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# Psychological Determinants of Intimacy Avoidance in High-Achieving Women with Attachment Insecurity

Aleksandra. Kowalska[1], Lukas. Gruber[2*]

[1] Department of Health Psychology, University of Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland
[2] Department of Educational Psychology, University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria

*** Corresponding author email address**: lukas.gruber@univie.ac.at

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A B S T R A C T

**Objective:** This study aimed to explore the psychological factors that contribute to intimacy avoidance in high-achieving women with attachment insecurity.

**Methods and Materials:** A qualitative research design was employed using semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 18 high-achieving women residing in Austria who self-identified as experiencing attachment insecurity (anxious, avoidant, or disorganized). Participants were selected via purposive sampling from professional, academic, and corporate sectors. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically using NVivo 14 software, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. Rigor was enhanced through peer debriefing, memo writing, and member checking.

**Findings:** Thematic analysis revealed four overarching psychological determinants of intimacy avoidance: (1) Fear of Emotional Exposure, which included subthemes such as fear of judgment, shame linked to emotional needs, and hyper-independence; (2) Attachment-Driven Self-Protection, involving internalized insecure scripts, cognitive defensiveness, and sabotage of closeness; (3) Performance-Based Self-Worth, where participants equated emotional detachment with professional control, often prioritizing efficiency over emotional connection; and (4) Childhood Relational Imprints, characterized by emotionally unavailable caregivers, conditional affection, and suppressed emotional vocabulary.

**Conclusion:** This study highlights the complex interplay between attachment history, performance identity, and relational defenses in shaping intimacy avoidance in high-achieving women. Clinical interventions should address these avoidant strategies by fostering emotional literacy, challenging perfectionistic self-worth contingencies, and building secure attachment representations. The findings also underscore the need to consider gendered sociocultural factors in therapeutic work with high-functioning avoidant individuals.

***Keywords:*** *Attachment insecurity; intimacy avoidance; high-achieving women; emotional suppression.*

## 1. Introduction

The interplay between attachment insecurity and intimacy avoidance has garnered increasing scholarly attention, particularly in the context of high-functioning individuals who maintain a façade of competence and self-sufficiency while struggling with emotional closeness. High-achieving women, who often defy traditional gender expectations by prioritizing career advancement, may be especially vulnerable to internal conflicts surrounding intimacy due to a convergence of psychological, relational, and societal factors. Research suggests that such women may exhibit elevated levels of attachment anxiety or avoidance, which can inhibit their ability to engage in emotionally intimate relationships despite a conscious desire for connection (Bear & Segel-Karpas, 2015; Favez & Tissot, 2019).

Attachment theory posits that early caregiving experiences shape internal working models that influence adult relational behavior, including proximity seeking, conflict resolution, and intimacy regulation (Dan et al., 2020; Tammilehto et al., 2024). Individuals with attachment insecurity—specifically avoidant or fearful-avoidant styles—tend to experience discomfort with closeness, distrust of others' emotional responsiveness, and a preference for emotional autonomy (Leenders et al., 2018; Park et al., 2018). High-achieving women with such attachment profiles often develop self-worth contingencies tied to performance and control, which may serve as compensatory mechanisms for underlying relational insecurities (MacDonald et al., 2019; MacNeill & DiTommaso, 2021). While these adaptive strategies may yield professional success, they often contribute to relational dissatisfaction and emotional isolation (Waring et al., 2019).

Avoidant defenses—both explicit (e.g., detachment, withdrawal) and implicit (e.g., cognitive distancing, suppression)—are especially prevalent in high-functioning avoidant individuals (Marks & Vicary, 2015). These defenses are frequently reinforced by sociocultural expectations of feminine success and self-reliance, leading to internalized beliefs that emotional dependency is a liability rather than a source of support (Cater et al., 2016; Quickert & MacDonald, 2020). For many high-achieving women, the tension between societal scripts of independence and the innate human need for closeness becomes a locus of psychological dissonance. This conflict may manifest as avoidance of vulnerability, discomfort with emotional expression, or withdrawal from intimate relationships, particularly under conditions of stress or perceived emotional threat (Lu et al., 2024; Pan et al., 2016).

