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## Adults With Avoidant Attachment Styles and Their Online Dating Experien

Amber Mae Nelson  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Amber M. Nelson

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
and that any and all revisions required by  
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University  
2024

Abstract

Adults With Avoidant Attachment Styles and Their Online Dating Experiences

by

Amber M. Nelson

MS, Walden University, 2016

BS, Boise State University, 2013

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

Walden University

August 2024

## Abstract

Adult attachment style can influence how individuals communicate with each other and how they deal with conflict, both of which may influence the formation and maintenance of romantic relationships. Research suggested, that attachment style influenced the level of relationship security individuals experience and the level of intimacy in which they are comfortable engaging. The convenience and popularity of online dating may present unique struggles and benefits for adults with avoidant attachment styles; exploring their online dating experiences may provide insight into the benefits and pitfalls as avoidant individuals pursue romantic relationships. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experience of avoidant people who use online dating platforms to pursue romantic relationships. The Ainsworth-Bowlby attachment theory provided a broad understanding of how experiences in childhood shape an individual and how those experiences persist into adulthood. The theory of close relationships expanded the Ainsworth-Bowlby attachment theory by explaining how those earlier experiences influence the way adults form and maintain their romantic relationships. Six semi-structured interviews were conducted with single and avoidant individuals, ages 25 to 40, actively dating via online platforms. Participants revealed that they enjoyed the control online dating allows them but were also concerned about the intentions and trustworthiness of others dating online. Participants also appreciated the convenience of online dating. The findings of this study have implications for positive social changes as these insights can inform online dating platform development, matchmaking services, and therapeutic protocols to help avoidant individuals develop and maintain successful intimate relationships.

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## Dedication

First and foremost, I would like to thank my parents; I would not be the hard-working and dedicated person I am if not for their love and support throughout my life. The values they have instilled in me both inspired me and enabled me to see this program through to completion. Thank you for loving me and believing in me every step of the way.

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Throughout this program, I experienced a rollercoaster of emotions and life challenges and I want to thank my significant other for sticking by my side and showing me support and encouragement throughout all the highs and lows of the process.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

This study intended to explore the online dating experiences of adults with avoidant attachment styles. The primary focus was the relationship formation, displayed behaviors and attitudes, and perceived benefits and pitfalls of the participants during their online dating interactions. A lack of research regarding how individuals with avoidant attachment styles experience online relationships over time has been reported (Hadden et al., 2013). Given the likelihood that attachment style may predict how individuals may communicate and deal with conflict, it was expected that exploring the online dating experiences of adults with avoidant attachment styles would address what was not yet known about ways that attachment style is implicated in various relationship experiences (Dominique & Mollen, 2009). Research has shown that an individual's attachment style can have a strong impact on the level of relationship security experienced and the level of intimacy they are comfortable giving and receiving (Dominique & Mollen, 2009). Exploring the experiences of avoidant individuals dating online provided further insight into the attitudes and behaviors related to previously reported deficits in relationship security and intimacy as well as insight into whether online dating has more benefits or pitfalls for them specifically. Because attachment style influences an individual's ability to communicate effectively and enjoy satisfactory levels of intimacy, a closer look at avoidant individuals' online dating experience was warranted.

This chapter describes the problem and its background followed by the purpose, conceptual framework, and a review of term definitions. The assumptions, limitations, scope, and delimitations of the study are also discussed. The chapter concludes with an

explanation of the significance of the study regarding adult attachment style and online dating.

### **Background**

Online dating has become increasingly popular over the last couple of decades and as it has become more popular the way it is done has continued to evolve (Stoicescu, 2019). Initially, online dating websites were used but with the proliferation of mobile devices over time, the creation and use of online dating applications has also increased. Some studies suggest that the online dating industry is to thank for the ever-changing structure of society and dating culture in general (Stoicescu, 2019). A variety of studies have been conducted with the purpose of understanding online dating behavior and typology, with much of the focus on the characteristics of people who choose to date online (Stoicescu, 2019). As the popularity of online dating continues to increase, psychologists have become more interested in the implications of characteristics such as attachment style for individuals interacting in a virtual meeting place (Burke et al., 2016). The internet plays an important role in relationship formation, making it imperative to understand the experience of its users in present day romance (Stoicescu, 2019).

There are many positives associated with online dating, including increased access to potential mates, increased likelihood of self-disclosure, and increased likelihood of developing an emotional connection before the distracting influence of physical attraction (Scott et al., 2006). Avoidant individuals are less likely to commit to a romantic relationship because commitment requires intimacy, which seems risky to them (Burke et al., 2016). Because avoidant individuals tend to expect relationships will fail, they are

disinclined to feel invested in their partner (Hadden et al., 2013). Avoidant individuals tend to be distrustful, believing that people are untrustworthy and unreliable; they are less likely to experience relationship satisfaction because of their fear of relationship intimacy and closeness (Hadden et al., 2013). Feelings of unworthiness and distrust in others make avoidant individuals wary of relationships in order to avoid romantic rejection (Goodboy & Bolkan, 2011). However, there is reason to expect that those who find intimacy difficult in their face-to-face relationships might be more likely to pursue online relationships (Scott et al., 2006).

Research shows that attachment plays a role in the way that both women and men choose to engage in technology for the purpose of meeting the emotional needs of both themselves and their romantic partners (Mosley et al., 2020). Technology can provide a different approach to exploring the attachment needs of avoidantly attached individuals. Attachment style needs may be relevant during various stages of a relationship and technology allows that to be explored (Mosley et al., 2020). Given the accessibility of online dating, 30% of individuals ages 18-24 and 12% of individuals ages 55-64 are using technology to date (Mosley et al., 2020). Avoidant individuals are reported to enjoy using technology to communicate because its remoteness affords wary individuals a protective distance (Mosley et al., 2020).

### **Problem Statement**

The intent of this study was to look at how people with avoidant attachment styles interact with potential mates through online dating platforms. Online dating allows individuals to initiate relationships from wherever they want, allowing avoidant

individuals who struggle with intimacy to control proximity to their potential mate (Mosley et al., 2020). Having a better understanding of how individuals with avoidant attachment experience online dating may allow online dating platforms to structure their platforms such that people of varying attachment styles can benefit. One study found that when therapists were aware of the romantic attachment style of their adult patients, they were better able to comprehend their struggles and approach their patients' needs at various stages in the therapy process (Burke et al., 2016). There have been few qualitative studies done that explore the perceived experiences of individuals with avoidant attachment styles, specifically in the context of online dating. This is the gap in the literature that my study addresses.

While the ability to control proximity to their partner makes online dating appealing to avoidant individuals, it may be less ideal for developing functional relationships (Goodcase et al., 2018). Online dating platforms allow avoidant individuals to use texting and email to communicate with potential mates giving them more control over the pace of their romantic relationships as well as frequency of interactions, thus building a relationship without requirement for true intimacy (Goodcase et al., 2018). Although these very benefits may make avoidant individuals more comfortable and perhaps more likely to pursue a romantic relationship, they are less conducive to creating closeness with a potential mate, resulting in lower relationship quality.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how adults with avoidant



attachment styles form relationships through online dating platforms, the attitudes, and behaviors they display as they engage in online dating, and the perceived benefits experienced. While securely attached individuals can maintain highly committed and stable relationships, avoidant individuals have greater difficulty (Hadden et al., 2013). Based on a review of the literature, it seems that research regarding relationship success, specifically for avoidant individuals, is lacking. Current research does explain, however, that adults with avoidant attachment can benefit from using online dating because it allows them, via email, to pick and choose when and what to respond to (Goodcase et al., 2018). To better understand the lived experience of online dating for avoidant individuals, the phenomenological design was utilized.

### **Research Question**

Research question (RQ): What are the online dating experiences of individuals with avoidant attachment styles?

### **Theoretical Foundation**

Bowlby-Ainsworth's (1991) attachment theory explains the process by which adult romantic relationships are formed and maintained. Bowlby formulated the essential principles of the theory, which changed the way we think about the mother-child dynamic and the impact that separation, withdrawal, and bereavement have on that dynamic. Ainsworth et al. (1978) explains that attachment is a behavioral system activated under specific circumstances, meaning that when the right combination of external factors is present this behavioral system responds. For example, an infant's mother who gets up from her seat and begins to move away makes the child anxious about how accessible she

will be in the future, leading to behaviors like crying in hopes of getting her to return. The specific behaviors activated are determined by the individual's attachment style (e.g., secure, dismissive avoidant, fearful avoidant, or preoccupied attachment style) (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Disruptions and dissolutions, such as an absent parent or being scolded for crying when in need, that take place within an attachment bond at a young age can seriously impact individual attachment bonds later in life. How an individual's attachment figure, such as a parent, responds to their wants and needs when they are young influences their behaviors in romantic relationships as adults (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). The views that an adult individual has about oneself are heavily impacted by the ways in which their caregivers responded to them when they were in search of comfort and security as children, and this can impact their adult romantic relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). The level of attachment that an individual forms to another person may vary in intensity overtime and various situations but once formed, it remains intact.

The theory of close relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1994) explains the process by which childhood attachment extends into adult romantic relationships. This theory addresses how adult romantic relationships are developed and maintained as well as how satisfaction is achieved and breakups occur, while considering individual differences and the role that close relationships play in adult lives. This theory also considers how affectional bonds are established and the similarities and differences in infancy versus adulthood. A primary distinction between adult and infant attachment is the unidirectionality of the latter, i.e., security is provided to the child, but the child does not provide it back. Conversely, adult attachment is bidirectional where both parties provide

and receive security in the relationship (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). Additionally, behavioral systems are utilized differently in adulthood versus childhood. In childhood, behavioral systems are utilized by crying and smiling to help keep an infant safe by keeping the caregiver close. Yet in adulthood, behavioral systems are activated as a means to keep a partner close for caregiving and sexual mating purposes. Although attachment styles are primarily formed in childhood, they can still be influenced by the extent of avoidance and anxiety experienced within adult romantic relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1994).

### **Nature of the Study**

The nature of this study was a qualitative approach. Qualitative research was appropriate for exploring individuals' lived experience of a shared phenomenon, in this case, the online dating experience of avoidant individuals. In particular, interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used as it was best suited to solicit the subjective experience of individuals rather than populations. To gain relevant knowledge, the interaction that occurred between the participant and the researcher was considered (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). For this study, I was an important component insofar as I was responsible for making sure that the results were reflective of only the participants' thoughts, feelings, and experiences. To that end, I conducted semi-structured interviews with participants followed by repeated reviews of their responses so as to identify themes that captured the essence of their experiences. This study was conducted entirely online and utilized online semi-structured interviews comprised of questions informed by the theories that guided this study and by the relevant literature. All communication was done via email and video interviews.

## Definition of Terms

*Adult Romantic Relationship:* An adult relationship that involves continuing interactions acknowledged by all involved parties as voluntary, commonly involving expressions of affection and sexual behavior (Collins et al., 2009).

*Romantic love:* The process of becoming attached emotionally to an adult romantic partner in the same way that an infant develops an emotional bond with their caregiver (Brennan & Shaver, 1995).

*Attachment:* Ainsworth and Bell (1970) define attachment as having an affectional tie between oneself and another individual and through this they are bound together in space and over time.

*Online Dating:* the use of mobile dating applications or online dating websites to search for a potential mate (Bonilla-Zorita et al., 2021).

*Avoidant Attachment:* When an individual experiences discomfort with closeness in their relationships and prefers to be independent and self-reliant as well as frequently experiences negative emotions related to their relationship (Schindler et al., 2010; Simpson, 1990).

*Attachment behavior:* The emotional behaviors that occur in adulthood and are guided by the working models of experiences that individuals had with their caregivers (Mehta et al., 2021).

*Attachment style:* The pattern of expectations present in a relationship and the needs, emotions, and behaviors that occur as a result of an individual's history with attachment experiences (Mende et al., 2019).

*Relationship formation:* The steps that individuals pursuing a potential mate take to build a functioning relationship.

*Relationship satisfaction:* The extent to which parties involved in a relationship feel satisfied.

*Relationship Quality:* The level of intimacy, affection, and nurturance that parties involved in a relationship expend (Collins., 2009).

### **Assumptions**

I assumed that an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach would provide the most insightful data because of its ability to provide an in-depth inquiry into avoidant individuals' online dating experiences. I assumed that semi-structured interview questions would yield specific insights into this phenomenon not already documented in the literature and that the questions allow participants to communicate effectively and honestly about the important aspects of their online dating experiences. It was also assumed that using social media to recruit participants would target a population that regularly engages in and is comfortable using social media and, therefore, might also engage in and be comfortable using online dating platforms. Considering my role as researcher, I assumed that I would be able to provide an unbiased interpretation of participant experiences.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The study focused only on Millennials, ages 25 to 40 years, as they are the most technology involved. Given that Millennials are past emerging adulthood are more stable, less self-focused, and more likely to seek a long-term romantic partner. This study also

solely focused on individuals who identified with an avoidant attachment style characterized by relationship complexity, including issues with security, trust, and intimacy, which the proposed study will explore. Participants had to be actively seeking a romantic relationship by using online dating platforms as had to be able to provide insight about previous and/or current experiences. Only participants willing to commit to a 90-minute online interview, required to gather the rich data needed for interpretative phenomenological analysis, were recruited. Because this was a qualitative study, it is possible that transferability was not achieved; however, the volume of data collected and richness of the description documented throughout the research process, provides sufficient detail for replication of the study with different populations in other contexts.

### **Limitations**

Purposive sampling limits the generalizability of the results given that only individuals with information-rich experience related to the phenomenon of interest were asked to participate. By keeping a reflexive journal, I attempted to acknowledge and set aside all personal assumptions, preconceptions, experience, and bias related to the phenomenon of interest, the potential for bias to contaminate data analysis and interpretation is a limitation of qualitative research. Interpretive validity was also challenging as I was attempting to capture the essence of participants' experience rather than an interpretation that reflects my own. To that same point, participants may not have felt comfortable sharing intimate details about themselves and their relationships, leaving it to me to accurately characterize an experience that was not fully disclosed.

### **Significance of the Study**

The proposed study used attachment theory (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991) to better understand the online dating experience of individuals with an avoidant attachment style, including their behaviors and perceived benefits and pitfalls. This research will make a unique contribution to the literature by focusing, from a qualitative perspective, specifically on the experiences of avoidant Millennials who date online. Given the relationship challenges experienced by avoidant individuals, the potential for virtual dating to address their intimacy and trust issues may help them find relationship success when it otherwise eluded them. Discovering new routes to intimacy and satisfaction that had been elusive may improve the quality of life of many avoidant individuals. Moreover, results of this study may yield insights that if used to inform therapeutic protocols, may help avoidant individuals develop and maintain successful intimate relationships.

### **Summary**

Chapter 1 provided an overview of the background, problem, purpose, theoretical framework, significance, and nature of the study. In chapter 2, the reader will be provided with an in-depth discussion of attachment theory and an exhaustive review of the literature related to key concepts (e.g., adult romantic relationships, online dating, and avoidant attachment styles).

