

Predicting Couple Relationship Quality from Adult Attachment and Emotional Intelligence: The Mediating Role of Empathic Communication

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Article Info

Article type:

Original Article

How to cite this article:

Krier, S., Evans, L., & Jankauskas, T. (2026). Predicting Couple Relationship Quality from Adult Attachment and Emotional Intelligence: The Mediating Role of Empathic Communication. *Applied Family Therapy Journal*, 7(4), 1-18.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.aftj.5685>



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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to predict couple relationship quality from adult attachment and emotional intelligence and to examine the mediating role of empathic communication in these associations.

Methods and Materials: The study employed a cross-sectional correlational design. The statistical population consisted of adults involved in committed romantic relationships and residing in Canada. A total of 384 participants were recruited using convenience sampling. Adult attachment was assessed using the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised questionnaire, emotional intelligence using the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale, empathic communication using an empathic communication measure, and couple relationship quality using the Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale. Data were analyzed using Pearson correlation coefficients, confirmatory factor analysis, and structural equation modeling. The significance of indirect effects was evaluated through bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples and 95% confidence intervals.

Findings: Attachment anxiety significantly predicted lower empathic communication ($\beta = -.24, p < .001$) and lower couple relationship quality ($\beta = -.19, p < .001$), while attachment avoidance also significantly predicted lower empathic communication ($\beta = -.31, p < .001$) and lower relationship quality ($\beta = -.23, p < .001$). Emotional intelligence positively predicted empathic communication ($\beta = .43, p < .001$) and couple relationship quality ($\beta = .24, p < .001$). Empathic communication positively predicted relationship quality ($\beta = .45, p < .001$). Significant indirect effects through empathic communication were observed for attachment anxiety ($\beta = -.11, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.16, -.07]$), attachment avoidance ($\beta = -.14, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.20, -.09]$), and emotional intelligence ($\beta = .19, 95\% \text{ CI } [.14, .25]$). The model explained 56.8% of the variance in empathic communication and 63.7% of the variance in couple relationship quality.

Conclusion: Adult attachment insecurity and emotional intelligence are important predictors of couple relationship quality, and empathic communication partially mediates these relationships, indicating that emotionally responsive communication is a key interpersonal mechanism linking individual emotional characteristics to romantic relationship functioning.

Keywords: adult attachment, emotional intelligence, empathic communication, couple relationship quality, romantic relationships, mediation, structural equation modeling

1. Introduction

Couple relationship quality is a multidimensional construct that encompasses emotional closeness, mutual satisfaction, perceived responsiveness, communication effectiveness, trust, intimacy, conflict regulation, and the capacity of partners to maintain a stable and supportive bond over time. High-quality intimate relationships are consistently associated with psychological well-being, emotional security, adaptive coping, and greater satisfaction with family life, whereas distressed couple relationships are often characterized by emotional disengagement, recurrent conflict, reduced responsiveness, and difficulties in expressing and interpreting partners' needs. Contemporary relationship research increasingly emphasizes that couple functioning cannot be explained solely by overt interactional behaviors; rather, it emerges from the interaction between enduring individual characteristics and dyadic processes that unfold within the relationship. In particular, attachment-related orientations, emotional competencies, and empathic modes of communication appear to shape how individuals perceive their partners, respond to relational stressors, communicate emotional needs, and construct a shared sense of connection. Recent work examining committed relationships has further underscored the importance of emotionally meaningful experiences, perceived connection, and interpersonal responsiveness in strengthening relational bonds and maintaining relationship quality over time (Sels et al., 2021; Wiecha et al., 2026).

Attachment theory provides one of the most influential frameworks for understanding individual differences in intimate relationship functioning. Originally developed to explain the formation of emotional bonds and later extended to adult romantic relationships, attachment theory proposes that repeated interpersonal experiences contribute to relatively stable internal working models regarding the availability of others, the worthiness of the self, and expectations concerning support, closeness, and rejection. Adult attachment is commonly conceptualized along the dimensions of attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. Individuals high in attachment anxiety tend to fear abandonment, seek excessive reassurance, remain hypervigilant to signs of rejection, and experience uncertainty regarding a partner's availability. By contrast, individuals high in attachment avoidance tend to experience discomfort with intimacy, suppress attachment-related needs, emphasize self-reliance, and distance themselves

emotionally during situations requiring vulnerability or dependence. Secure attachment, reflected in relatively low anxiety and avoidance, facilitates more flexible proximity seeking, emotional openness, trust, and responsiveness. More recent theoretical developments continue to highlight attachment as a central organizing system for understanding interpersonal connection and relational regulation across adulthood (Bell, 2023; Wiseman & Egozi, 2021).

Attachment orientations are particularly relevant to couple relationship quality because they influence not only subjective expectations about the partner but also concrete communication and emotion-regulation processes within the dyad. Anxiously attached individuals may interpret ambiguous relational cues as signs of rejection, intensify bids for reassurance, and experience difficulty regulating negative affect during conflict. Avoidantly attached individuals may disengage from emotional discussions, minimize emotional expression, and fail to provide support when their partners seek closeness. Such patterns may undermine mutual understanding and create cycles of pursuit, withdrawal, defensiveness, and misattunement. Research on couple interaction has shown that attachment-related processes shape the clarity with which individuals communicate their needs and the extent to which they respond appropriately to a partner's bids for connection (Seedall & Wampler, 2023). Evidence also suggests that attachment insecurity influences how partners perceive and interpret one another's emotional states. For example, avoidant individuals may be less accurate in recognizing their partners' positive emotions during intimate interactions, thereby reducing the relational impact of affection and support (Gauvin et al., 2024). This indicates that the effects of attachment on relationship quality may partly operate through interpersonal mechanisms involving emotional perception, responsiveness, and empathic communication.

The relevance of attachment to empathic functioning is supported by a growing body of research. Empathy involves the ability to understand another person's emotional experience, adopt the other's perspective, and respond with appropriate concern and sensitivity. Secure attachment is generally associated with a greater capacity to attend to others' emotional signals without becoming overwhelmed or defensively disengaged, whereas insecure attachment may interfere with this process. A meta-analytic review examining associations between attachment style and empathy across developmental stages found meaningful links between attachment organization and empathic

functioning, suggesting that relational security contributes to the capacity for understanding and responding to others' emotional states (Sanctis & Mesurado, 2022). Similarly, developmental research has shown that attachment-related experiences may contribute to the emergence and strengthening of empathic support behaviors within close relationships (Mora, 2021). These findings are particularly important for romantic relationships, where partners repeatedly encounter situations requiring emotional interpretation, validation, reassurance, and supportive responding.

Research conducted directly within couple contexts further demonstrates the connection between attachment and empathic or supportive behavior. Physiological and behavioral processes within couples are not independent of attachment orientation, especially during emotionally demanding life transitions. Studies of married couples have shown that attachment can moderate the association between physiological synchrony and supportive behavior, indicating that relational security influences how emotional attunement is translated into observable support (Fogel-Yaakobi et al., 2023). Related evidence suggests that attachment patterns are associated with empathic stress responses in romantic couples, demonstrating that individuals' internal attachment systems may shape both emotional resonance and the regulation of partner-focused distress (Gallistl et al., 2025). Attachment also appears to influence communication openness and empathic engagement in other relational contexts. For instance, work on adoptive parenthood has demonstrated that parental attachment and empathy are associated with communicative openness during the early period of family adjustment (Gorla et al., 2023). Collectively, these findings suggest that attachment security may support relational quality partly because it facilitates emotional accessibility, empathy, and communication that is responsive rather than defensive.

