

## The Interplay between Alexithymia and Insecure Attachment on Relationship Quality

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### Article Info

#### Article type:

Original Research

#### How to cite this article:

Kordoutis, P., & Machos, M. (2024). The Interplay between Alexithymia and Insecure Attachment on Relationship Quality. *Applied Family Therapy Journal*, 5(5), 1-10.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.aftj.5.5.1>



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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** Attachment insecurities along with emotional processing difficulties, pose important risks on romantic relationships. This study aims to investigate possible associations and the interplay of alexithymia and attachment orientation on relationship quality in romantic couples.

**Methods:** We used the actor-partner interdependence model and data from 56 heterosexual couples (N=112), who completed measures of attachment orientation, alexithymia and dyadic adjustment.

**Findings:** Regression models indicated that both dimensions of attachment insecurity were associated with alexithymia and they consistently predicted lower relationship quality. Partner's level of alexithymia moderated the relationship between attachment anxiety and dyadic adjustment. No significant interaction effects between attachment avoidance and alexithymia, were detected.

**Conclusion:** The results point to the interdependent nature of emotional deficits and their effects on couple's relationship quality. Theoretical implications and directions for future research are also discussed.

**Keywords:** Alexithymia, emotions, attachment, relationship, quality.

### 1. Introduction

The term alexithymia literary signifies “no words for emotions”, and it can be viewed as a multifaceted personality trait, characterized by cognitive deficits in an individual's ability to understand and express emotions, and by an impoverished fantasy life (Taylor & Bagby, 2004). Moreover, highly alexithymic individuals experience difficulties distinguishing between emotions and the

physiological concomitants of emotional arousal (Taylor et al., 1997). According to the initial definition of Nemiah (1977), alexithymia is characterized by: 1) difficulty in describing feelings, 2) difficulty in identifying feelings, 3) constricted imaginal processes and 4) an externally oriented cognitive style (Nemiah, 2010). Regulation of emotion is related with subjective awareness and verbalization of emotional states, whereas interpersonal relationships can act

as a source of support or stress, that can influence the way we process emotions (Taylor & Bagby, 2004).

Alexithymia is also associated with perceptual deficits in processing external emotional stimuli, such as, the emotional expressions of others. Empirical studies have shown that individuals with alexithymic characteristics show difficulties in identifying facial expressions of emotions (Kafetsios & Hess, 2019; Prkachin et al., 2009). Using signal detection methods, Prkachin et al. (2009), found that highly alexithymic individuals had greater difficulty in processing negative emotions in facial expressions (e.g., fury, fear, sadness) and performed similarly to non-alexithymics in perceiving more positive emotions, like joy (Prkachin et al., 2009). Overall, the existing literature suggests that the perceptual difficulties related to alexithymia, often result in a slower processing of negative emotions in others (Luminet et al., 2021).

In the general population, alexithymia has been found to be negatively associated to the notions of psychological mindedness and emotional intelligence. An increasing number of studies propose alexithymia as a personality trait, that greatly undermines relationship quality (Eid & Boucher, 2012; Humphreys et al., 2009). Alexithymia has been associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, dyadic trust, and perceived social support among dating and married couples (Eizaguirre, 2002; El Frenn et al., 2022; Humphreys et al., 2009). Highly alexithymic individuals face difficulties in maintaining long-lasting relationships, as they see relationships as highly substitutable and they more often dissolve existing relationships (Frye-Cox & Hesse, 2013). Additionally, they have lower capacity in taking the perspective of others, and consequently, they tend to appear cold and detached during interpersonal exchanges (Vanheule et al., 2007).

Several studies have shown significant associations between adult attachment orientations and alexithymia (Lyvers et al., 2017; Montebanocci et al., 2004; Scigala et al., 2021; Thorberg et al., 2011). Alexithymia can also be viewed as an emotion regulation deficit (Luminet et al., 2021), which is linked with features of insecure adult attachment, characterized by anxiety, fear of rejection and abandonment and discomfort with intimacy in romantic relationships. (Troisi et al., 2001). Consequently, insecurely attached individuals tend to present emotional processing difficulties and dysfunctional coping strategies that often lead to problems in adjusting in intimate relationships and emotional distress.

