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Romantic Passion Over Time: The Roles of Self-Expansion and Sexual Desire in Long-Term Relationships

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Abstract

Maintaining romantic passion is a central challenge in established relationships, yet comparatively little is known about the relational and motivational processes associated with its persistence. This cross-sectional study examined whether self-expansion, sexual desire, and relationship duration were associated with romantic passion among 205 German-speaking adults in relationships lasting at least two years. Twelve supplementary semi-structured interviews contextualized participants' experiences of romantic intensity. Self-expansion was positively associated with romantic passion, $r = .445$, $p < .001$, as was dyadic sexual desire, $r = .413$, $p < .001$. A statistically significant indirect association between self-expansion and romantic passion through sexual desire emerged, $b = 0.161$, 95% bootstrap CI [0.068, 0.308]. Relationship duration was negatively associated with romantic passion, $r = -.382$, $p < .001$. Contrary to expectations, however, relationship duration strengthened rather than weakened the positive association between sexual desire and romantic passion, $b = 0.014$, $p = .023$. In a multiple regression model, self-expansion remained the strongest unique correlate of romantic passion, and the model explained 31% of its variance. These findings highlight self-expansion and sexual desire as relevant relational processes associated with

romantic passion in established relationships, while underscoring the need for longitudinal and dyadic research.

Keywords: romantic passion, self-expansion, sexual desire, relationship duration, established relationships

Romantic passion is often treated as a defining feature of relationship initiation. Its intense combination of attraction, longing, physiological arousal, and persistent attention to a partner appears especially salient when a relationship is new. Yet romantic passion is not limited to relationship formation. Some partners continue to report strong romantic love after many years together, whereas others experience marked declines in emotional and sexual intensity (Acevedo & Aron, 2009). Explaining this variation requires attention to current relationship processes rather than treating time as an explanation in itself. The present study examines two such processes—self-expansion and dyadic sexual desire—and considers whether their associations with romantic passion differ across relationship duration.

Relationship science has long distinguished passion from other components of close relationships. Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory describes intimacy, passion, and commitment as related but separable components of love. Intimacy reflects closeness and emotional connection, whereas commitment refers to the decision to maintain a relationship. Passion is more closely tied to motivational activation, physical attraction, and sexual interest. Similarly, the distinction between passionate and companionate love separates an activated state of longing and attraction from the affection, security, and attachment that often characterize enduring bonds (Berscheid & Walster, 1969; Walster & Walster, 1978). These forms of love can coexist: the development of companionship does not require the disappearance of romantic passion.

In the current study, romantic passion is conceptualized as passionate love. Hatfield and Sprecher (1986) defined passionate love as an intense longing for union with another person. Their account includes cognitive components, such as recurrent thoughts and idealization; emotional components, such as longing and elation; physiological activation; and behavioural tendencies toward proximity and reciprocity. The Passionate Love Scale operationalizes this broad state rather than sexual desire alone. It also captures some potentially distressing features of high activation, including preoccupation, jealousy, and fear

of loss. Accordingly, high scores reflect romantic intensity but do not necessarily indicate uniformly secure or beneficial relationship functioning (Acevedo & Aron, 2009; Graham, 2011).

Passion may change as relationships develop, but duration is not a psychological mechanism. As partners become familiar, interactions and shared activities can become more predictable, and the rapid acquisition of new information about one another may slow. Hedonic adaptation can further reduce the affective impact of repeated positive experiences (Frederick & Loewenstein, 1999). Longitudinal studies also show that relationship trajectories vary considerably. Although average relationship satisfaction changes across adulthood and relationship duration, stable and heterogeneous trajectories are common (Bühler et al., 2021; Lavner & Bradbury, 2010; Williamson & Lavner, 2020). Research on sexual satisfaction and desire likewise suggests average declines in some samples alongside substantial individual variation (Mark & Lasslo, 2018; Schmiedeberg & Schröder, 2016). Relationship duration should therefore be understood as a temporal context in which relational routines, personal development, stressors, and motivational processes accumulate.

Self-Expansion and Romantic Passion

The self-expansion model offers a process-based account of why passion may remain strong in some established relationships. The model proposes that people are motivated to increase their efficacy by acquiring new perspectives, identities, resources, and capacities (Aron et al., 2013, 2022). Close relationships provide a particularly consequential route to expansion because partners can incorporate aspects of one another into the self and gain access to experiences that would otherwise be less available (Aron et al., 2022). Falling in love has accordingly been associated with growth in the content and diversity of the self-concept (Aron et al., 2022).

Self-expansion is theoretically relevant to passion because rapid expansion produces positive affect and motivational activation. New relationships often contain many opportunities to discover a partner's interests, perspectives, social networks, and activities. As familiarity increases, spontaneous opportunities for rapid expansion may become less frequent. The model does not imply that expansion inevitably ends, however. Partners can continue to facilitate growth through novel or challenging shared experiences, by introducing one another to new perspectives, or by supporting individual development that becomes integrated into the relationship (Aron et al., 2000, 2022; Fivecoat et al., 2015).

Experimental and daily-life findings support this account. Couples who completed novel and arousing activities reported greater improvements in perceived relationship quality than couples who completed mundane activities (Aron et al., 2000). Shared activities have also been linked to relationship quality when they are experienced as exciting and as reducing boredom, suggesting that time together is not sufficient unless the activity changes how partners experience themselves or one another (Reissman et al., 1993). In experience-sampling research, momentary self-expansion was associated with greater flow and more positive relationship experiences (Graham, 2008). Relational boredom, in contrast, predicts lower later satisfaction and may persist when couples fail to select activities that could provide greater novelty or challenge (Harasymchuk et al., 2017; Tsapelas et al., 2009). These findings concern relationship quality broadly, but self-expansion should be especially relevant to passion. Self-expanding experiences may renew attention to a partner, increase positive arousal, and allow partners to encounter one another outside familiar routines. An integrative review of romantic passion likewise identifies self-expansion as a central account of how motivational activation can be maintained in ongoing relationships (Carswell & Impett, 2021). Because the present study assesses perceived expansion through the relationship rather than the frequency of objectively novel activities, the proposed association

concerns the subjective experience of gaining perspectives, abilities, and opportunities through one's partner.

