

Are purposeful people more satisfied partners?: Associations between sense of purpose and romantic relationship outcomes in adulthood

Gabrielle N. Pfund¹, Hannah Brazeau², Mathias Allemand³, & Patrick L. Hill¹
 Washington University in St. Louis¹, Carleton University², & University of Zurich³

Introduction

- Sense of purpose is an individual difference beyond personality traits that is related to desirable social outcomes, such as:
 - Lower levels of loneliness (Bondevik & Skogstad, 2008)
 - Higher levels of belongingness (Lambert et al., 2016)
 - Higher sense of connectedness (Stavrova & Luhmann, 2015)
- Sense of purpose may also relate to desirable relationship outcomes.
- Sense of purpose may matter differently depending on one's stage of life.
 - Development of one's sense of purpose begins during adolescence and emerging adulthood (Burrow et al., 2018), so it could matter differently in a relationship based on where one is in the purpose development process.

Hypotheses

- Sense of purpose will be positively associated with relationship satisfaction, commitment, and perceived quality of alternatives.
- The relationship between sense of purpose and these relationship outcomes will be moderated by age.

Methods

Participants

- Survey overall: $n = 1552$; in relationships: $n = 1001$
- Age: ranged from 18 – 86; $M = 46.68$, $SD = 15.77$
- Gender: Female - 70.4%; Male - 29.1%; Race/Ethnicity: 81.8% Caucasian / White

Procedures

- Participants were collected through Qualtrics Panels to complete a single, online survey.
- If participants reported being in a serious relationship, they were directed to the relationship outcomes questions.

Measures

- **Sense of purpose:** the Purpose in Life subscale (Ryff, 1989) evaluated perceptions of aims and direction in life.
- **Relationship satisfaction:** the Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, 1998) evaluated relationship satisfaction.
- **Relationship commitment:** the Commitment subscale from the IMS (Rusbult et al., 1998) evaluated commitment.
- **Perceived quality of alternatives:** the Quality of Alternatives subscale from the IMS (Rusbult et al., 1998) evaluated positive or negative attitudes toward having an alternative partner.
- **Personality traits:** the Big Five Inventory - 2 (Soto & John, 2017) evaluated the Big Five personality traits.

Tables & Figures

Table 1. Correlations between Age, Sense of Purpose, Personality Traits, Affect, and Relationship Outcomes.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.
1. Age	-											
2. Sense of Purpose	.13*	-										
3. Rel. Satisfaction	.03	.30*	-									
4. Commitment	.04	.26*	.69*	-								
5. Alternative Quality	-.14*	-.26*	-.37*	-.48*	-							
6. Extraversion	.05	.46*	.21*	.07	-.05	-						
7. Agreeableness	.22*	.43*	.20*	.20*	-.20*	.27*	-					
8. Conscientiousness	.18*	.52*	.18*	.15*	-.15*	.41*	.48*	-				
9. Neuroticism	-.30*	-.47*	-.29*	-.10*	.02	-.44*	-.41*	-.47*	-			
10. Openness	-.03	.32*	.12*	.15*	.09*	.35*	.35*	.24*	-.16*	-		
11. Positive Affect	.05	.52*	.32*	.19*	.05	.59*	.33*	.40*	-.46*	.32*	-	
12. Negative Affect	-.32*	-.54*	-.33*	-.23*	.23*	-.32*	-.41*	-.47*	.67*	-.19*	-.30*	-
Scale Range		1 - 6	1 - 5	0 - 8	0 - 8	1 - 5	1 - 5	1 - 5	1 - 5	1 - 5	1 - 5	1 - 5
Mean	46.68	4.22	4.00	6.73	5.32	3.15	3.84	3.88	2.82	3.64	3.49	2.05
Standard Deviation	15.77	.99	.86	1.29	1.68	.64	.62	.68	.85	.63	.85	.89

