

**Attached at the Hip: An Investigation of Relationship Quality**

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by

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**Abstract**

Research has examined the impact of attachment style and personality on relationship quality as separate predictors, but few have examined all three concurrently. Here, attachment was examined as a mediator between personality and relationship quality. Attachment anxiety was found to be a mediator between Neuroticism and negative relationship expectations, and attachment avoidance was found to be a mediator between Extraversion and positive relationship expectations.

### **Attached at the Hip: An Investigation of Relationship Quality**

Having close relationships is essential for living a fulfilling life. Close relationships, especially romantic ones, can be viewed as one of life's most important features (Hendricks & Hendricks, 2005). Those with healthy close relationships have been found to live longer (Umberson & Montez, 2010), have better physical health (Umberson & Montez, 2010), and are overall happier than those without (Hendricks & Hendricks, 2005; Kanksy, 2018). Especially strong links have been found between romantic relationships and overall well-being due to the level of intimacy and unique emotions one experiences in these relationships (Kanksy, 2018). Close relationships are crucial for living a healthy, fulfilled life, therefore, it is necessary to investigate the factors that influence these relationships and how they work together. The current project explores both direct and mediating effects of factors related to relationship quality.

#### **Factors That Influence Relationship Quality**

Previous studies have evaluated factors that influence or contribute to relationship quality and have found mental health (Benazon & Coyne, 2000; Davila et al., 1997; Whisman & Baucom, 2012), one's perception of their partner and their experience in a relationship (Feeney & Fitzgerald, 2019; Fitzgerald et al., 2023; Hendricks & Hendricks, 2005; Molero et al., 2016), and attachment style (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Collins & Read, 1990; Feeney & Noller, 1990; Feeney & Fitzgerald, 2019; Gleeson & Fitzgerald, 2014; González-Ortega et al., 2021; Simpson et al., 2007) to be significant predictors of relationship quality. These factors, along with other contributors, help explain the variance in relationship quality among adult couples.

#### ***Mental Health***

One major factor that has been shown to impact relationship quality is mental health (Benazon & Coyne, 2000; Davila et al., 1997; Whisman & Baucom, 2012). Although there is

debate about whether mental health affects relationship quality or if relationship quality affects mental health, it has been established that there is a relationship between the two. Specifically, symptoms of depression and anxiety have been linked to increased relationship distress (Benazon & Coyne, 2000; Davila et al., 1997; Whisman & Baucom, 2012). For example, Benazon and Coyne (2000) found that those living with a depressed spouse reported experiencing more depressive symptoms than the population average. Partner mental health issues affect not only their own experience in a relationship but also their spouse's, in turn influencing the overall quality of the relationship. Additionally, a longitudinal study of newlyweds found that wives' baseline depressive symptoms predicted their marital distress at follow-up years later (Davila et al., 1997). Experiencing mental health issues can affect most, if not every, aspect of one's life, including their relationships. As mental health has such a significant influence on an individual's life experience, it naturally has an important impact on the quality of their close relationships.

### ***Partner Perception***

Another important factor that contributes to relationship quality is one's perception of their partner and their experience in a relationship. Numerous studies involving romantic relationship quality have revealed the importance of the role of partner perceptions in overall relationship quality (Feeney & Fitzgerald, 2019; Fitzgerald et al., 2023; Hendricks & Hendricks, 2005; Molero et al., 2016). Some studies have even found that *perceptions* of some partner variables, for example, self-disclosure, can be more predictive of relationship quality than actual levels of said variables (Hendricks & Hendricks, 2005). In a study conducted to examine actor and partner's perceptions of each other's attachment insecurities and the associations of these perceptions with relationship satisfaction, Molero et al. (2016) found that perceived partner avoidance was negatively associated with relationship satisfaction. This finding suggests that

perceiving one's partner as avoidant negatively impacts the overall quality of their relationship. Similarly, avoidant individuals have been found to perceive their partner's emotions much more negatively than their partner perceives them, in turn leading to hostile and aggressive behavior from the avoidant partner (Feeney & Fitzgerald, 2019). When one negatively perceives their partner's emotions, they may exhibit negative behaviors, deflating the quality of their relationship. These results reinforce the influence of partner perception on relationship satisfaction and quality. Additionally, those who make more negative attributions about their partner's behavior report poor relationship quality (Fitzgerald et al., 2023). When one perceives their partner's behavior negatively, they are likely to feel more negatively about their relationship in general. Negative attributions about partner behavior mediate the relationship between childhood maltreatment and relationship quality later in life (Fitzgerald et al., 2023). Childhood maltreatment contributes to one's internal working model, coloring their beliefs and expectations about others and their relationships with others in a negative way, in turn, affecting the quality of their relationships. Overall, these findings suggest that partner perceptions play a role in the quality of one's relationships.

### ***Attachment Style***

In addition to these influences, one of the most significant influences on relationship quality is attachment style (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Collins & Read, 1990; Feeney & Noller, 1990). Many psychological theories have attempted to explain how we develop and establish close relationships. Adult attachment theory (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) is one of the most common models used to explain this. Attachment theory, originally established by Bowlby (1969/1982) to explain infant attachment, has been applied to describe the establishment and success of romantic relationships in adulthood (Bartholomew & Horowitz,

1991; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Infant attachment theory suggests that an individual's earliest experiences with their primary caregiver will significantly impact the nature and quality of their relationships throughout the lifespan (Bowlby, 1969/1982). This idea has been supported by longitudinal research on attachment and relationship quality (Simpson et al., 2007). Early interactions with caregivers produce internal working models, the cognitive representations known as "schemas" that infants construct over time based on their developing understanding of self, their attachment figure, and their relationship with their attachment figure (Bowlby, 1969/1982). Gradually, these specific experiences produce more generalized beliefs and expectations about oneself and others (Collins, 1996). The working model of self includes beliefs relating to self-worth and whether one is deserving of love and care, while the working model of others involves beliefs about the trustworthiness, reliability, and accessibility of others (Bowlby, 1969; 1982). These internal working models consist of beliefs, attitudes, and expectations of a caregiver or attachment figure based on interactions in early childhood that will persist throughout the lifespan (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Collins & Read, 1990). These schemas serve as a lens through which all interpersonal relationships are viewed and processed, influencing one's beliefs, expectations, and behaviors in relationships (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Bretherton & Munholland, 2008; Monteoliva et al., 2016).

Hazan and Shaver (1987) applied infant attachment theory to adult romantic relationships, identifying parallels between attachment types for infant-caregiver relationships and attachment types for adults in romantic relationships. According to Hazan and Shaver (1987), the bond that is established between adult romantic partners is a result of the same motivational system as the bond formed between infants and their primary caregiver. They identified three adult attachment styles based on the types proposed for infant attachment by

Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978): secure, avoidant, and anxious/ambivalent. It was found in later studies that attachment style may be more appropriately conceptualized as areas within a bidimensional framework representing levels of avoidance and anxiety (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Bartholomew & Shaver, 1998; Brennan et al., 1998; Fraley et al., 2000). For example, Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) proposed a four-category model of adult attachment in which the model of self and the model of others were viewed as independent types of working models that can each be dichotomized as positive or negative. A positive view of others indicates low avoidance, while a negative view indicates high avoidance. A positive view of self suggests a low level of dependence on others for validation, while a negative view of self suggests a dependence on external acceptance and validation. Secure individuals are characterized by a positive image of self and others, preoccupied individuals by a negative view of self and a high image of others, dismissing by a positive image of self and a negative view of others, and fearful by a negative view of both self and others. The four categories reflect unique styles of relationship functioning (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

Later, Brennan et al. (1998) confirmed that these two dimensions, anxiety and avoidance, underlie the items used to assess adult attachment. Anxious attachment involves fears of separation, abandonment, and unreciprocated feelings. Avoidant attachment involves discomfort with closeness or intimacy, dependence on others, and disclosure of feelings. Those who score low on both anxiety and avoidance are categorized as securely attached and would be characterized by comfortability in close relationships. Individuals with high scores on anxiety and low scores on avoidance are considered to be preoccupied while holding a positive view of others but a low sense of self-worth. Individuals who score low on anxiety and high on avoidance are considered avoidant-dismissing and are characterized by a distrust for others and a

high sense of self. Finally, those who score high on both anxiety and avoidance, avoidant-fearful, seek validation from others as a result of low self-worth while also avoiding intimacy out of fear of rejection (Brennan et al., 1998).