At the same time, attachment is unlikely to be the only individual-level characteristic shaping the quality of romantic relationships. Emotional intelligence has emerged as another important predictor of interpersonal functioning. Emotional intelligence refers broadly to the capacity to perceive, understand, use, and regulate emotions in oneself and others. In intimate relationships, these abilities may facilitate more accurate interpretation of emotional cues, more effective regulation of anger or distress, greater responsiveness to a partner's needs, and more constructive management of conflict. Individuals with stronger emotional intelligence may be better able to recognize the emotional

meaning underlying a partner's words, distinguish between transient affect and deeper relational concerns, and respond in ways that reduce escalation and preserve connection. Recent research has directly linked emotional intelligence with better relationship quality, showing that emotionally intelligent individuals may value their partners more positively and experience more favorable relational outcomes (Xiao et al., 2025). This suggests that emotional intelligence may function as an important psychological resource in sustaining satisfying couple relationships.

The interpersonal significance of emotional intelligence becomes clearer when considered alongside broader research on emotional communication and personality functioning. Effective emotional communication requires more than simply expressing feelings; it involves identifying affective states, interpreting contextual cues, communicating them clearly, and responding appropriately to the emotions of others. Psychometric work on emotional communication has emphasized the importance of these competencies in interpersonal settings and has supported the assessment of emotionally responsive communication as a distinct and meaningful construct (Hernández-Jorge et al., 2022). More broadly, research examining personality traits and interpersonal functioning has highlighted the role of emotional and social competencies in adaptive relationships and professional as well as personal adjustment (Suciu et al., 2021). Conversely, deficits in social cognition, particularly when interpersonal processing becomes self-serving or insufficiently attuned to others, can compromise empathy and relationship functioning (Eddy, 2021). These findings reinforce the view that emotional intelligence may contribute to couple relationship quality not merely as an intrapersonal ability but through the way emotional information is communicated and used within the relationship.

Empathic communication may therefore constitute a critical mechanism linking both attachment and emotional intelligence to relationship quality. Empathic communication can be understood as the behavioral expression of emotional understanding within interpersonal exchange. It includes attentive listening, perspective taking, emotional validation, accurate recognition of a partner's feelings, supportive verbal and nonverbal responses, and the ability to communicate understanding without dismissing or distorting the partner's subjective experience. In couple relationships, empathy becomes relationally consequential when it is successfully communicated. A partner may internally understand another person's distress, but unless

that understanding is conveyed through responsive interaction, its protective effect on relationship functioning may be limited. Dyadic empathy research has increasingly emphasized that empathy within couples should be conceptualized as a relational process rather than solely as an individual disposition (Każmierczak & Karasiewicz, 2021). In this sense, empathic communication represents the interpersonal pathway through which emotional capacities become visible and meaningful to the partner.

The importance of empathic processes also becomes apparent in studies examining relationship adversity and relational trauma. Childhood maltreatment, for example, has been associated with poorer adult relationship quality, partly because early adverse experiences may alter attachment expectations, emotion regulation, trust, and interpersonal responsiveness (Zamir, 2021). The effects of such histories may extend beyond the individual who experienced maltreatment and influence partners through dyadic processes, as demonstrated by evidence of partner effects in intimate relationships (Vaillancourt-Morel et al., 2023). These findings suggest that relationship quality is shaped by interdependent emotional processes in which one partner's vulnerabilities, expectations, and regulatory patterns can influence the experiences of the other. Attachment insecurity and deficits in emotional understanding may thereby contribute to lower relationship quality when they disrupt empathic communication and reduce perceived responsiveness.

The significance of relational resources becomes especially evident under conditions of stress. Romantic relationships can function either as sources of support or as additional burdens depending on attachment style, relationship quality, and partners' capacity for dyadic coping (Gallistl et al., 2024). Stressful experiences often activate attachment systems, intensify emotion-regulation demands, and create situations in which partners must accurately interpret each other's needs. When communication is empathic and emotionally responsive, partners may experience greater security and co-regulation; when communication is dismissive, intrusive, or misattuned, distress may intensify. Attachment-related difficulties can also become particularly salient during broader social disruptions and traumatic circumstances, as highlighted in work examining attachment, trauma, and relational functioning during the COVID-19 period (Marmarosh, 2022). Thus, the quality of a romantic relationship may depend substantially on how effectively individual

emotional tendencies are translated into dyadic coping and empathic interaction.

Clinical and intervention research also supports the importance of communication and emotional responsiveness in couple functioning. Integrative behavioral couple therapy emphasizes the role of emotional acceptance, behavioral change, and improved interaction patterns in reducing marital distress and supporting reconciliation (Talib et al., 2025). Such findings are consistent with the broader assumption that relationship quality is not determined solely by stable personality characteristics but is shaped by modifiable communication processes. Empathic communication may be particularly important because it can influence the emotional climate in which conflict, vulnerability, and repair occur. When partners experience their emotional states as understood and validated, defensive responses may diminish and relational trust may strengthen. Conversely, when emotional messages are misunderstood or ignored, even otherwise strong relationships may become vulnerable to repeated cycles of dissatisfaction.

Current research also demonstrates that relational communication processes can vary substantially across different interpersonal contexts and populations. Studies of autistic adults in romantic relationships, for example, have highlighted both distinctive relational challenges and notable strengths, particularly in domains involving communication, mutual understanding, and adaptation between partners (Neu & Bradford, 2025). Research on consensually non-monogamous relationships has likewise drawn attention to complex emotional experiences, such as compersion, that depend on nuanced emotional interpretation and relationship-specific communication (Buczel et al., 2023). Although these relational contexts differ from conventional couple models, they collectively show that relationship quality depends heavily on how partners understand, negotiate, and communicate emotionally meaningful experiences. The central importance of empathy and communication is therefore likely to extend across diverse forms of committed romantic relationships.

Empathy itself is also linked to broader social and interpersonal outcomes beyond romantic partnerships. Research examining empathy and aggression has suggested that greater empathic capacity may be associated with reduced hostile or maladaptive interpersonal responding, although such relationships may vary according to gender and contextual factors (Sharma, 2021). This is relevant to couple relationships because empathic communication may

reduce the likelihood that emotionally charged interactions escalate into criticism, hostility, or withdrawal. By facilitating perspective taking and emotional understanding, empathy may allow partners to interpret conflict less defensively and respond with greater sensitivity. In this way, empathic communication may serve as a proximal behavioral mechanism through which attachment security and emotional intelligence exert beneficial effects on relationship quality.

Recent developments in research on attachment and empathy also extend beyond face-to-face human relationships and emphasize the general importance of perceived responsiveness and emotional connection in attachment processes. Research on attachment to social chatbots has examined how loneliness, self-disclosure, and empathy contribute to the formation of attachment-like bonds with artificial agents (Yao & Nan, 2025). Similarly, emerging work on multimodal social robots has emphasized user preferences for interaction systems that recognize, respond to, and adapt to emotional and relational needs (Zhang & Liu, 2026). Although these studies concern human–technology interaction rather than romantic couples, they underscore a broader psychological principle: the experience of connection depends heavily on perceived understanding, emotional responsiveness, and the communication of attunement. These same processes are central to intimate human relationships, where emotional responsiveness can determine whether attachment needs are met or frustrated.

