


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Making Sense of ‘Us’: Mechanisms Linking Attachment Avoidance and Couple Identity Clarity

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ABSTRACT

Just as people strive to understand their own individual identities—to form a clear and coherent sense of who they are—they also seek to gain a clear understanding of who and what they are as a couple. However, some people may struggle in this goal; specifically, people high in attachment avoidance, who face barriers unique to the specific nature of their insecurity. We investigated whether attachment avoidance is negatively correlated with couple identity clarity and tested potential mechanisms for this association. We proposed that less interpersonal closeness and self-verification from their partner would mediate the association between attachment avoidance and couple identity clarity. We found support for these hypotheses across three studies (total $N = 912$). Thus, attachment avoidance may create identity-specific challenges in relationships.

1 | Introduction

A unity, marriage, made of discrete parts. Lotto was loud and full of light; Mathilde, quiet, watchful.

Lauren Groff, *Fates and Furies*

How do couples make sense of who they are together? A couple's identity is based on the 'unity...of discrete parts' of their individual identities, the nature of their relationship and the dynamic that they develop between the two of them (Emery et al. 2021; Wang, Chen, and Aron 2023). Just as people strive to understand their own individual identities—to form a clear and cohesive sense of who they are—they also seek to gain a clear understanding of who and what they are as a couple. This understanding, or *couple identity clarity*, plays an important role in relationship perceptions and functioning.

Couple identity clarity refers specifically to the extent to which a person feels that they and their partner know who they are

as a couple—a clear and coherent sense of themselves as a dyad. (Emery et al. 2021). Couple identity clarity is thought to arise from people's shared experiences, emotions and self-disclosures in their relationship, as well as their own perceptions of their relationship and their understanding of their partner's perceptions of their relationship. It is distinct from self-concept clarity in that it focuses on perceptions of the couple, rather than the individual, and confers unique benefits to relationship quality (Emery et al. 2021).

Despite its benefits, there is reason to expect that couple identity clarity may be more difficult for some people to attain than others. Specifically, people who experience avoidant attachment dynamics in their adult romantic relationships often face challenges stemming from their insecure attachment representations. These challenges are not experienced by their more securely attached counterparts and are often different than the challenges faced by people who experience anxious attachment (e.g., Mikulincer and Shaver 2003). Many of these challenges are distinctly relational in nature—for instance, less trust, reduced relationship satisfaction

and increased risk of infidelity (e.g., Fraley and Brumbaugh 2007; Mikulincer and Shaver 2003; DeWall, Anderson, and Bushman 2011). However, attachment avoidance also presents challenges for the clarity of people's identities—specifically, their self-concept clarity (J. D. Campbell et al. 1996; Emery et al. 2018).

The current research investigated links between attachment avoidance and identity processes by considering how avoidance also might predict *couple* identity clarity. Given that people who experience greater attachment avoidance tend to keep psychological distance from romantic partners, we predicted that greater avoidance would be associated with less couple identity clarity. Furthermore, the current research tested two potential mechanisms for the proposed association: less interpersonal closeness and less partner-provided self-verification. Essentially, we predicted that more avoidant, compared to less avoidant, people would struggle to 'define', or feel clear about, who they and their partner are as a couple because they experience less interpersonal closeness in their relationship and less self-verification from their partner.

1.1 | Adult Attachment

The attachment system encompasses patterns of emotion, cognition and behaviour that organise human interpersonal activity 'from the cradle to the grave' (p. 129, Bowlby 1969). The attachment system enables people to respond adaptively to situations of threat (Bowlby 1969). In early life, people form primary attachment bonds and patterns with carers who promote their feelings of security (Ainsworth 1978). In adulthood, people often form primary attachment bonds with romantic partners (Hazan and Shaver 1987, 1994).

People's experiences within relationships give rise to differences in the nature of their attachment bonds; specifically, people vary in terms of their dispositional experiences of attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance (e.g., Ainsworth 1978; Mikulincer and Shaver 2003). Low levels of both attachment anxiety and avoidance, which are orthogonal constructs measuring different dimensions of attachment insecurity, indicate attachment security (e.g., Brennan, Clark, and Shaver 1998). Attachment anxiety functions as a hyperactivating strategy in which the primary features and functions of the attachment system are exacerbated (Mikulincer and Shaver 2003). Thus, in romantic relationships, more anxious people desire extreme closeness and intimacy with their partner, exhibit emotional distress when closeness to their partner is disrupted, are highly vigilant for threats to their relationship and catastrophise the experience of negative interactions or emotions in their relationship (e.g., L. Campbell et al. 2005; Fraley and Shaver 2000; Hazan and Shaver 1994). In contrast, attachment avoidance, which is the focus of the current work, functions as a deactivating strategy in which the primary features and functions of the attachment system are suppressed (Mikulincer and Shaver 2003). Thus, in romantic relationships, more avoidant people desire less closeness and intimacy with their partner, self-disclose less to their partners and downplay the experience of negative interactions or emotions in their relationship (e.g., Brennan and Shaver 1995; Fraley and Shaver 1997, 1998; Fraley and Brumbaugh 2007; Mikulincer, Dolev, and

Shaver 2004; Mikulincer and Nachshon 1991; Slotter and Luchies 2014).

Both attachment anxiety and avoidance can undermine romantic relationships, and both tend to be associated with less positive relationship perceptions and outcomes (e.g., Cohn et al. 2016; Collins et al. 2006; Dutton and White 2012; Etcheverry et al. 2013.; Li and Chan 2012; Mikulincer and Shaver 2005; Whiffen, Kallos-Lilly, and MacDonald 2001). Additionally, research on self and identity demonstrates that both attachment anxiety and avoidance have consequences for people's self-concepts. Understanding how attachment dynamics are involved in shaping identity processes has implications for both people's personal well-being and functioning, in addition to the well-being and functioning of their closest relationships.

1.2 | Attachment Avoidance and Personal Identity

The majority of the empirical work on the links between attachment and identity processes has focused on attachment anxiety as the dimension of interest. People who experience greater attachment anxiety exhibit more negative self-views, lower self-esteem, less complex self-structures and less stable self-concepts (Bartholomew and Horowitz 1991; Brennan and Morris 1997; Mikulincer 1995; Slotter and Gardner 2012). Variability on attachment avoidance, in contrast, is not reliably associated with differences in people's self-positivity or self-esteem (Bartholomew and Horowitz 1991; Mikulincer 1995).

Despite this emphasis on the associations between attachment anxiety and self-processes, fundamental aspects of attachment avoidance can have consequences for the self-concepts of more avoidant people (Emery et al. 2018). Specifically, people who experience attachment avoidance experience lower self-concept clarity (Emery et al. 2018). Self-concept clarity is a subjective, meta-cognitive judgement that people make regarding the clarity, coherence and consistency of who they are (J. D. Campbell 1990; J. D. Campbell et al. 1996). This sense that a person 'knows who they are' is associated with a host of positive personal and interpersonal well-being outcomes, including decreased social comparison, lower levels of self-handicapping, greater willingness to expand the self, higher self-esteem, less stress and lower depressive symptomology (e.g., Butzer and Kuiper 2006; J. D. Campbell et al. 1996; Campbell, Assanand, and Di Paula 2003; Emery, Walsh, and Slotter 2015; Slotter, Gardner, and Finkel 2010; Thomas and Gadbois 2007).

