


## ARTICLE

# A relational perspective on how and when follower attachment style impacts job performance: The moderating role of leader neuroticism

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## Abstract

We integrate insights from attachment theory and relational leadership to develop a novel interpersonal explanation of why, how and when followers' attachment anxiety and avoidance impact performance. Drawing on the attachment system dynamics model, we posit that attachment avoidance will be negatively related to LMX quality, whereas attachment anxiety will be positively related to LMX ambivalence. Furthermore, we predict that followers' anxious (and avoidant) attachment styles will interact with leader neuroticism leading to a hyperactivation (deactivation) of the attachment system, manifesting in greater LMX ambivalence (and lower LMX quality). Across three studies, we found consistent evidence for a positive relationship between follower attachment anxiety and LMX ambivalence, as well as an indirect effect between attachment anxiety and job performance. Leader neuroticism was especially likely to induce LMX ambivalence and, in turn, undermine job performance in anxiously attached followers. Attachment avoidance, although unaffected by leader neuroticism, was negatively related to LMX quality across all three studies and demonstrated an indirect effect on job performance in Study 3. Overall, our findings shed light on the unique explanatory power of relational mechanisms, beyond previously examined intrapersonal mechanisms, for understanding the attachment style–performance relationship as well as the role that leader characteristics play in triggering the attachment system in anxious followers.

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**KEYWORDS**

attachment, leader–member exchange, performance

**Practitioner points**

- Employee attachment styles (i.e., their typical orientation towards relationships with significant others) influence the development and maintenance of relationships with leaders and, thus, individual job performance levels.
- People who worry about their social relationships are more likely to feel ambivalent about their relationship with their leader, which may negatively influence their performance.
- Anxiously attached followers are especially likely to experience an ambivalent leader–follower relationship when their leader is less emotionally stable.

**BACKGROUND**

Over the last 50 years, few topics in the social sciences have garnered as much interest as attachment – the human proclivity to seek and develop affectional bonds with significant others (Bowlby, 1982), which has culminated in a rich theory of relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Attachment theory recognizes that, along with the innate need for attachment, variations in the quality of interactions with primary attachment figures also produce enduring and generalized individual differences in the functioning of the attachment system (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1982). Adult attachment style refers to an individual's typical orientation towards relationships with significant others. Specifically, it is argued that individuals form a secure or insecure (anxious or avoidant) attachment style towards primary caregivers early in life, and this attachment style becomes their internal working model for understanding and managing future relationships, including those at work.

The influence of attachment theory on organizational scholarship is growing (Yip et al., 2018) with an increasing number of studies focusing on attachment styles and their associations with employee attitudes and behaviours at work (e.g., Jahanzeb et al., 2022; London et al., 2023; Richards & Schat, 2011). One of the most studied outcomes of attachment styles, to date, has been employee job performance (e.g., Kale, 2020; Virgă et al., 2019) – an outcome of central concern to management researchers and practitioners alike (Babalola et al., 2021). However, previous research exploring this link has demonstrated heterogenous associations suggesting that this relationship is not yet well understood. Such variations may, in part, be due to differences in study design, with some studies including self-rated performance (e.g., Kale, 2020) and others focusing on other-rated performance (e.g., Wu et al., 2014). However, these issues aside, inconsistencies in the reported associations between attachment styles and job performance indicate that current understanding remains incomplete and that further research is needed to better explicate the underlying and potentially distinct mechanisms at play, as well as specific moderators that may either attenuate or exacerbate such effects. Accordingly, the central aim of this research is to extend understanding of the association between attachment styles and individual job performance by more carefully examining both how and when the relationship unfolds.

To address this aim, we begin by critically examining and meta-analysing (see [Supplementary Results](#)) the extant studies that have explored mediators underlying the attachment style–job performance relationship, including burnout (Virgă et al., 2019), self-efficacy (Kale, 2020) and self-compassion (Reizer, 2019). We argue that existing approaches are limited in three main ways. Firstly, researchers have focused almost exclusively on intrapersonal (i.e., cognitive and affective) mechanisms. Yet, attachment theory is inherently interpersonal (i.e., relational) in nature; attachment style represents

a relationship-based attribute, which shapes subjective evaluations of others and affects individuals' ability and willingness to build relationships (Richards & Hackett, 2012). As such, there is good reason to expect that relational mechanisms should provide a more coherent and useful explanation for unravelling the inconsistent findings on the attachment style–performance link; as well as affording a conceptual explanation which is better aligned to attachment theory, per se. As job performance is often contingent on the social interactions and support that one receives from others, especially one's leader (e.g., Martin et al., 2016), we reason that different attachment styles are more likely to influence job performance via relational mechanisms.

Secondly, previous research has tended to explore mechanisms in isolation from one another – focusing on a single mediator. Thus, it is unclear whether previously examined mediators have unique indirect effects, which (if any) are more powerful or whether their effects are additive. Thirdly, previous studies have neglected to explore potential differential mediators for different attachment styles. Specifically, scholars have typically utilized the same mediator to explain the effects of both avoidant and anxious attachment styles on job performance (e.g., Kale, 2020; Virgă et al., 2019). This is conceptually problematic for two reasons. First, in doing so they have, in effect, treated attachment styles as a unitary rather than a multidimensional construct. Second, this approach limits our understanding of the distinct mechanisms that might be associated with these different attachment styles, and how these uniquely unfold to influence job performance. To illustrate, Virgă et al. (2019) found evidence of an indirect effect between attachment anxiety and performance via burnout, yet no indirect effect was found for attachment avoidance. Considering the multidimensional nature of attachment styles, such findings point to the need for a more coherent explanation which can account for discrete mediational pathways through which anxious and avoidant attachment styles differentially transmit their effects onto job performance (see van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013).

In seeking to address these limitations and deepen our understanding of the attachment style–job performance association, in the current research, we draw on an established body of literature showing that follower attachment style directly shapes relationships with leaders (e.g., Maslyn et al., 2017; Richards & Hackett, 2012), specifically leader–member exchange (LMX) quality (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). In a recent review, Fein et al. (2020) reported an overall negative effect between LMX quality and avoidant attachment, yet inconsistent effects for anxious attachment. Such findings suggest that focusing exclusively on LMX quality provides an incomplete picture of the complex reality of leader–follower relationships in the workplace (see Melwani & Rothman, 2022), and how different aspects of the relationship are influenced by a follower's attachment style. Indeed, recent advances in the LMX field suggest that leader–follower relationships not only vary in terms of quality but also ambivalence, reflecting coexisting positive and negative thoughts about one's relationship (Lee et al., 2019) – with each aspect demonstrating unique consequences for follower outcomes (e.g., Dechawatanapaisal, 2021; Herr et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2019). The inconsistent evidence regarding the relationship between anxious attachment and LMX quality (Fein et al., 2020), coupled with attachment theorists' emphasis on the ambivalent relational tendencies of anxiously attached individuals (Mikulincer et al., 2010), points to the potential role played by LMX ambivalence for disentangling the attachment style–job performance link.