Attachment theory posits that children shape relational models characterized by the representation of themselves, the other and the relationship between themselves and others, based on how caregivers respond to children's needs for support and protection (Ainsworth, 1979; Bartholomew, 1990). Representations of childhood attachment can be stabilised over time and lead to the maintenance of patterns of adult insecure attachment, characterized by the fear of being rejected by the partner or emotional distress with intimacy (Bartholomew, 1990). Empirical findings suggest that dysfunctional parental behaviors and insecure parental attachment tend to foster alexithymic features (Thorberg et al., 2011). Given the inclination of attachment patterns to be relatively stable over time, highly alexithymic people are less likely to develop secure attachment with their partners.

Individual differences in attachment insecurity can be conceptualized as two dimensions: attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance (Brennan et al., 1998). Attachment anxiety is associated with feeling unworthy of love and preoccupation with fears of abandonment; attachment avoidance is associated with distrust of others and avoidance of emotional intimacy with romantic partners (Bartholomew, 1990). Attachment anxiety is often associated with negative relationship outcomes, because it raises fears of abandonment and rejection. Avoidant individuals experience difficulties due to reluctance to become intimate with or to rely on others, making it difficult to negotiate relationship challenges, to communicate constructively and to provide and receive substantial emotional support (Egeci & Gencoz, 2011; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003).

Troisi et al. (2001) found positive associations between alexithymia, insecure attachment and retrospective memories of separation anxiety, among young men. In another study, Vanheule et al. (2007) found alexithymia to be associated with discomfort with emotional intimacy, with less emotional involvement in relationships and with a higher need for approval from others (Vanheule et al., 2007). Additionally, alexithymia has been linked with characteristics related to insecure attachment, like low confidence in self and in others. (Montebanocci et al., 2004).

In many occasions, individuals with alexithymic characteristics appear more sensitive of being rejected and feel uncomfortable with being close with a romantic partner (Lyvers et al., 2022; Scigala et al., 2021). As a result, alexithymic individuals may deploy emotional suppression strategies, and lack the capacity to rely on romantic partners for support, when they experience problems. The

deactivation of attachment system can be considered a defensive strategy, stemming from the fear of intimacy with the partner (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Moreover, highly alexithymic individuals experience higher relationship distress and tend not to share the emotional characteristics of their experiences with others, thus failing to maintain emotional connection (Gross & John, 2003). As Mikulincer & Shaver (2003) pointed, both the hyperactivation of emotional reactions related to attachment anxiety and the deactivation strategies related to attachment avoidance, hamper the capacity to identify and regulate their emotions (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003).

Communication of intimacy is crucial for maintaining satisfactory romantic relationships. Emotional deficits, like the inability to identify and communicate emotions, affect the quality of romantic relationship, by disrupting the intimacy process (Pérusse et al., 2012). Highly alexithymic individuals find it hard to express and receive affection, and this leads to fewer and less satisfying close relationships (Hesse & Floyd, 2011). Communication of affection can lead to more supportive and self-disclosing behaviors among partners, and also predicts the quality and the stability of romantic relationships over time (Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004).

People with high alexithymia experience higher level of loneliness (Qualter et al., 2009), and tend to downgrade the importance of emotional interactions (Taylor et al., 1997). Building on that, research shows that when people display a cold and distant interpersonal style, this kind of interpersonal style tends to be reciprocated, such that those who display coldness to others, receive coldness in return (Hopwood et al., 2013). Consequently, both partner's perceived relationship quality may be adversely affected (Cordova et al., 2005). Individuals with alexithymic characteristics tend to regulate their emotions in a dysfunctional and hostile way, characterized by lack of support and empathy. Since regulation of emotions is detrimental for constructive communication in cases of couple's conflicts, highly alexithymic people may refrain from communicating in a constructive way during conflicts. As a result, alexithymia might generate mutual distress and lead to relationship dissolution in the long term (Al-Shahrani & Hammad, 2023).

