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Meredith M. Turner, Amanda Denes & Talea Cornelius

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The dyadic role of attachment in the relational maintenance of cohabitating couples during COVID-19

Meredith M. Turner, Amanda Denes, and Talea Cornelius

ABSTRACT

This study examined the role of attachment styles in relational maintenance behaviors among cohabitating couples during the COVID-19 pandemic. Utilizing a dyadic approach, the associations among anxious and avoidant attachment styles and personal and partner maintenance behaviors during the pandemic were explored. The role of COVID-related anxiety was also investigated as a potential moderator of attachment insecurity and relational maintenance behaviors. Dyadic analyses demonstrated significant negative actor and partner associations between attachment avoidance and the use of relational maintenance behaviors, whereas no significant associations were found between attachment anxiety and maintenance behavior. Additionally, COVID-anxiety was not a significant moderator of the association between attachment and relational maintenance. The findings provide insights into how couples navigated the heightened challenges of cohabitation during this period, offering implications for potential support strategies.

KEYWORDS

Attachment style; COVID-19; dyadic analysis; partner support strategies; relational maintenance; stress

The COVID-19 pandemic and its accompanying stay-at-home orders caused major disruptions to people's day-to-day interactions and limited their communication routines (Fenker et al., 2022). These disruptions were especially impactful on the communication behaviors of cohabitating couples in romantic relationships (Denes et al., 2023; Vigl et al., 2022). Stay-at-home orders caused some couples to make drastic changes, as it became necessary to coordinate tasks like working from home, childcare, and household chores (Bar-Shachar et al., 2023). For cohabitating couples, the sudden increase in time spent together at home was one of the most prominent consequences of the pandemic (Vigl et al., 2022). The outcome of this excessive time together is contested across the literature, with some studies finding higher levels of stress and others discovering stress-buffering effects (Carrese-Chacra et al., 2023; Vigl et al., 2022). Such variability may be due, at least in part, to interpersonal processes and their impact on couples' well-being and ability to manage pandemic-related stress (Afifi et al., 2024; Carrese-Chacra et al., 2023).

Unique external stressors such as those experienced during the pandemic can create a social environment where it is more difficult for partners to fulfill

CONTACT Meredith M. Turner meredith@uconn.edu Department of Communication, University of Connecticut, 337 Mansfield Road, Unit 1259, Storrs, CT 06269-1259, USA

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each other's relational needs and can lessen the amount of time partners spend maintaining their relationship (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). Relational maintenance refers to "communication approaches people use to sustain desired relational definitions" (Canary & Stafford, 1992, p. 243). The process of maintaining relationships involves both intentional behaviors used to preserve or improve the relationship as well as habitual, routine behaviors that may not be done with the express desire of maintenance (Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Stafford et al., 2000). These behaviors play a central role in how external stresses affect couples' personal and relational well-being, and have been shown to mitigate the negative effects of the COVID-19 stay-at-home orders (Bar-Shachar et al., 2023; Fenker et al., 2022; Ogolsky & Stafford, 2022).

There are many factors that impact how relational maintenance behaviors are enacted. One such factor is an individual's attachment style, which has been consistently identified as shaping the way individuals engage in relational maintenance behaviors (Bouchard et al., 2023). Recent scholarship has emphasized the importance of understanding both the individual and interpersonal effects of attachment on relational outcomes (Brandão et al., 2020; Carrese-Chacra et al., 2023; Lozano et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic offered a unique context for examining couples' interdependent maintenance behaviors, which were likely impacted not only by the isolation brought on by stay-home orders but also by the heightened anxiety that individuals experienced as they navigated the early months of the pandemic. Investigating these social environments is essential as a means of understanding how best to build resilience and respond to other high-stress situations such as natural disasters (Katsikopoulos, 2021). As such, this study aimed to examine the associations between partners' attachment styles, COVID-related anxiety, and relational maintenance behaviors during a unique time when couples' in-person interactions were largely restricted to one another.

Relational Maintenance

Relational maintenance typologies have been employed for decades to uncover how and why individuals sustain their close relationships (Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Goodboy et al., 2017; Ogolsky & Stafford, 2022). Under the theoretical framework of equity theory, these strategies are understood as the behaviors used to develop and maintain relationships that are fair or perceived to be equitable (Canary & Stafford, 2007; Stafford et al., 2000). Stafford and Canary's (1991) typology of relational maintenance strategies is often used to examine maintenance behaviors in close interpersonal relationships. This typology examines both strategic and habitual maintenance through seven strategies: assurances, openness, conflict management, shared tasks, positivity, advice, and social networks (Stafford, 2011; Stafford & Canary, 1991). *Assurances* are messages of appreciation, support, or comfort for an individual's partner as

well as talking about a shared future; *openness* reflects the level of self-disclosure partners engage in by talking about thoughts, feelings, fears, etc.; *integrative conflict management* describes when partners apologize and cooperate; *shared tasks* is the act of helping a partner with responsibilities and tasks such as household chores; *positivity* involves actively interacting with partners in a way that is cheerful and optimistic; *advice* is when a partner expresses opinions and support; and *social networks* is spending time with common friends and family members (Stafford, 2011).