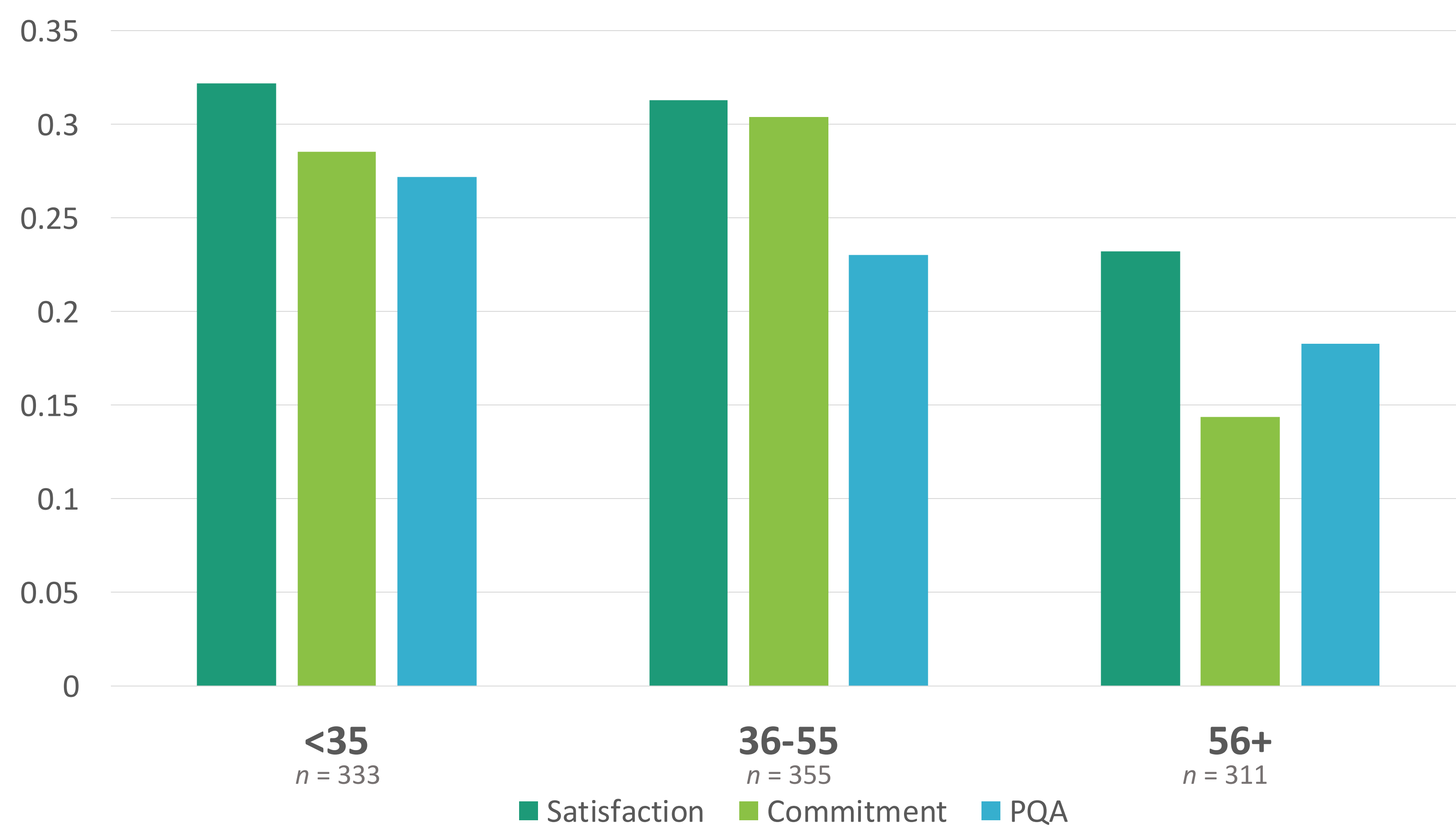
Table 2. Partial Correlations Controlling for Affect and Personality.

	1.	2.	3.	4.
	<i>controlling for affect</i>			
1. Age	-			
2. Sense of Purpose	-.03	-		
3. Rel. Satisfaction	-.08	.05	-	
4. Commitment	-.03	.12*	.66*	-
5. Alternative Quality	-.07	-.26*	-.37*	-.48*
	<i>controlling for personality</i>			
1. Age	-			
2. Sense of Purpose	-.01	-		
3. Rel. Satisfaction	.04	.16*	-	
4. Commitment	.00	.19*	.69*	-
5. Alternative Quality	-.12*	-.26*	-.38*	-.46*
	<i>controlling for both</i>			
1. Age	-			
2. Sense of Purpose	-.04	-		
3. Rel. Satisfaction	-.08	.07	-	
4. Commitment	-.02	.11*	.67*	-
5. Alternative Quality	-.08	-.23*	-.38*	-.45*