Hypothesis 1: Greater relationship self-expansion will be associated with greater romantic passion.

Sexual Desire as a Motivational Process

Romantic passion overlaps with sexual attraction, but romantic passion and sexual desire are not interchangeable. Passionate love includes longing, emotional activation, cognitive preoccupation, and a desire for closeness in addition to physical attraction (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986). Sexual desire refers more specifically to interest in or motivation for sexual activity (Spector et al., 1996). A person may experience sexual desire without broader romantic passion, and romantic attachment can remain meaningful when desire is low. Neural and psychological research nevertheless indicates that love and sexual desire recruit partly overlapping motivational systems (Cacioppo et al., 2012; Diamond, 2003).

Sexual desire may contribute to romantic passion by directing attention and approach motivation toward another person. Within relationships, sexual interest can make a partner salient as an attractive and distinct individual and can promote physical and emotional intimacy. The association is likely reciprocal rather than unidirectional: passion may increase sexual interest, sexual desire may intensify romantic activation, and both may be supported by responsiveness, positive affect, and relationship quality. For example, perceived partner responsiveness has been associated with stronger sexual desire, indicating that closeness can support rather than necessarily inhibit desire (Birnbaum et al., 2016). At the same time, maintaining some sense of a partner's distinctiveness may help preserve desire within a close bond (Muise & Goss, 2024).

Self-expansion provides a plausible link between relational growth and sexual desire. A partner encountered in a new or challenging context may again appear surprising, agentic,

and desirable. Across dyadic daily-diary, longitudinal, and experimental studies, shared self-expanding activities were associated with stronger partner-specific sexual desire, which in turn was associated with sexual and relationship satisfaction and a greater likelihood of sexual activity (Muise et al., 2019). These findings support the possibility that sexual desire is one motivational pathway through which self-expansion is related to romantic passion. The current cross-sectional design cannot establish temporal or causal mediation. We therefore test an indirect statistical association consistent with, but not sufficient to demonstrate, this proposed process.

Hypothesis 2: Relationship self-expansion will show a positive indirect association with romantic passion through dyadic sexual desire.

Personality and Romantic Passion

Broad personality traits may contribute to individual differences in romantic passion by shaping emotional reactivity, approach motivation, and the interpretation of relationship experiences. Extraversion is characterized by positive affect, sociability, activity, and sensitivity to reward. These tendencies may increase the likelihood of seeking stimulating shared experiences and experiencing positive emotional activation within a relationship. Previous research has linked extraversion with the eros love style and aspects of intimacy, although its associations with broader relationship outcomes are generally small and inconsistent (Davies, 1996; Malouff et al., 2010; White et al., 2004). Because romantic passion involves positive activation, attraction, and approach motivation, extraversion was expected to be positively associated with romantic passion.

Hypothesis 3: Extraversion will be positively associated with romantic passion.

Neuroticism is characterized by heightened negative emotionality, insecurity, and sensitivity to stress. It has consistently been associated with lower relationship satisfaction and less favourable relationship development (Kreuzer & Gollwitzer, 2022; Malouff et al., 2010). Individuals higher in neuroticism may experience relational uncertainty and conflict more intensely, potentially interfering with positive attraction and emotional engagement. Although passionate love can also include preoccupation and fear of loss, the original theoretical model emphasized the potentially disruptive role of negative emotionality in established relationships. Neuroticism was therefore expected to be negatively associated with romantic passion.

Hypothesis 4: Neuroticism will be negatively associated with romantic passion.

Relationship Duration as a Context for Desire and Passion

Sexual desire does not follow a uniform trajectory across relationships. Reviews identify physical and psychological well-being, sexual self-concept, partner responsiveness, communication, stress, and social norms as relevant to its maintenance (Mark & Lasslo, 2018). Studies relating desire to relationship duration have also produced differences across gender and samples (Klusmann, 2002; Murray & Milhausen, 2012). Duration is therefore unlikely to reduce desire directly in the same way for all partners. Instead, it may mark changes in novelty, daily demands, and the relative contribution of sexuality to the broader relationship.

The association between desire and passion may also vary with duration. In newer relationships, sexual desire and romantic activation often emerge together amid novelty and uncertainty. As relationships continue, intimacy, caregiving, shared history, and commitment may contribute more strongly to feelings of love. On this basis, the original theoretical model predicted that sexual desire would be less strongly associated with romantic passion at longer

relationship durations. Direct evidence for this moderation is limited, making the prediction more tentative than the expected association between self-expansion and passion. Testing it can nevertheless clarify whether sexual desire has the same relational meaning across relationships of different lengths.

Hypothesis 5: Relationship duration will attenuate the positive association between dyadic sexual desire and romantic passion.

Method

Design and Participants

The study used a primarily quantitative cross-sectional design supplemented by semi-structured qualitative interviews. The quantitative component consisted of an online survey of German-speaking adults in established romantic relationships. Eligibility required participants to be in a current romantic relationship that had lasted at least 2 years. A total of 328 records were initially available. We excluded 36 records because the relationship criteria were not met (25 participants were not currently in a relationship and 11 reported a relationship duration of less than 2 years), 84 because at least 50% of one or more questionnaires was missing, and three because of patterned responding. The final analytic sample comprised 205 participants.

