitment based on their partner's gender (hypothesis 2.3). This non-significant finding is also both consistent and inconsistent with previous research, although such research is limited in quantity (Cusack et al., 2012; Kurdek, 2007). That is, whereas some previous studies report non-significant differences in relationship commitment between SMW and heterosexual women (Cusack et al., 2012), other findings (Kurdek, 2007) suggest SMW couples tend to rate their level of relationship commitment more highly compared to their heterosexual counterparts. The reason for the non-significant finding within the current study may be due to the fact that both groups of women (e.g., women partnered with men and women partnered with women) rated their overall relationship commitment highly on the commitment subscale within the STLS regardless of their partner's gender. Another reason for this departure may be due to the fact that, within the current study, both groups of women reported being within their current romantic relationships for relatively extended periods of time, with an average of over 10 years in both groups. Indeed,

previous literature (Ahmetoglu, Swami, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2010; Cusack et al., 2012) suggests a positive correlation between relationship length and relationship commitment, in that couples tend to rate their overall commitment to their relationship more highly as the duration of the relationship increases. Another potential explanation for the departure within the current study may also be attributed to the concept of internalized homophobia and discrimination, particularly as it relates to SMW. That is, prior research (Balsam et al., 2008) suggests that same-sex couples tend to experience discriminatory environmental stressors specifically related to their sexual-minority status that their heterosexual counterparts do not experience. Such stressors may subsequently negatively impact relationship commitment. Thus, examining the rates of internalized homophobia and discrimination among women who are currently partnered with other women, and perhaps assessing such variables as potential moderators within the current study, might have proven to be beneficial when understanding the lack of significant commitment rate differences among participants. That is, perhaps women who are partnered with women within the current study experience overall low levels of internalized homophobia and discrimination, which would therefore help to explain the lack of commitment differences between the two groups.

The third hypothesis within the study, that attachment dimensions (i.e., attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety) will be predictive of relationship satisfaction (hypothesis 3.1), sexual satisfaction (hypothesis 3.2), and relationship commitment (hypothesis 3.3) in both groups, was partially supported. Specifically, attachment-related anxiety was predictive of relationship satisfaction (hypothesis 3.1) in both groups, as expected, in that women with more anxious, and therefore more insecure, levels of attachment tended to rate their overall relationship satisfaction significantly lower compared to those with less anxious, and

subsequently, more secure, levels of attachment. This finding is consistent with previously published reports examining the effects of attachment-related anxiety within romantic relationships (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005). The reason for this significant finding within the current study can perhaps be attributed to the notion that anxiously-attached individuals are more likely to perceive distress or conflict within their romantic relationships compared to non-anxiously-attached individuals. Indeed, anxiously-attached individuals may sometimes perceive conflict within the relationship when no conflicts may even exist (Campbell et al., 2005). Previous research also indicates that more anxiously-attached individuals tend to believe that experiencing conflict has more damaging effects to the overall quality, and thus the satisfaction, of their romantic relationships compared to individuals who are not anxiously-attached. Attachment-related avoidance, on the other hand, did not predict overall relationship satisfaction (hypothesis 3.1) among either group of women. This finding is an altogether surprising one considering that findings from prior research (Feeney, 2008; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) suggest attachment-related avoidance tends to predict lower levels of relationship satisfaction among women. The reason for this departure within the current study may be attributed to a number of methodological reasons. That is, as it pertains to relationship research, there has been a recent uptick in published reports examining the effect of pathological aspects of personality on relationship satisfaction and outcomes (Knabb, Vogt, Gibbel, & Brickley, 2012; Naud et al., 2013). Specifically, empirical studies have examined character traits of the depressive-masochistic personality (DMP) in order to better understand how pathological aspects of personality impact relationship satisfaction and outcomes. Specifically, the DMP, which is an extension of the personality trait neuroticism, is characterized by high emotional dependency, punitively high standards of self, and aggressive reactions to the frustration of their dependency

needs that are often exhibited through depressive responses (Naud et al., 2013). Moreover, such masochistic characterizations within romantic relationships are more frequently observed in women (Kernberg, 1995) and have been found to negatively influence overall relationship quality particularly as it pertains to satisfaction rates among long-term relationships (Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005). Prior longitudinal research (Naud et al., 2013) has examined DMP and attachment dimensions as predictors of long-term satisfaction. Results suggest that initial relationship satisfaction (i.e., at year 1) was directly predicted by self-reported attachment avoidance among women with high DMP traits. However, attachment avoidance, in particular, was found to no longer significantly affect long-term relationship satisfaction when women exhibited particularly elevated DMP traits. The authors (Naud et al., 2013) attribute this lack of association to the possibility that attachment deactivating strategies among women with particularly elevated DMP traits are perhaps eliminated by the intensity of certain DMP trait patterns such as excessive frustration when their high expectations are not met. In turn, these women may have adopted distance maintenance strategies throughout the years in order to achieve homeostasis, intimacy, and commitment within their long-term relationships. That is, these women may find comfort in such relationships where intimacy is at optimal levels and not too high in order to keep women's DMP traits from reactivating and subsequently acting as a catalyst for relationship dissatisfaction. Indeed, the understanding of how pathological aspects of personality impact attachment dimensions in predicting long-term relationship satisfaction remains ambiguous. However, prior longitudinal studies examining the effects of DMP in addition to attachment dimensions on women's relationship satisfaction may explain the reason for the lack of significance in the association between attachment avoidance and relationship satisfaction within the current study. As such, examining the rates of DMP traits among women

within the current study, whose length of relationships lasted, on average, more than 10 years, could have perhaps assisted in explaining the interaction of attachment dimensions with pathological personality traits among women's overall satisfaction in long-term relationships.