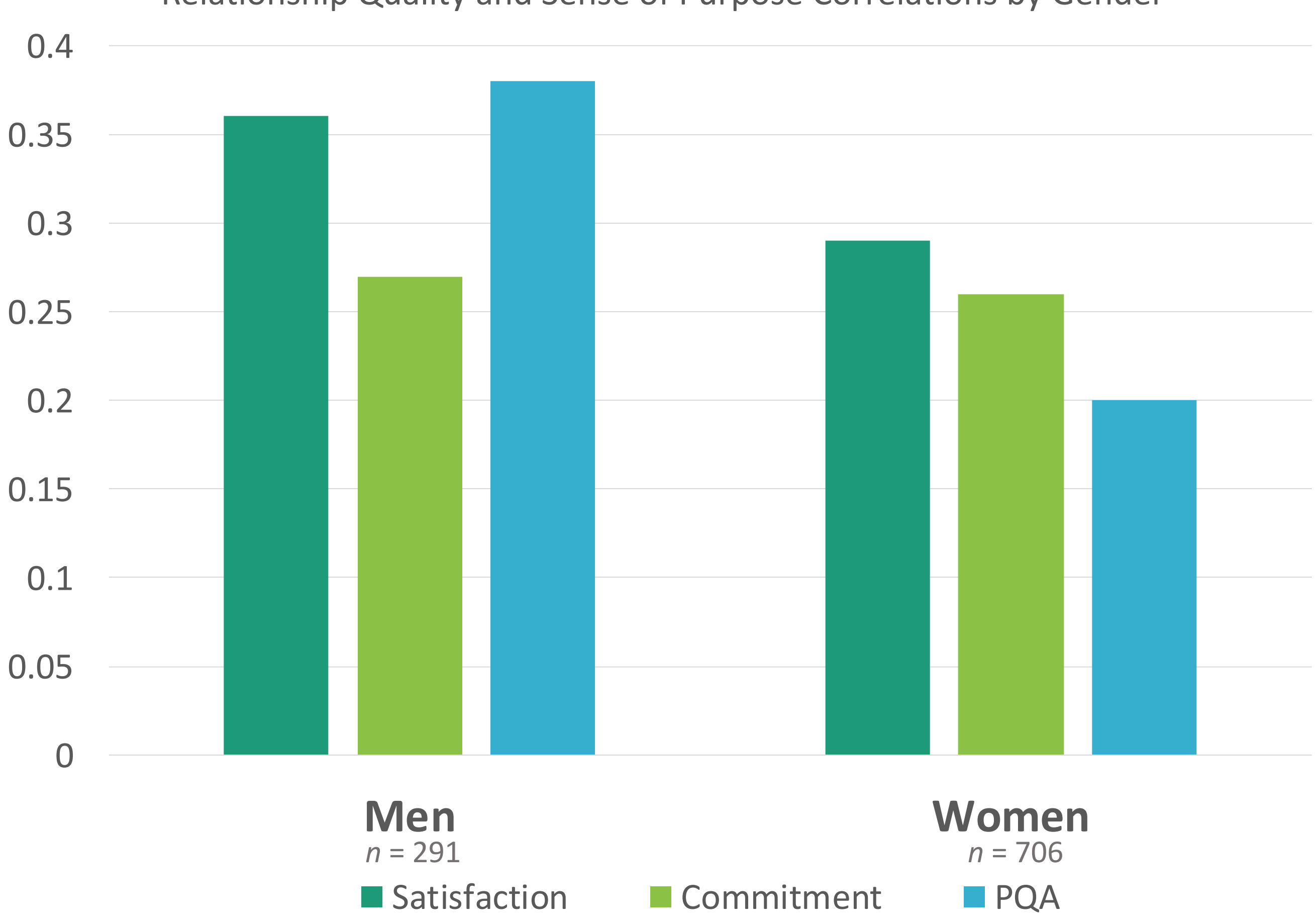
Note. n is between 992 and 1,001.

*significant at $p < .01$

Relationship Quality and Sense of Purpose Correlations by Age



Relationship Quality and Sense of Purpose Correlations by Gender



Conclusion

- Sense of purpose was positively associated with more desirable relationship outcomes (Table 1).
 - When controlling for affective well-being and personality, the association between sense of purpose and relationship satisfaction was no longer significant, but the association between commitment and perceived quality of alternatives was (Table 2).
- Neither age nor gender moderated the associations between sense of purpose and relationship satisfaction or commitment, but both moderated the association between sense of purpose and perceived quality of alternatives.
 - Sense of purpose is more strongly associated for younger adults in regard to considering alternative partners better than their own.
 - Sense of purpose is more strongly associated for men than women in regard to considering alternative partners better than their own.

Future Directions

Limitations

- Because this study was correlational, we were unable to identify whether purpose predicts relationship outcomes or vice versa.
- Relationship duration was not measured, which could be a potential moderator for these associations.

Future Directions

- Longitudinal research is necessary to evaluate the possible mechanisms for these associations such as the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors sense of purpose promotes.
- Dyadic research has found that personality trait similarities can be important for desirable relationship outcomes (van Scheppingen et al., 2018); dyadic research should be conducted to understand the extent to which sense of purpose similarity matters for relationship outcomes.

Acknowledgment: This research was supported by funding from the John Templeton Foundation (Grant #48175)