We propose that simultaneously examining the related, yet discrete relational mechanisms of LMX quality and LMX ambivalence will afford a more nuanced understanding of the distinct influence of anxious and avoidant attachment on the leader–follower relationship, and subsequent job performance of followers. Figure 1 highlights the conceptual model in which, over the course of three separate studies, we compare the explanatory power of LMX quality and LMX ambivalence with previously examined intrapersonal (cognitive and affective) mechanisms (i.e., burnout and self-efficacy). In doing so, we integrate recent advances in the relational leadership literature (Lee et al., 2019) with Mikulincer and Shaver's (2003) integrative model of the dynamics of the attachment system to guide our hypotheses regarding how and when anxious and avoidant attachment styles impact job performance through the leader–follower relationship. Thus, our core contribution lies in providing a more nuanced test of attachment theory by employing a set of competing relational mediating mechanisms (i.e., LMX quality and LMX ambivalence) to examine *how* insecure attachment styles (anxiety and avoidant) differentially

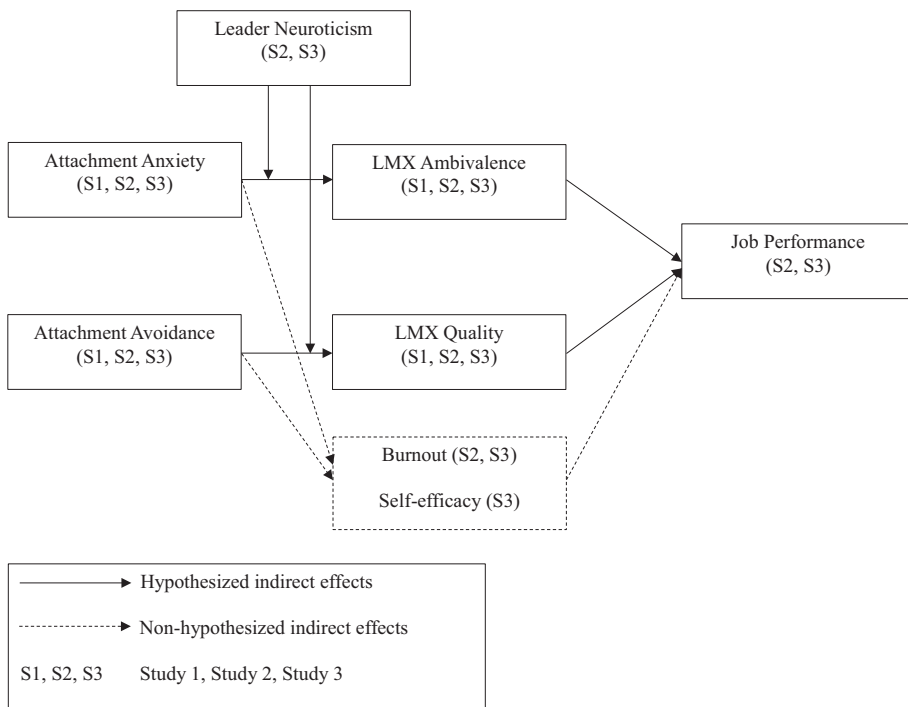


FIGURE 1 Conceptual model of the indirect effects between attachment style and job performance.

influence follower performance job, while also accounting for previously examined intrapersonal mechanisms, namely burnout and self-efficacy. In doing so, we seek to establish the unique explanatory power of a relational perspective on the attachment style–job performance nexus, elevating our understanding of attachment theory and enabling a clearer consensus over the implications of insecure attachment styles for follower job performance. Furthermore, in line with the attachment systems dynamic model (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003), we signify the role played by dimension-specific attachment strategies, thereby enabling a clearer consensus over the processes through which avoidant and anxious attachment styles (distinctively) impact follower job performance.

As well as exploring competing mechanisms, we also seek to advance our understanding of the conditionality of attachment theory by examining *when* attachment styles have a stronger association with leader–follower relationships and, subsequently, follower job performance. Again, drawing directly from the attachment system dynamics model (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003), we posit leader neuroticism as a moderator of both the relationships between follower attachment anxiety and LMX ambivalence, and follower attachment avoidance and LMX quality respectively. This answers recent calls to extend knowledge of both what activates and amplifies the attachment behavioural system – the aspect of attachment theory that is ‘most neglected in organizational research’ (Yip et al., 2018, p. 193). One of the enduring criticisms of attachment theory is the tendency for attachment researchers to overstate the trait-like nature of attachment styles and understate the importance of contextual and relational cues, in particular, relationship partner characteristics (Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Thus, to increase the explanatory power and provide a more systemic understanding of attachment dynamics in the workplace, we incorporate a person–situation interaction design by measuring the characteristics of both members of the relationship (i.e., follower attachment style  $\times$  leader neuroticism). Therefore, in addition to advancing the follower-centric perspective on LMX (Van Gils et al., 2010), our interactionist lens allows us to also account for the role of the leader (Uhl-Bien, 2006), specifically exploring the role that leader neuroticism may play in triggering and amplifying the follower attachment system.

Finally, as the first set of studies to empirically examine the antecedents of LMX ambivalence, our research also contributes directly to the LMX and followership literature. Examining how followers' attachment style impacts LMX ambivalence provides new theoretical insights into the aetiology of this important relationship perception (Lee et al., 2019), highlighting that followers' attachment style may influence and bias their perceptions of leadership. This is important because prior research has tended to focus on leader behaviours as the dominant driver of LMX development (Martin et al., 2019; Nahrgang & Seo, 2015; Xu et al., 2019), whereas we argue that the development of LMX ambivalence can be understood by examining follower attributes, specifically how followers' attachment style can sway their perceptions of leadership. Thus, as well as extending the nomological network of LMX ambivalence, our study also contributes to emerging scholarship on followership (e.g., Uhl-Bien et al., 2014) by exploring follower characteristics as a key predictor in our understanding of relational leadership.

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

### Attachment style

Adults vary substantially in their approaches to close relationships (Fraley et al., 2015). According to attachment theory, this can largely be attributed to variations in the quality of early caregiving experiences (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1982; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Bowlby (1982) hypothesized that the experiences that infants have with their parents result in scripts or working models of attachment that continue to influence interpersonal experiences throughout the lifespan of the individual. Attachment styles individuals form towards primary caregivers in childhood become internalized as a fundamental, yet malleable, dimension of their personalities (Ein-Dor & Hirschberger, 2016) and a working model of their future relationships (Collins & Feeney, 2004), including those in the workplace (e.g., Scrima et al., 2015). Originally framed in terms of three distinct types (secure, anxious and avoidant, see Hazan & Shaver, 1987), adult attachment styles are better conceptualized and measured through two essentially orthogonal dimensions – attachment *avoidance* and *anxiety* (e.g., Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Simpson, 1990) – which collectively capture individual differences in interpersonal functioning and the self-concept (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). Research using taxometric analysis supports this conceptualization by providing evidence that attachment styles are dimensional rather than typological, hence the emerging consensus that individuals differ by degree rather than in kind (see Fraley et al., 2015). Secure attachment can still be captured in a two-dimensional space, not as a different type, but as a linear combination of the two dimensions of (low) avoidance and (low) anxiety.

The avoidance dimension indicates the extent to which individuals avoid intimacy, question their relationship partners' goodwill and strive to maintain behavioural independence and emotional distance from their partners (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). An avoidant attachment style partly stems from childhood interactions wherein caregivers repeatedly provide improper care and feedback or dismiss attempts at closeness or affection. Avoidant attachment subsequently develops as individuals associate requests for attachment with adverse consequences such as being rejected by the caregiver (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). As a result, individuals high in avoidance tend to rely on 'fight or flight' responses (Ein-Dor et al., 2010) focused on self-protection and self-interest, and, thus, quickly withdraw from sources of stress and distress (Fraley & Shaver, 1997). In short, they develop a fragile internal working model of self and a negative model of others (Simpson & Karantzas, 2019).

Conversely, the anxiety dimension indicates the degree to which individuals tend to be anxious about abandonment and the availability and responsiveness of their relationship partners in times of need. Higher attachment anxiety is believed to develop in childhood when caregivers inconsistently provide care, attention and feedback, resulting in the development of anxious attitudes towards the relationship (Dinero et al., 2008). Consequently, individuals who score high on anxious attachment tend to be vigilant in monitoring their environment (Feeney & Noller, 1990), dwell on distressing feelings (Mikulincer & Florian, 1998), exhibit emotion-focused coping (e.g., self-blame and wishful thinking; Ognibene &

Collins, 1998), dysfunctional rumination (Lanciano et al., 2012) and exaggerate appraisals of threat (Mikulincer et al., 2002).