People's self-concept clarity emerges, in part, through the feedback they receive from others. Specifically, close others, such as romantic partners, serve as a critical source of self-knowledge (Cooley 1902). People use feedback from and interactions with relationship partners to pursue goals efficiently, expand their self-concept and receive self-perception-verifying feedback (Fitzsimons, Finkel, and van Dellen 2015; Kraus and Chen 2009; Mattingly, Lewandowski, and McIntyre 2014; Slotter and Gardner 2014; Swann, Hixon, and Ronde 1992). However, avoidant people may not be able to rely on this social feedback. They engage in less self-disclosure with their partner (e.g., Fraley and Brumbaugh 2007; Mikulincer and Nachshon 1991) and are less likely to

trust feedback that they do receive from them. As such, more avoidant people may miss out on the self-concept-supporting benefits of self-verification that their partners could provide. In fact, avoidantly attached people both perceive experiencing and actually receive less self-verification from their partners (Emery et al. 2018), which in turn is linked to lower self-concept clarity. Thus attachment avoidance is linked to how people understand their individual self-concepts.

Given that attachment anxiety and avoidance are both theoretically and empirically orthogonal constructs (i.e., Mikulincer and Shaver 2003; Bartholomew and Horowitz 1991), the current research opted to focus on attachment avoidance as a factor in predicting self-related outcomes in order to hone in on this particular type of insecurity's contribution to identity, couple-level identity specifically. We acknowledge that both types of attachment insecurity have implications for couple-level identity processes; however, the mechanisms for these associations are likely to be quite distinct given the differences in attachment anxiety compared to avoidance. In order to focus the current investigation, we examined the mechanisms specific to attachment avoidance that would be expected to impede couple identity clarity.

1.3 | Attachment Avoidance and Couple Identity

Individual self-concept clarity is not the only way in which people assess whether they possess a clear, cohesive and consistent identity. People in romantic relationships develop identities as a couple that are distinct from their sense of self at the individual level (e.g., Agnew et al. 1998; Wang, Chen, and Aron 2023). Couple identity clarity is a subjective, metacognitive judgement a person makes regarding whether they know who they and their partner are as a couple (Emery et al. 2021). Couple identity clarity is thought to stem from people's experiences of 'we-ness' in their relationship and their perceptions about their relationship.

Couple identity clarity is distinct from both self-concept clarity ('I know who I am'; J. D. Campbell et al. 1996) and significant-other-concept clarity ('I know who my partner is'; Gurung, Sarason, and Sarason 2001), and focuses specifically on the dyad ('we know who we are as a couple'; Emery et al. 2021). Higher couple identity clarity is associated with greater relationship commitment and reduced risk of dissolution over time (Emery et al. 2021).

Individuals higher in attachment avoidance face two potential barriers to establishing and maintaining high couple identity clarity. First, attachment avoidance evokes discomfort with interpersonal closeness (e.g., Mikulincer and Shaver 2003). In order to perceive clarity in a dyadic connection, the dyad must have sufficient closeness between its members to provide a basis for that connection. In ongoing romantic relationships, people readily create perceptions of themselves as part of a pluralistic collective, or couple unit (e.g., Agnew et al. 1998). However, people who are higher in attachment avoidance report both desiring and experiencing less interpersonal closeness than their less avoidant counterparts (e.g., Slotter and Luchies 2014).

Second, attachment avoidance reduces the self-verification a person experiences in their relationship. In order to achieve high couple identity clarity, two people in the relationship must share who they are with one another through self-disclosure, allowing themselves to be known by their partner. This process provides the foundational information to form an identity together—if we do not know each other individually, knowing 'us' as a couple becomes much harder. If a partner cannot reflect back to someone their valued identity aspects, it becomes difficult to activate joint goals (e.g., Kraus and Chen 2009), to identify points of similarity beneficial to the relationship (e.g., Murray, Holmes, and Griffin 2000) or to expand the couple's identity to incorporate a broader range of characteristics, interests and so on (e.g., Mattingly, Lewandowski, and McIntyre 2014). All of these cognitive components of the couple's identity are critical for experiencing that identity as clear and cohesive. If partners do not feel known by each other via self-verification, they cannot build a dyadic sense of self. Given these theoretical connections, the current research investigates a link between attachment avoidance and lower couple identity clarity and tests the two potential mechanisms of lower closeness and partner self-verification.

1.4 | Research Overview and Hypotheses

The current research investigated whether higher attachment avoidance would be associated with lower couple identity clarity. We also investigated two potential mechanisms for this proposed association. The first was less interpersonal closeness in the relationship. To the extent that more avoidant people distance themselves from their partner and eschew closeness and intimacy, they may have less of a basis on which to develop the sense of identity as a couple that is inherent in couple identity clarity. The second was less self-verification from the romantic partner, which is an established mechanism accounting for the association between higher attachment avoidance and less self-concept clarity and may also play a role in couple identity processes (e.g., Emery et al. 2018). Finally, we investigated whether our proposed effects would be robust beyond the related factors of attachment anxiety and self-concept clarity. Thus we had four primary hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. *People who are higher in attachment avoidance will report lower couple identity clarity.*

Hypothesis 2. *Interpersonal closeness will mediate the association between attachment avoidance and couple identity clarity. Specifically, people who are higher in avoidance will report lower interpersonal closeness, which in turn will be associated with lower couple identity clarity.*

Hypothesis 3. *Partner self-verification will mediate the association between attachment avoidance and couple identity clarity. Specifically, people who are higher in avoidance will report lower perceived partner self-verification, which in turn will be associated with lower couple identity clarity.*

Hypothesis 4. *Finally, the predicted effects of Hypotheses 1–3 will emerge beyond the contributions of attachment anxiety and individual self-concept clarity.*

We tested these hypotheses across four studies. Study 1 investigated the predicted association between attachment avoidance and couple identity clarity, thus testing Hypothesis 1. Study 2 examined all four hypotheses in two cross-sectional samples of romantically involved adults and tested the simultaneous contributions of our two proposed mediators. Study 3 examined all four hypotheses longitudinally in a sample of romantically involved adults.

We report all measures and exclusions in all studies. Following TOP Level 2 guidelines, measures from all three studies, including bivariate correlations, relevant code and [Supporting Analyses](https://osf.io/dnbc/?view_only=06c07e42bf2249afa0f11723e5a28a02), are available at https://osf.io/dnbc/?view_only=06c07e42bf2249afa0f11723e5a28a02. Data for Studies 1 and 2 (a and b) are available as well at the above link; data from Study 3 cannot be shared due to concerns regarding making dyadic data public (Joel, Eastwick, and Finkel 2018) but are available upon request. Study 2b was partially pre-registered at https://aspredicted.org/SSQ_XT5.¹ In all three studies, we control for attachment anxiety and self-concept clarity in all relevant analyses due to established links between these variables and both our predictors and outcomes of interest. We control for other select variables as noted in each study.