Neurobiological and affective evidence further supports the notion that avoidant attachment is associated with altered processing of emotional stimuli. Avoidant individuals often exhibit attenuated neural responses to emotionally salient cues, particularly those associated with caregiving or vulnerability, which can reduce their capacity for empathy and emotional attunement (Liu et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2018). These affective deficits are not merely cognitive but embedded in patterns of emotional regulation and interpersonal interpretation. As such, intimacy avoidance is not only a behavioral strategy but a deeply ingrained affective and cognitive orientation that distorts perceptions of closeness and support (Dan et al., 2020; Morison & Benight, 2022).

Intimacy avoidance can be particularly pronounced during conflictual or emotionally demanding relational interactions. In such moments, individuals with high attachment avoidance often resort to deactivating strategies—minimizing emotional relevance, denying personal needs, or prioritizing task over emotion (Paech et al., 2015; Rehman et al., 2022). These strategies are especially evident in romantic or sexually intimate contexts, where vulnerability and emotional reciprocity are most salient (Favez & Tissot, 2019; Gur-Yaish et al., 2019). Several studies indicate that avoidant individuals may experience discomfort with physical closeness and sexual intimacy, not due to a lack of desire, but because of the emotional exposure it entails. This discomfort can create cyclical patterns of closeness followed by withdrawal, especially when attachment fears are triggered (Bear & Segel-Karpas, 2015; MacDonald et al., 2019).

Moreover, communication patterns during relationship conflict often mirror underlying attachment dynamics. High-achieving women with attachment avoidance may rely on control-oriented or disengaging conflict strategies, such as avoidance, minimization, or intellectualization (Hasim et al., 2023; Quickert & MacDonald, 2020). These patterns serve to protect the individual from perceived emotional overwhelm but simultaneously restrict opportunities for mutual understanding and connection. In contrast, individuals with anxious attachment may over-engage emotionally, creating cycles of pursuit and withdrawal in intimate relationships. For some women, both patterns may coexist, reflecting a fearful-avoidant attachment style that oscillates between longing for closeness and fear of engulfment (Dan et al., 2020; Park et al., 2018).



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The psychological cost of such intimacy-avoidant strategies often remains hidden beneath professional success. However, avoidance can have deleterious effects on emotional well-being, interpersonal satisfaction, and even physical health (Morison & Benight, 2022; Waring et al., 2019). A growing body of literature suggests that avoidant individuals may experience elevated levels of stress, loneliness, and emotional dysregulation, despite external indicators of competence (Lu et al., 2024; Tammilehto et al., 2024). This disjunction may be particularly evident among women who occupy high-responsibility roles that demand constant self-control, decisiveness, and emotional containment.

Research also highlights the role of gendered expectations and cultural narratives in shaping the expression of attachment-related behaviors among high-achieving women. Societal discourses that valorize independence and emotional stoicism can reinforce avoidant tendencies, framing relational vulnerability as weakness or inefficiency (Bear & Segel-Karpas, 2015; MacNeill & DiTommaso, 2021). These internalized norms may lead women to suppress their attachment needs or to view them as incompatible with professional success. As a result, intimacy avoidance may not be consciously recognized as a maladaptive strategy but rather misinterpreted as rational prioritization or self-protective autonomy (Marks & Vicary, 2015; Pan et al., 2016).

Despite the wealth of research on attachment styles and intimacy behaviors, there is a notable gap in the literature concerning how these dynamics manifest specifically in high-achieving women. Much of the existing work focuses on general populations or on couples' dynamics without addressing how career-driven identity, societal pressures, and relational schemas intersect to shape intimacy avoidance in this subgroup (Leenders et al., 2018; Lu et al., 2024). Furthermore, most empirical studies rely on quantitative data, which may not fully capture the nuanced and context-dependent nature of intimacy-avoidant behavior. There is a critical need for qualitative research that explores the lived experiences of high-functioning women who struggle with closeness, especially in light of their attachment histories and sociocultural positioning.