## Attachment style and job performance

Workplace relationships not only define the social environment of organizations (Schneider, 1987) but also are fundamental in shaping how people feel, think and behave at work (Kahn, 2007). Given the central role that workplace relationships play in effective organizational functioning (Ferris et al., 2009; Gottfredson et al., 2022), organizational scholars have shown increasing interest in the association between attachment style and employee behaviour, such as performance. At first blush, findings arguably support the assumed logical positive association between secure attachment and job performance (e.g., Neustadt et al., 2011; Ronen & Zuroff, 2017). However, on closer inspection, the associations among attachment avoidance, anxiety and job performance are less clear-cut. For instance, some studies report non-significant correlations between insecure attachment styles and job performance (Wu et al., 2014), whereas others report significant negative correlations (e.g., Cheng et al., 2023). In order to more systematically summarize current findings, we conducted a meta-analysis of the six published articles (seven studies) which, to our knowledge, have so far explored the relationship between attachment styles and job performance (see [Supplementary Materials](#) for further details). Results demonstrated a small, heterogenous (indicated by 95% confidence intervals) relationship among attachment anxiety ( $\rho = -.16$ , 95% CI:  $-.18, -.09$ ), attachment avoidance ( $\rho = -.17$ , 95% CI:  $-.23, -.05$ ) and job performance. The heterogeneous effects point to the need to better understand the underlying mediators and moderators at play in this complex, yet important relationship.

To explain the possible effects of avoidant and anxious attachment styles on job performance, scholars have, to date, focused on intrapsychic explanations, exploring the recurrent cognitive and affective reactions of individuals with different insecure attachment styles. For example, drawing on the job demands–resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), Virgã et al. (2019) found evidence that burnout is an affective mediator in explaining the relationship between an anxious (but not avoidant) attachment style and self-rated job performance. Relatedly, Kale (2020) proposed a cognitive mechanism, consistent with social-cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977), reporting a negative indirect effect between both avoidant and anxious attachment styles and self-rated job performance via general self-efficacy. Although these two studies provide an initial theoretical understanding of the intrapersonal processes (cognitive and affective) that explain the attachment style–performance link, they are limited in at least three ways. First, contrary to attachment theory, both studies failed to test specific dimension–mediator linkages consistent with the multidimensional nature of attachment styles. In other words, it is unclear why the distinct dimensions of avoidant and anxious attachment styles were explained by a single mediating process (see van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). Second, given that attachment theory is inherently relational in nature, it is surprising that relational mediators were not considered as a plausible explanation for the attachment style–performance link. Moreover, comparing intra- and interpersonal explanations could help shed light on which offers a stronger explanation and/or whether attachment styles may have an effect through different mediators. Finally, these studies typically relied on common method designs and self-rated performance, which may have unduly inflated the effects (Heidemeier & Moser, 2009; Simmons et al., 2009).

To address these limitations, the current research aimed to provide a more comprehensive theoretical explanation of the attachment style–performance relationship, by examining the unique explanatory power of competing relational mechanisms (LMX quality and LMX ambivalence), while controlling for previously examined cognitive and affective mechanisms (burnout and self-efficacy), using a more robust time-separated design, with leader-rated (Study 2) and follower-rated (Study 3) measures of job performance (see [Figure 1](#)). Below, we provide a rationale for our specific focus on the relational mechanisms of LMX quality and LMX ambivalence, before presenting our hypothesized differential effects on follower job performance.

## Attachment style, LMX quality and LMX ambivalence

A basic tenet of attachment theory is the continuity of working models of attachment across different relationships (Bowlby, 1982; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Although malleable in adulthood (Fraley & Shaver, 2000), attachment styles shape subjective evaluations of others and affect individuals' ability and willingness to build and regulate workplace relationships (Richards & Hackett, 2012). Moreover, there are compelling theoretical and empirical grounds for expecting follower attachment styles to impact the leader–follower relationship. Among all workplace relationships, the leader–follower relationship is arguably the most significant, at least for followers (Lee et al., 2019). LMX researchers argue that followers are highly dependent on the quality of their LMX relationships, as these relationships are critical to their advancement and prospects in the organization (Sparrowe & Liden, 1997). Such outcome dependency is likely to motivate followers to be strongly attuned to the characteristics of the leader and how they impact the LMX relationship (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Neuberg & Fiske, 1987). In addition, followership theory advocates reversing the lens (Van Gils et al., 2010), and counteracting the leader-centric perspective that has often dominated the leadership literature, in order ‘...to see followers as causal agents and leaders as recipients or moderators of followership outcomes’ (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 84). Furthermore, there is meta-analytic evidence in both the LMX (e.g., Dulebohn et al., 2012) and the general leadership literature (e.g., Wang et al., 2019) that gives credence to this follower-centric perspective. Taken together, this line of reasoning suggests that important follower characteristics, such as followers' attachment style, are likely to impact how they perceive the leader and the LMX relationship (Wang et al., 2019).

A review by Fein et al. (2020) reported the findings of 10 studies exploring (leader or follower) attachment styles as predictors of LMX quality (three studies) or proxies that have been associated with LMX such as trust, liking or supervisor social support. The authors concluded that previous research has consistently found a negative association between followers' avoidant attachment style and LMX, whereas the association between follower secure and anxious attachment styles was less consistent. In addition, Fein et al. (2020) highlighted the need to incorporate moderator variables to help resolve the inconsistencies and gaps in our knowledge of when attachment styles impact LMX. Using this review as impetus, in the current research, we aim to extend current understanding of attachment and LMX in several ways. Most importantly, while previous research has focused on the relationship between attachment styles and aspects of LMX quality (see Fein et al., 2020), we examine LMX ambivalence, alongside LMX quality as an additional, yet distinct relational consequence of follower attachment style. Individuals experience ambivalence whenever positive and negative thoughts or feelings towards a single target coexist (Priester & Petty, 1996). Consequently, rather than being either supportive or unsupportive, a relationship may be considered *both* supportive and unsupportive (Ashforth et al., 2014; Campo et al., 2009; Methot et al., 2017). Therefore, LMX ambivalence – followers' subjective experiences of coexisting positive and negative thoughts towards the LMX relationship – represents a way of conceptualizing the leader–follower relationship that, alongside overall LMX quality, can provide a more complete view of the leader–follower relationship. While most LMX researchers have conceptualized the leader–follower relationship as unidimensional, varying on a continuum from negative to positive (Lee et al., 2019), focusing only on LMX quality is limited because interpersonal relationships are often characterized by ambivalence (Methot et al., 2017). LMX ambivalence represents a unique property of the leader–follower relationship that is distinct, albeit related, from overall quality and has different consequences (Lee et al., 2019). Like findings outside the workplace (Zoppolat et al., 2022), studies suggest that it is common for followers to be ambivalent about their leader–follower relationship and that such ambivalence is associated with negative outcomes, including lower task performance (Lee et al., 2019) and poorer well-being (Herr et al., 2019).

The current research is the first (to our knowledge) to explore a potential antecedent of LMX ambivalence and in doing so we extend our understanding of the consequences of attachment style in the workplace. Given the multidimensional nature of attachment, a coherent relationship-based explanation should account for distinct mediational pathways for anxious and avoidant attachment

styles. In their critique of transformational leadership, van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013) highlighted that multidimensional constructs (such as attachment style) require that, for each individual dimension identified (i.e., avoidant and anxious attachment), the conceptual case is made for a specific mediation relationship. The authors went on to highlight that many theories fail to sufficiently specify the causal model capturing how each dimension has a distinct influence on mediating processes and outcomes and how this is contingent on moderating influences (van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). We argue that by focusing solely on LMX quality as an outcome of both attachment avoidance and anxiety, current theorizing on attachment and LMX provides an incomplete view of the attachment–LMX relationship. By incorporating LMX ambivalence alongside LMX quality in our model, and then testing specific dimension–mediator linkages, a key aim of our research is to provide a more complete theoretical account that better captures the multidimensional nature of both attachment and LMX.