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Internet dating has become extremely common over the past several years (Heino et al., 2010) and over the past decade the interest that psychologists have in attachment theory has continued to grow (Burke et al., 2016). Using online communication to connect romantically will likely continue to be a common practice. Therefore, the way that virtual intimacy develops, and both the satisfaction and longevity of relationships developed online should be further explored (Scott et al., 2006). Attachment style is likely to influence dating experiences and preferences and an attachment style that is identified as being avoidant may impact an individual's dating experiences and preferences in specific ways. Researchers have explored the relationships that attachment styles may have with an individual's dating habits but there have been few qualitative studies done that explore the perceived experiences that individuals who identify with avoidant attachment styles have when it comes to online dating specifically. This is the gap in the literature that my study will address. The purpose of this study is to use a phenomenological qualitative approach to gather information on individuals who identify with avoidant attachment and their perceptions of dating online. Relevant information on avoidant attachment styles, relationship satisfaction, relationship formation, and the increasing popularity of online dating will be reviewed in order to provide a foundation for the purpose of the study.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

When starting my research, I searched the entire phrase “*adult avoidant attachment and online dating*” but was not able to come up with anything. Based on my



research, there is little research that specifically address online dating and adult avoidant attachment. The search was then broken down and the keywords “*online dating and attachment*” were searched. I was still unable to find many relevant articles, so I split my search and I searched the keywords “*online dating*”. I was able to find many articles about online dating. Next, I searched “*adult avoidant attachment*”. I was also able to find a decent number of articles on this topic. I then entered “*adult attachment*” on one search line and “*online dating*” on another line. I was able to retrieve some articles that discussed the relationship between the two topics to some extent. I have also tried searching using the phrase “*adult attachment*” on one search line and “*online dating*” on the next. This search uncovered some good results. Although the results were not specific to avoidant attachment and online dating, there was still a lot of information, and this information has allowed me to justify my gap.

The Walden University Library was used to locate the Psychology Databases Combined Search database. Searches here led to the use of databases such as PsycINFO and SAGE Journals. Keywords such as “*attachment*”, “*adult attachment*”, “*online*”, “*avoidant attachment*”, and “*dating*” were used. When “*attachment*” was entered on one line and “*literature review*” on the next, a literature review on attachment theory and research as well as a review of adult attachment measures were found. Related resources that were included in the reviews were then reviewed and utilized. When “*dating*” was added to this same search, no further reviews or articles on the topic were found.

Finding any articles concerning avoidant attachment and online dating was challenging. I attempted to use a variety of combinations of keywords and used a variety

of Boolean operators, but my searches seemed to come up short every time. I decided to make my search even more general by typing in “*avoidant*” on one line and “*review*” on another. I was able to find an article by Li and Chan (2012) that discusses how anxious and avoidant attachment affect romantic relationship quality differently. This article is a meta-analytic review and although it does not directly address avoidant attachment and online dating which was a good starting point.

Psychology Databases Combined Search is a database that was used to locate psychology articles from multiple databases at once. When conducting searches in this database I searched PsycARTICLES, PsycBOOKS, PsycCRITIQUES, PsycEXTRA, and PsycINFO. I also used PsycTESTS & Health and Psychosocial Instruments Combined Search to obtain research on different tests and instruments. I started the search by searching for articles published within the last 5 years. After finding very few I extended the search to cover the last 10 years and further extended it to cover the last 35 years from 1985 to the present of 2020.

## **Framework**

### **Attachment Theory**

Attachment theory was developed as a combination of both John Bowlby (1969) and Mary Ainsworth’s (1978) work. Beginning their work separately, Bowlby and Ainsworth eventually joined forces to form the Bowlby-Ainsworth’s attachment theory (1991) and focuses primarily on individuals’ intimate interpersonal relations. The Bowlby-Ainsworth attachment theory (1991) will be used to gain a better understanding of the way that adults form romantic attachments to their partners and the impact that

individual attachment style has on dating behavior. Ainsworth and Bell (1970) define *attachment* as having an affectional tie between oneself and another individual and through this they are bound together in space and over time. This framework focuses on attachment as a behavioral system that is activated under certain circumstances and results in certain behaviors that are associated with the four different attachment styles (secure, dismissive avoidant, fearful avoidant, and preoccupied) (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Hazan and Shaver (1994) later came to use the Bowlby-Ainsworth attachment theory as a basis for forming their theory of close relationships to better understand how attachment, per se, functions in adult relationships specifically.

### **Bowlby-Ainsworth Attachment Theory**

Bowlby's (1969) theory of attachment explains how the interactions children have with their caregivers early in life generate what they are likely to expect from and how they will perceive their future relationships (Carter et al., 2013). These early life interactions can not only influence their own adult relationship behavior but also their assumptions about how their partners should behave (Carter et al., 2013). Bretherton (1992) explains that Bowlby came to the overall conclusion that in order for an individual to grow up mentally healthy, they need to experience a relationship with their mother or permanent mother figure that is warm, intimate, and continuous. The main idea of attachment behavior is that individuals are constantly attempting to obtain and maintain a specific point of proximity, or closeness, to the object to which they are attracted, and the point of desired proximity can vary from one situation to the next. The point of proximity may be close physical contact in one situation while it may be communication from a

distance in another. *Attachment behavior* refers to behavior that attempts to foster proximity or contact with an attachment object. In a human infant these behaviors include things such as crying, clinging, smiling, and calling out for the attachment figure. While the level of intensity of attachment behavior may become heightened or diminished depending on the situation, the attachment remains intact once formed and does not completely vanish even when obvious attachment behavior is not being displayed. Because of this, attachment is viewed as an organization of behavioral systems that contains an internal fundamental component that remains steady even when attachment behaviors have not been activated (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

Attachment is just one of many interlocking behavioral systems; other systems include caregiving, exploration, sexual mating, and affiliation. All of these systems function uniquely and respond to different cues within the environment. Because human infants are immature, depending solely on their caregiver to survive, their attachment system is fully activated at birth and by about six or seven months they begin directing attachment behaviors primarily towards one person to form attachment to their attachment figure, however the attachment figure's response to their needs further develops the attachment bond. In sum, attachment formation begins when the human infant notices who is responding to their needs and the quality of response to those needs (Hazan & Shaver, 1994).

The disruption and dissolution that occurs within attachment bonds can heavily impact the attached individual. Bowlby examined how human children in nurseries responded when separated from their caregivers for extended periods of time; for some

infants the separation was permanent. It was observed that upon initial separation, the infants protested (cried, searched for, resisted others) then demonstrated despair (appeared to be sad and passive) and, lastly, showed emotional detachment; even when children were separated for brief periods of time, they seemed to become more anxious about being abandoned and looked more urgently for physical contact and reassurance. Some of these children even avoided contact with their caregiver for some time once reunited. Children tended to display distress signals in hopes of bringing their attachment figure back but when attempts to do so failed, they tended to lose hope for reestablishing proximity and detached as a way to reserve energy and resume normal activity (Hazan & Shaver, 1994).

There are individual differences in the nature and strength of attachment, and Ainsworth et al. (1978) explored these differences when developing a procedure for assessing the quality of attachment. Ainsworth et al. found three main styles of attachment resulting from a caregiver's responsiveness to the child's needs: (a) *securely attached* infants felt distressed when their mother was gone, but when she returned, they felt comforted and were okay engaging in exploration if she was around. In the home, the caregivers of these children were always around and responsive to the child's needs; (b) *anxious/ambivalent* children who were angry and anxious when their caregiver left, were so preoccupied with their caregiver leaving that they would not explore. In the homes of these anxious/ambivalent children, their caregiver appeared to be unresponsive and sometimes intrusive; and caregivers in the homes of (c) *anxious/avoidant* children typically deflected the child's needs. If the caregiver left, the anxious/avoidant child did

not show signs of distress and avoided contact with their caregiver when they were present (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

While early attachment theory focused on the relationship of caregivers and their children, Bowlby (1969) explains that attachment theory is applicable to other social relationships as well. In the child-parent relationship, both parties are viewed as being bonded but that attachment behavior is typically displayed towards the individual with the best coping skills within that bond. The term caregiving is used to describe the behavior that is directed toward the individual within the bond that is not as capable of coping. In an attachment-caregiver relationship, e.g., between a child and a parent, the roles of the partners remain the same for the majority of life, so attachment behavior tends to go in one direction such as from the child towards the parent. However, the continuity of roles is not inevitable.

Attachment theory is also applicable to other social bonds whereby each party is committed to the other. In committed social relationships, such as marriage, the roles of the partners typically change as the relationship changes, resulting in both bonded individuals displaying attachment behaviors; this is because, unlike childhood, there is not a set caregiver role in this type of relationship most of the time (Bowlby, 1969). Hazan and Shaver (1994) explain that, according to attachment theory, an individual's feelings and beliefs about oneself, specifically self-esteem, can be determined partially by the ways in which their caregiver responded to them when they needed comfort and security; therefore, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in other close relationships can be

guided by these working attachment models and influence an individual's adult romantic relationships.

### **Theory of Close Relationships**

Hazan and Shaver (1994) together developed a comprehensive theory of close [adult] relationships to extend attachment theory beyond the limitations of the child-caregiver. Their intent was to address a variety of topics relevant to close relationships, e.g., prospective partner appeal, and relationship development, maintenance, satisfaction, and breakup. Additionally, Hazan and Shaver addressed normative and individual differences, taking into account the overall role that a relationship plays in an individual's life. Especially important were both the similarities and differences in the affectional bonds established in infancy and continuing through adulthood.

Hazan and Shaver (1994) compared adult attachment to infant attachment and noted several differences. One of the most important differences was that during childhood the relationship is one-directional but with adult attachment the relationship works in both directions. In childhood, the attachment figure provides the care but does not receive it and the child seeks security but does not provide it. In adulthood, attachment is reciprocal with each partner providing and receiving care and providing and seeking security. Another important difference is the need for physical contact. While children require actual physical contact from their attachment figure in order to form healthy bonds, older children and adults are able to have healthy bonds simply by knowing that their attachment figure can be contacted if needed; adults simply need to "feel" a sense of security though their desire for physical touch likely does not dissolve

completely. The attachment figure, per se, is yet another difference, where in childhood the parent is usually the attachment figure and in adulthood the attachment figure is typically a peer or sexual partner.

An additional difference between childhood and adult attachment is the use of behavioral systems (i.e., a set of behaviors that serve the same function). For example, crying and smiling, are activated as a means to keep the infant safe from danger by keeping the caregiver close by. In adulthood, behavioral systems (i.e., systems servicing a unique function but responding to varying environmental cues) are activated for other purposes, namely attachment, caregiving, and sexual mating. Because of these differences, the motivators for proximity seeking (i.e., keeping the person you desire close by) in adulthood differ from childhood. When an adult experiences anxiety or distress they may seek out proximity to their partner, but they also may seek out proximity to their partner when they desire to protect or offer comfort (caregiving) as well as when they desire engagement in sexual activity (sexual mating). It has been hypothesized that attachment forms through physical closeness, but as individuals develop, the forces that encourage this closeness can change (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). All individuals have different childhood experiences that form their early attachment styles. Likewise, adult attachment is formed by early experience but is formed, additionally, by the level of avoidance and anxiety an individual experiences with their adult romantic relationships.

Adult attachment is comprised of two dimensions: the avoidance and anxiety dimensions (Carter et al., 2013). Carter et al. (2013) explained that avoidance attachment



refers to the level of discomfort that individuals feel with relationship closeness and emotional intimacy. Individuals who are high in *avoidance* are less likely to be fully invested in their relationships and typically seek to be emotionally independent. The extent to which individuals worry about being rejected or abandoned by a partner is what the *anxiety* dimension explores (Carter et al., 2013). Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) found that individuals who score high in one or both of these dimensions are likely to be insecure about attachment; they may have trouble trusting the intentions of their partner, worrying if their partner will be available when needed.

Edelstein and Shaver (2004) found that avoidant adults are likely to regulate the proximity of those they are close with by acting in a defensive manner either when they or their partner are feeling threatened or stressed. It was also found that avoidant adults, like avoidant infants, are not likely to display attachment behaviors or express distress to their partners. In general, Edelstein and Shaver (2004) concluded that adults with avoidant attachment styles are typically less likely to be emotionally connected or self-disclose to their partners. They also tend to like physical and emotional intimacy less and be less likely to grieve after a breakup compared to non-avoidant individuals (Edelstein & Shaver, 2004).

That said, these findings support the idea that adults with avoidant attachment styles keep both physical and psychological distance from their romantic partners as a way to keep from activating their attachment systems. By avoiding activation of their attachment system these individuals are not allowing themselves to engage in behaviors that show a desire for closeness with their romantic partner. As a result, this allows them

to avoid potential rejection and punishment as well as distress because if they do not show that they are wanting or needing something then they are less likely to be denied it (Edelstein & Shaver, 2004). Avoidant individuals tend to believe that other people are not honest or cannot be depended on; typically, this is the result of being neglected or having attachment figures who were consistently unresponsive during childhood, thus confirming that you cannot depend on others to fulfil your needs even if they say they will (Hadden et al., 2013).

The application of the Bowlby-Ainsworth attachment theory and the theory of close relationships has been demonstrated in a variety of studies that focus on relationship formation and maintenance and the importance of considering attachment when researching relationships in general. A qualitative research design to determine how the principles of attachment theory could potentially inform clinical practices, arguing that to make therapy more successful for clients their attachment styles should be considered, and therapeutic approaches should be modified accordingly (Burke et al., 2016). It was found that attachment theory provided a clinically useful framework to better comprehend different clients' problems and to better approach their different needs during different stages of therapy (Burke et al., 2016). While attachment theory does not define clinical intervention, it informs it and can be drawn upon regardless of a clinician's theoretical orientation. Burke et al. (2016) conducted the first qualitative study that explored how attachment theory can be applied by therapists when they are working with their adult clients. They concluded that an adult's attachment style should inform therapeutic interventions in order to improve each individual's wellbeing. Given the

results of this study, it seems possible that online dating approaches, if informed by individual attachment styles, might be more successful.

A study was conducted that explored the theoretical connections between attachment theory and communication between adult partners in romantic relationships (Domingue & Mollen, 2009). Based on theory and current literature at the time, Domingue and Mollen (2009) believed that if at least one individual in the relationship had a secure attachment style, the couple would be more likely to communicate constructively and build intimacy. It was hypothesized that differences in couples' attachment styles (i.e., secure-secure, secure-insecure, and insecure-insecure) may predict a negative communication pattern; three phases of interaction conflict (i.e., emergence of a relational problem, the discussion of the relational problem, and the post-discussion period) were assessed (Domingue & Mollen, 2009).

Findings showed that couples that included a secure individual did not have as much demand-withdraw within their relationships (i.e., one person pesters and is demanding, while the other partner tends to withdraw) and had less mutual communication avoidance and withholding than couples without a secure individual. It was also found that insecure-insecure couples did not have more negative communication patterns than the secure-insecure couples, but they did have more negative communication patterns such as demand withdraw and mutual avoidance and withholding communication than the secure-secure couple (Domingue & Mollen, 2009). Secure individuals are likely to be more comfortable self-disclosing and communicating directly with their partners because doing so furthers intimacy and secure individuals

desire this (Domingue & Mollen, 2009). Conversely, insecure individuals are disinclined to self-disclose because they lack self-confidence, are not as assertive, are less likely to trust that their partner will show support when needed, are more likely to demonstrate clingy behavior, be demanding, block their partner out, and/or withdraw from their relationship because they worry about rejection. Given that individuals with avoidant attachment styles fall into the insecure category, they are likely to struggle with self-disclosure, trust in their partner, and be more likely to withdraw from relationships (Bartholomew, 1990). Understanding the behavior of avoidant individuals is relevant to the proposed study as avoidant participants' online dating experiences will be explored.