Although there continues to be debate surrounding the way in which adult attachment is best measured or conceptualized, it is widely believed and accepted that styles are best understood as dimensional rather than categorical (Brennan et al., 1998; Fraley et al., 2015).

Research on attachment style and relationship quality has suggested that those who are securely attached will often have more positive experiences in close relationships than those who are insecurely attached (Collins, 1996; Collins & Read, 1990; Feeney & Noller, 1990; Feeney & Fitzgerald, 2019; Gleeson & Fitzgerald, 2014; González-Ortega et al., 2021; Monteoliva et al., 2016; Simpson et al., 2007). When attachment models are activated, they provide explanations for intrapersonal experiences as they are experienced (Collins, 1996). Therefore, those with different attachment styles will likely interpret events in very different ways, according to their view of self and view of others (Collins, 1996). For example, as those who are securely attached have internal working models that include positive expectations of others and a positive image of self, they are more likely to interpret intrapersonal interactions more optimistically and function more positively in close relationships. This is supported by numerous studies on attachment and relationship quality (Collins, 1996; Collins & Read, 1990; Feeney & Noller, 1990; Feeney & Fitzgerald, 2019; Gleeson & Fitzgerald, 2014; González-Ortega et al., 2021; Monteoliva et al., 2016; Simpson et al., 2007). For example, Monteoliva et al. (2016) found that secure and preoccupied individuals expect positive consequences to occur if they were to spend an extended period with their partner more so than avoidant individuals. Additionally, they found that dismissing individuals perceive the highest likelihood of negative consequences occurring if they



were to spend a lot of time with their partner (Monteoliva et al., 2016). As secure and preoccupied subjects are comfortable with closeness and intimacy (Brennan et al., 1998), they expect positive outcomes to occur if they spend considerable time with their romantic partner (Monteoliva et al., 2016). Avoidant subjects prefer to avoid closeness and intimacy, either out of fear of rejection or a wish for independence (Brennan et al., 1998) and therefore would expect more negative outcomes if they were to spend a lot of time with their partner (Monteoliva et al., 2016). Further, a longitudinal study found that infants who were insecurely attached to their caregivers expressed more negative emotions regarding relationship conflicts with their partners in early adulthood (Simpson et al., 2007). On the other hand, individuals who were securely attached in infancy recovered from conflicts with romantic partners better in early adulthood than those who were insecurely attached in infancy (Simpson et al., 2007). These findings are important as conflict and conflict resolution are major aspects of a relationship. These findings reaffirm that one's internal working model, developed in early childhood, follows one throughout the lifespan, influencing romantic relationships in adulthood (Simpson et al., 2007).

Other studies have also evaluated the association between attachment style, conflict, and relationship quality (Feeney & Fitzgerald, 2019; González-Ortega et al., 2021). Insecurely attached individuals have been found to approach and deal with conflicts in more harmful ways than those who are securely attached (Feeney & Fitzgerald, 2019; González-Ortega et al., 2021). Specifically, avoidant individuals are more likely to withdraw from conflict, while anxious individuals are more likely to engage (González-Ortega et al., 2021). These associations suggest that the negative styles of conflict engagement and withdrawal often reflected by insecurely attached individuals are damaging to relationship quality, while the functional style of positive problem-solving held by secure individuals promotes relationship satisfaction. These findings

align with the model proposed by Feeney and Fitzgerald (2019), which suggests that attachment insecurities foster the use of dysfunctional styles of conflict resolution, negatively impacting relationship quality. Additionally, avoidance has been found to have a stronger negative impact on relationship quality than anxiety (González-Ortega et al., 2021). Further, in a study conducted to evaluate the relationship between attachment style, perceptions of parents from childhood, and relationship satisfaction, those who are securely attached in their adult romantic relationships are more satisfied in their relationships than insecurely attached subjects, especially avoidant-fearful individuals (Gleeson & Fitzgerald, 2014). Specifically, secure participants tend to be most satisfied in their romantic relationships, while avoidant-fearful participants tend to be the least satisfied (Gleeson & Fitzgerald, 2014). These findings align with the current research (Fitzgerald, 2019; González-Ortega et al., 2021) and reinforce the impact of early childhood experiences with caregivers in shaping one's internal working model, which influences relationships into adulthood. Based on the previous research, it is evident that attachment style plays a crucial role in shaping the quality of one's close relationships in adulthood.

### **Personality Development and Attachment Style**

In addition to internal working models, attachment in early childhood also has a significant impact on personality development. Bowlby (1973) indicates early experience in the family as one of the most significant influences on personality development. He conceptualized personality development using the metaphor of a railroad system, where an individual starts their journey on a main route but will encounter a point at which the railroad branches off into numerous individual tracks, each leading to a different destination. The traveler will face new choices at every juncture he or she comes across, each of which will impact their journey and destination. This railway metaphor aids in conceptualizing personality development, as in early life, there are

many pathways one can develop along and a multitude of destinations at which one may arrive. These destinations can be characterized by high-functioning, positive relationships with important people in our lives, such as family members, friends, and romantic partners, or poor relationships with those close to us. Bowlby believed that early experiences within the family are highly influential in determining which of the many possible routes an individual would travel along and where they would end up.

Bowlby has done extensive work regarding the pathways along which people develop and the processes that either keep them on a certain path or allow them to deviate. In the context of personality development, Bowlby (1973) believed that several “homeorhetic processes” keep an individual on a certain path once it has been established. He categorized these pressures into two types: environmental and internal. Environmental pressures contribute to personality development continuity as family environments stay the same over time. The family pressures that lead individuals to a certain pathway will often persist, causing them to stay on that path. In addition to environmental pressures, internal pressures, such as the structural features of personality, also have their own means of self-regulation that maintain development along a certain path once established. For example, an individual’s existing cognitive and behavioral structures determine how one perceives and engages with new people and new situations, often reinforcing their established path by assimilating new information into existing schemas. This reaffirms how our working models and schemas influence our experience of our environment and the interactions we have with others (Fraley & Shaver, 2008), keeping us on our current pathway of development. Other studies support this idea, as they have found that one’s internal working model can influence the way others react to and perceive them (Troy & Sroufe, 1987) and how one perceives the intentions of others (Collins, 1996). Overall, the two processes

described work together, reinforcing each other, to maintain continuity of development along a certain pathway. This theory is important as it describes the impact the early caregiving environment has on an individual's developmental pathway. Although significant life events can impact and alter the course of one's life, the homeorhetic processes of attachment can help one stay aligned and on track over time (Bowlby, 1973; Fraley & Shaver, 2008). This applies both to personality development as well as attachment, as each of these persists throughout the lifespan, often along an established pathway (Bowlby, 1973).

When explaining personality development, Bowlby (1973) argued that uncertainty of the responsiveness and accessibility of an attachment figure sets the foundation for the development of an unstable and anxious personality. This directly relates to attachment style. If an individual is fearful about the availability and reliability of their caregiver, they are likely to be more fearful of common fear-producing events or stimuli than someone who is securely attached to their caregiver. In contrast, complete confidence in the availability and accessibility of an attachment figure serves as the solid foundation upon which a stable personality can be built. If one is confident that their caregiver will be available to them when needed, they feel it is safe to explore the world and how they fit into it. In contrast, when one is uncertain about parental support, they are unable and unwilling to explore the world for themselves, which restricts and negatively affects their personality development (Bowlby, 1973).