Research examining such behaviors consistently finds robust associations between the use of maintenance strategies and myriad positive relational outcomes, such as satisfaction, commitment, and love (Ogolsky & Stafford, 2022). The typology has been used comprehensively, as a holistic assessment of maintenance behaviors, by aggregating maintenance types into a composite index to provide an overarching gauge of maintenance efforts (Ogolsky & Stafford, 2022; Stafford, 2020). Research has demonstrated that different social contexts and personal dispositions affect the kinds of strategies that are used and how often they are employed (Abel et al., 2021; Durante et al., 2022; Mazur et al., 2023). Relevant to the present context, stressful events are known to have deleterious effects on commitment, satisfaction, and overall relational well-being, unless relational partners actively invest in and maintain their relationship (Afifi et al., 2024; Balzarini et al., 2023). Thus, investigating how couples navigated the COVID-19 pandemic through their use of maintenance can provide further insight on how couples invest in their relationship during times of heightened stress.

Relational Maintenance During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Throughout the pandemic, cohabitating couples faced considerable relational challenges. Lockdown orders limited access to family, friends, and other support networks, leading cohabitating couples to rely more heavily on their romantic partners during the stressful conditions (Carrese-Chacra et al., 2023). Some couples reported "effects on interdependence processes, effects on intimacy, increased negative emotions, stress, and uncertainty, and changes in communication frequency and valence" (Jones et al., 2021, p. 161). Other couples found that the pandemic interfered with daily relational experiences (e.g., heightened distraction during interactions), which contributed to overall feelings of hopelessness related to COVID-19 (Merolla et al., 2021). Couples also more frequently attributed relational issues to their partner and blamed them for relational struggles (Balzarini et al., 2023).

Though many couples' relationships suffered during this unprecedented time, others found positive outcomes of the stay-at-home orders. Some couples described the lockdown as a blessing in disguise, providing them with an opportunity to nurture their relationship (Holmberg et al., 2022), which

contributed to positive outcomes throughout the period of lockdown orders. Furthermore, engaging in relational maintenance *prior* to the pandemic allowed partners to accrue higher levels of emotional capital, which resulted in reduced stress, less conflict, and less expressions of anger during the pandemic (Mazur et al., 2023). During the pandemic, individuals who felt they actively maintained their relationship and that their partner did the same felt more unified in facing the stress of the pandemic, generated feelings of being appreciated, and enhanced their ability to flourish as a couple (Afifi et al., 2024). Taken together, it is clear that relational maintenance behaviors were essential to couples' experiences throughout the pandemic.

Attachment and Maintenance

Relational maintenance is considered to be contextually dependent (i.e., maintenance behaviors must be adapted by couples to serve various conditions and situations; Ogolsky & Stafford, 2022). As such, it is important to address motivations or personality factors associated with the use of maintenance strategies (Afifi et al., 2024; Pennington, 2020). One such factor is attachment style, which plays a crucial role in understanding people's behaviors and communication patterns within romantic relationships. Bowlby's (1973) attachment theory, and the decades of research it incited, describes how early childhood experiences with caretakers (i.e., attachment figures) create "working models" of close interpersonal relationships. These working models impact how one interacts with new attachment figures, such as romantic partners, as they bond and become attached (Bowlby, 1973; Hazan & Shaver, 1990). Mirroring attachment in childhood, adults are more likely to feel confident in their relationships, more emotional equanimity, and safer overall when their partner is responsive, sensitive, and available to attend to their needs (Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). In this way, their partner may be perceived as a "secure base" from which to explore the environment. This romantic attachment, unlike parent-child attachment, is conceptualized along two dimensions: anxiety and avoidance (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). *Avoidance* manifests as a person's hesitance to be intimate with others, whereas *anxiety* is a person's fear of rejection and abandonment (Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Romantic attachment is a key factor that accounts for differences in how romantic relationships are formed, maintained, and dissolved (Wang et al., 2023).

Extensive research has investigated how anxious and avoidant individuals engage with others in various contexts, with a particular emphasis on support behaviors and conflict management (Archard, 2014; Bohn et al., 2021; Overall & Simpson, 2015). Highly avoidant individuals use the "deactivating" strategy or attempt to distance themselves from partners so that they are neither dependent on nor relied upon for emotional support (Mikulincer & Shaver,

2003). Alternatively, highly anxious individuals tend to employ "hyper activating" strategies, or attempts to draw their partner closer because of their fear of losing their partner's interest (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003).