2 | Study 1

2.1 | Participants and Procedure

We recruited 353 participants from MTurk in this study (38.0% male, 61.2% female; age $M = 34.57$, $SD = 10.80$; 79.3% White, 10.8% Black/African American, 8.5% Hispanic or Latino, 5.4% Asian/Asian American, 3.1% Native American or American Indian, 1.1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander), all of whom were currently in romantic relationships (43.3% married or in a committed lifelong partnership; relationship duration $M = 7.05$ years, $SD = 7.30$; 89.2% heterosexual, 5.4% bisexual, 4.0% gay or lesbian, 0.6% uncertain or questioning, 0.6% other orientation). Approximately half participants had at least a 4-year college degree (51.4%; 54.7% of those 25 or older²). They completed the entire study in a single online session, and data collection was completed in ~ 1 day. Thirty-three participants were ultimately excluded from analyses because their time to complete the survey was $\pm 2 SD$ the average participation time, indicating poor attention. Sample size was not determined a priori based on power considerations, but we aimed to recruit ~ 350 participants. Only participants who completed all of the key measures are included in the analyses.

2.2 | Measures

Unless otherwise indicated, all measures were assessed on seven-point scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The current research also included measures of dispositional self-esteem (Rosenberg 1965) and neuroticism as filler measures. As these measures were not central to predictions, they are not reported; however, we did repeat our analysis controlling for both of these filler measures, and our reported results remain robust.

TABLE 1 | Study 1 analyses.

Model/variable	β	t -value	p -value	95% CI
DV = Couple identity clarity ($df = 283$)				
Attachment avoidance	-0.39	-7.92	<0.001	-0.48, -0.29
Attachment anxiety	-0.19	-3.82	<0.001	-0.28, -0.09
Self-concept clarity	0.30	5.83	<0.001	0.20, 0.40

2.2.1 | Attachment

Participants completed the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale-Short Form (Wei et al. 2007), which assesses attachment avoidance (6 items; e.g., 'I want to get close to my partner, but I keep pulling back'; $\alpha = 0.84$, $M = 2.31$, $SD = 1.10$) and anxiety (6 items; e.g., 'I need a lot of reassurance that I am loved by my partner'; $\alpha = 0.80$, $M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.33$).

2.2.2 | Couple Identity Clarity

Participants completed a measure of couple identity clarity (Emery et al. 2021; 11 items; $\alpha = 0.94$, $M = 5.11$, $SD = 1.27$; e.g., 'In general, my partner and I have a clear sense of who we are as a couple and what we are').

2.2.3 | Self-Concept Clarity

Participants completed a measure of self-concept clarity (J. D. Campbell et al. 1996; 12 items; $\alpha = 0.93$, $M = 4.89$, $SD = 1.25$; e.g., 'In general, I have a clear sense of who I am and what I am').

2.3 | Results

We conducted a simultaneous regression analysis predicting couple identity clarity from attachment avoidance, controlling for attachment anxiety and individual self-concept clarity in SPSS 29 (Table 1). Prior to analysis, we standardised all variables. Supporting Hypothesis 1, avoidance was negatively associated with couple identity clarity. Supporting Hypothesis 4, this association was robust beyond the contributions of attachment anxiety and self-concept clarity.

3 | Study 2

Study 2 began to test our central hypotheses that the lower couple identity clarity associated with elevated attachment avoidance evidenced in Study 1 (Hypothesis 1) should be accounted for by more avoidant individuals' experiences of both lower interpersonal closeness (Hypothesis 2) and less partner self-verification (Hypothesis 3). As in Study 1, we examined whether these predicted associations emerged beyond the contributions of attachment anxiety and self-concept clarity (Hypothesis 4). To this end, we conducted two surveys of adults in romantic

relationships. Two samples were recruited (2a and 2b) with slight variation in the measures included, although our key measures were the same across both. Both samples were collected in the summer months of 2022, and each participant only took part in one of the two studies (i.e., there were no duplicates). We report recruitment and methodology for both studies separately but opted to analyse together for brevity. When analysed separately, the conclusions drawn from our results remain robust. See the online supplemental document for these separated analyses.

3.1 | Method

3.1.1 | Participants

3.1.1.1 | Study 2a. A priori power analyses conducted in G*Power 9.41 suggested a minimum of 100 participants to reach a power of 0.80, assuming $\alpha = 0.05$ and a medium-predicted effect size of $d = 0.2$. Given the effects found in Study 1, this effect size is likely somewhat smaller than what we could expect to observe, but we opted to be cautious. To account for potential unusable data, we aimed to recruit 200 English-speaking, romantically involved adult participants living in the United States from Prolific.co. Ultimately, 214 participants began the survey. Seventeen participants were ultimately excluded from analyses either because they did not complete the survey ($n = 7$) or they completed it in less than 5 min ($n = 10$). The final sample for the current study included 196 participants (80.7% female, 18.3% male, 1.0% non-binary/other gender; 90.9% White, 3.6% Asian, 2.5% mixed race, 2.0% Black and 1.0% Latinx). Educationally, most participants had completed, at minimum, a bachelor's degree (54.7%, 20.3% some college but no degree earned, 6.6% associate degree, 14.7% high school diploma or equivalent, 3.6% some high school but no degree earned). Participants' mean age was 38.06 ($SD = 12.71$), and they had been in their current relationship for 12.52 years ($SD = 10.71$). Relationship type and participant sexual orientation were not assessed.

3.1.1.2 | Study 2b. A priori power analyses conducted suggested the same required sample size as in Study 2a. To account for unusable data, which was less of an issue in Study 2a than expected, we aimed to recruit 150 English-speaking, romantically involved adult participants from Prolific.co. Ultimately, 160 participants began the survey. Thirteen participants were ultimately excluded from analyses either because they did not complete the survey ($n = 11$) or they completed it in less than 5 min ($n = 2$). The final sample for the current study included 147 participants (76.2% female, 22.4% male, 1.4% non-binary/other gender; 91.2% White, 5.4% Asian, 2.0% mixed race and 1.4% Black). Educationally, most participants had completed, at minimum, a bachelor's degree (59.1%; 21.1% some college but no degree earned, 6.1% associate degree, 9.5% high school diploma or equivalent, 4.8% some high school but no degree earned). Participants' mean age was 37.41 ($SD = 11.70$), and they had been in their current relationship for 12.93 years ($SD = 13.52$). Relationship type and participant sexual orientation were not assessed.