Individuals who exhibit high levels of alexithymia, experience considerable difficulty integrating themselves into close relationships. Furthermore, studies have shown that alexithymic individuals are not assertive in their interpersonal relationships (Vanheule et al., 2007) and experience higher level of romantic and social loneliness

(Qualter et al., 2009). When highly alexithymic people do get involved in romantic relationships, they have a tendency to communicate about mundane events, that are external to the self (Taylor & Bagby, 2004). Therefore, it is suggested that the partners of highly alexithymic individuals, may experience less perceived support and more couple's conflicts (Wells et al., 2016). Supporting this claim, past research has demonstrated that spouse's high level of alexithymia was associated with more negative communication behaviors (e.g. withdrawal, hostility) and with lower marital satisfaction (Pérusse et al., 2012; Yelsma & Marrow, 2003). Alexithymia was found to moderate the effect of attachment avoidance on marital satisfaction (Besharat et al., 2014). Given the importance of emotions in relationships, we expect that higher levels of alexithymia will be associated with lower perceived relationship satisfaction and adjustment, between romantic partners.

The difficulty to understand one's own's emotions, and in turn to self-disclose these emotions to the partner, undermines the development of intimacy between couple's members, and might lead to reduced relationship satisfaction (Eid & Boucher, 2012). Moreover, the ability to understand the feelings of one's partner and feel empathic with her/him, are critical for maintaining satisfactory relationships (Cordova et al., 2005). Alexithymic individuals tend to have greater difficulty understanding unpleasant feelings in others (Prkachin et al., 2009) and face problems in managing conflicts (Pérusse et al., 2012). Thus, when significant others are experiencing negative emotions, alexithymic individuals find it difficult to notice sources of distress, and might not be able to understand their partner's need for emotional support. In conclusion, since highly alexithymic individuals have difficulty in understanding their own emotions, they might lack the emotional skills drawing on their own experiences to accommodate their partner's emotional needs.

Given the difficulties associated with alexithymia, there is a scarcity of studies examining attachment-related insecurities and alexithymia in the context of couple's relationship, using a dyadic approach. Existing research on this topic is limited by over-reliance on data collected from individuals, and mainly take an intrapersonal perspective. Thus, it is important to take into account the interpersonal processes that exist between romantic partners. To address issue, we employed actor-partner-interdependence models (APIM) (Kenny et al., 2006), accounting for the interdependence of the couple's data.

This study aimed to investigate the interplay between attachment-related insecurities and alexithymia, with regard to relationship quality in romantic couples. We examined whether associations between attachment insecurity and relationship quality could be explained through the effect of alexithymia. Relationship quality was assumed to be associated with both attachment-related insecurities and alexithymia. Our aim is to expand existing literature by investigating potential interpersonal effects of alexithymia on couple relationship adjustment. Informed by the attachment framework, we investigated the moderating role of alexithymia in the relationship between attachment-orientation and dyadic adjustment.

By examining actor and partner effects of attachment orientation and alexithymia on dyadic adjustment, the following hypotheses were tested: 1) There is a negative relationship between attachment-related insecurities and dyadic adjustment; 2) There is a positive relationship between attachment-related insecurities and alexithymia; 3) We hypothesize that one's own alexithymia will moderate the link between attachment-related insecurities and dyadic adjustment; 4) We expect partner's alexithymia to moderate the association between attachment-related insecurities and relationship quality.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Study design and Participant

This study's data were collected from 56 heterosexual, Greek-speaking romantic couples ( $N = 112$ ). The inclusion criteria for this study were the following: the participants had to be at least 18 years old and to be committed in a romantic relationship, for a minimum period six months, at the time they took the survey. Both partners had to complete all of the questionnaires. The mean age of female participants was 33.9 years ( $n=56$ ,  $SD = 8.95$ ), and the mean age of male participants was 38.5 years ( $n=56$ ,  $SD = 10.43$ ). The average duration of current romantic relationships was 10.75 years ( $SD = 8.80$ ). Additionally, the majority of the couples that took part in the survey did not have children from their current relationship ( $n=40$ , 72%) and a total of 33 couples (59%) were not married.

