

Obscuring the Self by Choosing a Partner: The Challenge of Identity Denial for Bisexuals in Romantic Relationships

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Background

- Romantic relationships have repeatedly been shown to be the strongest determinant of individual happiness. There have been many studies describing the mental health and happiness benefits of long-term romantic relationships, mostly focusing on heterosexual couples (Proulx, Helms, & Buehler, 2007).
- Bisexual identity is distinct from gay and lesbian identity, as well as heterosexuality, and little research has been dedicated towards interrogating how this difference affects the experience of romantic relationships.
- Identity denial* is a social phenomenon, which goes beyond simply reacting negatively to someone's self-identification, but rather includes either denying the existence of the group the person identifies with and/or denying that person's individual membership (Garr-Schultz & Gardner, 2017).
- Because the sexual identity of bisexual individuals may become less visible and thus less acknowledged and affirmed in romantic relationships, it is possible that, for bisexuals, relational benefits may come at the cost of identity.
- One indicator of whether identity denial (versus the affirmation received by straight and gay/lesbian individuals) destabilizes the self-concept is whether it influences *self-concept clarity* (Campbell, Trapnell, Heine, Katz, Lavalley, & Lehman, 1996). Self-concept clarity is the subjective sense that all the parts that define yourself are consistent, coherent, and stable, and has been consistently linked to a higher emotional well-being (Campbell, Assanand & Paula, 2003).
- Social reminders and support for identity boost self-concept clarity (Slotter & Gardner, 2014), whereas denial may harm it (Garr-Schultz & Gardner, 2017).
- To the extent bisexuals within relationships are suffering from identity denial, their relationships will fail to increase self-concept clarity, thus blocking one relational path to higher well-being.

Method

Participants

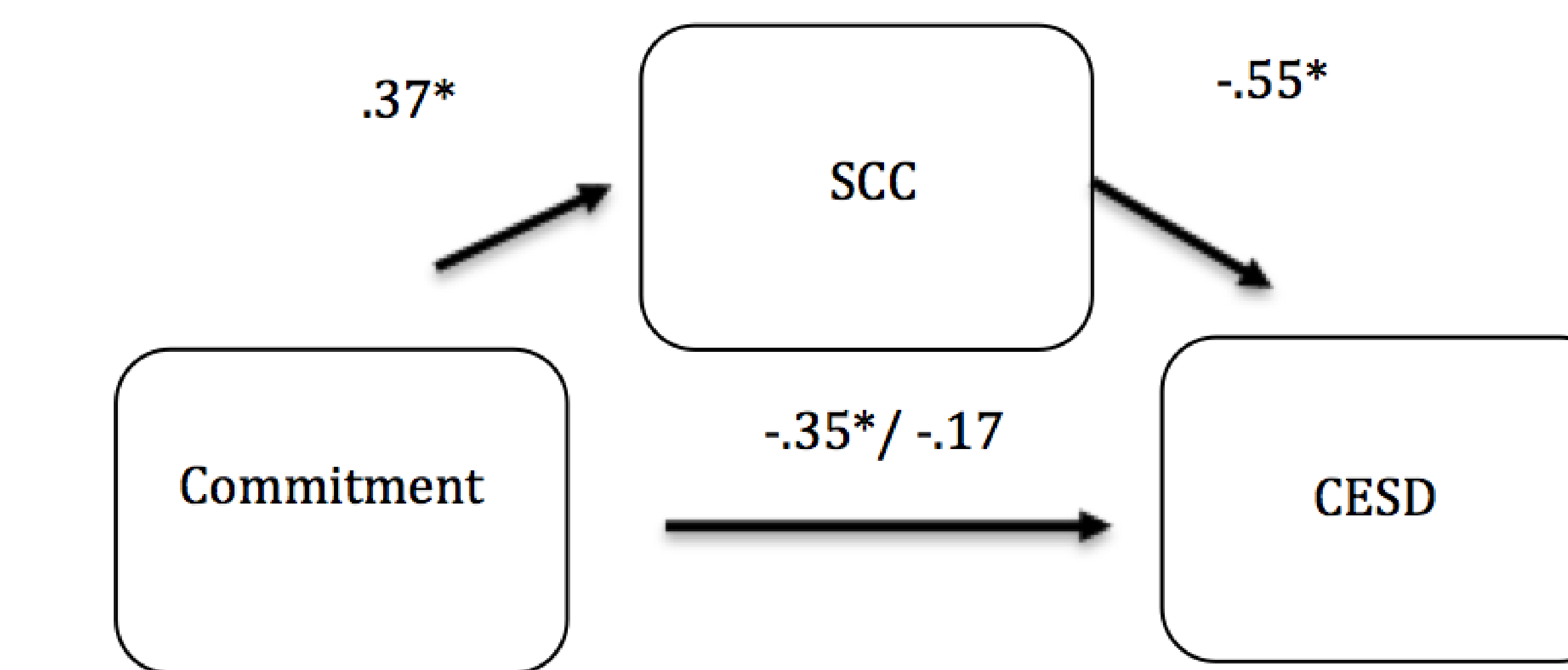
- We surveyed 253 participants recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk platform.
- We surveyed 50 straight participants, 100 bisexual participants, and 100 gay/lesbian participants.
- Individuals who self-identified as straight, gay, lesbian, or bisexual, and were 18 years of age or older, and have been in a romantic relationship for 1 year or longer were eligible for participation in this study.