A meta-analysis was conducted to explore how relationship duration moderates the relationship between attachment style (i.e., anxious, avoidant, and secure) and relationship quality (i.e., satisfaction and commitment) (Hadden et al., 2013). It found that as relationship duration increased, satisfaction in the relationship decreased; this was especially true for anxious attachments. Conversely, secure attachment was positively related to relationship satisfaction, such that the greater the duration, the greater the relationship satisfaction. On the other hand, relationship duration increased commitment, more for avoidant than for anxious attachments (Hadden et al., 2013). These findings supported the idea that relationship duration may be a crucial moderator when explaining the negative relationship between anxious and avoidant attachment styles and relationship satisfaction and are relevant to the proposed study as they directly address the influence that adult attachment style may have on the success of online romantic relationships (Hadden et al., 2013).

The dispositional factors that are related to online dating factors other than just relationship formation and initiation were examined and these addressed the relationship between personality variables and online dating behaviors, the Big-Five personality traits, self-esteem, rejection sensitivity, attachment styles, and use of online dating sites and their online dating behaviors (Blackhart et al., 2014). It was hypothesized that (a) men, (b) individuals sensitive to rejection, and (c) individuals with preoccupied and fearful attachments would be more likely to take part in risk-taking behaviors when meeting their online dating partner in person (Blackhart et al., 2014). Risk-taking behavior was defined as how quickly an individual is willing to meet their online dating partner in person, if the individual is willing to meet their online partner in public versus a secluded place, and if they will tell other people that they are going to meet their online dating partner alone (Blackhart et al., 2014). Findings showed that individuals sensitive to rejection were more likely to utilize online dating sites and less likely to tell others about the plans they had to meet an online dating partner in person; the latter finding was also found with men (Blackhart et al., 2014). These findings are relevant to the proposed study given that personality and its interaction with adult attachment style may be an important factor to consider when making predictions.

The extent to which attachment style is associated with seeking a romantic partner through online dating was explored by Torrence (2014). A mixed methods design was used to gather data from individuals with avoidant, anxious, and secure attachment styles as they discussed and engaged in online dating. Open-ended questions were used to explore participants' fantasies of ideal romantic partners. It was hypothesized that

avoidant individuals would prefer partners who seem reliable but may be less involved in the relationship and that different attachment style groups would likely be seeking different types of partners. Results found no differences in attachment style in the likelihood of communicating with a potential partner who is looking for a causal relationship, travels for work, has a busy social life, or is very involved in work or other obligations, nor did the findings show that anxious individuals would be more likely than avoidant individuals to communicate with a potential partner who definitely wants kids or sees themselves as family oriented in their future relationship. However, the results did show that secure and anxious individuals would be more likely than avoidant individuals to initiate a conversation with a potential partner (Torrence, 2014). These findings further our understanding of how adult attachment styles might influence their partner-seeking behavior and interactions online and are, therefore, relevant to the proposed study.

A study was conducted to investigate adult attachment and online dating deception, also known as catfishing and this study focused on individuals who were dating online and intentionally falsely representing themselves to their romantic partner (Mosley et al., 2020). These individuals also did not have intentions of actually meeting their romantic partner face to face. Logistic regression was used to determine if attachment anxiety, avoidance, and gender predicted who would *catfish* or be *catfished*. Participants were asked about relationships that had involved catfishing, the length of such relationships, and the methods of communication that were used in such relationships. Mosley et al. found that attachment anxiety and avoidance were significant predictors for catfishing behavior and that men are more likely to be perpetrators than

women and men are more likely to be targeted; attachment anxiety was a stronger predictor of catfishing status than avoidant attachment. Results found that adult attachment style predicts the way individuals use technology to initiate, function, and communicate with their partners (Mosley et al., 2020).

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973) provides a framework that explores the emotional needs capable of predicting whether or not an individual is more likely to use deception or to be targeted by deception when it comes to online relationships in their adult lives. Research shows that there are some apparent gender differences in how adults with different attachment styles use technology that is also apparent in face-to-face relationships (Mosley et al., 2020).

The mediating effect of love in the relationship between attachment style (i.e., preoccupied, dismissive, fearful, and secure) and the expression of affection (i.e., supportive, verbal, and nonverbal) in romantic relationships was examined and results showed that love mediated the relationships between (a) preoccupied and dismissive attachment styles and affectionate expression, (b) preoccupied attachment style and supportive affection, (c) preoccupied attachment and verbal and nonverbal affection, (d) dismissive attachment style and supportive, verbal, and nonverbal affection such that love activated the desire for individuals to engage in behaviors that are likely to improve the happiness and general wellbeing of their partner (e.g., affection expression; Dillow et al., 2014). However, love did not mediate the relationship between secure and fearful attachment styles and the three different types of affectionate communication. In these relationships, individuals were not motivated by love to engage in behaviors, such as

affection expression, to improve their romantic partners happiness and general wellbeing. The results also showed that dismissive individuals may report feeling less “romantic” love but are likely to express whatever love they do feel through nonverbal, verbal, and other supportive ways though they express little affection overall. These results suggest that when people are in “romantic” love, they are encouraged to demonstrate more affectionate communication when their partner has a preoccupied attachment style (Dillow et al., 2014).

Attachment theory and the theory of close relationships were used to examine the relationship between attachment style, technology-mediated communication (TMC), and the quality of relationships among individuals who used online sources to meet their romantic partner (Goodcase et al. (2018). They hypothesized a positive association between attachment anxiety and the ratio of TMC used, suggesting that when an individual has higher attachment anxiety and is away from their partner, they are more likely to feel distressed or uncertain than secure or avoidant individuals. These individuals will be more likely to use TMC because it allows them to engage with their partner when they are away and can alleviate their feelings of distress and uncertainty. However, the hypothesized relationship between attachment avoidance and TMC was not supported by the findings; avoidant individuals did not use TMC to distance themselves from their partners. And, finally, the ratio of TMC was negatively correlated with relationship quality such that greater use of TMC diminished the quality of relationships (Goodcase et al., 2018).



### **How Attachment Theory Relates to the Study**

The Bowlby-Ainsworth Attachment theory and the theory of close relationships are appropriate foundations for this study as they provide information relevant to the ways in which attachment formation in childhood and the continuing of attachment development in adulthood can impact an individual's close relationship formation and maintenance abilities. Specifically, these theories are the basis for better understanding adult avoidant attachment styles and how these attachment styles impact romantic relationships. Adult attachment systems have various orientations, including the expectations for relationships, emotions within a relationship, and relationship behaviors that have developed as a result of the individual's attachment history (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). The proposed study will use attachment theory to better understand the behaviors and preferences of adults with avoidant attachment styles when utilizing online dating as a way to form romantic relationships, in particular what aspects of online dating individuals with avoidant attachment styles find more or less ideal.

### **How the Research Question Relates to the Theory**

The research questions will also allow for more insight into what aspects of forming relationships through online dating adults with avoidant attachment styles find to be difficult as well as which aspects they find to be beneficial. Additionally, the research questions will provide insight as to the perceived challenges and benefits for adults with avoidant attachment styles when dating online versus traditional dating. Knowing more about the dating preferences and perceived difficulties and benefits that avoidantly

attached individuals have with online dating will advance theories of attachment and close relationships applicable to modern-day dating practices.

In sum, there have been many studies conducted that explore the ways in which the previously mentioned theories can be used to explain how individuals do or may behave in their relationships as well as the way that potential relationships will form and what maintenance looks like for active relationships. The Ainsworth-Bowlby attachment theory provides a broad understanding for how experiences in childhood shape an individual and how those experiences can follow the individual into adulthood, especially the security or anxiety the individual may feel when in proximity to their attachment figure and when that attachment figure goes away. The theory of close relationships expands the Ainsworth-Bowlby attachment theory by using it to explain how those earlier experiences can influence adult romantic relationships and how those experiences may influence the way adults form and maintain their romantic relationships.

### **Literature Review Related to Key Concepts**

#### **Adult Romantic Relationships**

Romantic adult relationships are necessary for procreation. These relationships look different from not only one country to the next but from one home to the next, including cultural, racial, and age differences (Hadden et al., 2018). The way a romantic relationship is formed and maintained, and the quality and satisfaction of the people involved, also differ from one couple to the next (Ogolzky et al., 2017). Even the reasons behind romantic relationship dissolution vary from one relationship to the next, including different expectations, needs, and desires and what may make or break one relationship

may not do the same for another (Le et al., 2010). Adult romantic relationships are made of many moving parts and there is a voluminous body of research that explores them from beginning to end.

Most people strive to end up in a satisfying long-term relationship or marriage and consider this to be one of their major life goals, but finding a romantic partner is not always an easy task (Stavrova & Ehlebracht, 2015). Informed by the sexual selection for altruism hypothesis, prosocial behavior has been found to be a desirable partner characteristic for both men and women. The sexual selection for altruism hypothesis posits that sexual selection has shaped distinctively human moral merits as dependable indicators of “fitness” (i.e., adaptive for reproductive success) (Miller, 2007). The likelihood that single individuals who exhibit prosocial behavior would find a committed partner in a one-year period was examined by Stavrova and Ehlebracht (2015). Participants were asked about their prosocial behavior, social activities, and marital status. Results indicated that single individuals who tend to engage in prosocial behavior regularly had much higher chances of being in a committed relationship within a year. However, the authors noted that participants’ social activity may have confounded the results given that more time spent networking creates more opportunities to meet a romantic partner compared to individuals who are not socially active.

Whether or not an individual is ready to commit to a romantic relationship is an important factor when deciding whether to begin a relationship. To explain how commitment readiness influences relationship formation, data were collected from five different samples of single individuals to determine if commitment readiness predicted

the likelihood of an imminent relationship and the level of commitment once the relationship began (Hadden et al., 2018). Results showed that commitment readiness predicted both the pursuit of a romantic relationship and the level of commitment to it.

Heterosexual romantic couples with a particular focus on gender differences in regard to the division of labor (i.e., initiation and relationship maintenance) and relationship satisfaction and commitment were examined (Sprecher et al., 2016). Findings showed that most individuals (about 70%) felt there was balance when it came to the work required to maintain the relationship and the majority of individuals (roughly 64%) viewed the work of initiation as imbalanced. Results showed, further, that views toward maintaining—but not initiating—the relationship were related to relationship satisfaction and commitment. This study is relevant to the proposed study as it suggests that relationships may be successful even with some degree of imbalance. The tolerance for some degree of imbalance in a relationship may be contingent on attachment style and is, therefore, important to consider (Sprecher et al., 2016).

Informed by attachment theory, the dating and commitment behaviors among individuals in the early stages of romantic relationship formation were examined (Schindler et al., 2010). Schindler et al. predicted that high attachment anxiety, but not high attachment avoidance individuals, would be likely to commit to a romantic relationship. An individual's desire to pursue a committed relationship, their previous dating experience, and their self-perceived attractiveness were also examined (Schindler et al., 2010). Findings indicated that an individual's level of attachment avoidance predicted when an individual would not commit to a dating relationship, but level of

attachment anxiety did not make this prediction possible. Schindler et al. determined that prior dating success was the strongest predictor of transition from dating casually to dating commitment. Findings that identify relationship formation predictors and that demonstrate the influence of avoidant attachment on dating behaviors as a relationship progresses are relevant to the proposed exploration of participants' online dating experience.

The actions and activities that relational partners use to maintain their relationships can be either positive or negative. Whether or not a romantic partner's use of negative relational maintenance behaviors (i.e., jealousy induction, avoidance, spying, infidelity, destructive conflict, allowing control) could be predicted by relational quality indicators (i.e., relationship satisfaction, commitment, control mutuality, liking, respect) was examined by Goodboy et al. (2010). They also examined if love was able to predict whether or not negative relational maintenance behaviors would be used once relational quality was controlled for. Results indicated that negative maintenance behaviors tend to be used when relationship quality is low and once controlling for relational quality, love styles were able to predict negative relational maintenance behaviors of jealousy induction, avoidance, spying, infidelity, and destructive conflict (Goodboy et al., 2010). These results are relevant to the proposed study in that a preference for negative or positive relationship maintenance strategies may be associated with attachment style and may, therefore, influence the online dating experience.

Relationship quality is important and has been explored through various studies with results indicating that its impact differs between women and men. While men are

more likely to consume alcohol as a result of poor relationship quality, women are more likely to experience psychological distress such as depressive symptoms (Roberson et al., 2018). Relationship quality and psychological distress among females and males were examined by Roberson et al. (2018), controlling for baseline depressive symptoms and alcohol consumption. Female participants of this study initially reported low levels of both relationship quality and overall alcohol but higher levels of depressive symptoms. Results indicated changes in both the overall level of alcohol consumption and depressive symptoms related to changes in the quality of the relationship, but only for women (Roberson et al., 2018).

One factor that heavily contributes to an individual's perception of relationship quality is sexual experience (van den Brink et al., 2018). It was suggested that the social exchange theory helps to explain the importance of sexuality within romantic relationships (van den Brink et al., 2018). Informed by social exchange theory, van den Brink et al. used online surveys to question heterosexual couples about their body image, sexual satisfaction, and perceived relationship quality, hypothesizing that sexual satisfaction would mediate the relationship between body image and relationship quality. The results indicated that sexual satisfaction increased both body image positivity and romantic relationship quality, both for males and females.

Once in a relationship, the motivators to maintain the relationship can change over time and typically vary from one individual to the next. Unfortunately, not all relationships last forever and according to Joel et al. (2018), the decision to leave a relationship can forever impact those involved in its dissolution. Research shows that

when thinking about leaving a relationship, decisions are motivated by the perceived impact on the partner who will be left; in other words, the feelings of the partner being left can potentially discourage the intent to end the relationship. Joel et al. (2018) aimed to determine if a decision to terminate a romantic relationship is influenced by the other partner's feelings. The results showed that people who believed that their partners were dependent on the relationship were less likely to initiate a breakup, such that people are encouraged to stay in an unfulfilling relationship in order to spare the feelings of their partner. It may be that decisions about when to leave a relationship are related to attachment style, making these findings relevant to the proposed study.

### **Online Dating**

It has been said that we are amidst a “digital revolution” and this revolution started changing the way that people date, court, and engage in romance many years ago and changes still occur on a regular basis as technology continues to advance (Hobbs et al., 2017). Online dating allows single individuals access to a revolving door of potential partners, be it romantically or sexually. Using smartphones and other technology to access social networks and dating algorithms has begun to displace the traditional ‘matchmakers’ that used to be an individual’s family, friends, or community leaders. The places where individuals traditionally would meet potential partners have slowly but surely begun to be displaced by meeting others with whom they have no ties in online spaces. Although online dating was initially presented as somewhat taboo, using dating websites and apps is now common practice and seen as socially acceptable, though there are pros and cons (Hobbs et al., 2017).

