

THE MEDIATING EFFECT OF COMMUNICATION PATTERNS ON  
THE LINK BETWEEN ATTACHMENT STYLES AND EMOTION  
REGULATION STRATEGIES IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

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# THE MEDIATING EFFECT OF COMMUNICATION PATTERNS ON THE LINK BETWEEN ATTACHMENT STYLES AND EMOTION REGULATION STRATEGIES IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

SORANA-MARIA AVRAMESCU

## **Abstract**

Research has investigated the connections between attachment styles and communication patterns in conflict, as well as the relationship between attachment styles and emotion regulation strategies. However, the interplay among the three is underexplored. To understand this complex dynamic, the present study examines how communication patterns during conflict mediate the relationship between attachment styles and emotion regulation strategies. A sample of 87 participants, aged 18 to 44, completed standardized questionnaires assessing each variable. Mediation analysis was used to investigate the relationship between attachment styles, communication patterns in conflict, and emotion regulation strategies. The results confirmed a relation between the variables. Specifically, the partner-demand/self-withdraw communication pattern mediated the relationship between both anxious and avoidant attachment styles with expressive suppression. This indicates that insecurely attached individuals who engage in this communication pattern tend to stifle their emotions. In contrast, the constructive communication pattern negatively mediated these relationships, indicating that those who communicate constructively are less prone to suppress their emotions, regardless of their attachment style. These findings contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms underlying emotion regulation and underscore the significance of communication patterns in conflict. This

knowledge can inform interventions aimed at improving communication skills and fostering healthier strategies for managing emotions.

### **Data Source, Ethics, Code and Technology Statement**

The data used in the present research was collected by the author through a questionnaire created in Qualtrics, making the researcher the sole owner. The participants were informed about the research purpose, their voluntary involvement, and the anonymous collection of the data. All figures and images presented in this paper were created by the author.

The code implemented for the data analysis was written by the researcher using Python as the programming language. The chosen development environment for this code was Visual Studio Code. Grammarly was employed to ensure proper formatting of the text, and Microsoft Word served as the platform for document creation.

### **Introduction**

Relationships represent one of the most important aspects of our lives; we are born in relationships, live in relationships, and perish in relationships. An ongoing longitudinal study on happiness has shown that the quality of our relationships plays a great importance in our levels of health, happiness, and longevity. (Vaillant, 2008). Happiness is also an important metric concerning relationships as happy people tend to have relationships of better quality (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008). However, every relationship brings with it conflict at some point, and how individuals navigate these conflicts can have a significant impact on the partnership's quality and longevity (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). It is not the presence of the conflict itself that determines the health of the partnership, but rather how couples manage their emotions and communicate during those disagreements (Winer, 2024). Effective communication patterns, such as active listening and expressing needs assertively, can foster constructive conflict resolution (Winer,

2024). Conversely, detrimental patterns like withdrawing from communication or blaming can exacerbate conflict. Thus, when partners can calmly express their needs and concerns and actively listen to each other, even in conflict, the relationship can grow stronger. This happens due to the closeness that arises and results in intimacy (Sternberg, 1986).

This study's aim is to bridge a gap in the broad study of relationships by answering the question “Do communication patterns during conflict mediate the relationship between attachment styles and emotion regulation strategies?”. While the connection between attachment and modes of communication in conflict (Fišerová et al., 2021) and attachment and emotion regulation (Brandao et al., 2022), have been individually studied, the interplay between the three has little background. However, these components are intricately linked within the context of romantic relationships. Attachment styles influence how individuals perceive and approach conflict and shape the way one communicates their needs, emotions, and concerns. For example, individuals with secure attachment styles are more likely to approach conflict constructively and utilize healthy communication patterns, whereas those with anxious attachment might resort to blaming or become overly critical during disagreements (Fišerová, 2021). By examining these constructs together, this study intends to offer a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics that unfold during interpersonal interactions, particularly in the context of relationship conflicts.

Investigating the interplay between attachment styles, communication patterns in conflict and emotion regulation strategies holds notable scientific importance. By examining the mediating role of communication, this study can contribute to a more comprehensive theoretical framework for attachment theory. It can shed light on the mechanisms by which early attachment experiences influence adult emotional regulation in conflict situations. Additionally, this

knowledge can inform the development of more effective interventions aimed at improving communication skills and fostering healthy emotional regulation within relationships.

The current study employed a quantitative approach. Data was collected through an online questionnaire composed of sociodemographic data and widely used measures for attachment styles, communication patterns and emotion regulation strategies. Several statistical methods were used to analyze the data. Correlation analysis was used to explore the relationships between the dimensions of each variable and to check the fitting with previous findings. Linear regression was employed for a better understanding of these associations. Mediation analysis was used to answer the research question and explore the relationship of the three together.

After analysis, statistically significant results were found confirming previous research and showing the mediation role of communication patterns on the relationship between attachment and emotion regulation strategies. However, the sample failed at matching with some aspects of previous research, maybe future studies can benefit from bigger samples. In the light of the new insights found, suggestions for future research were made regarding the structure of the studies.

## **Related Work**

### ***Attachment Styles***

Attachment theory, proposed by John Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980), suggests that people develop different attachment types based on their interactions with their caregivers and that this attachment shapes not only one's relationship dynamics throughout their life, but also one's interpersonal behaviors. The openness, sensitivity and responsiveness of the connection figure can lead to either a secure or an insecure attachment (Bowlby, 1973; Ruiters & Ijzendoorn, 1993). Trust, comfort with intimacy, and efficient emotion management are all characteristics of

secure attachment. Those who are securely attached can form comforting partnerships. Insecure attachment styles, such as anxious and avoidant, are linked to difficulty in forming and maintaining close relationships (Fišerová et al., 2021). “An anxious attachment style is defined as a fear of interpersonal rejection or abandonment, an excessive need for approval from others, and distress when one’s partner is unavailable or unresponsive. An avoidant attachment style is defined as a fear of dependence and interpersonal intimacy, an excessive need for self-reliance, and reluctance to self-disclose” (Paquette et al., 2020).

