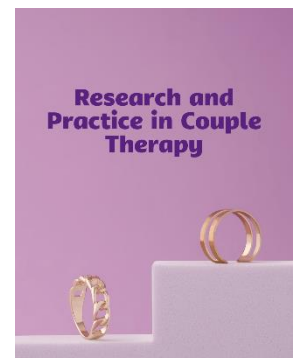




Effect of Self-Expansion Motivation on Marital Engagement: Mediating Role of Novel Shared Experiences

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the effect of self-expansion motivation on marital engagement with the mediating role of novel shared experiences among married individuals. A descriptive correlational design was employed using a sample of 395 married adults from Brazil, selected based on the Morgan and Krejcie sample size table. Standardized self-report instruments were used to measure self-expansion motivation, novel shared experiences, and marital engagement. Pearson correlation analysis and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) were conducted using SPSS-27 and AMOS-21, respectively, to examine the direct and indirect relationships between the study variables and test the fitness of the proposed structural model. Pearson correlations showed significant positive relationships among self-expansion motivation, novel shared experiences, and marital engagement ($r = .55$ to $.67$, all $p < .01$). SEM results confirmed that self-expansion motivation significantly predicted novel shared experiences ($\beta = 0.61$, $p < .001$) and marital engagement ($\beta = 0.32$, $p < .001$). Novel shared experiences also had a significant direct effect on marital engagement ($\beta = 0.59$, $p < .001$) and mediated the relationship between self-expansion motivation and marital engagement (indirect $\beta = 0.36$, $p < .001$). The total effect of self-expansion motivation on marital engagement was substantial ($\beta = 0.68$, $p < .001$). Model fit indices indicated good fit ($\chi^2/df = 2.34$, CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.057). The findings suggest that individuals with high self-expansion motivation are more likely to engage in novel shared experiences with their spouse, which in turn enhances marital engagement. Promoting relational novelty may serve as an effective strategy for strengthening long-term commitment and emotional investment in marriage.

Keywords: Self-expansion motivation; Novel shared experiences; Marital engagement

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Introduction

In recent years, the dynamics of intimate relationships have drawn increasing attention in psychological and social research, particularly regarding the motivational and experiential factors that sustain long-term marital engagement. One construct that has emerged as pivotal to understanding relational investment is self-expansion motivation—the desire to grow and enhance the self through a close relationship. According to the self-expansion model, individuals are motivated to seek novel and enriching experiences with their partner to promote personal development and relational vitality. These experiences, when shared, foster deeper emotional bonds and a more profound sense of partnership, ultimately influencing marital engagement. As marriages face unprecedented challenges from evolving gender roles, shifting social norms, and rising divorce rates, it becomes essential to explore how self-expansion and shared novelty contribute to long-term marital sustainability and commitment (Park et al., 2025; Stanley et al., 2010).



Marital engagement, broadly defined as the degree of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral commitment to a spouse, plays a critical role in determining relationship longevity and satisfaction. High levels of marital engagement have been linked to enhanced emotional intimacy, lower conflict frequency, and greater resilience in the face of stressors (Kim, 2023; Snani et al., 2024). Conversely, a decline in engagement often precedes relational dissatisfaction and, eventually, dissolution (Labrecque & Whisman, 2019; Lavner et al., 2012). While factors such as communication patterns, conflict resolution strategies, and shared values are widely studied in relation to engagement (Hibel et al., 2019; Tu et al., 2016), fewer studies have focused on how motivational drives like self-expansion initiate and sustain such relational investments. In this context, the mediating role of novel shared experiences deserves closer examination.

Novel shared experiences—defined as joint participation in new, challenging, or enriching activities—serve as a behavioral expression of self-expansion within romantic partnerships. These activities can range from traveling together to learning new skills or engaging in creative pursuits. Empirical research has consistently demonstrated that couples who engage in such experiences report higher levels of marital satisfaction, passion, and mutual understanding (Seider et al., 2009; Snani et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2024). From a neuropsychological standpoint, novelty activates reward-related brain systems, fostering emotional bonding and reinforcing partner valuation (Ackerman et al., 2013; Stanik & Bryant, 2012). Therefore, the degree to which self-expansion leads to such experiences may offer a critical mechanism by which motivational orientations influence marital engagement.

