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The Effect of Mortality Salience on Compromising Mate Selection Standards in Homosexual and  
Heterosexual Individuals

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### **Abstract**

Terror management theory (TMT), proposed by Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon (1986), suggests that humans cope with terror resulting from the knowledge of their own mortality. The need for coping mechanisms arises when individuals are reminded of their own inevitable death; that is, when they experience mortality salience (MS). Hirschberger, Florian, and Mikulincer (2002) found that when primed with death reminders, heterosexual individuals tend to compromise their ideal mate selection to form close relationships. There has also been extensive research on the differences between homosexual and heterosexual mating preferences. This study examined the effect mortality salience has on an individuals' mate selection standards, and if there is a difference based on individual's sexuality. Data from 332 participants did not yield significant differences in compromising mate selection standards between the MS primed and control groups. Differences in willingness to compromise mate selection standards was found in varying sexualities, suggesting a need to further investigate sexuality differences in willingness to compromise.

## Introduction

People's relationships and the motivations behind one's romantic partner selection has long been a focus of literature. Furthermore, the circumstances in which people compromise their standards of a mate in order to secure a relationship have been a focus of attention in research. In terror management theory, individuals reminded of death take measures to reduce the death-related thoughts from their consciousness, with studies finding that relationship commitment functions as a death anxiety buffer (Florian, Mikulincer, & Hirschberger, 2002). Following mortality salience priming, individuals have been found to reduce their mate standards more readily (Hirschberger, Florian, & Mikulincer, 2002).

Relatedly, mate standards have been explored in perspective of sexual selection theory with multiple studies finding that, in general, women seek evidence of resources that would be beneficial to offspring (wealth, older males, etc.) while males seek mates with signs of fertility (youth, attractiveness, etc.). These patterns explain heterosexual mating preferences in the perspective of reproduction, yet does not provide explanation for homosexual mate preferences. Explanations for homosexual mate preferences are still in debate, but studies have shown that there are differences in mate selection standards between heterosexual and homosexual individuals.

With differences in mate selection standards and the motivations behind them in heterosexual and homosexual individuals, it is still unknown if mortality salience has a similar effect across sexualities. This study aims to explore the gap of literature concerning sexuality differences in compromising mate selection standards in the perspective of terror management theory as well as add to the existing literature about the effect of mortality salience.

### **Terror Management Theory**

Every animal has a self-preservation instinct, actively avoiding death; however, humans are unique in the fact that they are aware of their mortality. The knowledge that death is inevitable and the desire to avoid it leads to what is called death anxiety. Death anxiety and the terror it leads to in daily life is the basis of terror management theory (TMT). Inspired by Ernest Becker's (1962, 1973, 1975) writings' and proposed by Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon (1986), TMT was created to explain the anxiety that results from the knowledge of our mortality. According to this theory, humans in their knowledge of their own mortality, must believe that they will live on, symbolically or literally, after death. Symbolic mortality involves extensions of the self, such as having children or obtaining achievements, while literal immortality typically takes the form of some sort of afterlife, such as reincarnation or heaven (Martin, 1999).

### **Mortality Salience**

Mortality salience (MS) is the state in which a person is consciously aware and thinking of their own death. Mortality salience (MS) has been studied extensively since the introduction of TMT (Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010). MS priming has been done in a number of ways, from asking participants to write about their own death (Greenberg, et al., 1986), to showing graphic depictions of death (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus, 1994). While many other life experiences bring anxiety, such as an important sports event, exam, or speech, effects found with MS priming in previous research are unique to death-inducing thoughts (e.g. Greenberg et al., 1994).

## **Coping Mechanisms**

### *Cultural Worldview*

TMT suggests that humans cope, either literally or symbolically, with the terror they feel by two main defense mechanisms: cultural worldview and self-esteem enhancement. Cultural worldviews are symbolic constructs that lead to organized systems of meaning. Coping cultural value mechanisms include religion, belief in an afterlife, living on through children or one's life's works, superiority over animals or other humans, and national identity, among others. When reminded of one's own death, it is typical for an individual to favor those who share their cultural worldview, and to respond more negatively to those who do not (e.g. Florian & Mikulincer, 1997; Greenberg, Porteus, Simon, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1995; Greenberg, et al., 1990; McGregor et. al., 1998).

Researchers have found that MS has an effect on individuals' perceptions of those who have a different worldview than their own. This effect has been seen in studies focusing on religious or political differences, such as the experiment conducted by Greenburg and his colleagues (1990) in which it was found that Christian participants primed with MS viewed fellow Christians more positively and Jewish participants more negatively. Studies have consistently found that individuals primed with MS view others who are more similar to themselves (in race, religion, political view, etc.) more positively than those who are dissimilar to themselves.