### ***Communication Patterns and Attachment***

As previously stated, conflicts are inevitable in romantic relationships. The response to them can differ, and one can engage in either adaptive or maladaptive resolution strategies. The adaptive strategies are those constructive for the relationship, as they are associated with positive interpersonal and personal consequences (Zacchilli et al., 2009; Paquette et al., 2020). “Constructive communication is an inclusive term for a host of positive behaviors that serve to promote a collaborative approach to problem-solving and engender trust and understanding. Examples include making suggestions (in contrast to demands), compromising, perspective-taking, and expressing feelings” (Crenshaw et al., 2017). Maladaptive ones, on the contrary, are destructive to the relationship and are associated with negative personal and interpersonal consequences (Zacchilli et al., 2009; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2014; Shrout et al., 2023). Researchers like Christensen (1987) have identified such maladaptive communication styles that hinder constructive conflict resolution. One such pattern is the demand/withdrawal behavior which maintains and intensifies the conflict, in which one partner nags, criticizes, and complains while the other partner withdraws from the interaction (Crenshaw et al., 2017).

Under conditions of threat, such as stress or potential loss of the relationship, the attachment system may activate (Campbell & Marshall, 2011). Thus, the moment conflict is

encountered in a relationship, attachment styles play a role in the direction of the dispute (MacDonald et al., 2019). Evidence suggests that insecure individuals tend to engage in destructive communication, such as the demand-withdrawal pattern (Ebrahimi & Ali Kimiaei, 2014). This leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy during conflict as destructive communication patterns, fueled by core attachment beliefs, create a cycle that reinforces those very beliefs. Anxious' individuals' demanding behavior might be perceived as neediness by avoidant partners, solidifying their fear of intimacy. Similarly, avoidant withdrawal can be interpreted as confirmation of unavailability by anxious partners, intensifying their anxieties. This interplay between communication and attachment styles ultimately strengthens the core beliefs associated with insecure attachment.

### ***Emotion Regulation Strategies and Attachment***

According to Gross (1998, 2015), emotion regulation is the process of altering the course of an emotional response. There are two well-defined and widely studied emotion regulation strategies, cognitive reappraisal, which involves changing one's perspective on a situation to affect the emotional impact, and expressive suppression, which entails restraining outward emotional display (Gross & John, 2003). Both strategies are ideal for observations due to their common usage in everyday life, manipulability in laboratory settings, and representation of both antecedent-focused and response-focused strategies. Cognitive reappraisal is known to be associated with positive outcomes in life, such as better physical health, while expressive suppression is associated with a reduced quality of life (Kelley, 2019).

The attachment working models may activate when facing physical or psychological threats in order to help people handle distress (Bowlby, 1969). The link between Bowlby's theory and the emotional and cognitive reactions to stressful events was studied by Mikulincer over several years (Mikulincer & Florian, 1998; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019). More securely attached

individuals tend to rely more on constructive emotion regulation strategies, while those insecurely attached tend to turn more toward suppression (Brandao et al., 2023).

### ***The Interplay of Attachment, Communication and Emotion Regulation***

The previous sections explored the established connections between attachment styles and communication patterns, as well as attachment styles and emotion regulation strategies. However, in real-world situations, these factors don't operate in isolation. Understanding how these factors interact can provide a more comprehensive picture of conflict resolution and emotional regulation in close relationships.

This research proposes a unifying framework where communication patterns act as a bridge between attachment styles and emotion regulation strategies. For instance, insecure attachment styles may predispose individuals to adopt maladaptive communication patterns, such as demand-withdrawal, which can hinder healthy emotion regulation. Investigating this mediation process holds significant potential for understanding how early experiences, communication styles, and emotional regulation interact to shape relationship dynamics. This paves the way for more effective interventions and strategies to promote healthier and more satisfying intimate connections.

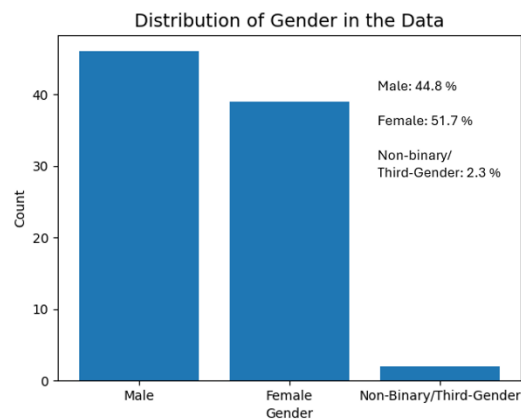
### **Method**

The study employed a snowball sampling technique to recruit participants, leveraging the author's relations and connections. Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling method where initial participants recommend others who meet the inclusion criteria (Johnson, 2014). Participants completed a self-administered questionnaire designed to gather data on relationship metrics such as attachment styles, communication patterns and emotion regulation strategies. It was created in Qualtrics software (Qualtrics, Provo, UT) and the items were presented in the

same order to the participants, with exception to questions regarding the relationship. Those were written in present or past tense based on the relationship status, or for those who have never been in a relationship a message was displayed stating that their input is valuable as well. The inclusion criteria were for the participants to be at least 18 years old and to have a good understanding level of English. Data collection took place over the span of 1 month, from the 16<sup>th</sup> of April to the 15<sup>th</sup> of May.

### **Participants**

The sample consisted of 87 individuals (44.8% men, 51.7% women, 2.3% non-binary/third gender) with ages varying from 18 to 44 ( $M = 25.39$  years old,  $SD = 6.02$  years). The distributions of gender and age are presented in Figure 1 and Figure 2. 57 out of the participants were involved in a relationship at the time of the study, 22 were previously involved in one, and 8 had never been in one. Of those who have been or were in a relationship, 31% had an age gap greater than two years and 26.4% had a partner of a different nationality than them.