The sample included 135 women (65.9%) and 70 men (34.1%); no participant selected the available *diverse* gender category. Age was assessed categorically: 48 participants (23.4%) were 18–24 years old, 71 (34.6%) were 25–34, 35 (17.1%) were 35–44, 35 (17.1%) were 45–54, and 16 (7.8%) were 55 or older. Relationship duration ranged from 2 to 55 years (M = 10.81, SD = 10.14, Mdn = 7.00). An a priori power analysis indicated a target sample of 221 participants.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through social media channels, university email lists, the urbia online community, and Poll-Pool. Data were collected through SoSci Survey between

April 27 and June 17, 2026. Before beginning the survey, participants received information about the study, voluntary participation, data handling, and their right to discontinue at any time. They could omit individual questions because the survey included potentially sensitive questions about relationships and sexuality. After providing informed consent, participants completed demographic and relationship questions, followed by the measures described below. The survey took approximately 20–30 min. Contact details volunteered for a separate interview study were stored separately from survey responses. The study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of the Bundeswehr Munich (approval/ reference number: EK UniBw M 26-11). All procedures were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible institutional committee and the Declaration of Helsinki. All procedures were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible institutional committee and the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Measures

Romantic Passion

Romantic passion was assessed with the 15-item Passionate Love Scale (PLS; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986). Items assess cognitive, emotional, and behavioural features of passionate love, including longing, preoccupation, attraction, and physiological arousal. An example item is “I feel my body responding when my partner touches me”. Responses were given on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all true*) to 9 (*definitely true*) and averaged, with higher scores indicating greater romantic passion. Because no validated German version was available for this study, the items were translated into German for the survey. Internal consistency in the present sample was high (Cronbach’s α = .91).

Relational Self Expansion

Relational self-expansion was measured with the 14-item Self-Expansion Questionnaire (SEQ; Lewandowski & Aron, 2002). The items assess the extent to which a partner and relationship provide novel experiences, perspectives, skills, and opportunities for

personal growth. An example item is “How much does being with your partner result in your having new experiences?” Participants responded on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not very much*) to 7 (*very much*). Item responses were averaged, with higher scores indicating greater perceived self-expansion. The items were translated into German for this study. Internal consistency was high (α = .90).

Dyadic Sexual Desire

Dyadic sexual desire was assessed using the five-item desire-with-interaction subscale of the German short form of the Sexual Desire Inventory–2 (SDI-2; Kuhn et al., 2014; Spector et al., 1996). The subscale captures sexual thoughts and desire involving another person rather than solitary sexual desire. An example item is “When you are in a romantic situation, how strong is your sexual desire?”. The five items used 8-point response formats tailored to their content. Frequency items ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 8 (*more than once a day*), desire-intensity items ranged from 1 (*no desire*) to 8 (*strong desire*), and the comparative item ranged from 1 (*much less desire*) to 8 (*much more desire*). Item responses were averaged, with higher scores indicating greater dyadic sexual desire. Internal consistency in the present sample was acceptable (α = .77).

Personality

Personality was assessed using the 21-item German short form of the Big Five Inventory (BFI-K; Rammstedt & John, 2005), which measures extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience. Example items are “I am outgoing and sociable” for extraversion and “I get nervous and insecure easily” for neuroticism. Participants rated each item on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*very inaccurate*) to 5 (*very accurate*). After reverse-scoring the relevant items, mean scores were calculated, with higher scores indicating higher levels of the respective trait. Extraversion and neuroticism were included in the hypothesis tests, whereas associations involving agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness were examined exploratorily. Internal

consistency was $\alpha = .84$ for extraversion, $\alpha = .61$ for agreeableness, $\alpha = .67$ for conscientiousness, $\alpha = .76$ for neuroticism, and $\alpha = .71$ for openness to experience.

Relationship Duration

Participants answered the open-ended question "How long have you been in your current relationship?" Responses were harmonized and converted into years. Relationship duration was treated as a continuous variable in the correlational, regression, and moderation analyses.

Data Preparation and Analytic Strategy

Survey responses were exported from SoSci Survey, screened in Microsoft Excel, and analyzed using JASP (Version 0.98.1; JASP Team, 2026). Missing item responses were not imputed; scale scores were calculated as item means from the available valid responses. All reported analyses used mean scores. Analyses corresponding to H1–H5 were hypothesis-driven. Supplementary exploratory analyses included correlations of romantic passion with agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience; a simultaneous multiple regression examining the unique associations of the focal predictors with romantic passion; and follow-up probing of the significant interaction using conditional effects and the Johnson–Neyman technique. All tests were two-tailed with $\alpha = .05$.

We first calculated descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations. H1, H3, and H4 were evaluated using bivariate correlations and simple linear regressions predicting romantic passion from self-expansion, extraversion, and neuroticism, respectively. For H2, we estimated the indirect association between self-expansion and romantic passion through dyadic sexual desire. The indirect effect was evaluated using 5,000 bootstrap samples and a 95% confidence interval. Because all variables were measured concurrently, this analysis estimates an indirect statistical association and does not establish temporal or causal mediation.

For H5, dyadic sexual desire and relationship duration were mean-centred before their product term was calculated. Romantic passion was regressed on the centred main effects and their interaction. Finally, an exploratory multiple regression included self-expansion, dyadic sexual desire, extraversion, neuroticism, and relationship duration simultaneously. Regression assumptions were evaluated using residual-versus-fitted plots, Q–Q plots, standardized residuals, Cook's distances, and variance inflation factors.

