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# Modeling the Effects of Childhood Emotional Neglect on Adult Romantic Relationship Quality through Attachment Avoidance and Emotional Intimacy

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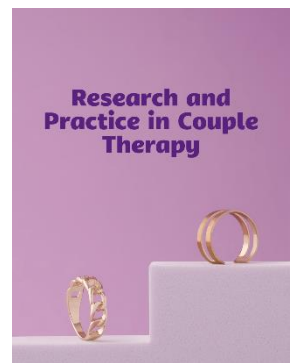
## ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to examine the direct and indirect effects of childhood emotional neglect on adult romantic relationship quality through the mediating roles of attachment avoidance and emotional intimacy among adults involved in committed romantic relationships. This cross-sectional correlational study was conducted among 524 adults residing in Canada who were currently involved in committed romantic relationships. Participants were recruited from major Canadian urban centers through online platforms, community organizations, and university research networks. Data were collected using the Emotional Neglect subscale of the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire–Short Form (CTQ-SF), the Avoidance dimension of the Experiences in Close Relationships–Revised Questionnaire (ECR-R), the Emotional Intimacy Scale (EIS), and the Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI-32). Structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed to examine the hypothesized relationships among childhood emotional neglect, attachment avoidance, emotional intimacy, and romantic relationship quality. Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to evaluate the measurement model, and mediation effects were assessed using a bias-corrected bootstrap procedure with 5,000 resamples. Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS version 29 and AMOS version 29. The structural equation model demonstrated excellent fit to the data ( $\chi^2/df = 2.08$ , CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.95, GFI = 0.92, AGFI = 0.90, RMSEA = 0.045, SRMR = 0.046). Childhood emotional neglect significantly predicted attachment avoidance ( $\beta = 0.61$ ,  $p < .001$ ), emotional intimacy ( $\beta = -0.18$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and romantic relationship quality ( $\beta = -0.15$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Attachment avoidance significantly predicted emotional intimacy ( $\beta = -0.63$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and relationship quality ( $\beta = -0.36$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Emotional intimacy positively predicted romantic relationship quality ( $\beta = 0.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Bootstrap analyses revealed significant indirect effects of childhood emotional neglect on emotional intimacy through attachment avoidance ( $\beta = -0.38$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and on relationship quality through both attachment avoidance and emotional intimacy ( $\beta = -0.21$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The model explained 37% of the variance in attachment avoidance, 54% of the variance in emotional intimacy, and 69% of the variance in romantic relationship quality. The findings indicate that childhood emotional neglect exerts enduring negative effects on adult romantic relationship quality both directly and indirectly through increased attachment avoidance and reduced emotional intimacy. Attachment avoidance emerged as a key developmental mechanism linking early emotional deprivation to difficulties in emotional closeness and relationship functioning. Emotional intimacy served as a significant protective factor associated with higher relationship quality. These results highlight the importance of attachment-based and intimacy-focused interventions for individuals with histories of childhood emotional neglect and contribute to a deeper understanding of the developmental pathways connecting early adverse experiences to adult romantic relationship outcomes.

**Keywords:** Childhood Emotional Neglect; Romantic Relationship Quality; Attachment Avoidance; Emotional Intimacy; Attachment Theory

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## Introduction

Childhood experiences play a foundational role in shaping emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal development across the lifespan. Developmental theories consistently emphasize that early interactions with caregivers create internal working models that guide individuals' expectations, beliefs, and behaviors within future interpersonal relationships. Emotional neglect, characterized by a persistent failure of caregivers to provide adequate emotional support, validation, affection, and responsiveness, represents one of the most prevalent yet often overlooked forms of childhood maltreatment. Unlike physical abuse or overt forms of victimization, emotional neglect involves the absence of necessary emotional experiences and supportive caregiving, making its effects less visible but potentially equally detrimental. Research has increasingly demonstrated that childhood emotional neglect can disrupt emotional regulation, self-concept development, interpersonal trust, and relational competence, thereby influencing psychological functioning well into adulthood (Malik et al., 2021; Panagou & MacBeth, 2022; Pfaff & Schlarb, 2021). Emerging evidence further suggests that the consequences of childhood emotional neglect extend beyond individual psychopathology and significantly affect the quality and stability of adult romantic relationships, which constitute one of the most important domains of psychosocial functioning during adulthood (Price et al., 2025; River et al., 2021; Rokach & MacFarlane, 2021). Understanding the mechanisms through which early emotional deprivation influences later romantic outcomes remains an important objective within developmental, clinical, and relationship research.