3.1.1.3 | Measures. Unless otherwise indicated, all measures were assessed on seven-point scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The current research also included measures of

dispositional self-esteem (Rosenberg 1965), relationship certainty (adapted from Knobloch and Solomon 1999) and the investment model scale (Rusbult 1983) as filler measures. As these were not central to predictions, they are not reported.³

3.1.2 | Study 2a

3.1.2.1 | Demographics. Participants reported on their age, identified gender, identified race, educational attainment, relationship status and relationship length.

3.1.2.2 | Attachment. We assessed participants' dispositional adult attachment via the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECR; Brennan, Clark, and Shaver 1998; attachment avoidance $M = 2.46$, $SD = 0.94$; $\alpha = 0.93$; attachment anxiety $M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.09$; $\alpha = 0.93$). This measure was the long-form version of the measure utilised in Study 1.

3.1.2.3 | Interpersonal Closeness. We assessed interpersonal closeness using the intimacy subscale of the Perceived Relationships Quality Scale (PRQS; Fletcher, Simpson, and Thomas 2000). This three-item subscale assesses participants' feelings of closeness and intimacy in their relationship (e.g., 'How close is your relationship?'; $M = 5.86$, $SD = 1.24$; $\alpha = 0.85$).

3.1.2.4 | Partner Self-Verification. We assessed partner self-verification using a three-item scale used in previous research (Emery et al. 2018). This scale assessed participants' feelings that their partner validated their identity ('My partner sees my true self'; $M = 5.97$, $SD = 1.07$; $\alpha = 0.93$).

3.1.2.5 | Couple Identity Clarity. As in Study 1, we assessed couple identity clarity via the Couple Identity Clarity Scale (Emery et al. 2021; $\alpha = 0.93$, $M = 5.66$, $SD = 1.18$).

3.1.2.6 | Self-Concept Clarity. As in Study 1, we assessed self-concept clarity via the Self-Concept Clarity Scale (J. D. Campbell et al. 1996; $\alpha = 0.93$; $M = 4.41$, $SD = 1.28$).

3.1.3 | Study 2b

Study 2b's measures were nearly identical to those in Study 2a, with the exception of including an additional measure to assess interpersonal closeness. Attachment avoidance ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 0.92$; $\alpha = 0.93$), anxiety ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 0.96$; $\alpha = 0.92$), partner self-verification ($M = 5.97$, $SD = 1.06$; $\alpha = 0.93$), couple identity clarity ($M = 5.46$, $SD = 1.17$; $\alpha = 0.93$) and self-concept clarity ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 1.31$; $\alpha = 0.93$) were assessed as in the previous study. Interpersonal closeness was assessed using both the measure used in Study 2a ($M = 5.69$, $SD = 1.27$; $\alpha = 0.91$) and by using the Inclusion of Other in Self scale (IOS; Aron, Aron, and Smollan 1992). This single-item scale assesses the degree to which individuals view themselves as close to, and integrated with, their romantic partner. It is a series of seven pairs of circles, one representing the self and one representing the partner that continue to increase in how much they overlap. Participants choose which one represents themselves and their partner ($M = 4.87$, $SD = 1.57$).

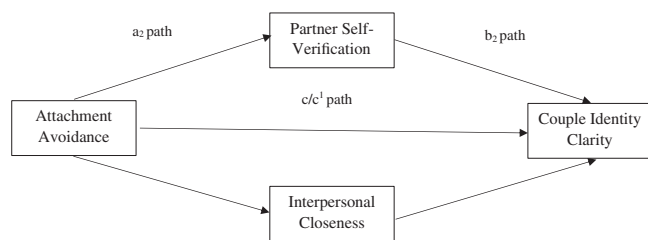


FIGURE 1 | Proposed mediational pathways.

3.1.3.1 | Procedure. Procedures for Studies 2a and 2b were identical. After indicating their consent to participate, participants completed demographic information followed by all key measures. They were then debriefed and compensated for their time.

3.2 | Results

3.2.1 | Analytic Strategy

We first combined the data from Studies 2a and 2b (combined $N = 343$) and standardised all measures to ease in the interpretation of effects and effect sizes ($M = 0$, $SD = 1$). Next, we tested our simultaneous mediation hypotheses using a series of multiple regressions in SPSS 29 to test each pathway of the proposed model, followed by a bias-corrected bootstrapping approach via the PROCESS macro for SPSS 29 (Preacher and Hayes 2004, 2008).⁴

As depicted in Figure 1, we predicted couple identity clarity from attachment avoidance, controlling for attachment anxiety and self-concept clarity (Model 1, c path). Next, we predicted interpersonal closeness (Model 2; a_1 path) from attachment avoidance, controlling for attachment anxiety. We next predicted partner self-verification (Model 3; a_2 path) from attachment avoidance, controlling for attachment anxiety. Finally, we predicted couple identity clarity from attachment avoidance and both mediators (b_1 and b_2 paths), controlling for attachment anxiety and self-concept clarity (Model 4). We then conducted two bias-corrected bootstrapping analyses based on 10,000 resamples and a 95% confidence interval to determine whether each of our proposed mediators significantly reduced the association between couple identity clarity and attachment avoidance (c' path). Thus, we took a hybrid approach to testing mediation in which we used a component, or joint-significance, approach in conjunction with an index approach to confirm the presence of our hypothesised indirect effects (Yzerbyt et al. 2018). Our covariates of attachment anxiety and self-concept clarity were included due to their conceptual relationships to our constructs of interest to show our key effects were robust beyond these additional factors. That said, all significant tests yielded identical conclusions with the omission of these covariates in our models.

Additionally, two simultaneous mediation models were tested. The first used the intimacy subscale of the PRQS (Fletcher, Simpson, and Thomas 2000) as our index of interpersonal closeness and includes the combined data from both the Studies 2a and 2b samples. The second employed the IOS, taken only in Study 2b

TABLE 2 | Study 2a and 2b analyses.

Model/variable	β	t -value	p -value	95% CI
Model 1				
DV = Couple identity clarity ($df = 340$)				
Attachment avoidance	-0.49	-11.30	<0.001	-0.57, -0.40
Attachment anxiety	-0.12	-2.74	0.007	-0.21, -0.04
Self-concept clarity	0.22	4.49	<0.001	0.12, 0.31
Model 2				
DV = Interpersonal closeness ($df = 341$)				
Attachment avoidance	-0.57	-12.65	<0.001	-0.66, -0.48
Attachment anxiety	-0.02	-0.45	0.65	-0.11, 0.07
Model 3				
DV = Partner self-verification ($df = 341$)				
Attachment avoidance	-0.55	-12.11	<0.001	-0.64, -0.46
Attachment anxiety	-0.06	-1.20	0.23	-0.14, 0.04
Model 4				
DV = Couple identity clarity ($df = 337$)				
Attachment avoidance	-0.20	-4.56	<0.001	-0.28, -0.11
Attachment anxiety	-0.15	-3.81	<0.001	-0.22, -0.07
Closeness	0.44	9.40	<0.001	0.34, 0.53
Partner self-verification	0.12	2.58	0.01	0.02, 0.21
Self-concept clarity	0.13	3.24	0.001	0.05, 0.21

as the index of interpersonal closeness. This second analysis was pre-registered.