As well as testing a more complex relational model of attachment and LMX, in the current research we also explore the relative effects of attachment avoidance and anxiety. It is important to note that Fein et al. (2020) review discussed each attachment style dimension in isolation and none of the papers included in the review explored the relative/concurrent effects of attachment styles on LMX quality. For instance, Maslyn et al. (2017) explored follower attachment style (secure, anxious and avoidant) as antecedents of LMX quality but analysed the effects of each dimension separately. As such, the differential effects of attachment avoidance and anxiety on LMX quality remain unclear.

## Attachment avoidance and LMX quality

As highlighted above, in the current research we aim to explore the unique association between two dimensions of follower attachment style (i.e., anxious and avoidant attachment) and different aspects of LMX – LMX quality and LMX ambivalence. This model aims to explore distinct mediational pathways for anxious and avoidant attachment styles. The attachment system dynamics model (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003) in conjunction with theory and research on relational leadership provides a valuable theoretical vantage point for understanding when and how these differential processes operate. The activation component of the model explains *when* the attachment system is activated and is relevant to our (later) theorizing concerning moderation, whereas the model's regulation component explains *how* regulating the attachment system affects relationship functioning and is relevant to our theorizing about mediation. Although avoidant and anxious attachment styles have both been found to undermine relationship functioning (e.g., Li & Chan, 2012), the model's regulatory component explains how they exert effects through different mechanisms (Main, 1990; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003).

In the case of avoidant attachment, individuals tend to employ a *deactivating strategy* to diminish proximity, thereby avoiding the distress of spurned attachment requests (Cassidy & Kobak, 1988). Those higher in attachment avoidance tend to maintain distance and avoid interdependence in relationships (Mikulincer, 1997). Those who are more avoidant view others as generally unavailable or untrustworthy in times of need (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005); this leads to the 'deactivation of proximity seeking, inhibition of the quest for support and active attempts to handle distress alone' (Mikulincer et al., 2003, p. 85). This deactivation of the attachment system serves to avoid the anticipated frustration associated with an attachment figure's unavailability (Cassidy & Kobak, 1988). This results in the denial and suppression of attachment needs, the denial of the importance of relationships and the avoidance of emotional involvement or closeness (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). Over time, the chronic activation of these avoidant attachment dynamics results in a fragile internal working model of self, and a negative model of others (Simpson & Karantzas, 2019). Hence, consistent with previous research (Fein et al., 2020), followers with high attachment avoidance tend to seek independence, adopt a negative view of their leaders and, thus, develop a low-quality LMX relationship.

**Hypothesis 1.** Follower attachment avoidance will be negatively related to LMX quality.



## Attachment anxiety and LMX ambivalence

The attachment system dynamics operate differently for those who are more anxiously attached (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Instead of avoiding interdependent relationships, those higher in attachment anxiety are more likely to adopt a *hyperactivating strategy* to enhance proximity by sending strong signals to their partners to provide appropriate support and reassurance (Cassidy & Kobak, 1988). However, this is expressed through insecurity and over-dependency which makes it challenging for their partner to effectively buffer and satisfy their needs (Simpson & Overall, 2014). Hyperactivating strategies develop in those with a history of attachment figures who have been unreliable and inconsistent in their responsiveness, placing the needy person on a partial reinforcement schedule that rewards persistence in proximity- and reassurance-seeking attempts – they sometimes succeed and sometimes fail (Mikulincer et al., 2010).

Consequently, the major implication of people utilizing hyperactivating strategies is that ‘...they tend to intensify the magnitude of their cognitions, emotions, and behaviors, both positive and negative ones, toward their partner’ (Li & Chan, 2012, p. 409). That is, people with anxious attachment tend to perceive more negative experiences in their relationships but they are also likely to perceive relatively more positive experiences (compared with those with avoidant attachment) (Li & Chan, 2012). As a result, they are likely to have a more nuanced and conflicted view of the relationship, and not simply evaluate it in a negative fashion. The upshot of this discussion is that hypervigilant strategies should lead to LMX ambivalence (i.e., coexisting *positive* and *negative* thoughts about one's LMX relationship).

While no prior research has directly examined the anxious attachment–ambivalence link in the workplace, a good deal of evidence has been found in family and relationship contexts. Several studies have demonstrated that anxiously attached individuals experience both more intense feelings and more variable highs and lows in their romantic relationships than others (Collins & Read, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Maio et al. (2000) found a positive link between adolescents' attachment anxiety and ambivalent attitudes towards their parents. Notably, Mikulincer et al. (2010) conducted six studies exploring the relationship between attachment anxiety and both explicit and implicit manifestations of attitudinal ambivalence towards romantic partners. Findings indicated that more anxiously attached respondents tended to simultaneously hold positive and negative views of their romantic partners (attitudinal ambivalence) at both conscious and implicit levels. They also possessed highly accessible, yet preconscious, approach and avoidance goals with respect to relational closeness, which predicted both implicit and explicit measures of relational ambivalence (Mikulincer et al., 2010). Accordingly, there are compelling theoretical and empirical grounds to expect that more anxiously attached individuals are likely to have conflicting perceptions of their LMX relationship as both supportive and unsupportive, thus, manifesting in more LMX ambivalence.

**Hypothesis 2.** Follower attachment anxiety will be positively related to LMX ambivalence.

## Attachment style, LMX quality and ambivalence: Consequences for job performance

In the previous section, we argue that attachment anxiety and avoidance will have differential associations with LMX quality and LMX ambivalence. Specifically, we posit that attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety will be associated with LMX quality and LMX ambivalence respectively. In turn, we predict that the relational consequences of follower attachment will have differential downstream ramifications for follower job performance.

Research has indicated robust associations between LMX quality and employee performance (Martin et al., 2016). Avoidantly attached individuals, however, are more likely to seek independence and distance themselves from leaders, and thereby inadvertently forgo the socio-emotional support and other performance-related advantages conferred by a high-quality LMX relationship. Thus, we anticipate that

those who are more avoidantly attached will develop a low-quality LMX relationship that, in turn, will undermine followers' job performance.

**Hypothesis 3.** There will be a negative indirect effect between follower attachment avoidance and follower job performance via LMX quality.

LMX ambivalence constitutes a particularly relevant construct for examining the performance implications of attachment anxiety because it is consistent with our prior theorizing about attachment system dynamics (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003), and has been theoretically linked to job performance. As summarized by Rothman et al., 'the types of negative outcomes of ambivalence that have been studied in psychology largely build on the assumption that negative affect is the driving mechanism' (2017, p. 39). For example, ambivalence-induced negative affect is viewed as aversive, unpleasant and physiologically arousing in the social psychology literature (e.g., Newby-Clark et al., 2002; Nordgren et al., 2006; van Harreveld et al., 2015) because it violates the fundamental need for evaluative consistency (Croyle & Cooper, 1983; Festinger, 1957). Moreover, resource allocation theories posit that people possess limited attentional resources and that performance will be undermined if cognitive and emotional energy is diverted away from task performance (e.g., Koy & Yeo, 2008). Thus, in the face of high contextual demands (e.g., high LMX ambivalence and associated negative affect), individuals typically cope by dissipating valuable resources (e.g., cognitive focus, emotional stability and energy; Sguera et al., 2016). In support of this view, research demonstrates that negative affect gives rise to off-task attentional demands such as self-focused attention (Mor & Winquist, 2002), affective rumination (Feldner et al., 2006) and arousal and emotional regulation (Beal et al., 2005). Applying this reasoning to the leader–follower relationship, Lee et al. (2019) found that LMX ambivalence's negative effect on job performance could be explained by the attentional demands elicited by ambivalence, which divert followers' cognitive and emotional energy away from performance-related activities. Therefore, we expect that anxious attachment and the subsequent LMX ambivalence it provokes will have a detrimental impact on followers' job performance.

**Hypothesis 4.** There will be a negative indirect effect between follower attachment anxiety and follower job performance via LMX ambivalence.