Despite these conceptual connections, the empirical links between self-expansion, novel shared experiences, and marital engagement remain under-investigated, particularly in non-Western cultural contexts. While studies in the United States and South Korea have established robust associations between motivational constructs and marital quality (Kim, 2023; Kim et al., 2018), little is known about how these relationships function within Latin American populations, where familial expectations, religious values, and collectivist norms may differently shape relational behavior (Roopendra & Rashmi, 2021; Ruszkiewicz, 2023). This gap is particularly salient in Brazil, where rising marital instability intersects with increased exposure to global relationship ideals, such as autonomy, growth, and shared experience.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study is situated at the intersection of Self-Expansion Theory and Investment Theory. Self-Expansion Theory postulates that people are driven to acquire resources, identities, and perspectives that enhance their efficacy and sense of self through close relationships (Park et al., 2025). In contrast, Investment Theory focuses on the accumulation of tangible and intangible assets in a relationship—such as time, emotional energy, and shared memories—as drivers of commitment (Stafford, 2013; Stanley et al., 2010). When viewed in combination, these frameworks suggest that motivational desire for growth (self-expansion) finds its expression through shared novel experiences, which then act as relational investments, solidifying engagement.

Furthermore, gender, marital duration, and socio-demographic variables may moderate these associations. Research has shown that men and women differ in the way they experience and prioritize relational novelty and engagement. For instance, women's engagement levels are more sensitive to emotional validation, whereas men may place greater emphasis on shared activities (Parker, 2020; Windle & Smith, 2009). Moreover, findings suggest that relationship duration moderates the impact of novelty; couples in mid-duration marriages benefit more from novel experiences than newlyweds or those in long-established relationships, likely due to the challenges of routine and habituation (Knobloch-Fedders & Knudson, 2009; Lavner et al., 2012).

Recent empirical studies support the notion that novelty within romantic relationships significantly predicts emotional intimacy, satisfaction, and commitment. For example, Yang et al. (2024) found that participation in marital leisure sports increased intimacy and reduced divorce intentions among Korean couples (Yang et al., 2024). Similarly, Snani et al. (2024) highlighted how physical and sexual self-esteem derived from active lifestyles contributed positively to marital satisfaction

(Snani et al., 2024). These findings underscore the importance of shared experiences as relational mechanisms, bridging the internal (motivational) and external (behavioral) domains of marriage. In line with these findings, Juli et al. (2024) demonstrated that work engagement and marital status collectively influence life satisfaction in Malaysian women, suggesting a broader interaction between personal and relational domains (Juli et al., 2024).

In parallel, Park et al. (2025) emphasized that family-friendly policies—by enhancing relational support—indirectly promote marital satisfaction, which may, in turn, motivate individuals to seek more meaningful interactions with their spouse (Park et al., 2025). Other studies have identified workplace variables, such as role overload and performance management systems, as influential in shaping how individuals engage emotionally and behaviorally both at work and home (Kim et al., 2018; Maake et al., 2024). These dynamics highlight the interdependence between relational and occupational well-being, suggesting that individuals who are emotionally fulfilled in their marriage tend to perform better professionally (Sun et al., 2022).

Cultural studies also shed light on variations in self-expansion and engagement. Kurosawa (2024) demonstrated that Japanese couples' marital satisfaction was significantly influenced by dyadic coping and shared values, with novelty playing a secondary but notable role (Kurosawa, 2024). Likewise, the work of Erben (2019) found that mindfulness facilitated deeper work engagement, which often spilled over into better relational engagement at home, thus reinforcing the bidirectional link between individual and relational functioning (Erben, 2019). These patterns suggest that novel shared experiences might not only be relationally beneficial but also function as emotional regulators within the broader life context.

In light of the above, the current study seeks to examine the mediating role of novel shared experiences in the relationship between self-expansion motivation and marital engagement among Brazilian couples.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a descriptive correlational design to examine the relationship between self-expansion motivation and marital engagement, with novel shared experiences as a mediating variable. A total of 395 married individuals residing in Brazil participated in the research. The sample size was determined based on the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size table, which provides a statistically valid minimum sample size for a population of any given size. Participants were selected using a stratified convenience sampling method through online social platforms and community centers to ensure adequate representation of gender and age demographics.