All results for the combined analysis utilizing the PRQS intimacy subscale as the index of closeness are reported in Table 2. In Model 1, as predicted, greater attachment avoidance was significantly associated with lower reported couple identity clarity. As predicted, greater attachment avoidance was significantly associated with less interpersonal closeness (Model 2) and less partner self-verification (Model 3). In Model 4, less interpersonal closeness and less partner self-verification were both associated with less couple identity clarity. In this model, attachment avoidance was less strongly associated with couple identity clarity than in Model 1.

Using a component approach, both key a and b pathways were significant. Furthermore, our bias-corrected bootstrapping analyses indicated that both of our predicted mediators contributed to the reduction in the association between our independent

TABLE 3 | Study 2b analyses.

Model/variable	β	<i>t</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value	95% CI
Model 1				
DV = Couple identity clarity (<i>df</i> = 143)				
Attachment avoidance	-0.49	-6.94	<0.001	-0.63, -0.35
Attachment anxiety	-0.04	-0.50	0.62	-0.18, 0.11
Self-concept clarity	0.23	2.98	0.003	0.08, 0.33
Model 2				
DV = Closeness (<i>df</i> = 144)				
Attachment avoidance	-0.31	-3.91	<0.001	-0.47, -0.16
Attachment anxiety	0.14	1.71	0.09	-0.02, 0.30
Model 3				
DV = Partner self-verification (<i>df</i> = 144)				
Attachment avoidance	-0.62	-9.16	<0.001	-0.75, -0.48
Attachment anxiety	0.05	0.78	0.44	-0.08, 0.19
Model 4				
DV = Couple identity clarity (<i>df</i> = 141)				
Attachment avoidance	-0.27	-3.42	0.001	-0.43, -0.11
Attachment anxiety	-0.08	-1.26	0.21	-0.21, 0.05
Closeness	0.17	2.61	0.01	0.04, 0.30
Partner self-verification	0.29	3.69	<0.001	0.13, 0.44
Self-concept clarity	0.21	2.88	0.01	0.06, 0.35

and dependent variables, as the 95% confidence intervals for both and interpersonal closeness (-0.29, -0.16) and partner self-verification (-0.12, -0.01) excluded zero.

We next conducted our analyses using the pre-registered IOS (Aron, Aron, and Smollan 1992) as our index of interpersonal closeness. All results are reported in Table 3. Again, these analyses only include data from the Study 2b sample (*N* = 147). In Model 1, greater attachment avoidance was significantly associated with lower reported couple identity clarity. As predicted, greater attachment avoidance was significantly associated with less interpersonal closeness (Model 2) and less partner self-verification (Model 3). In Model 4, less interpersonal closeness and less partner self-verification were both associated with less couple identity clarity. In this model, attachment avoidance was less strongly associated with couple identity clarity than in Model 1.

Using a component approach, both key a and b pathways were significant. Furthermore, our bias-corrected bootstrapping analyses indicated that both of our predicted mediators contributed to the reduction in the association between our independent and dependent variables. In this mediational test, the 95% confidence intervals for both interpersonal closeness (-0.12, -0.01) and partner self-verification (-0.31, -0.08) excluded zero.

Taken together, the results from Study 2 demonstrated that attachment avoidance is associated with lower couple identity clarity (Hypothesis 1) and that both lower interpersonal closeness (Hypothesis 2) and lower partner self-verification (Hypothesis 3) experienced by more avoidant people partially account for this relationship. Furthermore, these effects emerged beyond the effects of both attachment anxiety and self-concept clarity (Hypothesis 4).

4 | Study 3

Although the results from Study 2 provide initial support for our hypotheses that interpersonal closeness and partner self-verification serve as mechanisms linking attachment avoidance and couple identity clarity, both of the previous studies were cross-sectional, which limits the mediational conclusions we can draw from these findings. Thus, Study 3 tested our hypotheses in a daily diary study of romantically involved adults.

4.1 | Participants

We recruited a sample of 108 couples (216 individuals) from (major US metropolitan area; redacted for peer review) (49.1% male, 49.1% female, 1.4% nonbinary; age *M* = 36.38, *SD* = 12.64; 63.4% European American, White, Anglo or Caucasian; 24.1% African American, Black, African or Caribbean; 8.3% Asian American, Asian or Pacific Islander; 7.9% Hispanic American, Latino(a) or Chicano(a); 2.3% Native American or American Indian; 2.8% other race or ethnicity; 78.7% heterosexual, 6.0% gay or lesbian, 5.6% bisexual, 5.6% queer, 2.3% pansexual, 1.4% other). Participants were required to be over 25 years old; 65.4% of the sample had at least a 4-year college degree, and 34.3% did not. They were also required to be in a relationship for at least 6 months (relationship duration *M* = 8.26 years, *SD* = 8.41; 18.5% dating seriously, 44.4% in a committed lifelong partnership, 37.0% married), be born in the United States, and have internet access. Recruitment strategies were online advertisements and targeted flyers. For the purpose of this paper, we focus just on the intake and diary portions. No data were excluded.⁵

4.2 | Procedure

After completing a screening questionnaire, both members of the couple received a link to the online intake questionnaire. They then completed a 2-week daily diary, with surveys at the end of each day. Of the 216 participants, 97.7% completed at least one diary; among those who completed at least one, participants completed an average of 80%.

4.3 | Measures

4.3.1 | Intake

4.3.1.1 | Attachment. Participants completed the same measure of attachment as in Study 1 (Wei et al. 2007; avoidance: $\alpha = 0.78$, $M = 2.19$, $SD = 0.95$; anxiety: $\alpha = 0.75$, $M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.19$).

4.3.1.2 | Couple Identity Clarity. Participants completed the same measure of couple identity clarity as in the previous studies (Emery et al. 2021; $\alpha = 0.91$, $M = 5.59$, $SD = 1.08$).

4.3.1.3 | Self-Concept Clarity. Participants completed the same measure of self-concept clarity as in previous studies (J. D. Campbell et al. 1996; $\alpha = 0.88$, $M = 4.85$, $SD = 1.15$).

4.3.2 | Diary

4.3.2.1 | Couple Identity Clarity. Participants completed a one-item measure of couple identity clarity ($M = 5.77$, $SD = 1.33$, ‘today, I felt that my partner and I have a clear sense of who we are as a couple and what we are’).

4.3.2.2 | Interpersonal Closeness. Participants completed a one-item measure of closeness ($M = 5.60$, $SD = 1.45$; ‘today, I felt close and connected to my partner’).

4.3.2.3 | Partner Self-Verification. Participants completed a one-item measure of self-verification ($M = 5.61$, $SD = 1.37$; ‘today, my partner saw me as the person I really am’; adapted from Emery et al. 2018).