Romantic relationship quality has been identified as a major determinant of psychological well-being, physical health, life satisfaction, and overall quality of life. High-quality romantic relationships are characterized by mutual trust, emotional support, intimacy, effective communication, and relationship satisfaction, whereas poor-quality relationships are associated with psychological distress, loneliness, depression, conflict, and relational instability (He, 2024; Zhou, 2024). Researchers have increasingly sought to identify childhood antecedents that contribute to variations in adult romantic functioning. A growing body of evidence indicates that adverse childhood experiences, particularly those involving emotional neglect and maltreatment, are associated with lower relationship satisfaction, greater interpersonal conflict, impaired communication, and increased vulnerability to relationship dissolution (Fitzgerald et al., 2024; Sokar, 2024; Zamir, 2021). Childhood emotional neglect deprives children of opportunities to develop secure emotional bonds and adaptive interpersonal schemas, which may later manifest as difficulties establishing closeness and maintaining satisfying romantic partnerships. Longitudinal and retrospective studies have consistently shown that individuals exposed to adverse relational environments during childhood often report poorer romantic relationship outcomes in adulthood compared to those raised in emotionally supportive families (Cheung & Huang, 2022; Li & Zheng, 2021; Price et al., 2025).

Attachment theory provides one of the most influential frameworks for understanding the long-term effects of childhood emotional neglect on adult relationships. According to attachment theory, repeated interactions with caregivers contribute to the formation of attachment representations that influence emotional regulation, interpersonal expectations, and relational behaviors throughout life (Malik et al., 2021). When caregivers are emotionally unavailable, rejecting, or inconsistent, children may develop insecure attachment patterns characterized by anxiety, avoidance, or disorganization. Among these patterns, attachment avoidance has received particular attention in studies examining the consequences of emotional neglect. Individuals with avoidant attachment orientations typically experience discomfort with emotional dependence, suppress attachment needs, maintain emotional distance from others, and avoid vulnerability within intimate relationships. Such tendencies may serve as adaptive responses to emotionally neglectful childhood environments but often become maladaptive in adult romantic contexts where emotional closeness and mutual reliance are essential (Höltge et al., 2022; Papalia & Widom, 2023; Whittington, 2023).

Research has repeatedly demonstrated that childhood maltreatment is associated with higher levels of attachment avoidance, which subsequently predicts poorer relationship quality, increased conflict, and reduced intimacy in adulthood (Doorn et al., 2024; Quan et al., 2025; Wrobel et al., 2022).

The role of attachment avoidance as a mediating mechanism linking childhood adversity to adult relational outcomes has received increasing empirical support. Studies have shown that individuals exposed to childhood maltreatment are more likely to develop avoidant attachment styles due to repeated experiences of emotional unavailability and rejection by caregivers (Höltge et al., 2022; Papalia & Widom, 2023). These avoidant tendencies may persist into adulthood, affecting romantic relationships through reduced trust, emotional disengagement, fear of dependency, and reluctance to disclose personal emotions. For example, research has demonstrated that attachment insecurity mediates associations between childhood trauma and a wide range of adult psychosocial outcomes, including depression, loneliness, interpersonal difficulties, self-harm, and relationship dysfunction (Jalilian et al., 2023b; Stagaki et al., 2022; Wrobel et al., 2022). Similarly, studies focusing specifically on romantic relationships have found that attachment avoidance serves as a key pathway through which childhood maltreatment predicts lower relationship satisfaction and greater relational distress (Doorn et al., 2024; Kara & Şahin, 2022; Quan et al., 2025). These findings suggest that attachment avoidance may represent a crucial psychological mechanism connecting childhood emotional neglect to later romantic relationship quality.

Another construct that appears central to understanding the relational consequences of childhood emotional neglect is emotional intimacy. Emotional intimacy refers to the subjective experience of closeness, trust, emotional disclosure, acceptance, and mutual understanding between romantic partners. It is widely recognized as a fundamental component of healthy and satisfying romantic relationships. Emotional intimacy enables partners to communicate openly, provide support during stressful experiences, and develop secure emotional bonds that enhance relationship stability and satisfaction (He, 2024; Tadros, 2024). However, the development of emotional intimacy may be significantly compromised among individuals who experienced emotional neglect during childhood. Because emotionally neglected children often learn that emotional needs are ignored or invalidated, they may develop expectations that others are unavailable, unresponsive, or untrustworthy. These expectations can reduce willingness to engage in emotional self-disclosure and vulnerability, thereby hindering the formation of intimate romantic connections in adulthood (Aracı-İyiyaydın et al., 2023; Fitzgerald et al., 2024; Sun et al., 2021).

Empirical evidence supports the association between childhood emotional adversity and deficits in emotional intimacy. Studies examining survivors of childhood maltreatment have reported lower levels of emotional closeness, trust, relationship satisfaction, and perceived partner responsiveness compared to non-maltreated individuals (Rokach & MacFarlane, 2021; Zamir, 2021). Emotional neglect appears particularly relevant because it directly interferes with the development of emotional awareness, emotional expression, and interpersonal trust, all of which are essential for intimacy formation. Research has further indicated that attachment insecurity may undermine emotional intimacy by promoting avoidance of emotional vulnerability and interpersonal closeness (Tadros, 2024; Tolmacz et al., 2022). Thus, emotional intimacy may function as an additional mediator linking childhood emotional neglect and attachment avoidance to romantic relationship quality. Individuals with histories of emotional neglect may develop avoidant attachment orientations that subsequently reduce emotional intimacy, ultimately contributing to poorer relationship outcomes.

