



Attachment Avoidance and Intimacy Decline: The Mediating Role of Expressive Suppression

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to examine the association between attachment avoidance and intimacy decline in romantic relationships and to test whether expressive suppression mediates this relationship among adults in Kenya.

Methods and Materials: A descriptive correlational design was adopted with a sample of 391 adults recruited from different counties in Kenya, determined using the Morgan and Krejcie sample size table. Participants completed standardized self-report instruments: the Experiences in Close Relationships–Revised (ECR-R) for attachment avoidance, the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) for expressive suppression, and the Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR) Inventory for intimacy decline. Data analysis was conducted in two stages: bivariate relationships were tested using Pearson’s product–moment correlation coefficients in SPSS-27, and the hypothesized mediational model was examined using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with AMOS-21. Model fit was evaluated with multiple indices (χ^2/df , GFI, AGFI, CFI, TLI, RMSEA).

Findings: Attachment avoidance was strongly and positively associated with intimacy decline ($r = .61, p < .001$) and with expressive suppression ($r = .54, p < .001$). Expressive suppression was moderately correlated with intimacy decline ($r = .48, p < .001$). The SEM analysis showed excellent model fit ($\chi^2 = 112.47, df = 48, \chi^2/df = 2.34, CFI = .97, TLI = .96, GFI = .95, RMSEA = .058$). Attachment avoidance had a significant direct effect on intimacy decline ($\beta = .52, p < .001$) and an additional indirect effect through expressive suppression ($\beta = .16, p < .001$), yielding a substantial total effect ($\beta = .68, p < .001$).

Conclusion: These findings support attachment theory by confirming that expressive suppression functions as a key process linking avoidant relational orientations to intimacy erosion. The results highlight the importance of targeting emotional inhibition in interventions designed to maintain closeness and relational health across cultures.

Keywords: attachment avoidance; expressive suppression; intimacy decline; emotion regulation

1. Introduction

Intimacy—the capacity to share one’s inner emotional world with another while feeling safe, valued, and accepted—remains a cornerstone of romantic relationship quality. Yet a growing body of evidence shows that intimacy can erode over time, especially when partners rely on defensive interpersonal strategies such as avoidance and emotional inhibition. Declines in intimacy are not merely subjective discomfort; they predict marital dissatisfaction, loneliness, and lower overall well-being (Ghasemi, 2023; Yu-wen, 2023). Understanding the antecedents of intimacy decline has therefore become central to both clinical intervention and theoretical models of close relationships (Batthyany & Blasi, 2025; Brassard et al., 2023).

Attachment theory posits that internal working models formed through early caregiver experiences guide adults’ expectations and behaviors in intimate partnerships (Mu, 2025; Pei, 2025). Individuals with secure attachment generally trust that partners will be responsive, which facilitates emotional sharing and closeness. Conversely, attachment avoidance—characterized by discomfort with dependency, emotional distance, and self-reliance—has been repeatedly linked to difficulties in sustaining intimacy (Batthyany & Blasi, 2025; Farahmand et al., 2021). Avoidantly attached individuals often downplay the importance of closeness, misinterpret or minimize their partner’s positive affect, and adopt deactivating strategies to regulate vulnerability (Gauvin et al., 2024; Wood et al., 2022). Over time, these patterns undermine warmth, responsiveness, and sexual and emotional satisfaction (Brassard et al., 2023; Lankveld, Dewitte, Verboon, et al., 2021).

Several studies document this dynamic in diverse cultural and relational contexts. For example, attachment avoidance predicted lower marital intimacy among Iranian women, partly by disrupting feelings of belonging and self-esteem (Farahmand et al., 2021). In male same-sex couples, avoidance was negatively associated with emotional intimacy, especially when internalized homonegativity was high (Guzmán-González et al., 2023). Among postpartum couples, avoidance diminished sexual motives aligned with connection and reduced satisfaction (Brassard et al., 2023). Such converging evidence suggests that avoidance is a robust precursor of intimacy decline across relational stages and demographics (Pouya et al., 2025; Waqas et al., 2024).