As expected, attachment-related anxiety was also predictive of sexual satisfaction in both groups (hypothesis 3.2), as women with more anxious, and therefore more insecure, levels of attachment tended to rate their overall sexual satisfaction significantly lower compared to those women with less anxious, and, subsequently, more secure, levels of attachment. As expected, attachment-related avoidance was also predictive of sexual satisfaction in both groups (hypothesis 3.2), as women with more avoidant, and therefore more insecure, levels of attachment tended to rate their overall sexual satisfaction significantly lower compared to those women with less avoidant, and, subsequently, more secure, levels of attachment. Both of these findings are consistent with previous literature (Goldsmith, Dunkley, Dang, & Gorzalka, 2016) in that women who exhibit higher levels of attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance (e.g., insecure attachment styles) tend to report lower levels of sexual satisfaction. Thus, the reason for this finding may be attributed to the role of sexual communication within romantic relationships. In the context of romantic relationship, sexual communication refers to the negotiation of sexual activities between partners, including how, when, and where sexual activity will occur (Byers, 2011). Prior research (Davis et al., 2006) highlights the mediational role of sexual communication as it relates to the association of attachment dimensions and sexual satisfaction specifically as it pertains to women. That is, prior studies (Goldsmith et al., 2016) indicate that sexual communication is associated with both attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance among women, such that those women who exhibit higher anxious attachment and/or avoidant attachment tend to exhibit poorer sexual communication within their

relationships. Specifically, women high in attachment-related avoidance tend to be less likely to communicate with their romantic partners in general (Hazan & Shaver, 1987) in order to avoid intimacy. Women high in attachment-related anxiety, on the other hand, likely display lower levels of sexual communication in an effort to appease their concerns regarding acceptance from others. Thus, they may avoid communication so as to avoid any potential rejection or negative reactions from their partner. Therefore, in order to assess the strength of the association between attachment dimensions (e.g., anxiety and avoidance) and sexual satisfaction among both groups of women, future research examining sexual communication as a potential moderator is warranted.

Attachment-related anxiety also successfully predicted relationship commitment in both groups (hypothesis 3.3), as women with more anxious, and therefore more insecure, levels of attachment tended to rate their overall relationship commitment significantly lower compared to those women with less anxious, and, subsequently, more secure, levels of attachment. This finding is consistent with previous literature (Simpson, 1990; Slotter & Finkel, 2009) in that women with higher levels of anxious attachment tend to report overall lower levels of relationship commitment. The reason for this significant finding within the current study may be attributed to the underlying characteristics of attachment anxiety as it relates to individuals' poor working models of self and others as well as low felt security. That is, anxiously-attached individuals tend to desire acceptance and support from romantic partners; however, they tend to believe that they are undeserving of having their needs met. Thus, anxiously-attached individuals are often unwilling or unable to sustain romantic relationships and are often in relationships with shorter durations compared to individuals who are not anxiously attached (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). On the other hand, attachment-related avoidance did not successfully predict relationship

commitment in either groups of women (hypothesis 3.3). This finding is inconsistent with previous literature in that results, although limited in quantity and to some extent dated (Birnie, McClure, Lydon, & Holmberg, 2009; Kurdek, 1997), found attachment avoidance to be negatively associated with relationship commitment among women and to subsequently predict overall lower levels of commitment within such relationships. The reason for this departure within the current study may be due to methodological reasons. That is, prior research (Kurdek, 1997) examining the effects of attachment dimensions, and attachment avoidance, in particular, on relationship outcomes (e.g., relationship commitment) among both SMW and their heterosexual counterparts utilized the personality trait known as neuroticism. Neuroticism has been operationally defined within the literature (Kurdek, 1997) as the extent of being unable to effectively cope with stressful situations. Prior research suggests that an individual's depression tends to be inversely associated with one's overall commitment levels within relationships, and indicates that attachment dimensions successfully mediate the relationship between individual depression and relationship commitment (Kurdek, 1997). These findings are consistent with the view that when an individual experiences depression, she or he is more likely to develop unhealthy internal working models of the self and of others, subsequently diminishing her or his overall motivation to sustain the relationship over time. As it relates to the current study, examining the effects of neuroticism among both groups of women, particularly, rates of depression, could perhaps explain the reason for this departure.