Theoretical and empirical work also highlights the broader developmental context through which childhood experiences shape adult relationships. Family-of-origin experiences influence relational attitudes, interpersonal expectations, conflict management strategies, and patterns of emotional engagement throughout development (River et al., 2021; Strickland & Mosley, 2022). Exposure to dysfunctional family environments, parental conflict, emotional rejection, and inconsistent caregiving has been linked to difficulties establishing healthy romantic relationships during adolescence and adulthood (Cheung

& Huang, 2022; Tolmacz et al., 2022). Studies examining parental involvement and attachment development have shown that emotionally supportive parenting fosters secure attachment, whereas neglectful parenting predicts attachment insecurity and emotional difficulties later in life (K. & K., 2024; Li & Zheng, 2021). Moreover, experiences of rejection from significant others may reinforce maladaptive relational beliefs and increase vulnerability to loneliness, interpersonal anxiety, and relational dissatisfaction (Aracı-İyiyaydın et al., 2023; Jalilian et al., 2023a, 2023b). These findings underscore the importance of investigating developmental pathways connecting childhood emotional experiences with adult romantic functioning.

Recent research has increasingly adopted mediation models to identify mechanisms that explain how childhood adversity affects later interpersonal outcomes. Studies have demonstrated the mediating roles of attachment insecurity, maladaptive schemas, mentalizing deficits, social support, resilience, and emotional regulation processes in associations between childhood maltreatment and adult adjustment (Genç, 2025; Panagou & MacBeth, 2022; Stagaki et al., 2022). For instance, attachment insecurity has been shown to mediate links between childhood trauma and depression, violent behavior, self-harm, loneliness, and partner aggression (Papalia & Widom, 2023; South et al., 2022; Wrobel et al., 2022). Similarly, social support and attachment processes have been identified as important mediators between childhood trauma and romantic relationship satisfaction (Quan et al., 2025). Research examining marital relationships has also found that attachment styles mediate associations between childhood trauma, relational resilience, marital self-efficacy, and relationship quality (Kara & Şahin, 2022; Sokar, 2024). Nevertheless, despite these advances, relatively few studies have simultaneously examined attachment avoidance and emotional intimacy within a unified structural model focused specifically on childhood emotional neglect and adult romantic relationship quality.

The importance of examining emotional neglect separately from broader categories of childhood maltreatment should also be emphasized. Emotional neglect represents a unique developmental risk factor because it reflects the chronic absence of emotional nurturance rather than the presence of overt abuse. Emerging evidence suggests that emotional neglect may exert particularly strong effects on attachment development, interpersonal trust, and emotional functioning because it directly undermines children's fundamental needs for emotional connection and validation (Fitzgerald et al., 2024; Sun et al., 2021). Furthermore, intergenerational studies have highlighted the long-term relational consequences of adverse childhood experiences, demonstrating how early emotional deprivation may influence relational patterns across generations (Langevin et al., 2025; Langevin et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2024). Systematic reviews have similarly concluded that childhood experiences significantly shape adult intimate relationships through multiple psychological and interpersonal pathways, although additional research is needed to clarify the specific mechanisms involved (Price et al., 2025; Zamir, 2021).

Although substantial evidence links childhood maltreatment to adult relationship difficulties, important gaps remain in understanding how childhood emotional neglect specifically influences romantic relationship quality through sequential attachment and intimacy processes. Existing studies often focus on global measures of childhood trauma, broad indicators of relationship functioning, or isolated mediators rather than integrated developmental pathways. Consequently, there remains a need for comprehensive models that simultaneously examine attachment avoidance and emotional intimacy as mechanisms linking childhood emotional neglect to adult romantic relationship quality. Such investigations can contribute to theoretical refinement, inform attachment-based interventions, and enhance understanding of how early emotional experiences continue to influence relational functioning across the lifespan. Therefore, the present study aimed to examine the direct and indirect effects of childhood emotional neglect on adult romantic relationship quality through the mediating roles of attachment avoidance and emotional intimacy using structural equation modeling.

## Methods and Materials

### Study Design and Participants

This study employed a cross-sectional correlational design using structural equation modeling (SEM) to examine the direct and indirect effects of childhood emotional neglect on adult romantic relationship quality through the mediating roles of attachment avoidance and emotional intimacy. The study was conducted in Canada between January and June 2025 and targeted adults who were currently involved in a committed romantic relationship for a minimum duration of one year. The use of a structural equation modeling framework allowed for the simultaneous examination of multiple latent constructs and pathways, providing a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms linking early adverse emotional experiences to later relational outcomes.

The study sample consisted of 524 adults recruited from major urban centers across Canada, including Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal, Calgary, and Ottawa. Participants were selected through a combination of online advertisements, social media platforms, community organizations, and university research participation networks. Eligibility criteria included being at least 18 years of age, fluent in English, currently involved in a romantic relationship, and willing to provide informed consent. Individuals with severe cognitive impairments or those unable to complete the questionnaires independently were excluded from participation.