2. Emotional Suppression as a Regulatory Mechanism

While attachment avoidance sets a general interpersonal stance, the specific emotion regulation strategies individuals adopt in response to threat or closeness cues shape day-to-day relational dynamics. One such strategy—expressive suppression—involves consciously inhibiting outward signs of internal feelings (Wang et al., 2022). Though sometimes adaptive in highly evaluative social contexts, suppression is typically maladaptive for intimacy. By reducing transparency, it limits opportunities for empathic attunement and mutual understanding (Finzi-Dottan & Abadi, 2024; Naor-Ziv, 2024).

Research increasingly positions suppression as a mechanism linking attachment avoidance to poor relational functioning. Avoidantly attached adults report higher tendencies to block emotional expression to maintain autonomy (Mu, 2025). Suppression then disrupts perceived partner responsiveness and satisfaction (Park & Harris, 2022). In actor–partner models, habitual suppression reduced both one’s own and the partner’s felt closeness (Wendolowska et al., 2022). Moreover, poor meta-emotional awareness among avoidant partners amplifies suppression and its relational costs (Rigby & Cobb, 2022).

This pathway is also culturally nuanced. In collectivist contexts, suppression may be socially endorsed to maintain harmony, but chronic use still correlates with distress and unmet emotional needs (Wang et al., 2022). Ukrainian adaptation work on the Experiences in Close Relationships–Revised (ECR-R) shows that while cultural meaning affects reporting, avoidance consistently predicts reduced openness (Pohorila & Vinogradov, 2024). Among Kenyans and other emerging populations, similar links are being documented as relationship norms shift amid modernization (Wang, 2025).

Intimacy decline refers to the progressive reduction of mutual disclosure, emotional warmth, and felt closeness in a romantic bond. It is often observed during relationship transitions, stress, and parenthood, but also emerges insidiously through emotional disengagement (Yu-wen, 2023). Longitudinal and daily diary research shows that avoidant individuals’ discomfort with vulnerability erodes partner responsiveness and sexual desire (Lankveld, Dewitte, Thewissen, et al., 2021). The erosion of intimacy, in turn, predicts marital burnout and lower resilience during conflict (Pouya et al., 2025). Intimacy loss has also been tied to infidelity risk (Shrestha et al., 2023), relationship ambivalence (Waqas et al., 2024), and diminished marital forgiveness (Farahmand et al., 2021).

From a clinical standpoint, couples experiencing intimacy decline often present with communication

breakdown, sexual dissatisfaction, and chronic relational stress (Chahal, 2025; Rodrigues et al., 2024). These difficulties interact with trauma history and rejection sensitivity, amplifying emotional withdrawal (Batthyany & Blasi, 2025; Finzi-Dottan & Abadi, 2024). Consequently, scholars have called for more integrative models that link distal attachment patterns with immediate regulatory behaviors to better explain why some couples disengage while others sustain closeness (Pei, 2025; Tkalych & Hrechanyk, 2025).

An emerging integrative view conceptualizes expressive suppression as a mediator between attachment avoidance and intimacy decline. Avoidant individuals, motivated to avoid dependency, frequently downregulate visible emotional cues, especially under relational threat (Mu, 2025). While this may reduce short-term discomfort, it prevents needs communication, leading partners to feel unseen or rejected (Gauvin et al., 2024). Repeated cycles of concealment then translate into diminished perceived intimacy and satisfaction (Brassard et al., 2023; Park & Harris, 2022).

Recent empirical work underscores this sequential pattern. In couples transitioning to parenthood, avoidance predicted higher suppression, which then predicted lower sexual and emotional connection (Brassard et al., 2023). In cross-sectional research on married Iranian women, avoidance led to decreased intimacy partially via emotion regulation difficulties (Farahmand et al., 2021). Likewise, individuals high in avoidance showed increased defensive deactivation and reduced empathic responding, mediated by suppression (Finzi-Dottan & Abadi, 2024). These findings suggest that suppression is a plausible, measurable process variable explaining how avoidant internal working models manifest in everyday closeness erosion.

The interplay of avoidance, suppression, and intimacy decline may be moderated by gender, sexual orientation, and cultural scripts. For instance, gay and lesbian adults show unique attachment trajectories, where avoidance interacts with minority stress to predict intimacy struggles (Guzmán-González et al., 2023; Tkalych & Hrechanyk, 2025). Adolescents with insecure attachment demonstrate early emotion regulation disruptions that forecast adult relational difficulties (Naor-Ziv, 2024; Persram & Konishi, 2022). Meanwhile, in more collectivist societies, normative pressure to maintain harmony can mask intimacy loss until relationships are deeply eroded (Kharazi & Ramezani, 2022).