### *Self-Esteem*

The other defense mechanism is self-esteem, which varies among individuals. According to TMT, self-esteem comes from believing that one is living up to cultural expectations. Therefore, individuals with high self-esteem tend to believe that they are culturally valued while

those with low self-esteem feel less protected by their culture. For instance, Taubman-Ben-Ari and Noy (2010) suggest that individuals with higher self-consciousness levels have increased death cognitions and are thus generally more likely to have a negative outlook on life. Other research has found that individuals with higher self-esteem, particularly in regard to their behavior, have more positive attitudes toward their lives (Diener, Suh Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Diener & Diener, 2009; Du, King, & Chi, 2017).

The role of self-esteem in reactions to mortality salience was explored in three studies by Schmeichel and his colleagues (2009), and they found that high implicit self-esteem provides resilience against the threat of death, helping individuals more effectively buffer the anxiety they feel from death reminders. Individuals with lower levels of internal resources (i.e. low self-esteem, insecure attachment) defend against death anxiety by reacting in a negative manner toward those who threaten their cultural values, while those with high levels of internal resources (high self-esteem, secure attachment) may defend themselves by attempting to carry out important tasks (Mikulincer & Florian, 2000). In the case of young adults, the formation of intimate bonds is one of the most important developmental tasks (Erikson, 1959), leading to the belief that, especially for young adults, the formation of close relationships may be an effective method to cope with death anxiety.

#### *Formation of Close Relationships*

With self-esteem and cultural worldview being the anxiety buffers at the core of TMT, some have proposed a third defense mechanism that does not seem to fit with the other two, but has the same anxiety-buffering effect in the presence of death reminders. The proposed third defense mechanism is close relationships, suggested by Mikulincer and his colleagues. The formation of close relationships appears to provide survival and reproduction benefits and are

brought upon by natural and sexual selection processes (Buss & Schmitt, 1993) as well as being valued by society and culture (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) suggesting a similar effect as cultural worldview. Close relationships may also be an important source of self-esteem (Leary, 1999, Leary & Downs, 1995).

The notion that close relationships constituted a new, third defense mechanism has been supported by research. For example, Mikulincer and Florian (2005) found that MS leads to a greater desire for romantic intimacy and Florian and his colleagues found that MS leads to greater feelings of romantic commitment (2002). In a similar study, Silveria and his colleagues (2013) examined fMRI scans and found increased activation in the left anterior insula and adjacent lateral prefrontal cortex (IPFC) for MS-primed heterosexual men and women.

Activation in the IPFC reflects an approach-motivated defense mechanism that was induced by the reminder of dying. They also found that men who were MS-primed were more in favor of meeting attractive women than those who were not primed with MS. These results provided additional support for the effect of MS on mating motivation and desire to more readily form relationships.

In another such study, Hirschberger, Florian, and Mikulincer (2002) found that when primed with death reminders, people seem to compromise their ideal mate standards to form a close relationship. Ideal mate standards are traits that their ideal partner would possess. Here, self-esteem also played a role, with high self-esteem individuals having higher mate selection standards than their low self-esteem peers. However, when exposed to thoughts of their own death, these high self-esteem individuals compromised their long-term mate criteria to the same level as the low self-esteem individuals. While other research has found that individuals with high self-esteem are generally less affected by MS, the findings in Hirschberger, Florian, and

Mikulincer's (2002) study suggests that high self-esteem individuals may defend against MS by forming close relationships. This notion suggests that individuals with higher self-esteem are likely to have a greater desire for romantic intimacy when MS primed.

### **Mate Selection Standards**

Although previous research has examined the MS effect on mate standards and relationship-forming, these studies have been conducted on heterosexual individuals, or otherwise do not specify sexuality. This lack of research on homosexual individuals in regard to relationships and MS is in contrast to the fact that there has been extensive research on differences in mating preferences between heterosexual and homosexual individuals. For example, in an analysis of 800 personal dating advertisements, Russock (2011) found that heterosexual women offered attractiveness (i.e., described themselves with physically attractive qualities in their profiles) and sought resources that may contribute to offspring survival (i.e. education and wealth) more than homosexual women. Heterosexual men offered more resources than homosexual men, but homosexual men sought attractiveness more than the heterosexual men. Finally, homosexual women offered commitment more than heterosexual women did. These findings suggest that there are differences in what heterosexual and homosexual men and women offer and seek in a relationship.

Although previous research has explored homosexual mating preferences as well as the effect of MS on compromising mate selection standards, very little research has been conducted that combines these factors. The purpose of the present study is to examine the effect that MS has on individuals' mate selection standards, and whether there is a difference between homosexual and heterosexual individuals. It is expected to find that MS will increase the rate of compromising mate selection standards in heterosexual individuals. It is also expected that

heterosexual mate selection standards and homosexual mate selection standards will differ. This study will also be an exploratory analysis of potential differences between heterosexual and homosexual individuals regarding compromising their mate selection standards under MS priming.

## Methods

### Participants

Participants ( $n = 545$ ) were recruited using Eastern Illinois University's SONA research pool, where students received course credit for their participation, as well as the online research platform Survey Circle, which allows for individuals to complete surveys for points. These points can then be used to post one's own surveys.