Bowlby's theories have been supported by further research on personality and attachment style (Hankin et al., 2005; Hazan & Shaver, 1990; Shaver & Brennan, 1992). Presently, personality is believed to be comprised of traits (e.g., the Big Five theory), which are widely understood as the global dimensions that underly the construct of personality. For example,

Costa and McCrae (1995) identified five dimensions of personality: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to new experiences, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness.

Studies have consistently found significant associations between insecure attachment and two facets of Neuroticism – depression and anxiety (Hankin et al., 2005; Shaver & Brennan, 1992; Leveridge et al., 2005). Specifically, studies have found that insecure individuals were more likely to experience anxiety and depression than secure individuals, suggesting that these individuals are less emotionally stable than securely attached individuals (Hazan & Shaver, 1990; Leveridge et al., 2005). This is supported by research that has found secure attachment to be inversely related to anxiety and depression (Leveridge et al., 2005). Additionally, Hankin et al. (2005) found that anxious and avoidant attachment were both related to increased depressive symptoms, and anxious attachment was related to symptoms of trait anxiety. These findings further establish the association between insecure attachment and neuroticism, as well as the inverse relationship between secure attachment and Neuroticism.

Further, Shaver and Brennan (1992) conducted a study in which they evaluated similarities between the NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI) scales and Hazan and Shaver's (1987) attachment measure to determine how predictive they each are of relationship quality in adulthood. Secure participants were found to be less neurotic, more agreeable, and more extroverted than avoidant participants. Both avoidant and anxious participants were higher on Neuroticism than secure participants. Social aspects of Extraversion, such as Warmth, Assertiveness, and Gregariousness, were related to secure attachment, while the arousal aspects, such as Activity and Excitement seeking, were not. Those who are highly sociable do not wish to avoid others and, therefore, reasonably do not show attachment avoidance, but rather security. The predictive value of NEO-PI scores regarding attachment was also evaluated. Secure

attachment was found to be best predicted by high Extraversion and low Neuroticism. Avoidance was best predicted by high Neuroticism and low Agreeableness. Finally, Neuroticism, especially the depression subscale, was the only significant predictor of the anxious-ambivalent rating. These results are consistent with the previous research and further establish the connection between attachment style and personality traits. Regarding the predictability of relationship quality based on these two factors, the only relationship variable that the NEO-PI variables rivaled attachment in predictive value was relationship length. Anxious ambivalence was found to be related either to not being in a relationship or shorter duration when in relationships. Avoidance was also associated with shorter relationships as well as lower levels of relationship satisfaction and commitment (Shaver & Brennan, 1992). Overall, these studies indicate that although attachment style and personality traits are meaningfully related, they are separate constructs that capture and predict relationship outcomes differently.

It is important to note in early childhood, one's infant attachment style will influence the development of one's personality, as discussed (Bowlby, 1973). In adulthood, individuals will bring their developed personality to their adult romantic relationships, therefore influencing how they approach, experience, and behave in these intimate relationships. This is supported by previous research (Hazan and Shaver, 1990; Leveridge et al., 2005; Hankin et al., 2005; Shaver & Brennan, 1992). Therefore, in the present study, adult attachment style will be evaluated as a mediator for the relationship between personality and relationship quality in adulthood.

### **Personality and Relationship Quality**

As demonstrated by Shaver and Brennan (1992), personality importantly relates to relationship quality. This connection between personality and relationship quality is supported by numerous studies (Caughlin et al., 2000; Karney & Bradbury, 1997; O'Meara & South, 2019;

Robins et al., 2000, 2002). High levels of Neuroticism or emotional instability have been commonly found as a strong predictor of poor relationship quality (Caughlin et al., 2000; Karney & Bradbury, 1997; O'Meara & South, 2019) and lower marital satisfaction from the start of marriage (Karney & Bradbury, 1997). Those who possess this trait are less emotionally stable and less adaptive which negatively impacts the way they approach and behave in their relationships from the very beginning (Karney & Bradbury, 1997). Another study of married couples found that Neuroticism was consistently negatively associated with relationship satisfaction, both at the onset of marriage and over time (O'Meara & South, 2019). Similarly, high levels of negative emotionality in young adulthood have been found to be associated with lower levels of relationship quality and higher levels of conflict and abuse in later relationships (Robins et al., 2002). These results demonstrate that as personality is relatively stable (Bowlby, 1973), it will impact the quality of one's relationships over time. Additionally, anxiety, a facet of Neuroticism, is related to decreased marital satisfaction (Caughlin et al., 2000). Consistent associations have been found between individuals' anxiety and their own negativity as well as evoking negativity from their spouses (Caughlin et al., 2000). This result supports the idea that a spouse's negative emotionality influences both their own as well as their partner's satisfaction in a relationship. Based on these findings, it is evident that less adaptive personality traits, such as Neuroticism and its facets, importantly influence the quality of one's close relationships.

Positive personality traits are also related to relationship quality (O'Meara & South, 2019; Robins et al., 2000, 2002; Stroud et al., 2010). Extraversion has been linked to relationship satisfaction initially and over time (O'Meara & South, 2019). This further demonstrates how personality remains stable over time (Bowlby, 1973), therefore influencing the quality of one's relationship. Further, Robins et al. (2000) found that individuals reporting higher levels of

positive emotionality, a facet of Extraversion, indicate higher relationship quality. Specifically, both men and women were in happy, satisfying relationships when the man expressed positive emotions, such as social closeness and well-being, and exhibited impulse control. Further, positive emotionality at age 18 years is predictive of higher relationship quality and lower levels of poor relationship outcomes such as abuse and conflict at age 26 (Robins et al., 2000). Findings for constraint were similar, as those who reported higher levels of constraint over their impulses indicated higher relationship quality (Robins et al., 2002). These results demonstrate that those with well-adjusted personalities, characterized by high levels of positive emotionality and constraint and low levels of negative emotionality, tend to have happier, healthier, and more satisfying relationships (Robins et al., 2000, 2002). These findings were replicated by Stroud et al. (2010) in a sample of married couples. Both husbands and wives with higher levels of positive emotionality reported greater relationship satisfaction, while those with higher negative emotionality indicated more dissatisfying relationships (Stroud et al., 2010). Another study on married couples found that Conscientiousness was the strongest predictor of marital satisfaction and accounted for more variance in satisfaction than Neuroticism (Claxton et al., 2012). This result is surprising, as Neuroticism often comes up as a stronger predictor in the research. This difference may be due to age, as this study evaluated couples who were fifty years of age or older and had been married for twenty years or longer (Claxton et al., 2012). Overall, these findings support the idea that positive personality traits can facilitate romantic relationships, which aligns with previous research that indicates that individuals high in these traits, particularly Extraversion, naturally experience more positive emotions and are drawn to interpersonal relationships (Donnellan et al., 2005).



Although positive emotionality has often been found to be a predictor of high relationship quality and satisfaction, complex relations between Extraversion and relationship quality have also emerged. Specifically, some studies have found weaker correlations between Extraversion and relationship quality (Chen et al., 2009; Claxton et al., 2012). For example, Claxton et al. (2012) found that individual trait Extraversion was not as strong a predictor of relationship quality as positive reporting discrepancies. When spouses rated their partners more positively, they were more satisfied in their relationships. These positive reporting discrepancies were even more predictive of marital satisfaction than personality traits, including Extraversion (Claxton et al., 2012). Further, the influence of Extraversion has been found to differ between partners (Chen et al., 2009). Chen et al. (2009) found that husbands were more satisfied with their relationship when their wives were more extroverted, but husbands' level of Extraversion did not contribute to wives' marital satisfaction. Overall, these findings suggest a complex association between personality traits and relationship quality, warranting further research on the subject.