The final hypothesis (hypothesis 4), that sexual satisfaction, relationship satisfaction, and relationship commitment will be significantly and positively correlated in both groups, was supported. That is, among women partnered with women, as participants reported higher overall sexual satisfaction, they also tended to report higher overall rates of relationship satisfaction and



relationship commitment. Additionally, among women partnered with men, as participants reported higher overall sexual satisfaction, they also tended to report higher overall rates of relationship satisfaction and relationship commitment. This result is consistent with previous literature in that sexual satisfaction has been found to be positively linked with both relationship satisfaction and relationship commitment among women within heterosexual relationships (Sprecher, 2002). Results of the current study therefore indicate that similar associations extend to women within same-sex relationships as well. Thus, those women who tend to report higher levels of relationship commitment and relationship satisfaction, in turn, tend to report higher levels of sexual satisfaction and vice-versa, regardless if they are partnered with a woman or partnered with a man. The findings within the current study may be attributed to the social exchange theory (Sprecher, 1998), which purports that sexual exchanges that are positive and balanced in nature tend to be correlated with relationship satisfaction rates and the desire to stay committed within the relationship over extended periods of time.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

There were several strengths to this study, including the examination of key study variables (e.g., attachment identity, relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and relationship commitment) among a particularly understudied population, SMW, and also among women based on their partner's gender. For instance, 96% of participants within a meta-analysis (Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010) of 137 studies assessing predictors of relationship dissolution, in particular, involved only heterosexual relationships. Just as alarming, prior research examining attachment identity among women as it pertains to differences across sexual orientations is also extremely limited in quantity. For example, 10 out of 11 studies within a recent meta-analysis (Karantzas et al., 2016) that examined the association of attachment

dimensions and sexual coercion involved heterosexual participants or did not explicitly state the sexual orientation of the participants. Additionally, the current study examined such variable differences not only among women as they relate to sexual orientation, but also among women based on their romantic partner's gender (regardless of women's self-identified sexual orientation). To the author's knowledge, the examination of such variables in relation to partner gender differences has thus far been conducted only among women partnered with men (as opposed to women partnered with women). By extension, although this study is generally exploratory in nature, it is the only known one assessing for attachment identity, relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, and sexual satisfaction differences and predictors between women based on partner gender, therefore further contributing to the gaps within the literature.

However, the limitations within this study should not go unnoticed. Specifically, this study's sample was not particularly diverse in regards to age, geographical location, race, or relationship length. Specifically, over 58% of the sample was between the ages of 25 and 39, over 86% self-identified as White, and over 56% reported being in their current relationship for at least 10 years. Moreover, over 75% of the sample reported residing within the Deep South, particularly within Southeastern Louisiana. The sociopolitical history of the deep southern region of the United States, particularly as it relates to diversity and prejudice, tend to produce uniquely oppressive circumstances for sexual minorities (Baunach, Burgess, & Muse, 2010) compared to those sexual minorities residing within more culturally progressive regions. The lack of geographical diversity among the sample may have impacted the findings of the current study, and as such, the study's findings should be interpreted with caution.

The lack of diversity within the sample is perhaps attributed to the study's utilization of convenience-based sampling methods (e.g., snowball sampling). Such sampling methods utilize

a nonrandom approach of selecting individuals on the basis of community networks, which may therefore lead to questionable representativeness of the sample and may subsequently undermine the researcher's ability to infer generalizations from the sample to the target population (Rubin & Babbie, 2011). Because a non-probability sampling approach was used, sampling error cannot be estimated; however, sampling error is possibly present in the current study, which subsequently affects representativeness of the sample and the ability to infer generalizations to the target population (Rubin & Babbie, 2011). Also, with regard to the methodology, the current study was cross-sectional in nature, which tends to limit the researcher's ability in determining causality and directionality of the study's results, as opposed to longitudinal studies.

Another limitation within the current study relating to the sample was the uneven sample sizes between groups (i.e., women partnered with women vs. women partnered with men). That is, although the percentage of same-sex relationships within the current study was only marginally less compared to prior studies (Brashier & Hughes, 2012; Cusack et al., 2012), future research examining differences between women based on partner gender should aim to utilize a more even percentage breakdown between groups in order to avoid potential differences in power and to ensure conclusions of equivalence (Rusticus & Lovato, 2014).

An additional limitation to this study involves the utilization of self-reported data. As such, the study's findings should be interpreted with caution given that self-reported data are, at times, accompanied by reliability issues, especially when studying concepts sensitive in nature, such as sexual identity, relationship satisfaction, and sexual satisfaction. Furthermore, the potential of self-selection bias occurring within the sample may also be an issue. That is, considering that the sample, as a whole, reported generally high levels of both relationship commitment and sexual satisfaction, in particular, participants who experienced higher rates of

such variables may have been more likely to participate in the survey compared to those who had lower levels of relationship commitment and sexual satisfaction. As such, it would be particularly interesting to replicate the current study's findings with opposite-sex and same-sex couples from a clinical sample presenting relationship-related distress and insecure attachment styles.

### **Future Research**

There are a number of important future research directions to be pursued based on the current study's findings. Considering that women within same-sex relationships tend to rate their relationship satisfaction levels more highly compared to women within opposite-sex relationships, regardless of self-identified sexual orientation, it may prove to be beneficial within future research to examine variables that may act as mediators between partner gender and relationship satisfaction. One variable in particular that may explain the association between relationship satisfaction and partner gender among women may include communication styles. Other studies suggest that effective communication, particularly within the realm of conflict resolution, tends to positively influence one's level of satisfaction within relationships (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005).

Additionally, because the first simple linear regression model within this study accounted for more than 10% of the variance in relationship satisfaction for both groups of women (women partnered with women and women partnered with men), it is understandable to assume that factors in addition to partner gender affect women's overall relationship satisfaction. That is, one additional factor that is worthy of investigation particularly as it pertains to relationship satisfaction among women within same-sex relationships involves the effects of discrimination. Because sexual minorities tend to be significantly more likely to experience discrimination with

regard to their relationships compared to their heterosexual counterparts, coping with such environmental stressors may either strengthen their relationships or cause additional stress (Frost, 2011). It therefore may be helpful for future studies to examine the effects of external and internal stressors such as discrimination and internalized homophobia on overall relationship satisfaction among women within same-sex relationships.