*Figure 1 Distribution of gender in the data*

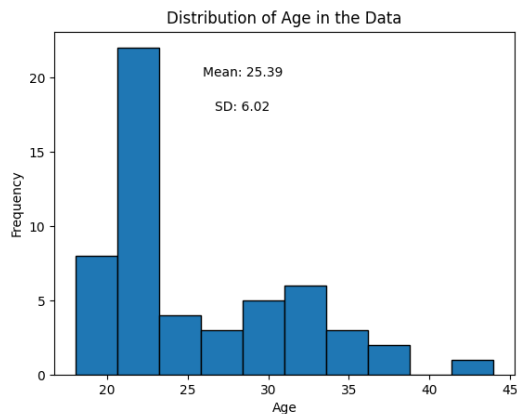


Figure 2 Distribution of age in the data

### **Procedure**

Participants completed an online survey, which included an informed consent form, demographic information (age, gender, relationship status, length, and difference in the nationality or age within the couple), and questionnaires measuring attachment style, emotion regulation strategy and communication patterns in conflict. These were The Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised questionnaire, or ECR-R (see Appendix A), the Communication Patterns Questionnaire, or CPQ (see Appendix B) and the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire, ERQ (see Appendix C). Participants were also given the option to voluntarily enter a raffle for a 25 EUR gift card for bol.com, a Dutch online store, where 69% of people responded.

### **Measures**

Attachment was measured using the Experiences in Close Relationships – revised (Fraley, 2000), where the 36 items are answered on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Half of the questions measure the level of one’s anxiety (e.g. “I often worry that my partner doesn’t really love me.”) and half measure the level of avoidance (e.g. “I prefer not to be too close to romantic partners.”). A low score in both dimensions can be categorized as a

secure person (Fraley, 2012). The total score for each dimension is calculated using the mean of the respective items.

Two dimensions of emotion regulation were assessed: cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression, using the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (Gross, 2003). It consists of ten questions, six for reappraisal (e.g. "When I'm faced with a stressful situation, I make myself think about it in a way that makes me stay calm.") and four for suppression (e.g. "I control my emotions by not expressing them."), that are rated as well on a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 represents strongly disagree and 7 represents strongly agree. The scores for the two dimensions are calculated using their mean.

Communication patterns in conflict were measured using a shortened version of the Communication Pattern Questionnaire – revised (Crenshaw et al., 2017), following the recommendations of the authors for such a situation. It comprised 23 items, scored on a Likert scale from 1 (Very unlikely) to 9 (Very likely). The revised version differentiated between three patterns: constructive communication (e.g. "Both my partner and I try to discuss the problems."), self-demand/partner-withdraw (e.g. "I nag and demand while my partner withdraws, becomes silent, or refuses to discuss the matter further."), partner-demand/self-withdraw (e.g. "My partner criticizes while I defend myself."). The mean of each dimension represents the score for the pattern.

### ***Analysis***

The current study employed several statistical analyses to investigate the relationships between the variables. All of these were conducted using Python programming language with the afferent libraries, such as pandas, numpy, matplotlib or SciPy Stats (Van Rossum, & Drake, 2009). As a starting point, the scores for each measurement for each participant were calculated. For the

sake of categorizing participants on their attachment styles, they were categorized into groups based on the median of avoidance and anxiety (cf. Fraley, 2012). Based on this scoring there were 32 securely attached individuals, 11 were avoidant, 11 were anxious, and the rest of 33 were undefined. Out of those, 30 scored higher on the anxious scale. However, as the author advises against this classification, the analysis was performed on the participants' scores on the anxious and avoidant scale (Fraley, 2012).

The scores of the measurements were followed by correlation analysis and linear regression to have a better understanding of the overall trends in the data and to check the consistency with the literature. To answer the research question and to analyze the relationship between the three together, mediation analysis was used. For this, communication patterns were used as the mediating variable to determine if they partially explain the effect of attachment styles (independent variable) on emotion regulation strategies (dependent variable). Gender differences were also calculated to check for potential variations.

## Results

Pearson's correlation coefficient was used across the variables to check for the associations between the variables. The results revealed significant correlations between attachment styles, communication patterns and expressive suppression as a method of emotion regulation (all  $p < .001$ ). These can be seen in Table 1. However, no significant correlation was found with cognitive reappraisal.

Both an anxious attachment and an avoidant attachment were positively correlated with expressive suppression (anxious:  $r = .469$ ; avoidant:  $r = .562$ ). Both anxious and avoidant attachment styles exhibited positive correlations with self-demand/partner-withdraw (anxious:  $r = .391$ ; avoidant:  $r = .369$ ) and partner-demand/self-withdraw (anxious:  $r = .366$ ; avoidant:  $r =$

.435) communication patterns. Conversely, both attachment styles were negatively correlated with constructive communication (anxious:  $r = -.358$ ; avoidant:  $r = -.473$ ).

There were also significant correlations found between expressive suppression and the communication patterns: positive with partner-demand self-withdraw ( $r = .471$ ) and negative with constructive communication ( $r = -.425$ ). These results can be further visualized in the scatter plots represented in Figure 3.

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Anxious attachment	-					
2. Avoidant attachment	/	-				
3. Constructive communication	<b>-0.357596</b>	<b>-0.473094</b>	-			
4. Partner-demand/self-withdraw	<b>0.366119</b>	<b>0.435242</b>	/	-		
5. Self-demand/partner-withdraw	<b>0.390750</b>	<b>0.369458</b>	/	/	-	
6. Cognitive reappraisal	-0.118161	-0.118440	0.062227	-0.074568	-0.071173	-
7. Expressive suppression	<b>0.469092</b>	<b>0.562183</b>	<b>-0.425046</b>	<b>0.470627</b>	0.232032	/

*Table 1 Correlations between Attachment Styles, Expressive Suppression, and Communication Patterns (n = 87). All correlations are statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ). Bolded values indicate moderate correlations. Missing values (/) represent correlations between members of the same category which are not relevant in the scope of the project.*