### Measures

Childhood emotional neglect was assessed using the Emotional Neglect subscale of the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire–Short Form (CTQ-SF), developed by Bernstein and colleagues in 2003. This subscale consists of five items designed to evaluate the extent to which individuals experienced emotional deprivation, lack of emotional support, and unmet emotional needs during childhood. Participants responded to each item on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never True) to 5 (Very Often True). Higher scores indicate greater levels of perceived childhood emotional neglect. The CTQ-SF has demonstrated strong psychometric properties across diverse populations, including satisfactory internal consistency, construct validity, and test–retest reliability. Previous studies conducted in North American samples have reported Cronbach’s alpha coefficients ranging from .78 to .92 for the emotional neglect subscale.

Attachment avoidance was measured using the Avoidance dimension of the Experiences in Close Relationships–Revised Questionnaire (ECR-R), developed by Fraley, Waller, and Brennan in 2000. The avoidance dimension consists of 18 items assessing discomfort with closeness, emotional distancing, and reluctance to depend on romantic partners. Participants rated each statement on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). Higher scores reflect greater attachment avoidance. The ECR-R is one of the most widely used measures of adult attachment and has demonstrated excellent reliability and validity across clinical and non-clinical populations. Previous research has consistently reported Cronbach’s alpha values exceeding .90 for the avoidance dimension.

Emotional intimacy was assessed using the Emotional Intimacy Scale (EIS), originally developed by Sinclair and Dowdy in 2005. The scale consists of 17 items measuring perceptions of emotional closeness, mutual understanding, trust, emotional disclosure, and connectedness within romantic relationships. Responses are recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Higher scores indicate stronger emotional intimacy between partners. The EIS has demonstrated strong convergent and discriminant validity and has been widely utilized in studies of couple functioning and relationship processes. Previous investigations have reported Cronbach’s alpha coefficients ranging from .89 to .95.

Romantic relationship quality was measured using the Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI-32), developed by Funk and Rogge in 2007. The CSI-32 consists of 32 items assessing overall relationship satisfaction, emotional fulfillment, relationship stability, conflict management, and perceived quality of the romantic partnership. Items utilize varying response formats, which are combined to produce a total relationship quality score. Higher scores indicate greater relationship satisfaction and quality. The CSI-32 has demonstrated superior sensitivity and reliability compared with earlier measures of relationship satisfaction and has consistently shown excellent psychometric properties in community and clinical samples. Previous studies have reported internal consistency coefficients above .95 and strong evidence of construct validity.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics version 29 and AMOS version 29. Initially, data were screened for missing values, outliers, and violations of statistical assumptions. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis values, were calculated for all study variables. The normality of data distributions was examined through both statistical and graphical methods. Internal consistency reliability for each instrument was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients and composite reliability indices.

Pearson correlation analyses were performed to examine bivariate relationships among childhood emotional neglect, attachment avoidance, emotional intimacy, and romantic relationship quality. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to evaluate the measurement properties of the latent constructs and to verify the adequacy of the proposed measurement model. Model fit was assessed using multiple fit indices, including the chi-square statistic ( $\chi^2$ ), comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), goodness-of-fit index (GFI), adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI), standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA).

Following confirmation of the measurement model, structural equation modeling was employed to test the hypothesized direct and indirect pathways. The structural model examined the influence of childhood emotional neglect on romantic relationship quality both directly and indirectly through attachment avoidance and emotional intimacy. Mediation effects were evaluated using the bias-corrected bootstrap procedure with 5,000 resamples and 95% confidence intervals. Indirect effects were considered statistically significant when the confidence intervals did not include zero. Statistical significance for all analyses was established at  $p < .05$ . The final model was interpreted based on both statistical significance and practical effect sizes to provide a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms linking childhood emotional neglect to adult romantic relationship functioning.

### **Findings and Results**

The final sample consisted of 524 Canadian adults currently involved in committed romantic relationships. Among the participants, 276 (52.7%) were women and 248 (47.3%) were men. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 58 years, with a mean age of 34.82 years ( $SD = 8.76$ ). Regarding educational attainment, 18.9% had completed high school, 31.7% held a college diploma, 38.4% possessed a bachelor's degree, and 11.0% had completed postgraduate education. In terms of relationship status, 72.1% were married, while 27.9% were involved in long-term committed non-marital relationships. The mean relationship duration was 7.14 years ( $SD = 5.29$ ). Participants were recruited from multiple Canadian provinces, with the largest proportions residing in Ontario (41.2%), British Columbia (18.9%), Quebec (16.4%), Alberta (12.2%), and other provinces (11.3%). Preliminary data screening revealed no substantial missing data patterns, and all variables demonstrated acceptable distributions with skewness and kurtosis values within recommended limits for structural equation modeling.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Study Variables**