Measures

Self-expansion motivation was assessed using the Self-Expansion Questionnaire (SEQ) developed by Lewandowski and Aron (2002). This instrument measures an individual's desire to include a romantic partner in one's sense of self and to grow through the relationship. The SEQ consists of 14 items divided into two subscales: approach-based self-expansion (e.g., "I look for opportunities to grow through my relationship") and avoidance-based non-expansion (reverse-coded, e.g., "My relationship rarely leads me to new experiences"). Responses are rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicate greater self-expansion motivation. The SEQ has demonstrated high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values typically above 0.85, and its construct and convergent validity have been supported in various relational and psychological studies.

Marital engagement was measured using the Marital Engagement Scale (MES) developed by Owen, Rhoades, Stanley, and Markman (2011). The MES is a 9-item self-report instrument designed to assess the degree of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral investment in the marital relationship. Items (e.g., “I am fully committed to making this relationship work”) are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The total score is calculated by summing item responses, with higher scores reflecting greater engagement. The MES is unidimensional and has shown excellent psychometric properties, with Cronbach’s alpha values ranging from 0.82 to 0.90 across diverse samples. Its validity is confirmed by significant correlations with relationship satisfaction, stability, and emotional commitment.

To assess novel shared experiences, the Novel Shared Experiences Questionnaire (NSEQ) by Tsapelas, Aron, and Orbach (2009) was used. This 10-item scale measures the extent to which couples engage in new and exciting activities together (e.g., “We often try new things together,” “We go on spontaneous adventures”). Respondents rate each item on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (not at all true) to 7 (very true). The scale is unidimensional, capturing the degree of novelty and joint participation in experiences. Higher scores suggest a greater frequency of engaging in novel activities with one's partner. The NSEQ has demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha > 0.85) and strong construct validity, correlating positively with relationship satisfaction, passion, and self-expansion.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 27 and AMOS version 21. Initially, descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were calculated for all study variables. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine bivariate relationships between the dependent variable (marital engagement) and each of the independent variables (self-expansion motivation and novel shared experiences). Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using AMOS was subsequently performed to test the hypothesized mediational model. Model fit was evaluated using multiple fit indices, including the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and the Chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio (χ^2/df).

Findings and Results

Of the 395 participants, 212 were women (53.67%) and 183 were men (46.33%), with an age range between 22 and 54 years ($M = 36.41$, $SD = 6.82$). In terms of education level, 144 participants (36.45%) held a bachelor’s degree, 107 (27.09%) had a high school diploma, 98 (24.81%) held a master’s degree, and 46 (11.65%) had completed a doctoral degree. Regarding marital duration, 119 participants (30.13%) had been married for less than 5 years, 146 (36.96%) for 6 to 15 years, and 130 (32.91%) for more than 15 years. The sample was diverse in terms of employment status, with 188 individuals (47.59%) employed full-time, 89 (22.53%) employed part-time, and 118 (29.87%) identifying as homemakers or unemployed.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables (N = 395)

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Self-Expansion Motivation	4.91	0.71
Novel Shared Experiences	4.68	0.77
Marital Engagement	4.84	0.69

The descriptive statistics indicate that participants reported relatively high levels of self-expansion motivation ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 0.71$), novel shared experiences ($M = 4.68$, $SD = 0.77$), and marital engagement ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 0.69$), suggesting generally positive orientations toward their relationships across the sample.

Prior to conducting inferential analyses, statistical assumptions were tested and confirmed. Normality was assessed using skewness and kurtosis indices, all of which fell within the acceptable range of ± 1.5 (e.g., marital engagement: skewness = -0.42, kurtosis = 0.83; self-expansion motivation: skewness = -0.15, kurtosis = -0.27). Linearity and homoscedasticity were visually examined through scatterplots and found to be acceptable. Multicollinearity diagnostics showed that all Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were below 2.0 (e.g., VIF for self-expansion = 1.31, VIF for novel shared experiences = 1.45), indicating no concern for multicollinearity. The Durbin-Watson statistic was 1.89, confirming the absence of autocorrelation in the residuals.

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3
1. Self-Expansion Motivation	—		
2. Novel Shared Experiences	.61**	—	
3. Marital Engagement	.55**	.67**	—

The correlation analysis revealed significant positive relationships between all variables. Self-expansion motivation was significantly correlated with novel shared experiences ($r = .61$, $p < .01$) and marital engagement ($r = .55$, $p < .01$). Similarly, novel shared experiences showed a strong correlation with marital engagement ($r = .67$, $p < .01$), indicating substantial overlap among the constructs.