Materials and Procedure

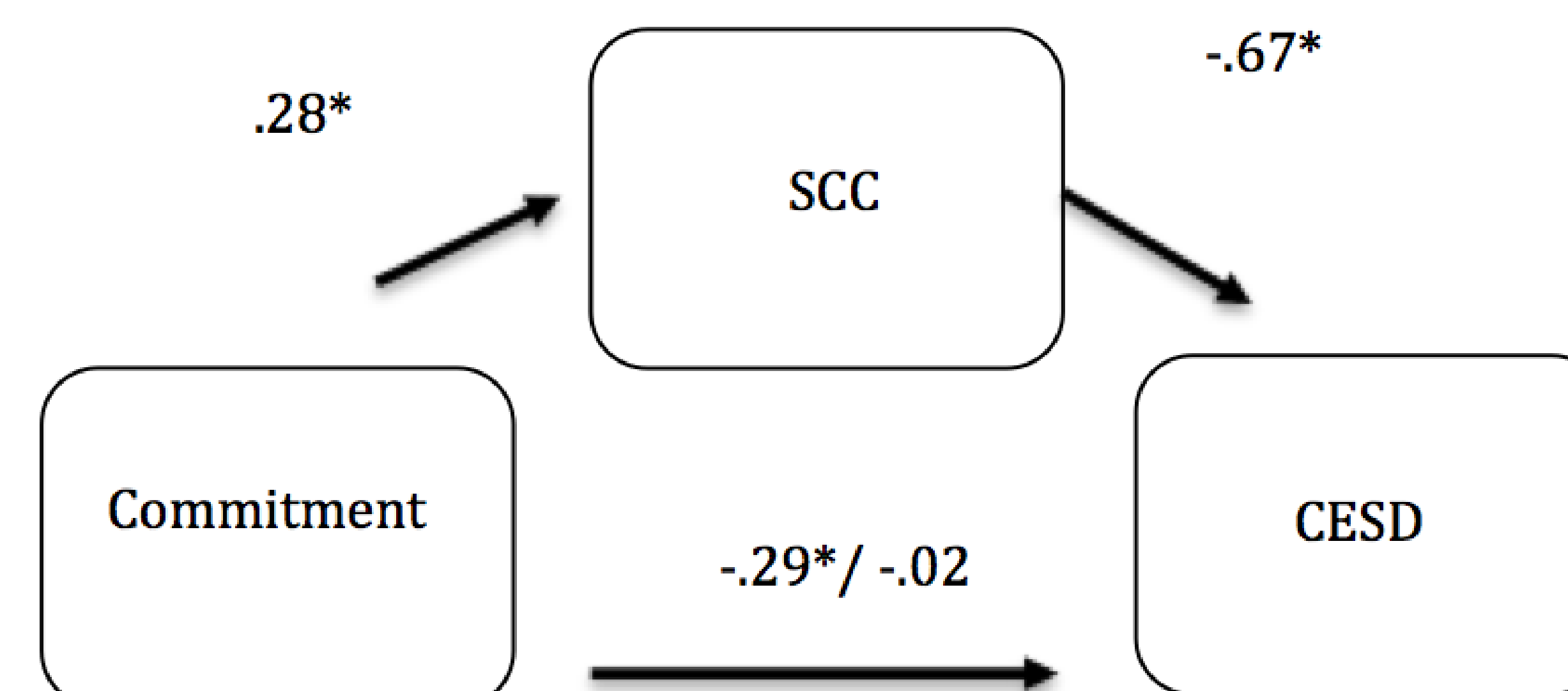
- Participants were asked to report on relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, self-concept clarity, and individual well being measures (e.g., depressive symptomology, self-esteem, and self-concept clarity) (Garr-Schultz & Gardner, 2017).