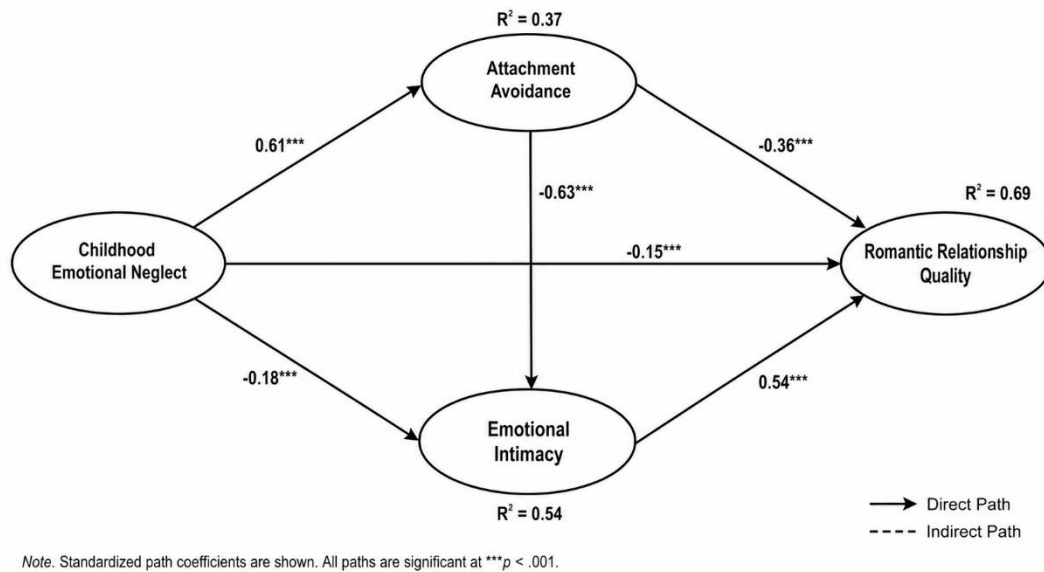
Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Childhood Emotional Neglect	14.87	4.96	1			
2. Attachment Avoidance	62.14	16.28	0.58**	1		
3. Emotional Intimacy	58.72	10.93	-0.49**	-0.67**	1	
4. Romantic Relationship Quality	114.85	21.64	-0.53**	-0.71**	0.76**	1

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients for all study variables. The findings demonstrated that childhood emotional neglect was positively associated with attachment avoidance ( $r = 0.58, p < .001$ ), indicating that individuals reporting higher levels of emotional neglect during childhood were more likely to exhibit avoidant attachment tendencies in adulthood. Childhood emotional neglect was negatively correlated with emotional intimacy ( $r = -0.49, p < .001$ ) and romantic relationship quality ( $r = -0.53, p < .001$ ), suggesting that adverse emotional experiences during childhood are associated with lower levels of closeness and poorer relationship functioning in adult romantic relationships. Attachment avoidance showed a strong negative association with emotional intimacy ( $r = -0.67, p < .001$ ) and relationship quality ( $r = -0.71, p < .001$ ). Furthermore, emotional intimacy demonstrated a strong positive relationship with romantic relationship quality ( $r = 0.76, p < .001$ ). The magnitude and direction of these correlations provided preliminary support for the proposed mediation model and justified proceeding with structural equation modeling analyses.

**Table 2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Measurement Model Fit Indices**

Fit Index	Obtained Value	Recommended Value
$\chi^2$	812.36	—
df	391	—
$\chi^2/df$	2.08	< 3.00
CFI	0.96	> 0.90
TLI	0.95	> 0.90
GFI	0.92	> 0.90
AGFI	0.90	> 0.90
SRMR	0.046	< 0.08
RMSEA	0.045	< 0.08
90% CI RMSEA	0.041–0.049	—

The results of the confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the measurement model provided an excellent fit to the observed data. The chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio ( $\chi^2/df = 2.08$ ) was well below the recommended threshold of 3.00, suggesting an acceptable level of model parsimony. Incremental fit indices were also highly satisfactory, with CFI = 0.96 and TLI = 0.95, both exceeding recommended criteria. Absolute fit indices further supported the adequacy of the measurement model, as evidenced by GFI = 0.92 and AGFI = 0.90. Error-based fit measures demonstrated minimal residual discrepancies between the observed and estimated covariance matrices, with SRMR = 0.046 and RMSEA = 0.045. Collectively, these findings confirmed that the latent constructs of childhood emotional neglect, attachment avoidance, emotional intimacy, and romantic relationship quality were adequately represented by their respective observed indicators and were suitable for structural model testing.



**Figure 1. Structural Model of the Relationships among Childhood Emotional Neglect, Attachment Avoidance, Emotional Intimacy, and Romantic Relationship Quality**

The structural model illustrated the hypothesized pathways linking childhood emotional neglect to adult romantic relationship quality through attachment avoidance and emotional intimacy. Standardized path coefficients revealed that childhood emotional neglect exerted both direct and indirect influences on relationship functioning. The strongest pathway emerged from attachment avoidance to emotional intimacy, highlighting the central role of attachment processes in shaping emotional closeness within romantic relationships. Emotional intimacy subsequently demonstrated a substantial positive effect on relationship quality, supporting its role as a key relational mechanism through which early childhood experiences influence adult romantic outcomes. Overall, the figure demonstrated a coherent and theoretically meaningful pattern of associations consistent with attachment theory and developmental relationship frameworks.