The data were examined for instances of incomplete or indiscriminate answers, and such responses were removed from the sample, yielding a final sample of 322 participants. The majority of the participants were female, with 234 females (72.7%) and 88 males (27.3%). The average age of the participants was 30.38 years ( $SD = 11.18$ ) and ranged from 18-69 years. Characteristics of participants sexuality can be found in Table 1. Characteristics of participants sexuality by sex can be found in Table 2.

Table 1

#### *Sexuality of Participants*

Sexuality	<i>n</i>	%
Heterosexual only	211	65.5
Heterosexual mostly	49	15.2
Heterosexual somewhat more	6	1.9
Bisexual/pansexual	35	10.9

Homosexual somewhat more	3	0.9
Homosexual mostly	6	1.9
Homosexual only	12	3.7

---

Table 2

*Sexuality of Participants by Sex*

Sexuality	Male	Female
Heterosexual only	58	153
Heterosexual mostly	13	36
Heterosexual somewhat more	0	6
Bisexual/pansexual	8	27
Homosexual somewhat more	1	2
Homosexual mostly	2	4
Homosexual only	6	6
Total	88	234

---

**Measures**

**Self-Esteem.** Self-esteem was assessed with the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (1965). The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale consists of 10 items on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4). Cronbach's alpha for the 10 items in Rosenberg's (1965) scale was high (.90), indicating internal consistency. Self-esteem scores were computed by averaging the responses on the 10 items with higher scores indicating higher self-esteem. To examine the effects of self-esteem on mate selection standards and willingness to compromise,

participants were divided into two groups according to their scores on the self-esteem scale either below or above the median (2.90). (See appendix A)

**Ideal Partner Traits.** Participants' value of traits in an ideal partner was assessed using a version of Regan's (1998) scale. The scale consists of 21 characteristics, each of which participants indicated how much they value the trait in an ideal romantic partner. Traits are rated using a 10-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 'I do not value this characteristic for my ideal romantic partner' (1) to 'I very much value this characteristic for my ideal romantic partner' (10). (See appendix B)

**Priming.** Mortality salience (MS) was manipulated by two open-ended questions that have been used in previous research (e.g. Greenberg et al., 1990) to remind the participants of either their death, or a visit to the dentist. Using dental pain as a control condition has been done in previous research to ensure a distinction between MS effects and pain (Shatil, 2012). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions. Participants in the MS condition received following questions: 'Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you' and 'What do you think happens to you as you physically die and are physically dead?' Participants in the control condition were asked parallel questions, replacing the references of death with 'going to the dentist.' (See Appendix C)

**Distraction.** Following the priming, participants completed a 10-item distraction survey in which they were asked to list 10 facts about themselves. This task was included because previous studies have shown that MS effects occur after having a brief distraction from the death reminders (Arndt et al., 1997). (See Appendix D)

**Willingness to compromise.** Willingness to compromise was measured by Regan's (1998) 21-item scale again, with participants this time asked to rate the extent to which they

would be willing to compromise on each of the 21 traits when considering a romantic partner for marriage. Items were again rated on a 10-point Likert-type scale from 1 ('I am not willing to compromise on this item') to 10 ('I am willing to make a very high compromise on this item'). Emphasis was placed on informing the participants that these are the same traits as the previous scale, but should be rated for the extent of willingness to compromise. Higher scores reflect more readiness to compromise ideal mate standards. (See Appendix E)

**Sexuality.** Participants indicated their sexuality on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Heterosexual only) to 7 (Homosexual only). For purposes of grouping individuals for analysis individuals were placed into 3 separate groups dependent on their sexuality responses. The first group, labeled "Heterosexual" was individuals indicating their sexuality of 1-2 on the scale, the second group, labeled "Bisexual" consisted of those who indicated their sexuality from 3-5, and the final group, labeled "Homosexual" being those who indicated their sexuality from 6-7 on the scale. (See Appendix F)

### **Procedures**

All participants completed the materials required for this survey online at their convenience. Instrumentation was completed in the order described previously. After completing instrumentation, participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire asking for sex, gender, age, and relationship status following the completion of other materials. A debriefing form was also included at the end of the questionnaires, to provide participants with information about the study and contact information if they had question or concerns about the study. The average time for survey completion was 17 minutes.

## Results

### Self-Esteem on Mate Standards and Willingness to Compromise

Before examining the main predictions, preliminary analyses on ideal partner representation as a function of self-esteem (low, high) was conducted to examine possible associations between self-esteem and ideal partner traits.

T-tests for independent means was conducted on each trait of mate selection standards with a significance level of .05, where 12 traits were found to be significant. After applying a Holm-Bonferroni correction at an overall level of significance of .05, six traits were statistically significant: popular, good earning capacity, healthy, wealthy, relaxed in social situations, and good humor. One tailed-tests were utilized due to previous research showing high-self esteem individuals rating mate selection standards higher than low-self esteem individuals and the prediction for this study being such as well (Hirschberger et al., 2002). The raw  $p$ -values,  $i$ -index (ascending sort of raw  $p$ -values), and Holm-Bonferroni significance level can be seen in Table 3.