4.4 | Results

In this study, we examined the association between attachment avoidance at intake of the study and couple identity clarity over the 14-day diary study, mediated by daily closeness and self-verification across the 14-day diary study, and controlling for couple identity clarity at intake (as well as attachment anxiety and self-concept clarity). To this end, we employed a lagged multi-level modelling using a maximum likelihood approach, given the size of our sample, in SAS 9.4 to account for the non-independence in the data (Kashy and Cook 2020). In our model, we predicted daily outcomes from both the same-day predictors and the predictors on the previous day (lag_1), controlling for the outcomes on the previous day in these analyses (lag_1).

This approach enabled us to examine temporal effects—specifically, it allowed us to test for both lagged effects (i.e., the effect of yesterday’s predictor on today’s outcome) and regressed change effects (i.e., the effect of today’s predictor on today’s outcome, controlling for both yesterday). Effects of our lagged predictors would indicate that previous-day experiences are associated with current-day outcomes. Regressed change effects assess whether the change in experiences from the previous day to the current day predicts current-day outcomes (e.g., Cohen et al. 2003; Audigier et al. 2023).

This also allowed us to account for the non-independence in our data introduced by the daily diary approach and the use of couples. Specifically, we specified an approach that crossed residuals of people within a couple within time in line with current analytic recommendations (Kenny, Kashy, and Cook 2020; code is available in the supporting documentation).⁶ Prior to analyses, we standardised all variables ($M = 0$, $SD = 1$).

First, we predicted daily couple identity clarity from attachment avoidance at intake, controlling for attachment anxiety, self-concept clarity and couple identity clarity at intake (Model 1; Table 4). Greater avoidance was associated with lower daily couple identity clarity. As in previous studies, avoidance at intake was also associated with less daily interpersonal closeness (Model 2) and less daily partner self-verification (Model 3). In these models, we controlled for attachment anxiety at intake and the lagged, or previous day’s closeness or partner self-verification, respectively.

In our final model, less closeness and self-verification on the current day, in turn, were associated with lower couple identity clarity on that same day (Model 4). We controlled for attachment anxiety, self-concept clarity and couple identity clarity at intake in this model, as well as lagged, or the previous day’s, couple identity clarity, closeness and self-verification. The direct effect of attachment avoidance at intake was non-significant in this model. Furthermore, previous day’s closeness and partner self-verification did not predict current day couple identity clarity.

These findings support a regressed change interpretation of our effects such that change in our mediators from the previous to the current day (i.e., the current day predictor controlling for the lagged predictor) was associated with change in our outcome from the previous day to the current day (i.e., the current day outcome controlling for the lagged outcome). As such, decreases in closeness and partner self-verification from one day to the next were associated with decreases in couple identity clarity and mediated the association between dispositional attachment avoidance and daily couple identity clarity.

As in Study 2, we took a hybrid approach to assessing mediation. We first examined a component approach, such that our key a and b pathways were significant (i.e., Yzerbyt et al. 2018). Next, we introduced an index approach by conducting mediation analyses using the MEDMC web utility for testing mediation in multi-level models hosted by Preacher and Selig (2012; <http://quantpsy.org/medmc/medmc.htm>). The MEDMC utility uses a maximum likelihood approach with Monte Carlo 95% confidence intervals, based on 10,000 resamples. We examined current-day interpersonal closeness as a mediator, using the estimates generated by Model 4. We next examined current-day partner self-verification as a mediator, using the same procedure. The 95% confidence intervals for both interpersonal closeness (-0.13 , -0.06) and partner self-verification (-0.08 , -0.03) excluded zero, indicating that both of our predicted mediators contributed to the reduction in the association between our independent and dependent variables.

The results of Study 3 support our hypotheses that greater attachment avoidance would be associated, in this case over a period of 2 weeks, with less daily couple identity clarity (Hypothesis 1). Furthermore, Study 3 provided clearer support for

TABLE 4 | Study 3 analyses.

Model/variable	β	<i>t</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value	95% CI
Model 1				
DV = Couple identity clarity (current day)				
Attachment avoidance (intake; <i>df</i> = 179)	-0.15	-6.25	<0.001	-0.20, -0.10
Attachment anxiety (intake; <i>df</i> = 137)	-0.06	-2.77	0.006	-0.10, -0.02
Self-concept clarity (intake; <i>df</i> = 165)	0.02	0.78	0.438	-0.03, 0.06
Couple Identity Clarity (intake; <i>df</i> = 194)	0.29	11.21	<0.001	0.24, 0.34
Model 2				
DV = Interpersonal closeness (current day)				
Attachment avoidance (intake; <i>df</i> = 147)	-0.18	-8.51	<0.001	-0.22, -0.14
Attachment anxiety (intake; <i>df</i> = 104)	-0.05	-2.51	0.012	-0.08, -0.01
Lagged interpersonal closeness (previous day, <i>df</i> = 1976)	0.35	16.62	<0.001	0.30, 0.38
Model 3				
DV = Partner self-verification (current day)				
Attachment avoidance (intake; <i>df</i> = 157)	-0.16	-8.22	<0.001	-0.20, -0.12
Attachment anxiety (intake; <i>df</i> = 133)	-0.06	-3.05	0.002	-0.09, -0.02
Lagged partner self-verification (previous day, <i>df</i> = 1945)	0.51	26.38	<0.001	0.47, 0.54
Model 4				
DV = Couple identity clarity (current day)				
Attachment avoidance (intake; <i>df</i> = 137)	0.01	0.55	0.579	-0.03, 0.05
Attachment anxiety (intake; <i>df</i> = 109)	-0.02	-1.18	0.237	-0.05, 0.01
Interpersonal closeness (current day; <i>df</i> = 1974)	0.39	20.71	<0.001	0.35, 0.42
Self-verification (Current Day; <i>df</i> = 1877)	0.23	10.96	<0.001	0.19, 0.27
Lagged interpersonal closeness (previous day; <i>df</i> = 1953)	-0.02	-0.91	0.363	-0.06, 0.02
Lagged self-verification (previous day, <i>df</i> = 1940)	0.03	1.62	0.105	-0.01, 0.08
Lagged couple identity clarity (previous day, <i>df</i> = 1942)	0.24	11.05	<0.001	0.19, 0.28
Self-concept clarity (intake; <i>df</i> = 128)	-0.01	-0.34	0.734	-0.04, 0.03
Couple identity clarity (intake; <i>df</i> = 143)	0.11	5.48	<0.001	0.07, 0.15

our hypotheses that greater attachment avoidance would predict less daily interpersonal closeness and less daily partner self-verification and that these factors would serve as mediators of the direct association between attachment avoidance and couple identity clarity (Hypothesis 2 and 3). As in the previous studies, these effects emerged beyond those of attachment anxiety and self-concept clarity (Hypothesis 4).