## Amplifying the attachment system: the moderating role of leader neuroticism

An important contribution of the present research is ascertaining not only how attachment styles influence job performance via relational mechanisms but also when such effects are more (or less) pronounced. Our theorizing is directly underpinned by Mikulincer and Shaver (2003) model, which explains both the activation (first module) and subsequent regulation (second and third modules) of attachment system dynamics. Under the first module, the attachment system is argued to be activated if individuals perceive a potential threat emanating from an attachment figure (i.e., one's leader), with recurrent perceptions of threat leading to chronic activation and amplification of the attachment system, as described in the second module of the model. In the case of insecurely attached individuals, this activation then sets the dysfunctional regulation of the attachment system (i.e., the use of hyperactivating or deactivating relationship-based strategies) in motion, as captured in the third module of Mikulincer and Shaver (2003) model. Thus, while anxious and avoidant attachment styles may predispose individuals towards experiencing relationship difficulties in general, such associations may be contingent on the routine presence of certain situational or relational stressors/threats, which serve to both activate as well as amplify attachment system dynamics. Relatedly, a good deal of research has demonstrated the substantive influence of relationship partners' personality characteristics on the emergence, maintenance and quality of social relationships (e.g., Back, 2015; Malouff et al., 2010). In the context of the leader–follower relationship, leader neuroticism, in particular, has been shown to negatively impact

LMX quality (Schmitt et al., 2022). Given that personality represents consistent patterns of behaviour across time and situations, we build on these findings to reason that more neurotic leaders may constitute a particularly pertinent contextual threat that would more likely both activate the attachment system, as well as signal a chronic relational threat to followers based on the perceived lack of leader availability. Below we explain our rationale for the moderating role of leader neuroticism in more detail.

Firstly, in terms of attachment system activation, we reason that neurotic leaders are more likely to be perceived as a sign of threat to their insecure followers for two reasons. First, evidence suggests that greater neuroticism reflects a tendency to feel elevated negative affect and be more emotionally volatile (Gross et al., 1998; Hisler et al., 2020). Neurotic individuals report more negative reactions to unpleasant events and stressors, as well as display more variability in negative affect over time (e.g., Bolger & Schilling, 1991). Neuroticism has also been linked with the intensity and variability of positive affect (e.g., Kuppens et al., 2007; Leger et al., 2016). Taken together, this suggests that neuroticism is a particularly striking and salient trait, likely due to the higher informational value of negative (compared to positive) moods (Baumeister et al., 2001), especially when transmitted by leaders to followers (Sy & Choi, 2013). Second, leader neuroticism has been found to be particularly contagious (Sy & Choi, 2013), with negative information tending to be more penetrative and contagious than positive information (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Thus, when a leader's personality is characterized by high levels of neuroticism (i.e., a tendency to be more anxious, stressed and moody), it is likely that everything in their follower's work environment will be tainted by this disposition – including reactions to work events, general interpersonal exchanges as well as specific leader–follower interactions (Keltner, 1998). Overall, this evidence implies that more neurotic leaders are more likely to be viewed as threatening by followers than their emotionally stable counterparts, and are, thus, more likely to activate a follower's attachment system in the first module of Mikulincer and Shaver (2003) model.

Secondly, beyond exacerbating the frequency of attachment system activation, we posit that leader neuroticism will also play a moderating role in the amplification of attachment system dynamics. In the second module of their model, Mikulincer and Shaver (2003) argue that followers will be concerned with establishing attachment figure availability – asking themselves if the leader ‘is available, attentive, responsive etc.’ (p. 72). However, the authors themselves acknowledge that the precise definition of attachment figure availability is poorly defined and that more research is needed to refine and elaborate this part of model (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003; p. 128). In practice, the extent to which a leader is perceived as available could manifest from a wide range of discrete behaviours, such as showing openness to emotional dialogue and acceptance of follower emotions (Emde, 1980), as well as from more general behaviours showing moodiness and impatience. The focus on leader neuroticism, thus, enables us to capture a broad range of leader behaviours reflecting a tendency towards negative emotionality, most of which are likely to signal a lack of leader availability to followers, and thus, compound the distress of attachment insecurity.

In turn, the third module of Mikulincer and Shaver (2003) model predicts that a lack of leader availability will lead to either deactivation or hyperactivation of the attachment system in avoidant and anxious followers respectively. For more avoidantly attached followers, this likely involves greater reliance on deactivating regulatory strategies to reduce the frustration associated with an attachment figure (Cassidy & Kobak, 1988), resulting in denying the importance of the LMX relationship and avoiding emotional involvement and interdependence (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). In other words, individuals with an avoidant attachment style are likely to employ deactivating strategies in reaction to threatening relationship events. This deactivation involves a strategy that Bowlby (1982/1969) termed ‘compulsive self-reliance’. Using deactivating strategies involves the down-regulation of the attachment system in order to avoid the pain and distress caused by a relationship threat. As such, the combination of high follower attachment avoidance and high leader neuroticism should provoke deactivation strategies and lead to poorer LMX quality. Conversely, in the case of more anxiously attached followers, this likely entails greater use of hyperactivating regulatory strategies to minimize distance from the leader in the face of relationship threats. Essentially, hyperactivating strategies maintain the attachment system in a chronically activated state, leading anxiously attached individuals to fixate on the relationship and intensify

monitoring of the relationship partner, increasing the likelihood of detecting signs of distance, rejection and unavailability. Indeed, previous research has demonstrated that those with an anxious attachment style are particularly vigilant and sensitive to the emotional signals of others (Fraley et al., 2006), suggesting that they would be acutely aware of the emotional inconsistency of a neurotic leader, and thus exacerbating LMX ambivalence.

In summary, drawing directly on Mikulincer and Shaver (2003) model, we posit that the combination of high follower attachment avoidance and high leader neuroticism should provoke deactivation strategies and lead to poorer LMX quality, whereas the combination of high follower attachment anxiety and high leader neuroticism should provoke hyperactivation strategies and lead to greater LMX ambivalence.

**Hypothesis 5.** The negative relationship between follower attachment avoidance and LMX quality will be stronger when leader neuroticism is high compared to when it is low.

**Hypothesis 6.** The positive relationship between follower attachment anxiety and LMX ambivalence will be stronger when leader neuroticism is high compared to when it is low.

Logically, the culmination of the previous hypotheses implies an overall moderated mediation model (c.f., Preacher et al., 2007) whereby there is a negative indirect effect of follower attachment anxiety and avoidance on job performance via LMX ambivalence and LMX quality, respectively, with the relationships varying in strength according to leader neuroticism (see Figure 1).

**Hypothesis 7.** The negative indirect effect between attachment avoidance and job performance via LMX quality will be stronger when leader neuroticism is high compared to low.

**Hypothesis 8.** The negative indirect effect between attachment anxiety and job performance via LMX ambivalence will be stronger when leader neuroticism is high compared to low.

## STUDY 1

### Data and sample

To explore the first stage of our hypothesized model, we collected measures of followers' avoidant and anxious attachment styles as well as their ratings of LMX ambivalence and LMX quality (Time 1). We then collected a second measure of LMX quality and LMX ambivalence at Time 2, 6 months later, to ascertain whether attachment style at Time 1 was associated with its respective LMX outcome over time while controlling for the previous level. We collected data from full-time professionals in a part-time MBA programme at a leading business school in China. A total of 405 participants were invited to complete the survey, and the final sample consisted of 158 matched responses from Times 1 and 2. A student ID was required at the end of both surveys for matching purposes. Average age was 32.66 years, 52.83% were female and participants worked across finance (39.72%), manufacturing (24.11%), information technology (29.79%) and commercial (6.38%) industries.

### Measures

Participants were required to rate each scale item using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

## Attachment style

The adult attachment scale (Wu & Parker, 2017) was used to assess attachment anxiety (four items) and avoidance (six items). A sample item for attachment anxiety is 'I often worry that others don't really like me' ( $\alpha = .72$ ), and for attachment avoidance is 'I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others' ( $\alpha = .81$ ).