The history and culture of the Internet were reviewed, comparing self-disclosure, conflict management, and relationship identity between computer-mediated and face-to-face interactions with implications for future practice as Internet usage becomes more prevalent (Merkle & Richardson, 2000). Motivated by Meyers' (1993) notion of psychological reward, Merkle and Richardson (2000) suggested that people prefer to be in relationships where the work they contribute is rewarded with positive outcomes. It was found that this social exchange perspective applies equally to the development and maintenance of both face-to-face and computer-mediated relationships (Merkle & Richardson, 2000)

Online dating experiences tend to vary from one individual to the next influenced by a variety of factors such as self-perceived desirability, self-perceived success, and an individual's perceived number of available partners (Alexopoulos et al., 2020). Alexopoulos et al. (2020) investigated individuals' perceptions of their mobile app dating experiences. The purpose of the study was to examine the cognitive processes involved in their intent toward infidelity with the following hypotheses: that (a) the use of a mobile dating app would be positively related to the number of perceived dating partners available, (b) perceived number of available partners would mediate the relationship between use of the mobile dating app and their intent to cheat (c) perceived success would be positively correlated to self-perceived desirability, (d) self-perceived desirability would mediate the relationship between perceived success and the intent to cheat, and (e) perceived number of partners would mediate the relationship between self-perceived success and intent to cheat. When individuals perceived themselves as



successful in their dating app experiences, their intent to stray was positively related to self-perceived desirability (Alexopoulos, 2020). Additionally, they found a negative association between the intent to cheat and the perceived number of available partners. Relevant to the proposed study, Alexopoulos et al. (2020) concluded that the availability of dating online challenges boundaries as to what type of behavior is acceptable for committed relationships, especially if they feel that they are desirable individuals. Dating online also is a challenge for single users because with so many partner options, settling down may be challenging and if they do settle, they may be more likely to cheat on future partners. It seems possible that adult romantic attachment style may play a role in the potential for these different scenarios.

For many people, online dating is often seen as an easy and efficient way to search for a romantic companion. Although online dating does have a variety of advantages, users are often uncertain about the accuracy of profile pictures and the chances of general misrepresentation of online partner information (McGloin & Denes, 2018). McGloin and Denes (2018) looked at how people enhance their dating profile pictures, specifically how enhancements influence perceived trustworthiness and how trustworthiness influences perceived attractiveness and desire to date the individual in question. The authors hypothesized that enhanced profile pictures would be perceived as more attractive than profile pictures that had not been enhanced and that people in unenhanced profile pictures would be perceived as more trustworthy than profile pictures that were enhanced. The authors hypothesized, further, that the relationship between perceived similarity and attractiveness would be mediated by perceived trustworthiness

and that perceived attractiveness will positively predict the desire to date the profiled person for reasons beyond just perceived trustworthiness and similarity. Results showed that, for men, there was a negative correlation between the attractiveness of profile pictures and trustworthiness whereas, for women, the more attractive the man (based on profile pictures) the more the perceived trustworthiness. An indirect effects model to test the association between similarity (independent variable), trustworthiness (mediating variable), and attractiveness (dependent variable) and the results indicated that perceived trustworthiness mediated the relationship between perceived similarity and attractiveness and that the desire to date was positively related to profile picture attractiveness. This means that when an individual perceives a similarity between themselves and a potential mate, they are also more likely to perceive the potential mate as more trustworthy; perceptions of similarity and trustworthiness contribute, further, to the perceived attractiveness of the potential mate. Given the results of this study, it is clear that perceived physical attractiveness plays a role in the chances that someone's online dating profile will get "traffic," encouraging people to alter their pictures to attract more potential partners, reminding people looking for a partner that they should be cautious of these potential alterations. The proposed study aims to explore the online dating behaviors of individuals with avoidant attachment styles, thus considering the level of importance avoidant individuals place on perceived physical attractiveness, trustworthiness, and similarity may need to be considered. There are many different online dating platforms that individuals use in an attempt to find a romantic partner. The Tinder dating application is one of the very well-known and most commonly used

platforms, generating roughly 1.4 billion swipes per day (LeFebvre, 2018). In order to learn more about how individuals use Tinder to participate in interpersonal relationship initiation, how they go about selecting potential mates, and the pre-interaction processes that occur prior to their interactions, LeFebvre (2018) explored the evolution of the contemporary-mediated dating culture. The author aimed to answer why people were selecting to either use or delete Tinder, what their pre-interaction preferences were, what motivated Tinder users with regard to relationship initiation swiping strategies, and what hookup experiences Tinder users were having. Results indicated that both initiating and experimenting processes do take place on Tinder after a match takes place. Yet, prior to the interaction, strategic behaviors such as choosing which mobile dating application to utilize, making choices about how an individual's personal profile will appear, and making an impression without live/face-to-face interactions taking place. LeFebvre (2018) suggests that this newly revealed information should be accounted for when considering the relationship development model. It is important to consider the influence of individual behaviors given the variety of available dating application and website options. An individual's romantic attachment style may play a role in their relationship pre-initiation behaviors, which may be important to consider when looking at their actual online dating experiences across different platforms.

An individual's social behavior changes as they age, especially related to emotion regulation and goals for interpersonal interactions; this is explained by socioemotional selectivity (Lansford et al., 1998). The socioemotional selectivity theory also explains that, as adults, people tend to focus more on finding a lifelong partner (Hallam et al.,

2019). As we age, in a constantly changing world, traditional ways of dating and presentation of opportunity no longer work for everyone. Online dating provides a way for people to initiate an offline, hopefully long-term relationship. Dating that begins online, eventually switching to dating offline, is called modality switching; trust is important in modality switching, just as it is when potential partners meet initially offline. Hallam et al. (2019) aimed to determine which personal factors would predict modality switching, hypothesizing that older online daters would be more likely to modality switch than younger online daters. Participants were 645 individuals between the ages of 18 and 73 who were asked about their level of trust in general, level of trust online, and their modality switching behavior. Results indicated that age was the only variable that predicted online dating and the likelihood of continuing the online relationship offline. The authors concluded that as individuals age, they are more inclined to modality switch, which increases the occurrence of dating offline (Hallam et al., 2019).

There are many factors that may influence an individual's online dating site usage, including age (i.e., being 30-50 years old), less trusting, less dating anxiety, and higher rejection sensitivity (Hance et al., 2018). Although research has shown that individuals higher in rejection sensitivity are more likely to use online dating sites (Blackhart et al., 2014), research has not presented a clear reason why this is the case. Two studies were conducted by Hance et al. (2018) in an attempt to explain the relationship between rejection sensitivity and online dating, the first was to replicate the findings of Blackhart et al. (2014) and the second to determine if self-disclosure mediates the relationship between presenting one's true self and online dating site/app usage.

Hance et al. (2018) were able to replicate the findings of Blackhart et al. (2014) and found that individuals who were rejection sensitive tended to feel more at ease when revealing aspects of their true selves in online environments. This explains why rejection sensitive individuals are more comfortable self-disclosing in online environments and why they are more likely to engage in online dating.

Being able to date online has significantly impacted adult romantic relationships. As a result of the ability to meet partners online, people began to change the way that they date, court, and engage with potential mates (Hobbs et al., 2017). Online dating gives people looking for a partner access to a never-ending stream of potential mates and workarounds when it comes to finding a mate despite one's own insecurities or faults. While some of the same worries are present when it comes to online dating, there are also new worries that arise.

People must worry about whether or not their online profile appropriately portrays who they are without face-to-face, live interaction; they must consider whether they should or should not conform to trends like altering pictures using filters and how choosing to conform to trends such as these might alter other people's perception of them (McGloin and Denes, 2018). Having access to unlimited potential mates may cause relationship problems because people already committed may want to keep looking (Alexopoulos et al., 2020). When dating online, the potential for withholding information may also be cause for concern (Blackhart et al., 2014). While dating online has many benefits, there are also many downsides that should be considered, but it is also worth noting that dating in person has pros and cons as well and it is simply a matter of what

someone is willing to give up and wants to gain when choosing a dating modality.

### **Avoidant Attachment Styles**

There are different working models that impact adult attachment behaviors and that these can be loosely placed into two continuous dimensions, those being secure and insecure (Ferraro & Taylor, 2021). Insecure attachment styles are then further categorized as anxious or avoidant. Avoidant people tend to fear intimacy and generally sense distrust in others. These individuals also tend to think that if they express distress they will be ignored by their partner, leading them to soothe themselves rather than seek soothing from others (Ferraro & Taylor, 2021). Avoidant adults desire autonomy and often self-isolate as a way to avoid getting too emotionally close to others (Ferraro & Taylor, 2021); they have a negative view of others and feel discomfort when relationships get too close and intimate (Vollmann et al., 2019). Vollmann et al. (2019) explained that avoidant individuals employ attachment deactivating strategies to regulate emotions, including extreme self-reliance, denying the need for attachment, and shifting attention away from any information that might encourage attachment. This behavior is typically the result of an individual having had attachment figures in their past who were unavailable. When attachment avoidance is high, emotion-related thoughts are denied and individuals tend to inhibit emotional reactions (Vollmann et al., 2019).

Previous research on attachment styles (e.g., Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) suggests that an individual's ability to cope with emotions may be related to their attachment style (Stevens, 2014). To further explore this suggestion, Stevens (2014) conducted a study to determine if individuals with different attachment styles (e.g., anxious versus avoidant)

displayed specific patterns in their ability to regulate and identify their own emotions. To examine this idea, participants were asked about their attachment styles using the Experiences in Close Relationships instrument (Brennan et al., 1998). They were also asked about their ability to cope with and awareness of their own emotions using the Difficulties in Emotional Regulation Scales (DERS; Gratz & Roemer, 2004), hypothesizing that avoidantly attached individuals would demonstrate deficits in emotional awareness and clarity but anxiously attached individuals would show deficits in emotion regulation and goal direction. The results of the study showed that there is a pattern when it comes to individuals with avoidant attachment styles and their lack of awareness related to their own emotional state and a lack of reactivity to their emotions (Stevens, 2014). Whereas individuals with anxious attachment demonstrated an amplified level of emotional awareness. Both individuals with avoidant attachment and anxious attachment demonstrated issues with identifying their feelings and being able to manage impulses (Stevens, 2014). This study concluded that individuals cope with their emotions differently as a result of their attachment style. Specifically, avoidantly attached individuals are more likely to avoid their feelings which makes them less aware of the emotions they experience and anxiously attached individuals have increased awareness when it comes to their emotions which can lead them to struggle with regulating them. Anxiously attached individuals also tend to struggle with both identifying and controlling their emotions. Stevens (2014) explains that the results of this study imply that clinicians may need to use different strategies when working with clients based on their attachment styles. This is relevant to the proposed study because the results of the study conducted

by Stevens (2014) may also imply that online dating platforms may need to consider the attachment styles of their consumers in order to help their consumers to succeed in dating online.

The extent to which gratitude toward one's partner mediates the association between attachment insecurities and romantic relationship satisfaction was examined (Vollmann et al., 2019). Participants actively involved in a romantic relationship completed questionnaires that measured experience in close relationships, gratitude, and relationship satisfaction. Vollmann et al. predicted that attachment avoidance and anxiety would be negatively related to relationship satisfaction such that higher levels of avoidance/anxiety would decrease relationship satisfaction. Results showed that individuals with higher levels of attachment anxiety and avoidance tend to experience lower romantic satisfaction and that gratitude toward one's partner is a mediating tool underlying the association between attachment avoidance and relationship satisfaction. Vollmann et al. (2019) explain that higher levels of attachment anxiety/avoidance are associated with decreased feelings of gratitude toward the partner which, in turn, lowers relationship satisfaction. This information highlights the important role that adult attachment style plays in the satisfaction with and success of romantic relationships, which should be of interest to those who build online dating platforms. The more satisfied people are with the platform, the more profitable the platform may be. Additionally, having a platform that caters to people of all attachment styles allows more opportunities for people to be successful at finding a long-term partner in the online dating world.



Adult avoidant attachment style may be perceived as limiting given that these individuals tend to suppress their emotions, avoid intimacy, and generally fear or need to escape closeness with others while still desiring romantic partners; it just may be more difficult (Vollmann et al., 2019). While adults with avoidant attachment styles may tend to isolate themselves, preferring a solitary lifestyle, they can and do still engage in long-term relationships and often resort to online dating platforms like anyone else (Chin et al., 2019). Although the insecure dimension of attachment is the primary focus of the proposed study, the secure dimension of attachment should also be considered as these individuals interact with and enter into relationships with insecure individuals. Collins (1996) explains that *secure* adults tend to be comfortable with closeness and intimacy, which is quite the opposite of *insecure* individuals who report that they are willing to rely on others when it is necessary but tend not to be concerned with rejection by others (Collins, 1996).

While secure individuals still have their concerns and struggles, they tend to think more positively about the social world and feel that other people are trustworthy, dependable, and altruistic, which allows them to be more flexible, understanding, and less likely to overreact or be easily upset when struggles emerge in a romantic relationship (Collins, 1996). Adults who have more secure working models are more likely to report positive relationship experiences, viewing them as intimate, stable, and overall satisfying. Internal working models are an individual's mental representations of oneself and others. Additionally, internal working models make it possible to understand and develop expectations about one's own relationships, including how people guide their social

interactions and the experiences that they have (Vollmann et al., 2019). Collins (1996) explains that individual differences reflected in working models are integral to shaping romantic partners' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral response patterns. Therefore, it seems important that all attachment styles and how they interact should be considered in relation to online dating platforms that aim to provide customers with a satisfactory product.

### Chapter 3: Research Methods

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how adults with avoidant attachment styles form relationships through online dating platforms, the attitudes and behaviors they commonly display as they engage in online dating, and the perceived benefits experienced with online dating. While securely individuals attached can maintain highly committed and stable relationships over time, there is no research that documents how avoidant individuals experience either in-person or online relationships over time (Hadden et al., 2013). Hazan and Shaver (1994) found that with relationships there are differences from one individual to the next that derive primarily from experiences in infancy that continue to develop throughout adulthood. Individual attachment style has been found to impact relationship security and level of intimacy. Dominigue and Mollen (2009) hypothesized that attachment style is predictive of individual communication patterns and strategies for dealing with conflict. Given the influence of attachment style on communication effectiveness, intimacy level, and romantic relationship differences, it is important to explore what role it plays in the online dating experience of individuals with a specific type of attachment style, avoidant, in this case.

In this chapter, the research design and rationale are presented followed by the role of the researcher, the study methodology, and procedures for recruitment. Additionally, data collection procedures, data analysis plan, and ethical procedures will be discussed.

## **Research Design and Rationale**

RQ1 – Qualitative: What are the online dating experiences of individuals with avoidant attachment styles?

### **Central Concepts of the Study**

Guided by Bowlby-Ainsworth's (1991) attachment theory and the theory of close relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1994), this study explores the formation of romantic relationships via online dating platforms for individuals with an avoidant attachment style, including their attitudes and behaviors and perceived benefits and pitfalls. The avoidance dimension of adult romantic attachment theory considers how comfortable, or not, individuals feel when experiencing closeness and emotional intimacy in their romantic relationships. Highly avoidant individuals tend to avoid becoming too invested in their romantic relationships, instead remaining emotionally independent; avoidants resist depending on anyone else to make them feel happy and do not want others to expect them to provide intimacy/closeness (Carter et al., 2013). Given the traits that uniquely characterize avoidant individuals, it is reasonable to expect that their online dating experience may differ from individuals characterized by more secure attachment styles. This study explored how the characteristics of avoidant individuals shape their experiences with online dating.