**Table 3. Standardized Direct Effects among Latent Variables**

Path	$\beta$	SE	CR	p
Childhood Emotional Neglect → Attachment Avoidance	0.61	0.05	11.92	<0.001
Childhood Emotional Neglect → Emotional Intimacy	-0.18	0.04	-4.31	<0.001
Childhood Emotional Neglect → Relationship Quality	-0.15	0.05	-3.42	<0.001
Attachment Avoidance → Emotional Intimacy	-0.63	0.04	-13.68	<0.001
Attachment Avoidance → Relationship Quality	-0.36	0.05	-7.54	<0.001
Emotional Intimacy → Relationship Quality	0.54	0.04	12.61	<0.001

The direct effects analysis demonstrated that childhood emotional neglect significantly predicted higher attachment avoidance ( $\beta = 0.61, p < .001$ ), indicating that emotionally neglected individuals were more likely to develop discomfort with interpersonal closeness and dependency. Childhood emotional neglect also had significant negative direct effects on emotional intimacy ( $\beta = -0.18, p < .001$ ) and relationship quality ( $\beta = -0.15, p < .001$ ). Attachment avoidance emerged as a powerful negative predictor of emotional intimacy ( $\beta = -0.63, p < .001$ ), suggesting that avoidant individuals tend to experience difficulties in emotional disclosure, trust, and relational closeness. In addition, attachment avoidance directly reduced relationship quality ( $\beta = -0.36, p < .001$ ). Emotional intimacy was found to be the strongest positive predictor of relationship quality ( $\beta = 0.54, p < .001$ ), indicating that emotionally connected couples reported significantly greater satisfaction and stability in their romantic relationships. These findings supported all hypothesized direct pathways within the conceptual model.

**Table 4. Bootstrap Analysis of Indirect and Total Effects**

Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect	95% Boot CI Lower	95% Boot CI Upper	p
Childhood Emotional Neglect → Emotional Intimacy (via Attachment Avoidance)	-0.38	-0.56	-0.46	-0.30	<0.001
Childhood Emotional Neglect → Relationship Quality (via Attachment Avoidance)	-0.22	-0.37	-0.29	-0.15	<0.001
Childhood Emotional Neglect → Relationship Quality (via Emotional Intimacy)	-0.10	-0.25	-0.15	-0.06	<0.001
Childhood Emotional Neglect → Relationship Quality (via Attachment Avoidance and Emotional Intimacy)	-0.21	-0.36	-0.28	-0.15	<0.001

The bootstrap mediation analysis based on 5,000 resamples revealed statistically significant indirect effects across all hypothesized pathways. Childhood emotional neglect exerted a substantial indirect negative influence on emotional intimacy through attachment avoidance ( $\beta = -0.38$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that avoidant attachment tendencies partially explained why emotionally neglected individuals reported lower levels of emotional closeness in their romantic relationships. Furthermore, childhood emotional neglect indirectly reduced relationship quality through attachment avoidance alone ( $\beta = -0.22$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and through emotional intimacy alone ( $\beta = -0.10$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The strongest mediation pathway involved the sequential effects of attachment avoidance and emotional intimacy, yielding a significant indirect effect of  $\beta = -0.21$  ( $p < .001$ ). Because all bootstrap confidence intervals excluded zero, the mediation effects were considered statistically significant. The findings therefore supported a partial mediation model in which childhood emotional neglect adversely affects adult romantic relationship quality both directly and indirectly through increased attachment avoidance and diminished emotional intimacy. The overall structural model accounted for 37% of the variance in attachment avoidance, 54% of the variance in emotional intimacy, and 69% of the variance in romantic relationship quality, indicating substantial explanatory power and strong empirical support for the proposed theoretical framework.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The present study investigated the effects of childhood emotional neglect on adult romantic relationship quality through the mediating roles of attachment avoidance and emotional intimacy among Canadian adults involved in committed romantic relationships. The findings demonstrated that childhood emotional neglect was significantly associated with poorer romantic relationship quality both directly and indirectly through attachment avoidance and emotional intimacy. Furthermore, attachment avoidance emerged as a powerful predictor of reduced emotional intimacy and diminished relationship quality, while emotional intimacy demonstrated a strong positive association with romantic relationship quality. The structural equation model showed excellent fit indices and explained substantial proportions of variance in attachment avoidance, emotional intimacy, and relationship quality, indicating that the proposed model provides a robust explanation of how early emotional deprivation influences adult romantic functioning.