Some References

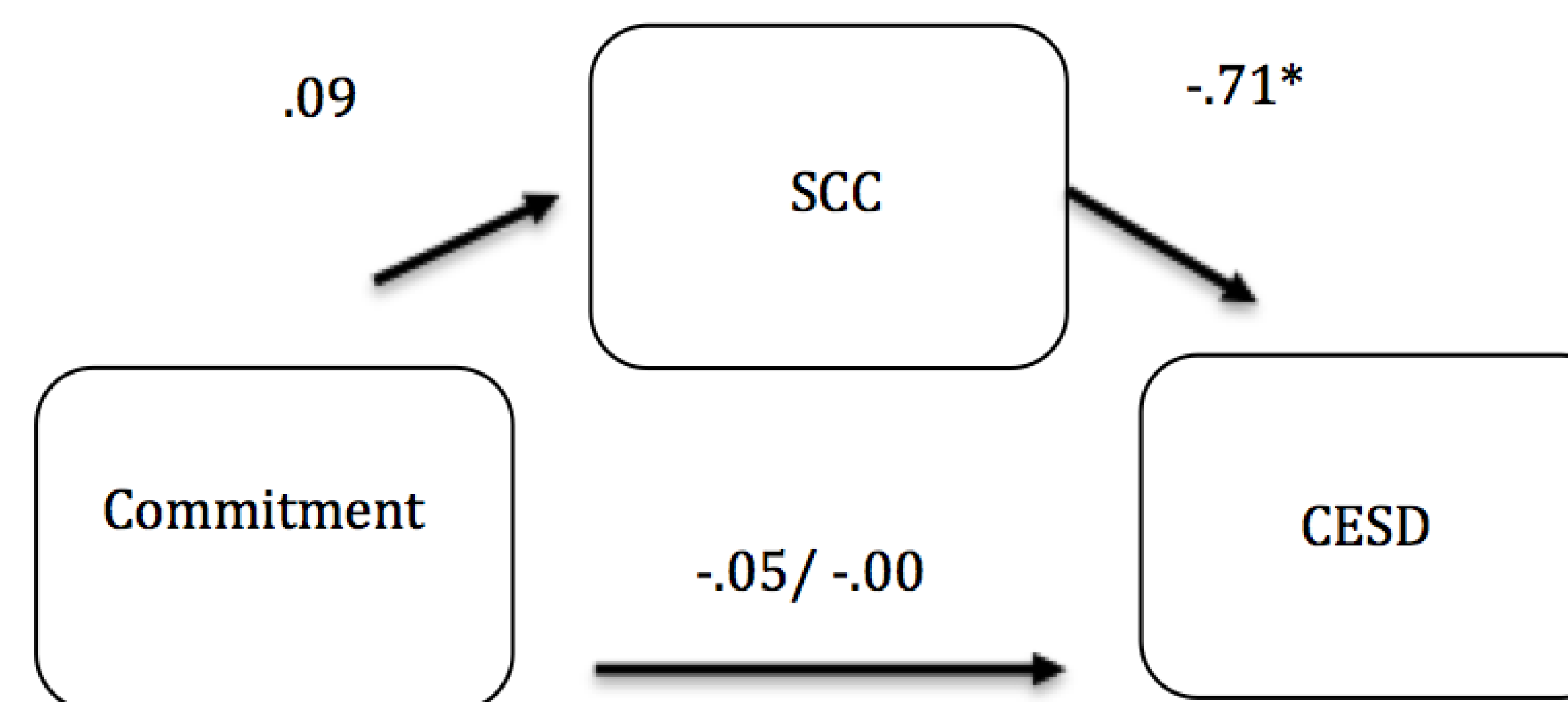
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Sobel $z_{St} = 2.42, p = .02$