Supplementary Qualitative Interviews and Analysis

To contextualize the quantitative findings, 12 survey participants who had voluntarily provided contact information participated in supplementary semi-structured interviews. The qualitative sample comprised six women and six men. Contact information was stored separately from the survey responses, and interview data were not linked to participants' quantitative responses. The interviews were conducted between June 10 and June 23, 2026, and lasted approximately 30–45 min. The interview guide addressed participants' understandings of romantic intensity or "butterflies," perceived changes across their relationships, experiences associated with renewed romantic intensity, and factors that facilitated or inhibited these experiences. Before each interview, participants were informed about the purpose and procedure, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and audio recording and provided informed consent to participate and be recorded.

The first two interviews were transcribed manually. Interviews 3–12 were transcribed using aTrain (Version 1.4.1; Haberl et al., 2024), after which the transcripts were manually checked, corrected, and anonymized. All 12 interviews were examined using a focused qualitative content analysis informed by Renner and Jacob (2020). Relevant passages were organized thematically and compared across participants, considering recurring patterns as well as complementary and divergent accounts. The analysis was intended to contextualize the quantitative findings rather than independently test the hypotheses or provide an exhaustive line-by-line analysis. Coding was conducted by one researcher and was not

independently verified by a second coder. Illustrative quotations were translated from German into English for publication. The semi-structured interview guide was developed specifically for the present study and is provided in English as Supplementary File 1.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Associations

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations are shown in Table 1. Romantic passion was positively associated with both self-expansion, $r = .445$, $p < .001$, and dyadic sexual desire, $r = .413$, $p < .001$. Relationship duration was negatively associated with romantic passion, $r = -.382$, $p < .001$, as well as with self-expansion and dyadic sexual desire. Extraversion was not significantly associated with romantic passion, $r = .114$, $p = .104$. Neuroticism showed a small positive association with romantic passion, $r = .159$, $p = .022$. Exploratory analyses showed that neither agreeableness, $r = .060$, $p = .391$, nor conscientiousness, $r = .063$, $p = .369$, was significantly associated with romantic passion. Openness to experience showed a small positive association with romantic passion, $r = .164$, $p = .019$. However, this association did not remain statistically significant after applying a Holm correction across the three exploratory personality correlations, adjusted $p = .056$.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlations Among Study Variables

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Romantic passion	6.62	1.38	—					
2. Dyadic sexual desire	5.12	1.28	.413***	—				
3. Self-expansion	4.94	0.95	.445***	.396***	—			
4. Extraversion	3.50	0.90	.114	.205**	.021	—		

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6
5. Neuroticism	3.04	0.85	.159*	.046	.042	−.187**	—	
6. Relationship duration	10.81	10.14	−.382***	−.394***	−.357***	−.150*	−.119	—

Note. N = 205. Relationship duration is reported in years. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Hypothesis Tests

Self Expansion and Romantic Passion

Consistent with H1, self-expansion was positively associated with romantic passion. The simple regression model was significant, $F(1, 203) = 49.98$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .198$. Self-expansion was a positive predictor of romantic passion, $b = 0.64$, SE = 0.09, $\beta = .445$, $t = 7.07$, $p < .001$. H1 was supported.

Indirect Association Through Dyadic Sexual Desire

The results were consistent with the indirect association proposed in H2 (Table 2). Self-expansion was positively associated with dyadic sexual desire, and dyadic sexual desire was positively associated with romantic passion after accounting for self-expansion. The indirect effect was statistically significant, $b = 0.161$, $SE = 0.046$, 95% bootstrap CI [0.068, 0.308]. The direct association between self-expansion and romantic passion remained significant, $b = 0.481$, $SE = 0.094$, $p < .001$. These cross-sectional results support H2 at the statistical level but do not establish the temporal sequence implied by causal mediation.

Table 2

Indirect Association of Self Expansion With Romantic Passion Through Dyadic Sexual Desire

Effect or path	*b*	*SE*	*z*	*p*	95% CI
Self-expansion → desire	0.531	0.104	5.11	< .001	[0.318, 0.727]
Desire → romantic passion	0.303	0.084	3.60	< .001	[0.141, 0.464]

Effect or path	*b*	*SE*	*z*	*p*	95% CI
Direct effect	0.481	0.094	5.12	< .001	[0.302, 0.669]
Indirect effect	0.161	0.046	3.53	< .001	[0.068, 0.308]
Total effect	0.642	0.090	7.10	< .001	[0.449, 0.829]

Note. $N = 205$. Coefficients are unstandardized. The confidence interval for the indirect effect was based on 5,000 bootstrap samples.

Personality and Romantic Passion

H3 predicted a positive association between extraversion and romantic passion. The regression model was not significant, $F(1, 203) = 2.67$, $p = .104$, $R^2 = .013$, and extraversion did not significantly predict romantic passion, $b = 0.17$, SE = 0.11, $\beta = .11$, $t = 1.64$, $p = .104$, 95% CI [−0.04, 0.39]. H3 was not supported.

H4 predicted a negative association between neuroticism and romantic passion. Contrary to this prediction, neuroticism showed a small positive association with romantic passion. The model was significant, $F(1, 203) = 5.29$, $p = .022$, $R^2 = .025$, and the coefficient was positive, $b = 0.26$, $SE = 0.11$, $\beta = .16$, $t = 2.30$, $p = .022$, 95% CI [0.04, 0.48]. H4 was not supported.