One of the most important findings of the study was the significant direct association between childhood emotional neglect and lower romantic relationship quality. Individuals who reported greater emotional neglect during childhood experienced lower levels of satisfaction, emotional fulfillment, and overall quality in their adult romantic relationships. This finding supports developmental theories suggesting that early caregiving experiences serve as foundational templates for later interpersonal functioning. Childhood emotional neglect deprives children of emotional validation, affection, responsiveness, and support, thereby interfering with the development of secure relational expectations. As a result, neglected children may enter adulthood with maladaptive assumptions regarding trust, intimacy, emotional dependence, and interpersonal worthiness, which subsequently affect their romantic relationships. This finding aligns with previous studies demonstrating that childhood

maltreatment and emotional adversity are associated with poorer romantic relationship outcomes, including lower satisfaction, greater conflict, reduced commitment, and increased relational instability (Fitzgerald et al., 2024; Li & Zheng, 2021; Price et al., 2025; River et al., 2021; Rokach & MacFarlane, 2021; Sokar, 2024; Zamir, 2021). The results also support evidence indicating that adverse childhood experiences continue to shape adult intimate relationships long after the original experiences have occurred, highlighting the enduring influence of early emotional environments on relational functioning throughout adulthood (Cheung & Huang, 2022; Langevin et al., 2025; Zhu et al., 2024).

The study further found that childhood emotional neglect significantly predicted attachment avoidance. Participants reporting higher levels of emotional neglect demonstrated greater discomfort with closeness, emotional dependence, and interpersonal vulnerability. This finding is highly consistent with attachment theory, which proposes that emotionally unavailable caregiving environments encourage children to suppress attachment needs and develop self-protective strategies characterized by emotional distance and avoidance. When emotional expressions repeatedly fail to elicit support or responsiveness from caregivers, children may learn that dependence on others is ineffective or unsafe. Over time, these experiences contribute to the formation of avoidant attachment representations that persist into adulthood. The present finding corresponds closely with previous empirical investigations showing strong associations between childhood maltreatment, parental neglect, emotional rejection, and insecure attachment orientations (Höltge et al., 2022; Malik et al., 2021; Whittington, 2023). Similar findings have been reported regarding the influence of parental involvement and caregiving quality on attachment development, with emotionally neglectful parenting consistently predicting higher levels of attachment insecurity and avoidance later in life (K. & K., 2024; Li & Zheng, 2021). Furthermore, previous studies have identified attachment insecurity as a developmental consequence of childhood trauma and maltreatment across diverse populations and cultural contexts (Doorn et al., 2024; Papalia & Widom, 2023; Wrobel et al., 2022). The present results therefore strengthen the growing body of evidence suggesting that attachment avoidance represents a central psychological outcome of childhood emotional neglect.

Another important finding was the strong negative effect of attachment avoidance on emotional intimacy. Individuals characterized by higher levels of attachment avoidance reported substantially lower levels of emotional closeness, trust, self-disclosure, and emotional connectedness within their romantic relationships. This finding is theoretically expected because attachment avoidance is fundamentally characterized by discomfort with vulnerability and emotional dependence. Avoidantly attached individuals often suppress attachment-related emotions, maintain interpersonal distance, and avoid situations requiring emotional openness. Consequently, their capacity to establish emotionally intimate relationships may become compromised. These results are consistent with previous research demonstrating that attachment avoidance predicts lower intimacy, poorer communication, weaker emotional bonds, and reduced relationship satisfaction (Araci-İyiyaydin et al., 2023; Tadros, 2024; Tolmacz et al., 2022). Studies examining romantic attachment have similarly shown that avoidant individuals experience difficulty trusting partners, expressing emotions, and engaging in mutual emotional support, all of which are necessary components of emotional intimacy (Sun et al., 2021; Tadros, 2024). The findings therefore suggest that attachment avoidance functions as a developmental mechanism through which early emotional neglect disrupts later emotional closeness within romantic partnerships.

The findings also revealed that emotional intimacy was one of the strongest predictors of romantic relationship quality. Individuals who reported greater emotional intimacy experienced significantly higher levels of relationship satisfaction and overall relational functioning. This result is consistent with extensive literature identifying emotional intimacy as a core determinant of healthy romantic relationships. Emotional intimacy promotes mutual understanding, emotional support, trust, acceptance, and effective communication, all of which contribute to stronger and more satisfying partnerships. When

individuals feel emotionally connected to their partners, they are more likely to perceive their relationships as secure, supportive, and fulfilling. The present findings support previous research emphasizing the central role of emotional intimacy in relationship adjustment and satisfaction (He, 2024; Tadros, 2024; Zhou, 2024). Moreover, studies focusing on childhood emotional maltreatment have similarly demonstrated that difficulties in emotional expression and interpersonal trust often undermine intimacy development and subsequently contribute to poorer romantic outcomes (Fitzgerald et al., 2024; Price et al., 2025; Sun et al., 2021). Consequently, emotional intimacy appears to represent a critical interpersonal resource that protects relationship quality despite the presence of earlier developmental adversities.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of the present study lies in the mediation findings. The bootstrap analyses demonstrated that attachment avoidance significantly mediated the relationship between childhood emotional neglect and emotional intimacy. In addition, attachment avoidance and emotional intimacy jointly mediated the association between childhood emotional neglect and romantic relationship quality. These findings suggest that childhood emotional neglect does not influence adult relationships solely through direct effects; rather, its influence operates through developmental processes involving attachment representations and interpersonal emotional functioning. Emotional neglect appears to foster avoidant attachment tendencies, which subsequently reduce emotional intimacy and ultimately impair relationship quality. This developmental pathway is consistent with contemporary attachment-based models proposing that internal working models formed during childhood influence adult relationship experiences through their effects on emotional regulation, interpersonal expectations, and relational behavior (Malik et al., 2021; Papalia & Widom, 2023). Similar mediation mechanisms have been documented in studies examining the links between childhood maltreatment and psychological outcomes such as depression, loneliness, aggression, and self-harm, where attachment insecurity serves as a central explanatory pathway (Jalilian et al., 2023a, 2023b; Stagaki et al., 2022; Wrobel et al., 2022). The current study extends these findings by demonstrating that comparable mechanisms operate within the domain of romantic relationship quality.