Based on the previous research, it is evident that there are direct relationships between personality, attachment style, and relationship quality, separately. The traits of Extraversion and Neuroticism stand out in the literature as significant predictors of both attachment and relationship quality in adulthood. Extraversion is often related to secure attachment and positive relationship quality, while Neuroticism is often associated with insecure attachment and poor relationship quality. However, few studies have looked at all three in a single study. The purpose of this study was to determine how these three components work together to paint a more complete picture of relationship quality. More specifically, this study aimed to determine if attachment serves as a mediator for the relationship between personality and relationship quality in adulthood.

## Method

### Participants

The participants consisted of 109 individuals, most of whom were undergraduates at a private liberal arts university in the Midwest. Table 1 shows demographic information about participants, including age, sex, and relationship status. An initial email with a link to a Microsoft Form including the consent form and research instruments was sent to students directly as well as in a newsletter. Students enrolled in sections of an introductory psychology course received credit towards a class research requirement for their participation. Participants were encouraged to share the link through email or social media with friends and family, promoting a snowball sampling effect. The research instrument and this sampling method were approved by the university's institutional review board. All participants gave consent before participating in this study.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

Sex	<i>N</i>	% in a Relationship	Age	Range	<i>SD</i>
Male	45	27	19.82	18-49	1.86
Female	63	40	20.2	18-26	4.43
No response	1	0	19	--	--

### Measures

The Microsoft Form requested basic demographic information and additional instruments were used to measure adult romantic attachment style, personality traits, and relationship quality/expectations. Each instrument is described below.

#### *Adult Romantic Attachment Style*

**Relationship Questionnaire.** Participants completed the Relationship Questionnaire (RQ) developed by Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) to assess their attachment style in intimate relationships. The RQ measures adult attachment by presenting four short paragraphs describing different attachment models as applied to close relationships. The four attachment models are as follows: secure, fearful-avoidant, preoccupied, and dismissive-avoidant. This measure includes both a categorical and a continuous measure. Participants were first asked to choose which style described their experience in close relationships best, then were asked to rate their level of agreement with each style on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The continuous measure tends to generally show greater reliability with a reliability coefficient of .50, as compared to the categorical measure (kappa coefficient around .35) (Crowell et al., 2008; Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1994). Additionally, the RQ has been found to have convergent validity with other measures of adult attachment, such as Hazan and Shaver's three-category measure of attachment (Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1994).

**Experience in Close Relationship Questionnaire-Revised.** Participants completed the Experience in Close Relationship Questionnaire-Revised (ECR-R), which also measures adult attachment. The ECR-R is a 36-item self-report measure of adult romantic attachment style developed by Fraley et al. (2000). Participants were asked to rate each item based on how much they agreed or disagreed with the statement using a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The ECR-R produces scores on two subscales, avoidance and anxiety, with 18 items measuring each dimension. Higher scores indicate higher levels of anxiety or avoidance. The ECR-R is one of the most used measures of adult romantic attachment (Crowell et al., 2008), as the anxiety and avoidance subscales have been proven to capture two distinct

dimensions with high internal reliabilities (mean coefficient alphas of .95 and .93, respectively) (Sibley & Liu, 2005).

### ***Relationship Quality***

**Behavioral Beliefs (Perceived Costs and Benefits).** To assess relationship quality, participants were asked to indicate the probability of eight (four positive and four negative) relevant consequences occurring if they were to exhibit the behavior, “whenever possible, to take my partner with me everywhere over the next 20 days” (Monteoliva et al., 2016). After indicating the probability of these consequences occurring, participants were then asked to indicate the degree to which they felt these consequences would be positive or negative. The items included four positive consequences: a) sharing more things together; b) feeling more secure; c) spending more time together; d) getting to know each other better; and four negative consequences: e) losing other relationships; f) the relationship becoming more monotonous and boring; g) a loss of independence; and h) having more arguments. Perceived probability and the evaluation of each consequence were measured on a Likert scale, ranging from 1 (not at all likely) to 7 (very likely) regarding probability and 1 (very negative) to 7 (very positive) regarding evaluation. The item “getting to know each other better” was mistakenly excluded from the evaluation portion of this measure. This measure of relationship expectations was adapted from Monteoliva et al. (2016), in which a pilot study involving open-ended questions was conducted to obtain behavioral beliefs about the consequences of engaging in certain behaviors and the evaluations of said consequences.

### ***Personality***

**IPIP-NEO-60.** Personality traits were measured using the IPIP-NEO-60 (Maples-Keller et al., 2019). The IPIP-NEO-60 is a 60-item measure that assesses five personality traits:

openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Participants rated items on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (Very inaccurate) to 5 (Very accurate). The IPIP-NEO-60 has demonstrated high internal consistency, with mean coefficient alphas of .80 and good convergent validity with other personality measures, including the NEO PI-R, IPIP-NEO, and BFI-2, with a mean convergent  $r$  of .83 (Maples-Keller et al., 2019).

### **Procedure**

Participants first gave consent for their participation in the study and indicated that they were 18 years of age or older. Subjects who were not 18 years old or older were dismissed from the study. Participants were then asked to indicate basic demographic information such as age, sex, and their current relationship status. Following demographics, participants completed the RQ, followed by the ECR-R, the relationship quality/expectations measure, and the IPIP-NEO-60. Completing the research instrument took participants approximately 15 minutes. Data collection took place from April 16, 2024, to October 30, 2024, using Microsoft Forms.

## **Results**

### **Adult Romantic Attachment Style**

Table 2 shows the distribution of adult attachment styles as a function of sex, as measured by the categorical measure of the RQ. Preoccupied, fearful, and dismissing subjects were grouped into a single “insecure” attachment group and compared to secure subjects. A chi-square test of independence revealed that men were evenly distributed in the insecure and secure attachment categories, while more women fell into the insecure category than the secure category,  $\chi^2(1, N = 109) = 5.46, p < .05$ .

### **Table 2**

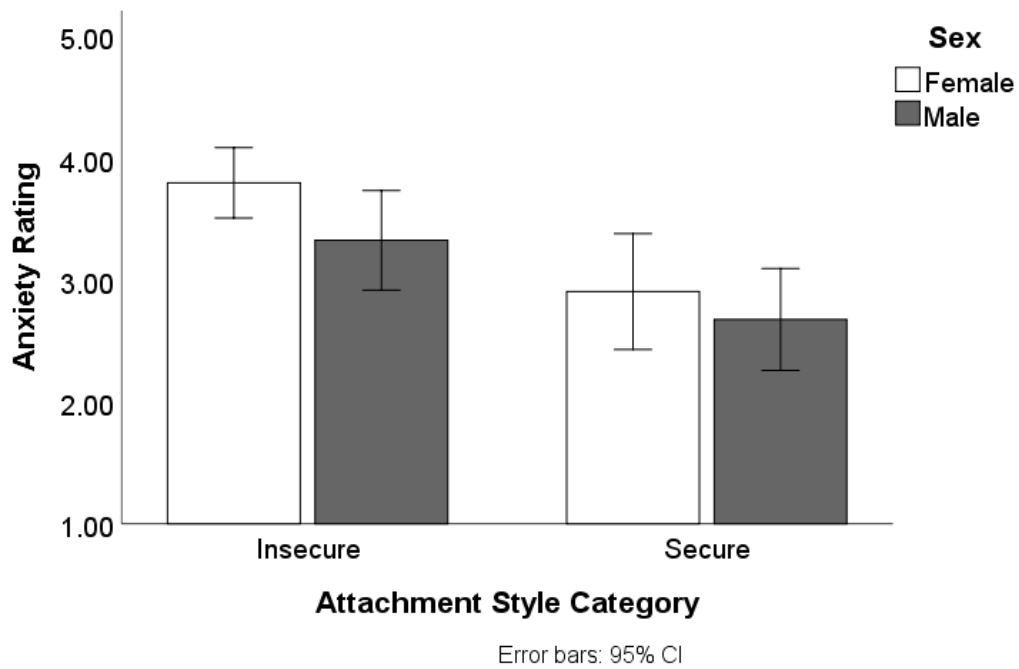
*Percentage of Participants in Each Attachment Category by Sex*

Sex	Attachment Style	
	Insecure	Secure
Male	21.30	20.37
Female	42.59	15.74

A 2 (sex) x 2 (attachment) multivariate ANOVA on anxiety and avoidance was run as a validity check for the secure and insecure attachment categories. A main effect of attachment security was found on anxiety,  $F(1,104) = 14.35, p < .00$ . Insecure participants, both male and female, were more anxious than secure participants (see Figure 1). Similarly, a main effect of attachment security was found on avoidance,  $F(1,104) = 22.61, p < .00$ . Insecure participants, both male and female, were more avoidant than secure participants (see Figure 2). This suggests that the anxiety and avoidance subscales of the ECR-R are picking up the differences between insecure and secure attachment.