At the dyadic level, relationship quality is therefore likely to arise from a combination of attachment-based expectations, emotional competencies, and interactional processes. Attachment anxiety may reduce relationship quality through hyperactivation of attachment concerns, excessive sensitivity to rejection, and difficulties interpreting partners' behavior in a balanced manner. Attachment avoidance may impair relationship quality through emotional distancing, reduced disclosure, and diminished responsiveness to the partner's emotional needs. Emotional intelligence, in contrast, may promote relationship quality by improving emotional awareness, regulation, and accurate appraisal of interpersonal signals. Yet these individual tendencies are unlikely to affect relationships only through direct pathways. Their relational consequences may depend substantially on whether they are expressed behaviorally through empathic communication. An individual with greater emotional intelligence may be more capable of understanding a partner's emotional state,

but the relational benefit of that capacity may emerge most clearly when it is conveyed through attentive listening, validation, and supportive responding. Similarly, securely attached individuals may maintain higher-quality relationships partly because their attachment security allows them to remain emotionally available during difficult conversations.

Although previous studies have examined attachment and relationship quality, emotional intelligence and relational outcomes, and empathy or communication in close relationships, fewer studies have integrated these constructs within a single explanatory model. Much of the existing literature has focused on direct associations or has considered attachment, emotional intelligence, and empathy separately. However, the available evidence suggests a more interconnected process in which attachment orientation and emotional intelligence shape empathic communication, which in turn contributes to relationship quality. This integrative perspective is theoretically important because it distinguishes relatively stable individual differences from a potentially modifiable interpersonal mechanism. It is also clinically relevant because empathic communication may represent a target through which couple interventions can reduce the negative relational consequences of attachment insecurity and strengthen the positive effects of emotional competence. Research emphasizing supportive interaction, responsiveness, and relational attunement provides a strong foundation for testing such a mediation model (Fogel-Yaakobi et al., 2023; Seedall & Wampler, 2023; Xiao et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the investigation of these processes in a Canadian sample is important given the cultural, linguistic, and relational diversity that characterizes contemporary intimate partnerships in Canada. Relationship functioning occurs within social contexts that shape norms regarding emotional expression, autonomy, intimacy, gender roles, and communication. A model that simultaneously considers attachment, emotional intelligence, empathic communication, and relationship quality may therefore provide a more comprehensive account of how individual emotional tendencies become translated into relational outcomes in a diverse adult population. Such a model also responds to contemporary calls for relationship research that moves beyond isolated predictors and instead examines the mechanisms through which personal characteristics influence dyadic functioning.

Accordingly, the aim of the present study was to predict couple relationship quality from adult attachment and

emotional intelligence and to examine the mediating role of empathic communication in these associations.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational research design to investigate the relationships among adult attachment, emotional intelligence, empathic communication, and couple relationship quality, with particular emphasis on the mediating role of empathic communication. The statistical population consisted of adults involved in committed romantic relationships and residing in Canada during the data-collection period. A total of 384 participants were recruited from several Canadian provinces through online advertisements, community organizations, social media platforms, university mailing lists, and relationship-oriented community networks. Participants were selected using a convenience sampling approach while efforts were made to obtain variation in age, gender, educational background, relationship duration, and marital status. Eligibility criteria required participants to be at least 18 years of age, currently married or involved in a committed cohabiting romantic relationship for at least one year, residing in Canada, having sufficient proficiency in English to understand and complete the questionnaires, and providing informed consent to participate in the study. Individuals who reported that their current romantic relationship had lasted less than one year, who were separated from their partner at the time of data collection, or who submitted questionnaires with substantial amounts of missing data were excluded from the analysis. Data were collected through a secure online questionnaire platform. Before accessing the research instruments, participants were presented with information concerning the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality of responses, anonymity of collected information, and their right to discontinue participation at any time without penalty. Electronic informed consent was obtained before participants proceeded to the questionnaires. No personally identifying information was included in the analytical dataset. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles governing research involving human participants, including respect for autonomy, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and secure handling of research data.

2.2. Measures

Demographic and relationship information was obtained using a researcher-developed questionnaire that collected data concerning age, gender, educational level, employment status, marital status, duration of the current romantic relationship, and whether the participant was married or cohabiting with a partner. Adult attachment was assessed using the Experiences in Close Relationships–Revised questionnaire (ECR-R), developed by Fraley, Waller, and Brennan. The ECR-R consists of 36 items and evaluates two major dimensions of adult romantic attachment: attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. Eighteen items assess attachment anxiety, reflecting concerns about rejection, abandonment, and insufficient partner availability, whereas the remaining 18 items assess attachment avoidance, reflecting discomfort with emotional closeness, dependence, and intimacy. Participants respond to each item on a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). After reverse-scored items are recoded, mean scores are calculated separately for the attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance dimensions. Higher scores indicate greater attachment insecurity in the corresponding dimension, whereas comparatively lower scores on both dimensions are indicative of greater attachment security. The ECR-R has been extensively used in studies of romantic attachment and has demonstrated strong internal consistency, construct validity, and factorial stability in adult populations.

Emotional intelligence was measured using the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS). The WLEIS is a 16-item self-report instrument designed to assess emotional intelligence through four dimensions: self-emotion appraisal, others' emotion appraisal, use of emotion, and regulation of emotion. Self-emotion appraisal represents individuals' ability to understand and accurately identify their own emotional states, whereas others' emotion appraisal refers to the ability to recognize and understand the emotions of other people. The use of emotion dimension reflects the extent to which individuals employ emotional information to facilitate goal-directed behavior and constructive functioning, and the regulation of emotion dimension measures the ability to manage and modify emotional responses effectively. Items are rated on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Subscale scores may be calculated separately, while an overall emotional intelligence score is obtained by averaging or summing the responses across the

16 items. Higher scores represent greater perceived emotional intelligence. The WLEIS has demonstrated satisfactory psychometric properties across diverse cultural and adult samples, including evidence of internal consistency, convergent validity, discriminant validity, and a stable four-factor structure.

Empathic communication was assessed using an empathic communication measure designed to capture participants' ability to communicate understanding, emotional responsiveness, perspective taking, attentive listening, and sensitivity to their romantic partner's emotional experiences during interpersonal exchanges. The measure included statements addressing behaviors such as listening carefully to a partner's feelings, attempting to understand situations from the partner's perspective, accurately recognizing the partner's emotional state, responding to emotional disclosures in a supportive manner, and communicating acceptance and understanding during disagreements. Responses were provided on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher total scores representing greater empathic communication within the romantic relationship. Negatively worded items, where applicable, were reverse-scored before calculation of the total score. In the present study, empathic communication was conceptualized as the principal mediating variable through which attachment-related tendencies and emotional abilities could influence perceived relationship quality. Internal consistency of the measure was evaluated in the study sample using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability coefficients, and its measurement properties were examined before testing the structural mediation model.