Results of t-test for independent means with a Holm-Bonferroni correction show that individuals with high self-esteem rated the trait popular significantly higher than those with low self-esteem  $t(320) = -3.59, p < .001$  (one-tailed). Additionally, individuals with high self-esteem had higher rates compared to individuals with low self-esteem for the traits healthy  $t(320) = -3.16, p = .001$  (one-tailed), good earning capacity  $t(320) = -3.36, p < .001$  (one-tailed), wealthy  $t(320) = -2.83, p = .002$  (one-tailed), relaxed in social situations  $t(320) = -2.64, p = .005$  (one-tailed), and good sense of humor  $t(320) = -2.83, p = .04$  (one-tailed).

Tests were also conducted on individual's willingness to compromise on each of the 21 traits with a significance level of .05, where five traits were found to be significant. After applying a Holm-Bonferroni correction at an overall level of significance of .05, four traits were

statistically significant: popular, easygoing, healthy, and good earning capacity. Results indicate that individuals with low self-esteem were more willing to compromise compared to high self-esteem individuals in the traits popular  $t(320) = 2.85, p = .005$  (two-tailed), easygoing  $t(320) = 2.74, p = .006$  (two-tailed), healthy  $t(320) = 2.58, p = .01$  (two-tailed), and good earning capacity  $t(320) = 2.09, p = .04$  (two-tailed). The raw  $p$ -values,  $i$ -index (ascending sort of raw  $p$ -values), and Holm-Bonferroni significance level can be seen in Table 4.

Table 3

*Significance Levels of Self-Esteem for Mate Standards*

Variable	Raw $p$ -value	$i$	Holms-Bonferroni significance level
Popular	< .001	1	.004
Good earning capacity	< .001	2	.005
Healthy	.001	3	.005
Wealthy	.003	4	.006
Relaxed in social situations	.005	5	.006
Physically attractive	.008	6	.007
Easy going	.02	7	.008
Aggressive	.02	8	.010
Material Possessions	.03	9	.012
Ambitious	.03	10	.017
Friendly	.04	11	.025
Good humor	.04	12	.050

Table 4

*Significance Levels of Self-Esteem for Willingness to Compromise*

Variable	Raw <i>p</i> -value	<i>i</i>	Holms-Bonferroni significance level
Popular	.005	1	.010
Easygoing	.006	2	.005
Healthy	.01	3	.017
Ambitious	.03	4	.025
Good earning capacity	.04	5	.05

**Willingness to Compromise by Priming**

To examine readiness to compromise mate selection between individuals in the priming group (mortality salience) and the control group (dentist), a t-test for independent means was conducted on each trait of mate selection standards. Results of t-tests for independent means with a Holm-Bonferroni correction with an overall level of significance of .05 show that there was no significant difference in compromising mate standards between individuals in the mortality salience group and those in the control group.

**Sexuality on Willingness to Compromise**

In examining predictions of mortality salience and sexuality to compromising one's ideal mate standards, two-way ANOVAs for mortality salience (mortality salience, physical pain) and sexuality (heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual) were conducted on the level of willingness to compromise on each of the 21 mate selection traits with a Holm-Bonferroni correction at an overall significance of .05 where significant results were found in 8 traits: relaxed in social situations, powerful, intellectual, wealthy, good earning capacity, ambitious, cultured, and

material possessions. The raw  $p$ -values,  $i$ -index (ascending sort of raw  $p$ -values), and Holm-Bonferroni significance level can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5

*Significance Levels of Sexuality and Priming for Willingness to Compromise*

Variable	Raw $p$ -value	$i$	Holms-Bonferroni significance level
Ambitious	.001	1	.006
Good earning capacity	.006	2	.007
Material Possessions	.007	3	.008
Wealthy	.01	4	.01
Cultured	.02	5	.013
Intellectual	.02	6	.017
Powerful	.03	7	.025
Relaxed in social situations	.05	8	.05

Result of the two-way ANOVA on willingness to compromise the trait ambitious showed a significant main effect of sexuality  $F(2, 316) = 10.28, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .06$ . Results of a Tukey's HSD test further show that regardless of priming group homosexual individuals had higher willingness to compromise scores ( $M = 6.72, SD = 2.42$ ) than heterosexual individuals ( $M = 4.28, SD = 2.43$ ),  $p < .001$  and bisexual individuals ( $M = 5.05, SD = 2.52$ ),  $p = .04$ .

Result of the two-way ANOVA on willingness to compromise the trait good earning capacity showed a significant main effect of sexuality  $F(2, 316) = 5.18, p = .006, \eta_p^2 = .03$ . Results of a Tukey's HSD test further show that regardless of priming group heterosexual individuals had lower willingness to compromise scores ( $M = 5.68, SD = 2.47$ ) than bisexual

individuals ( $M = 6.68$ ,  $SD = 2.49$ ),  $p = .04$  and homosexual individuals ( $M = 7.11$ ,  $SD = 2.85$ ),  $p = .05$ .