Moderating Role of Relationship Duration

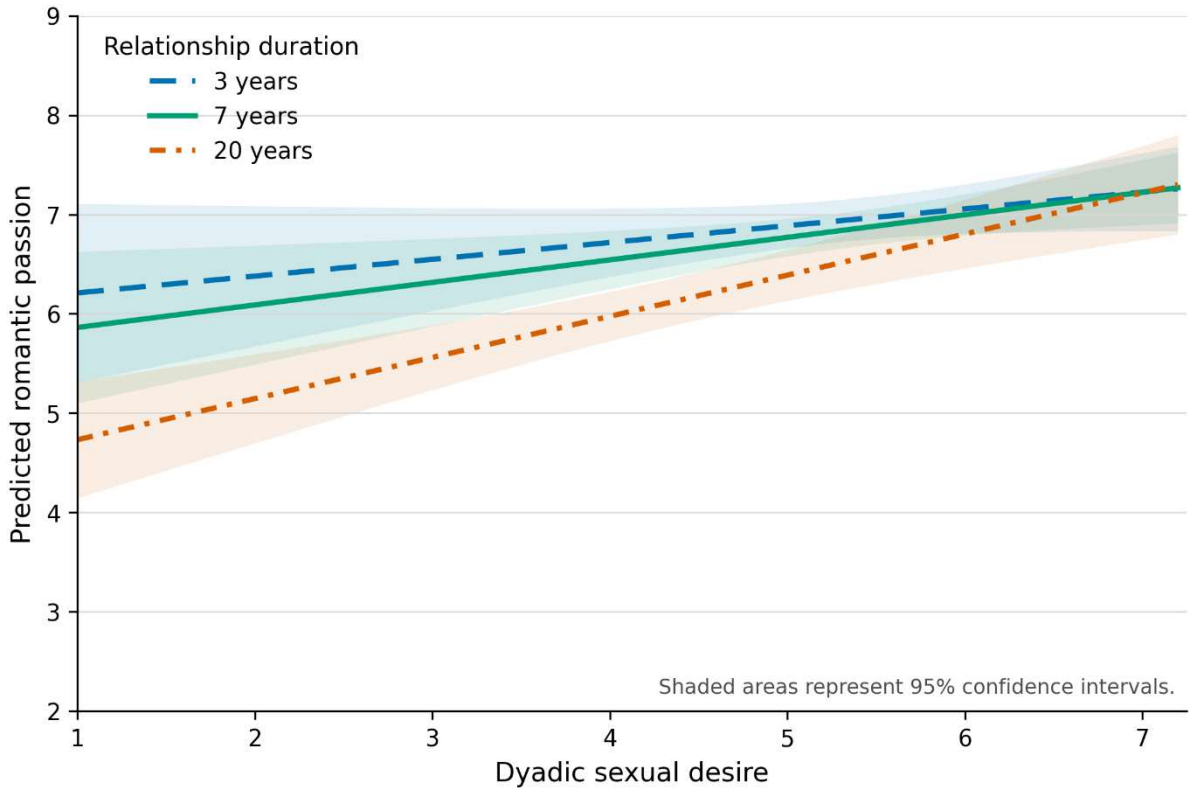
H5 predicted that relationship duration would weaken the positive association between dyadic sexual desire and romantic passion. The overall model was significant, $F(3, 201) = 22.02$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .247$. At the mean relationship duration, dyadic sexual desire was positively associated with romantic passion, $b = 0.282$, $SE = 0.075$, $\beta = .26$, $t = 3.74$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.133, 0.430]. At the mean level of dyadic sexual desire, relationship duration was negatively associated with romantic passion, $b = −0.028$, $SE = 0.010$, $\beta = −.20$, $t = −2.85$, $p = .005$, 95% CI [−0.047, −0.008]. The interaction between dyadic sexual desire and relationship duration was significant, $b = 0.014$, $SE = 0.006$, $\beta = .17$, $t = 2.30$, $p = .023$, 95% CI [0.002, 0.027]. Contrary to H5, the positive interaction indicated that the association between dyadic

sexual desire and romantic passion became stronger as relationship duration increased (see Table 3 and Figure 1).

To further explore this interaction, conditional effects were estimated at empirically observed relationship durations of 3, 7, and 20 years. Probing the interaction at empirically observed relationship durations showed that the association was positive but not statistically significant at 3 years, $b = 0.169$, $SE = 0.102$, $t(201) = 1.66$, $p = .098$, 95% CI [−0.032, 0.370]. It was significant at 7 years, $b = 0.227$, $SE = 0.086$, $t(201) = 2.64$, $p = .009$, 95% CI [0.058, 0.396], and stronger at 20 years, $b = 0.414$, $SE = 0.080$, $t(201) = 5.20$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.257, 0.571]. As an additional exploratory follow-up, a Johnson–Neyman analysis indicated that the conditional association became statistically significant at relationship durations above approximately 4.37 years. Thus, H5 was not supported.

Figure 1

Association Between Dyadic Sexual Desire and Romantic Passion at Different Relationship Durations



Note. Lines represent model-predicted romantic passion at relationship durations of 3 years, 7 years, and 20 years, corresponding approximately to the 16th percentile, median, and 84th percentile of the observed distribution. Shaded areas represent 95% confidence intervals.

Table 3

Moderation of the Association Between Dyadic Sexual Desire and Romantic Passion by Relationship Duration

Predictor	*b*	*SE*	*β*	*t*	*p*	95% CI
Dyadic sexual desire	0.282	0.075	.26	3.74	< .001	[0.133, 0.430]
Relationship duration	−0.028	0.010	−.20	−2.85	.005	[−0.047, −0.008]
Desire × duration	0.014	0.006	.17	2.30	.023	[0.002, 0.027]

Note. $N = 205$. Dyadic sexual desire and relationship duration were mean-centered. $R^2 = .247$.