Furthermore, because the second simple linear regression model within this study accounted for more than 16% of the variance in sexual satisfaction for both groups of women (women partnered with women and women partnered with men), it is also plausible to anticipate additional factors to impact women's overall sexual satisfaction. One factor that warrants further research as it pertains to women's sexual satisfaction involves the aspect of sexual trauma histories. That is, decades of research suggests strong associations between CSA and a variety of health consequences for women (e.g., chronic pain, anxiety disorders, depression, and substance abuse). CSA can also have deleterious effects on sexual aspects within adult relationships. Prior research (Balsam et al., 2005) also indicates significant mean differences as it relates to lifetime sexual victimization rates between LGB individuals and their heterosexual counterparts, where higher rates of both CSA and physical victimization in adulthood occur within the former group. Specifically, Balsam and colleagues (2005) found that among the women in their study, 30% of those whom self-identified as heterosexual reported sexual abuse that occurred before age 18 compared to 44% and 48% of self-identified lesbians and bisexual women, respectively. Existing literature (Sullivan et al., 2017) suggests that trauma exposure may exacerbate the negative effects that sexual minority discrimination, in particular, poses on not just sexual satisfaction but also overall functioning and commitment within romantic relationships. Thus, discrimination related to one's sexual-minority status may be correlated with an overall lower level of sexual

satisfaction and relationship commitment, particularly among those with more severe histories of trauma. However, it remains unclear if exposure to trauma impacts the association between discrimination and sexual satisfaction and relationship commitment among sexual-minority couples. Future research is therefore warranted in order to examine sexual trauma histories as a potential mediator of sexual satisfaction and relationship commitment among both groups of women.

The study's third and final simple linear regression model accounted for more than 11% of the variance in relationship commitment among both groups of women (women partnered with women and women partnered with men). Additional facets inclusive of pathological personality traits among women may be worthy of investigation within future studies as it pertains to women's relationship commitment. Prior longitudinal research (Naud et al., 2013) has shown associations between the effects of attachment dimensions (e.g., attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety) as well as masochistic personality characterizations on relationship satisfaction and relationship commitment among women currently involved in heterosexual relationships. As such, future research is warranted in order to empirically validate this assumption and examine the interplay between DMP, attachment, sexuality, and relationship satisfaction among both groups of women (women partnered with women and women partnered with men).

Likewise, although each multivariate model within the current study yielded significant results as it pertains to explaining the variance in relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and relationship commitment among women (e.g., 23%, 22%, and 18%, respectively), it is possible that the model was misspecified because interaction terms were not included (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2012). Specifically, other variables associated with relationship

satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and relationship commitment, such as pathological personality traits and/or communication, were not included as potential predictors.

### **Implications for Practice**

The results of this study support attachment theory as an underlying foundation to understanding women's relationships and may be used to guide clinical practice when working with women who are currently in romantic relationships. Specifically, the negative correlation occurring within the current study between insecure attachment dimensions, particularly, attachment-related anxiety, and overall relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, and sexual satisfaction among both groups of women, supports the theoretical underpinnings of attachment theory. These findings therefore legitimize the utility clinical interventions by social workers within therapeutic settings with the overall goal of fostering a secure attachment bond between partners, regardless of the gender of those partners.

As it pertains to implementations, social workers, particularly those who perform couples counseling, may find it beneficial to include a measure of attachment within initial intake forms for both partners, regardless if those couples consist of opposite-sex or same-sex partners. Doing so would subsequently allow social workers to identify potential strengths and weaknesses in how partners communicate and relate to each other within the context of the relationship. In turn, social workers would be able to explore how attachment patterns affect both partners within the relationship, and subsequently evaluate the couple's relationship dynamics and components associated with overall relationship quality (e.g., relationship commitment and sexual satisfaction).

By extension, social workers who conduct couples counseling should also be aware of clients' individual attachment patterns and how such behaviors not only influence the overall

quality of the relationship, but also the alliance formed between a social worker and the client. That is, the attachment bond that occurs between a child and her or his caregiver within the child's formative years can be activated by any emotionally close relationship, including the social worker-client relationship. Several characteristics associated with the alliance between social workers and clients may activate the client's expectations of the relationship, including the emotional availability of the social worker and the client's perception that the social worker provides a secure base from which the client is able to process her or his experiences (Holmes, 1999). Therefore, if the social worker-client alliance contains qualities of an attachment relationship, and the social worker acts as a secure base for clients, the theoretical underpinnings of attachment can, in turn, provide considerable insight into the therapeutic process. That is, with respect to the dimension of attachment avoidance, clients who exhibit deactivating attachment behaviors, for example, those who tend to divert their attention from stress-inducing stimuli as well as thoughts and feelings related to their attachment behaviors, may seek avoidant attachment therapeutic alliances in order to increase distance between themselves and their social worker. Conversely, clients who exhibit hyper-activating attachment behaviors, for example, those who exaggerate expressions of distress and expect abandonment from attachment figures, may seek anxious attachment therapeutic alliances in order to maintain emotional proximity between themselves and their social worker by communicating their sense of dependency. Researchers (Slade, 2008) suggest that utilizing corrective emotional experiences within therapy, a process by which clients are re-exposed to emotional experiences of the past in order to repair the traumatic influences on such experiences (Roessler, 2011), may maximize the secure base and the emotional security within the therapeutic relationship. For instance, with clients who seek to increase distance from the therapeutic alliance, it may be particularly effective for the