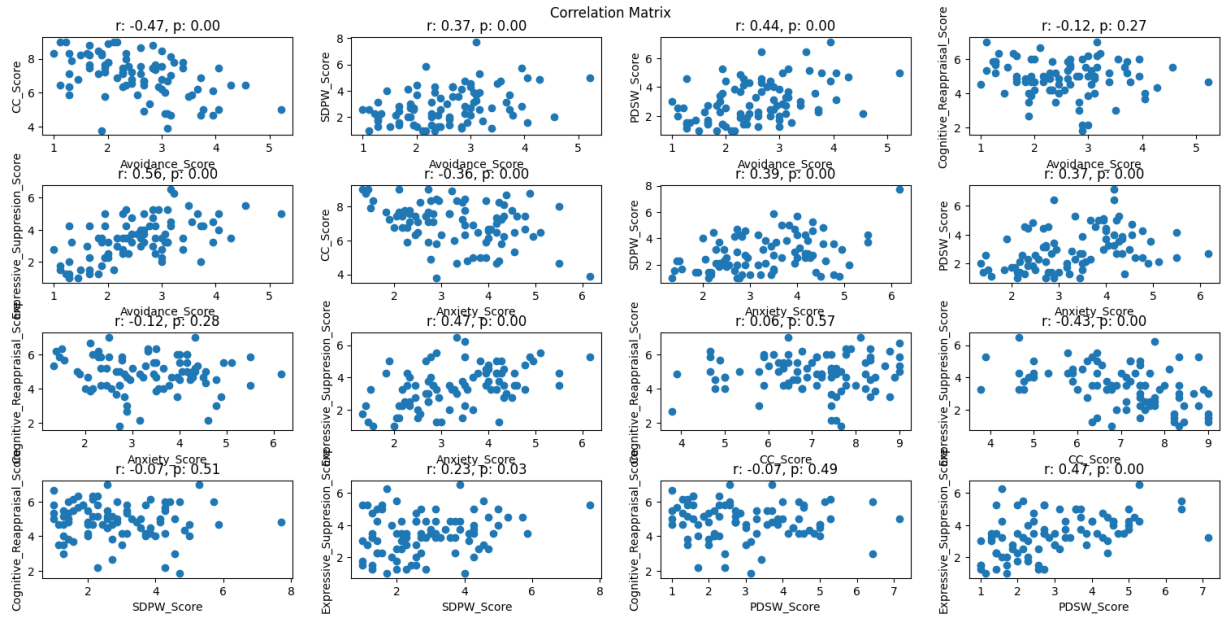


Figure 3 Correlations between the variables

Linear regression was conducted to further explore the relationships between communication patterns and emotion regulation strategies, as well as to validate the previously established associations with attachment styles. The results can be partially seen in the scatter plots in Figure 4, where the weaker associations were excluded. The analysis showed no strong evidence for a linear relationship between cognitive reappraisal and any of the communication styles in this dataset, with very low R-squared values for all ( $\sim .00$ ) and non-significant F statistics for all ( $p > .05$ ). In contrast, expressive suppression has proved to be a better predictor in the relationship with communication styles. There is a weak positive relation with self-demand/partner-withdraw ( $R\text{-squared} = .054$ ,  $p\text{-value} < .03$ ), a moderate negative with constructive communication ( $R\text{-squared} = -.181$ ,  $p\text{-value} < .00$ ), and a moderate positive with partner-demand/self-withdraw ( $R\text{-squared} = .221$ ,  $p\text{-value} < .00$ ).

For further validation of the correlations, the relationships with attachment were explored as well. While there were again no significant results regarding cognitive reappraisal with attachment ( $R\text{-squared values} < .01$ ,  $p\text{-values} > .05$ ), expressive suppression showed statistically

significant results with both anxiety ( $R$ -squared = .22,  $p$ -value < .00) and avoidance ( $R$ -squared = .31,  $p$ -value < .00). Thus, higher insecure attachment is linked to suppression of emotions.

Regarding attachment and communication patterns, an avoidant attachment had significant results with all communication patterns ( $p$ -value < .00). It showed a negative relationship with constructive communication ( $R$ -squared = .22) and positive with self-demand/partner-withdraw and partner-demand/self-withdraw ( $R$ -squared = .13;  $R$ -squared = .18). Anxious attachment showed weaker relationships, with  $R$ -squared values around .14, and  $p$ -values < .00.

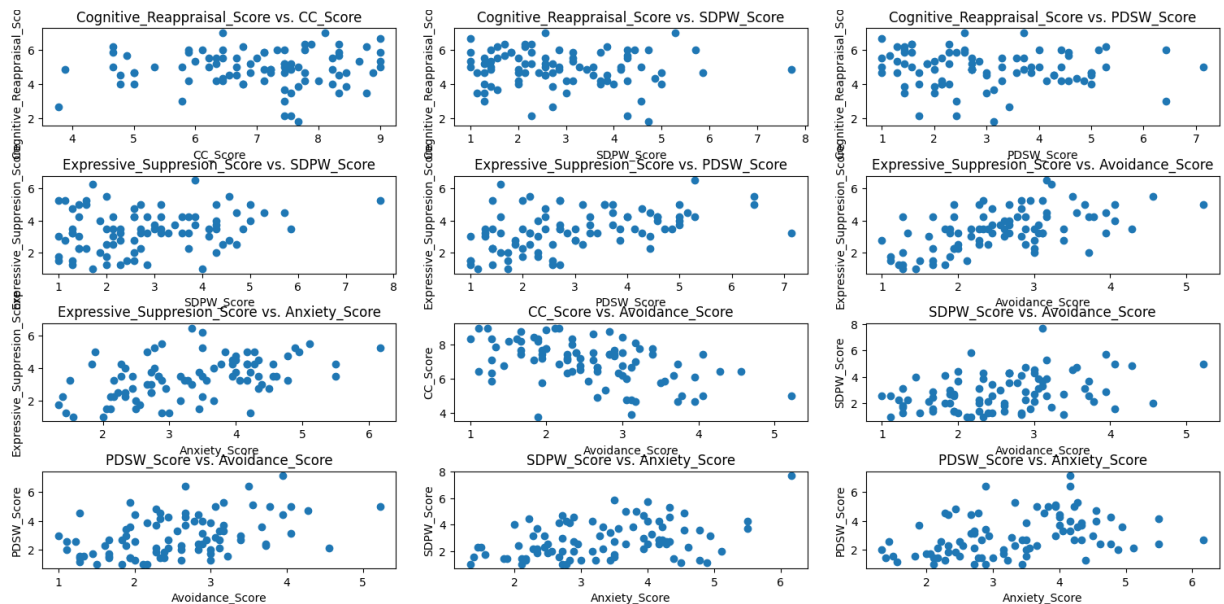


Figure 4 Scatter plots for linear regression

The mediation analysis explored the role of communication patterns during conflict as a mediator between attachment styles and emotion regulation strategies. Bootstrapping was used to examine these indirect effects. Results revealed significant mediation effects in certain combinations. Specifically, constructive communication significantly mediated the relationship between an anxious attachment style and the employment of expressive suppression, with a

negative indirect effect observed, visible in Figure 5 (Bootstrap Indirect Effect = -0.15, 95% CI [-0.259, -0.061]).