The current study seeks to fill this gap by exploring the psychological determinants of intimacy avoidance in high-achieving women with attachment insecurity.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. *Study design and Participant*

This study employed a qualitative exploratory design grounded in an interpretivist paradigm to gain a deep understanding of the psychological factors contributing to intimacy avoidance among high-achieving women experiencing attachment insecurity. This approach was deemed appropriate for exploring complex psychological experiences and subjective meanings that are not readily quantifiable.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit 18 participants from various academic and professional settings in Austria, including universities, research institutions, and corporate organizations. All participants identified as women, aged between 28 and 44, held postgraduate degrees or equivalent professional qualifications, and were currently employed in high-responsibility roles. Each participant also reported moderate to high levels of career achievement and self-identified or were previously assessed as having patterns of insecure attachment (anxious, avoidant, or disorganized). Recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was achieved—that is, no new themes or insights emerged from additional data.

### 2.2. *Measures*

Data were collected using in-depth, semi-structured interviews designed to elicit rich narratives about participants' emotional, relational, and psychological experiences related to intimacy and attachment. The interview guide covered domains such as personal definitions of intimacy, experiences of vulnerability and emotional closeness, perceived barriers to intimacy, early attachment experiences, self-concept in achievement contexts, and emotional regulation strategies. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted in person or via secure video conferencing platforms, depending on participant availability and preference. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

### 2.3. *Data Analysis*

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach, with the support of NVivo 14 qualitative data analysis software. Initially, transcripts were read multiple times for familiarization, followed by open coding of meaningful



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units of text. Codes were then grouped into broader categories and refined into emergent themes through an iterative and recursive process. Axial coding was employed to explore the relationships between themes, particularly focusing on the interaction between attachment-related cognitions and intimacy-avoidant behaviors.

The research team maintained an audit trail to ensure analytic rigor, including reflexive memos, codebooks, and iterative discussions. Peer debriefing and member checks with a subset of participants were employed to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings.

## 3. Findings and Results

The final sample consisted of 18 high-achieving women residing in Austria, ranging in age from 28 to 44 years (M = 36.1, SD = 4.5). Regarding educational attainment, the majority held postgraduate degrees, including master's (n = 12) and doctoral degrees (n = 6). Participants were employed in diverse high-responsibility sectors, including academia (n = 5), corporate leadership (n = 6), law and policy (n = 4), and healthcare administration (n = 3). Most participants identified as single (n = 10), while the remaining were married or in long-term partnerships (n = 8). All participants self-reported a history of attachment-related difficulties, with attachment insecurity profiles including anxious (n = 7), avoidant (n = 6), and mixed or disorganized (n = 5). The inclusion of participants from varied professional domains and relational statuses ensured a rich diversity of lived experiences regarding intimacy avoidance within the context of high achievement and attachment insecurity.