Previously, studies primarily focused on individuals, overlooking how the characteristics of both individuals *and* their partners affect relationship dynamics (Overall et al., 2022). Recent scholarship has emphasized the need to dyadically analyze how attachment impacts romantic relationships (Bar-Shachar et al., 2023; Bouchard et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023). Dyadic investigations have indicated that individuals who have insecurely attached partners have lower relationship satisfaction than those with secure partners (Molero et al., 2016). Even for couples with more secure attachment overall, increases in stress paired with partner insecurity decreased relationship functioning (Overall et al., 2022). Further, insecure attachment may increase the amount of negative maintenance behaviors for one or both partners (Goodboy et al., 2017).

However, partners' maintenance behaviors can buffer the detrimental effects of insecure attachment styles by offering comfort and reassurance of one's commitment, which aligns with the relational maintenance strategy of assurances (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Overall & Simpson, 2015). For example, individuals with low levels of avoidance and anxiety (i.e., more secure attachment) use more prosocial relational maintenance behaviors and may be able to transfer more positive beliefs about the relationship to an insecurely attached partner (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Wang et al., 2023). Other research has found that anxious partners can enhance relational quality by demonstrating a higher level of commitment or a fear of dissolution (Wang et al., 2023). Furthermore, the dyadic perspective on attachment supports the idea that the attachment style of one partner can influence the maintenance behaviors of the other through reciprocal interaction patterns (Lozano et al., 2021). For example, a highly anxious individual may marshal maintenance from their partner by demonstrating a need for such behaviors (e.g., by directly or indirectly expressing this need), whereas a highly avoidant individual may distance themselves in a way that also limits their partner's opportunities to enact maintenance behaviors. A greater discrepancy in partners' avoidance orientations (e.g., one partner being high in avoidance and one partner being low in avoidance), also predicted better relational outcomes due to the fact that more constructive approaches were still used by those low in avoidance (Wang et al., 2023). Particularly in times of stress, relational maintenance from one partner can help to meet the needs and concerns of an insecurely attached partner, which can buffer their relationship from the typically destructive behaviors they may engage in (Overall & Simpson, 2015). Together, such work indicates that couples may benefit from higher levels of attachment security from either partner, as the more securely attached partner may encourage the insecure partner to engage in more positive maintenance

behaviors (Wang et al., 2023). These findings highlight some of the underlying mechanisms that link attachment to relational maintenance in dyads.

Individuals' attachment style directly influences their engagement in relational maintenance behaviors due to the internal working models of self and others that attachment theory describes (Bouchard et al., 2023). These models dictate how individuals approach intimacy and dependency, thus shaping their maintenance actions. For instance, individuals with more anxious or avoidant attachment styles might engage in maintenance behaviors that are either overly distancing or demanding, reflecting their discomfort with closeness or fears of abandonment, respectively. This interdependence necessitates an examination of both actor and partner effects of attachment on maintenance, highlighting the varied ways in which individual differences in attachment can manifest in the relational maintenance efforts of both partners. Taken together, we expected that one partner's attachment anxiety/avoidance would be significantly associated with both their own and their partner's relational maintenance strategies. Thus, we proposed the following:

H1: Attachment avoidance will be negatively associated with (a) an individual's own and (b) their partner's maintenance behaviors.

H2: Attachment anxiety will be positively associated with (a) an individual's own and (b) their partner's maintenance behaviors.

Attachment-related responses are exacerbated during times of stress (Brandão et al., 2020). High levels of attachment avoidance have been associated with less support-seeking behaviors, negative evaluations of support attempts, and insensitivity to a partner's relational behavior (Bar-Shachar et al., 2023; McLeod et al., 2020). Individuals with higher levels of attachment anxiety experience overdependence on others, excessive support-seeking behaviors, and high reactivity to their partner's relational behaviors (Bar-Shachar et al., 2023; McLeod et al., 2020). Overall, individuals who are insecurely attached are less able to cope in stressful situations and are at a higher risk of emotional difficulties (Vowels et al., 2022). Thus, partners with higher levels of anxiety or avoidance are more likely to respond to stress in ways that could harm their relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic (Eder et al., 2021; Overall et al., 2022).