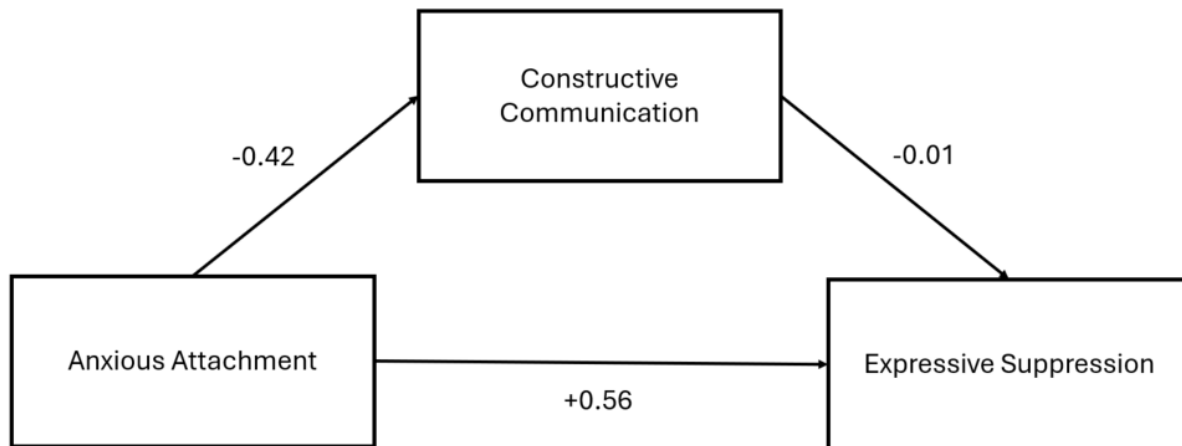


Figure 5

Additionally, partner-demand/self-withdraw exhibited a significant positive mediation effect on the relationship between anxious and expressive suppression, visible in Figure 6 (Bootstrap Indirect Effect = 0.16, 95% CI [0.069, 0.251]) and avoidant and expressive suppression, visible in Figure 7 (Bootstrap Indirect Effect = 0.12, 95% CI [0.043, 0.216]).

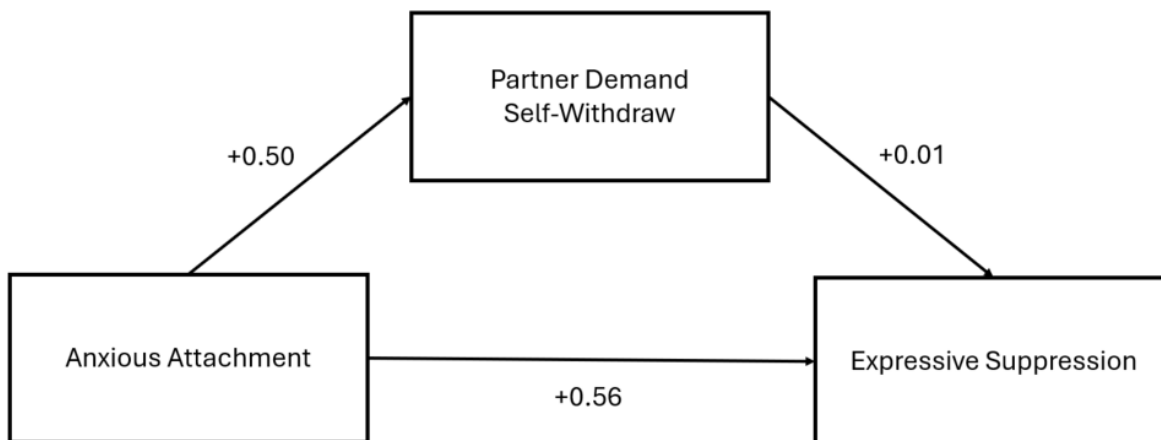


Figure 6

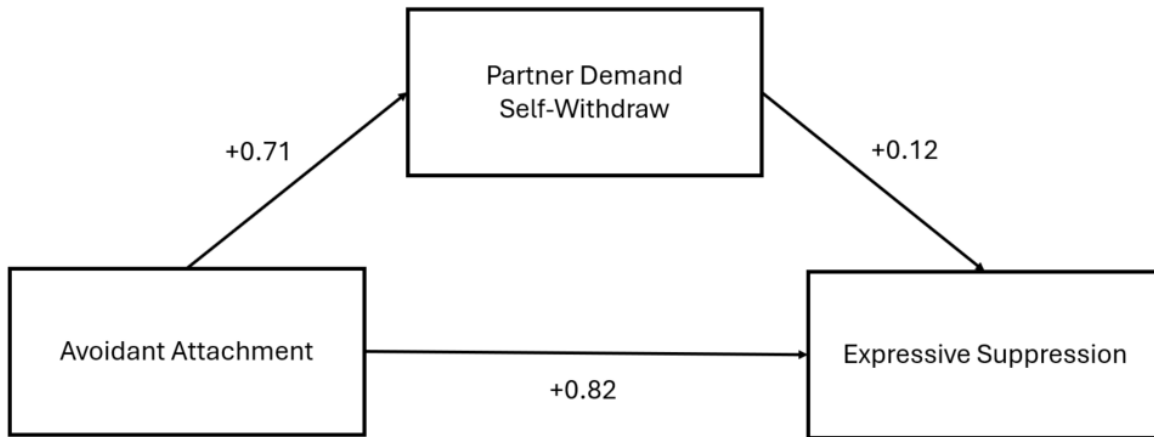


Figure 7

When looking at the gender differences, women had higher means for all variables, but one, namely partner-demand, self-withdraw (male 3.34, female 2.72).