Exploratory Multiple Regression

An exploratory multiple regression was conducted to examine the unique associations of relational self-expansion, dyadic sexual desire, relationship duration, extraversion, and neuroticism with romantic passion when considered simultaneously. The exploratory model containing all five predictors was significant, $F(5, 199) = 17.90$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .31$, adjusted $R^2 = .29$ (Table 4). Self-expansion showed the largest unique association with romantic passion, followed by dyadic sexual desire. Relationship duration remained negatively associated with romantic passion, and neuroticism retained a small positive coefficient. Extraversion did not explain unique variance. Diagnostic checks indicated no problematic multicollinearity (VIFs = 1.06–1.34). The residual Q–Q plot indicated minor deviations from normality in the lower tail. Although two observations had standardized residuals below −4, their Cook's distances were small (.042 and .088), and neither observation was considered unduly influential. Both observations were therefore retained.

Table 4

Exploratory Multiple Regression Predicting Romantic Passion

Predictor	*b*	*SE*	*β*	*t*	*p*	95% CI
Intercept	2.64	0.74	—	3.55	< .001	[1.17, 4.10]
Self-expansion	0.42	0.10	.29	4.43	< .001	[0.24, 0.61]
Dyadic sexual desire	0.23	0.07	.21	3.09	.002	[0.08, 0.37]
Extraversion	0.10	0.10	.06	1.02	.308	[−0.09, 0.29]
Neuroticism	0.21	0.10	.13	2.13	.034	[0.02, 0.40]
Relationship duration	−0.02	0.01	−.17	−2.54	.012	[−0.04, −0.01]

Note. $N = 205$. $R^2 = .31$; adjusted $R^2 = .29$. Coefficients represent unique associations with all listed predictors entered simultaneously.

Supplementary Qualitative Findings

The focused analysis identified five recurring experiential patterns associated with maintaining, changing, or renewing romantic intensity: novel shared experiences, physical

and sexual intimacy, intentional couple time and everyday stress, changes across the relationship, and individual differences in the experience of romantic intensity.

Novel Shared Experiences. Participants associated renewed romantic intensity with shared activities that interrupted everyday routines, including travel, excursions, concerts, new restaurants, and sports. Several participants emphasized that the specific activity was less important than experiencing something engaging together or perceiving the partner in a different context. As one participant explained, “When we actually experience something new together, there is a good chance—if it sparks something in both of us—that these moments bring back the butterflies”. However, novelty was not described as essential by all participants. Familiar activities could also feel romantically meaningful when they involved deliberate attention and a sense of shared engagement.

Physical and Sexual Intimacy. Participants described hugging, cuddling, kissing, touching, and sexual encounters as possible expressions of closeness and romantic connection. Unexpected physical affection was sometimes associated with renewed excitement. The relevance of sexuality nevertheless varied. Whereas some participants closely connected sexual attraction with romantic intensity, others distinguished sexuality from their experience of “butterflies” and placed greater emphasis on nonsexual affection, loyalty, honesty, and emotional security.

Intentional Couple Time and Everyday Stress. Deliberately creating time as a couple was repeatedly associated with stronger romantic feelings. Participants mentioned date nights, shared evenings, excursions, and time without children or other obligations. They distinguished intentional couple time from merely being present in the same place. Conversely, work demands, fatigue, health problems, household responsibilities, childcare, and lack of time were described as barriers to romantic connection. Several accounts suggested that romantic intensity could become more noticeable again when these pressures decreased or when couples deliberately created time for one another.

Changes Across the Relationship. Participants did not describe a uniform developmental trajectory. Some reported that the physiological excitement experienced early in the relationship had become less intense or less frequent. Others characterized romantic intensity as fluctuating, with periods of greater closeness alternating with periods dominated by routine. Familiarity, security, gratitude, and emotional comfort were sometimes described as becoming more important over time. One participant in a relationship lasting several decades explained, “The feeling changes, even though it is similar. […] The butterflies are more a feeling accompanied by excitement, and over time that gives way to a certain familiarity”. Other participants perceived little change in their romantic feelings across the relationship.

Individual Differences in Romantic Intensity. Participants differed in both their experience and evaluation of “butterflies.” Descriptions included bodily sensations such as warmth, tingling, increased heart rate, and smiling, as well as frequent thoughts about the partner and a desire for closeness. For some, butterflies represented an important indication of continuing romantic love. Others regarded them as pleasant but unnecessary for a satisfying relationship and associated established love more strongly with security and a sense of having “arrived.” Overall, the accounts illustrated substantial variation in how romantic intensity was experienced and interpreted.

Discussion

The present study examined relational, motivational, temporal, and personality-related correlates of romantic passion in established relationships. Three findings warrant particular attention. First, relational self-expansion showed the strongest and most consistent association with romantic passion. Second, dyadic sexual desire was independently associated with romantic passion and statistically accounted for part of the association between self-expansion and passion. Third, relationship duration was associated with lower romantic passion on average but unexpectedly strengthened rather than weakened the association between dyadic

sexual desire and passion. By comparison, personality showed limited explanatory value: Extraversion was unrelated to romantic passion, whereas neuroticism showed a small positive association contrary to the hypothesized direction. Taken together, the findings point more strongly to proximal relational processes than to broad personality traits as correlates of romantic passion.

Relational Self-Expansion and Romantic Passion

The clearest support emerged for H1. Participants who perceived their relationships as providing opportunities for new experiences, perspectives, and personal growth reported greater romantic passion. This association was evident at the bivariate level, in the hypothesis-specific regression, and in the exploratory simultaneous model, in which relational self-expansion remained the strongest unique correlate after dyadic sexual desire, relationship duration, extraversion, and neuroticism were considered.

This pattern is consistent with the self-expansion model, according to which close relationships can broaden individuals' resources, identities, perspectives, and capacities (Aron et al., 2013, 2022). Previous studies have shown that novel and arousing shared activities can benefit relationship quality (Aron et al., 2000) and that momentary self-expansion is associated with more positive relationship experiences (Graham, 2008). The present findings extend this work by linking perceived relational self-expansion specifically with romantic passion in relationships lasting at least two years.