**Table 1**

*Thematic Structure*

| Category (Theme) | Subcategory (Subtheme) | Concepts (Open Codes) |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Fear of Emotional Exposure | Fear of being judged | Perfectionism; Fear of failure; Self-criticism; Avoidance of vulnerability; Reputation anxiety |
| | Emotional suppression strategies | Withholding feelings; Controlled expression; "Professional mask"; Internalized stoicism |
| | Distrust of emotional reciprocity | Expecting rejection; Conditional love history; Unreciprocated vulnerability; Emotional betrayal |
| | Shame linked to emotional needs | Feeling weak when needy; Childhood shaming; Self-devaluation; Suppressed dependency |
| | Defensive distancing | Emotionally zoning out; Premature disengagement; Post-intimacy regret |
| | Hyper-independence | "I can handle it alone"; Fear of being a burden; Idealization of self-reliance |
| | Avoidant self-narratives | "I don't need closeness"; Narratives of past suffocation; Devaluation of emotional connection |
| 2. Attachment-Driven Self-Protection | Internalized insecure scripts | "Love equals hurt"; "People leave"; "Closeness invites pain"; Expecting abandonment |
| | Selective intimacy patterns | Withholding in romantic ties; Seeking closeness in platonic ties; Emotional compartmentalization |
| | Cognitive defensiveness | Reinterpreting others' intentions; Minimizing hurt; Rationalization of detachment |
| | Autonomy as emotional armor | Avoiding dependence; Rewarding detachment; Professional identity as shield |
| | Sabotaging emerging closeness | Creating conflict; Distancing after intimacy; Breaking off relationships prematurely |
| 3. Performance-Based Self-Worth | Achievement as validation | "I'm only as good as my results"; External approval; Work as escape; Achievement addiction |
| | Emotional cost of overachievement | Burnout; Emotional exhaustion; Personal sacrifice; Loneliness at the top |
| | Merging identity with success | Self = job; Fragile self-esteem; Role fusion; Loss of personal self |
| | Discomfort with relational dependency | Fear of needing others; Devaluing support; Viewing intimacy as weakness |
| | Control-oriented relational patterns | Planning conversations; Anticipating rejection; Emotional scripting |
| | Avoiding perceived emotional inefficiency | Seeing closeness as unproductive; Efficiency mindset; Overprioritizing task over people |
| 4. Childhood Relational Imprints | Emotionally unavailable caregivers | Cold parenting; Lack of empathy; Task-oriented parenting; No emotional modeling |
| | Inconsistent affection | Love withdrawal; Unpredictable approval; "Push and pull" parental dynamics |
| | Conditional acceptance | Performance-based love; Guilt conditioning; "Be perfect to be loved" |
| | Suppressed emotional vocabulary | Not knowing how to express; Shame in sharing feelings; Emotional illiteracy |
| | Modeling avoidance behavior | Observing parental detachment; Learned suppression; Family culture of silence |



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**Theme 1: Fear of Emotional Exposure**

**Fear of being judged.** Many participants expressed an acute sensitivity to being judged, particularly in emotionally vulnerable moments. This subcategory emerged as a core psychological barrier to intimacy. Women described suppressing their emotional needs out of fear that others might perceive them as weak or unprofessional. One participant shared, *"If I let someone see me upset or uncertain, it feels like I'm failing, not just as a partner, but as a person."* This fear often stemmed from deeply internalized perfectionistic standards and experiences of emotional invalidation in early relationships.

**Emotional suppression strategies.** Participants habitually engaged in strategic suppression of emotions, particularly in relational contexts. This often took the form of withholding feelings, putting on a "professional mask," or adopting a controlled demeanor to prevent perceived emotional chaos. One interviewee noted, *"I've learned to keep things in. I don't cry in front of people—even my partner. It's just easier that way."* These suppression strategies served as self-protective mechanisms to avoid perceived relational risk.

**Distrust of emotional reciprocity.** A recurrent theme was participants' skepticism about whether emotional intimacy would be met with mutual care and empathy. This distrust, often rooted in past betrayals or inconsistent emotional responses from significant others, led many to emotionally withdraw. As one participant stated, *"Even when I've opened up, I've been disappointed. People don't really know how to hold that kind of space."*

**Shame linked to emotional needs.** Participants frequently associated emotional needs with shame, particularly in the context of intimate relationships. Many spoke of childhood experiences where emotional expression was met with mockery or indifference, leading to the internal belief that needing others was a source of humiliation. One woman described, *"My mother always said, 'Stop being dramatic.' So I stopped asking for anything."*

**Defensive distancing.** Several women reported engaging in preemptive emotional distancing as a defense against potential rejection or engulfment. This often involved becoming emotionally detached soon after moments of closeness. One participant reflected, *"As soon as I feel someone getting too close, something in me pulls away. It's automatic."*

**Hyper-independence.** A notable subtheme was the overreliance on self-sufficiency, framed by participants as both a source of pride and a relational obstacle. Many rejected dependence on others, associating autonomy with strength. A participant explained, *"I've always handled things on my own. Depending on someone else just feels risky—like giving up control."*