### Discussion

The aim of the present study was to analyze the relationship between attachment styles, communication patterns in conflict and emotion regulation strategies in romantic relationships. Previous studies have shown an association between attachment styles with each communication pattern and emotion regulation strategies. As in conflict various feelings can arise, one may regulate their emotions. Thus, an initial assumption was made that there ought to be a relationship between the three.

The study confirms previous assumptions on the relationship between attachment and communication (Bonache et. al, 2019; Bretaña, 2020; Fišerová, 2021) and attachment and emotion regulation strategies (Winterheld, 2016; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019; Clear et al., 2020). Furthermore, it provides deeper insights and contributes to a better understanding of the associations between the three and a more complete and more complex grasp of attachment theory.

Several statistical methods were employed to analyze the data. Correlation analysis was used to investigate the association between the variables. It confirmed previous research that showed the relationship between attachment and communication patterns as well as attachment and emotion regulation strategies.

The maladaptive communication strategies, characterized by demand and withdrawal were positively correlated with both anxious and avoidant attachment. Conversely, the two were negatively correlated with constructive communication. These findings suggest that individuals with anxious or avoidant attachment styles tend to engage in communication patterns characterized by self-withdrawal, while also struggling with more constructive forms of communication. These results are also seen in previous studies, where anxiously attached individuals are prone to use maladaptive strategies (Paquette et al., 2020) and avoidants have a higher tendency to withdraw (Creasey et al., 1999; Bretaña, 2020).

The two insecure attachment forms were positively correlated with the suppression of emotions. This suggests that individuals with more anxious or avoidant attachment styles tend to suppress their emotions more frequently. The current results align with prior research that highlighted the use of deactivating strategies in avoidantly attached individuals (Brandão, 2019, Messina et al., 2023). They also further confirm findings regarding those anxiously attached, which tend to go rapidly in negative states and stay there extensively (Mikulincer & Orbach, 1995, Vrtička et al., 2012). However, no significant correlation was found with cognitive reappraisal. Previous studies showed a negative correlation between cognitive reappraisal and insecure attachments (Mikulincer et al., 2003; Read et al., 2018; Brandão, 2023). Vrtička et al. (2012) confirmed these results through brain scans, results that are compatible with the defensive use of maladaptive strategies in avoidants and the worrying nature of anxiously

attached individuals. It might be due to the small sample that the present study was not able to replicate these results.

There was also found a correlation between communication patterns and emotion regulation strategies not previously shown, specifically between the partner-demand/self-withdraw pattern and expressive suppression. This makes sense as suppression of emotions can be an aspect of the withdrawal pattern, however further research is needed to confirm this assumption. Although Crenshaw et al. (2017) have mentioned that expression of feelings is a characteristic of constructive communication, nothing was mentioned about the expression or suppression of emotions in relation to the partner-demand/self-withdraw. Thus, the findings suggest a novel insight into how expressive suppression may be linked to less constructive communication patterns, highlighting the need for further research to explore the dynamics of emotion regulation within different communication contexts in relationships

Linear regression was used to provide more robust information regarding the relationships. The results were mostly consistent with the ones from the correlation analysis and previous findings, although the relationship between an anxious attachment style was weaker concerning the communication patterns. A weak association was also shown between self-demand/partner-withdraw and expressive suppression which was not visible with the correlation analysis.

All communication patterns had significant results when analyzed with avoidant attachment. The maladaptive ones showed positive relationships while the adaptive one showed a negative relationship. Interestingly, despite the good correlation between an anxious attachment and the communication patterns, linear regression showed weaker relationships.

Regarding the relationship between emotion regulation strategies and communication patterns in conflict, there were no strong results for cognitive reappraisal. This shows once again that for better results regarding this emotion regulation strategy a bigger sample might be needed. In contrast, suppression of emotions proved to be a better predictor for all communication styles, positive with the demand/withdrawal patterns, and negative with the constructive pattern.

These findings suggest the relationship between self-demand/partner-withdraw with expressive suppression needs further investigation. Moreover, they re-confirm the negative association between this emotion regulation strategy and constructive communication. These show that suppressing emotions can lead to less constructive communication, and a strong relationship with the self-withdraw pattern, highlighting how one that chooses to suppress the emotions has the predisposition to withdraw in conflict.

The results were statistically significant and although the R-squared values were low, previous research confirmed that when it comes to studying human behavior lower values do not pose a problem. The reason behind is that predicting such patterns can be a more difficult task compared to a physical process.

In the light of the results regarding cognitive reappraisal for both correlation analysis and linear regression, future studies might benefit from bigger samples to better assess these relationships, as previous study found significant results. Looking at neural correlates Messina (2023) highlighted in a review of the literature that several studies have shown that for those insecurely attached are associated with deficits in the brain regions involved in emotion regulation.

Although the r-squared values are low, Ozili (2022) has shown that when it comes to social science the purpose is to understand how certain factors influence the outcome of interest, rather than predict human behavior.

The results of the analysis confirm the initial assumption as well by revealing the mediation role of communication patterns on the relationship between attachment styles and emotion regulation strategies. Specifically, the partner-demand self-withdraw communication pattern was found to mediate the association between avoidant and expressive suppression, and between anxious and expressive suppression. This suggests that communication patterns act as a bridge between attachment styles and how individuals manage emotions during conflict. An anxious individual, with fear of rejection and abandonment, may choose to withdraw in conflict and suppress their emotions. The same goes for avoidants, but from a fear of intimacy and hesitation to share emotions. Thus, insecure individuals who primarily engage in the pattern of partner-demand/self-withdraw are more likely to suppress their emotions. Conversely, a constructive communication pattern showed a negative mediation effect, indicating that anxiously attached individuals who communicate constructively are less likely to resort to expressive suppression to regulate their emotions.