The couples for this study were recruited through email, online advertisements, social media (e.g. Facebook) and word-of-mouth, using snowball sampling. Prior to participating, individuals were informed about the nature and the purpose of the study, the procedure, and confidentiality issues. After consenting, couples were

assigned a unique code, so each record was associated with its respective couple. All participants were asked to complete the questionnaires, independently from their partner.

Firstly, participants were asked to provide information regarding socio-demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, education), as well as, information about their romantic relationship (e.g., length of relationship, marital status). Then participants completed the following measures:

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Alexithymia

In this study we used the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20) (Bagby et al., 1994). It is a 20-item self-report measure that is widely used and consists of three subscales representing difficulty with identifying feelings (7 items; e.g., "When I am upset, I don't know if I am sad, frightened, or angry"), difficulty describing feelings to others (5 items; e.g., "It is difficult for me to reveal my innermost thoughts, even to close friends"), and externally oriented thinking (8 items; e.g., "I prefer talking to people about their daily activities rather than their feelings"). Responses to items were rated using a 5-point Likert scale with higher scores reflecting a greater degree of alexithymia. This measure has been translated and validated in a Greek sample (Tsaousis et al., 2010), and demonstrated good internal consistency ( $\alpha = .83$ ).

#### 2.2.2. Attachment Orientation

The ECR-Short Version (ECR-s) (Wei et al., 2007). The Experiences in Close Relationships Scale is a 12-item version of the original ECR (Brennan et al., 1998), which is a validated self-report measure of adult romantic attachment. This questionnaire is measuring adult attachment insecurity in two dimensions: attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. Avoidance (e.g., "I am nervous when partners get too close to me.") and anxiety (e.g., "My desire to be very close sometimes scares people away.") are assessed with 6 items each. Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Some items are reverse scored. The scale showed good internal consistency (.87 for attachment avoidance and .88 for attachment anxiety).

2.2.3. *Dyadic Adjustment*

Relationship quality was assessed through the use of the Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS) (Busby et al., 1995). The RDAS includes 14 items that measure adjustment in dyadic relationships on three subscales: Satisfaction (4 items), Consensus (6 items), and Cohesion (4 items). Participants evaluated whether they agree, or disagree, with their partner on numerous topics, and also indicated how frequently they engage in relationship-specific behaviors. For example, some items measure how frequently specific situations related to relationship satisfaction occur (e.g., “How often do you and your partner quarrel?”). The subscales were summed to create a total score indicative of relationship satisfaction, with higher scores representing greater relationship quality. The scale showed adequate internal consistency ( $\alpha=.74$ ).

2.3. *Data Analysis*

We tested our hypotheses using the APIM Model. In the APIM we can distinguish between actor and partner effects. Actor effects are observed within individuals, whereas partner effects are observed between individuals. In couple research, it is important to examine whether dyadic data are non-independent (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). Therefore, we investigated whether each member of a dyad (e.g., romantic partners) influence one another and therefore share a common variance. Omnibus tests of distinguishability were used to examine whether treating the dyad as distinguishable, improved the fit of the model. Power estimates were obtained using the software program, G\*Power 3.1.9.2. We then tested whether alexithymia had a moderator role of actor and/or partner effects.

Analyses were run in IBM SPSS Statistics 26. The study’s hypotheses were tested with two separate models for

attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance respectively. Standardized grand-mean-centered scores of the predictors were used.

3. **Findings and Results**

Given our sample, we performed a sensitivity analysis to evaluate how large the unique effects of the predictors had to be, to be detected by our VAR analysis. The required effect size to reach a power of .80 ( $p = .05$ , two-tailed), amounted to .18. This is considered a medium effect size.