Cross-cultural adaptation of measures like the ECR-R further supports the universal yet context-sensitive nature of avoidance (Pohorila & Vinogradov, 2024). As global relational patterns evolve with digital communication and shifting family norms, conceptual models must integrate cultural differences while recognizing shared underlying processes (Chahal, 2025; Wang, 2025). Kenya and other Sub-Saharan contexts are underrepresented in this research, despite evidence that modernization and urbanization may challenge traditional attachment and expression norms (Waqas et al., 2024).

Despite abundant evidence linking attachment avoidance to intimacy decline, and growing recognition of expressive suppression as a harmful regulation strategy, few studies have explicitly tested a mediational model in diverse, non-Western populations.

3. Methods and Materials

3.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a descriptive correlational design to investigate the relationship between attachment avoidance and intimacy decline, as well as the mediating role of expressive suppression. A total of 391 participants (sample size determined using the Morgan and Krejcie table for a large population at a 95% confidence level) were recruited from different counties in Kenya through convenience and voluntary participation. Inclusion criteria were being at least 18 years old, currently involved in a romantic relationship, and providing informed consent. Participants completed an online questionnaire containing standardized scales for the study variables and demographic items (e.g., age, gender, relationship duration, and education level).

3.2. Measures

To measure intimacy decline, the Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR) Inventory – Intimacy Subscale developed by Schaefer and Olson (1981) was used. The PAIR Inventory is a widely applied tool for assessing the perceived intimacy level in close relationships. The intimacy subscale consists of 6 items that evaluate the extent of openness, emotional closeness, and mutual understanding between partners (e.g., “My partner listens to me when I need someone to talk to”). Responses are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating greater intimacy. In this study, items were reverse-scored to reflect intimacy decline,

where higher values denote lower intimacy and closeness. The PAIR Inventory has been shown to have strong internal consistency (Cronbach’s α typically $> .80$) and good construct validity across different cultural and relational contexts.

Attachment avoidance was assessed using the Experiences in Close Relationships–Revised (ECR-R) questionnaire created by Fraley, Waller, and Brennan (2000). The ECR-R is a standard and widely validated measure of adult romantic attachment, consisting of 36 items that form two subscales: Attachment Avoidance (18 items) and Attachment Anxiety (18 items). Only the avoidance subscale was used for this study, capturing discomfort with closeness, emotional distance, and self-reliance in intimate relationships (e.g., “I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down”). Participants responded on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The ECR-R has been extensively validated, with excellent internal consistency (α for avoidance typically $> .90$), strong test–retest reliability, and demonstrated convergent and discriminant validity across diverse populations.

Expressive suppression was measured with the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) developed by Gross and John (2003). The ERQ contains 10 items and assesses two dimensions of emotion regulation: Cognitive Reappraisal (6 items) and Expressive Suppression (4 items). Only the expressive suppression subscale was employed in this study, evaluating the extent to which individuals consciously inhibit outward displays of emotion (e.g., “I control my emotions by not expressing them”). Responses are rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The expressive suppression subscale has been widely used and shows strong internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha \sim .73-.80$), as well as solid construct validity

and cross-cultural reliability in various psychological studies.

3.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in two main stages. First, descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages) were calculated for all variables and participant demographics. Pearson’s product–moment correlation coefficients were used to examine the bivariate relationships between intimacy decline and the independent variables (attachment avoidance and expressive suppression) using SPSS version 27. Second, a Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) approach was applied using AMOS version 21 to test the hypothesized mediating role of expressive suppression between attachment avoidance and intimacy decline. The SEM analysis included testing of the measurement model for factor loadings and fit indices (CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and χ^2/df). Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

4. Findings and Results

Of the 391 participants, 222 (56.78%) were female and 169 (43.22%) were male. The participants’ ages ranged from 18 to 47 years ($M = 29.36$, $SD = 6.42$). Regarding educational level, 118 participants (30.18%) held a bachelor’s degree, 164 (41.94%) had completed college diploma or certificate programs, 79 (20.20%) had a master’s degree, and 30 (7.67%) had secondary education or less. Relationship duration varied, with 142 (36.32%) in relationships of 1–3 years, 105 (26.86%) in relationships of 4–6 years, 87 (22.25%) in relationships of more than 6 years, and 57 (14.58%) in relationships shorter than one year.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables (N = 391)