### **Rationale for Use of Phenomenological Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of avoidant attachment individuals engaged in online dating, including their attitudes and behaviors and benefits and pitfalls. In order to better understand the lived experience of online

dating for avoidant individuals, the phenomenological design was utilized.

Phenomenology is used to understand *what*, *why*, and *how* (Irarrázaval, 2020).

Essentially, the researcher must attempt to understand an experience through the participant's eyes. This type of study solicits responses under natural conditions from individuals with direct personal experience of the phenomenon under study rather than collecting and quantifying data in an impersonal survey-type approach (Irarrázaval, 2020). When attempting to understand an individual's feelings and intimate experiences, an in-depth interview approach is most appropriate; it allows for less structure and the latitude required for exploring personal beliefs and ideographic descriptions (Irarrázaval, 2020).

### **Role of the Researcher**

As the researcher, I acknowledged my role as a human instrument responsible for collecting and analyzing participants' responses and made sure that my interpretations accurately reflected the essence of their experiences. To better understand how individuals with avoidant attachment styles experience online dating, it was important for me to listen carefully to what they had to say. For the insights gleaned to be relevant, I was careful to hear and report participants' experiences from their perspective, not mine. I was responsible for designing the study and conducting the interviews, using follow-up probes when needed. Interview questions were reviewed by methodology experts to confirm their alignment with the study's focus.

### **Ethical Issues and Biases**

Given that I am not personally or professionally connected to any of the participants, the study poses no ethical concerns. Participants were volunteers recruited via social media. All participants were 18 years or older and were able to consent to participate on their own. Volunteers with whom I had a relationship with were excluded as well as individuals in vulnerable or protected populations. Vulnerable populations are individuals or groups of people who may not be capable of good judgment or have the potential to be coerced (Ferreira et al., 2015). This can be the case for people who lack the ability, power, or appropriate resources to make decisions for themselves. Participants were offered a \$10 Amazon gift card as a small incentive to participate in this study which they received once their interviews were complete as a thank you for their time and participation. The consent form informed them of this incentive.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection Logic**

**Target group.** The target population was individuals between the ages of 25 and 40 who identified as having an avoidant attachment style, were single (not married or in a serious monogamous relationship) and were actively dating via online platforms. The participants had to be actively seeking a serious and monogamous relationship by searching for potential partners through internet websites and mobile applications.

**Sampling strategy.** This study utilized a purposive sample strategy. Purposive sampling is used when the researcher intends for participants to meet certain preselected criteria relevant to the phenomenon under exploration (Suri, 2011). Purposive sampling

does not require a fixed sample size prior to data collection; instead, the sample size is determined when theoretical saturation has been met, meaning that additional data will not produce new insights into the phenomenon reflected in the research questions (Suri, 2011). According to (Reifman et al., 2007), between the ages of 18 and 25 years, individuals exploring their identity tend to be unstable, self-focused, feeling in-between, and focused on the broad spectrum of possibilities that life has to offer. Given the characteristics of this age group, the starting age of 25 was meant to target individuals no longer considered to be emerging adults. The end range of 40 years was intended to target a population that is most likely to use online dating applications, i.e., Millennials (Dusitpirom, 2018).

**Participant selection criteria.** This study intended to explore the lived experience of individuals with avoidant attachment styles engaged in online dating. Only individuals ages 25-40, identifying as having an avoidant attachment style, and who were actively using online dating platforms to search for a potential mate were included. After meeting these criteria there were no restrictions as to who could participate, allowing for insights from people with diverse backgrounds.

**Sample size and rationale.** Sample sizes in qualitative studies can vary quite a lot but saturation always determines the number of participants needed (Malterud et al., 2016). For a qualitative study, the sample size need not be predetermined and can be adjusted accordingly as the information is gathered and the researcher feels that saturation has been met (Malerud et al., 2016). The quality of interviews, number of interviews, experience of the researcher, and sampling procedures are all factors used to

determine the sample size needed to reach saturation (Marshall et al., 2013). According to Marshall et al. (2013), phenomenological study samples tend to range from 6 to 10. My sample was to include a minimum of 6 participants, with more to be recruited if needed to achieve saturation.

**Procedures for recruitment.** Announcements were posted in various Facebook groups, on Twitter, and on LinkedIn, asking individuals who might be interested and who met the criteria listed to email me at my university email with their contact information and preferred method of contact. I then reached out to those who expressed interest and asked them to review the consent form, including the intent of the study. They were also informed that any concerns or questions they had regarding the consent form could be communicated via email. If no further information was needed, they emailed the signed consent form to me.

### **Instrumentation**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually using Zoom to ask participants about their views, overall experiences, and purpose for using online dating platforms. An interview guide that was comprised of questions related to all aspects of avoidant individuals' experiences with online dating, including follow-up questions to make sure that participants' experiences were explored in-depth and as much information relevant to the phenomenon under study was collected (see Appendix A). These questions ensured that each participant's unique experience was documented.



### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

Participants were recruited using an invitation (see Appendix B) posted to various online platforms via my personal social media accounts (e.g., Facebook groups, Twitter, and LinkedIn). Inclusion criteria for participation was detailed in the announcement, including individuals ages 25 to 40, who answered yes to the statement that classified them as having an avoidant attachment style, and who were actively using online dating platforms to search for a potential mate. The invitation also included the purpose of the study and my contact information.

Once a sufficient number of participants who met the criteria had been in contact with a signed consent form, I worked with them to schedule their virtual interview. Virtual interviews (e.g., zoom) rather than in-person interviews were required. To ensure consistency, all participants were asked the same interview questions. The one-on-one virtual interviewing allowed for a personalized experience where participants could feel comfortable sharing their information without the potential for others to pass judgment. Interviews were conducted in one session and did not exceed 90 minutes.

At the start of the interview, I reminded participants that their remarks would be recorded and later transcribed. During the interview, I noted both my reactions to participant disclosures and their general behavior. The interview guide was used to ensure that the research questions remained the focus and that information was gathered pertaining to those questions. At the end of the interview, participants were thanked, given the opportunity to ask questions and/or express concerns about the study, provided with their \$10 Amazon gift card, and informed as to when and how they would receive a

copy of their interview transcript. I asked participants for their preferred method of contact, should any part of the interview need clarification and/or follow-up. If participants had no further questions/comments, the video interview and recording were concluded.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Analyzing data that has been collected using the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework was very complex and time-consuming as it was important for me to be continually immersed in the process. I did my best to view the phenomenon of interest from the perspective of the participants when analyzing the data. There were many steps required in the data analysis process. I first used Microsoft Word to transcribe my interviews, I followed this up by reading through the transcript while playing the audio recordings to be sure that the interviews were transcribed verbatim and made corrections as needed. Transcriptions were sent to participants to verify that the transcript accurately depicted their thoughts and feelings about their experiences. Next, I began to organize the data and familiarize myself with the transcripts from the interviews to prepare them for analysis before precoding could begin; precoding occurred when I took the time to read, question, and engage with the data before beginning the formal process of coding (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Listening to and then transcribing the interviews followed by several readings of the transcripts, familiarized me with the participants' holistic experience (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). While reviewing the transcribed interviews, I took notes, highlighting recurring words and phrases. Once precoding was complete, I began officially coding the data. Coding is the process whereby codes are

assigned to words or phrases that capture some aspect of the phenomenon under study. Coding helped me break down the data into manageable segments.

I used the MAXQDAT data management software to organize the data in a way that made analyzing it less time-consuming. I was able to color-code information gathered from interviews as well as create memos to help organize my thoughts on the data. Having completed the coding, I sorted and made sense of the codes by grouping related codes; this began the categorization process (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). When categorizing, I paid particular attention to similarities and differences among the codes as a basis for consolidating codes into categories. Finally, themes that captured the essence of participants' experience began to emerge as codes were consolidated into categories and categories were reduced to themes.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

#### **Credibility**

In order to establish credibility, I incorporated research reflexivity, bracketing, and member checks. The purpose of this was to make sure that biases were not present and that the participant's responses were interpreted correctly.

**Researcher reflexivity.** Reflexivity refers to the researcher continuously engaging in self-reflection to be sure that they are aware of, acknowledge, and then set aside their preconceptions and biases (Darawsheh, 2014). By remaining reflexive, I was able to make changes along the way to ensure that my study findings accurately reflect the participants' experiences untainted by my biases (Darawsheh, 2014). Because

subjectivity is hard to avoid, as humans are inherently subjective, I was sure to make note of any personal reactions I had throughout the process.

**Bracketing.** Bracketing is a method that is used to help mitigate the potential for personal biases to contaminate the research process (Darawsheh, 2014). To that end, I identified and then set aside my prior knowledge, beliefs, values, and experiences regarding the phenomenon to ensure that the findings reflected participants' experiences rather than my own.

**Member checking.** To do this, transcriptions of participant interviews were emailed to them to confirm their accuracy. This allowed me to make any corrections identified by participants. The participants should feel as though their reality is accurately represented in their interview transcriptions (Cho & Trent, 2006). I checked in with participants and let them know that if they felt any mistakes had been made, they should communicate that with me and that I would correct them accordingly. No participants responded with requests to alter their transcripts.

### **Transferability**

To achieve transferability, I have provided sufficient detail so that other researchers can apply the procedures used to other contexts, situations, times, and populations. I have provided rich detail about all aspects of the research process (e.g., how and where the data were collected, a detailed description of the methodology used, and detailed information about the analysis process). By providing this information, the reader will be able to better understand the circumstances under which the data were collected (Treharne & Riggs, 2014). Ravitch and Carl (2019) explain that qualitative

research must provide descriptive and relevant detail, sufficient to be applied to broader contexts.

### **Dependability and Confirmability**

I used an audit trail to document all research procedures, including raw data, data reduction and analysis products, process notes, materials relating to intentions and dispositions, instrument development information, and data reconstruction products. I was sure to enhance the audit process by maintaining a decision trail that is adequate to explain my reasons for categorizing data a certain way and making certain inferences about my analysis. This will permit other researchers to verify that my findings are consistent with the raw data and that by following the procedures I used and the decisions I made, others will arrive at similar findings and draw similar conclusions (Kemparaj & Chavan, 2013).

### **Ethical Procedures**

Participant recruitment and data collection began once I received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). I replied to all prospective participant inquiries about my posts on various online platforms via my personal social media accounts (e.g., Facebook groups, Twitter, and LinkedIn) and instructed the participants to email me stating their interest in participating. In my email reply, I introduced myself and provided a brief explanation of the purpose of the study and a copy of a consent form for them to review and sign digitally. As recommended by Ravitch and Carl (2019), this consent form included information describing the study, clear communication that the study is voluntary and that they have the right to withdraw at any time, participant expectations,

any potential risks (e.g., emotional upset, stress), and protections taken to ensure participant confidentiality. Participants' names have not been used in the study; they have been referred to only by participant number or interview date in my audio recordings, notes, and transcripts. All information was emailed via encrypted, password-protected email with a requirement for signature by the intended recipient. All data has been kept in locked filing cabinets and on a password-protected hard drive that is accessed only by me. As required by the IRB, the data will be stored for five years and then destroyed.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to provide details of the essential concepts of the study, including the research design and rationale for its use, participant selection, recruitment and data collection procedures, justification for the sample size, and instrumentation. Ethical considerations and strategies used for achieving trustworthiness were also discussed.

Chapter four will provide participant demographics, data collection and analysis procedures, concluding with a discussion of the results.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the online dating experiences of adults with avoidant attachment styles using Bowlby-Ainsworth's (1991) attachment theory and the theory of close relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). Using semi-structured interviews, the IPA approach was selected as it allowed me to gain a clearer understanding of each participant's lived experiences. Interview questions solicited information about romantic relationship formation using online platforms, perceived benefits and pitfalls, and comfort level experienced by participants who self-identified as avoidant.

RQ –What are the online dating experiences of individuals with avoidant attachment styles?

This chapter reviews the setting in which the interviews took place and the demographics of the participants who were interviewed. This chapter also presents the data collection and analysis procedures, evidence of trustworthiness, and results, ending with a summary and transition to Chapter 5.

### **Setting**

The research study was conducted over a personal and password-secure computer using the program Zoom and was conducted from my personal home office with a closed door and no one else was in the home. The participants were not required to use the video feature in the Zoom program or disclose their location. All six interviews took between 30 and 50 minutes and were completed while the participant was in a location of their choice, using either a personal computer, tablet, or phone to participate. None of the

participants appeared to have environmental distractions and all were focused and attentive during their interviews.

### **Demographics**

The target population was adults, ages 25 to 40, actively using online dating platforms to search for potential partners. Disclosure of sexual orientation, gender identity, and race were not requested. All participants are currently living in the United States, five were female and one was male. Specific details, such as exact age and precise location, were not requested.

### **Data Collection**

After approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB), IRB approval # 07-06-22-0567192, participant recruitment began. The approved research flyer for the study was posted on multiple social media platforms shortly after approval was received. The flyer was posted on my personal Instagram and Facebook story, on my personal Twitter, TikTok, and LinkedIn accounts, and in various Facebook social groups. Potential participants were directed to email me to express interest in participating in the study. After receiving emails expressing interest, I emailed a copy of the informed consent notice and asked participants to verify that they met the criteria for participation and, if so, respond to the email stating “I consent.” Once these steps were complete, available interview dates and times were discussed with participants and invites to a Zoom interview session were then sent.

To gather data, a single Zoom interview taking less than 60 minutes was conducted with each of the six participants. The participants were notified that the



interviews would be recorded and transcribed before the beginning of the session. The interviews were recorded using Zoom and stored in both a password-protected Zoom account and a password-protected personal computer accessed only by me. The interviews were audio recorded and initially transcribed using the Zoom program and they were conducted in the privacy of my home office. To protect participants' identity, interview recordings were stored by saving the interview title as the date of the interview rather than the participant's name. Participants were notified that their names would not be disclosed. All data were collected between October 2022 and February 2023.

Transcriptions were initially done using the downloadable transcript option offered through a paid Zoom subscription. I then transferred the transcripts to a Microsoft Word document and, to ensure accuracy listened through the interview audio and made edits to correct any errors made by the auto-transcription Zoom software. The Microsoft Word documents containing the transcriptions were copied into my password-protected Google Docs account as well as stored on my personal password-protected laptop. The Microsoft Word documents were uploaded into the MAXQDA software for coding. The six initial participants provided ample information and after a review of the data from the final participant, no new codes were revealed, indicating that saturation had been achieved.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis utilized Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6-phase thematic analysis process.

#### **Familiarization**

Data were analyzed using the MAXQDAT data management software. All interview transcriptions were uploaded via individual Microsoft Word documents into the

coding software program. I read through all interview transcriptions multiple times to familiarize myself with the data. Initial impressions of the data, such as remarks that seemed interesting and/or unique, were noted in a separate Microsoft Word document titled *coding notes* (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### **Generating Initial Codes**

The first step was to produce initial codes, using the MAXQDA software. This software provides the tools needed to code data but is a manual process that is done by selecting the text of interest and assigning a code. When I came across a word or phrase that seemed interesting and meaningful, I highlighted the text and assigned a fitting code. New codes were created as needed and were created with the subject matter in mind, usually 1-3 words in length. An example of this would be coding data that discusses what someone is looking for in a partner or a *potential mate*. New codes were created when relevant data did not seem to fit with any of the codes that had already been created, or the selected data were added to a code that had already been created. Once the data were uploaded into the MAXQDA, I used a systematic approach to assign labels to phrases relevant to the research question. As I read through the data, I highlighted any that were of interest and added a code. The highlighted data are known as text extracts (i.e., single words and entire phrases). The process of highlighting the data of interest and assigning a code to it is also known as ‘tagging’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Some text extracts were tagged for multiple codes, as the content was relevant to more than one code. Any text extracts with the same meaning were tagged with the same code. Any new data were incorporated into the previously created code.