Couple relationship quality was assessed using the Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS). The RDAS is a 14-item instrument developed to provide a concise assessment of adjustment and relationship functioning among married and cohabiting couples. The scale evaluates three interrelated dimensions of relationship functioning: dyadic consensus, dyadic satisfaction, and dyadic cohesion. Dyadic consensus assesses the degree of agreement between partners regarding important aspects of their shared life, dyadic satisfaction evaluates perceived stability, satisfaction, and conflict within the relationship, and dyadic cohesion reflects the extent to which partners engage in shared activities, communication, and emotional connection. Items employ response formats appropriate to their content and are combined to produce a total relationship adjustment score. Higher total scores indicate better dyadic adjustment

and higher overall couple relationship quality, whereas lower scores represent greater relational difficulties. The RDAS has been widely applied in relationship research and has shown satisfactory reliability, criterion validity, construct validity, and sensitivity to differences in couple functioning. In the present study, couple relationship quality constituted the primary outcome variable.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics and structural equation modeling software. Prior to hypothesis testing, the dataset was screened for completeness, duplicate responses, out-of-range values, patterns of missing data, and potential univariate and multivariate outliers. Descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation, minimum, maximum, frequency, and percentage, were calculated as appropriate to summarize participant characteristics and the principal study variables. The distributional characteristics of continuous variables were evaluated using skewness and kurtosis coefficients in conjunction with graphical inspection. Multicollinearity among predictor variables was examined using correlation coefficients, tolerance values, and variance inflation factors. Reliability of the study measures was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability, with coefficients of .70 or higher considered indicative of acceptable internal consistency. Where latent-variable modeling was employed, convergent validity was examined through standardized factor loadings and average variance extracted, and discriminant validity was evaluated by examining the distinctiveness of the latent constructs. Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted before testing the structural model to determine whether the measurement structure adequately represented adult attachment, emotional intelligence, empathic communication, and couple relationship quality.

Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were calculated to examine the bivariate relationships among attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, emotional intelligence, empathic communication, and couple relationship quality. The hypothesized mediation model was subsequently evaluated using structural equation modeling. In the model, attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, and emotional intelligence were specified as predictor variables, empathic communication was specified as the mediator, and couple relationship quality was specified as the outcome variable. Direct paths were estimated from the predictor variables to empathic communication and couple

relationship quality, as well as from empathic communication to couple relationship quality. This specification permitted simultaneous examination of the direct effects of attachment and emotional intelligence on relationship quality and their indirect effects through empathic communication. Model adequacy was evaluated using multiple goodness-of-fit indices, including the chi-square to degrees-of-freedom ratio, Comparative Fit Index, Tucker-Lewis Index, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation, and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual. A chi-square to degrees-of-freedom ratio below 3.00, Comparative Fit Index and Tucker-Lewis Index values of approximately .90 or higher, and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual values below .08 were considered indicative of an acceptable model fit.

The statistical significance of indirect effects was examined using a nonparametric bootstrap procedure with 5,000 resamples and bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals. An indirect effect was considered statistically significant when the corresponding confidence interval did not include zero. Standardized path coefficients were reported to facilitate interpretation of the magnitude and direction of relationships among variables. The proportion of variance explained in empathic communication and couple relationship quality was evaluated using squared multiple correlations. Participant age, gender, relationship duration, and marital or cohabitation status were initially examined as potential covariates and were retained in the final model when they demonstrated theoretically meaningful or statistically significant associations with the principal outcome variables. All statistical tests were two-tailed, and the significance level was set at $p < .05$. The proposed analytical strategy therefore allowed simultaneous evaluation of whether insecure adult attachment was associated with poorer relationship quality, whether higher emotional intelligence predicted better relationship quality, and whether empathic communication represented a statistically significant explanatory mechanism linking these

individual characteristics to the perceived quality of participants' romantic relationships.

3. Findings and Results

The final analytical sample consisted of 384 adults who were currently involved in a committed romantic relationship and residing in Canada. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 62 years, with a mean age of 36.84 years ($SD = 9.27$). Of the total sample, 207 participants (53.91%) identified as women and 174 (45.31%) identified as men, while 3 participants (0.78%) identified with another gender identity or preferred not to specify. Regarding relationship status, 261 participants (67.97%) were legally married and 123 (32.03%) were living with a romantic partner in a committed cohabiting relationship. Relationship duration ranged from 1 to 31 years, with an average duration of 9.16 years ($SD = 6.42$). In terms of educational attainment, 31 participants (8.07%) had completed secondary education or less, 76 (19.79%) held a college or technical diploma, 167 (43.49%) held a bachelor's degree, and 110 (28.65%) held a master's or doctoral degree. Regarding employment status, 279 participants (72.66%) were employed either full-time or part-time, 38 (9.90%) were self-employed, 31 (8.07%) were students, and 36 (9.38%) were unemployed, retired, or otherwise outside paid employment. Preliminary examination of the demographic variables indicated sufficient heterogeneity in age, educational level, relationship duration, and relationship status for subsequent correlational and structural analyses. Missing responses were limited and were below 2% for all study variables; inspection of missingness patterns suggested no systematic concentration of missing values. After data screening, no case met the criteria for exclusion because of excessive missingness. Examination of standardized scores and Mahalanobis distance identified a small number of potentially unusual observations; however, sensitivity analyses indicated that retaining these cases did not materially change the estimated coefficients. Therefore, all 384 eligible participants were retained in the final analyses.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics, Distributional Characteristics, and Reliability of the Main Study Variables

Variable	Possible Range	Observed Range	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Cronbach's α	Composite Reliability
Attachment Anxiety	1–7	1.17–6.72	3.61	1.12	0.28	-0.41	.91	.92
Attachment Avoidance	1–7	1.11–6.44	3.27	1.06	0.36	-0.29	.90	.91
Emotional Intelligence	1–7	2.19–6.88	4.86	0.89	-0.31	-0.22	.92	.93
Empathic Communication	1–5	1.58–4.96	3.74	0.67	-0.42	0.17	.91	.92
Couple Relationship Quality	0–69	24–68	51.82	8.63	-0.48	-0.06	.89	.90

As shown in Table 1, the principal study variables demonstrated satisfactory variability and acceptable distributional characteristics. Mean scores indicated moderate levels of attachment anxiety ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 1.12$) and attachment avoidance ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 1.06$), suggesting that attachment insecurity was present to varying degrees across the sample rather than being concentrated at either extreme of the measurement scales. The average emotional intelligence score was 4.86 ($SD = 0.89$) on the seven-point response scale, indicating a generally moderate-to-high level of perceived emotional ability. Empathic communication also showed a relatively favorable average level ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 0.67$), while the mean score for couple relationship quality was 51.82 ($SD = 8.63$), reflecting substantial between-participant variation in perceived dyadic adjustment. Skewness coefficients ranged from -0.48 to 0.36 and kurtosis coefficients ranged from -0.41 to 0.17, remaining well within commonly accepted limits for

univariate normality. Accordingly, there was no evidence of serious departure from normality that would preclude the use of maximum-likelihood-based structural modeling. Internal consistency was high for all study measures. Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged from .89 for couple relationship quality to .92 for emotional intelligence, while composite reliability coefficients ranged from .90 to .93. These findings exceeded the conventional minimum criterion of .70 and supported the reliability of the measures used in subsequent analyses. The relatively similar values obtained for Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability further suggested that the internal consistency estimates were not substantially influenced by unequal item loadings. Collectively, the descriptive and reliability findings indicated that the measures had adequate psychometric performance and that the observed distributions provided an appropriate basis for correlation, confirmatory factor analysis, and structural equation modeling.