Specifically, constructive communication significantly mediated the relationship between an anxious attachment style and the employment of expressive suppression, with a negative indirect effect observed. This suggests that for individuals with higher anxiety scores, engaging in constructive communication may be associated with less reliance on expressive suppression as an emotion regulation strategy. Additionally, partner-demand/self-withdraw exhibited a significant positive mediation effect on the relationship between anxious and expressive suppression and avoidant and expressive suppression. The results showed that regardless of the attachment style, those who engage in self-withdraw during conflict also suppress their

emotions. However, mediation effects were not statistically significant in other combinations, indicating a nuanced relationship between attachment styles, communication patterns during conflict, and emotion regulation strategies. Further analysis is needed to explore the specific mechanisms underlying this indirect effect.

In the case of cognitive reappraisal as an emotion regulation strategy and self-demand/partner-withdraw pattern of communication, no significant relationships were found. It may be that insecurely attached individuals tend to engage less in cognitive reappraisal. Although the present sample did not show this, previous studies found negative associations between cognitive reappraisal and anxious and avoidant attached individuals (Read et al., 2018; Brandão, 2023). As for the self-demand/partner-withdraw communication pattern, the withdrawal tendency of avoidants is a given as research has shown. However, when it comes to anxious individuals a paradox was shown such that anxious people also tend to be demanding and reactive in conflict due to their higher levels of distress and perception of conflict as a threat (Campbell et al., 2005; MacDonald et al., 2019). This highlights the complexity of attachment styles and the possibility of context-dependent communication patterns. Moreover, gender differences have shown that women have the tendency to react while men have the tendency to avoid. These findings were proved by the present research as well, with higher means for demand in women, and higher means for withdraw in men.

Interestingly, women had higher means in both anxiety and avoidance scores, unlike previous research (MacDonald, 2019). Moreover, besides the partner-demand/self-withdraw pattern, women registered higher means in all other dimensions studied. This suggests that further research could benefit from a bigger sample, ideally with an equal ratio of men and women. As there were only two individuals that identify themselves as third-binary/non-gender,

there were no statistics calculated. Unforeseen, several participants refrained from answering the question regarding their age (34%), making it difficult to assess differences based on age.

The findings offer valuable insight into the complex interplay between attachment, communication, and emotion regulation in romantic relationships. These suggest that the three are not only correlated and that there is a relation between the three that was not previously shown or investigated. Statistical analysis was used to investigate and provide evidence for the mediation relationship while the existing research supports the validity of the results (Winterheld, 2016; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019; Bretaña, 2020; Fišerová, 2021). The findings align with previous research demonstrating the associations between the variables. They contribute to the growing body of literature examining relational dynamics by confirming and expanding these connections. It provides a more comprehensive and nuanced perspective on the complex interplay between interpersonal processes and emotional functioning within romantic relationships.

### ***Limitations***

There are a few limitations concerning this research. First, it makes use only of self-reported measures, which may involve response biases and social desirability effects. However, efforts were made to mitigate this limitation by assuring the participants of the confidentiality of their responses and emphasizing the importance of their honesty. Secondly, the use of the short version of the revised questionnaire used to assess the communication patterns lacks precedent in previous research. Despite this, the items were selected based on the authors' recommendation to ensure the validity of the content (Crenshaw et al., 2017). Moreover, in their analysis, although they presented more questions, they only investigated the items that are used for the short version. A third limitation is posed by the fact that the ECR-R measures attachment on the scales of avoidance and anxiety and in research secureness is determined based on a low

score in both dimensions (avoidance and anxiety) rather than a dimension for it (secureness) (Fraley, 2012).

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between attachment styles, communication patterns in conflict, and emotion regulation strategies in romantic relationships. It confirmed previous research on the association between attachment and the two other variables and demonstrated the mediating role of communication patterns on the relationship between attachment style and emotion regulation strategies.

This finding highlights the importance of communication patterns in conflict and provides insight into the mechanisms behind emotion regulation. Furthermore, it can inform theoretical frameworks and have practical applications. An example could be for couples with insecurely attached partners as they might benefit from interventions focusing on improving emotion regulation or communication patterns, particularly reducing self-withdrawal, and fostering constructive communication.

While self-reported measures provided valuable data, future research could utilize mixed methods approaches, such as combining surveys with observational data, to gain a more comprehensive picture. Additionally, further validation of the used communication questionnaire would strengthen its reliability. Beyond methodological improvements, future research could explore longitudinal studies, experimental designs on interventions, as well as investigate potential mediators that may influence the relationship observed in this study.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

The experiences in close relationships – revised questionnaire (ECR-R)

#### Reference

Fraley, R. C., Waller, N. G., & Brennan, K. A. (2000). An item-response theory analysis of self-report measures of adult attachment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78, 350-365.

#### Description of Measure

A 36-item measure of adult attachment style. The ECR-R measures individuals on two subscales of attachment: Avoidance and Anxiety. In general Avoidant individuals find discomfort with intimacy and seek independence, whereas Anxious individuals tend to fear rejection and abandonment.

#### Scale

The statements below concern how you feel in emotionally intimate relationships. We are interested in how you generally experience relationships, not just in what is happening in a current relationship. Respond to each statement by choosing a number to indicate how much you agree or disagree with the statement.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly disagree			Neutral			Strongly agree

1. I'm afraid that I will lose my partner's love.
2. I often worry that my partner will not want to stay with me.
3. I often worry that my partner doesn't really love me.
4. I worry that romantic partners won't care about me as much as I care about them.
5. I often wish that my partner's feelings for me were as strong as my feelings for him or her.
6. I worry a lot about my relationships.
7. When my partner is out of sight, I worry that he or she might become interested in someone else.
8. When I show my feelings for romantic partners, I'm afraid they will not feel the same about me.
9. I rarely worry about my partner leaving me.
10. My romantic partner makes me doubt myself.
11. I do not often worry about being abandoned.
12. I find that my partner(s) don't want to get as close as I would like.
13. Sometimes romantic partners change their feelings about me for no apparent reason.
14. My desire to be very close sometimes scares people away.
15. I'm afraid that once a romantic partner gets to know me, he or she won't like who I really am.
16. It makes me mad that I don't get the affection and support I need from my partner.
17. I worry that I won't measure up to other people.
18. My partner only seems to notice me when I'm angry.
19. I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down.
20. I feel comfortable sharing my private thoughts and feelings with my partner.
21. I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on romantic partners.