The qualitative accounts added useful context. Participants associated renewed romantic intensity with travel, excursions, shared activities, and interruptions of everyday routines. However, experiences did not necessarily need to be objectively new. Familiar activities could also feel romantically meaningful when they involved deliberate attention, shared engagement, or an opportunity to perceive the partner differently. Relational self-expansion may therefore depend less on novelty itself than on whether an experience feels stimulating, meaningful, and growth-promoting.

Despite its consistency across the present analyses, the association cannot be interpreted causally. Relational self-expansion may contribute to romantic passion, but passion may also increase the extent to which a relationship is perceived as enriching. Both may additionally reflect a broader positive evaluation of the relationship. The finding therefore identifies relational self-expansion as a particularly relevant correlate, not as an established cause of romantic passion.

The Role of Dyadic Sexual Desire

The second most consistent pattern concerned dyadic sexual desire. Participants reporting greater desire involving another person also reported greater romantic passion, and this association remained significant in the exploratory simultaneous model. The constructs were related but not interchangeable. Dyadic sexual desire concerns sexual interest and approach motivation, whereas romantic passion additionally encompasses longing, emotional activation, preoccupation, attraction, and a desire for closeness.

Consistent with H2, relational self-expansion showed a significant indirect association with romantic passion through dyadic sexual desire. This pattern corresponds with evidence that shared self-expanding activities may increase sexual desire for a partner, which is subsequently associated with relational and sexual outcomes (Muise et al., 2019). Self-expansion may renew attention to a familiar partner and provide opportunities to experience that person as interesting, attractive, or desirable. Sexual desire may then function as an approach-oriented motivational process that supports intimacy and connection (Birnbaum & Reis, 2019). More recent theorizing similarly suggests that maintaining sexual desire in established relationships may depend on balancing closeness with a continuing sense of otherness and individuality between partners (Muise & Goss, 2024).

The continued direct association between self-expansion and romantic passion indicates, however, that dyadic sexual desire did not statistically account for the entire association. Other processes may include positive emotional arousal, renewed attention,

shared meaning, or a temporary interruption of routine. Romantic passion should therefore not be reduced to sexual desire.

This distinction was also evident in the interviews. Some participants associated kissing, touching, sexual attraction, and spontaneous sexual encounters with renewed romantic intensity. Others emphasized nonsexual affection, trust, loyalty, or emotional security and did not regard sexual activity as essential. Thus, physical and sexual intimacy may contribute to romantic passion differently across individuals and relationships.

Because all variables were assessed concurrently, the indirect association does not establish a causal sequence. The findings cannot demonstrate that self-expansion first increases dyadic sexual desire and that desire subsequently increases romantic passion. Reverse and reciprocal associations remain plausible. H2 was supported statistically, but the proposed mediational process requires longitudinal or experimental confirmation.

Relationship Duration and Romantic Passion

Relationship duration was moderately and negatively associated with romantic passion, indicating that participants in longer relationships reported lower romantic passion on average. This association remained statistically significant when the other predictors were considered simultaneously in the exploratory multiple regression. Participants in longer relationships therefore reported lower passion on average. This pattern is compatible with declining novelty, habituation, and increasing routine, but it does not imply that romantic passion inevitably disappears. Consistent with this distinction, reviews of sexual desire in long-term relationships indicate average declines over time alongside substantial variability between individuals and couples (Mark & Lasslo, 2018). Previous research indicates considerable heterogeneity in relationship trajectories, and intense romantic love can persist in long-term relationships when it is distinguished from anxious or obsessive passion (Acevedo & Aron, 2009).

The qualitative findings similarly argued against a uniform trajectory. Some participants described less physiological excitement than during the beginning of their relationships, whereas others reported fluctuations between periods of stronger and weaker romantic intensity. Familiarity, security, gratitude, and emotional closeness sometimes became more important over time. Relationship duration should therefore be understood as a temporal context rather than as a psychological mechanism in itself.

The moderation analysis produced a more tentative and unexpected finding. Contrary to H5, relationship duration strengthened the association between dyadic sexual desire and romantic passion. Exploratory probing suggested that the association was not statistically significant at 3 years but was significant and stronger at 7 and 20 years. One possible interpretation is that continued sexual desire becomes a more distinctive marker of romantic passion in longer relationships. During earlier relationship stages, desire may frequently coexist with novelty and general activation; later, its continued presence may more clearly differentiate individuals reporting sustained romantic passion.

This interpretation should remain provisional. The interaction contradicted the hypothesized direction, and the conditional-effects and Johnson–Neyman analyses were exploratory follow-ups. In addition, relationship duration is associated with age, parenthood, health, caregiving, stress, and other life-stage differences. The interaction requires preregistered replication before it is incorporated into broader theoretical accounts.

Personality and Romantic Passion

Personality contributed comparatively little to the explanation of romantic passion. H3 was not supported because extraversion was not significantly associated with romantic passion. Although extraversion is related to positive affect, activity, and approach orientation, these broad dispositions may be less relevant to passion within a specific relationship. This null finding is compatible with evidence that associations between extraversion and

relationship outcomes are often small or inconsistent (Malouff et al., 2010; White et al., 2004).

H4 was also not supported. Neuroticism showed a small positive rather than the predicted negative association with romantic passion. Thus, participants higher in neuroticism reported slightly greater romantic intensity, although the association was small and does not imply greater relationship satisfaction or a healthier form of romantic love. This differs from its typically negative association with relationship satisfaction and stability (Kreuzer & Gollwitzer, 2022; Malouff et al., 2010). One possible explanation concerns the breadth of the Passionate Love Scale, which includes intense preoccupation and emotional absorption in addition to positive attraction and longing. Measures of passionate love may therefore overlap partly with more obsessive aspects of romantic experience (Graham, 2011). Individuals higher in neuroticism might report greater emotional intensity or cognitive preoccupation without necessarily experiencing a more secure or satisfying relationship.