Descriptive statistics for the study’s variables are presented in Table 1. The distribution of all variables in the study was close to normal. All study variables had adequate internal consistency. A series of independent -sample t-tests examined whether mean levels of attachment anxiety, avoidance, alexithymia and dyadic adjustment were different for males and females. The results demonstrated that there were no significant differences on dyadic adjustment, attachment avoidance and alexithymia between males and females. However, females reported higher mean level of attachment anxiety, than males ( $t(56) = 2.13, p < .05$ ).

Some correlations of note are that both attachment anxiety and avoidance were positively related with alexithymia, and negatively associated with dyadic adjustment. Additionally, attachment avoidance was significantly correlated between partners ( $r = .27, p < .05$ ). Partner’s level of alexithymia was associated to one’s own attachment anxiety. Furthermore, male’s alexithymia showed a negative correlation with dyadic adjustment ( $r = -.25, p < .05$ ), however female’s alexithymia was not significantly related to dyadic adjustment ( $r = -.12, p = .19$ ). No significant correlations were found for alexithymia, between partners.

**Table 1**

*Couple’s Bivariate Correlations, Means and Standard Deviations, by gender (n=56)*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. M_Alexithymia	-							
2. M_Anxiety	.442**	-						
3. M_Avoidance	.474**	.447**	-					
4. M_Dyadic Adjust.	-.246*	.534**	.667**	-				
5. F_Alexithymia	.111	.168	.157	-.054	-			
6. F_Anxiety	.229*	.050	.185*	-.051	.464**	-		
7. F_Avoidance	.084	-.113	.267*	-.028	.065	.431**	-	
8. F_Dyadic Adjust.	-.126	.031	-.123	.065	.048	-.277*	.633**	-
Mean	2.71 (.42)	2.48 (.90)	2.28 (.85)	15.62	2.71 (0.38)	2.90	2.15	14.57
(Standard Deviations)				(2.36)		(1.30)	(.83)	(3.09)

M = Male; F= Female; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

Regarding distinguishability by gender, the results of the F Omnibus tests did not reveal significant differences, concluding that we could treat the dyads, as indistinguishable. An APIM regression model between attachment anxiety and dyadic adjustment was examined, while controlling for relationship length. Actor's effects were observed, since attachment anxiety was negatively

related to their own dyadic adjustment ( $b = -1.85, t = -3.29, p < .01$ ), however no partner's effects were noted ( $b = .15, t = .26, p < .05$ ). Similarly, we explored actor's and partner's effects between attachment avoidance and dyadic adjustment. We observed actor's avoidance effects ( $b = -4.20, t = -4.78, p < .01$ ), whereas partner's avoidance was not significantly associated (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Actor's and Partner's Effects of Attachment related Insecurity on Dyadic Adjustment (N=112)*

Variable	B	SE b	T	p
Attachment Anxiety				
Intercept	1.69	.68		
Anxiety	-1.85	.56	-3.29	$p < .01$
Partner Anxiety	.15	.56	.26	$p = .79$
Attachment Avoidance				
Intercept	2.99	1.20		
Avoidance	-4.20	.29	-4.78	$p < .01$
Partner Avoidance	.66	.29	-1.01	$p = .39$

Initially, to examine whether alexithymia moderated the negative and significant association between attachment avoidance and dyadic adjustment, we analyzed a regression model that included actor and partner attachment avoidance (predictor variables), actor and partner alexithymia (moderators), and their interactions. Accordingly, in the second model we included actor and partner attachment anxiety, as predictor variables and actor and partner alexithymia, as moderating variables. Regarding the distinguishability according to gender, the comparison of the models that included attachment dimensions and alexithymia as predictors, showed that the dyads were

empirically indistinguishable in terms of dyadic adjustment ( $\Delta = 6.39, p = .34$  and  $\Delta = 5.32, p = .29$ , respectively).

In the first model the results of the multiple linear regression model showed that actor's reports of attachment avoidance had a significant effect on their own dyadic adjustment ( $b = -1.57, t = -5.02, p < .01$ ). However, no significant interaction effects on dyadic adjustment, were observed (see Table 3). Thus, our research hypothesis was not confirmed. This indicates that the strength of the relationship between attachment avoidance and dyadic adjustment did not change substantially across different levels, of actor's alexithymia, as well as, partner's alexithymia.