## LMX quality

A seven-item scale (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) was used to assess LMX quality at Time 2. A sample item is 'I would characterize my working relationship with my manager as very good' ( $\alpha = .94$ ).

## LMX ambivalence

LMX ambivalence was measured at Time 2 using the seven-item scale developed by Lee et al. (2019). A sample item is 'I have conflicting thoughts: sometimes I think that my working relationship with my manager is very good, while at other times, I don't' ( $\alpha = .89$ ).

## Control variables

To better understand the effect of attachment style on LMX quality and LMX ambivalence, we controlled for baseline (Time 1) levels of both variables. This allowed us to explore the relationship between attachment styles and change in LMX quality and LMX ambivalence, helping to rule out reverse causality arguments. LMX quality ( $\alpha = .97$ ) and LMX ambivalence ( $\alpha = .90$ ) were measured at Time 1 and included as control variables.

## Results

As shown in Table 1, and consistent with our first two hypotheses, attachment anxiety was significantly positively correlated with LMX ambivalence at both Time 1 ( $r = .40, p = .00 < .001$ ) and Time 2 ( $r = .25, p = .003 < .01$ ). Attachment avoidance was significantly negatively correlated with LMX quality at Time 1 ( $r = -.21, p = .007 < .01$ ) and Time 2 ( $r = -.33, p = .00 < .001$ ).

TABLE 1 Means, standard deviations and intercorrelations among Study 1 variables.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Avoidance (Time 1)	2.58	.78	-				
2. Anxiety (Time 1)	2.49	.78	.19*	-			
3. LMX quality (Time 1)	3.27	1.22	-.21**	-.21**	-		
4. LMX ambivalence (Time 1)	2.78	.84	.09	.40**	-.42**	-	
5. LMX quality (Time 2)	3.45	.99	-.33**	-.14	.41**	-.29**	-
6. LMX ambivalence (Time 2)	3.20	.81	-.08	.25**	-.18*	.24**	-.24**

Note:  $N = 158$ . \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

Abbreviations: LMX, leader-member exchange.

## Confirmatory factor analysis

Before testing the hypotheses, confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) were conducted using MPLUS (version 7) to assess model fit. The goodness-of-fit indicators of the proposed six-factor model, which included LMX ambivalence (Times 1 and 2), LMX quality (Times 1 and 2) and attachment avoidance and anxiety as distinct latent factors ( $X^2 = 992.69$ ,  $df = 650$ ,  $RMSEA = .06$ ,  $CFI = .92$ ), suggested a good model fit.

## Hypothesis testing

To test Hypotheses 1 and 2, we conducted multivariate regression analysis using STATA. Attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance (both measured at Time 1) were included as independent variables, with LMX ambivalence (Time 2) and LMX quality (Time 2) as the dependent variables (while controlling for LMX ambivalence and LMX quality at Time 1). As seen in Table 2, support was found for Hypothesis 1, as attachment avoidance was negatively related to LMX quality ( $\beta = -.33$ ,  $p = .00 < .001$ ), explaining an incremental 6% of the variance in LMX quality. Support was also found for Hypothesis 2, as attachment anxiety was significantly positively associated with LMX ambivalence ( $\beta = .22$ ,  $p = .009 < .01$ ), explaining an incremental 5% of the variance in LMX ambivalence.

## Discussion

In support of our first two hypotheses, attachment avoidance was negatively associated with LMX quality, while attachment anxiety was positively associated with LMX ambivalence, supporting the notion that these distinct attachment styles might affect job performance via distinct relational mechanisms. The observed relationships were found to exist over a period of 6 months, controlling for baseline levels of LMX ambivalence and LMX quality. In Study 2, we build on these results by testing a larger model, examining leader neuroticism as a first-stage moderator on the relationship between attachment avoidance (anxiety) and LMX quality (ambivalence), while including leader-rated follower job performance as a dependent variable. We also explore the relative indirect effects of LMX quality and LMX ambivalence, by testing burnout, as established intrapersonal mechanism, as a parallel mediator.

TABLE 2 Study 1 multivariate regression results.

Variable	LMX quality (time 2)		LMX ambivalence (time 2)	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
LMX Quality (Time 1)	.28** (.07)	.24** (.06)	-.06 (.06)	-.08 (.06)
LMX Ambivalence (Time 1)	-.17 (.09)	-.18 (.10)	.19 (.08)	.12 (.09)
Avoidance		-.33** (.09)		-.16* (.08)
Anxiety		.04 (.10)		.22** (.09)
R <sup>2</sup>	.18**	.25**	.06**	.11**
$\Delta R^2$		.06**		.05*

Note:  $N = 158$ . \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ . Standard error estimates listed in parentheses. Models 1 and 3 include only control variables and Models 2 and 4 include both control and independent variables.

Abbreviations: LMX, leader–member exchange.

## STUDY 2

### Data and sample

To reduce the potential for common method bias, we conducted a multi-source time-separated field study (Podsakoff et al., 2012). At Time 1, followers rated their attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. At Time 2, 2 weeks later, followers rated their LMX ambivalence and LMX quality. Finally, 2 weeks later at Time 3, line managers rated follower job performance and provided self-ratings of leader neuroticism.

We collected data from 453 employees and their 134 direct line managers working at 19 organizations based in Egypt and Pakistan. Participants from Egypt worked in organizations from various industries (civil service, manufacturing, construction and petroleum). All survey instruments were translated from English into Arabic, the employees' working language, following a standard translation–back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1970). Participants from Pakistan were from seven public sector organizations providing financial and administrative services to citizens. Surveys were completed in English, the working language of the Pakistani civil service. Respondents' mean age was 39 years and 51% of the sample was male.

### Measures

Participants were required to rate each item using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). We used the same measures for attachment anxiety ( $\alpha = .75$ ), attachment avoidance ( $\alpha = .81$ ), LMX ambivalence ( $\alpha = .91$ ) and LMX quality ( $\alpha = .95$ ) as in Study 1. Additionally, the following variables were measured:

#### Leader neuroticism

The Big Five Inventory (McCrae & Costa Jr, 2004) was used to measure leader neuroticism based on eight items. Line managers rated the extent to which they agreed to possess neurotic personality traits. A sample item is 'I see myself as someone who is depressed, blue' ( $\alpha = .89$ ).

#### Job performance

Followers' in-role job performance was rated by their line managers using the five-item shortened version of Williams and Anderson's scale (1991; e.g., Nahrgang et al., 2009). A sample item is 'This employee meets the formal performance requirements of the job' ( $\alpha = .93$ ).

#### Burnout

As previous research has identified burnout as a mediator of the attachment style–performance relationship (Virgă et al., 2019), it was included as an additional intrapersonal mediator. Burnout was measured at Time 2 using the 5-item emotional exhaustion dimension from the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Schaufeli et al., 1996;  $\alpha = .91$ ).

#### Control variables

As this study included respondents who shared a line manager, we controlled for mean-level LMX quality within the team and LMX differentiation, measured by the within-group standard deviation of

LMX quality. Both these group-level variables are theoretically and empirically associated with follower performance (e.g., Yu et al., 2018). As the data were collected from multiple organizations and across two different samples, we also controlled for both of these aspects in our analysis.

## Results

Table 3 presents the means, standard deviations, reliabilities and intercorrelations among the variables for Study 2. Consistent with Study 1, and our hypotheses, attachment avoidance was significantly correlated with LMX quality ( $r = -.29, p = .00 < .001$ ) and attachment anxiety was significantly correlated with LMX ambivalence ( $r = .46, p = .00 < .001$ ). Additionally, both LMX quality ( $r = .21, p = .00 < .001$ ) and LMX ambivalence ( $r = -.26, p = .00 < .001$ ) had significant correlations with leader-rated job performance.