In cases where the data provided more specific detail about a previously created code, a subcode was created to help further inspect and capture some nuance that the broader code would not have revealed. With my research question in mind, I consolidated codes into categories, helping to organize the data into groups that would eventually become themes. I did this by initially identifying codes that seemed especially relevant to the research question or that were repeated, organizing related codes into broader categories based on the subject matter.

Next, all text extracts from the participant responses associated with the same code were consolidated and reviewed. Codes were adjusted, revised, and merged when needed. All told, there were 16 initial codes and 51 subcodes created. After continuing to review and revise, some codes were merged and some subcodes were eliminated due to a lack of relevance or supportive data from text extracts. An example of this was the merging of subcodes *more successful* and *less successful* into one subcode of *success*. This subcode was subsumed under the *personal experiences compared to others* code. I created a Final Coding Table (Table 1) which displays the final 16 codes and their descriptions as well as the 31 resulting subcodes.

***Table 1 Final Coding Table***

<b>Code</b>	<b>Subcode</b>
Goals	Descriptions of what participants hope to gain by dating online.
Participant Characteristics	Ways in which participants describe their own personality

		characteristics, needs, and behaviors.
Personal experience compared to others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Readiness</li> <li>• Higher standards</li> <li>• Success</li> </ul>	Descriptions of reasons participant chose to start and continue to utilize online dating platforms.
Why Online dating		Descriptions of outcomes and experiences related to face-to-face dating.
Relationships initiated face-to-face		Descriptions of outcomes and experiences related to face-to-face dating.
Behaviors to meet mate		Descriptions of ways participants may behave in order to try to attract mates and be sure the right connections are made.
Potential mate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Interest</li> <li>• Honesty</li> <li>• Safety</li> <li>• Respect</li> </ul>	Descriptions of characteristics and behavior of potential mate.
Negative experiences		Describing poor outcomes and experiences in relationships that were initiated online.

Positive Experiences	Descriptions of experiences with online dating that have added value to participants' lives or encouraged future interactions.
Online Dating History	Information discussing online dating history including length of time and platform utilization.
Platforms	Discussion of types of platforms used to meet potential mates online.
Relationships initiated online	Descriptions of experiences specific to relationships initiated online.
Downfalls of online dating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Missing Pieces</li> <li>• Dishonesty</li> <li>• Hookup culture</li> <li>• Conveniency</li> </ul> Descriptions of how online dating takes away from participant happiness or success and motivation related to dating.
Benefits of online dating	Descriptions of reasons why online dating adds value to life or assists participants.

Causes of avoidance	Descriptions of behaviors of personal characteristics that would cause participants to not want to meet in person or further engage in conversation.
Initial Interactions Online	Descriptions of initial interactions with potential mates online. Including behaviors of themselves and others.

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### Categories

Initial codes were then consolidated into categories. To do this, I organized codes into groups that addressed the research question. During this process, some initial codes (e.g., potential mate and participant characteristics) formed main categories, while all other initial codes were sorted into five additional categories. The final list consisted of seven code groups: *behaviors*, *attitudes*, *positive aspects*, *negative aspects*, *participant characteristics*, *potential mate characteristics*, and *motivation*. Categories were assigned definitions that reflected their essential meaning. Within these seven groups were sixteen codes: *Behaviors to meet mate*, *relationships initiated face-to-face*, *relationships initiated online*, *goals*, *personal experiences compared to others*, *initial interactions online*, *platforms*, *online dating history*, *positive experiences*, *benefits of online dating*, *negative experience*, *downfalls of online dating*, *causes of avoidance*, *participant characteristics*, *potential mate*, and *why online dating* which are all represented in Table 2.

*Table 2 Categorizing Codes*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Relevant Codes</b>
<b>Behaviors:</b> How the participants engage with and respond to potential mates.	Behaviors to meet mate Relationships initiated face-to-face Relationships initiated online
<b>Attitudes:</b> How participants think and feel about using online dating to search for a partner.	Goals Personal experiences compared to others Initial interactions online Platforms Online dating history
<b>Positive Aspects:</b> Positive outcomes and interactions the participant has experienced.	Positive experiences Benefits of online dating
<b>Negative Aspects:</b> Negative outcomes and interactions the participant has experienced.	Negative experience Downfalls of online dating Causes of avoidance
<b>Participant Characteristics:</b> Personality characteristics and values of participants.	Participant characteristics
<b>Potential Mat Characteristics:</b> Desired characteristics and actions of potential mates.	
<b>Motivation:</b> Information related to purpose of using online dating.	Why online dating

Following the grouping of codes into 7 categories, I reviewed the information with the intent to revise the categories/groups and refine them to ensure that each category included a sufficient number of codes to support its relevance and uniqueness. In some instances, codes in a category that were not clear and/or meaningful were excluded. There was no need to merge categories, as they were all unique.

### **Themes and subthemes**

At this point, coded data in each category was further reviewed to identify and create themes and subthemes. While categories are created to consolidate related codes, themes emerge from the categories that reflect the essence of participants' lived experience. As I reviewed the coded and categorized data, essential aspects of participants' experience became clearer. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a theme is apparent when something relevant to the overall research question stands out. This inductive approach to thematic analysis is a bottom-up process, starting with the raw data and working toward the *emergent* themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As I moved through the process of creating themes, some of the code and category names were changed to be clearer. Additionally, as previously done when creating categories, some codes were either deleted altogether, merged, or reorganized into more fitting categories to make the process of creating themes more straightforward and comprehensive. Themes became apparent when groups of coded data assisted in telling a "story" about participants' lived experience as related to the research questions. Upon completion of this process, I had 5 themes and 4 subthemes. The results of this can be viewed in Table 3.

***Table 3 Themes and Subthemes***

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>
<b>Theme 1:</b> Other people dating online have different goals and standards than me.	
<b>Theme 2:</b> People online often put up a façade and have poor communication skills and follow-through abilities.	<b>2.1</b> The convenience of online dating seems to encourage laziness and quick turnover.
<b>Theme 3:</b> I like dating online because it allows me to pick and	<b>3.1</b> I like to be in control.



choose who I want to interact with and when.

**3.2** I am more comfortable being able to “screen” my potential mates before meeting.

**Theme 4:** Intentionality, honesty, and good communication skills are important when interacting with potential mates.

**4.1** It is important to set boundaries.

**Theme 5:** Online dating is an accessible and convenient way to meet new people without wasting my time.

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### **Producing the report**

Once I had my set of themes that had been fully reviewed and worked out, I began to analyze the themes and start writing up the report of my findings. The purpose of this step in thematic analysis is to convey a clear and concise message to the reader about what the data have revealed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The report should communicate not only the story reflected in each theme but across them as well (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To convey this clear message, data excerpts should be included to emphasize what exactly the participants experienced and why those experiences were interesting and relevant to the overall themes.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

#### **Credibility**

I was able to achieve credibility by using reflexivity, bracketing, and member checking. Completing these steps during the data collection and analysis processes allowed me to set aside potential biases and misinterpretations of participant responses.

***Researcher reflexivity.*** As I collected and interpreted data from the study

participants, I was actively reflecting on my thoughts and perceptions, making sure to set aside any biases and/or preconceptions that could taint my results. I kept a reflexive journal during the process to take note of my reactions to participant responses, allowing me to make any changes that seemed appropriate and necessary. Maintaining reflexivity throughout the process ensured that it was the participants' experiences being captured rather than my perception of them. I did think initially that this may be a challenge, but participants provided such clear complete pictures of their unique experiences that any distortions, influenced by my own biases, were avoided.

***Bracketing.*** Bracketing was used to mitigate personal biases with the potential to contaminate the research process. Before and during the process, I took note of any preconceptions rooted in my prior knowledge, beliefs, values, and experiences regarding online dating among adults with avoidant attachment styles. I did not allow any of these things to influence my research but rather allowed the participants to recount their own experiences.

***Member checking.*** The member-checking process was completed by emailing interview transcriptions to participants to confirm their accuracy and asking them to review the transcripts and inform me of any discrepancies. None of the participants reported having found mistakes or discrepancies.

### **Transferability**

To achieve transferability, I have provided rich detail describing my study procedures from start to finish. This will allow other researchers to apply the procedures to other contexts, situations, and populations. Especially important to transferability are

details of the recruitment and interview processes, such as the setting in which interviews took place and participant demographics. According to Ravitch and Carl (2019), qualitative studies need to be descriptive and provide relevant detail so that the procedures can be applied to broader contexts. I have provided this information.

### **Dependability and Confirmability**

To document a stepwise account, I utilized an audit trail during the data collection and analysis procedures. I also maintained a decision trail that explains my reasoning for categorizing data the way I did and how I justified my inferences. Doing this allows other researchers to verify that my findings are justified by the data and that by following the same procedures using the same decision-making process, the results and conclusions drawn from them would be similar (Kemperaj & Chavan, 2013). Ravitch and Carl (2021) explain that the purpose of confirmability is to explore how your biases find their way into your interpretation of data and that you mitigate those biases in all ways possible during the process. Reflexivity and an audit trail were both utilized to ensure that my personal biases and preconceptions did not impact my interpretations of the data.

### **Results**

The primary research question that drove my study was: What are the online dating experiences of adults with avoidant attachment styles? Five themes emerged from the data, offering insights into the online dating experiences of adults with avoidant attachment styles, including what behaviors attract desirable mates, what their goals are with online dating, and what makes them want to date online.

#### **What your current goals are with online dating?**

***Theme 1: Other people dating online have different goals and standards.***

A common theme that emerged from the data is participants' concern with the different goals and standards people have when searching for a potential mate. This theme encompasses not only the potential mates that participants are seeking but also touches on other people the participants know who are also dating online.

P1: I would like to meet some guy that we can be really good friends, but in turn, it'd be romantic. So, they're just kinda on there for this and that, or we're all in there for different reasons like they might want to stroke their ego for a little bit.

P2: Yeah, my current goal is to meet someone to potentially have a long-term relationship with. I am actively talking to a few people, and I'm making it clear to the people that I'm talking to that I'm also talking to other people. So that way, we have an understanding and set expectations of what each other is doing.

P3: "I'm looking for a decent guy that could potentially build into a relationship."

P4: "I mean I do want a long-term relationship. I'm tired of being alone. I've been alone for 7 years now, so that is what I'm looking for."

P5: "And I feel like, maybe a lot of people on dating apps don't necessarily know like exactly what they want..."

P6: "But yeah, I don't think a lot of people um on online platforms are looking for exactly what I am looking for... "

As a whole, participants in this study had shared feelings about their purpose for online dating as different from the purposes of the individuals with whom they were connecting online. Participants found this aspect of online dating discouraging as they

expressed desires for long-term committed relationships, while they felt their potential mates were wanting to 'hook-up' or date around.

**What downfalls do you see when it comes to online dating?**

*Theme 2: People online often put up a façade and have poor communication skills and follow-through abilities.*

Multiple participants expressed concerns about people pretending to be someone they aren't or lacking the ability to properly communicate and follow through with plans. Participants described the specifics of these perceived downfalls of online dating.

P1: But then I'm like it's the same problems online because most guys are getting a divorce, and it's not even final yet and they're getting on there. And they work a lot or they travel a lot to work, you know. So, they're just kinda on there for this and that, or we're all in there for different reasons like they might want to stroke their ego for a little bit and oh, this chick likes me she went out with me cool.  
Done.

P2: So just like not being truthful and that obviously has to deal with the person more than the app. So just people not being truthful, or people not being honest about what they want or what they need, can also impact the experience and honestly, it says a lot about a person when they like make those meetups and the planning and consideration that they do know the other person's preference and the other person's limitations and abilities. It just says a lot about them.

P5: You really don't know who you're talking to until you meet this person. And that you can see, like their body, language, and their confidence in like what's

going on. But like online, yeah, they could appear to be like this really wonderful stable person and then in real life, it's actually just like a bundle of nerves, and like not really much going for them.

**Sub Theme 2.1: *The convenience of online dating encourages laziness and quick turnover.*** A few of the participants expressed concern over the ability to easily move from one prospective partner to the next, comparing the experience to online shopping.

P1: Probably like the attention span of both me and them like again it's kinda like it's just so quick. It's almost like if you don't immediately click with someone you're like, well, just go back, and find someone else to chat up. And you kind of start to process over, and then I feel like it does a disservice to both people because anyone can have a bad first date.

P1: However, I think it's kinda like a lot of matches, so it gets overwhelming at times, and then sometimes it's almost like online shopping.

P5: And I feel like, maybe a lot of people on dating apps don't necessarily know like exactly what they want when you find somebody else that knows what they want.

While participants generally enjoyed the distance that online dating allows and appreciated that they can pick and choose when to respond to their potential mates and which mates to pursue, they also felt that online dating makes it too easy to move on. They felt that there were so many options that moving on without ever really pursuing someone was too easy and their potential mates can do the same. Finding a partner who

feels trustworthy was also important to them, yet most felt that many of their interactions were with people who were not trustworthy. They also felt that people they met online did a poor job at communicating what they were looking for as well as making plans and sticking to them. The online aspect made it a bit more challenging for participants to read the intentions of their potential mates given that communication was often inconsistent or fragmented.

**What benefits do you see when it comes to online dating?**

**Theme 3: Dating online allows for the opportunity to pick and choose who you interact with and when.**

Almost all of the participants expressed that one of the desirable aspects of online dating for them is the fact that you get to pick and choose whom you interact with. They explained that they enjoy being able to ask important questions before actually meeting and have the opportunity to build a certain level of trust and comfort before an in-person meeting as well.

P1: You know, meeting new people, and it's almost kind of like interviewing to me like. The more you interview, the more you get into it So it's like practice.

You know, when you do meet someone, you're really interested in.

P2: I honestly would prefer the online date, probably, even if all these things didn't happen, because you can start to build that conversation, because unless I can communicate with my partner and that's a very important value with me is communication, at the beginning then I would you even pursue a partner like that.

P3: So, one of the things that I like with more current apps is, there is a little more depth to it. It's multiple images, you know. Hinge now they do, you can do like a voicemail, prompt, and even now a video prompt.

P4: So right now, I'm just on Facebook dating and hinge and I think Facebook dating is probably my primary one, and like I said that one I like most because it's convenient. I also like it, because I feel like there is a good variety of people on there, and I feel like I feel like Facebook dating is one of the safer ones. I can't tell you why I think that that's just my perception of it.

***Sub Theme 3.1: I like to be in control.*** Half of the participants discussed aspects of online dating that they are able to control and reasons that they enjoy those aspects. Factors like having the ability to set boundaries, easily end the relationship, and choose whether or not to initiate contact were mentioned.