22. I am very comfortable being close to romantic partners.
23. I don't feel comfortable opening up to romantic partners.
24. I prefer not to be too close to romantic partners.
25. I get uncomfortable when a romantic partner wants to be very close.
26. I find it relatively easy to get close to my partner.
27. It's not difficult for me to get close to my partner.
28. I usually discuss my problems and concerns with my partner.
29. It helps to turn to my romantic partner in times of need.
30. I tell my partner just about everything.
31. I talk things over with my partner.
32. I am nervous when partners get too close to me.
33. I feel comfortable depending on romantic partners.
34. I find it easy to depend on romantic partners.
35. It's easy for me to be affectionate with my partner.
36. My partner really understands me and my needs.

### **Scoring**

Scoring Information: The first 18 items above comprise the attachment-related anxiety scale. Items 19 – 36 comprise the attachment-related avoidance scale. In real research, the order in which these items are presented should be randomized. To obtain a score for attachment-related anxiety, please average a person's responses to items 1 – 18. However, because items 9 and 11 are "reverse keyed" (i.e., high numbers represent low anxiety rather than high anxiety), you'll need to reverse the answers to those questions before averaging the responses. (If someone answers with a "6" to item 9, you'll need to re-key it as a 2 before averaging.) To obtain a score for attachment-related avoidance, please average a person's responses to items 19 – 36. Items

20, 22, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 33, 34, 35, and 36 will need to be reverse keyed before you compute this average.

## Appendix B

### Communication Patterns Questionnaire – Revised CPQ-R

#### Reference

Crenshaw, A.O., Christensen, A., Baucom, D.H., Epstein, N.B., & Baucom, B.R.W. (2017). Revised scoring and improved reliability for the Communication Patterns Questionnaire. *Psychological Assessment*, 29, 913-925.

#### Description of Measure

The Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ-R) is a 35-item self-assessment of spouses' perceptions of marital interactions.

#### Scale

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Very unlikely				Neutral				Very likely

We are interested in how you and your partner typically deal with problems in your relationship.

Please rate each item on a scale of 1 (= very unlikely) to 9 (= very likely).

A. WHEN SOME PROBLEM IN MY RELATIONSHIP ARISES,

1. Both my partner and I avoid discussing the problem.
2. Both my partner and I try to discuss the problem.
3. I try to start a discussion while my partner tries to avoid a discussion.
4. My partner tries to start a discussion while I try to avoid a discussion.

B. DURING A DISCUSSION OF A RELATIONSHIP PROBLEM,

1. Both my partner and I express our feelings to each other.
2. Both my partner and I suggest possible solutions and compromises.
3. I nag and demand while my partner withdraws, becomes silent, or refuses to discuss the matter further.
4. My partner nags and demands while I withdraw, become silent, or refuse to discuss the matter further.
5. I criticize while my partner defends himself or herself.
6. My partner criticizes while I defend myself.
7. I pressure my partner to take some action or stop some action, while my partner resists.
8. My partner pressures me to take some action or stop some action, while I resist.
9. I threaten negative consequences and my partner gives in or backs down.
10. My partner threatens negative consequences and I give in or back down.
11. I call my partner names, swear at my partner, or attack my partner's character.
12. My partner calls me names, swears at me, or attacks my character.

C. AFTER A DISCUSSION OF A RELATIONSHIP PROBLEM,

1. Both my partner and I feel understood by each other.
2. Both my partner and I withdraw from each other.
3. Both my partner and I feel that the problem has been solved.
4. Neither I nor my partner is giving to the other.
5. Both my partner and I try to be especially nice to each other.
6. I pressure my partner to apologize or promise to do better, while my partner resists.
7. My partner pressures me to apologize or promise to do better, while I resist.

## Appendix C

### Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ)

#### Reference

Gross, J.J., & John, O.P. (2003). Individual differences in two emotion regulation processes: Implications for affect, relationships, and well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85, 348-362.

#### Description of Measure

A 10-item scale designed to measure respondents' tendency to regulate their emotions in two ways: (1) Cognitive Reappraisal and (2) Expressive Suppression. Respondents answer each item on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Note: the authors request that researchers do not change the order of the items.

#### Scale

Instructions and Items: We would like to ask you some questions about your emotional life, in particular, how you control (that is, regulate and manage) your emotions. The questions below involve two distinct aspects of your emotional life. One is your emotional experience, or what you feel like inside. The other is your emotional expression, or how you show your emotions in the way you talk, gesture, or behave. Although some of the following questions may seem similar to one another, they differ in important ways. For each item, please answer using the following scale:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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Strongly disagree			Neutral			Strongly agree
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1. When I want to feel more positive emotions (such as joy or amusement), I change what I'm thinking about.
2. I keep my emotions to myself.
3. When I want to feel less negative emotion (such as sadness or anger), I change what I'm thinking about.
4. When I am feeling positive emotions, I am careful not to express them.
5. When I'm faced with a stressful situation, I make myself think about it in a way that helps me stay calm.
6. I control my emotions by not expressing them.
7. When I want to feel more positive emotions, I change the way I'm thinking about the situation.
8. I control my emotions by changing the way I think about the situation I'm in.
9. When I am feeling negative emotions, I make sure not to express them.
10. When I want to feel less negative emotion, I change the way I'm thinking about the situation.

### Scoring

Items 1, 3, 5, 7, 8, 10 make up the Cognitive Reappraisal facet. Items 2, 4, 6, 9 make up the Expressive Suppression facet. Scoring is kept continuous. Each facet's scoring is kept separate.