social worker to increase the client's awareness of such emotional processes and therefore solidify her or his active engagement within therapy. On the other hand, for clients who tend to magnify their attachment needs and subsequently reduce the distance within the therapeutic relationship, it may be beneficial for the social worker to encourage the client to increase her or his overall sense of autonomy which, in turn, provides maintenance of appropriate boundaries within the social worker-client relationship. As such, corrective emotional experiences may perhaps be obtained within therapeutic settings by helping the client to become aware of the lack of cohesion between her or his expectations for others (e.g., working model of others) and her or his coinciding self-representations (e.g., working model of self).

Findings from this study also suggest that a variety of areas may be targeted via interventions aimed to increase sexual satisfaction among both groups of women (women partnered with women and women partnered with men). Social work clinicians may also refer to findings of this study that suggest that it is not necessarily the length of the relationship that leads to declines in sexual satisfaction among women, regardless of their partner's gender, but instead emphasize that external factors linked to the relationship may provide a better understanding of overall sexual satisfaction among couples. Specifically as it relates to women within same-sex relationships, social work clinicians should be sensitive to the possibility that such couples may struggle with potential negative effects of internalized homophobia on sexual satisfaction. Additionally, given that overall satisfaction within one's relationship as well as relationship commitment were associated with overall sexual satisfaction between both groups of women, interventions aimed at increasing sexual satisfaction within relationships should address broader relationship issues and the emotional quality of their relationship and sexual encounters. Specifically, social work clinicians should encourage more open dialogue surrounding desires for

sexual experiences and assist in problem-solving around any internal or external barriers related to sexual satisfaction.

Such discussions could perhaps be facilitated through therapeutic models that help partners discuss vulnerable experiences and emotions. Specifically, emotion-focused couples therapy (EFT; Johnson, 2004) is an example of an empirically effective intervention that is grounded in attachment theory and is commonly used to treat relationship distress. EFT draws upon the theoretical underpinnings of attachment and focuses on the emotional bond shared by romantic partners in order to modify interactive patterns between partners and reduce attachment insecurities. As such, modification of attachment patterns is thought to occur through the development of secure attachment bonds as couples express attachment needs beyond the utilization of defense mechanisms that can maintain distance and distress within relationships. Prior research suggests that partners who perceive distress within their relationship tend to exhibit patterns that subsequently foster distance between partners and are predictive of relationship dissolution, such as criticism, contempt, and resentment (Gottman & Levenson, 2002). Within the context of EFT, these negative patterns are viewed as the result of an insecure attachment bond shared by the couple where both partners' attachment insecurities are activated, thereby creating distance within the relationship. The overall objective of EFT is to therefore break the cycle of such negative attachment patterns by creating secure interactive behaviors within the relationship through a series of three separate stages (e.g., the de-escalation stage, the restructuring attachment interactions stage, and the consolidation and integration stage; Johnson, 2004). Moreover, prior research suggests EFT to be effective in creating lasting relationship satisfaction among couples and in reducing attachment-related anxiety, in particular (Wiebe et al., 2016). That is, among couples who have engaged in and completed EFT, attachment-related

anxiety (compared to attachment-related avoidance) has been shown to more likely maintain positive changes years after EFT ended, and such changes in relationship functioning derived from EFT have been shown to be long-lasting. In contrast, attachment-related avoidance has been shown to be less likely to maintain lasting change after EFT ends (Wiebe et al., 2016). These results suggest that maintaining changes in attachment avoidance tends to be more difficult for couples after completion of EFT, and as such, indicates the need for social workers to assess for attachment avoidance during therapy sessions and to perhaps spend a longer duration within the third and final stage of EFT (e.g., the consolidation stage), where new, positive attachment behaviors are practiced and such patterns are adapted into the couple's daily interactions (Johnson, 2004). Considering the current study found that attachment avoidance significantly contributes to lower levels of sexual satisfaction within relationships, and that relationship satisfaction is correlated with sexual satisfaction, regardless of partner gender, a longer duration spent within the consolidation stage of EFT with avoidantly-attached couples would help to ensure that integrative changes are successfully incorporated into both partners' daily dyadic interactions, therefore increasing both relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction.

Although empirical investigations examining specific therapeutic interventions among same-sex couples, particularly as it pertains to women within same-sex relationships, is virtually non-existent (Spitalnick & McNair, 2005), some researchers (Hardtke, Armstrong, & Johnson, 2010) argue that EFT is particularly well-suited to address the unique needs of women within same-sex relationships. For example, environmental stressors such as homophobia can negatively impact the lives of same-sex couples in that experiencing such sexual-minority-related stress influences not only how sexual minorities feel about themselves but also how they

outwardly represent their relationships to their loved ones and to society. Such societal stigma concerning homosexuality therefore prevents many same-sex couples from being open about their relationships (i.e., coming out of the closet), which, in turn, can negatively affect overall relationship quality and satisfaction (Hardtke & el., 2010). Prior research on same-sex relationships suggests that EFT emphasizes the interplay between focusing on the couple and focusing on the individual, which, in turn, allows both partners within therapy to explore their varying levels of being “out of the closet” as it pertains to both the individual and the couple as a whole. As such, researchers (Hardtke et al., 2010) posit that due to this aforementioned interplay, coupled with prior empirical evidence purporting that full-treatment models tend to be more effective with regard to relationship distress compared to the implementation of isolated intervention components from a variety of models (Wood, Crane, Schaalje, & Law, 2005), the utilization of EFT is well-suited for women within same-sex relationships.