P3: “One of the things that I really liked about Bumble is the girl has to make the initial contact.”

P4: I have social anxiety uhhh (giggles) So I mean meeting someone in person is incredibly anxiety inducing to me, even after like it's someone that I've been talking to and I think it's because I lack some self-confidence and so I would rather get to know a person via like text or messaging before I meet them in person, just because I have, like a fear of rejection I would say.

***Sub Theme 3.2: Being able to “screen” my potential mate before meeting comforts me.*** The ability to get to know a bit about a person before meeting face-to-face was mentioned as a desirable aspect of online dating.



P2: "...communicating wise, if they're communicating a lot, and they constantly want to text, they constantly want to call they constantly want to video chat, I will cut that off right away because I don't have time for that. Nor do I want that type of relationship... I am also very independent, and I also like to do things outside of my relationship."

P4: Yes, whereas with online Dating I can yeah really like kind of think about it and take that time to evaluate what they're saying to me and pick it apart. Which is what I do, um whereas that's a little bit more difficult to do in person, I think.

Participants expressed their appreciation for how online dating allows them to do things at their own pace and to have control over who they interact with and to what extent. Most of them explained that they do not enjoy being in typical environments where people go to find potential mates. They also appreciate that they can get a feel for a person without committing to meeting them, making them feel more comfortable with taking a relationship into an offline environment.

**What types of behavior would encourage you to want to meet a potential mate in person?**

***Theme 4: Intentionality, honesty, and good communication skills are important when interacting with potential mates.***

All 6 of the participants have more desire to meet a potential mate in person when the potential mate demonstrates intentionality and honesty during initial interactions.

P1: My time is really valuable, so if I'm really interested in the guy and I want to meet him, I straight up say so are we gonna meet or what? If you wanna meet me

here's my number, and I've done that before, too, like here is my number. If you wanna go out on a date, you can message me and then I just leave it at that.

P3: Yeah, so I think communication is key, so it always stands out to me a when a guy is able to communicate, and with full sentences, it always stands out to me when there's something that clearly, they read my profile, because they comment on something, or they ask a question about something that I put on there. So, there's just you know to me it's pretty basic like, hey, I see you. I notice you. Let's start a conversation.

**Sub Theme 4.1: *It is important to set boundaries.*** Half of the participants discussed the importance of boundaries during initial interactions with potential mates. This includes being able to set boundaries and having boundaries respected.

P2: Yeah, and then also, like a lot of times for me, sexual attraction doesn't come until I actually get to know them and get to know them as a person. that's not gonna come from me at the beginning. So a lot of that is going to help before meeting them. I'm going to already start to feel okay. Maybe I can see potential with this person. Otherwise, if I was meeting them just in person, I'm not gonna feel anything towards them.

P2: I would hope my partner would like to do things without me as well to have that little bit of separation and so that is important to me because I like to volunteer, and I don't. And sometimes I'd like to volunteer with my partner, but sometimes I also just want to hang out with my friends, because it adds a different dynamic and a different setting and different groups.

Participants placed a lot of value on potential mates displaying intentionality and honesty during their initial interactions. They also wanted to see potential mates be strong communicators and accepting of boundaries. In general, participants wanted to see their potential mates show a strong interest in meeting offline and the ability and willingness to do so promptly once discussed. It was also important that potential mates be honest about their characteristics and intentions early on. Additionally, participants placed a lot of importance on being able to set boundaries up front and have those boundaries be understood and respected.

**Why do you think online dating is a good option for you?**

***Theme 5: Online dating is an accessible and convenient way to meet new people without wasting time.***

P1: "I do feel like there's a little better quality than just going to sit at a bar or something and meeting someone because you don't know that person if they're even looking for a relationship."

P1: So, I'd say accessibility, even making friends. Like I've made quite a few friends, and sometimes we'll meet out in a big group. They'll hang out, and then they can introduce you to people, or they might connect with a friend of yours. So, I like that, So probably just the accessibility, and like the social aspect of it. You know, meeting new people, and it's almost kinda like interviewing to me like. The more you interview, the more you get into it so it's like practice. You know, when you do meet someone, you're really interested in.

P2: I'm not necessarily gonna go to all these other places, and I'm an introvert, so I'm not as much sociable as I would like to be. But yeah, there's more opportunities to meet people with similar interests and similar personality styles as mine through the online platforms rather than going to a party and meeting someone at that kind of venue.

P4: It's convenient. It. It gives me the chance to like to take a minute or 2, or 5, even to decide if I want to pursue that person or not, whereas if um someone is right in my face in a natural situation, there might be more pressures. Whereas with online dating I can yeah really like kind of think about it and take that time to evaluate what they're saying to me and pick it apart. Which is what I do, um whereas that's a little bit more difficult to do in person, I think.

P5: Just because I'm working on myself and learning how to set boundaries with people face to face and not come off as like super, nervous, and kind of like, willing to fall into like a fawning sort of state. I would rather, yeah, like, set my boundaries like kind of right up front and have that be the expectation when I meet them, and I can like restate them if needed. But yeah, it's just a little more difficult, like face to face, especially when um yeah, I'm unsure of, like the safety of the person.

Accessibility was important to participants, as most were concerned with wasting time. They felt that being able to avoid meeting someone in person saved time, allowing them to easily sift through potential mates online rather than going from one meeting place to the next looking for someone. Some participants also

felt that dating online allowed opportunities for building friendships and networking in addition to searching for a mate. In general, the ability to quickly decide if they were interested and to either continue or discontinue engaging accordingly was viewed as a major benefit.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to explore the online dating experiences of adults with avoidant attachment styles. Six individuals who identified as having avoidant attachment styles and were actively using only dating platforms to pursue a potential mate were interviewed. All participants had been dating online for more than two years and were seeking a long-term relationship. Interviews took place via Zoom and the participant's responses were explored to determine common themes across all interviews. In chapter 4, the data collected during participant interviews was analyzed and five themes that supported the conceptual framework for the study and provided an answer to the research question emerged. These themes clearly describe the overall experiences of adults with avoidant attachment styles who were dating online.

The five themes were (a) other people dating online have different goals and standards, (b) people online often put up a façade and have poor communication skills and follow-through abilities, (c) dating online allows for the opportunity to pick and choose who you interact with and when, (d) intentionality, honesty, and good communication skills are important when interacting with potential mates, and (e) online dating is an accessible and convenient way to meet new people without wasting time. Chapter 5 I will further examine these themes and how they are supported by the

conceptual framework.

Chapter 5 will discuss interpretations of the key findings of this study supported by the theory of close relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1994), which expands Bowlby-Ainsworth's (1991) attachment theory by explaining how experiences early in life influence the way adults form and maintain their romantic relationships. I will also review the strengths and limitations of the study. At the end of Chapter 5, there will be a discussion of recommendations for future research as well as implications for positive social change.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the online dating experiences of adults with avoidant attachment styles. This study addressed a gap in the literature by providing insight into how adults who identify with avoidant attachment styles perceive their online dating experiences and the attitudes and behaviors of others in the online dating space in relation to their own. There has not been any specific research conducted on how adults with avoidant attachment styles experience online dating, though there is ample research that describes their experience in a general sense. For example, Edelstein and Shaver (2004) determined that adults who are avoidant tend to constantly maintain distance from those they have close relationships with, and Carter et al. (2013) found that they also have difficulty fully investing in their relationships, having a strong desire to be emotionally independent. My findings support the idea that adults with avoidant attachment styles attempt to keep their partners at a distance both physically and psychologically, thus avoiding emotional displays that would be inviting to potential partners. As a result, avoidant individuals avoid potential rejection, as they are unlikely to express their wants and needs which, then, cannot be denied.

A qualitative approach was chosen to explore the lived experiences of adults with avoidant attachment styles who were actively using online dating to search for a potential mate. IPA was used to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences, and data collection was done by conducting semi-structured interviews, providing insights into how the participants perceived their own experiences.

## **Summary of Key Findings**

Five themes emerged from the collected data. First, people with avoidant attachment styles dating online believe that other people dating online have different goals and standards than they do. All the participants expressed that they were concerned that both their potential mates, and other people they know who were dating online, are likely looking for something different than they are. Many of the concerns were centered around potential mates pretending to be someone they were not and lack of ability to follow through when plans were made for in-person meetings. Most participants expressed positive attitudes toward dating online, allowing them to pick and choose with whom they interact, improving their chances of avoiding negative interactions. All participants reported that intentionality, honesty, and good communication skills are the most desirable behaviors potential mates can display during initial interactions. All participants also expressed thoughts about the accessibility and convenience of online dating, appreciating the fact that online dating allowed them to avoid wasting time while searching for a potential mate and meeting new people in general.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

**Research Question: What are the online dating experiences of individuals with avoidant attachment styles?**

The online dating experiences of adults with avoidant attachment styles were explored by taking an in-depth look at their firsthand experiences using both Bowlby-Ainsworth's attachment theory (1991) and the theory of close relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). I will organize the interpretation of findings by themes.



***Theme 1: Other people dating online have different goals and standards.***

The way that individuals behave tends to change as they get older, this is especially true regarding their goals for interpersonal interactions, an idea explained by the socioemotional theory (Lansford et al., 1998). While the socioemotional selectivity theory supports the idea that people, in general, are looking for a lifelong partner, the participants in this study believe most potential mates they interacted with did not share that goal. The participants tended to believe that other people are using online platforms to 'hook up.' P1 said, "I'm looking for somebody to start building a future with." As a result of this perception, the participants in this study often had specific standards their potential mates had to meet before they would be willing to interact. Most of the participants had very clear goals laid out for their potential relationships and were unwilling to settle. For the most part, the participants were aware of this, and some even expressed that they felt other people were only successful dating online because they did not have high standards or had different relationship goals. P6 said, "...a lot of people that use online dating or at least the online dating platforms that I use, are the people that are just looking short short-term dating."

Research conducted by Hazan and Shaver (1994) supports these findings. Their research highlights the fact that adult attachment, unlike childhood attachment, is meant to work in both directions, meaning there is a desire for goals and standards to be met. Adults expect attachment to be reciprocal, in the way that each partner both provides and receives care and security. The participants in this study seemed to perceive other people on online dating platforms did not match their goals and standards and the participants

were unwilling to compromise their wants and needs. P2 said:

I know my personality, and I don't necessarily give off the most warmest vibe so, and I make that very clear from the beginning. Like If I have something that's bothering me. I'm just gonna tell you because I don't want you to have to guess It's not part of my system. And like it's not going to work. And you're just not going to be happy trying to guess what it is.

This unwillingness to compromise was seemingly due to the fear of ultimately not receiving proper care and security (Hazan & Shaver, 1994).

While multiple participants seemed to think they were “picky” none of them viewed this as being a fault. P5 said:

I wouldn't say that people in my circle necessarily do. But I have met couples that have met online. And it's kind of always a little bit of a surprise, um especially so I'm a wedding and event photographer And so I have like I've photographed a couple of weddings where they did meet online And or like on Tinder specifically, and so it's a little surprising but I don't know, I guess I just kind of like also look like who those people are and I think that they were kind of like, ready to be in a certain type of relationship. Yeah, they were really like they knew what they wanted. And I feel like, maybe a lot of people on dating apps don't necessarily know like exactly what they want when you find somebody else that knows.

While the participants' thoughts about reasons for success may vary slightly, they all seem to agree that knowing what you want plays a role in finding a potential mate online.

P6 added:

Um, I don't think so. Um I think that I definitely am not getting as much out of it, but it is because of what I'm looking for I would say. Um a lot of the times. It's a lot of people that use online dating or at least the online dating platforms that I use are the People that are just looking short-term dating and um and just on it. on it for other similar reasons as me, just for validation and stuff like that. But yeah, or for other reasons associated. But yeah, I don't think a lot of people um on online platforms are looking for exactly what I am looking for or at least, maybe I'm just not using the right platforms.

***Theme 2: People online often put up a façade and have poor communication skills and follow-through abilities.***

In their research, McGloin and Denes (2018) point out that there is an array of potential advantages people might experience when dating online. However, they also point out that there are also disadvantages, one of the main disadvantages is the fact that people can so easily misrepresent themselves. They may do this by altering pictures of themselves or purposely portraying themselves in a more positive light, such as leading others to believe they are trustworthy when they may not be. This misleading behavior is not uncommon, and the findings of this study support these ideas, as most participants had firsthand experience with it.

Most of the participants had concerns about people saying things about

themselves or their goals that were not true rather than fear of pictures being misleading. P5 said, “You don't know who you're talking to until you meet this person. And that you can see, like their body, language, and their confidence in like what's going on. But like online, yeah, they could appear to be like this wonderful stable person...” Some research suggests that adults with avoidant attachment styles tend to believe that other people are dishonest and not dependable, which is likely because they had unresponsive attachment figures as children (Hadden et al., 2013). The findings of this study support that idea, as most of the participants expressed worry about their potential mates either not being upfront and honest about intentions or, ultimately, not being willing to follow through on plans for meeting.

At least half of the participants discussed behavior demonstrating a lack of follow-through or not showing strong signs of interest as reasons why they would not want to meet potential mates in person. Most participants said they would prefer to meet their potential date sooner rather than later after initiating a relationship online but that the lack of initiating or not following through with plans would cause participants to be disinterested. These findings are in line with those found by Blackhart et al. (2014) when examining personality variables and online dating behaviors. They found that people with preoccupied and fearful attachments (symptoms of avoidant attachment) were more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviors during their online dating experiences, meaning that these individuals would be more willing to meet a potential mate in person.

The findings of this study build upon the Blackhart et al. (2014) study by providing insight into why these individuals are more willing to meet in person. While

some of my participants did say that they preferred to get to know the person a bit before meeting, most of them made comments that suggested either directly or indirectly that they would prefer to meet their potential mate pretty quickly. This seemed to be because they did not want to waste their time if the individual was not being upfront about who they were; they also wanted to test the intentions and commitment level of their potential mate early on. This idea was commonly mentioned among participants as not wanting to waste time. P6 said, "...it makes it not feel like it's worth the time for either one of us." Canceled plans, or making only tentative plans without follow-through, is the type of behavior that was noted by multiple participants as a turn-off when it comes to meeting in person.

***Theme 3: Dating online allows for the opportunity to pick and choose who you interact with and when.***

As a result of their research, Goodcase et al. (2019) suggested that adults with an avoidant attachment may benefit from online dating because it would allow them to pick and choose when and whom they respond to as a potential mate, findings that my study supported. While all participants did express some pitfalls in online dating, they also saw many benefits in this modality. The overarching theme that explained their reasons for liking online dating was that they had more control over who they interacted with and when and how they interacted.

Participants also said they enjoyed that their initial interactions with their potential mates were able to take place from a distance. Based on the experiences of the participants, it seemed that control was one of the main reasons for this. Being able to set

boundaries, easily end the relationship if desired, and choosing if they want to even start a conversation with the potential mate were mentioned frequently. P5 said, “I really did like the fact that I could just kind of like meet people leisurely and like on my own time, and then decide if I wanted to like, you know, even continue a conversation in real life with them...”