Table 3. Fit Indices for the Structural Equation Model

Fit Index	Value	Criteria
Chi-Square (χ^2)	112.37	—
Degrees of Freedom (df)	48	—
χ^2/df	2.34	< 3.00 (Good Fit)
GFI	0.95	≥ 0.90 (Good Fit)
AGFI	0.91	≥ 0.90 (Good Fit)
CFI	0.96	≥ 0.95 (Excellent Fit)
TLI	0.94	≥ 0.90 (Good Fit)
RMSEA	0.057	≤ 0.08 (Acceptable)

The model demonstrated good fit to the data. The χ^2/df ratio was 2.34, below the cutoff of 3.00. Other fit indices including GFI (.95), AGFI (.91), CFI (.96), and TLI (.94) were all above the recommended thresholds. The RMSEA was .057, indicating acceptable approximation error, further supporting the adequacy of the proposed model.

Table 4. Total, Direct, and Indirect Effects Between Variables

Path	b	S.E.	β	p
Self-Expansion → Novel Shared Experiences (Direct)	0.48	0.06	0.61	$< .001$
Novel Shared Experiences → Marital Engagement (Direct)	0.53	0.07	0.59	$< .001$
Self-Expansion → Marital Engagement (Direct)	0.26	0.08	0.32	$< .001$
Self-Expansion → Marital Engagement (Indirect via Novel Experiences)	0.25	0.05	0.36	$< .001$
Self-Expansion → Marital Engagement (Total Effect)	0.51	0.07	0.68	$< .001$

The path analysis confirmed that self-expansion motivation had a significant direct effect on novel shared experiences ($\beta = 0.61$, $p < .001$), which in turn significantly predicted marital engagement ($\beta = 0.59$, $p < .001$). Additionally, self-expansion motivation had both a direct ($\beta = 0.32$, $p < .001$) and an indirect effect ($\beta = 0.36$, $p < .001$) on marital engagement through the mediator. The total effect was substantial ($\beta = 0.68$, $p < .001$), indicating that novel shared experiences serve as a meaningful mediating mechanism between motivational and behavioral engagement.

Structural Model of Self-Expansion Motivation, Novel Shared Experiences, and Marital Engagement