Table 2

Pearson Correlations Among Adult Attachment, Emotional Intelligence, Empathic Communication, and Couple Relationship Quality

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Attachment Anxiety	1				
2. Attachment Avoidance	.41***	1			
3. Emotional Intelligence	-.32***	-.38***	1		
4. Empathic Communication	-.46***	-.51***	.61***	1	
5. Couple Relationship Quality	-.52***	-.57***	.58***	.69***	1

Table 2 presents the zero-order correlations among the principal study variables. Attachment anxiety was positively associated with attachment avoidance ($r = .41$, $p < .001$), indicating that participants who reported greater concerns regarding rejection and abandonment also tended, to some extent, to report greater discomfort with intimacy and dependence. However, the magnitude of this association was moderate rather than excessive, supporting the treatment of attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance as related but conceptually distinct dimensions. Attachment anxiety was negatively related to emotional intelligence ($r = -.32$, $p < .001$), empathic communication ($r = -.46$, $p < .001$), and couple relationship quality ($r = -.52$, $p < .001$). Similarly, attachment avoidance demonstrated significant negative associations with emotional intelligence ($r = -.38$, $p < .001$), empathic communication ($r = -.51$, $p < .001$), and relationship quality ($r = -.57$, $p < .001$). The strongest attachment-related correlation with relationship quality was observed for attachment avoidance, suggesting that

discomfort with emotional closeness and dependence may be particularly detrimental to perceived couple functioning.

Emotional intelligence showed a strong positive association with empathic communication ($r = .61$, $p < .001$) and a moderately strong positive association with couple relationship quality ($r = .58$, $p < .001$). Thus, individuals reporting greater ability to identify, understand, use, and regulate emotional information also tended to report more empathic exchanges with their partners and higher overall relationship quality. Empathic communication demonstrated the largest zero-order association with couple relationship quality ($r = .69$, $p < .001$), indicating that participants who reported greater attentiveness to their partner's emotional experiences, more effective perspective taking, supportive emotional responsiveness, and greater interpersonal understanding also reported substantially better dyadic adjustment. None of the correlations among the independent variables exceeded conventional thresholds associated with serious multicollinearity. Additional examination of

variance inflation factors produced values ranging from 1.24 to 1.58, with tolerance coefficients ranging from .63 to .81, confirming that collinearity was not sufficiently high to compromise interpretation of the structural regression coefficients. Overall, the correlational pattern was consistent

with the proposed conceptual model: attachment insecurity was associated with poorer empathic communication and lower relationship quality, whereas emotional intelligence and empathic communication were positively related to relationship quality.

Table 3

Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Measurement Model Results

Measurement Indicator	Standardized Loading Range	AVE	Composite Reliability
Attachment Anxiety	.66–.84	.57	.92
Attachment Avoidance	.64–.83	.55	.91
Emotional Intelligence	.68–.87	.62	.93
Empathic Communication	.67–.86	.60	.92
Couple Relationship Quality	.63–.84	.56	.90
Model Fit Index	Obtained Value	Recommended Criterion	
χ^2/df	2.18	< 3.00	
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	.954	≥ .90	
Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI)	.946	≥ .90	
Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI)	.919	≥ .90	
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	.056	< .08	
90% CI for RMSEA	.049–.063	—	
Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR)	.047	< .08	

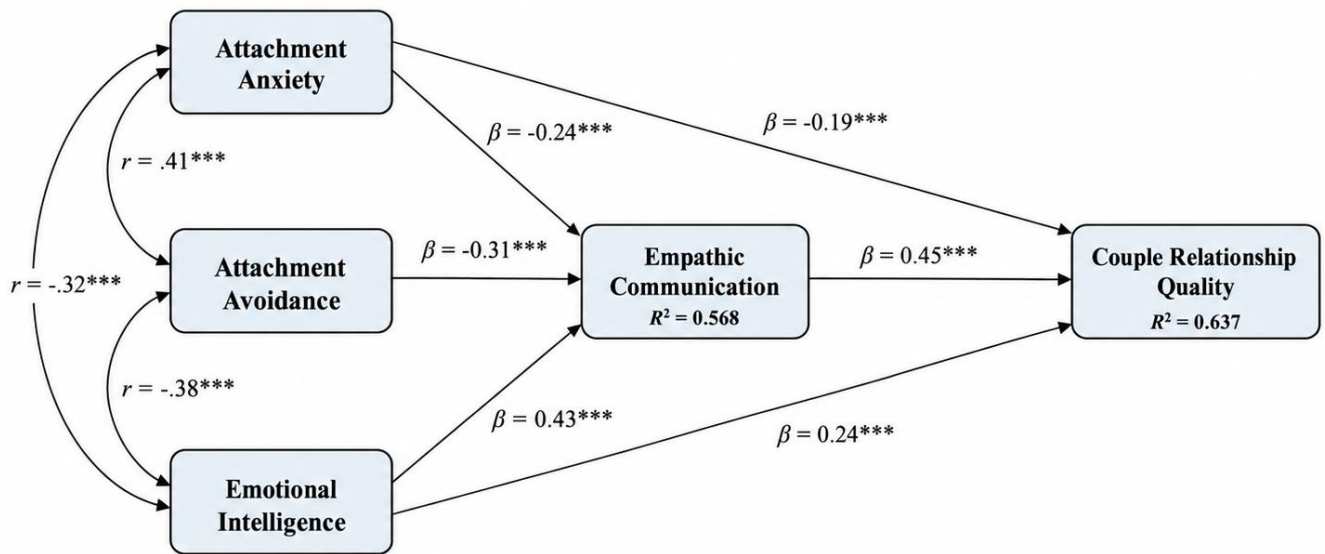
The confirmatory factor analysis supported the adequacy of the proposed measurement model. Standardized factor loadings ranged from .63 to .87 across the five constructs, and all loadings were statistically significant at $p < .001$. More specifically, attachment anxiety indicators loaded between .66 and .84, attachment avoidance indicators between .64 and .83, emotional intelligence indicators between .68 and .87, empathic communication indicators between .67 and .86, and relationship-quality indicators between .63 and .84. These coefficients indicated that the selected indicators represented their intended latent variables to a satisfactory degree. Average variance extracted values ranged from .55 for attachment avoidance to .62 for emotional intelligence, and all exceeded the recommended value of .50. Therefore, more than half of the variance in the indicators of each construct was accounted for by the corresponding latent factor, supporting convergent validity. Composite reliability coefficients ranged from .90 to .93 and were consistent with the internal consistency results reported in Table 1. Inspection of interconstruct relationships and the square roots of the average variance extracted values additionally indicated satisfactory

discriminant validity, because each construct shared more variance with its own indicators than with conceptually distinct constructs.

The overall measurement model also demonstrated a satisfactory fit to the observed data. The chi-square-to-degrees-of-freedom ratio was 2.18, which was below the recommended threshold of 3.00. The Comparative Fit Index was .954 and the Tucker-Lewis Index was .946, both exceeding the .90 criterion and approaching the more stringent .95 benchmark. The Goodness-of-Fit Index was .919, further indicating acceptable correspondence between the hypothesized measurement structure and the observed covariance matrix. The RMSEA was .056, with a 90% confidence interval from .049 to .063, indicating close approximate fit, while the SRMR was .047, substantially below the .08 threshold. Taken together, these indices provided evidence that the measurement model adequately represented the empirical data and justified proceeding with estimation of the structural mediation model. No theoretically unjustified correlated error terms or cross-loadings were added to improve fit, thereby preserving the conceptual integrity of the proposed measurement structure.