This finding supports the idea that adults with avoidant attachment styles prefer to have control over proximity to their partner (Goodcase et al., 2018). Goodcase et al. also stipulate that online dating would be appealing to this group of individuals, for this reason, it may not be the best way for them to develop functional relationships. This is likely because keeping communication limited to texting and email if desired, allows avoidant individuals to avoid the intimacy aspect of relationships. While participants in my study appreciated the fact that they could control their interactions, making them more open to dating, it does enable them to avoid closeness and as previous research has suggested, may result in lower relationship quality when a relationship is ultimately formed.

Research conducted by Scott et al. (2006) suggested that more research was needed to determine how intimacy develops in online relationships, as the likelihood that relationships initiated online could be satisfactory and long-term. When asked about serious relationships that lasted long-term and were initiated online, most of the participants did not have much to say. Of the six, only two developed relationships that extended beyond 3-5 meetings and of those two, only one had a relationship that lasted over six months. Most participants reported that their relationships either developed into

friendships or did not last beyond a few meetings. This was typically due to lack of common interests, not feeling a connection, or behaviors that were ultimately turn-offs for the participant. In regard to why a relationship that started online didn't turn into a long-term relationship P5 said, "...we kind of dated for like a week and then I realized that I like he was not somebody that I would want a date I just wanted to hang out with him, and so we've been friends ever since then." P5 also said, "Yeah, it's I don't know. I feel like the like kind of face-to-face interactions that evolve into anything more than just like acquaintances or a friendship are probably few and far between."

Carter et al. (2013) explained that avoidant individuals tend to struggle to fully invest in relationships and, in general, prefer to be emotionally independent. My results support these findings. P3 said:

So, it's kind of where I'm at with relationships where there's nothing so uncomfortable that it's like I just really want to have this person in my life. You know...if I come upon them, and that's kind of how I'm approaching online dating where it's like, yeah, I'll, I'll check it every so often and have conversations and see if there's like... oh yeah, this guy I want to go on a date with and see where it goes. But there's nothing in me that's like wanting to make this happen.

Edelstein and Shaver (2004) even found that avoidant individuals tend to grieve less after break-ups, having been less emotionally connected which wasn't directly supported by this study but multiple participants implied that they find it easy to move on from one potential mate to the next. P1 said, "It's almost like if you don't immediately click with someone, you're like, well, just go back, and find someone else to chat up. And you kind

of start to process over, and then I feel like it does a disservice to both people because anyone can have a bad first date.”

***Theme 4: Intentionality, honesty, and good communication skills are important when interacting with potential mates.***

The need for effective and clear communication was common to my participants who stated that one of the biggest turn-offs of avoidant individuals who are dating online is poor communication and were also turned off by potential mates who did not appear to be intentional and honest. Domingue and Mollen (2009) explored the theoretical connections present between attachment theory and communication in adult romantic partners, finding that if at least one of the individuals in the relationship were secure in their attachment, then communication would be more constructive, and the couple would be better able to build intimacy.

Unfortunately, the participants in my study (who fall into the insecurely attached category) were unaware of their potential mate’s attachment styles, making it more difficult to determine the compatibility of their communication styles. Domingue and Mollen (2009) also explained that in a situation where both individuals in the relationship are insecure, there is more likely to be demand withdrawal and overall avoidance consistent with what some of my participants expressed. Insecure individuals are also more likely to withdraw from relationships early on because they fear rejection and are attempting to avoid it: “Um, consistency in like their communication and stuff... I can be avoidant and so I may not always like initiate something.” These findings support



Torrence (2014) who found that avoidant individuals are less likely than people with other attachment styles to initiate a conversation with a potential mate.

While getting to know a bit about someone by talking online is appealing to all the participants, most would prefer that the initial conversations be used to set up a time and place to meet in person. While reaching a certain level of comfort is required before the meeting, P2 said, "I'm not looking for a pen pal, right?" Having a potential mate want to only communicate online appears to be a turn-off for this individual. Considering ideas presented by previously conducted research, the result of the study at hand could reinforce the idea that avoidant individuals may end a relationship early, in this situation before it even has a chance to begin, because they are concerned with getting rejected. The participants in this study seem to want answers right away and lack of intentionality, honesty, and poor communication can delay receipt of those answers and ultimately be a sign of rejection. Participants also mentioned that potential mates replying to messages using only 1- or 2-word replies would cause them to lose interest and not want to meet that individual face-to-face, again this seems to be a potential sign of rejection which leads to termination of the relationship. P6 said, "It's quite obvious when the other person is not putting any effort into keeping things interesting or showing any interest."

***Theme 5: Online dating is an accessible and convenient way to meet new people without wasting time.***

When participants were asked to describe some of the positive aspects of online dating, all mentioned factors such as convenience, ability to screen potential mates, accessibility, and the impact on self-esteem and confidence. This confirms research done

by Blackhart et al. (2014), suggesting that the willingness of avoidant individuals to use online dating platforms stems from feeling more comfortable sharing information that reveals their 'true self' in an online capacity. Dating online allows these individuals to self-disclose at their own pace and have some sense of control over what happens next, thus improving their chances of avoiding rejection, which Hance et al. (2018) contend is a common concern of avoidant individuals. Many participants were also concerned with wasting their time and expressed that they are either busy or know what they want and do not want to pursue something with someone they know does not have those qualities. P3 said, "I'm a pretty busy successful person and I don't have a lot of time. So, if, if someone's like yeah, it's just not the right time. I'm cool with that like great, you know. I wish you luck on your journey. I just don't like my time to be wasted..." P4 said, "And that's exactly it. Yes, I, I struggle with the effort part cause. I feel like at this point in my life. I just want someone to sweep me off my feet. That's really what I'm looking for, and that's that's hard to find."

Stavrova and Ehlebracht (2015) examined the prosocial behavior among single individuals, finding that it increases their chances of entering a committed relationship within a year. However, this study focused on singles without consideration for attachment style. Findings from my study showed that avoidant individuals are less likely to engage in prosocial behavior as many expressed not wanting to meet people in social situations. P2 said, "I'm not necessarily gonna go to all these other places, and I'm an introvert, so I'm not as sociable as I would like to be." Another participant said, "I have social anxiety... so I mean meeting someone in person is incredibly anxiety-inducing to

me.” Some individuals expressed that they were not even sure where they could go to meet new people or that they were not interested in going to places where people meet, such as bars.

Online dating allows individuals with avoidant attachment styles to engage in prosocial behavior in their way and on their terms rather than conforming to traditional prosocial behavior. My findings show that although these individuals may not enjoy traditional prosocial activities, online dating gives them opportunities to engage prosocially but on their terms, potentially increasing their chances of finding a relationship. For avoidant individuals, the perceived safety of online interaction creates more networking opportunities, including prosocial opportunities, increasing the chances of meeting a romantic partner (Stavrova & Ehlebracht, 2015).

Prospective mates who lack the ability to hold a conversation or demonstrate true interest, according to my participants, discourages in-person meetings. P4 said, “If you don't respond to me, and you can't carry a conversation, I don't even bother. Like if you're if you're not going to carry a conversation with me, then I'm not gonna talk to you.” For people who are highly concerned with wasting their time, this makes a lot of sense. Participants also mentioned that they prefer transparency and knowing ahead that the people of interest are single and looking for a partner, rather than having to guess in a face-to-face situation and put themselves at risk of rejection and waste of time.

The findings of this study also confirm the findings of Vollmann et al. (2019) who explained that people with avoidant attachment styles are likely to put deactivating strategies into play when they feel the need to regulate emotions. These deactivating

strategies include behavior such as not attending to information that may encourage them to become attached. Participants often mentioned wanting to avoid wasting time, often because the potential mates do not seem to have the qualities they want, but this could be an excuse (or rather a deactivating strategy) to avoid attachment when they do not think the relationship will work out.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study had several limitations. It is typical for qualitative studies not to be representative of the general population given that sample sizes tend to be quite small, including only those who have experienced the specific situation under exploration. Additionally, while the goal is to be as unbiased as possible, all humans have a point of view that reflects their life's experiences that may be reflected, inadvertently, in the data analysis and interpretation (Morrow, 2005). Given my target population (i.e., avoidant individuals) is likely to be more private, recruitment took quite a long time. The interviews were also conducted using Zoom and although all participants appeared to be in a private area during their interviews, it is impossible to know if they were distracted by their environment during their interviews.

Most of the participants in this study were females, making it impossible to know if males experience online dating the same way. This study also was limited to heterosexual individuals, although this was not required and no specific information about gender identity or sexual orientation was collected, a clear picture of avoidant individuals with different sexual orientations or gender identities could not be gleaned. This study also focused only on Millennials, a generation that may have different perceptions of online

dating than others. While disclosing geographical location and ethnicity were not requirements for this study, all participants were living and online dating in the United States, limiting insights that may be on offer from different cultures and geographical locations.

I collected data from a single source which may have more accurately portrayed the experiences of avoidant individuals had I triangulated data collection. The majority of participants were recruited from Facebook groups; although other platforms were used to attempt to recruit, they were not successful. All participants were required to have internet access in order to take part in the study, which could be limiting when considering socioeconomic status. As the researcher, I identify with the population as someone who has used online dating platforms, which could have unknowingly biased data collection, analysis, and interpretation even though proper steps were taken to avoid it.

### **Recommendations**

First, it is recommended that this study be replicated with a better balance of males and females and participants with varying sexual orientations, gender identities, and geographical locations. This will help form clearer assumptions about avoidant individuals dating online as a whole. It is also recommended that interviews be conducted in person, as using online video interviews may be limiting. If possible, this study should be conducted having identified which dating platforms are being utilized. This may create a better picture of which online dating platforms are preferred by avoidant individuals and why; identifying platform-specific benefits would save avoidants time, energy,

money, and disappointments. Additionally, this study could be replicated but with individuals who identify with other attachment styles as well as individuals from other generations. With these new insights, future online dating platforms could be made more appealing and successful for adults with avoidant attachment styles.

## **Implications**

### **Positive Social Change**

One implication for positive change is knowing what aspects of online dating are especially challenging for people with avoidant attachment styles who use these sites often but with little success in finding long-term committed relationships. My results showed that avoidant individuals are doubtful that others on online dating platforms are looking for serious committed relationships. These findings could encourage current and future creators of online dating platforms to put features in place that identify the type of relationship an individual is seeking, their communication style, and their commitment to the process; this could help avoidant individuals to have more successful relationships. Ultimately, insights from this study can be used to develop avoidant-specific dating platforms, just as platforms exist to accommodate specific religious denominations, age groups, professions, and relationship intentions. An avoidant-specific dating platform that addresses the unique needs of avoid individuals would create a new marketing target, increasing profits for platform creators and happiness and wellbeing for consumers.

Insights from this study could provide anyone interested in matchmaking services (online dating platforms or otherwise) with guidance for creating in-person, prosocial events that may appeal to avoidant individuals who tend to avoid social opportunities for

prosocial behavior. If these events took place in relaxed, pressure-free environments, then avoidant individuals may be more likely to attend. Online dating platform-sponsored events could be widely advertised, guaranteeing good attendance. These events should include some type of gatekeeping to make sure that people attending are like-minded and have the same goals. Online platforms could recruit brand and event ambassadors to host these events, like how athletic brands host races and other running events country-wide.

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative study explored adults with avoidant attachment styles and their online dating experiences. Braun and Clark's Thematic Analysis guided the formulation of interview questions and the analysis and interpretation of results. Five themes emerged, including that avoidant adults find many benefits in online dating, in particular the ability to control their interactions with others. It is also more likely to allow them to avoid intimacy than in-person dating (Goodcase et al., 2018). Although avoidant individuals may find these aspects of online dating appealing, it is possible that the aspects of online dating that are appealing to them may impede their ability to form long-term relationships and experience relationship satisfaction. According to Stavrova and Ehlebracht (2015), avoidant individuals often avoid engaging in prosocial behavior which decreases their chances of finding a potential mate. Simply engaging in online dating to any extent should increase an avoidant individual's chances of meeting a long-term partner within a year, assuming they are ready to commit (Hadden et al., 2018). This should be the case regardless of the potential drawbacks of online dating (Stavrova & Ehlebracht, 2015).

In general, participants identified more benefits than downfalls when asked about

dating online. Most participants felt that dating online allowed them to screen potential mates, reducing time wasted on screen time with people who did not share their interests, priorities, or intentions. Many participants expressed concern about potential mates pretending to be someone they are not online to obtain an in-person meeting. Most of the concerns pertained to potential mates possibly acting as though they wanted a long-term relationship when, really, they were looking for a 'hook up' or presenting themselves as trustworthy when they were not. Avoidant individuals seem to be less concerned with physical appearance and more concerned with honesty. Generally, participants appreciated that online dating allows them to easily end a relationship if it was not serving them; indeed, none had found connections sufficient to warrant the pursuit of a long-term relationship. Their ability to be choosy, though perceived as a benefit, may more likely be a pitfall. Putting in place screening tools that permit attachment-style matchups would benefit not only avoidants seeking to form enduring relationships but would identify a new target market for online dating platform developers, increasing their profits and consumer satisfaction.



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## Appendix A: Interview Guide

## 1. Background and Demographics

- a. Tell me about your history with online dating.
  - i. Prompt: How long have you been using online dating platforms?
  - ii. Prompt: What types of online platforms have you tried?
  - iii. Prompt: Have you met many people through online dating that you chose to pursue?
- b. Tell me about your current online dating platform use.
  - i. Prompt: What positive experiences have you had?
  - ii. Prompt: What negative experiences have you had?
- c. Tell me about how you initially interact with a potential mate online.
  - i. Prompt: What types of behavior would encourage you to want to meet a potential mate in person?
  - ii. Prompt: What types of behavior would cause you to not want to meet a potential mate in person?
- d. Tell me about why you chose online dating over face-to-face dating?
  - i. Prompt: What benefits do you see when it comes too online dating?
  - ii. Prompt: What downfalls do you see when it comes to online dating?
- e. Have you ever found a serious relationship that lasted long-term through online dating?

i. If yes, tell me about that experience.

2. Experience and Behavior

- a. Please describe what your current goals are with online dating and what you are doing to meet those goals.
- b. Please describe your experience with serious relationships that were originally initiated online.
- c. Please describe your experience with serious relationships initiated face-to-face.

3. Opinions and Values

- a. Why did you think online dating is a good option for you?
- b. Do you think that you personally gain more out of online dating experiences?

4. Feelings and Emotions

- a. Do you feel that other people have more success with online dating than you?
- b. Do you feel like there are any specific reasons for you being more or less successful with dating online versus in person?

## **Online study seeks participants who are dating online to participate in interview**

There is a new study that is aiming to explore the online dating experiences of adults. This study could potentially provide information that allows online dating platforms and professionals to change the way their services work to encourage more positive outcomes for individuals of all adult romantic attachment styles. For this study, you are invited to describe your experiences using online dating platforms to search for a potential partner.

This survey is part of the doctoral study for Amber Nelson, a Ph.D. student at Walden University.

### **About the study:**

- One 60–90-minute virtual interview

- To protect your privacy, no names will be collected

**Volunteers must meet these requirements:**

- 25-40 years old
- Currently using online dating platforms to search for a potential partner
- The following statement accurately describes you: When it comes to my romantic partners, I prefer not to show them how I feel deep down, and I do not feel comfortable sharing my private thoughts and feelings with them. I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on and open up to my romantic partners. I also prefer not to be too close to romantic partners and if my romantic partner wants to be very close, I get uncomfortable.

**To confidentially volunteer, email**