**Table 3**

*Alexithymia x Attachment Avoidance on Dyadic Adjustment (N=112)*

Variable	B	SE b	T	p
Intercept	-.07	.29		
Avoidance.	-1.57	.34	-4.62	$p < .01$
Partner Avoidance	-.27	.34	-.79	$p = .451$
Alexithymia	-.66	.72	.91	$p = .389$
Partner Alexithymia	.44	.72	.61	$p = .558$
Avoidance X Alexithymia	1.07	.85	1.25	$p = .246$
Partner Avoidance X Alexithymia	-.09	.90	-.25	$p = .809$
Avoidance X Partner Alexithymia	-.74	.90	-1.03	$p = .333$
Partner Avoidance X Partner Alexithymia	.23	.85	.27	$p = .794$
Model Summary	$R^2 = .24$ **			

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$

In the next APIM model, we tested the moderating effects of alexithymia on the relationship between attachment insecurity and dyadic adjustment. Actor's and partner's attachment anxiety main effects on dyadic adjustment were statistically significant (see Table 4). We found that partner alexithymia moderated the relationship between attachment anxiety and dyadic adjustment, since interaction effects showed a negative, statically significant, impact ( $b = -1.34$ ,  $t = -2.30$ ,  $p = .024$ ). This implies that partner's alexithymia

level can potentiate the negative impact of one's own attachment anxiety on dyadic adjustment. No significant moderating effect was noted in the case of actor's alexithymia. The fit statistics indicated that including the interaction terms substantially improved the model fit, ( $F(4, 104) = 6.88$ ,  $p = .040$ ). The overall model explained 34% of the variance, associated with dyadic adjustment (see Table 4).

**Table 4**

*Alexithymia x Attachment Anxiety on Dyadic Adjustment (N=112)*

Variable	B	SE b	T	p
Intercept	2.97	.99		
Anxiety	-.60	.22	-2.08	$p < .05$
Partner Anxiety	-1.19	.23	-5.02	$p < .01$
Alexithymia	.76	.70	1.09	$p = .307$
Partner Alexithymia	1.47	.70	2.05	$p < .05$
Anxiety X Alexithymia	.38	.50	.76	$p = .446$
Partner Anxiety X Alexithymia	-.21	.58	-.86	$p = .392$
Anxiety X Partner Alexithymia	-1.34	.58	-2.30	$p < .05$
Partner Anxiety X Partner Alexithymia	.19	.50	.62	$p = .710$
Model Summary	$R^2 = .34$ **			

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study sought to extend prior knowledge about the interpersonal impact of alexithymia on relationship outcomes, from an attachment framework perspective. By examining the interactions of these variables, the results highlight the importance of employing dyadic models that explore the interactions between emotional processes and relational outcomes.

Firstly, with regard to the study's variables, we observed positive significant associations between alexithymia and attachment insecurity dimensions, for both men and women. As expected, our results are in line with previous studies (Lyvers et al., 2022; Montebanocci et al., 2004). Furthermore, our results were consistent with previous findings (Eizaguirre, 2002; Karukivi et al., 2014), revealing that men's level of alexithymia showed a negative correlation with their own dyadic adjustment, whereas, in women the respective association was weaker. Expectations driven by social norms may influence men to be emotionally distant and to hide their vulnerabilities, (Levant et al., 2009).

Moreover, women tend to focus more on verbal communication to enhance intimacy (Cordova et al., 2005).

As expected, our results revealed significant actor effects of both attachment dimensions on dyadic adjustment (Butzer & Campbell, 2008). Additionally, we reaffirmed previous research, indicating that associations between attachment avoidance and relationship satisfaction were stronger, compared to attachment anxiety (Rigby & Cobb, 2023). It has been demonstrated that both attachment strategies hamper the perception of emotions during social interactions, and consequently deteriorate relationship quality (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Insecure attachment often leads to emotional withdrawal, difficulty in understanding the feelings of the partner and poor coping mechanisms. Despite their need for intimacy, anxiously attached people may be less likely to disclose their feelings in romantic relationships, through fear that they will be rejected (Feeney, 1995). Respectively, avoidant individuals due to their fear of emotional closeness may experience more difficulties in differentiating emotions, and might be less used to verbalizing their feelings to others.