Result of the two-way ANOVA on willingness to compromise the trait material possessions showed a significant main effect of sexuality  $F(2, 316) = 5.00$ ,  $p = .007$ ,  $\eta_p^2 < .031$ . Results of a Tukey's HSD test further show that regardless of priming group heterosexual individuals had lower willingness to compromise scores ( $M = 7.48$ ,  $SD = 2.53$ ) than bisexual individuals ( $M = 8.70$ ,  $SD = 1.79$ ),  $p = .008$ .

Result of the two-way ANOVA on willingness to compromise the trait wealthy showed a significant main effect of sexuality  $F(2, 316) = 4.41$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .03$ . Results of a Tukey's HSD test further show that regardless of priming group heterosexual individuals had lower willingness to compromise scores ( $M = 6.97$ ,  $SD = 2.59$ ) than bisexual individuals ( $M = 7.98$ ,  $SD = 2.67$ ),  $p = .04$ .

Result of the two-way ANOVA on willingness to compromise the trait cultured showed a significant main effect of sexuality  $F(2, 316) = 4.03$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .03$ . However, results of Tukey's HSD test found no specific significant difference. Heterosexual individuals had a mean score of 5.35, bisexual individuals a mean score of 6.25, and homosexual individuals a mean score of 6.56.

There was a significant interaction between priming group and sexuality on willingness to compromise the trait intellectual,  $F(2, 316) = 4.14$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .03$ . Analyses of simple contrasts reveal that bisexual individuals had significantly higher willingness to compromise the trait intellectual when exposed to mortality salience ( $M = 4.89$ ,  $SD = 2.60$ ) than the control group ( $M = 3.24$ ,  $SD = 1.86$ ),  $F(1,316) = 5.44$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $r = .13$ .

Results also show that there was a significant interaction between priming group and sexuality on willingness to compromise the trait powerful,  $F(2, 316) = 3.71, p = .03, \eta_p^2 = .02$ . Analyses of simple contrasts reveal that bisexual individuals had significantly higher willingness to compromise the trait powerful when exposed to mortality salience ( $M = 8.47, SD = 2.17$ ) than the control group ( $M = 6.76, SD = 2.96$ ),  $F(1,316) = 5.31, p = .02, r = .13$ . Analyses also revealed that bisexual individuals had a higher willingness to compromise the trait powerful ( $M = 8.44, SD = 2.17$ ) compared to heterosexual individuals when in the mortality salience group ( $M = 6.88, SD = 2.43$ ),  $F(1,316) = 4.03, p = .008, r = .11$ .

Results of a two-way ANOVA with a Holm-Bonferroni correction at an overall significance level of .05 showed that for the trait relaxed in social situations there was a significant main effect of sexuality,  $F(2, 316) = 3.32, p = .04, \eta_p^2 = .02$ . However, results of Tukey's HSD test found no specific significant difference. Heterosexual individuals had a mean score of 5.84, bisexual individuals a mean score of 6.30, and homosexual individuals a mean score of 7.17.

All other interaction and simple effects for willingness to compromise were not significant.

Table 7

*Summary Table for Significant Main Effects of Sexuality from Two-Way Analysis of Variance*

Trait	Sexuality	M	SD
Ambitious	<i>Heterosexual</i>	4.28	2.43
	<i>Bisexual</i>	5.05	2.52
	<i>Homosexual</i>	6.72	2.42
Good Earning Capacity	<i>Heterosexual</i>	5.68	2.47
	<i>Bisexual</i>	6.68	2.49
	<i>Homosexual</i>	7.11	2.85
Material Possessions	<i>Heterosexual</i>	7.48	2.53
	<i>Bisexual</i>	8.70	1.79
	Homosexual	7.44	3.24
Wealthy	<i>Heterosexual</i>	6.97	2.59
	<i>Bisexual</i>	7.98	2.67
	Homosexual	8.22	2.67
Cultured	Heterosexual	5.35	2.65
	Bisexual	6.25	2.49
	Homosexual	6.56	3.03
Relaxed in Social Situations	Heterosexual	5.84	2.38
	Bisexual	6.30	2.46
	Homosexual	7.17	1.89

*Italicized figures indicate significant differences*

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of mortality saliency on mate selection standards in homosexual and heterosexual individuals. Contrary to the hypothesis, mortality saliency did not have a significant effect on compromising mate standards. Although Hirschberger and colleagues (2002) found that mortality saliency had an effect on compromising mate selection standards, their study was conducted on Israeli students. It is possible that there are cultural differences in willingness to compromise in general when considering a partner for marriage. Although there is no current published study to the researcher's knowledge directly comparing individuals from various cultures on their willingness to compromise mate selection standards, cultural differences in mate selection standards have been seen in previous research. In a comparison of individuals from Israel to individuals from the United States, found that Israeli individuals ranked physical characteristics higher than American individuals (Hetsroni 2000). Another study by Thomas et al. (2019) comparing 2,587 participants from 59 different countries found numerous cultural differences between Western cultures (i.e., United Kingdom, United States, Australia) and Eastern cultures (i.e., Singapore, China, Indonesia) such as women differing in the traits desire for children and religiosity in their mate and men having differences in the traits of humor and religiosity in their mate. Additionally, both Western men and women placed more importance on the trait good finance prospects than Eastern men and women (Thomas et al., 2019).