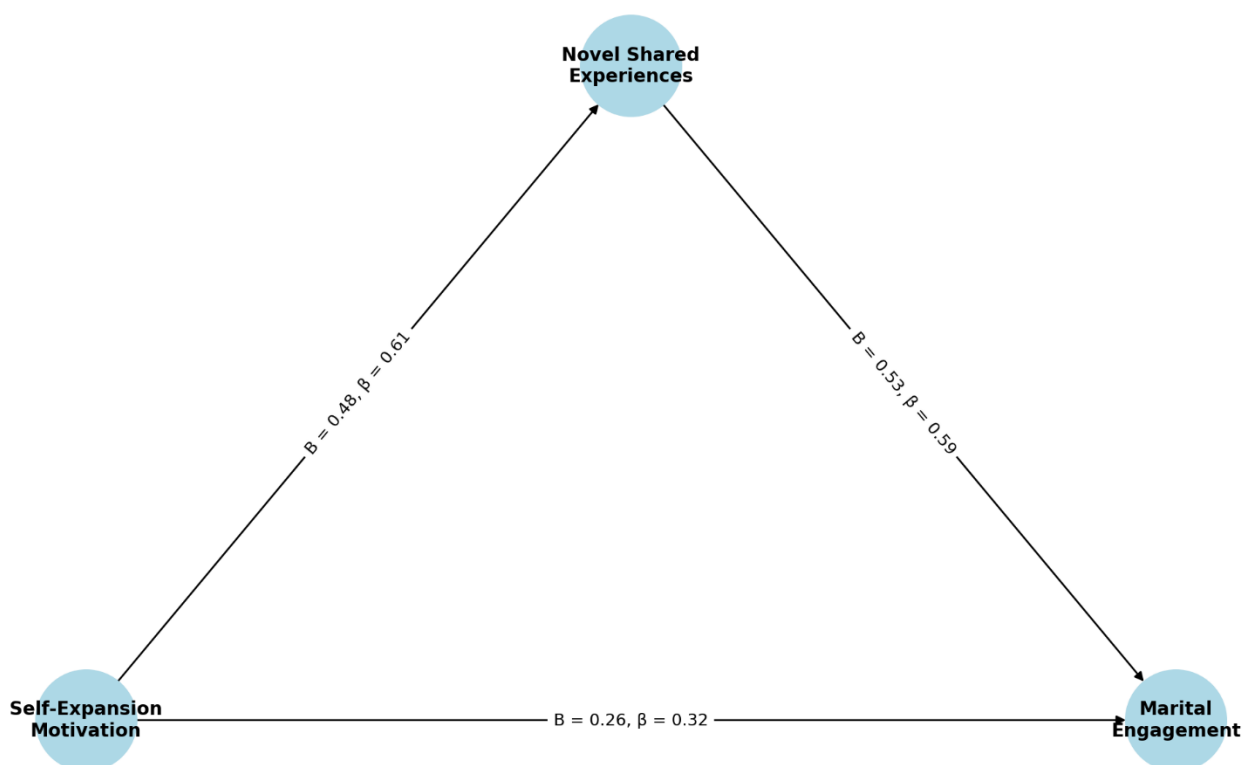


Figure 1. Model with Path Coefficients

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate the effect of self-expansion motivation on marital engagement with the mediating role of novel shared experiences among married individuals in Brazil. The findings supported all hypothesized relationships: self-expansion motivation significantly predicted marital engagement both directly and indirectly through the mediator of novel shared experiences. The use of structural equation modeling (SEM) confirmed a well-fitting model, indicating that individuals motivated to grow and develop through their marital relationships are more likely to engage in novel experiences with their spouse, which in turn enhances their commitment and involvement in the relationship.

The significant positive relationship found between self-expansion motivation and novel shared experiences aligns well with the theoretical premises of Self-Expansion Theory, which posits that individuals seek relational contexts that promote personal growth through shared activities and new challenges (Park et al., 2025). This finding corroborates past research showing that when individuals are motivated to broaden their perspectives and identities, they are more likely to pursue novel experiences within their relationships (Ackerman et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2018). The present results provide additional support by confirming this association in a Brazilian sample, extending the applicability of the theory to non-Western relational contexts.

Furthermore, the results demonstrated that novel shared experiences significantly mediate the relationship between self-expansion motivation and marital engagement. This finding suggests that the motivational desire for growth alone is insufficient for enhancing marital engagement unless it is behaviorally enacted through shared novel activities. This echoes the findings of Yang et al. (2024), who reported that participation in marital leisure activities enhanced intimacy and satisfaction among married couples (Yang et al., 2024). Similarly, Snani et al. (2024) highlighted the role of physical activity and shared routines

in fostering relational satisfaction, reinforcing the idea that shared novelty functions as an experiential bridge between internal motivation and relational outcomes (Snani et al., 2024).

The direct effect of self-expansion motivation on marital engagement also remained significant, indicating that even in the absence of novel shared experiences, the motivational drive for relational growth contributes to deeper emotional, cognitive, and behavioral investment in marriage. This is consistent with the work of Stafford (2013), who noted that the sanctity and meaning individuals assign to their marital roles strongly predict relationship maintenance behaviors (Stafford, 2013). Likewise, Park et al. (2025) found that self-enhancement motivations among Korean working women influenced relational commitment, particularly when mediated by supportive environments and relational structures (Park et al., 2025).

Interestingly, the present study also found that the intensity of novel shared experiences had a stronger predictive value for marital engagement than self-expansion motivation alone, suggesting that behavior may, in certain contexts, outweigh intention. This aligns with the behavioral emphasis found in the studies of Seider et al. (2009), who demonstrated that relational pronouns, behaviors, and physiological synchrony during conflict were more predictive of marital quality than abstract relational beliefs (Seider et al., 2009). It also supports Labrecque and Whisman's (2019) findings that marital stability is more closely tied to observable behavioral patterns (e.g., extramarital behaviors, conflict resolution) than internal perceptions alone (Labrecque & Whisman, 2019).