### Figure 1

*Anxiety as a Function of Attachment Security*

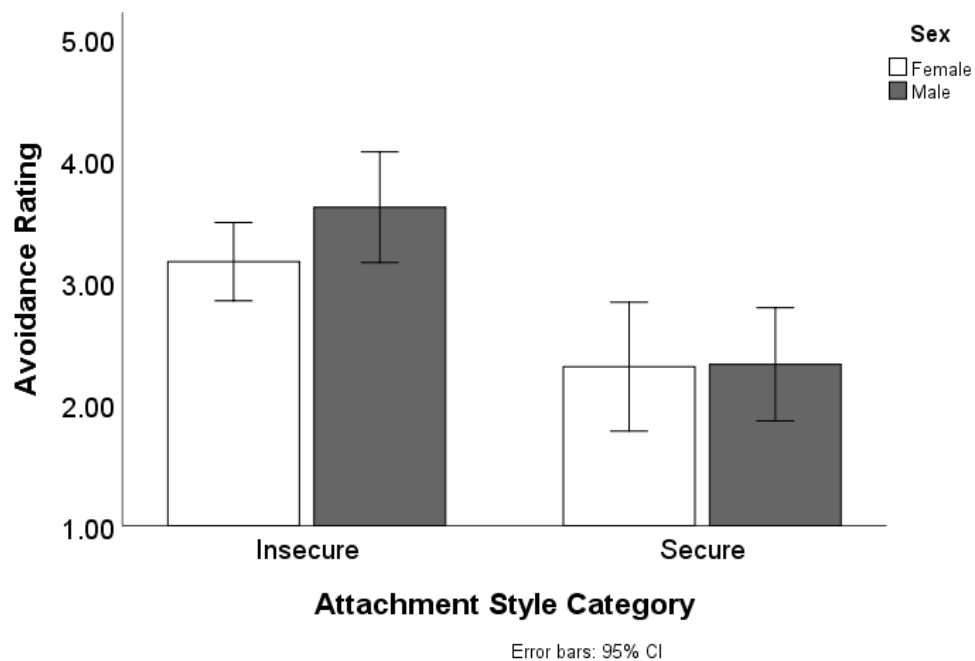


*Note.* Insecure and secure subjects' ratings on the anxiety subscale of the ECR-R are shown.

Insecure subjects, both male and female, showed more attachment anxiety than both male and female secure subjects.

## Figure 2

*Avoidance as a Function of Attachment Security*



*Note.* Insecure and secure subjects' ratings on the avoidance subscale of the ECR-R are shown.

Insecure subjects, both male and female, showed more attachment avoidance than both male and female secure subjects.

### Relationship Quality

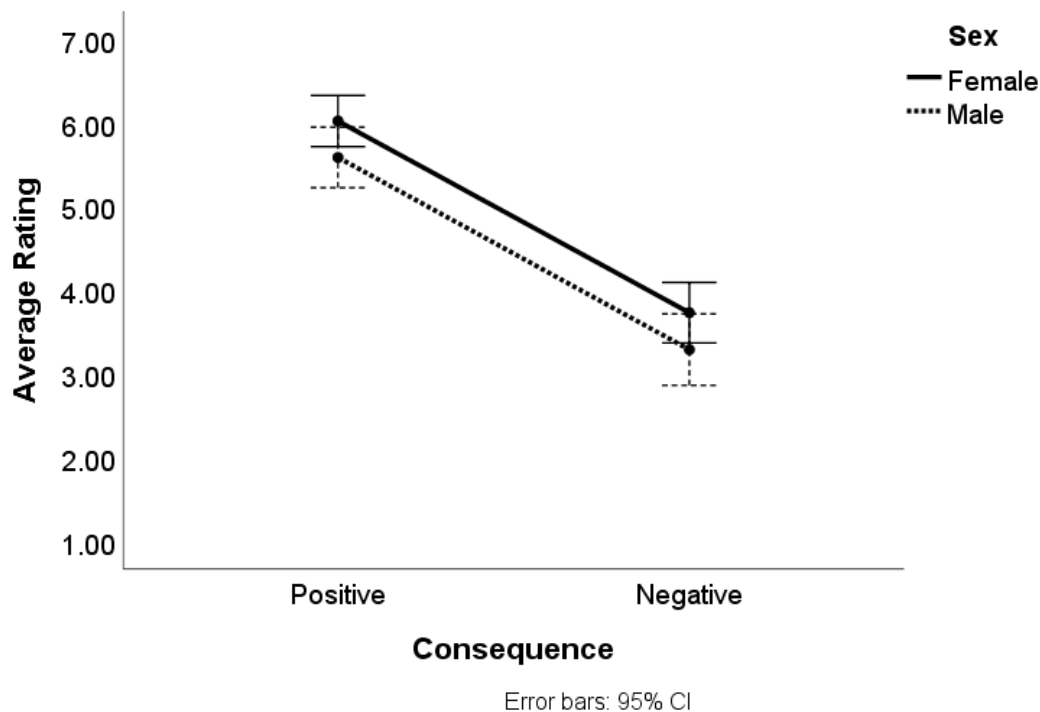
A 2 (sex) by 2 (consequence) mixed ANOVA on the degree to which participants expect each outcome to occur if they were to spend an extended period with their partner was run. To capture consequences, the eight items of the behavioral beliefs measure were collapsed into two categories, one for the expectation of positive consequences and one for the expectation of negative consequences. There was a statistically significant main effect of expected consequences,  $F(1,106) = 152.79, p < .001$ . Both men's and women's expectations were stronger for positive consequences than negative consequences ( $M = 5.84$  and  $3.55$ , respectively, see Figure 3). There also was a significant main effect of sex,  $F(1,106) = 5.66, p < .05$ . Overall, women's ratings for both positive and negative consequences were stronger than men's ratings.



Regardless of whether it was positive or negative, women gave stronger ratings for expecting consequences to occur than men ( $M's = 4.87$  and  $4.43$ , respectively, see Figure 3).