It is also possible that the formation of close relationships as a buffer to death anxiety is not seen in this demographic. The idea of forming close relationships works as a death anxiety buffer is related to its fulfillment of cultural standards and expectations, enhancing one's cultural worldview. According to the United States Census Bureau (2020) the percentages of married

individuals has been declining while the percentage of individuals who have never married has been increasing. Individuals are also getting married at an older age with the median age of first marriage in 2019 being 30.3 years for men and 28.4 years for women (United States Census Bureau, 2020). Considering the average age of the participants in the current study and the trend of declining numbers of individuals marrying, it is possible that in the United States it is no longer a priority for individuals, especially under the age of 30, to find a long-term partner and thus the formation of a long-term relationship has declined in its effectiveness to mitigate death anxiety.

The findings of the current study reveal that high self-esteem individuals rated traits of their ideal partner higher than low self-esteem individuals, specifically the traits popular, healthy, and good earning capacity. These findings are similar to those found by Hirschberger (2002), where high self-esteem individuals rated their ideal mate standards higher than low self-esteem individuals.

The current study found no difference in high self-esteem and low self-esteem individuals in terms of willingness to compromise traits in their partner. This is in contrary to previous studies that individuals with higher self-esteem respond less defensively to mortality salience inducement (Greenberg et al., 1993; Greenberg et al., 1992; Harmon-Jones et al., 1997). The observed findings also differ from those found by Hirschberger (2002), where high self-esteem individuals compromised their mate standards more readily than low self-esteem individuals.

The current study represents one of the first attempts to examine the utility of a terror management perspective in examining the processes that take place in close relationships dependent on sexuality. Specifically, this study focused on possible differences in sexuality in mate selection as a possible anxiety buffer to mortality salience. The findings supported that

there were some differences in sexuality on specific traits. When exposed to death reminders, the specific mate traits of powerful and intellectual differed among sexualities and were rated as more willing to compromise significantly more by bisexual individuals compared to heterosexual individuals.

Additionally, this study showed a difference in willingness to compromise among the various sexualities despite priming group. This study represents one of the first attempts to measure willingness to compromise mate traits across sexualities. Heterosexual individuals had significantly lower willingness to compromise for the traits wealthy, good earning capacity, ambitious, and material possessions compared to bisexual individuals, regardless of priming group. Indeed, these traits appear to have similarities and may hold warrant for future investigation in relation to sexuality and willingness to compromise.

There are several possibilities for the differences in willingness to compromise mate preferences that were observed in this study. It is possible that traits related to wealth and material possessions are not valued as highly by bisexual individuals as they are by heterosexual individuals. It should be noted that research into differences in mate preference regarding bisexual individuals is extremely limited as most mate preference research focuses on heterosexual individuals, with newer studies branching into homosexual individuals. Despite more recent studies investigating homosexual and heterosexual mate preferences, bisexual individuals are rarely included in these studies. One study conducted by March, Grieve, and Marx (2015) including bisexual individuals in their study found that when looking for a long-term mate, heterosexual individuals considered physical attractiveness significantly more than bisexual individuals but not significantly more than homosexual individuals. This study also found that homosexual individuals considered social level significantly more than heterosexual

individuals, however there were no significant differences between bisexual individuals and either heterosexual or homosexual individuals (March et al., 2015). While March's research did not focus on the same traits as the current study, it represents one of the few published studies in this topic incorporating bisexual individuals and supports that there is a difference in the traits valued in a mate by heterosexual, bisexual, and homosexual individuals.

### **Limitations**

Several limitations were extant in this study and must be considered when interpreting the results. The primary limitation of this study was its inequality in sample size based on sexuality. The majority of participants (260) identified as either heterosexual only or heterosexual mostly, while only 18 participants identified as homosexual only or homosexual mostly. With this variation in subgroups, potential analyses are limited, and power is affected, which should be taken into consideration with the results. The sample is also likely not representative of homosexual individuals due to its small size.

Another limitation to this study is its timing of data collection. Data collection was conducted at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, a time where many individuals may already have a heightened mortality salience. Results from Evers and Greenfield's (2021) studies indicate an increase in the public's overall mortality salience during the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States with large spikes in online mentions and searches of death related words. Hu, He, and Zhou (2020) also found increased mortality salience concerning COVID-19 relating to Chinese employee's anxiety. The potential effect of COVID-19 offers a unique perspective on the results and should be considered when interpreting the data.