Figure 1

Structural Model of Adult Attachment, Emotional Intelligence, Empathic Communication, and Couple Relationship Quality



Overall, the findings supported the proposed theoretical model. Greater attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance were associated with poorer couple relationship quality both directly and indirectly through lower levels of empathic communication. Emotional intelligence was associated with better relationship quality both through a direct pathway and through its positive association with empathic communication. The persistence of statistically significant direct effects after inclusion of the mediator indicated partial mediation for all three predictor pathways. Among the examined interpersonal mechanisms, empathic communication emerged as a particularly important

proximal correlate of couple relationship quality and accounted for a meaningful proportion of the associations between individual emotional and attachment characteristics and participants' evaluations of their romantic relationships. The consistency of the correlation, measurement, and structural modeling results provided convergent support for the proposition that secure relational tendencies and emotional competencies are linked to better relationship functioning partly because they facilitate more empathic, emotionally responsive communication between romantic partners.

Table 4

Standardized Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects in the Structural Mediation Model

Hypothesized Effect	β	SE	t	p	95% Bootstrap CI	Result
Attachment Anxiety → Empathic Communication	-.24	.04	-5.73	<.001	[-.32, -.16]	Significant
Attachment Avoidance → Empathic Communication	-.31	.04	-7.18	<.001	[-.39, -.22]	Significant
Emotional Intelligence → Empathic Communication	.43	.04	9.81	<.001	[.34, .51]	Significant
Empathic Communication → Relationship Quality	.45	.05	9.27	<.001	[.36, .54]	Significant
Attachment Anxiety → Relationship Quality	-.19	.04	-4.61	<.001	[-.27, -.11]	Significant
Attachment Avoidance → Relationship Quality	-.23	.04	-5.44	<.001	[-.31, -.15]	Significant
Emotional Intelligence → Relationship Quality	.24	.05	5.16	<.001	[.15, .33]	Significant
Attachment Anxiety → Empathic Communication → Relationship Quality	-.11	.02	—	<.001	[-.16, -.07]	Significant indirect effect
Attachment Avoidance → Empathic Communication → Relationship Quality	-.14	.03	—	<.001	[-.20, -.09]	Significant indirect effect
Emotional Intelligence → Empathic Communication → Relationship Quality	.19	.03	—	<.001	[.14, .25]	Significant indirect effect

The structural model demonstrated satisfactory fit to the data, $\chi^2/df = 2.24$, CFI = .951, TLI = .943, RMSEA = .057, and SRMR = .050, indicating that the proposed directional relationships among adult attachment, emotional intelligence, empathic communication, and couple

relationship quality were consistent with the observed covariance structure. Attachment anxiety significantly and negatively predicted empathic communication ($\beta = -.24$, SE = .04, $t = -5.73$, $p < .001$), indicating that greater concerns regarding rejection, partner availability, and abandonment

were associated with less effective empathic exchange within the romantic relationship. Attachment avoidance demonstrated an even stronger negative relationship with empathic communication ($\beta = -.31$, $SE = .04$, $t = -7.18$, $p < .001$), suggesting that discomfort with closeness and emotional dependence constituted an important impediment to empathic engagement with the partner. In contrast, emotional intelligence positively predicted empathic communication ($\beta = .43$, $SE = .04$, $t = 9.81$, $p < .001$). This was the strongest predictor of the mediator, indicating that individuals with greater emotional awareness, emotion recognition, emotional regulation, and constructive use of emotion were more likely to engage in emotionally responsive and perspective-sensitive communication with their partners.

Empathic communication, in turn, significantly and positively predicted couple relationship quality ($\beta = .45$, $SE = .05$, $t = 9.27$, $p < .001$). This path represented the strongest direct predictor of relationship quality in the structural model, highlighting the central role of empathic interpersonal processes in perceived dyadic functioning. Even after empathic communication was included as a mediator, attachment anxiety continued to exert a statistically significant negative direct effect on relationship quality ($\beta = -.19$, $SE = .04$, $t = -4.61$, $p < .001$), as did attachment avoidance ($\beta = -.23$, $SE = .04$, $t = -5.44$, $p < .001$). Emotional intelligence also maintained a significant positive direct effect on relationship quality ($\beta = .24$, $SE = .05$, $t = 5.16$, $p < .001$). Thus, the effects of attachment and emotional intelligence were not fully transmitted through empathic communication, indicating partial rather than complete mediation.

The bootstrap analysis based on 5,000 resamples provided direct support for the hypothesized mediating role of empathic communication. The indirect effect of attachment anxiety on relationship quality through empathic communication was negative and statistically significant ($\beta = -.11$, $p < .001$, 95% bootstrap CI $[-.16, -.07]$). Because the confidence interval did not contain zero, the mediation effect was considered statistically significant. Similarly, attachment avoidance exerted a significant negative indirect effect on relationship quality through empathic communication ($\beta = -.14$, $p < .001$, 95% bootstrap CI $[-.20, -.09]$). This indirect effect was somewhat larger than that observed for attachment anxiety, suggesting that the adverse relationship between attachment avoidance and relationship quality was particularly likely to operate through reduced empathic interpersonal engagement. Emotional intelligence

showed a statistically significant positive indirect effect on relationship quality through empathic communication ($\beta = .19$, $p < .001$, 95% bootstrap CI $[.14, .25]$). This was the largest of the three indirect effects and indicated that an important component of the association between emotional intelligence and higher-quality romantic relationships could be explained by the greater capacity of emotionally intelligent individuals to communicate with empathy and responsiveness.

When direct and indirect effects were considered together, the total standardized effect of attachment anxiety on couple relationship quality was $\beta = -.30$, the total effect of attachment avoidance was $\beta = -.37$, and the total effect of emotional intelligence was $\beta = .43$. These findings indicated that attachment avoidance constituted the strongest negative predictor of relationship quality, whereas emotional intelligence represented the strongest positive predictor among the dispositional variables included in the model. The model explained 56.8% of the variance in empathic communication and 63.7% of the variance in couple relationship quality, indicating substantial explanatory power. Inclusion of age, gender, relationship duration, and relationship status as control variables produced only minor changes in the principal coefficients and did not alter the statistical significance or direction of the hypothesized paths. Relationship duration showed a small positive association with relationship quality, whereas the remaining demographic covariates did not exhibit consistent independent effects after the psychological variables were entered. Accordingly, the final interpretation focused primarily on attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, emotional intelligence, and empathic communication.

4. Discussion

The present study examined the prediction of couple relationship quality from adult attachment and emotional intelligence, with empathic communication considered as a mediating mechanism. The findings showed that both attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance were significantly and negatively associated with couple relationship quality, whereas emotional intelligence was significantly and positively associated with relationship quality. In addition, attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance negatively predicted empathic communication, while emotional intelligence positively predicted empathic communication. Empathic communication, in turn, emerged as a strong positive predictor of couple relationship quality.

Bootstrap analyses further demonstrated that empathic communication significantly mediated the relationships of attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, and emotional intelligence with relationship quality. The persistence of significant direct effects alongside significant indirect effects indicated partial mediation. Overall, these findings support an integrated model in which attachment-related tendencies and emotional competencies influence relationship quality not only directly but also through the extent to which individuals communicate empathically with their romantic partners.