**Figure 3**

*Expectations for Relationship Outcomes by Sex*

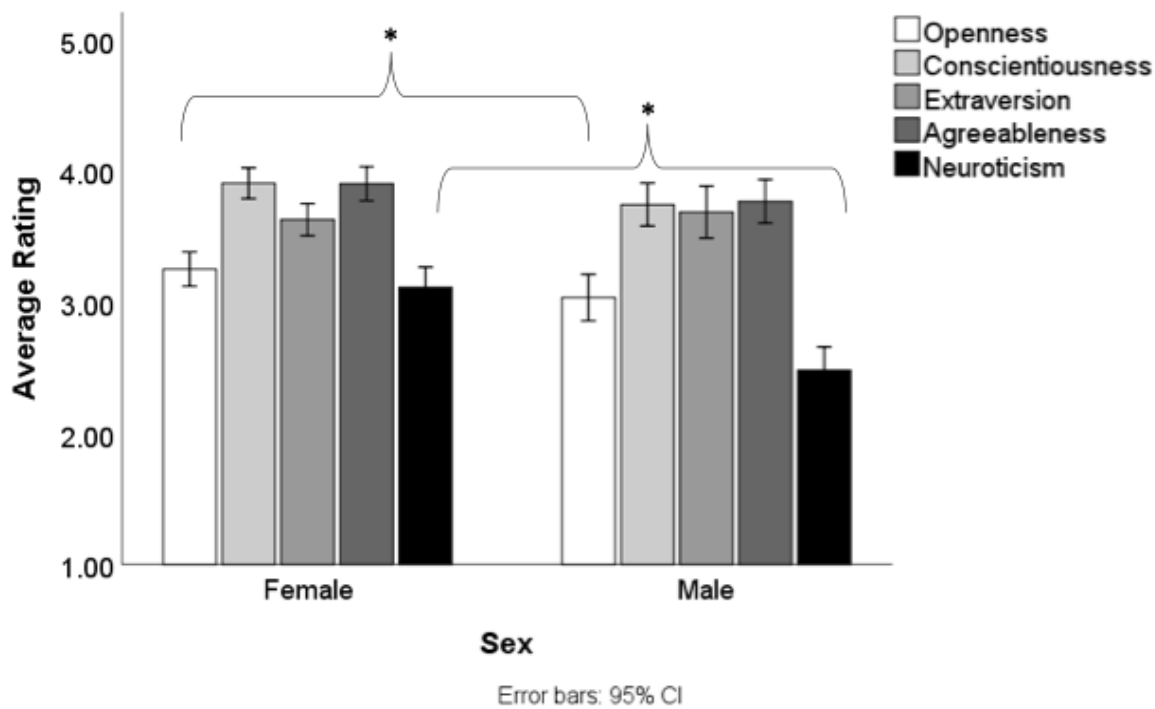


*Note.* Male and female participants' expectations for positive and negative relationship outcomes are shown. Men's and women's expectations were stronger for positive consequences than negative consequences.

### Personality

A multivariate one-way ANOVA was run to examine women's and men's scores on the five personality factors. Results for personality on each of the five traits are reported as a function of sex (see Figure 4). Women scored statistically significantly higher than men on Openness,  $F(1,106) = 4.10, p < .05$ , and Neuroticism,  $F(1,106) = 28.68, p < .05$

**Figure 4**

*NEO-PI-60 Personality Average Scores as a Function of Sex*

\*  $p < .01$

*Note.* Average ratings for each personality trait are shown as a function of sex. Women scored statistically significantly higher on Openness and Neuroticism.

### Attachment Style and Relationship Quality

Table 3 shows the relationship between attachment and expectations of positive and negative consequences. Secure attachment was significantly correlated with the probability of positive consequences. This finding indicates that those who are securely attached expect positive consequences to occur if they were to spend as much time with their partner as possible. Regarding the anxiety and avoidance subscales, there was a significant correlation between attachment anxiety and the probability of negative consequences. This indicates that those who are more anxiously attached expect more negative consequences to occur if they were to spend as much time with their partner as possible. There was a significant negative correlation between

attachment avoidance and the expectation of positive consequences. This finding suggests that the more avoidant an individual is, the less they expect positive consequences to occur if they were to take their partner with them everywhere for 20 days.

**Table 3**

*Correlations Between Attachment Scores and Relationship Expectations*

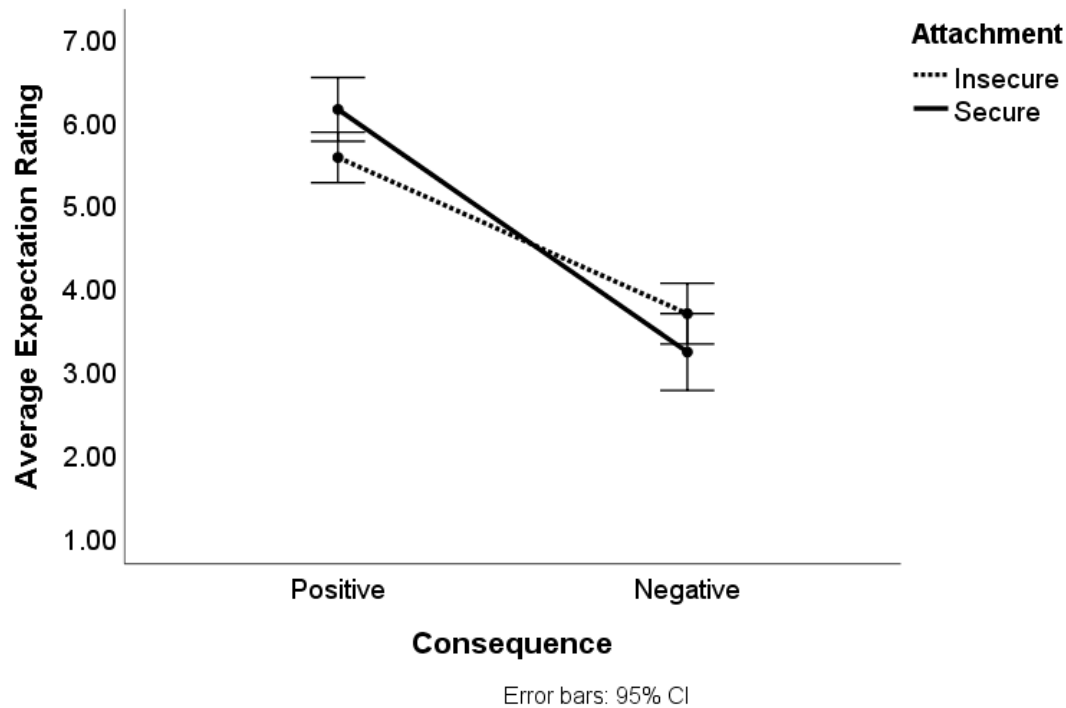
Attachment	Expected Relationship Consequences	
	Positive	Negative
Secure	.25*	-.13
Insecure	.05	.17
Anxiety	-.01	.32*
Avoidance	-.61*	.08

*Note.* \*Correlation is significant at 0.01.

A 2 (attachment category) x 2 (consequence) mixed ANOVA on the degree to which participants expect each outcome was run to follow up on the correlations above. As expected, there was an Attachment Category x Consequence cross-over interaction,  $F(1, 107) = 7.42, p < .01$  (see Figure 5). Individuals with a secure attachment had a stronger expectation for positive outcomes than those with an insecure attachment, and those with an insecure attachment had a stronger expectation for negative consequences than those with a secure attachment.

**Figure 5**

*Expectations for Relationship Outcomes by Attachment Group*



*Note.* Insecure and secure participants' expectations for positive and negative relationship outcomes are shown. Securely attached individuals had a stronger expectation for positive outcomes than insecurely attached individuals. Insecurely attached individuals had a stronger expectation for negative consequences than securely attached individuals.

### Personality and Relationship Quality

Table 4 shows the relationship between personality and expectations of positive and negative consequences. Results indicated a significant positive correlation between Extraversion and the probability of expecting positive consequences when spending as much time as possible with a partner. This suggests that the more extraverted one is, the more they expect positive consequences to occur if they were to spend as much time as possible with their partner. There was also a significant positive correlation between Conscientiousness and the probability of positive consequences. A significant correlation was also found between Agreeableness and the probability of positive consequences. These findings indicate that those who are conscientious or

agreeable expect more positive outcomes to occur when spending as much time as possible with their partner.

**Table 4**

*Correlations Between Personality Traits and Relationship Expectations*

Personality	Expected Relationship Consequences	
	Positive	Negative
Openness	-.04	.04
Conscientiousness	.30*	-.01
Extraversion	.38*	.15
Agreeableness	.29*	-.19
Neuroticism	-.09	.15

*Note.* \*Correlation is significant at 0.01.