### Confirmatory factor analysis

The goodness-of-fit indicators of a seven-factor model, which included all of the study variables as distinct latent factors, were compared to a number of six-factor models in which these latent variables were combined. The seven-factor model yielded a good model fit ( $X^2 = 1487.38, df = 798, RMSEA = .04, CFI = .94$ ).

### Hypothesis testing

As data were collected from employees nested in multiple teams and organizations, we tested our hypotheses using three-level linear models in STATA. Organizational membership was modelled at Level 3; leader neuroticism, LMX team mean and LMX differentiation were modelled at the team level (Level 2); while all other variables were modelled at the individual level (Level 1). We used moderated path analysis (Edwards & Lambert, 2007) using R software to test the confidence interval of indirect effects with 20,000 Monte Carlo simulations. Results are shown in Table 4. We group mean centred all individual variables with team-based group mean and grand-mean centred all team variables with general grand mean.

Model 2 shows support for Hypothesis 1 as attachment avoidance ( $\gamma = -.21, p = .00 < .01$ ) had a significant and negative association with LMX quality, explaining an incremental 5% of the variance in LMX quality. Model 5 shows support for Hypothesis 2, as attachment anxiety had a significant and positive association with LMX ambivalence ( $\gamma = .46, p = .00 < .01$ ), explaining an incremental 16% of the variance in LMX ambivalence. No supporting evidence was found for Hypothesis 3 because the indirect effect between attachment avoidance ( $-.01$ ; 95% CIs  $[-.04, .02]$ ) and job performance via LMX quality was non-significant. However, the indirect effect between attachment anxiety and job performance via LMX ambivalence was significant ( $-.11$ ; 95% CIs  $[-.17, -.06]$ ), thus, supporting Hypothesis 4. To explore the relative indirect effects of LMX quality and LMX ambivalence, we also included burnout as a parallel mediator. However, we found no evidence of a significant indirect effect between attachment avoidance ( $-.00$ ; 95% CIs  $[-.01, .00]$ ) or anxiety ( $-.01$ ; 95% CIs  $[-.03, .01]$ ) on job performance via burnout.

To test our moderation hypotheses, we first mean-centred attachment anxiety, avoidance and leader neuroticism. No support was found for Hypothesis 5 as the interaction between attachment avoidance and leader neuroticism on LMX quality was non-significant. However, in support of Hypothesis 6, a significant interaction effect was found between attachment anxiety and leader neuroticism on LMX ambivalence ( $\gamma = .11, p = .002 < .01$ ) in Model 6, accounting for a further 5% of the variance in LMX ambivalence. To better understand the nature of the interaction, we used the Johnson–Neyman technique,



TABLE 3 Means, standard deviations and intercorrelations among Study 2 variables.

Variable	$\alpha$	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. LMX differentiation	—	1.13	.69	—								
2. LMX team mean	—	4.88	1.03	-.43**	—							
3. Sample	—	.47	.50	-.25**	.07	—						
4. Avoidance	.81	3.42	1.17	.02	-.19**	-.03	—					
5. Anxiety	.75	3.80	1.19	.05	-.11*	-.07	.18**	—				
6. LMX quality	.95	4.88	1.53	-.29**	.67**	.05	-.29**	-.19**	—			
7. LMX ambivalence	.91	3.76	1.35	.13*	-.25**	-.35**	.07	.46**	-.27**	—		
8. Leader neuroticism	.89	2.99	1.34	.12*	-.05	.24**	.07	.12*	-.04	.13*	—	
9. Burnout	.91	3.26	1.46	.01	-.19**	.01	.10*	.24**	-.20**	.31**	.03	—
10. Performance	.93	5.37	1.25	.03	.18**	-.04	-.08	-.15**	.21**	-.26**	-.05	-.17**

Note. Sample was a dummy variable: 1 means sample 3 (N = 212 at the individual level, N = 76 at the team level and N = 12 at the organization level) and 0 means sample 4 (N = 241 at the individual level, N = 58 at the team level and N = 7 at the organization level). \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

Abbreviations: LMX, leader-member exchange.

TABLE 4 Study 2 multivariate regression results.

	LMX quality			LMX ambivalence			Burnout			Performance	
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8	M9	M10	M11
LMX differentiation	.00 (.09)	-.04 (.09)	-.05 (.09)	-.12 (.11)	-.12 (.1)	-.19+ (.1)	-.21 (.13)	-.2 (.13)	-.19 (.13)	.24* (.1)	.19* (.1)
LMX team mean	1.00** (.06)	.92** (.06)	.93** (.06)	-.29** (.07)	-.28** (.07)	-.29** (.07)	-.27** (.09)	-.23** (.09)	-.22* (.09)	.27** (.06)	.12 (.08)
Sample	.00 (.11)	0 (.11)	.03 (.11)	-.95** (.16)	-.96** (.14)	-.93** (.14)	-.04 (.18)	-.03 (.18)	-.04 (.18)	.14 (.15)	-.1 (.15)
Avoidance		-.21** (.05)	-.22** (.05)		-.05 (.05)	-.07 (.04)		.06 (.06)	.06 (.06)		-.02 (.05)
Anxiety		-.13** (.05)	-.13** (.05)		.46** (.04)	.43** (.04)		.24** (.06)	.24** (.06)		-.02 (.05)
Leader neuroticism			.01 (.04)			.18** (.05)			-.01 (.06)		
Anxiety x Leader neuroticism			.03 (.03)			.11** (.03)			-.03 (.04)		
Avoidance x Leader neuroticism			-.08* (.04)			-.03 (.03)			.01 (.04)		
LMX Quality											.07 (.05)
LMX Ambivalence											-.23** (.05)
Burnout											-.05 (.04)
R <sup>2a</sup>	.27	.32	.33	.18	.34	.39	.05	.10	.11	.01	.09
Δ R <sup>2a</sup>		.05	.01		.16	.05		.04	.01		.08

Note:  $N=453$  at the individual level,  $N=134$  at the team level and  $N=19$  at the organization level. Numbers in parentheses represent standard errors.  $a-R^2$  is calculated based on proportional reduction of error variance due to predictors in the models (Snijders & Bosker, 1999). \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , two-tailed.

which provides a point estimate for the range of values of the moderator where the focal independent variable (attachment anxiety) is significantly related to LMX ambivalence. The plotted moderation effect is shown in Figure 2.

No support was found for Hypothesis 7, as the indirect effect between attachment avoidance and job performance via LMX quality remained non-significant when examining the moderating effect with leader neuroticism. Hypothesis 8 predicted that the negative indirect effect between attachment anxiety and job performance via LMX ambivalence would be positively moderated by leader neuroticism. This hypothesis was supported as a larger indirect effect was observed when leader neuroticism was high ( $-.13$ , 95% CIs  $[-.19, -.07]$ ) than when it was low ( $-.07$ , 95% CIs  $[-.11, -.03]$ ), and the difference was significant with 95% CIs not including zero  $[-.11, -.02]$ .