COVID-related anxiety

Despite the potential benefits of engaging in maintenance behaviors during lockdown, some partners may have experienced an increase in relational tension and instability simply due to the stress of living through the pandemic (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). External stress and anxiety can "create a context in which it is more difficult for partners to be

responsive to each other because they are distracted, fatigued, or overwhelmed" (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021, p. 441). Relational maintenance behaviors require energy and cognitive resources, which may be depleted from stress management efforts (Neff et al., 2022). The relational effects of this emotional exhaustion paired with the enforced closeness during lockdown orders is difficult to gauge from previous scholarship (Vigl et al., 2022).

Past work suggests that the myriad stressful circumstances of the pandemic increased tension between partners, led to increased hostility, and reduced relationship happiness (Neff et al., 2022; Vigl et al., 2022). Further, the stress of the pandemic may create a paradox, wherein providing support becomes more difficult due to stress, but the need to provide support to distressed partners can magnify the stress of the situation (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). Alternatively, some studies indicated that COVID-related anxiety led to explicit communication about concerns, which was related to higher levels of dyadic relational coping strategies (Donato et al., 2021). Similarly, scholars reported that couples sought security and turned toward each other when faced with the threat of the pandemic (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). This variability highlights how individual and relational processes may have influenced how couples experienced and managed their COVID-related anxiety. As it is essential for relational functioning to have a partner who is readily available to provide emotional resources (Lozano et al., 2021), this variability may be intrinsically linked to individuals' attachment tendencies.

It is possible that COVID-19 anxiety heightened the link between attachment and maintenance, as increased COVID-19 anxiety may have prompted individuals to turn toward their partners for support (i.e., amplifying and the positive association between attachment anxiety and maintenance, and dampening the negative association between avoidance and maintenance). However, COVID-19 anxiety may alternatively have contributed to feelings of cognitive and emotional depletion, which can deprive individuals (and potentially their partner) of the energy and resources needed to engage in relational maintenance (Afifi et al., 2016). In other words, it is also possible that greater COVID-19 anxiety weakened the association between attachment anxiety and an individual's own or their partner's maintenance or had little impact on individuals high in attachment avoidance, who may already engage in fewer maintenance behaviors. Given these competing possibilities, the following questions were posed:

RQ1: Does COVID-related anxiety moderate the association between attachment avoidance and (a) an individual's own and (b) their partner's maintenance behaviors?

RQ2: Does COVID-related anxiety moderate the association between attachment anxiety and (a) an individual's own and (b) their partner's maintenance behaviors?

Method

Upon approval from the Institutional Review Board at the first author's university, participants were recruited via online social communities, forums, and ResearchMatch.org from April 2020 to September 2020. In an effort to focus specifically on partners' daily interactions, couples cohabiting in New York City, Boston, or Chicago who did not have any other people living in their home (including children) were recruited to participate. Cities were chosen due to similar urban environments and COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. Participants included 102 individuals from 51 couples. Couples consisted of 41 different-sex couples and 7 same-sex couples ($n = 4$ male-male couples; $n = 3$ female-female couples) and 3 where one partner identified as female, and their partner identified as genderqueer, genderfluid, or other. Participants identified as female ($n = 50$), male ($n = 49$), genderqueer ($n = 1$), genderfluid ($n = 1$), and transgender ($n = 1$). The mean age of participants was 36.59 years ($SD = 11.74$; $Mdn = 32$; Age range = 23–76), and they had been in their relationships for a mean of 8.39 years ($SD = 9.65$; Range = 0.67–53.00). Over half of the participants were married ($n = 26$). Participants identified as White/European ($n = 67$), Hispanic/Latinx ($n = 14$), Black/African American ($n = 12$), Asian/Pacific Islander ($n = 11$), Native American/American Indian ($n = 1$), and Other ($n = 1$). In terms of sexual orientation, 76 individuals identified as heterosexual, 3 as lesbian, 7 as gay, 8 as bisexual, 4 as queer, and 2 as other. Out of 98 participants disclosing their household income, the median was reported at $100,000 ($SD$ Range = 0–$300,000) with 77 being employed, 18 unemployed, and 5 reporting as other.

This dataset was gathered in the context of a broader investigation focused on the physical and relational well-being of couples during the COVID-19 pandemic. The present study focuses on data collected in the baseline survey. As part of that project, participants completed an initial survey assessing key variables and demographics, followed by additional procedures such as daily diaries and follow-up surveys, which are irrelevant to the present investigation. All surveys were administered via the Qualtrics platform, and participants were compensated up to $25 based on the number of surveys completed.

Measures

Baseline demographics

Participants self-reported marital status, relationship length, income, and employment status in the baseline survey.