**Avoidant self-narratives.** Finally, participants often articulated identity narratives that framed intimacy as unnecessary or even undesirable. These narratives helped justify emotional avoidance. One woman remarked, *"I've never been the type who needs someone to complete me. That whole closeness thing? It's just not for me."*

**Theme 2: Attachment-Driven Self-Protection**

**Internalized insecure scripts.** Participants conveyed deeply rooted relational schemas reflective of early attachment experiences, often expressed through internal mantras like *"closeness equals hurt"* or *"people always leave."* These scripts shaped their expectations in adulthood and reinforced avoidance patterns. A participant noted, *"I expect that if I get too close, they'll disappear. So I just don't get too close."*

**Selective intimacy patterns.** Many women described compartmentalizing their emotional lives, often avoiding intimacy in romantic relationships while permitting closeness in platonic or professional friendships. One participant shared, *"I can be open with my best friend, but not with a partner. There's just more at stake romantically."* This selective pattern served as a protective boundary.

**Cognitive defensiveness.** This subtheme captured participants' tendencies to rationalize or reinterpret threatening relational dynamics in ways that minimized emotional discomfort. Several women described downplaying hurt or preemptively attributing negative intentions to others. *"When someone cancels plans, I tell myself they're busy—not that I wasn't worth it,"* explained one interviewee.

**Autonomy as emotional armor.** The pursuit of independence was often framed not just as a lifestyle, but as a form of emotional armor. Participants emphasized emotional self-containment as a strength, often weaponized against perceived dependency. *"Being strong means not needing anyone,"* declared one participant, highlighting the way autonomy was idealized and intimacy devalued.

**Sabotaging emerging closeness.** Participants described instances in which they unconsciously disrupted growing emotional intimacy, either by initiating conflict, withdrawing emotionally, or ending relationships abruptly. One participant recounted, *"Things were getting serious and I panicked. I picked a fight over nothing and ended it."*



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These behaviors often occurred despite a desire for closeness, revealing deep ambivalence.

**Theme 3: Performance-Based Self-Worth**

**Achievement as validation.** For many women in the study, professional success was not merely aspirational but necessary for self-worth. The relentless pursuit of excellence often masked deeper insecurities and reduced availability for emotional intimacy. One interviewee confessed, *"If I'm not achieving something, I don't feel like I'm enough. Relationships don't give me that same validation."*

**Emotional cost of overachievement.** Participants described exhaustion and emotional depletion as consequences of high-functioning behavior. This left little energy for relational engagement. *"By the time I get home, I'm spent. I don't have the capacity to connect with anyone,"* shared one woman, underscoring the cost of perpetual striving.

**Merging identity with success.** Many participants revealed that their sense of identity was intricately tied to their roles as high achievers. This fusion made relational vulnerability difficult. One participant noted, *"If I fail professionally, I feel like I disappear. I don't know who I am without my work."*

**Discomfort with relational dependency.** Participants expressed unease when relationships required emotional interdependence. Support from others was often seen as a sign of weakness. One woman reflected, *"I hate the feeling of needing someone. It's like giving up my power."*

**Control-oriented relational patterns.** Interviewees described efforts to control interpersonal dynamics to avoid perceived chaos or vulnerability. This included planning conversations, anticipating rejection, and overanalyzing emotional cues. As one participant explained, *"I script what I'm going to say, even in casual conversations. It's safer that way."*

**Avoiding perceived emotional inefficiency.** A few women described intimacy as inefficient or "unproductive," often in contrast to their time-optimized, task-focused lives. One participant said, *"Emotional conversations feel like they take forever and go nowhere. I'd rather focus on things I can control."*

**Theme 4: Childhood Relational Imprints**

**Emotionally unavailable caregivers.** Many participants traced their intimacy avoidance back to childhood experiences with emotionally distant caregivers. The absence of emotional warmth or attunement led to the internalization of emotional self-sufficiency. *"My parents never asked how I felt. It was always about grades or achievements,"* recalled one participant.