5 | General Discussion

People who experience attachment avoidance in their relationships often have a difficult road to travel. They are at greater risk of a host of suboptimal relationship dynamics and outcomes, including reduced trust, reduced self-disclosure, higher risk of infidelity and higher risk of dissolution (e.g., Fraley and Brumbaugh 2007; Mikulincer and Shaver 2003; DeWall, Anderson, and Bushman 2011). Beyond these well-established findings, more recent work shows that attachment avoidance comes with individual costs as well. In particular, more avoidant people experience less self-concept clarity than their less avoidant counterparts, in part

because they are less likely to receive self-verifying feedback from their partners (Emery et al. 2018).

The present research aimed to expand the consideration of how attachment avoidance might relate to people's identity clarity—specifically, by examining couple identity clarity. It is distinct from the personal identity clarity conveyed by self-concept clarity and is uniquely related to relationship outcomes. In this paper, we investigated whether people higher in attachment avoidance might also experience lower couple identity clarity (Hypothesis 1). We also considered two potential mechanisms that might account for this proposed relationship: less experienced interpersonal closeness (Hypothesis 2) and less partner-based self-verification (Hypothesis 3). We also predicted that our effects across studies would be robust beyond the contributions of both attachment anxiety and self-concept clarity (Hypothesis 4).

We based these predictions in the adult attachment literature; more avoidant people desire and seek out less closeness with their partners (e.g., Mikulincer and Shaver 2003; Slotter and Luchies 2014). Closeness is a critical component of creating a dyadic sense

of self or 'we-ness' (Agnew et al. 1998). People who do not share experiences, emotions or self-disclosures with their partners have reduced feelings of closeness with their partners and also exhibit less developed relational identities. Thus, we predicted that if people feel less close to their partners, they would also feel less couple identity clarity.

With regard to partner self-verification, as with self-concept clarity, avoidant people are reticent to share much of themselves with their partner. As such, it is hard for their partner to provide self-verifying feedback about the individual. A lack of self-verification from one's partner hinders dyadic goal development (e.g., Kraus and Chen 2009) and is likely detrimental to other dyadic identity processes such as similarity perceptions and self-expansion (e.g., Mattingly, Lewandowski, and McIntyre 2014). Without this reflection of self, it becomes harder for a person to craft a clear sense of themselves within the dyad, and thus couple identity clarity suffers.

We tested these hypotheses across four studies. Study 1 established our basic association between greater attachment avoidance and less couple identity clarity. Study 2 began to examine our mediational pathways by demonstrating that less interpersonal closeness and partner self-verification served as simultaneous mediators between elevated attachment avoidance and less couple identity clarity. Additionally, Study 2 conceptualised closeness in two different ways: via a self-report measure of intimacy (Study 2a/2b; Fletcher, Simpson, and Thomas 2000) and via the Inclusion of Other in Self Scale (Study 2b; Aron et al. 1991). Results were similar across these different ways of operationalising closeness.

Study 3 further solidified our findings by demonstrating this same pattern of simultaneous mediation across a 14-day daily diary study of adult romantic couples. Specifically, Study 3 demonstrated that couple identity clarity, measured daily, was lower to the extent that people were higher in attachment avoidance at the start of the study, controlling for baseline couple identity clarity. Furthermore, people's current day reports of interpersonal closeness and partner self-verification both mediated this association. These mediational pathways emerged controlling for previous day reports of closeness, verification, and couple identity clarity. These temporal findings add additional support for our hypotheses.

Across all of our studies, our effects emerged beyond the effects of attachment anxiety and self-concept clarity. The robustness of our findings beyond the contributions of these related constructs demonstrates that the links we establish between attachment avoidance and our mediating and outcome variables are unique to the dynamics and properties of this particular attachment style, not associations indicative of attachment insecurity in a broad sense. Additionally, our effects are unique to *couple* identity clarity above and beyond the associations of attachment avoidance, closeness, or partner self-verification with individual self-concept clarity. This means that our key constructs exhibit unique associations with people's views of their sense of self as a couple, beyond their personal one.

Taken together, the findings from the current research paint a consistent picture of how attachment avoidance is associated with how people perceive their identity as a couple. The dynamics

inherent in attachment avoidance, such that people seek less closeness and feedback from their partners, directly contribute to lower clarity in how people see themselves and their partner as a couple.

5.1 | Implications and Future Directions

As noted previously, attachment avoidance is robustly associated with negative relationship outcomes (e.g., Mikulincer and Shaver 2003); similarly, couple identity clarity is associated with positive relationship outcomes (Emery et al. 2021). The current research provides an important insight into how these two factors might be interrelated to predict relationship well-being. Perhaps one of the contributing factors to poorer relationship functioning among more avoidant people is that they simply are less sure of who they are as part of a couple. If they are less clear on the 'we-ness' of their romantic bond, avoidant people might be less invested in promoting and fostering that bond. It was beyond the scope of the current work to directly connect these associations to broader relationship functioning, but this seems a critical endeavour for future research.

The current research not only creates a better understanding of the dynamics at play for avoidant people in their relationships but also provides a window into places for intervention. The current work adds to growing body of literature suggesting that attachment avoidance presents challenges to people, both individually and relationally, that may be unique to avoidance. The current findings also suggest potential solutions for those challenges. If targeted interventions could be developed to enhance closeness or increase partner self-verification in the relationships of more avoidant people, they might personally benefit in terms of the clarity of multiple aspects of their identity, and this could have downstream consequences for their relationship functioning. Two evidence-based interventions, The Gottman Method and Emotionally Focused Therapy-Couples, specifically target turning toward a partner to enhance closeness (Goldman and Greenberg 2013). Further, EFT-C reciprocally targets identity and attachment, addressing identity related needs in romantic relationships in parallel, if not paramount, to targeting attachment needs (Goldman and Greenberg 2013). These interventions could be useful entry points for clinicians seeking to aid avoidant people in bettering their relationships. Furthermore, the skills associated with these clinical approaches may be teachable outside of therapeutic settings, allowing avoidant people to better their relationships even if there are barriers to accessing therapy.

Future research would also benefit from examining naturalistic changes in these factors over time. For example, some evidence points to the idea that being with a secure partner can increase an insecurely attached person's security over time (e.g., Mikulincer and Shaver 2007). Perhaps experienced closeness and partner self-verification could likewise shift over time based on behaviours or interactions with a more versus less securely attached partner. Relatedly, future work should consider whether the effects evidenced in the current work represent ongoing feedback loops within relationships. It is possible that experiencing lower couple identity clarity might exacerbate avoidance-related behaviours in relationships, and thus these effects might worsen over time in a particular dyad. Conversely, if relationship partners are able to

enhance closeness or self-verification, it might enhance couple identity clarity over time in a dyad—and perhaps could even contribute to reducing avoidance over time.

