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# Identification and Explanation of Mechanisms Regulating Closeness and Distance from Affective Objects in Individuals with Depression: A Mixed-Methods Study with Emphasis on Attachment, Fear of Intimacy, and Rejection Sensitivity

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| Editor | Reviewers |
|---|---|
| John S. Carlson<br>Distinguished Professor of the Department of Educational Psychology, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, United<br>carlsoj@msu.edu | **Reviewer 1:** Mohammad Hassan Ghanifar<br>Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Birjand Branch, Islamic Azad University, Birjand, Iran. Email: ghanifar@iaubir.ac.ir<br>**Reviewer 2:** Mohsen Kachooei<br>Assistant Professor of Health Psychology, Department of Psychology, Humanities Faculty, University of Science and Culture, Tehran, Iran. kachooei.m@usc.ac.ir |

## 1. Round 1

### *1.1. Reviewer 1*

Reviewer:

In the Introduction paragraph stating that “Attachment anxiety is typically characterized by fear of abandonment... Attachment avoidance, in contrast, is associated with discomfort with dependency,” the theoretical account is accurate at a general level but should be connected more explicitly to the study’s six empirically identified regulation mechanisms. Because the eventual model distinguishes reassurance-seeking proximity, hypervigilant monitoring, ambivalent approach–withdrawal, protective emotional distancing, concealment of vulnerability, and post-rejection deactivation, the Introduction should prospectively explain why attachment hyperactivation would be expected to manifest through the first two mechanisms and attachment deactivation through the latter mechanisms. This would make the hypotheses theoretically derived rather than appearing to have been formulated retrospectively from the results.

The final portion of the Introduction states that "Far less attention has been devoted to the actual mechanisms through which depressed individuals dynamically regulate proximity to emotionally significant others." This is the key research-gap statement, but it is currently asserted rather than demonstrated. The authors should more systematically distinguish their contribution from previous research on interpersonal dependency, reassurance seeking, rejection sensitivity, attachment hyperactivation/deactivation, intimacy avoidance, and interpersonal theories of depression. A focused synthesis showing that these constructs have generally been studied separately would substantially strengthen the originality claim and establish more convincingly why a mixed-methods mechanism-identification study is warranted.

In the Methods paragraph beginning "This study employed an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design," the rationale for the specific mixed-methods design should be made more methodologically explicit. The authors state that qualitative findings were "subsequently used to formulate an empirical framework," but they should identify the exact point of interface between the phases: how qualitative codes became questionnaire items, how categories determined latent dimensions, whether quantitative hypotheses were specified before analysis, and how qualitative and quantitative findings were integrated. It would be useful to identify the design using established mixed-methods terminology, such as QUAL→QUAN, and state whether integration occurred through building, connecting, and merging procedures.

Table 1 identifies six mechanisms and the text states that these were organized around "threat-sensitive regulation of affective proximity." The qualitative Results would be substantially strengthened by including direct participant quotations for each major category. At present, the interpretation is presented almost entirely in the researchers' analytic language, making it difficult to evaluate grounding in participants' narratives. The authors should provide at least one representative quotation per major mechanism, accompanied by anonymous participant identifiers, while preserving confidentiality. Contradictory or negative cases should also be reported, especially if some participants demonstrated stable support seeking rather than oscillating approach–avoidance patterns.

Response: Revised and uploaded the manuscript.

### *1.2. Reviewer 2*

Reviewer:

The qualitative sampling paragraph reports that "The participants in the qualitative phase consisted of 22 adults with depressive symptoms," while later specifying that eligibility required "meeting criteria for a current depressive disorder based on a clinical diagnostic interview." This wording is internally inconsistent. The authors should clearly indicate whether participants had a formally established depressive disorder, clinically significant depressive symptoms, or both. The exact diagnostic interview should be named, including version, administration procedure, interviewer qualifications, and diagnostic criteria used. If multiple depressive diagnoses were accepted, such as major depressive disorder or persistent depressive disorder, their frequencies should also be reported.

The quantitative sampling paragraph states that "The quantitative phase included 420 adults with depression" and that "A multistage convenience sampling procedure was used." The phrase "multistage convenience sampling" requires clarification because multistage sampling commonly implies probability-based selection at successive levels, whereas convenience sampling is non-probabilistic. The authors should describe precisely how treatment centers were selected, how many centers participated, whether geographical areas of Tehran were intentionally represented, how eligible patients were approached, how many declined, and whether recruitment occurred consecutively. A participant-flow description would improve transparency and allow readers to assess selection bias.

The sample-size justification in the sentence "The sample size was selected to provide adequate statistical power for confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling" is insufficiently specific. The authors should provide an a priori or model-based sample-size calculation. This should identify the assumed effect size, desired power, alpha level, number of latent variables or free parameters, and the method/software used. Because the study conducted exploratory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis, and structural equation modeling using the same overall sample of 420 participants, the authors



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should also explain whether the sample was split into independent EFA and CFA subsamples. Performing EFA and CFA on the same observations risks capitalizing on chance and overestimating structural validity.

In the Data Collection Tools section, the manuscript states that the researcher-developed "Closeness–Distance Regulation Mechanisms Questionnaire" was generated from qualitative codes and reviewed by experts. This instrument is central to the study but is insufficiently documented for replication. The authors should report the original number of generated items, number and expertise of content validators, method used to calculate content validity, criteria for item deletion, pilot-sample size, response scale, scoring procedure, final item distribution across six dimensions, and representative items. Quantitative indices such as the Content Validity Ratio and Content Validity Index should be provided if they were used. The manuscript should also state whether permission or future access to the instrument is available.

The Methods section describes the use of the Beck Depression Inventory-II, Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised questionnaire, Fear of Intimacy Scale, and Adult Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire, but does not provide adequate evidence regarding their psychometric suitability for the Persian-speaking Iranian population. For example, the paragraph beginning "Attachment-related tendencies were measured using the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised questionnaire" should identify the Persian version used, translation or validation source, scoring range, number of items, and reliability and validity evidence from Iranian samples. The same detail should be added for all standardized instruments. Given the cultural sensitivity of intimacy, rejection, and attachment constructs, local measurement validity is especially important.

The qualitative analysis paragraph states that data were analyzed "using a grounded-theory-oriented constant comparative approach," followed by open, axial, and selective coding. The authors should either identify a specific grounded theory tradition or avoid terminology suggesting formal grounded theory if the study was essentially thematic/category analysis. If Strauss and Corbin procedures were used, this should be stated explicitly, along with information regarding theoretical sampling, memoing, paradigm coding, category saturation, and development of the central category. Furthermore, because interviews were initially purposively sampled with maximum variation, the authors should explain whether sampling became theoretically directed as analysis progressed, which would be expected in a genuine grounded theory design.

The manuscript reports that "selected interpretations were discussed with participants through member checking" and that "portions of the coding process were independently reviewed by researchers," but the procedures for establishing qualitative rigor need greater specificity. The authors should indicate how many participants participated in member checking, what materials they reviewed, whether any interpretations were modified, how many coders were involved, how disagreements were resolved, and whether coding agreement was formally quantified. The criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability should be linked to concrete actions rather than listed generically.

Response: Revised and uploaded the manuscript.

**2. Revised**

Editor's decision after revisions: Accepted.
Editor in Chief's decision: Accepted.



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