With regard to avoidant individuals, moderation analysis did not reveal significant results, for the combined effects of

attachment avoidance and alexithymia on dyadic adjustment. Therefore, our hypothesis was not confirmed, in contrast to previous study (Besharat et al., 2014). One interpretation for this could be, that avoidant individuals lack the motivation to obtain favourable relationship outcomes. They also tend to avoid dealing with relationship conflicts, through their limited emotional investment and introspection (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003).

Notably, moderation results revealed, that partner's alexithymic characteristics potentiated the negative impact of attachment anxiety on relationship quality. This indicates that the interplay between attachment anxiety and alexithymia may exert adverse interpersonal effects on romantic partners. Anxiously attached individuals experience cumulative relationship distress, when their partners are less expressive and emotionally distant. Highly alexithymic partners often engage in hostile and withdrawal communication behaviors (Pérusse et al., 2012), thus failing to meet the emotional needs of anxiously attached individuals. Given their difficulties in understanding their own and their partner's feelings, highly alexithymic individuals seem to lack the emotional skills to communicate their own emotional needs, as well as, to provide emotional support to their partners.

Emotional disclosure is critical to the development of intimacy. Subsequently, anxious individuals may fail to develop a sense of intimacy, when their partner exhibits emotional expression difficulties. The results from this study point to prior research linking intimate communication to positive relationship outcomes (Frye-Cox & Hesse, 2013). Supposedly, alexithymia could also inhibit intimate communication, due to its association with interpersonal sensitivity and aggression (Vanheule et al., 2007). The potential to establish and maintain a satisfactory romantic relationship entails emotional identification and expression, as well as, the understanding of partner's feelings (Yelsma & Marrow, 2003). Arguably, because highly alexithymic individuals may not know what to expect from interactions with their partner, they show difficulty in building trust in a relationship context (Qualter et al., 2009)

Our findings provide support that, in romantic couples, emotional communication difficulties and emotional deficits do not occur in isolation, since their effects can be reciprocal. Consistent with attachment theory, our results may reflect developmental processes, as an insecure base may hamper the ability to communicate emotions. Accordingly, attachment insecurities in adult romantic relationships may be detrimental for nurturing emotional expression. Whether

or not this impact is short term, it is suggested that alexithymia, could have adverse interpersonal effects between insecurely attached partners, that in turn lead to lower relationship quality.

## 5. Suggestions and Limitations

It is important to note that our study is subject to a number of limitations, such as its cross-sectional design and the self-report nature of the measures we used. Despite the good fit indices, our study sample was relatively small with limited statistical power to detect effects, therefore we should interpret the results with caution. The correlational design of our study is not indicative for interpreting the causal direction of effects. Future longitudinal studies may shed more light on the nature of these associations. Moreover, future research would benefit by including alternate observational methods and structured interviews (Bagby et al., 1994), to measure alexithymia. Attainment of a more ethnically diverse sample, would also enrich the findings from this study. Furthermore, investigation of how gender-specific attitudes interact with alexithymia may give new insights on how individuals manage relationship conflicts. Building on larger samples and focusing more on distressed couples, will be critical in developing couple-based interventions that promote their coordinated coping efforts.

We pinpointed the interdependent nature of emotional processing difficulties in moderating the consequences of existing attachment insecurities within close relationships. Given the regularly occurring inner dynamics that are influencing romantic partners, our study offered some insights about the role of alexithymia on couples' relationship adjustment, that might be useful for researchers and mental health professionals. With regard to therapy outcomes, research has shown that long-term psychodynamic therapy can improve alexithymia and anxiety symptoms (Khademi et al., 2019). In conclusion, interventions that promote social support and reduce alexithymia through introspection and self-disclosure, might be beneficial for couple's relationship.

## Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

## Declaration

None.



## Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

## Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

## Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

## Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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