Furthermore, within the context of the EFT model, a strong and positive social worker-client alliance is pertinent to the success of the attachment change process for women within relationships, regardless of their partner’s gender. However, given the societal barriers that women within same-sex relationships frequently endure as a result of their sexual minority status, a secure therapeutic environment that allows couples to safely explore the expression of attachment needs is especially crucial. As such, Hardtke and colleagues (2010) theorize that qualities commonly associated with social workers who conduct EFT for women within same-sex relationships, such as unconditional positive regard, validation, and empathy, may be perceived as effective treatment interventions in of themselves, given that qualities positively contribute to positive changes within relationships and may subsequently help such couples to cope with stressors related to homophobia. Additional social work skills found within prior

research (Biaggio, Coan, & Adams, 2002) to positively contribute to the overall therapeutic alliance with same-sex couples involves the continual affirmation of the couple, being culturally aware and sensitive of issues related to sexual minorities, and the capability to work jointly with the couple with regard to how the couple views the nature of distress within the relationship.

## **Conclusion**

Although the use of attachment theory as it pertains to relationship satisfaction is well-documented within the literature, almost all published reports to date have used only heterosexual samples. This study therefore aimed to fill that gap within the research by examining the associations between relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, sexual satisfaction, and attachment dimensions (i.e., avoidance and anxiety) between two groups of women based on partner gender: (1) women partnered with women and (2) women partnered with men. Moreover, to the author's knowledge, this study is among the first to examine partner gender as a predictor of relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, sexual satisfaction, and attachment dimensions (i.e., avoidance and anxiety). This study's results support attachment theory as an underlying framework to understanding women's relationships. Findings within the current study revealed significant positive associations between relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, and sexual satisfaction between both groups of women. Additionally, findings suggested that women's attachment dimensions are independent of their partner's gender, and that attachment-related anxiety, in particular, predicts overall lower levels of relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, and sexual satisfaction between both groups of women. A significant negative association between attachment-related avoidance and sexual satisfaction also emerged between both groups, indicating that as one's attachment avoidance increases, her sexual satisfaction decreases, regardless of her romantic partner's gender.

Although notable limitations within the current study occurred as it relates to the sample's diversity and recruitment methodology, the study's findings suggest that there are a number of important future research directions to be pursued. As such, the incorporation and examination of additional variables as mediators inclusive of sexual communication and DMP traits among both groups of women, as well as internalized homophobia and sexual trauma histories among women within same-sex relationships, may prove to be beneficial for future research. The results of this study also can be used to guide the clinical practices of social workers when working with women currently in romantic relationships. Specifically, social workers performing couples therapy for women in romantic relationships may benefit from the inclusion of attachment measures within initial intake forms, the incorporation of corrective emotional experiences for both anxiously- and avoidantly-attached couples in order to maintain healthy social worker-client alliances, the broader incorporation of components linked to the relationship within sexual satisfaction interventions, and a longer duration spent within the consolidation phase of EFT for avoidantly-attached couples, regardless of partner gender.

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**APPENDIX A. IRB EXPEDITED APPROVAL**

**ACTION ON PROTOCOL APPROVAL REQUEST**



**TO:** Elaine Maccio  
Social Work

**FROM:** Dennis Landin  
Chair, Institutional Review Board

**DATE:** June 27, 2017

**RE:** IRB# 3885

Institutional Review Board  
Dr. Dennis Landin, Chair  
130 David Boyd Hall  
Baton Rouge, LA 70803  
P: 225.578.8692  
F: 225.578.5983  
[irb@lsu.edu](mailto:irb@lsu.edu)  
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**TITLE:** Sexual Orientation as a Predictor of Relationship Commitment, Relationship Satisfaction, Sexual Satisfaction, and Attachment Identity in Women

**New Protocol/Modification/Continuation:** New Protocol

**Review type:** Full  Expedited

**Review date:** 6/23/2017

**Risk Factor:** Minimal  Uncertain  Greater Than Minimal

**Approved**  **Disapproved**

**Approval Date:** 6/27/2017 **Approval Expiration Date:** 6/26/2018

**Re-review frequency:** (annual unless otherwise stated)

**Number of subjects approved:** 300

**LSU Proposal Number** (if applicable):

**Protocol Matches Scope of Work in Grant proposal:** (if applicable)

**By:** Dennis Landin, Chairman

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING – Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:**

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU's Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects\*
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
7. Notification of the IRB of a serious compliance failure.
8. **SPECIAL NOTE: When emailing more than one recipient, make sure you use bcc.**

*\*All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU's Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at <http://www.lsu.edu/irb>*

**APPENDIX B. RELATIONSHIP ASSESSMENT SCALE**

Please read each of the following statements and rate the extent to which it describes your feelings about your current romantic relationship.