This explanation is speculative because attachment insecurity, jealousy, dependency, and romantic obsession were not assessed separately. Moreover, the association was small and should not be interpreted as evidence that neuroticism promotes a healthier form of passion. The more defensible conclusion is that broad personality traits showed limited explanatory value relative to relational self-expansion, dyadic sexual desire, and relationship duration.

Implications

The findings support a distinction between distal conditions and proximal relational processes. Personality traits provide broad dispositional tendencies, and relationship duration describes a temporal context. Relational self-expansion and dyadic sexual desire, by contrast, more directly reflect current experiences within the relationship. Romantic passion may therefore be better understood as a dynamic relational experience than as a fixed quality

determined primarily by personality or time, consistent with integrative accounts emphasizing multiple and potentially changing sources of romantic passion (Carswell & Impett, 2021).

The positive association with neuroticism further suggests that romantic intensity should not automatically be equated with positive relationship functioning. Passion may include secure attraction and mutual engagement, but it may also contain preoccupation, uncertainty, or emotional volatility. Future models should distinguish mutually rewarding passion from forms characterized by anxiety, dependency, or obsession.

Practical conclusions must remain cautious. The findings do not demonstrate that introducing novel activities or increasing sexual contact will cause passion to increase. Nevertheless, they identify potentially useful areas for reflection in couple counseling and relationship education. Rather than prescribing novelty as a universal solution, practitioners might explore which shared experiences provide both partners with stimulation, attention, or personal growth. The qualitative accounts also suggest that stress, fatigue, childcare, and lack of time may restrict opportunities for romantic connection. Sexual and nonsexual intimacy should be discussed flexibly because their meaning differs across individuals and couples.

Limitations and Future Directions

The primary limitation is the cross-sectional design. It precludes conclusions about causal direction, temporal ordering, and within-couple development. This is particularly important for the indirect-effects analysis and the association with relationship duration. Comparing individuals in relationships of different lengths does not show how passion changes within the same relationship over time.

All focal constructs were assessed through self-reports from one member of each couple. Common-method variance and general relationship evaluations may therefore have inflated some associations. Without partner data, reciprocal and partner effects could not be examined. Longitudinal dyadic studies are needed to separate within-person change, between-person differences, and interpersonal influence. Daily diary and experience-sampling methods

could additionally identify situations associated with short-term fluctuations in self-expansion, desire, and passion.

The sample also limits generalizability. The final sample of 205 participants was slightly smaller than the target of 221, potentially reducing power for small effects and interactions. Recruitment through digital channels may have produced self-selection, women were overrepresented, and all participants were German-speaking. Replication is needed across genders, sexual orientations, relationship structures, cultural contexts, and life stages.

Measurement limitations should also be considered. The German versions of the Passionate Love Scale and Self-Expansion Questionnaire were translated for this study but were not independently validated. High internal consistency does not establish factorial equivalence with the original measures. The dyadic desire subscale assesses desire involving another person but does not necessarily refer exclusively to the current partner. Future studies should use validated translations and partner-specific measures of desire. They should also distinguish secure romantic passion from anxiety, dependency, jealousy, and obsession.

Several analyses were exploratory, including the simultaneous multiple regression, correlations involving the additional Big Five traits, and follow-up probing of the interaction. These findings require independent confirmation. The unexpected moderation effect should be tested in preregistered studies that assess age, parenthood, health, caregiving responsibilities, sexual satisfaction, and current stress.

The qualitative component was supplementary and based on 12 interviews. The focused analysis was intended to contextualize the quantitative findings rather than provide a comprehensive qualitative account. Coding was not independently conducted by a second researcher. The interview findings therefore illustrate possible experiences but cannot establish their prevalence.

Experimental research represents an important next step. Studies could compare shared activities that vary in novelty, arousal, personal relevance, and perceived

meaningfulness to determine whether subjective engagement is more consequential than novelty itself. Combined with longitudinal and dyadic assessments, such research could test whether relational self-expansion and partner-specific desire precede changes in romantic passion.

Conclusion

Relational self-expansion emerged as the strongest and most consistent correlate of romantic passion, followed by dyadic sexual desire. Relationship duration was associated with lower passion on average but unexpectedly strengthened the association between desire and passion. Personality showed substantially weaker associations. The qualitative accounts further illustrated how shared engagement, physical closeness, intentional couple time, and everyday stress may shape the subjective experience of romantic intensity.

The findings do not establish how romantic passion can be causally maintained or renewed. They nevertheless suggest that passion in established relationships is connected with how partners experience growth, attraction, attention, and shared engagement within their relationship.

Declarations

Ethics approval

The study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of the Bundeswehr Munich (approval/reference number: EK UniBw M 26-11). All procedures were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible institutional committee and the Declaration of Helsinki.

Consent to participate

Informed consent was obtained from all participants before participation. Participants who took part in the qualitative interviews provided additional informed consent for the interview and its audio recording.

Consent for publication

Participants in the qualitative interviews consented to the use of anonymized interview material for scientific publication. No identifying information is reported.

Availability of data and materials

The de-identified quantitative data and supporting materials are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to the conditions of the participants' informed consent and applicable data-protection requirements. The qualitative interview data are not publicly available because they contain potentially identifying and sensitive information.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Authors' contributions

ENM contributed to the conceptualization and planning of the study, supervised and conducted the research, and contributed to writing the manuscript. QSA contributed to data collection and drafted the initial version of the manuscript. KHR contributed to the conceptualization of the study and critically revised the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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