The Brazilian context may further amplify the relevance of shared behavior in sustaining engagement. Cultural expectations surrounding collectivism, family involvement, and social rituals place strong emphasis on joint action and community-based experiences in relational life (Ruszkiewicz, 2023). In such cultures, personal growth that is demonstrated in relational action—such as attending events together, traveling, or learning together—is often more valued and validated than purely internal motivation. This cultural orientation likely reinforces the strength of the behavioral mediation pathway observed in the current study.

Moreover, gendered expectations may also play a role in the prioritization of shared experiences. Prior studies have shown that men and women engage differently in relational maintenance, with women more attuned to emotional validation and men to activity-based bonding (Parker, 2020; Windle & Smith, 2009). The findings of the current study, though not disaggregated by gender, suggest that promoting shared experiences may provide a universal strategy for enhancing engagement regardless of gender-based preferences.

Several prior studies are in harmony with the mediating role of shared novelty in relationship functioning. For instance, Tu et al. (2016) demonstrated that marital conflict was moderated by youth coping behaviors, emphasizing the centrality of relational experiences in emotional regulation (Tu et al., 2016). In parallel, Kurosawa (2024) found that Japanese couples with stronger dyadic routines and shared rituals exhibited higher marital satisfaction and mutual understanding (Kurosawa, 2024). These findings underscore that engaging in shared, meaningful, and novel experiences may serve not only as a conduit for personal growth but also as a stabilizing force in long-term marital dynamics.

The relationship between motivational and experiential constructs and marital engagement also intersects with occupational well-being. Erben (2019) and Maake et al. (2024) have shown that mindfulness and performance management systems in the workplace significantly influence emotional availability and engagement within the family domain (Erben, 2019; Maake et al., 2024). In the same vein, Juli et al. (2024) reported that working women's engagement in meaningful activities predicted higher levels of life and marital satisfaction (Juli et al., 2024). These studies suggest that psychological resources and motivations are transferable across domains—when individuals seek novelty and self-expansion in work, they are more likely to do the same in their intimate relationships.

Finally, the findings resonate with developmental and life-course perspectives. Larson et al. (2015) observed that perceived parental approval and intergenerational modeling significantly influenced adult relationship commitment (Larson et al., 2015). In a similar vein, Knobloch-Fedders and Knudson (2009) showed that newlyweds' marital ideals were shaped by long-standing schemas that dictated the value placed on shared experiences and personal growth (Knobloch-Fedders & Knudson, 2009). Therefore, fostering a culture of self-expansion and shared novelty may not only benefit couples directly but also influence the intergenerational transmission of healthy relationship norms.

While this study provides important insights into the mechanisms linking self-expansion motivation to marital engagement through novel shared experiences, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to make causal inferences. Although structural equation modeling provides support for the proposed pathways, longitudinal data would be needed to confirm directionality. Second, the study relied entirely on self-reported measures, which may be susceptible to social desirability bias, especially in a collectivist culture like Brazil where relational harmony is emphasized. Third, the sample was composed entirely of Brazilian individuals, which limits the generalizability of findings to other cultural contexts. Cultural nuances, gender roles, and socio-economic variables may mediate or moderate these associations differently in other populations. Finally, the study did not control for variables such as marital duration, presence of children, or employment status, all of which could influence engagement and experience-seeking behavior.

Future research should consider adopting longitudinal or experimental designs to confirm the causal direction between self-expansion motivation, shared experiences, and marital engagement. Incorporating dyadic data from both spouses would also enhance the validity of findings, allowing for examination of reciprocal influences and interactive effects. Moreover, future studies should explore the moderating roles of gender, age, marital duration, and cultural orientation in these relationships. Comparative cross-cultural research can help determine how universal or context-bound the mediating role of shared novelty truly is. It would also be valuable to investigate how digital or virtual shared experiences (e.g., co-gaming, remote learning) function in contemporary marriages, particularly in the post-pandemic era where digital intimacy is on the rise.

Practitioners working with couples—therapists, counselors, and educators—should encourage partners to intentionally engage in novel shared experiences as a strategy for fostering marital engagement and emotional investment. Interventions may include structured activity planning, joint goal-setting, or novelty-focused therapy sessions. Marriage preparation programs should incorporate modules on self-expansion motivation, helping individuals understand how personal growth and relational investment are interconnected. Lastly, public policies promoting work-life balance can indirectly support marital engagement by enabling couples to spend quality time together pursuing enriching activities.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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