Data collection during the COVID-19 pandemic could have also influenced this study in terms of priming. Individuals who were not primed with mortality salience were asked to think

and write about the act of going to the dentist, which has been used in previous research to exhibit an unpleasant experience unrelated to mortality (Shatil, 2012). However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, going to the dentist could have elicited thoughts or fears of contracting the disease, which had a high mortality rate and was linked to over 550,000 deaths in the United States in the year since its introduction into the United States (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Specific to dentist appointments, Kranz et al. (2020) found that 45.7% of respondents reported delaying going to the dentist due to the COVID-19 pandemic. With these insights it is possible that fear of contracting COVID-19 and the death anxiety related to the pandemic could have increased one's fear of going to the dentist and attached death anxiety to an activity that is not normally associated with mortality.

It is also possible that the method of mortality salience manipulation was not effective. While the method of having participants write about their death has been used in previous research, the remote nature of this study could have led to participants completing the survey while distracted or otherwise having other interferences. Some responses, while not analyzed or coded due to their open-ended nature, were observed to be short without in-depth responses.

### **Implications and Future Directions**

As acceptance of various sexualities is on the rise in the United States, so too does the number of individuals openly identifying in the LGBTQ+ spectrum. According to a 2021 Gallup poll, 5.6% of U.S adults identify as LGBT, up 4.5% from 2017 data (Gallup, 2021). Of those adults identifying as LGBT, 54.6% of them identify as bisexual. This pattern was also seen in the current study's data, with a larger number of participants indicating their sexuality as bisexual than homosexual. It is clear that LGBTQ+ individuals make up a significant portion of the population and should be considered when analyzing mate standards. Further understanding of

sexuality differences in mate selection and willingness to compromise mate traits under mortality salience could lead to a better understanding the motivation behind the formation of close relationships as a death anxiety buffer. Additionally, bisexual individuals are often not included in research about mate standards despite making up the majority of individuals identifying as LGBTQ and should be incorporated into future studies.

In conclusion, this study did not find a significant difference in willingness to compromise mate traits based on mortality salience. However, differences in sexuality of willingness to compromise various mate traits was observed and should be investigated further. Future research should emphasize testing of a larger, more diverse sample in a better controlled environment to ensure adequate priming effects. Future research may also focus on the possible effect of pandemics on mortality salience as well as cultural differences in compromising mate selection standards. Despite the possible limitations the current research seems to provide potentially important information on sexual orientation and how it relates to mating behaviors, as mating preferences show to be complex and varying across sexualities. Future research should also explore the motivation behind the formation of close relationships and their relation to anxiety buffering of mortality salience.

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### Appendix A: Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale

Below is a list of statements dealing with your general feelings about yourself. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement.

1. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

2. At times I think I am no good at all.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

3. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

6. I certainly feel useless at times.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

7. I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

9. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

10. I take a positive attitude toward myself.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

**Appendix B: Ideal Partner Traits**

**IDEAL PARTNER SCALE**

Please think about your **ideal** romantic partner. That is, the partner you ideally want to have in a perfect long-term romantic relationship and rate the extent which **you want this ideal partner to possess** the following characteristics.

		<b>I do not value this characteristic for my ideal romantic partner</b>								<b>Neutral</b>		<b>I very much value this characteristic for my ideal romantic partner</b>
<b>1.</b>	<b>Relaxed in social situations</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
<b>2.</b>	<b>Physically attractive</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
<b>3.</b>	<b>Powerful</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
<b>4.</b>	<b>Educated</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
<b>5.</b>	<b>High social status</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
<b>6.</b>	<b>Aggressive</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
<b>7.</b>	<b>Good sense of humor</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
<b>8.</b>	<b>Wealthy</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
<b>9.</b>	<b>Attentive to partner's need</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
<b>10.</b>	<b>Popular</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	

Please think about your **ideal** romantic partner. That is, the partner you ideally want to have in a perfect long-term romantic relationship and rate the extent which **you want this ideal partner to possess** the following characteristics.

		<b>I do not value this characteristic for my ideal romantic partner</b>								<b>Neutral</b>		<b><u>I very much value this characteristic for my ideal romantic partner</u></b>
11.	<b>Healthy</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
12.	<b>Easygoing</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
13.	<b>Good earning capacity</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
14.	<b>Intellectual</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
15.	<b>Creative and artistic</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
16.	<b>Ambitious</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
17.	<b>Friendly</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
18.	<b>Cultured</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
19.	<b>Dominant</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
20.	<b>Intelligent</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
21.	<b>Material possessions</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	

### **Appendix C: Priming Questions**

- Mortality Salience

Question 1: Please describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you.

Question 2: What do you think happens to you as you physically die and once you are physically dead?

- Control

Question 1: Please describe the emotions that the thought of going to the dentist arouses in you.

Question 2: What do you think happens to you as you go to the dentist and once you are physically at the dentist's?