**Inconsistent affection.** Some women recounted experiences of receiving love in unpredictable or conditional ways, leading to emotional mistrust and fear of abandonment. *"One day my dad was warm, the next day he ignored me,"* noted a participant. Such unpredictability fostered emotional vigilance and hesitancy in adult relationships.

**Conditional acceptance.** Participants often grew up in environments where love and approval were contingent upon success or compliance. This performance-based affection shaped their later relational expectations. *"I had to be perfect to be noticed. So now, if I'm not perfect, I assume I'll be left,"* shared one woman.

**Suppressed emotional vocabulary.** Due to emotionally barren environments, participants struggled with articulating their emotions, describing a lack of words for inner experiences. One interviewee stated, *"I didn't grow up with language for feelings. Even now, I don't always know what I'm feeling, let alone how to express it."*

**Modeling avoidance behavior.** Finally, participants reported learning avoidant patterns by observing emotionally distant parents who rarely demonstrated vulnerability. *"My mother never talked about emotions. She just shut down. I guess I learned to do the same,"* explained one participant.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to explore the psychological determinants underlying intimacy avoidance in high-achieving women with attachment insecurity. Through qualitative analysis of 18 semi-structured interviews, four major themes were identified: fear of emotional exposure, attachment-driven self-protection, performance-based self-worth, and childhood relational imprints. Participants described a wide range of strategies, beliefs, and internalized scripts that inhibited emotional closeness, many of which were shaped by early attachment experiences and reinforced by societal expectations of success, autonomy, and control. Although these women outwardly exhibited competence and independence, they also revealed profound discomfort with relational vulnerability and emotional interdependence.

A primary finding of this study was the centrality of emotional exposure as a perceived threat, leading to defensive distancing, emotional suppression, and hyper-independence. Participants expressed concern about being



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judged, rejected, or viewed as weak when emotionally vulnerable—responses that are consistent with the behavioral profile of avoidantly attached individuals (Dan et al., 2020; Park et al., 2018). Many of the women framed emotional closeness as risky or inefficient, revealing an internalized dichotomy between success and intimacy. These findings align with existing research suggesting that avoidant attachment is associated with the devaluation of emotional expression, a preference for cognitive control, and discomfort with perceived emotional inefficiency (Marks & Vicary, 2015; Quickert & MacDonald, 2020).

Another prominent theme was the use of attachment-based self-protective strategies such as selective intimacy, cognitive defensiveness, and emotional compartmentalization. Participants frequently reported relational schemas grounded in early experiences of inconsistent or emotionally unavailable caregiving. These schemas included beliefs such as "closeness leads to abandonment" or "love must be earned," which mirror cognitive models of insecure attachment reported in prior studies (Bear & Segel-Karpas, 2015; Leenders et al., 2018). The deployment of deactivating strategies—such as downplaying hurt, withdrawing after closeness, or avoiding dependency—supports the assertion that avoidant individuals actively regulate relational proximity to maintain psychological equilibrium (MacDonald et al., 2019; Pan et al., 2016). These strategies may be effective in reducing immediate anxiety but ultimately perpetuate emotional isolation and relationship dissatisfaction (Lu et al., 2024; Morison & Benight, 2022).

Notably, participants described a strong association between self-worth and performance, which shaped their interpersonal behaviors. For many, professional success was not only a goal but a core component of identity, often adopted as a defense against emotional vulnerability. This pattern is supported by research indicating that attachment avoidance is positively correlated with extrinsic validation and control-oriented coping mechanisms (Gur-Yaish et al., 2019; MacNeill & DiTommaso, 2021). High-achieving women may equate autonomy with worthiness, and dependency with failure—a belief system that reinforces avoidant tendencies and creates internal conflict when emotional intimacy is desired. Moreover, the merging of identity with achievement has been shown to impair emotional availability, especially when individuals feel emotionally depleted or threatened by intimacy demands (Maccallum & Bryant, 2018; Waring et al., 2019).