Attachment

Attachment avoidance and anxiety dimensions were assessed using a shortened version of Fraley and Shaver's (2000) attachment scale. This 6-item scale contains three items measuring attachment avoidance and three items measuring attachment anxiety. A sample item for avoidance is "I am very comfortable being close to romantic partners" (reverse-coded). An example item for anxiety is "I often worry that my partner will not want to stay with me." Higher scores on each subscale indicate higher levels of avoidance and anxiety. Response options were scored on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; avoidance: $M = 1.72$, $SD = .74$, $\alpha = .67$; anxiety: $M = 1.95$, $SD = 1.17$, $\alpha = .86$).

Relational maintenance

Relational maintenance was measured with 18 items assessing 7 strategies (Stafford & Canary, 1991). Example items include, "I imply that our relationship has a future" (assurances; 3 items); "I disclose what I need or want from the relationship" (openness; 3 items); "I cooperate in how I handle disagreements" (conflict management; 3 items); "I do my fair share of the work we have to do" (shared tasks; 3 items); "I try to be upbeat when we are together" (positivity; 2 items); "I give him/her my opinion on things going on in his/her life" (advice; 2 items); and "I like to spend time with our same friends" (social networks; 2 items). Participants responded on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Prior work has indicated that the strategies can be combined to create one unidimensional scale, particularly when the interest is "not in each of the seven factors per se or variations among them" (Stafford, 2016, p. 124), but rather, in the "overall maintenance effort" (Stafford, 2020, p. 2352). Indeed, dyadic studies have used a unidimensional relational maintenance scale to better manage the complexity of examining actor and partner effects (e.g., Stafford, 2016, 2020). Given our interest in partners' overall enactment of maintenance behaviors, we thus averaged scores across all items to create a mean relational maintenance score ($M = 5.91$, $SD = .65$, $\alpha = .88$).

Covid-related anxiety

COVID-related anxiety was assessed based on a 10-item scale derived from Chen et al.'s (2015) tool for measuring feelings of uncertainty and threat, modified by Vermote et al. (2022) to specifically focus on experiences related to the COVID-19 lockdown. Participants were asked to rate their feelings and thoughts over the previous week of the pandemic in relation to various life aspects (i.e., health, food, finances, and infection). An example item is "I was concerned with how the current situation will evolve." Responses were recorded on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = *not at all true*, 5 = *completely true*).

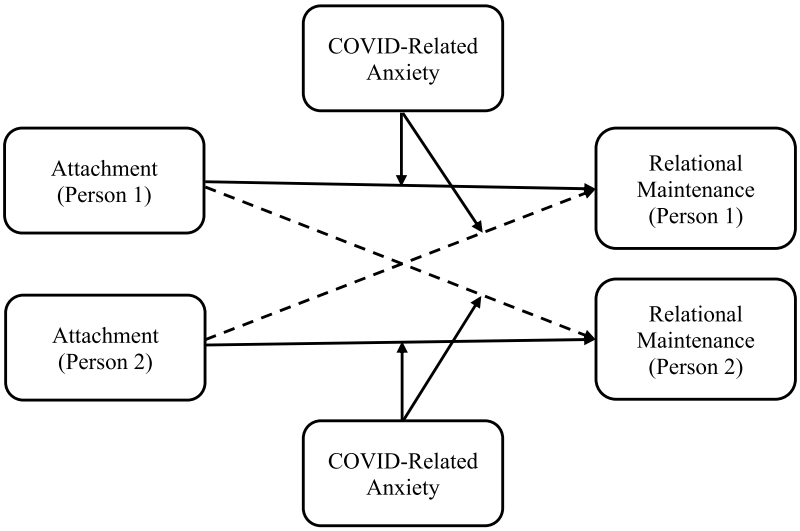


Figure 1. Full model including actor and partner effects for attachment, COVID-related anxiety, and relational maintenance. *Note:* Solid lines are actor effects; dashed lines represent partner effects.

A mean score was calculated, wherein a higher score indicated a higher level of COVID-related anxiety ($M = 2.85$, $SD = .88$, $\alpha = .86$).

Data analysis strategy

Multilevel models with correlated errors were specified using PROC MIXED in SAS v. 9.4 to account for interdependence within couples (Kenny et al., 2006). Figure 1 illustrates the models tested via the following hypotheses. For H1, both one's own (actor effect) and one's partner's (partner effect) report of attachment anxiety were entered as predictors of one's own relational maintenance. For H2, own and partner attachment avoidance were entered as predictors of one's own relational maintenance. For RQ1, one's own COVID-related anxiety was added as a predictor to the H1 model, as were interactions of COVID-related anxiety with own and partner attachment anxiety. For RQ2, one's own COVID-related anxiety was added as a predictor to the H2 model, as were interactions of COVID-related anxiety with own and partner attachment avoidance.