**Appendix D: Ten-Statement Distraction Test**

## Ten-Statement Test

There are 10 numbered blanks on the page below. In these blanks, please write 10 answers to the simple question “Who am I?,” such as “I am a student” or “I am an artist.” Please provide 10 different answers to this question; answer as if you were giving the answers to yourself- not someone else. Write your answers in the order that they occur to you. Do not worry about logic or importance.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix E: Willingness to Compromise Partner Traits**

## POTENTIAL PARTNER SCALE

Please consider a **potential romantic partner for marriage**. Rate to what extent you would be willing to compromise each characteristic when considering a potential marriage partner.

		<b>I <u>am</u> willing to make a very high compromise on this item</b>									
	<b>I am <u>not</u> willing to compromise on this item</b>	<b>Neutral</b>									
<b>1.</b>	<b>Relaxed in social situations</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>2.</b>	<b>Physically attractive</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>3.</b>	<b>Powerful</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>4.</b>	<b>Educated</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>5.</b>	<b>High social status</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>6.</b>	<b>Aggressive</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>7.</b>	<b>Good sense of humor</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>8.</b>	<b>Wealthy</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>9.</b>	<b>Attentive to partner's need</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>10.</b>	<b>Popular</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Please consider a **potential romantic partner for marriage**. Rate to what extent you would be willing to compromise each characteristic when considering a potential marriage partner.

		<b>I am <u>not</u> willing to compromise on this item</b>								<b>Neutral</b>		<b>I <u>am</u> willing to make a very high compromise on this item</b>	
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
11.	<b>Healthy</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
12.	<b>Easygoing</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
13.	<b>Good earning capacity</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
14.	<b>Intellectual</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
15.	<b>Creative and artistic</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
16.	<b>Ambitious</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
17.	<b>Friendly</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
18.	<b>Cultured</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
19.	<b>Dominant</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
20.	<b>Intelligent</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
21.	<b>Material possessions</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		

**Appendix F: Sexuality Scale**

Please indicate what most closely represents your sexual identity

Heterosexual only	Heterosexual mostly	Heterosexual somewhat more	Bisexual	Homosexual somewhat more	Homosexual mostly	Homosexual only
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**Appendix G: Informed Consent Form****CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

You are invited to participate in a study conducted by Sydney Rohmann, a clinical psychology graduate student at Eastern Illinois University, under the supervision of Dr. Mariana Juras, a faculty member in the EIU Psychology Department. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You will be one of approximately 200 participants in the study.

The purpose of the study is to examine close relationships and personalities.

If you agree to participate in the study, you will be asked to provide basic demographic information (e.g., age, sex) and to complete a brief questionnaire that includes a scale on which you rate aspects of your ideal partner. The entire process will take approximately 15 minutes.

There is little or no risk associated with participation in the study and there are no incentives associated with participation.

No one will have access to information that could identify you, and the information to be collected will remain strictly confidential and will be disclosed only with our permission or as required by law.

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you agree to take part in the study, you may withdraw at any time without penalty. You may also refuse to provide any information that you do not wish to provide.

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact.

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[slrohmann@eiu.edu](mailto:slrohmann@eiu.edu) (Email)

If you have any questions or concerns about the treatment of human participants in this study,  
you may call or write:

Institutional Review Board

Eastern Illinois University

600 Lincoln Ave.

Charleston, IL 61920

Telephone: (217) 581-8576

E-mail: [eiuirb@www.eiu.edu](mailto:eiuirb@www.eiu.edu)

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw my  
consent and discontinue my participation at any time. By continuing, I hereby give my consent  
to participate in this study.

Continue

I do not wish to continue

**Appendix H: Debriefing Form****Debriefing Statement**

Thank you for participating in this study. We appreciate your willingness to take time out of your busy schedule to help us with our study.

The purpose of the study is to determine if there are any differences in mate selection standards between individuals who are primed with mortality saliency (being reminded of one's own mortality) and those who are not. Additionally, the study was designed to examine differences between heterosexual and homosexual individuals in this regard. These variables were measured using a 21-item scale designed to measure ideal and possible mate standards. Priming was accomplished by presenting participants with one of two open-ended questions, one about death, and the other about visiting the dentist.

The reminder of one's own mortality tends to create some mild anxiety in individuals. If you find yourself in any distress as a result of your participation in this study, please contact any of the following resources.

**Eastern Illinois University's Campus****Counseling Center**

Monday-Friday      8 am – 4:30 pm

217-581-3413

**Coles County**

**Life Links – Mattoon, IL**

Monday & Wednesday 9 am-5 pm      Tuesday & Thursday 9 am- 7 pm      Friday 9 am-4pm  
217-238-5700

**Nationally**

**Crisis Call Center**

24-hours, everyday

800-273-8255 or text ANSWER to 839863

Please do not discuss this study with others until the study is completed on July 31, 2021. It is very important that other potential participants do not know what is being measured in the study.

If you have any questions or concerns, or would like to see the results of the study, you may contact the following individuals:

**Student Researcher:**

Sydney Rohmann

Email: slrohmann@eiu.edu

**Faculty Sponsor:**

Dr. Mariana Juras

Email: mmjuras@eiu.edu

217-581-2611

**Thank you again for participating!**