The fourth theme—childhood relational imprints—highlighted the developmental roots of intimacy avoidance. Participants consistently referred to emotionally distant, unpredictable, or performance-oriented parenting as key to their current relational patterns. These early environments failed to support the development of secure emotional expression or trust in relational reciprocity, consistent with the formation of insecure internal working models (Hira & Bhogal, 2020; Tammilehto et al., 2024). Particularly striking was the absence of emotional language in their family systems, leading to emotional illiteracy and difficulties in recognizing or articulating needs. This aligns with research demonstrating that fearful-avoidant individuals often struggle with emotion recognition and regulation due to underdeveloped affective schemas (Liu et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2018).

Taken together, these findings provide a nuanced understanding of how attachment insecurity, achievement orientation, and emotional avoidance intersect in the lives of high-achieving women. The themes also reveal the double bind many of these women experience: their psychological defense mechanisms (e.g., emotional distancing, over-functioning, autonomy) that have enabled career success simultaneously undermine the very relational fulfillment they seek. This is consistent with the theoretical framework of attachment deactivation, which posits that avoidant individuals suppress attachment needs to avoid relational distress, even at the cost of intimacy (Paech et al., 2015; Rehman et al., 2022).

Moreover, this study expands the discourse by illuminating the gendered and cultural context of attachment avoidance in high-functioning women. While the attachment literature often focuses on individual-level variables, it is essential to consider the societal narratives that shape emotional expression and relational behavior. For women in high-responsibility roles, societal scripts of strength, competence, and self-reliance may reinforce avoidant strategies, making emotional dependency appear antithetical to personal identity (Cater et al., 2016; MacNeill & DiTommaso, 2021). As such, the tension between professional identity and relational vulnerability becomes an internal conflict, often leading to suppressed needs, relational sabotage, and emotional exhaustion.

These insights have significant implications for both clinical practice and future research. From a therapeutic perspective, it is essential to recognize that intimacy avoidance in high-achieving women is not merely a matter of personal choice or relationship dissatisfaction but a deeply



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embedded psychological orientation formed through early attachment experiences and sustained by sociocultural reinforcements (Lu et al., 2024; Morison & Benight, 2022). Addressing these patterns requires helping individuals build emotional literacy, develop a tolerance for vulnerability, and disentangle their self-worth from achievement. Interventions that combine attachment-informed therapy with emotion-focused strategies may be particularly effective for this population.

## 5. Limitations and Suggestions

While this study offers a rich and detailed exploration of intimacy avoidance in high-achieving women, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample was limited to 18 participants from Austria, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to other cultural or socioeconomic contexts. Second, all data were self-reported and based on retrospective accounts, which may be subject to recall bias or selective reporting. Third, although efforts were made to include participants with diverse attachment experiences, the sample skewed toward individuals with relatively high self-awareness and willingness to engage in reflective dialogue. This may limit the transferability of the findings to avoidant individuals with lower emotional insight or less willingness to participate in introspective interviews.

Future research should consider expanding the scope of investigation to include cross-cultural samples and comparative studies between high-achieving women and men. Quantitative follow-ups could help validate the emergent themes and explore their predictive power in relational functioning, emotional health, or occupational stress. Longitudinal designs may also be valuable in examining how intimacy avoidance evolves across the lifespan and how it interacts with changing roles, such as motherhood or leadership. Additionally, future studies could explore the impact of intersectional identities—including race, sexual orientation, and class—on the expression of attachment-related intimacy avoidance in professional women.

Practitioners working with high-achieving women who present with relational difficulties should assess for underlying attachment patterns, particularly those marked by emotional deactivation or distrust of intimacy. Therapeutic interventions should focus on building emotional awareness, facilitating secure attachment representations, and challenging internalized beliefs that equate dependency with weakness. Moreover, therapists should be mindful of the sociocultural messages that shape their clients' relational behavior and help them critically examine the impact of achievement-based identity on their emotional lives. Group-based formats may also be helpful in normalizing vulnerability and providing corrective relational experiences.

### Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

### 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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