Variable	M	SD
Attachment Avoidance	3.84	0.79
Expressive Suppression	3.62	0.88
Intimacy Decline	3.27	0.74

The sample reported a moderately high mean score for attachment avoidance ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 0.79$), suggesting a general tendency toward discomfort with closeness. Expressive suppression scores were slightly above the scale midpoint ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 0.88$), while intimacy decline was

moderate ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 0.74$), indicating variability in how participants experienced closeness loss.

Before conducting the analyses, the data were screened for statistical assumptions. Tests of normality using Kolmogorov–Smirnov statistics indicated non-significant deviation from normality for attachment avoidance ($D =$

0.047, $p = .079$), expressive suppression ($D = 0.051$, $p = .064$), and intimacy decline ($D = 0.049$, $p = .072$). Skewness values ranged between -0.41 and 0.56 , and kurtosis values between -0.67 and 0.48 , all within the acceptable ± 1 range. Multicollinearity diagnostics revealed Variance Inflation Factors (VIFs) of 1.38 for attachment avoidance and 1.42 for

expressive suppression, confirming no multicollinearity concerns. Additionally, scatterplots indicated linear relationships and homoscedasticity among variables. These results supported the suitability of the data for Pearson correlation and SEM analyses.

Table 2

Pearson Correlations Among Study Variables (N = 391)

Variable	1	2	3
1. Attachment Avoidance	—		
2. Expressive Suppression	.54 ($p < .001$)	—	
3. Intimacy Decline	.61 ($p < .001$)	.48 ($p < .001$)	—

Results indicated a strong positive correlation between attachment avoidance and intimacy decline ($r = .61$, $p < .001$). Avoidance was also positively associated with expressive suppression ($r = .54$, $p < .001$). Additionally,

expressive suppression showed a moderate positive relationship with intimacy decline ($r = .48$, $p < .001$). These findings support the hypothesized direct and indirect connections between avoidance and intimacy loss.

Table 3

Model Fit Indices for the Structural Equation Model

χ^2	df	χ^2/df	GFI	AGFI	CFI	RMSEA	TLI
112.47	48	2.34	.95	.92	.97	.058	.96

The overall model demonstrated excellent fit: the chi-square statistic was non-inflated relative to degrees of freedom ($\chi^2 = 112.47$, $df = 48$, $\chi^2/df = 2.34$). Fit indices were all within recommended cutoffs (GFI = .95, AGFI = .92, CFI

= .97, TLI = .96, RMSEA = .058), indicating that the hypothesized mediation model adequately represented the observed data.

Table 4

Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects Among Study Variables

Path	b	SE	β	p
Attachment Avoidance → Expressive Suppression	0.61	0.05	.54	< .001
Expressive Suppression → Intimacy Decline	0.39	0.06	.30	< .001
Attachment Avoidance → Intimacy Decline (direct)	0.68	0.07	.52	< .001
Attachment Avoidance → Intimacy Decline (indirect via Suppression)	0.24	0.04	.16	< .001
Attachment Avoidance → Intimacy Decline (total)	0.92	0.08	.68	< .001