### **Personality, Attachment, and Relationship Quality**

Several personality traits correlated with dimensions of attachment and were predictive of relationship quality before attachment was considered, so a mediation analysis was run.

Specifically, the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2020) was used to assess whether the personality traits of Extraversion and Neuroticism impacted relationship quality indirectly through attachment. The analyses controlled for sex as a covariate and used attachment anxiety and avoidance as mediating variables. Two mediation analyses were run: one to evaluate Extraversion, attachment avoidance, and positive consequences, and one to evaluate Neuroticism, attachment anxiety, and the expectation for negative consequences.

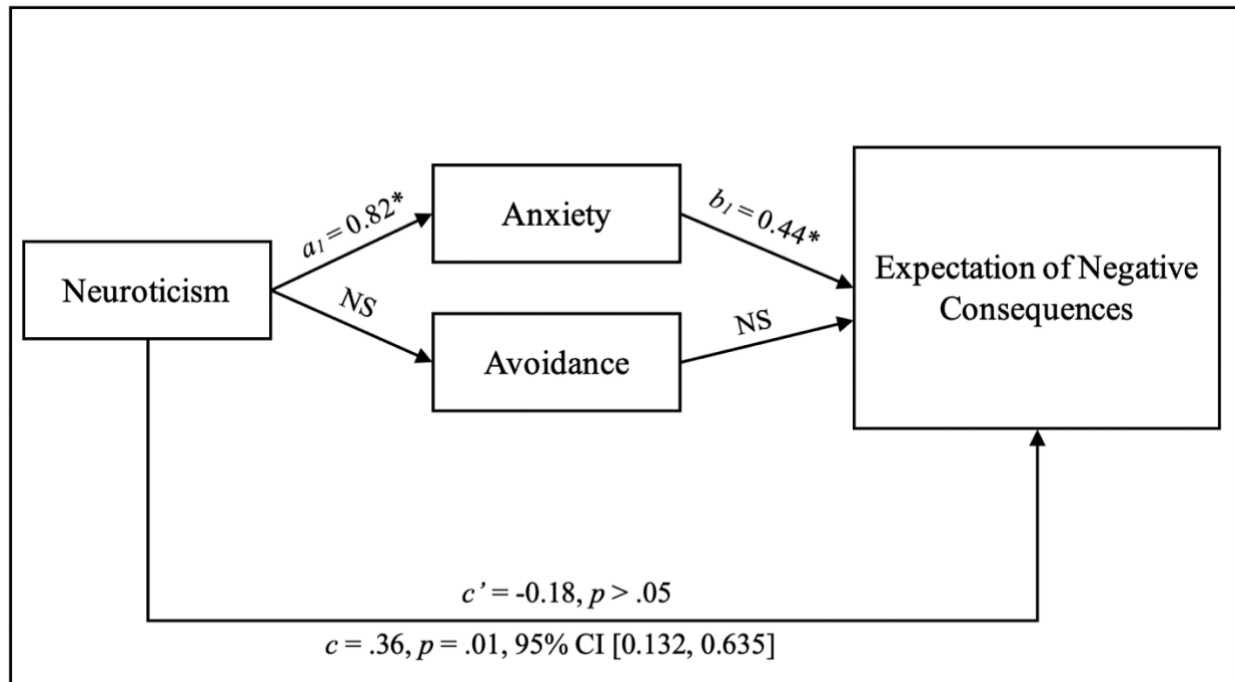
Figure 6 shows the regression coefficients for each path of the mediation model. The total effect of Neuroticism on the expectation of negative consequences, with the covariates

considered, was significant,  $b = 0.38$ ,  $p = .005$ , 95% CI [0.135, 0.687], but with the mediating variables included, the direct effect was no longer significant, indicating full mediation (see Figure 6). Neuroticism was indirectly related to expecting negative consequences through its relationship with attachment anxiety. This means that the less emotionally stable an individual is, the more anxiously attached they are. Further, the more anxiously attached an individual is, the more they expect negative consequences to occur if they were to spend as much time with their partner as possible. A 95% confidence interval based on 5,000 bootstrap samples indicated that the indirect effect of Neuroticism through attachment anxiety ( $b = 0.36$ , 95% CI [0.132, 0.635]) was entirely above zero, whereas the path through attachment avoidance was not ( $b = 0.026$ , 95% CI [-0.049, 0.154]). This indicates that the direct effect is attributed almost entirely to the path through attachment anxiety. Overall, these findings indicate that Neuroticism alone does not lead one to expect negative consequences to occur, but through attachment anxiety it does. By incorporating attachment into the relationship between personality and relationship quality, relationship quality can be predicted, proving the importance of knowing both personality and attachment.

### **Figure 6**

*Parallel Mediation Analysis of Neuroticism on Relationship Quality Through Attachment*

*Dimensions*



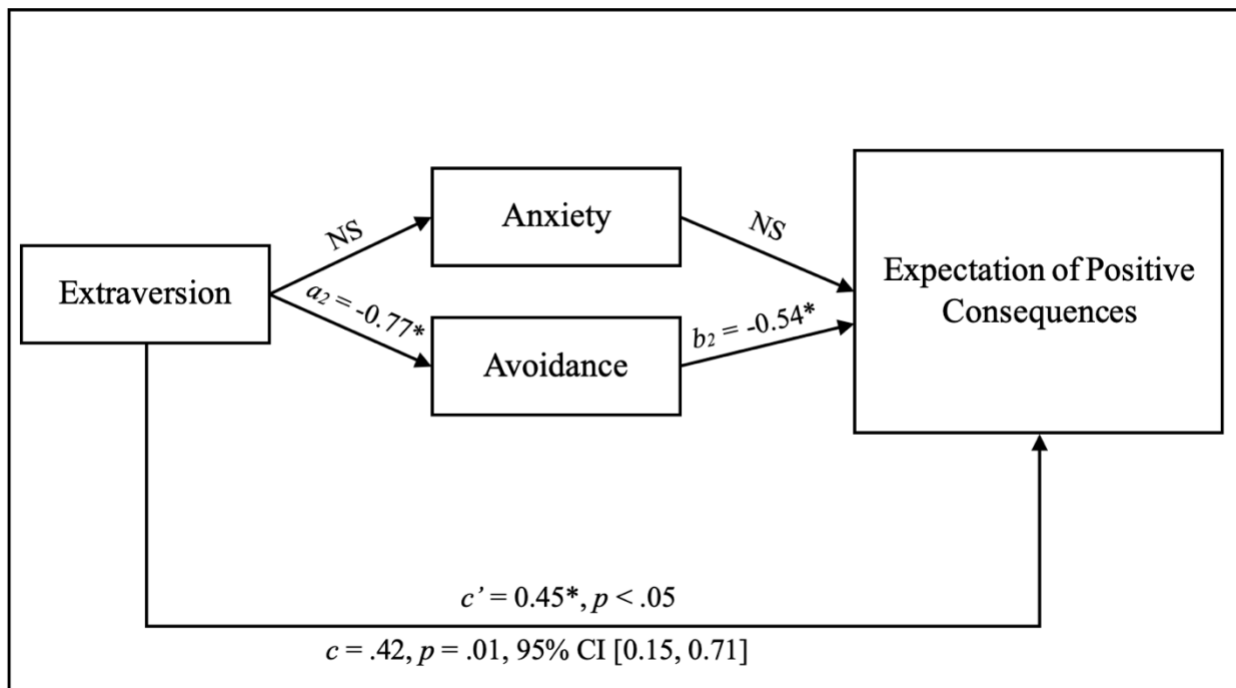
*Note.* All presented effects are unstandardized coefficients;  $a_n$  is effect of Neuroticism on dimensions of attachment;  $b_n$  is effect of attachment dimensions on expectation of negative consequences;  $c'$  is direct effect of Neuroticism on expectation of negative consequences;  $c$  is the mediated effect of Neuroticism on expectation of negative consequences.  $*p < .05$ .