The negative association between attachment anxiety and couple relationship quality is consistent with attachment theory and with previous research emphasizing the importance of attachment security in close relationships. Individuals high in attachment anxiety typically experience heightened sensitivity to signs of rejection, abandonment, or insufficient responsiveness from their partners. These concerns can promote hyperactivation of the attachment system, excessive reassurance seeking, emotional volatility, and a tendency to interpret ambiguous relational cues in a threatening manner. Such processes may undermine satisfaction and increase conflict because partners can become caught in cycles in which one person intensifies bids for closeness while the other experiences these bids as demanding or difficult to satisfy. The present finding is therefore consistent with the broader conceptualization of attachment as a central organizing system for intimacy, support seeking, and relational regulation (Bell, 2023; Wiseman & Egozi, 2021). It also aligns with research showing that attachment dynamics affect how needs are signaled and how partners respond to those needs during couple interaction (Seedall & Wampler, 2023).

Attachment avoidance also significantly predicted lower couple relationship quality, and its negative total effect was somewhat stronger than that of attachment anxiety. This result is theoretically plausible because attachment avoidance is characterized by discomfort with dependence, suppression of attachment needs, reluctance to disclose vulnerability, and emotional distancing during relational stress. These tendencies can directly interfere with processes that are essential for relationship maintenance, including mutual disclosure, reassurance, emotional availability, and responsive caregiving. The result is consistent with evidence that avoidant individuals may inaccurately perceive their partners' positive emotions during emotionally meaningful interactions, thereby reducing their ability to benefit from expressions of affection and connection (Gauvin et al.,

2024). If positive signals are overlooked or discounted, opportunities for reinforcement of closeness may be lost, while emotionally difficult interactions may be more likely to produce withdrawal. The present finding also corresponds with work showing that attachment style is linked to relationship quality and dyadic coping under psychosocial stress (Gallistl et al., 2024). Thus, attachment avoidance may compromise relationship quality both by limiting emotional engagement and by weakening the couple's ability to function as a coordinated regulatory system during stress.

A further important finding was that both dimensions of insecure attachment negatively predicted empathic communication. This result suggests that attachment insecurity may shape relationship quality partly by disrupting how effectively individuals perceive, understand, and respond to their partner's emotional experiences. In attachment anxiety, attention to the partner's emotions may become excessively filtered through fears of rejection or abandonment, making it more difficult to maintain a balanced empathic stance. In attachment avoidance, the problem may be different: emotional distancing and defensive deactivation can reduce willingness to engage deeply with the partner's affective state. This interpretation is consistent with meta-analytic evidence demonstrating meaningful associations between attachment and empathy across developmental periods (Sanctis & Mesurado, 2022). It is also compatible with findings that attachment contributes to the growth and expression of empathic support in close relationships (Mora, 2021). The present results extend this literature by showing that, in adult romantic relationships, attachment insecurity is not only associated with lower relationship quality but is also linked to reduced empathic communication, which helps explain part of that association.

The stronger negative path from attachment avoidance to empathic communication is also consistent with existing relational research. Empathic communication requires sustained attention to another person's subjective experience, emotional openness, and a willingness to remain psychologically engaged when the partner is distressed or vulnerable. These requirements directly conflict with the deactivating strategies characteristic of avoidant attachment. Previous research with couples has shown that attachment moderates the association between physiological synchrony and supportive behavior, suggesting that attachment orientation influences whether emotional attunement is translated into observable support (Fogel-Yaakobi et al., 2023). Similarly, research examining empathic stress in

romantic couples indicates that attachment is related to how individuals resonate with and regulate responses to their partner's emotional states (Gallistl et al., 2025). These findings support the interpretation that insecure attachment, particularly avoidance, may reduce relationship quality because it interferes with the translation of emotional information into supportive interpersonal behavior.

Emotional intelligence was positively associated with couple relationship quality and positively predicted empathic communication. This result supports the view that emotional intelligence represents an important personal resource in romantic relationships. Individuals with greater emotional intelligence are more likely to recognize their own emotional states accurately, identify the emotions of others, regulate affective reactions effectively, and use emotional information in ways that facilitate adaptive action. In intimate relationships, these competencies can reduce impulsive responding during conflict, improve interpretation of a partner's emotional cues, and increase the likelihood of supportive and validating communication. The finding is directly consistent with evidence linking emotional intelligence to better relationship quality and more favorable evaluations of one's romantic partner (Xiao et al., 2025). The present study adds to this literature by indicating that the relational value of emotional intelligence is partly expressed through empathic communication rather than operating solely as an internal emotional capacity.

The positive relationship between emotional intelligence and empathic communication is also consistent with research emphasizing the interpersonal nature of emotional competence. Emotional communication depends on the ability to identify emotional meaning, convey it appropriately, and respond to the affective state of another person. Psychometric work on emotional communication has highlighted these capacities as central components of effective interpersonal functioning (Hernández-Jorge et al., 2022). Similarly, broader work on personality and psychosocial functioning suggests that emotional and interpersonal competencies contribute to adaptive social behavior (Suciu et al., 2021). In contrast, difficulties in social cognition can produce self-focused interpretations and reduced sensitivity to the perspectives or needs of others (Eddy, 2021). The current findings therefore support the view that emotional intelligence is likely to enhance couple functioning because it facilitates more accurate and constructive exchanges of emotional information between partners.

Empathic communication was the strongest direct predictor of couple relationship quality in the structural model. This finding underscores the importance of empathy not merely as an internal disposition but as an interpersonal behavior that is communicated and perceived within the dyad. Relationship quality is likely to improve when partners feel heard, understood, validated, and emotionally taken into account. Such experiences can reduce defensiveness, facilitate repair after conflict, and strengthen a sense of safety and mutual responsiveness. Research on dyadic empathy supports the conceptualization of empathy as a relational process that unfolds within couple interactions rather than as an isolated individual characteristic (Kazmierczak & Karasiewicz, 2021). The result is also compatible with work emphasizing interdependence and perceived partner responsiveness as central to emotional dynamics in intimate relationships (Sels et al., 2021). Thus, the current study supports a process-oriented view in which empathic communication acts as a proximal relational mechanism connecting individual emotional tendencies with broader evaluations of relationship quality.

The mediation findings are particularly important because they clarify how attachment insecurity and emotional intelligence may become translated into relational outcomes. The significant indirect effect of attachment anxiety suggests that part of its association with poorer relationship quality occurs because anxious individuals may have greater difficulty communicating empathy in a stable and partner-focused manner. Their attention may become dominated by concerns about their own security, reducing the capacity to remain attuned to the partner's perspective during difficult interactions. In contrast, the significant indirect effect of attachment avoidance suggests that emotional disengagement and discomfort with intimacy may undermine relationship quality partly by reducing empathic responsiveness. These interpretations are consistent with the attachment-based couple interaction framework, which emphasizes the importance of clearly signaling needs and responding appropriately to a partner's attachment-related bids (Seedall & Wampler, 2023).

The significant indirect effect of emotional intelligence was also noteworthy and was the largest of the indirect pathways examined. This suggests that emotionally intelligent individuals may experience higher-quality relationships in part because they are better able to convert emotional awareness into empathic interpersonal behavior. Emotional intelligence may allow individuals to recognize subtle emotional cues, distinguish their own affect from that

of their partner, regulate defensive reactions, and select responses that communicate understanding. This mechanism is consistent with research showing that emotional intelligence is associated with better relational outcomes (Xiao et al., 2025) and with the broader view that emotionally meaningful connection depends on accurate recognition and responsive communication. Recent work on experiences of being emotionally moved within committed relationships also highlights the importance of shared emotional meaning and interpersonal connection in maintaining relational bonds (Wiecha et al., 2026). The current mediation findings therefore suggest that emotional intelligence may become relationally consequential when it facilitates empathic engagement with the partner.