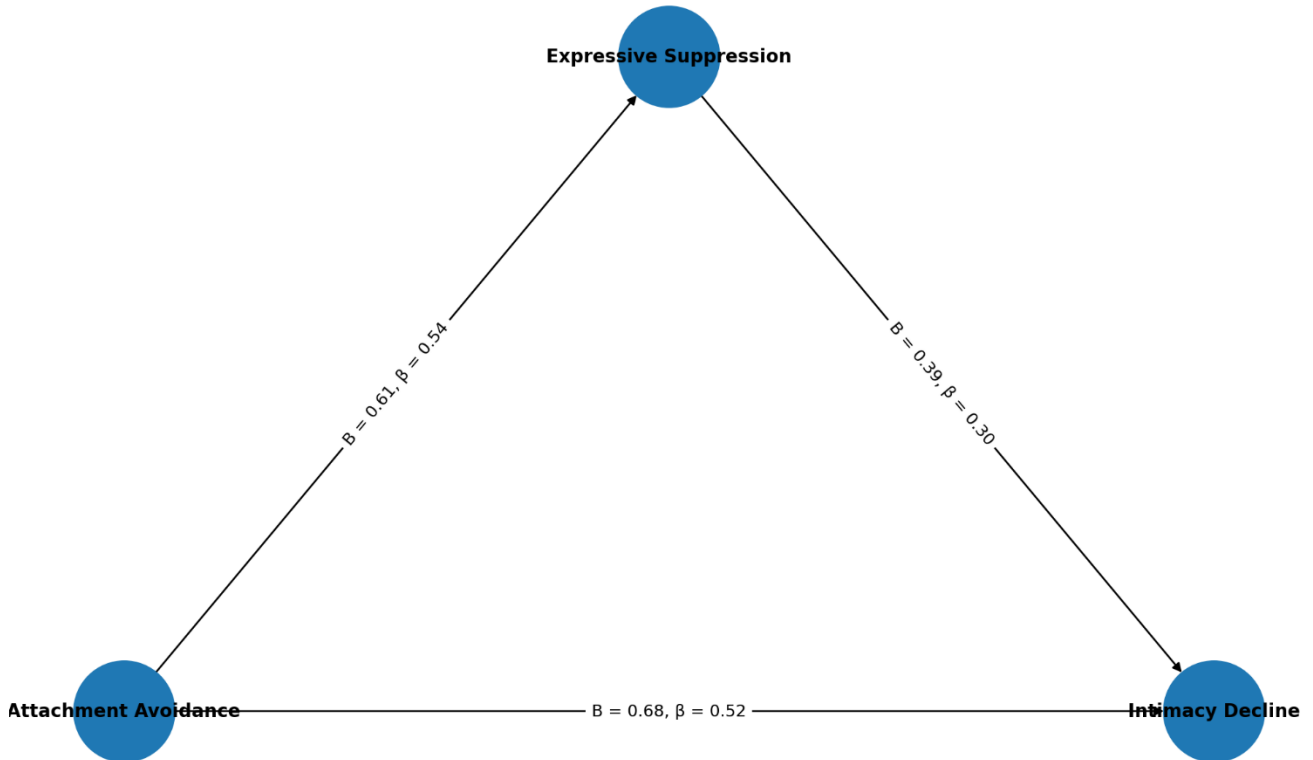
Results showed that attachment avoidance had a strong direct effect on expressive suppression ($b = 0.61$, $\beta = .54$, $p < .001$) and a significant direct effect on intimacy decline ($b = 0.68$, $\beta = .52$, $p < .001$). Expressive suppression also predicted intimacy decline ($b = 0.39$, $\beta = .30$, $p < .001$). The

indirect effect of avoidance on intimacy decline through suppression was significant ($b = 0.24$, $\beta = .16$, $p < .001$). The total effect of avoidance on intimacy decline (direct + indirect) was substantial ($b = 0.92$, $\beta = .68$, $p < .001$), confirming the mediational hypothesis.

Figure 1

Model with Beta Coefficients

Structural Model: Attachment Avoidance, Expressive Suppression, and Intimacy Decline



5. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study examined the relationship between attachment avoidance and intimacy decline and tested the mediating role of expressive suppression in a large community sample of Kenyan adults. As hypothesized, results revealed a significant positive association between attachment avoidance and intimacy decline, indicating that individuals who are more discomforted by closeness and dependency tend to report reduced emotional and relational intimacy. Additionally, expressive suppression significantly mediated this relationship, suggesting that avoidant individuals’ tendency to inhibit outward emotional expression partly explains their erosion of intimacy. These findings align closely with attachment theory and with prior empirical work conducted in diverse contexts (Batthyany & Blasi, 2025; Brassard et al., 2023; Mu, 2025).