Figure 7 shows the regression coefficients for each path of the mediation model. The total effect of Extraversion on the expectation of positive consequences, with the covariates considered, was significant,  $b = 0.41, p = .005, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.149, 0.696]$ , and with the mediating variables included, the direct effect was still significant (see Figure 7). Extraversion was indirectly related to expecting positive consequences through its relationship with attachment avoidance. This suggests that the more extroverted an individual is, the less avoidantly attached they are. Further, the less avoidantly attached an individual is, the more they expect positive consequences to occur if they spend a lot of time with their partner. A 95% confidence interval based on 5,000 bootstrap samples indicated that the indirect effect of Extraversion through

attachment avoidance ( $b = 0.417$ , 95% CI [0.152, 0.705]) was entirely above zero, whereas the path through attachment anxiety was not ( $b = -0.005$ , 95% CI [-0.047, 0.031]). This indicates that the direct effect is attributed almost entirely to the path through attachment avoidance. Overall, these findings reaffirm the significance of both personality factors and attachment in predicting relationship quality.

**Figure 7**

*Parallel Mediation Analysis of Extraversion on Relationship Quality Through Attachment Dimensions*



*Note.* All presented effects are unstandardized coefficients;  $a_n$  is effect of Extraversion on dimensions of attachment;  $b_n$  is effect of attachment dimensions on expectation of positive consequences;  $c'$  is direct effect of Extraversion on expectation of positive consequences;  $c$  is the mediated effect of Extraversion on expectation of positive consequences.  $*p < .05$ .

## Discussion



The current study sought to investigate the relationship between personality, attachment, and relationship quality in adulthood. Specifically, it aimed to determine if attachment serves as a mediator for the relationship between personality and relationship quality in adulthood. Studies have consistently found direct, independent associations between these three, but few studies have looked at all three in a single study. Here, both direct correlations as well as mediation analyses between personality, attachment, and relationship quality were examined.

### **Attachment and Relationship Quality**

Secure attachment was found to be significantly related to expecting positive consequences if one were to spend a lot of time with their partner, while insecure attachment, specifically attachment anxiety, was significantly related to expecting negative consequences. These findings are consistent with the previous research that indicated securely attached individuals report higher relationship quality than those who are insecurely attached (Collins & Read, 1990; Feeney & Noller, 1990; Feeney & Fitzgerald, 2019; Gleeson & Fitzgerald, 2014; González-Ortega et al., 2021; Monteoliva et al., 2016; Simpson et al., 2007). A core characteristic of secure attachment is possessing positive expectations about others (Bowlby, 1962; Collins, 1996). Expectations about relationships are based on previous encounters and experiences, that assimilate into one's internal working model (Bowlby, 1969/1982, 1973; Collins, 1996). When one expects positive consequences to occur if they were to spend a significant amount of time with their partner, it seems clear that their experiences in relationships have been positive, indicating positive relationship quality. Similarly, those who have had negative experiences in relationships will likely have negative perceptions and expectations about others, which will be reflected in the quality of their relationships (Collins, 1996).

### **Personality and Relationship Quality**

Extraversion and Neuroticism were focused on because of their consistent associations with both attachment and relationship quality, and conceptual relevance. As Extraversion is in part defined by sociability and a desire to be around others, it is expected that those high on Extraversion would wish to approach others rather than avoid them. Additionally, anxiety is a dimension of Neuroticism, therefore warranting exploration of attachment anxiety as a mediator for the association between Neuroticism and the expectation of negative relationship consequences. Findings regarding Extraversion and relationship quality from the present study are partially consistent with the previous research. Past research has found correlations between Extraversion or positive emotionality and positive relationship quality (O'Meara & South, 2019; Robins et al., 2000, 2002; Stroud et al., 2010). This is consistent with findings from the present study, as Extraversion was significantly related to expecting positive consequences in a relationship. As those who are extraverted are often more optimistic and well-adjusted (Robins et al., 2000, 2002), it is reasonable that they would expect more positive consequences to occur if they were to spend a lot of time with their partner. Additionally, there was an indirect effect of personality on relationship quality through avoidant attachment. Those who were more extroverted showed less avoidant attachment and expected positive relationship outcomes. When an individual is both extroverted and shows little attachment avoidance, it can be predicted that they will expect positive consequences to occur if they were to be with their partner for an extended period. As avoidant attachment involves a wish for independence and reluctance towards intimacy or closeness (Brennan et al., 1998), it makes sense that those who score low in this dimension would expect positive outcomes to occur if they were to spend a lot of time with their partner. Avoidance has also been linked to lower levels of relationship satisfaction and commitment (Shaver & Brennan, 1992), further supporting findings from the present study.

Findings regarding Neuroticism and relationship quality were not fully consistent with the previous research which has found significant correlations between Neuroticism and negative relationship quality (Caughlin et al., 2000; Karney & Bradbury, 1997; O'Meara & South, 2019). These studies have commonly found the depression and anxiety facets of Neuroticism to be consistently linked to poor relationship outcomes (Caughlin et al., 2000; Karney & Bradbury, 1997; O'Meara & South, 2019). In the present study, Neuroticism did not have a direct effect on relationship quality. However, the mediated relationship between Neuroticism and the expectation of negative consequences through attachment anxiety was significant. This finding suggests the importance of knowing both personality and attachment style in predicting relationship quality. Although one's personality can provide meaningful information about one's adaptability (Stroud et al., 2010), the way one handles conflict (Robins et., 2002) and one's approach to stressful situations (Karney & Bradbury, 1997), it may not always be enough to predict the quality of their relationships without the addition of attachment. As attachment produces an internal working model that consists of beliefs and expectations that persist throughout the lifespan (Bowlby, 1969/1982; 1973; Collins, 1996), it heavily influences one's relationships, including the quality of these relationships. While personality and attachment can separately impact relationship quality, when put together, they can provide a more complete picture of the quality of one's relationships than just two alone can. This encapsulates the purpose of this study, which aimed to evaluate the role of attachment as a mediator for the relationship between personality and relationship quality in adulthood. Through the relationship between Neuroticism, attachment anxiety, and poor relationship quality, it is evident that attachment can serve as a mediator for the relationship between personality and relationship quality in adulthood.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

A few limitations of this study are worth noting. First, this study was rather exploratory. Based on the previous research, it was expected that personality, attachment, and relationship quality would be related to one another, but the exact way in which they would fit together was unclear. The purpose of this study was to determine how they fit together to illustrate a more complete image of relationship quality. Therefore, setting more clear hypotheses and looking at other models would be interesting to explore in future studies. Further, the age of participants could be a limitation of this study, as the mean age for participants was 20 years. It would be interesting to investigate whether a wider age range would produce different results.

Additionally, regarding the measures used, the measure of relationship quality (Monteoliva et al., 2016) chosen was unique but very narrowly defined. This measure was chosen based on its uniqueness and its direct relationship to internal working model, as it captures an individual's expectations for a relationship. These expectations will be based on their previous experiences in relationships, all of which have contributed to the development of their internal working model, therefore influencing subsequent relationships (Bowlby, 1969/1982; 1973; Collins, 1996).

However, other studies of relationship quality have used measures that evaluate multiple dimensions of relationship quality, such as satisfaction, conflict, and commitment (González-Ortega et al., 2021; Shaver & Brennan, 1992; Simpson et al., 2007). Including an additional measure that evaluates multiple dimensions of relationship quality would be interesting for comparison purposes. Additionally, all measures used were self-reported, which can involve bias or honesty issues (Donnellan, 2005). Utilizing observational measures to reduce these concerns could be a direction for future studies. Despite these limitations, this research produced important findings about personality, attachment, and relationship quality, enhancing our

understanding of the relationship between these factors and hopefully stimulating further research on this topic.

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