That said, a remaining issue to consider is exactly what gives rise to the more negative views of closeness and partner self-verification that more avoidant people experience within their relationships. As such, we cannot differentiate between whether more avoidant people *perceive* less closeness or partner self-verification in their relationships versus whether their relationships are *actually* characterised by less of these factors. Past research demonstrates that more avoidant people are biased in their views of their partners and relationships (see Mikulincer and Shaver 2003 for a review), often perceiving more negativity, less cause for trust and so forth than might be warranted by the partner's objective behaviours. Perhaps more avoidant people believe their relationships to be less close and that their partners provide less self-verifying feedback in situations where a less avoidant person would not have the same perception. This perspective dovetails with existing work showing that avoidance is associated with cognitive distancing, suppressing bids for affection, etc., that may lead avoidant people to perceive less closeness and self-verification, even if it is objectively present. On the other hand, more avoidant people often actually behave in ways that serve to distance them from becoming too close to their partner (e.g., Slotter and Luchies 2014). Indeed, when considering self-concept clarity, more avoidant people not only perceived less self-verifying feedback from their partners, objective measures showed they actually received less as well (Emery et al. 2018). Future research could tackle this issue by including more objective measures of closeness and verification, such as behavioural measures when examining couple identity clarity, specifically, or by contrasting the experiences of both members of a given couple.

Future research might consider alternative or additional mechanisms that may mediate the negative association between avoidant tendencies and couple identity clarity. For instance, other factors, such as reduced trust for the partner, may also play a role in how avoidant attachment shapes people's experiences of their identity as part of a couple. The research linking self-concept clarity and avoidance demonstrated that more avoidant people not only perceived less self-verification from their partners but also trusted that they did receive less (Emery et al. 2018). Perhaps less trust in the partner may similarly contribute to less couple identity clarity. Future research should continue to build a comprehensive understanding of the perceptions and experiences that avoidant people have within their romantic relationships and how these experiences and perceptions shape their personal and relational outcomes.

A final direction for future research would be to examine attachment anxiety and couple identity clarity. Although attachment anxiety was not the focus of the present work, attachment anxiety was also consistently associated with less couple identity clarity as a main effect. That said, the association in all of our studies was consistently weaker than the association between attachment avoidance and couple identity clarity. As our aim was to explore the mechanisms linking avoidance and couple identity clarity, not the mechanisms linking anxiety and couple identity clarity, we did not examine this further. However, future research could examine what mechanisms link this distinct form of attachment

insecurity to couple identity clarity. We might speculate, as the dynamics involved in anxiety are different from those implicated in avoidance, that there might be unique mechanisms that might drive the association. Given that more anxious people often report lower self-concept clarity in addition to experiencing higher levels of uncertainty in their relationships and/or greater relational malleability of their self-concepts (e.g., Slotter and Gardner 2012), they may experience lower couple identity clarity through these mechanisms, which are distinct from those experienced by more avoidant people.

5.2 | Strengths and Limitations

The current research has many strengths. We recruited romantically involved adults and employed diverse methods, incorporating longitudinal data in the form of the daily diary method from Study 3 to strengthen our mediational arguments. We also built a systematic and consistent argument for closeness and partner self-verification as our primary mechanisms. Our findings demonstrated that people's romantic bonds support their self-concept clarity and couple identity clarity in some similar (partner self-verification) and some distinct (interpersonal closeness) ways.

Of course, the current work also possesses some limitations. The cross-sectional mediations in Studies 2a and 2b are worth noting as limitations, although we believe that Study 3 alleviates some of the concerns associated with these studies. Additionally, there are many additional factors that might be worthwhile covariates that were not assessed in the present work, including (but not limited to) attractiveness or past relationship histories. Finally, we cannot make any claims regarding causality in the current work. Future research might strive to manipulate people's perceptions of closeness or partner self-verification as a means of establishing some causal links between our key variables; manipulating attachment avoidance is often difficult but would provide another avenue toward causal connections.

5.3 | Conclusion

The current research sought to examine how attachment avoidance related to people's experiences of their romantic dyad as clear, cohesive and consistent over time. This experience benefits couples via better experienced relationship coordination and quality (e.g., Emery et al. 2021). We also sought to identify several potential mechanisms for the proposed association. Across four studies, we established that more avoidant people experience less couple identity clarity than their less avoidant counterparts. Furthermore, less interpersonal closeness and less partner self-verification served as mediators of this association. Thus, experiencing closeness and less self-relevant feedback with their partners directly contributes to more avoidant people feeling less certain about their couple identity, struggling to make sense of the 'unit' of who they are together.

Ethics Statement

This research was conducted in accordance with APA ethical guidelines and was approved by the Institutional Review Boards at all relevant

institutions. All participants provided informed consent before taking part.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in OSF at https://osf.io/dnbrc/?view_only=06c07e42bf2249afa0f11723e5a28a02.

Open Access Statement

Following TOP Level 2 guidelines, measures from all three studies, including bivariate correlations, relevant code, and supporting analyses are available at https://osf.io/dnbrc/?view_only=06c07e42bf2249afa0f11723e5a28a02. Data for Studies 1–2 (a and b) are available as well at the above link; data from Study 3 cannot be shared due to concerns regarding making dyadic data public but are available upon request. Study 2b was pre-registered at https://aspredicted.org/SSQ_XT5. We report all measures and exclusions in all studies.

Endnotes

- ¹ Please note that one portion of the preregistration linking these effects to relationship outcomes was not tested.
- ² Recommendations for reporting socioeconomic status based on educational attainment suggest that reporting the percentage of participants with or without a 4-year degree is more interpretable as a metric of SES when reporting among those 25 or older (McGorray et al. 2023).
- ³ Relationships satisfaction, which captures a person's general feelings of positivity toward their relationship, is a subscale included in the investment model scale. Although we did not advance any predictions regarding this measure, it is conceptually distinct from couple identity clarity (Emery et al. 2021) and included only as filler material. We did replicate all of our reported analyses in Study 2, controlling for satisfaction. We wished to demonstrate that our effect emerged beyond the contributions of relational happiness. Across both studies, our reported result remained robust, with unchanged interpretations upon the inclusion of relationship satisfaction as a covariate.
- ⁴ An alternate approach for analysing these data would be to treat 'study' as a nested variable and to employ multi-level modelling to test our hypotheses. A drawback to this approach is that current mediation testing for multi-level modelling does not, to our knowledge, allow for the simultaneous testing of mediators. As such, this approach would not allow us to examine whether closeness and partner self-verification simultaneously mediated the association between avoidance and couple identity clarity, which is a key aspect of Study 2. We would have to test each mediational pathway separately. We do, however, recognise the value of this alternative approach and have included it in the online supplementals. Results are nearly identical with this approach.
- ⁵ Our original goal was to recruit 150 couples to test a variety of hypotheses; we began recruitment in April 2019 but had to stop recruitment in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to the intake and diary, couples also completed filmed discussions and longer-term follow-ups.
- ⁶ An alternative model specification would be to treat this as a three-level nested model (day within person, person within dyad; Kenny, Kashy, and Cook 2020). We conducted this alternative version of our model and found that our effects were nearly identical to those presented in the text.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.