Our results reinforce a robust empirical pattern: attachment avoidance undermines closeness and shared emotional life in romantic relationships. Avoidant individuals often strive for self-sufficiency, mistrust partner

responsiveness, and minimize emotional interdependence, which eventually leads to relational disengagement (Batthyany & Blasi, 2025; Farahmand et al., 2021). This outcome is consistent with the notion of “deactivating strategies,” where avoidant partners suppress proximity-seeking impulses and downplay intimacy needs to protect themselves from vulnerability (Mu, 2025; Pei, 2025). Our findings resonate with work showing that avoidant adults underestimate partner warmth and affection during emotional conversations, leading to decreased mutual understanding and closeness (Gauvin et al., 2024).

Moreover, the results converge with research among married Iranian women, where avoidance predicted reduced intimacy and belonging (Farahmand et al., 2021). Similar dynamics have been observed among same-sex male couples, where avoidance predicted lower emotional intimacy, especially in the presence of minority stress (Guzmán-González et al., 2023; Tkalych & Hrechanyk, 2025). These parallels suggest that, regardless of culture or sexual orientation, avoidance remains a universal barrier to sustained closeness. Importantly, our Kenyan sample provides new evidence that these processes hold beyond

Western and Middle Eastern populations, supporting the cross-cultural validity of attachment models (Chahal, 2025; Waqas et al., 2024).

A major contribution of this study is confirming that expressive suppression partially mediates the effect of avoidance on intimacy decline. Individuals high in avoidance are motivated to protect themselves from perceived rejection by withholding emotional cues (Mu, 2025). This defensiveness may reduce short-term anxiety but has long-term interpersonal costs by making the partner feel shut out and emotionally unsupported (Finzi-Dottan & Abadi, 2024). Our findings echo actor-partner models showing that suppression diminishes both the suppressor's and partner's sense of connection (Wendolowska et al., 2022) and undermines satisfaction (Park & Harris, 2022).

Consistent with Brassard and colleagues' work among couples transitioning to parenthood, our data suggest that suppression acts as a proximal interpersonal process through which global attachment orientations translate into day-to-day communication and emotional exchange (Brassard et al., 2023). Suppression is likely detrimental because it blocks the "signal function" of emotion in intimate contexts: partners cannot respond supportively when emotional cues are masked (Gauvin et al., 2024; Wood et al., 2022). Over time, this cycle accelerates intimacy decline and fosters alienation.

Our results also support Finzi-Dottan and Abadi's findings that emotional abuse and rejection sensitivity predict fear of intimacy through maladaptive regulation patterns (Finzi-Dottan & Abadi, 2024). Avoidant individuals, by anticipating rejection, may suppress even mild vulnerability, preventing corrective emotional experiences and reinforcing distance. This pattern appears culturally robust; while some collectivist norms endorse controlled expression (Wang et al., 2022), habitual suppression nonetheless predicts distress and relational dissatisfaction (Pohorila & Vinogradov, 2024). Our Kenyan data add weight to calls for culturally nuanced, yet conceptually consistent, understanding of suppression's relational harm (Chahal, 2025; Waqas et al., 2024).

By integrating attachment theory with emotion regulation research, these findings help refine a process model of intimacy decline. Attachment avoidance sets the motivational stage—valuing independence and fearing rejection—while expressive suppression operationalizes these motives behaviorally in everyday interactions (Mu, 2025; Pei, 2025). This sequence aligns with dual-process models of attachment, which propose that rapid, defensive

System 1 processes (e.g., distancing) interact with deliberate regulatory strategies to shape relationship outcomes (Pei, 2025).

Culturally, this work extends the evidence base to Kenya, an underrepresented context in relational science. Prior work suggests modernization and shifting gender norms can destabilize traditional attachment expectations and emotional expression styles (Chahal, 2025; Waqas et al., 2024). Our results show that even as cultural norms evolve, the avoidance-suppression-intimacy pathway remains salient, underscoring the universality with contextual nuance of these processes (Pohorila & Vinogradov, 2024).

The findings also speak to sexual intimacy and partner responsiveness models. Sexual desire and satisfaction are deeply tied to emotional safety; avoidance reduces sexual desire partly by lowering perceived responsiveness (Lankveld, Dewitte, Thewissen, et al., 2021; Lankveld, Dewitte, Verboon, et al., 2021). Suppression may amplify this effect by muting emotional cues needed for erotic connection (Kharazi & Ramezani, 2022; Rodrigues et al., 2024). Clinically, targeting suppression could thus improve both emotional and sexual closeness.