The significant indirect effects observed in this study also align with emerging evidence indicating that relational difficulties associated with childhood adversity are often explained by disruptions in interpersonal and emotional processes rather than by childhood experiences alone. Research has increasingly highlighted the importance of attachment, social support, resilience, mentalizing abilities, and emotional regulation as mediating mechanisms linking adverse childhood experiences to adult adjustment outcomes (Genç, 2025; Panagou & MacBeth, 2022). For example, attachment insecurity has been found to mediate associations between childhood trauma and partner aggression, relationship dysfunction, violent behavior, and marital dissatisfaction (Doorn et al., 2024; Kara & Şahin, 2022; South et al., 2022). Similarly, social support and attachment processes have been shown to explain links between childhood trauma and romantic relationship satisfaction (Quan et al., 2025). The present findings contribute to this literature by illustrating that emotional intimacy represents an additional mechanism through which childhood emotional neglect exerts long-term influences on romantic functioning.

Another noteworthy implication concerns the specificity of emotional neglect as a form of childhood adversity. Much of the existing literature examines childhood maltreatment as a broad construct encompassing physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect. However, emotional neglect differs from other forms of maltreatment because it involves the absence of necessary emotional experiences rather than the presence of overt harmful behaviors. The present findings suggest that emotional neglect may be particularly relevant to adult relationship functioning because it directly disrupts the development of emotional awareness, trust, attachment security, and intimacy. This interpretation is consistent with studies indicating that emotional maltreatment is uniquely associated with difficulties in emotional processing, interpersonal trust, and romantic relationship functioning (Fitzgerald et al., 2024; Sun et al., 2021). Moreover, evidence from intergenerational research suggests that unresolved consequences of childhood emotional neglect may influence not only adult romantic relationships but also

future parenting practices and family functioning, thereby contributing to the transmission of relational vulnerabilities across generations (Langevin et al., 2025; Langevin et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2024).

Taken together, the findings support an integrated developmental model in which childhood emotional neglect contributes to the formation of avoidant attachment orientations, which subsequently undermine emotional intimacy and reduce romantic relationship quality. The substantial variance explained by the structural model underscores the importance of attachment and intimacy processes as key mechanisms linking childhood experiences to adult relationship outcomes. These results reinforce attachment theory while simultaneously highlighting the interpersonal pathways through which early emotional deprivation continues to shape adult relational experiences. By identifying attachment avoidance and emotional intimacy as significant mediators, the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of the developmental processes underlying romantic relationship functioning and offers important directions for clinical intervention and relationship enhancement.

One limitation of the present study is its cross-sectional design, which restricts causal interpretations of the observed relationships. Although the structural model was theoretically grounded and statistically supported, longitudinal studies are necessary to establish temporal ordering among childhood emotional neglect, attachment avoidance, emotional intimacy, and relationship quality. Additionally, all measures relied on self-report instruments, which may have introduced recall bias, common method variance, and social desirability effects. The sample was also limited to Canadian adults involved in committed relationships, potentially limiting the generalizability of the findings to other cultural contexts, age groups, and relationship structures. Furthermore, childhood emotional neglect was assessed retrospectively, making responses vulnerable to memory distortions and subjective interpretation.

Future research should employ longitudinal and prospective designs to examine developmental trajectories linking childhood emotional neglect to adult romantic functioning over time. Researchers may also investigate additional mediating variables such as emotion regulation, self-compassion, trust, mentalization, resilience, and social support to develop more comprehensive explanatory models. Cross-cultural studies would be valuable for determining whether the observed pathways operate similarly across different cultural environments and relational norms. Future investigations may further benefit from dyadic methodologies that include reports from both romantic partners, allowing for examination of reciprocal influences and interpersonal dynamics within relationships.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that clinicians working with couples should assess histories of childhood emotional neglect and consider their potential influence on current relationship difficulties. Attachment-based interventions may be particularly beneficial for individuals demonstrating avoidant attachment tendencies resulting from early emotional deprivation. Therapeutic approaches aimed at increasing emotional awareness, emotional expression, vulnerability, and interpersonal trust may help improve emotional intimacy and relationship satisfaction. Couple therapy programs should also emphasize the development of secure attachment behaviors, effective emotional communication, and supportive relational interactions. Prevention initiatives focusing on emotionally responsive parenting may contribute to reducing the long-term relational consequences of childhood emotional neglect and promote healthier interpersonal functioning across generations.

### **Declaration of Interest**

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

### **Ethical Considerations**

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

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## Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

## Transparency of Data

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

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