Results

All 51 couples (102 individuals) were included in the analysis. The actor effect for one's own attachment avoidance on relational maintenance was negative and statistically significant, $B = -0.36$, 95% CI [−0.52, −0.21], $p < .001$. The partner effect for attachment avoidance was also negative and statistically

significant, $B = 0.21$, 95% CI [−0.37, −0.06], $p = .008$. Thus, in support of H1a and H1b, one's own and one's partner's greater attachment avoidance were each independently associated with lower levels of relational maintenance, indicating that the higher the level of attachment avoidance in either partner, the less each partner engaged in relational maintenance. For RQ1, interactions of COVID-related anxiety with own and partner attachment avoidance were not significant (*ps*< .20).

In a separate model, the actor effect for one's own attachment anxiety on relational maintenance was not statistically significant, $B = -0.08$, 95% CI [−0.19, 0.03], $p = .14$. The partner effect for attachment anxiety on relational maintenance was also not significant, $B = -0.02$, 95% CI [−0.13, 0.09], $p = .67$. One's own and their partner's attachment anxiety were negatively associated with relational maintenance but was not significant. Therefore, H2a and H2b were not supported. Results from RQ2 demonstrated that interactions of COVID-related anxiety with own and partner attachment anxiety were not significant (*ps*< .54). Correlations, means, and standard deviations are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Correlations.

		Relational maintenance	Anxious attachment	Avoidant attachment	COVID-related anxiety
	Mean (SD)	*r*	*r*	*r*	*r*
Relational Maintenance	5.91 (.64)	.39	−.09	−.39	.17
Anxious Attachment	1.95 (1.17)	−.16	.36	.24	.15
Avoidant Attachment	1.72 (.74)	−.50	.22	.35	.03
COVID-Related Anxiety	2.85 (.88)	.03	.23	-.01	.35

Note. Values below the diagonal represent within-actor correlations, while values above the diagonal represent between-partner correlations.

Discussion

This study explored the associations among the attachment styles and relational maintenance behaviors of cohabitating couples during the COVID-19 pandemic. Dyadic analysis revealed significant negative associations between attachment avoidance and the enactment of relational maintenance behaviors by both individuals and their partners. However, no significant associations were found between attachment anxiety and maintenance behaviors, and COVID-related anxiety did not moderate the relationships between attachment styles and maintenance behaviors. The absence of significant findings related to attachment anxiety and the non-moderating effect of COVID-related anxiety suggest nuanced pathways through which attachment and external stressors

may interact to affect relationship maintenance, which are discussed further below.

The results indicated that both an individual's and their partner's attachment avoidance were negatively associated with relational maintenance. This aligns with previous evidence that attachment avoidance, especially in times of stress, is related to fewer disclosures, less dyadic maintenance, and an overall insensitivity to a partner's support-seeking attempts (Bar-Shachar et al., 2023; Lozano et al., 2021; McLeod et al., 2020; Overall et al., 2022). These deactivating strategies are thought to be protective for individuals high in avoidance, as they are hesitant to depend on or be emotionally intimate with their partners (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Our findings extend this work by confirming that in high-stress situations, such as the pandemic and ensuing lockdown, a person's higher level of attachment avoidance may lessen a couple's relational maintenance overall. Although this study was conducted during a high-stress period, the cross-sectional design does not allow us to determine whether stress amplified these effects. Instead, our findings highlight how avoidance functions within relationships regardless of stress, with potential implications for high- and low-stress contexts. Furthermore, avoidantly attached partners may negatively impact relational outcomes more than anxiously attached partners, which may explain why a significant association emerged between attachment avoidance and maintenance, but not between attachment anxiety and maintenance. Additionally, individuals with high anxiety may develop a more secure attachment through the confirming strategies of a more secure partner, whereas those high in avoidance do not experience the same benefits (Lozano et al., 2021). Our sample reported relatively low levels of both attachment avoidance ($M = 1.72$) and attachment anxiety ($M = 1.95$), suggesting that the relational processes observed in this study are occurring in a population that is, on average, less insecurely attached than in prior scholarship. Given that attachment insecurity is associated with greater relational instability and heightened stress responses (Molero et al., 2016; Overall et al., 2022), these lesser levels may have dampened the effects of attachment on maintenance behaviors. Further, in a sample with more secure partners to buffer these tendencies (e.g., Wang et al., 2023), relational maintenance may function differently than in more imbalanced attachment distributions. Future research should consider whether these patterns persist in more attachment-diverse samples and explore the potential buffering role of secure attachment in mitigating the relational difficulties faced by insecurely attached couples.