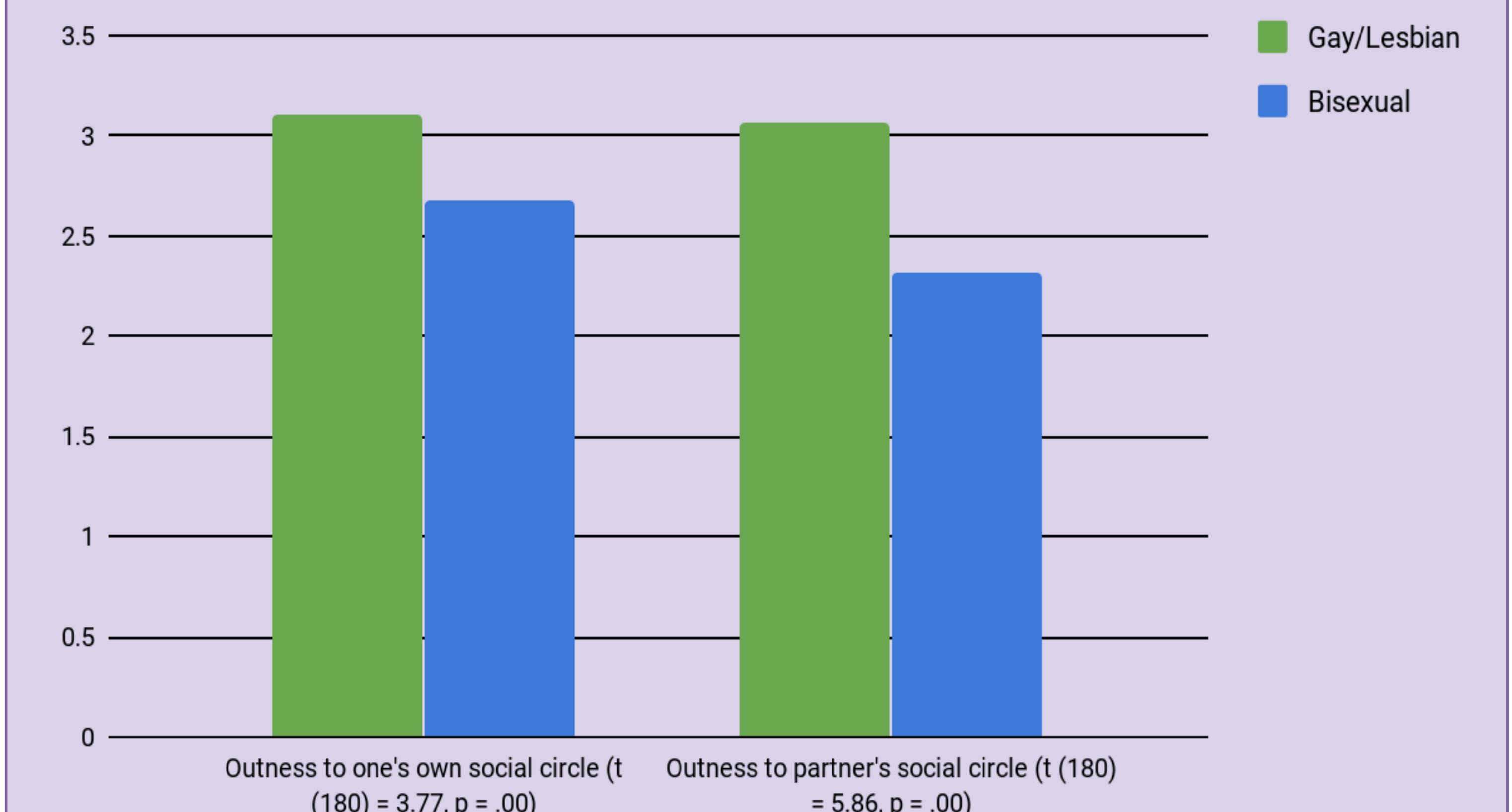
Sobel $z_{GL} = 3.17, p = .00$



Sobel $z_{Bi} = -.89, p = .37$

Figure 1. Mediation of the effect of relationship commitment on self-concept clarity for straight individuals (top) and gay/lesbian individuals (middle), but not for bisexual individuals (bottom).

Outness



Results

- We found that for straight, gay and lesbian individuals romantic commitment reduced depressive symptomology and increased self-concept clarity, but these effects were not evident for bisexual individuals.
- Self-concept clarity was still important for the mental health of bisexual individuals, but it was not mediated by relationship commitment
- Bisexual individuals reported lower levels of outness to both their own and their partner's social circles as compared to their gay and lesbian counterparts

Conclusions

- Replicated prior findings showing lower benefits of committed romantic relationships for bisexual individuals compared to straight or gay/lesbian individuals.
- Straight and gay/lesbian individuals show an association between relationship commitment and self-concept clarity that bisexual individuals do not, and this increased self-concept clarity buffers them from depression.
- Self-concept clarity is just as much a buffer for depression for bisexual individuals, but relationship commitment does not boost it.
- Having one's identity visible (being out) in one's own social circle and one's partners social circle boosted self-concept clarity and buffered from depression across the sample, but bisexual individuals showed significantly lower scores on both of these measures.
- In many ways, choosing a partner as a bisexual person makes you invisible.
- The most objective measure of bisexual visibility is "does your (own and partner's) social circle know who you are?" For bisexual individuals, the answer is a resounding no, especially when compared to gay/lesbian people.
- It is not that bisexual people need different things to thrive from their gay, lesbian, and straight counterparts, it is that they aren't getting them from their romantic relationships in the same way.
- It is important to note that this doesn't reduce overall satisfaction with their partners; it just makes it harder for them to know themselves.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by an academic year grant from Northwestern University's Office of Undergraduate Research. However, the conclusions, opinions, and other statements are the author's and not necessarily those of the sponsoring institution.