	Low				High
1. How well does your partner meet your needs?	1	2	3	4	5
2. In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?	1	2	3	4	5
3. How good is your relationship compared to most?	1	2	3	4	5
4. How often do you wish you hadn't gotten into this relationship?	1	2	3	4	5
5. To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?	1	2	3	4	5
6. How much do you love your partner?	1	2	3	4	5
7. How many problems are there in your relationship?	1	2	3	4	5

## APPENDIX C. SEXUAL SATISFACTION SCALE FOR WOMEN

Please read each of the following statements and rate the extent to which it describes your feelings about your sexual satisfaction within your current relationship.

---

### Question

Q1: I feel content with the way my present sex life is.

Q2: I often feel something is missing from my present sex life.

Q3: I often feel I don't have enough emotional closeness in my sex life.

Q4: I feel content with how often I presently have sexual intimacy (kissing, intercourse, etc.) in my life.

Q5: I don't have *any* important problems or concerns about sex (arousal, orgasm, frequency, compatibility, communication, etc.).

Q6: Overall, how satisfactory or unsatisfactory is your present sex life?

Q7: My partner often gets defensive when I try discussing sex.

Q8: My partner and I do not discuss sex openly enough with each other, or do not discuss sex often enough.

### Response options

1 = Strongly disagree

2 = Disagree a little

3 = Neither agree or disagree

4 = Agree a little

5 = Strongly agree

5 = Strongly disagree

4 = Disagree a little

3 = Neither agree or disagree

2 = Agree a little

1 = Strongly agree

5 = Strongly disagree

4 = Disagree a little

3 = Neither agree or disagree

2 = Agree a little

1 = Strongly agree

1 = Strongly disagree

2 = Disagree a little

3 = Neither agree or disagree

4 = Agree a little

5 = Strongly agree

1 = Strongly disagree

2 = Disagree a little

3 = Neither agree or disagree

4 = Agree a little

5 = Strongly agree

5 = Completely satisfactory

4 = Very satisfactory

3 = Reasonable satisfactory

2 = Not very satisfactory

1 = Not at all satisfactory

5 = Strongly disagree

4 = Disagree a little

3 = Neither agree or disagree

2 = Agree a little

1 = Strongly agree

5 = Strongly disagree

4 = Disagree a little

3 = Neither agree or disagree

2 = Agree a little

- Q9: I usually feel completely comfortable discussing sex whenever my partner wants to. 1 = Strongly agree  
1 = Strongly disagree  
2 = Disagree a little  
3 = Neither agree or disagree  
4 = Agree a little  
5 = Strongly agree
- Q10: My partner usually feels completely comfortable discussing sex whenever I want to. 1 = Strongly disagree  
2 = Disagree a little  
3 = Neither agree or disagree  
4 = Agree a little  
5 = Strongly agree
- Q11: I have no difficulty talking about my deepest feelings and emotions when my partner wants me to. 1 = Strongly disagree  
2 = Disagree a little  
3 = Neither agree or disagree  
4 = Agree a little  
5 = Strongly agree
- Q12: My partner has no difficulty talking about their deepest feelings and emotions when I want him to. 1 = Strongly disagree  
2 = Disagree a little  
3 = Neither agree or disagree  
4 = Agree a little  
5 = Strongly agree
- Q13: I often feel my partner isn't sensitive or aware enough about my sexual likes and desires. 5 = Strongly disagree  
4 = Disagree a little  
3 = Neither agree or disagree  
2 = Agree a little  
1 = Strongly agree
- Q14: I often feel that my partner and I are not sexually compatible enough. 5 = Strongly disagree  
4 = Disagree a little  
3 = Neither agree or disagree  
2 = Agree a little  
1 = Strongly agree
- Q15: I often feel that my partner's beliefs and attitudes about sex are too different from mine. 5 = Strongly disagree  
4 = Disagree a little  
3 = Neither agree or disagree  
2 = Agree a little  
1 = Strongly agree
- Q16: I sometimes think my partner and I are mismatched in needs and desires concerning sexual intimacy. 5 = Strongly disagree  
4 = Disagree a little  
3 = Neither agree or disagree  
2 = Agree a little  
1 = Strongly agree
- Q17: I sometimes feel that my partner and I might not be physically attracted to each other enough. 5 = Strongly disagree  
4 = Disagree a little  
3 = Neither agree or disagree  
2 = Agree a little  
1 = Strongly agree



- Q18: I sometimes think my partner and I are mismatched in our sexual styles and preferences. 5 = Strongly disagree  
4 = Disagree a little  
3 = Neither agree or disagree  
2 = Agree a little  
1 = Strongly agree
- Q19: I'm worried that my partner will become frustrated with my sexual difficulties. 5 = Strongly disagree  
4 = Disagree a little  
3 = Neither agree or disagree  
2 = Agree a little  
1 = Strongly agree
- Q20: I'm worried that my sexual difficulties will adversely affect my relationship. 5 = Strongly disagree  
4 = Disagree a little  
3 = Neither agree or disagree  
2 = Agree a little  
1 = Strongly agree
- Q21: I'm worried that my partner may have an affair because of my sexual difficulties. 5 = Strongly disagree  
4 = Disagree a little  
3 = Neither agree or disagree  
2 = Agree a little  
1 = Strongly agree
- Q22: I'm worried that my partner is sexually unfulfilled. 5 = Strongly disagree  
4 = Disagree a little  
3 = Neither agree or disagree  
2 = Agree a little  
1 = Strongly agree
- Q23: I'm worried that my partner views me as less of a woman because of my sexual difficulties. 5 = Strongly disagree  
4 = Disagree a little  
3 = Neither agree or disagree  
2 = Agree a little  
1 = Strongly agree
- Q24: I feel like I've disappointed my partner by having sexual difficulties. 5 = Strongly disagree  
4 = Disagree a little  
3 = Neither agree or disagree  
2 = Agree a little  
1 = Strongly agree
- Q25: My sexual difficulties are frustrating to me. 5 = Strongly disagree  
4 = Disagree a little  
3 = Neither agree or disagree  
2 = Agree a little  
1 = Strongly agree
- Q26: My sexual difficulties make me feel sexually unfulfilled. 5 = Strongly disagree  
4 = Disagree a little  
3 = Neither agree or disagree  
2 = Agree a little  
1 = Strongly agree
- Q27: I'm worried that my sexual difficulties might cause me to seek sexual 5 = Strongly disagree