The results provided no evidence that attachment anxiety for either partner was associated with relational maintenance. Previous findings have indicated that anxiously attached individuals will engage in more maintenance behaviors as a way to soothe their fears of rejection and abandonment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003; Ogolsky & Stafford, 2022). However, our results indicate that

this may not be the case among couples living together during a stressful period. This may be due in part to partners' perceived availability during lockdown. Taylor and Bazarova (2021) indicated that individuals report higher well-being when they perceive that their partner is immediately available. Couples who were forced into constant proximity during the lockdown may have felt more secure due to the availability of their partner, attenuating the potential effects of attachment anxiety on their maintenance behaviors. Given that our participants reported relatively high levels of maintenance ($M = 5.91$), it is possible that they were more responsive to their partners' needs in general and were better able to effectively reduce their stress because they had more emotional reserves or could more easily adapt to the situation (Balzarini et al., 2023; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). The lack of significant findings also may be explained by anxiously attached individuals' ambivalent approach to support-seeking. Although they strongly desire security, reassurance, and protection (Overall & Simpson, 2015), concerns about the availability of support and fear of rejection may cause those with high levels of attachment anxiety to express their needs indirectly (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). This ambivalence can manifest in inconsistent verbal and nonverbal emotional expressions, such as exaggerated sadness without explicit help-seeking messages (Brandão et al., 2020; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). These indirect signals may contribute to difficulty detecting clear patterns in their behavior.

The findings indicated that COVID-related anxiety did not impact the association between attachment avoidance or anxiety and maintenance behaviors for individuals or their partners. The participants in the present study indicated moderate levels of COVID-related anxiety ($M = 2.85$), which may partially explain the absence of an effect. In other words, the participants may not have been sufficiently anxious for it to strengthen or weaken the impact of other well-established working models, such as individuals' attachment tendencies. Although stress often lowers relationship satisfaction, in situations where stress is shorter-term or acute, partners may have more resources than when the stress is chronic or long term (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021), and thus may have been better able to cope with their moderate levels of COVID-related anxiety in a way that did not impact their relationship. As this study was conducted between May and September of 2020, it is also possible that the stress of the pandemic had not [yet] depleted their emotional or cognitive reserves (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). Similar studies have indicated that relational maintenance behaviors prior to the lockdown predicted less stress overall (Afifi et al., 2024; Mazur et al., 2023; Overall et al., 2022). Further, stress can cause partners to turn toward each other for support (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021), avoid conflicts (Vigl et al., 2022), and affirm their relational bonds (Neff et al., 2022). Overall, these findings extend previous research on stress and relational outcomes, as they demonstrate the variability of couples' responses to the pandemic and suggest that couples with high levels of

maintenance may not be as impacted by the stressors of the pandemic, regardless of either partner's attachment (in)security.

Limitations and future directions

This study offers valuable insights into how couples maintain their relationships through times of severe stress, yet it is not without limitations. For example, due to the cross-sectional nature of this data, there is no way to know the direction of the effects between relational maintenance, attachment avoidance and anxiety, and COVID-related anxiety. As such, it is possible that an individual's level of avoidance may decrease their relational maintenance behaviors, or that a decrease in maintenance may cause people to feel more distant from their partner and engage in behaviors indicative of avoidance. Related, attachment orientation is generally assumed to be deeply rooted and developed early in one's life (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), but there is no way to determine a causal relationship between attachment and maintenance from our data. Future studies should utilize longitudinal approaches to assess the timing and evolution of maintenance behaviors more thoroughly as they relate to attachment. Moreover, although the sample size aligns with previous dyadic analyses investigating attachment (Carrese-Chacra et al., 2023; Donato et al., 2021; Lozano et al., 2021), we may have been limited in our ability to detect significant effects. Future research would benefit from collecting a larger sample, which may also allow for testing more complex models. For example, prior studies have determined that other relational variables such as loneliness, partner support, and intimacy mediate the relationship between attachment insecurity and relational maintenance (Bröning & Wartberg, 2022). Considering these factors could help to clarify how relational maintenance functions in relationships with (in)securely attached partners. Our sample also reported high levels of maintenance overall, which limited our capacity to test for these effects.

In the present study, subscales of the relational maintenance measure were combined to capture an overall assessment of partners' maintenance behaviors. Using a unidimensional measure of relational maintenance is consistent with previous scholarship (see Ogolsky & Stafford, 2022; Stafford, 2016, 2020) however, certain relational maintenance strategies are more effective than others, and in some circumstances, can increase negative relational outcomes (Ogolsky & Stafford, 2022). Studies have also shown that anxiously attached individuals may use strategies that emphasize negative emotions (Winterheld, 2016), and that both partners are more likely to engage in negative maintenance behaviors when one partner is insecurely attached (Goodboy et al., 2017). As our participants only reported on their positive relational maintenance strategies, some of the effects of attachment anxiety on maintenance might have been overlooked and may be better reflected in the enactment of

negative maintenance behaviors (e.g., jealousy induction, spying, destructive conflict; Dainton & Gross, 2008). Future work should consider evaluating various types of maintenance strategies and comparing negative versus positive maintenance as it relates to attachment insecurity, particularly during times of stress.