Our data align with extensive scholarship emphasizing that intimacy loss is rarely abrupt but often a cumulative process fueled by defensive emotional strategies (Farahmand et al., 2021; Yu-wen, 2023). They also echo findings that cultural adaptations of measures like the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R) remain psychometrically robust while capturing local meaning (Pohorila & Vinogradov, 2024). Importantly, by using SEM, we provide statistical support for the mediational sequence suggested qualitatively in prior work (Pouya et al., 2025; Rigby & Cobb, 2022).

Our Kenyan evidence parallels studies of adolescents where early insecure attachment predicts emotion regulation difficulties and later relational struggles (Naor-Ziv, 2024; Persram & Konishi, 2022). It also resonates with research among military couples demonstrating that avoidance and poor expression complicate post-deployment reconnection (Wood et al., 2022). These convergences suggest that despite contextual differences—sexual orientation, trauma exposure, life stage—the avoidance → suppression → intimacy decline mechanism is stable and theoretically meaningful.

6. Suggestions and Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, its cross-sectional design precludes firm conclusions about causality. While our SEM model supports a theoretically driven direction—from avoidance through suppression to intimacy decline—reverse or bidirectional effects are possible. Longitudinal or daily diary methods would better capture temporal ordering (Brassard et al., 2023; Lankveld, Dewitte, Thewissen, et al., 2021).

Second, the data relied on self-report measures, which may be influenced by social desirability and subjective bias, particularly for sensitive topics like emotional withholding and intimacy. Although we used validated tools adapted across cultures (Pohorila & Vinogradov, 2024; Waqas et al., 2024), future studies could integrate partner reports or behavioral coding to strengthen ecological validity.

Third, while the Kenyan sample diversifies the literature, generalizability beyond urban, educated participants is limited. Relationship dynamics may differ in rural or highly traditional communities where cultural scripts around emotion and closeness diverge from urban contexts (Chahal, 2025). Finally, we focused on expressive suppression as the sole regulatory mediator; other strategies (e.g., cognitive reappraisal, rumination) and contextual moderators (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, trauma history) warrant inclusion for a more comprehensive model (Finzi-Dottan & Abadi, 2024; Tkalych & Hrechanyk, 2025).

Future research should employ longitudinal and multi-method designs to confirm the temporal sequencing of avoidance, suppression, and intimacy decline. Daily experience sampling could illuminate moment-to-moment shifts in emotional expression and closeness (Lankveld, Dewitte, Verboon, et al., 2021). Examining bidirectional influences—for example, whether declining intimacy triggers greater avoidance and suppression—would enrich process models.

Researchers should also consider partner and dyadic perspectives. Actor-partner interdependence modeling could test how one partner's avoidance and suppression influence the other's intimacy experience (Wendołowska et al., 2022). Including both members of the couple would better represent relational reciprocity and feedback loops.

Cross-cultural expansions remain vital. Comparative studies between Kenyan couples and those from Western and Asian contexts could reveal culture-specific moderators, such as collectivist norms or gender roles (Chahal, 2025; Waqas et al., 2024). Moreover, intersectional factors—

sexual orientation, trauma exposure, digital communication habits—may shape how avoidance translates into suppression and intimacy decline (Guzmán-González et al., 2023; Tkalych & Hrechanyk, 2025). Finally, investigating other emotion regulation strategies (e.g., reappraisal, acceptance) alongside suppression could refine intervention targets.

For clinical and educational practitioners, these findings emphasize the importance of addressing emotional defensiveness in avoidant individuals. Couple therapy can target suppression by promoting emotional awareness and safe disclosure, enabling partners to share needs without triggering avoidance. Emotionally focused therapy and attachment-based psychoeducation may help reduce defensive distance.

Interventions could also integrate communication training that normalizes vulnerability and teaches partners how to respond supportively to each other's emotions, buffering against intimacy decline. In culturally diverse contexts like Kenya, therapists should respect local norms while gently challenging harmful suppression.

At the preventive level, premarital and relationship education programs can incorporate modules on attachment awareness and healthy emotion regulation, helping couples identify avoidant patterns before intimacy deteriorates. Training mental health professionals to recognize avoidance-related suppression can improve treatment of relational distress across cultures and populations.

Authors' Contributions

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

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

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

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

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

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