The partial rather than complete mediation observed for all three predictors indicates that empathic communication is an important but not exclusive mechanism linking attachment and emotional intelligence to relationship quality. Attachment orientations may affect relationship quality through additional pathways such as trust, jealousy, emotion regulation, sexual intimacy, conflict behavior, support seeking, and perceptions of partner availability. Likewise, emotional intelligence may influence relationships through self-regulation, constructive problem solving, or greater tolerance of emotional complexity even when empathic communication is not directly involved. The persistence of significant direct effects is therefore theoretically expected. It also reflects the multidimensional nature of romantic relationships, in which multiple interpersonal and intrapersonal processes operate simultaneously.

The findings can also be interpreted in light of research showing that early relational adversity can shape adult couple functioning through multiple emotional and interpersonal pathways. Childhood maltreatment has been linked to poorer relationship quality, partly through its effects on attachment, emotion regulation, trust, and interpersonal expectations (Zamir, 2021). In addition, adverse relational histories may produce effects not only for the individual but also for the romantic partner, supporting a dyadic understanding of relationship functioning (Vaillancourt-Morel et al., 2023). These studies reinforce the present finding that attachment-related patterns and empathic communication should not be understood in isolation. Rather, they form part of a broader interpersonal system in which one partner's emotional regulation and relational expectations can affect the other's experience of safety, support, and connection.

The results are also consistent with studies emphasizing the role of relationships as either resources or burdens during periods of stress. When relationship quality is high and partners engage in effective dyadic coping, the romantic relationship can buffer acute psychosocial stress; when attachment insecurity and poor communication predominate, the same relationship can become an additional source of strain (Gallistl et al., 2024). Attachment-related vulnerabilities may become particularly salient under challenging conditions because stress activates needs for reassurance, closeness, and co-regulation. Work addressing attachment and trauma during the COVID-19 period similarly highlighted the importance of relational security and group processes under conditions of uncertainty and threat (Marmarosh, 2022). The current findings imply that empathic communication may be one mechanism that determines whether stress is managed collaboratively or becomes amplified within the couple.

The practical importance of empathic communication is further supported by intervention research. Integrative Behavioral Couple Therapy emphasizes acceptance, emotional understanding, and modification of maladaptive interaction patterns as important components of relationship improvement (Talib et al., 2025). The current findings are consistent with this approach because they identify empathic communication as a strong predictor of relationship quality and as a mediator of the effects of individual characteristics. Similarly, research on communicative openness has linked empathy and attachment with more adaptive communication within family relationships (Gorla et al., 2023). Although the context of adoptive parenthood differs from romantic partnership, the underlying principle is comparable: attachment security and empathy may create a relational climate in which emotionally important information can be expressed more openly and received with less defensiveness.

The relevance of empathy can also be understood through its association with broader interpersonal functioning. Research on empathy and aggression suggests that empathic capacity may be inversely related to hostile or maladaptive interpersonal behavior in some contexts (Sharma, 2021). In romantic relationships, greater empathy may reduce tendencies toward criticism, retaliatory responses, or rigid self-protection during conflict. This may help explain why empathic communication was strongly associated with relationship quality in the present study. When partners are able to represent each other's emotional states accurately and respond sensitively, disagreements may be less likely to escalate into destructive interaction patterns.

It is also important to recognize that communication and relational adaptation may vary across populations and relationship structures. Research on autistic individuals in romantic relationships has identified both communication-related challenges and distinctive strengths, emphasizing the importance of mutual adaptation rather than assuming a single normative style of intimacy (Neu & Bradford, 2025). Research on consensually non-monogamous relationships has likewise highlighted complex emotional experiences that depend on careful negotiation and communication (Buczel et al., 2023). These studies support a broader interpretation of the current findings: empathic communication is likely to be important across diverse relational forms, but the behavioral expression of empathy may vary according to the needs, expectations, and communication styles of the partners involved.

5. Conclusion

The present results also resonate with emerging research outside conventional romantic relationship contexts. Studies of attachment to social chatbots have shown that empathy, self-disclosure, and loneliness contribute to attachment-like bonds with artificial agents (Yao & Nan, 2025), while research on social robots for later-life support emphasizes user needs for responsive, adaptive, and emotionally meaningful interaction (Zhang & Liu, 2026). Although these contexts are fundamentally different from human romantic relationships, they underscore the broader psychological importance of perceived understanding and responsiveness. The current findings suggest that in human couples, empathic communication may serve precisely this function by signaling that the partner is emotionally available, attentive, and responsive.

6. Limitations & Suggestions

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the cross-sectional design does not permit causal conclusions regarding the direction of the observed relationships. Although the proposed model positioned attachment and emotional intelligence as predictors, empathic communication as a mediator, and relationship quality as an outcome, reciprocal influences are plausible. For example, repeated experiences of low relationship quality may gradually reduce empathic communication or intensify insecure attachment-related responses. Second, all variables were assessed using self-report measures, which can be affected by social desirability,

shared method variance, recall bias, and participants' subjective interpretations of their relationships. Third, data were obtained from individual participants rather than from both partners within each couple, limiting the ability to examine actor and partner effects or discrepancies between partners' perceptions. Fourth, convenience sampling may reduce the representativeness of the Canadian adult population, particularly because participation through online and community recruitment may favor individuals with greater interest in relationship topics or greater access to digital platforms. Finally, although several demographic variables were considered as covariates, other potentially important factors such as socioeconomic strain, cultural background, sexual orientation, parenting status, mental health, relationship conflict severity, and previous relationship experiences were not modeled in detail.

Future studies should employ longitudinal and prospective designs to clarify the temporal ordering of attachment, emotional intelligence, empathic communication, and relationship quality. Dyadic research recruiting both partners would be particularly valuable and would allow the use of actor-partner interdependence models to determine whether one partner's attachment orientation or emotional intelligence predicts not only their own relationship evaluations but also those of their partner. Experience-sampling or daily-diary methods could be used to capture fluctuations in empathic communication during naturally occurring interactions and to identify how momentary stress or conflict alters these pathways. Future research should also incorporate observational measures of couple communication, behavioral coding, physiological indicators of emotional regulation, and partner reports to reduce reliance on single-source self-report data. Cross-cultural comparisons would help determine whether the strength of these pathways differs according to norms surrounding emotional expression, autonomy, and intimacy. It would also be useful to examine additional mediators and moderators, including emotion regulation, perceived partner responsiveness, conflict management, trust, jealousy, sexual satisfaction, and dyadic coping.

The findings suggest that practitioners working with couples should assess not only overt relationship conflict but also underlying attachment tendencies, emotional competencies, and the quality of empathic communication between partners. Couple interventions may benefit from helping anxiously attached individuals communicate needs more directly without escalating reassurance seeking, while avoidantly attached individuals may need support in

tolerating vulnerability and remaining emotionally engaged during difficult conversations. Training in emotional awareness, emotion labeling, regulation, perspective taking, reflective listening, validation, and nondefensive responding may strengthen empathic communication and improve relationship quality. Practitioners should also consider framing empathy as a behavioral skill that can be practiced rather than as a fixed personality trait. Structured exercises in which partners identify emotional cues, paraphrase each other's experiences, and respond with validation may be particularly useful. Because emotional intelligence showed both direct and indirect associations with relationship quality, interventions aimed at strengthening emotion recognition and regulation may also produce broader benefits for couple functioning.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who cooperated in carrying out this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

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

Transparency of Data

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

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have equally contributed 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.

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