fulfillment outside my relationship.

4 = Disagree a little  
3 = Neither agree or disagree  
2 = Agree a little  
1 = Strongly agree

Q28: I'm so distressed about my sexual difficulties that it affects the way I feel about myself.

5 = Strongly disagree  
4 = Disagree a little  
3 = Neither agree or disagree  
2 = Agree a little  
1 = Strongly agree

Q29: I'm so distressed about my sexual difficulties that it affects my own well-being.

5 = Strongly disagree  
4 = Disagree a little  
3 = Neither agree or disagree  
2 = Agree a little  
1 = Strongly agree

Q30: My sexual difficulties annoy and anger me.

5 = Strongly disagree  
4 = Disagree a little  
3 = Neither agree or disagree  
2 = Agree a little  
1 = Strongly agree

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## APPENDIX D. REVISED ADULT ATTACHMENT SCALE

Please read each of the following statements and rate the extent to which it describes your feelings about romantic relationships. Please think about all your relationships (past and present) and respond in terms of how you generally feel in these relationships. If you have never been involved in a romantic relationship, answer in terms of how you think you would feel.

Please use the scale below by placing a number between 1 and 5 in the space provided to the right of each statement.

1-----2-----3-----4-----5  
**Not at all** **Very**  
**characteristic** **characteristic**  
**of me** **of me**

- 1) I find it relatively easy to get close to people.
- 2) I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on others.
- 3) I often worry that romantic partners don't really love me.
- 4) I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like.
- 5) I am comfortable depending on others.
- 6) I don't worry about people getting too close to me.
- 7) I find that people are never there when you need them.
- 8) I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others.
- 9) I often worry that romantic partners won't want to stay with me.
- 10) When I show my feelings for others, I'm afraid they will not feel the same about me.
- 11) I often wonder whether romantic partners really care about me.
- 12) I am comfortable developing close relationships with others.
- 13) I am uncomfortable when anyone gets too emotionally close to me.
- 14) I know that people will be there when I need them.

- 15) I want to get close to people, but I worry about being hurt.
- 16) I find it difficult to trust others completely.
- 17) Romantic partners often want me to be emotionally closer than I feel comfortable being.
- 18) I am not sure that I can always depend on people to be there when I need them.



## APPENDIX F. DEMOGRAPHICS

Please tell us about yourself.

1. How old are you? (Please indicate a number, not a range.)

Age in years: \_\_\_\_\_

2. What is your gender? (Please check one.)

- Female  
 Male  
 Transgender  
 Intersex  
 Other \_\_\_\_\_

3. How do you identify in terms of your race? (Please check one.)

- European American or White, not of Hispanic Origin  
 African American or Black  
 Hispanic/Latino  
 Native American/American Indian/Alaska Native  
 Asian American or Asian  
 Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander  
 Biracial/Multiracial (Please specify)  
 Other \_\_\_\_\_

4. How long have you been in your current relationship? (Please indicate a number in years and months)

\_\_\_\_\_years, \_\_\_\_\_ months

5. What is your current marital status?

- Married or domestic partnership  
 Widowed  
 Divorced  
 Separated  
 Single, never married

6. What is your yearly household income?

- Less than \$20,000  
 \$20,000 to \$34,999  
 \$35,000 to \$49,999  
 \$50,000 to \$74,999  
 \$75,000 to \$99,999  
 \$100,000 to \$149,999

\$150,000 to \$199,999

\$200,000 or more

7. Do any children age 12 or under live in your household?

No

Yes

8. What is your current zip code?

\_\_\_\_\_

## VITA

Amy Leigh Wright was born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in 1988, and now resides in Bloomington, Illinois. She received her Bachelor of Science in psychology from Louisiana State University in 2011, and she began volunteering as a crisis counselor at the Baton Rouge Crisis Intervention Center (BRCIC) as a junior during her undergraduate studies. She was then hired by BRCIC as staff and continued to work there while pursuing her Master of Social Work (MSW) at Louisiana State University. She graduated with her MSW in May of 2013, and in August of 2013 she began her doctoral studies. While completing her doctoral program, Amy worked as an emergency room social worker at a local hospital, conducting comprehensive chemical dependency and psychosocial evaluations among some of the most vulnerable populations within Baton Rouge. She also worked as a research and teaching assistant under the supervision of her mentor, Dr. Elaine M. Maccio. Amy's research interests surround gender and sexuality issues, social and health disparities among sexual-minority women, and attachment and close relationships in adulthood. She has started a new, tenure-track faculty position as an Assistant Professor of Social Work at Illinois State University in Fall of 2018.