Another important limitation of this study is the geographic and household composition of our sample. All couples were recruited from large metropolitan areas, limiting the generalizability of our findings to smaller cities, rural communities, or other urban centers with different sociocultural landscapes. Geography is often associated with broader ideological, relational, and interpersonal orientations such as community interdependence and relational norms (Kitayama & Salvador, 2024). These cultural differences may shape attachment dynamics and relational maintenance behaviors in meaningful ways and may have been especially impactful in various regions throughout the period of lockdown orders. Further, our sample was restricted to couples living alone, meaning that individuals with children, roommates, or extended family in the home were not included. This exclusion is particularly relevant given that parenthood introduces additional relational demands that may alter the way couples engage in relational maintenance. For example, transitioning to parenthood is often associated with increases in attachment anxiety and avoidance, particularly when partners struggle to balance new caregiving responsibilities with their own relational needs (Overall et al., 2022). Moreover, attachment processes in couples may be influenced by intergenerational relationships, particularly in multigenerational households where parental attachment histories interact with family caregiving roles (Cook & Roggman, 2010). Because our sample did not include parents or extended-family households, the applicability of our findings to couples navigating co-parenting, family caregiving, or intergenerational influences on attachment remains uncertain. Future research should explore how regional, cultural, and household structures influence attachment and relational maintenance, particularly in populations that reflect greater geographic and familial diversity. Although our sampling approach allowed us to focus on dyadic processes within a controlled context, these factors represent important areas for further investigation.

Conclusion

This study underscores the influence of attachment avoidance on relationship maintenance behaviors among cohabitating couples during the COVID-19 pandemic. It highlights the unique association of attachment avoidance with both an individual's own and their partner's engagement in maintenance strategies, as well as the lack of an association between attachment anxiety and relational maintenance. These findings offer valuable insights for relational maintenance strategies, emphasizing the need for tailored approaches that consider individual

and partner attachment tendencies, especially during times of stress like the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, this study offers valuable insights into how couples maintain their relationships during periods of severe stress, providing a foundation for informing best practices in future interventions targeting natural disasters, crises, or similar high-stress contexts. Understanding the associations between attachment orientations, relational maintenance behaviors, and stress-related anxiety can help shape programs that support couples in navigating challenging times. For example, interventions could emphasize fostering direct communication and tailored relational maintenance strategies that account for attachment-related tendencies, such as the ambivalence often observed in anxiously attached individuals and the deactivation of those high in avoidance. Additionally, highlighting maintenance behaviors' ability to mitigate negative relational outcomes could inform relationship counseling and community support initiatives during crises, promoting resilience and relational stability in high-stress environments. Our study, thereby, informs individuals on how to better support their partners during future disasters and high-stress situations, and guides future research in how best to examine these outcomes in varied contexts. This research contributes to the broader understanding of the dynamic interplay between attachment, relationship maintenance, and context-specific anxiety, elucidating how personal differences are associated with the maintenance strategies used among cohabitating couples.

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Notes on contributors

Meredith M. Turner (MA, California State University, Fullerton) is a PhD student in the Department of Communication at the University of Connecticut. Her work investigates the bridge between psychological and communication processes by looking at the ways in which various psychological dispositions affect communicative behaviors. Her research often centers on how different identities and personality factors are activated and communicated, and how these communication behaviors impact relational outcomes in close relationships.

Amanda Denes (PhD, University of California, Santa Barbara) is a Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Connecticut. Her work aims to identify communication practices in close relationships that contribute to people's physical, psychological, and

relational health. Much of her research focuses on communication processes related to maintaining successful relationships and the role of biology in understanding communication behavior.

Talea Cornelius (PhD, University of Connecticut, MSW, Boston University) is a health psychologist and Assistant Professor of Medical Sciences at Columbia University Irving Medical Center. Her research situates mental health and health behaviors within a social context. In particular, she explores how an acute medical event, such as an acute coronary syndrome or a stroke, impacts patients and partners alike, and how partners can both facilitate and undermine patient well-being. Dr Cornelius is also exploring novel applications of dyadic analysis to gain insight into interdependent, individual-level processes.

ORCID

Meredith M. Turner http://orcid.org/0009-0004-5412-8146
Amanda Denes http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2252-5687
Talea Cornelius http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7181-0981

Data availability statement

The study data is not available, but study materials can be obtained from the first author.

Ethical standards and consent

All study procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Connecticut (H20-0058). Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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