## Discussion

Consistent with the results of Study 1, attachment avoidance was found to be negatively associated with LMX quality, while attachment anxiety was positively related to LMX ambivalence. Study 2 also found

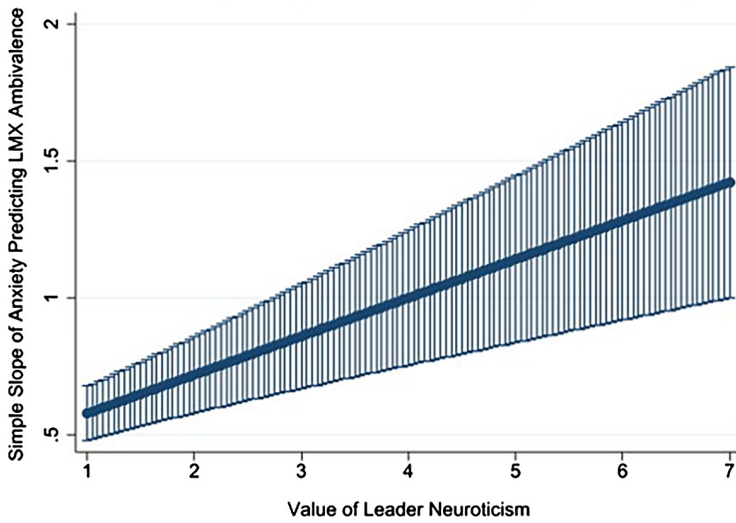


FIGURE 2 The plotted moderation effect at 95% CIs Johnson–Neyman technique between attachment anxiety and leader neuroticism on LMX Ambivalence (Study 2).

initial evidence of mediation. Specifically, a significant indirect effect between attachment anxiety and job performance via LMX ambivalence was identified. However, no indirect effect was found between attachment avoidance and job performance via LMX quality. Furthermore, the results from Study 2 inform our initial understanding of the specific conditions under which the attachment activation system is triggered and amplified. The findings suggest that the effects of anxious attachment on LMX ambivalence are augmented in the presence of a perceived threat to a relationship when leaders are more neurotic, and thus, perceived as unavailable. However, no evidence of moderation was found in relation to attachment avoidance.

Accordingly, the aim of the final study was to provide a second test of our full moderated mediation model while controlling for follower neuroticism due to its association with attachment anxiety (Donnellan et al., 2008). Furthermore, in addition to examining the indirect effects of LMX quality and LMX ambivalence relative to burnout, we also included follower self-efficacy as an additional alternative mediator in Study 3, thus, accounting for previous findings based on intrapersonal explanations (Kale, 2020).

## STUDY 3

### Data and sample

We collected data at two time points from 643 participants who were recruited via the Prolific online platform (prolific.co) developed at Oxford University. The selection criteria stipulated that participants be currently employed (and should not be students), over the age of 18, have a direct supervisor and speak fluent English. As the data collection was completed during the COVID-19 pandemic, additional inclusion criteria required participants to be working during the pandemic. To reduce common method variance issues, we collected data at two time points using the same participants (Podsakoff et al., 2012). All surveys were conducted in English. Specifically, we measured the independent variables (attachment styles) and moderator (leader neuroticism) at Time 1. At Time 2, we measured the mediators (LMX quality and LMX ambivalence, along with the alternative

mediators of burnout and self-efficacy) and the dependent variable (follower self-rated job performance). At Time 1, we recruited 750 participants who were compensated £7.00 per hour for their time. At Time 2, 2 weeks later, we surveyed the same participants again. Before doing so, we filtered out 54 participants who failed an attention check at Time 1. Overall, we obtained 643 matched responses over the two time points. On average, the participants were 34 years old, and 55% of the sample were male. Participants were based in a range of countries, with the largest proportion in the United Kingdom (42%).

## Measures

Participants were required to rate each scale item using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). We used the same measures for attachment anxiety ( $\alpha = .70$ ), attachment avoidance ( $\alpha = .80$ ), LMX ambivalence ( $\alpha = .86$ ) and LMX quality ( $\alpha = .91$ ) as in Studies 1 and 2. Leader neuroticism was measured with the same scale as in Study 2 but was rated by followers ( $\alpha = .91$ ) rather than leaders. Participants rated their own level of current job performance using the same measure as in Study 2 ( $\alpha = .93$ ).

### Self-efficacy

As previous research has explored general self-efficacy as an intrapersonal mediator of the attachment style–performance relationship (Kale, 2020), we included this as a parallel mediator in Study 3. General self-efficacy was measured using a 10-item measure by Schwarzer and Jerusalem (1995;  $\alpha = .88$ ) at Time 2.

### Burnout

As in Study 2, we also included burnout as a parallel mediator, which was measured using the full 16-item Maslach Burnout Inventory (Schaufeli et al., 1996;  $\alpha = .88$ ) at Time 2.

### Control variables

Participants provided self-ratings of their own neuroticism using a four-item measure developed by Donnellan et al. (2006;  $\alpha = .82$ ) at Time 2. We included neuroticism as it is conceptually related to attachment anxiety (e.g., Donnellan et al., 2008) and is theoretically related to ambivalent attitudes (e.g., Pinquart et al., 2008) as well as job performance (e.g., Sosnowska et al., 2020).

## Results

Table 5 presents the means, standard deviations and zero-order correlations among the study variables. As in the previous studies, attachment anxiety was positively correlated with LMX ambivalence ( $r = .24$ ,  $p = .00 < .001$ ). Both attachment anxiety ( $r = -.09$ ,  $p = .02 < .05$ ) and attachment avoidance ( $r = -.28$ ,  $p = .00 < .001$ ) were also negatively correlated with LMX quality. Furthermore, LMX quality ( $r = .24$ ,  $p = .00 < .001$ ) and LMX ambivalence ( $r = -.30$ ,  $p = .00 < .001$ ) were significantly correlated with self-rated job performance.

TABLE 5 Means, standard deviations and intercorrelations among Study 3 variables.

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Follower neuroticism	2.57	.94								
2. Avoidance	2.81	.82	.14**							
3. Anxiety	2.36	.72	.37**	.42**						
4. LMX quality	3.52	.89	-.20**	-.28**	-.09*					
5. LMX ambivalence	2.81	.92	.20**	.16**	.24**	-.39**				
6. Leader neuroticism	2.55	1.00	.09*	.12**	.16**	-.33**	.46**			
7. Self-efficacy	3.93	.56	-.27**	-.20**	-.25**	.24**	-.18**	-.14**		
8. Burnout	2.61	.72	.29**	.33**	.27**	-.44**	.40**	.29**	-.45**	
9. Performance	4.19	.80	-.10**	-.12**	-.19**	.24**	-.30**	-.24**	.28**	-.32**

Note:  $N = 643$ . \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

Abbreviations: LMX, leader–member exchange.

## Confirmatory factor analysis

The goodness-of-fit indicators of a nine-factor model, which included attachment avoidance and anxiety, LMX ambivalence, LMX quality, leader neuroticism, burnout, general self-efficacy, follower neuroticism and job performance as distinct latent factors ( $X^2 = 4853.11$ ,  $df = 2378$ ,  $RMSEA = .04$ ,  $CFI = .89$ ), yielded adequate model fit.

## Hypothesis testing

The analyses were conducted in STATA, and we used moderated path analysis (Edwards & Lambert, 2007) using R software to test the confidence intervals of indirect effects with 20,000 Monte Carlo simulations. The results are shown in Table 6.

Model 2 shows support for Hypothesis 1, as attachment avoidance had a significant and negative association with LMX quality ( $\beta = -.31$ ,  $p = .00 < .01$ , in Model 2), accounting for 7% of the variance in LMX quality. In accordance with Hypothesis 2, attachment anxiety had a significant and positive association with LMX ambivalence ( $\beta = .21$ ,  $p = .00 < .01$ , in Model 5), accounting for 3% of LMX ambivalence variance.

Hypothesis 3 was supported as a significant indirect effect between attachment avoidance and job performance via LMX quality was found ( $-.02$ ; 95% CIs  $[-.04, -.00]$ ). A significant indirect effect was also found between attachment anxiety and job performance via LMX ambivalence ( $-.01$ ; 95% CIs  $[-.02, -.00]$ ), thus, supporting Hypothesis 4. We included self-efficacy and burnout as parallel mediators in our analyses to explore the relative indirect effects of LMX quality and LMX ambivalence. We found a non-significant indirect effect between attachment avoidance ( $-.02$ ; 95% CIs  $[-.04, .00]$ ) and job performance via general self-efficacy, but a significant indirect effect between attachment anxiety ( $-.03$ ; 95% CIs  $[-.05, -.02]$ ) and performance via general self-efficacy. A significant indirect effect was found between attachment avoidance and job performance via burnout ( $-.03$ ; 95% CIs  $[-.05, -.02]$ ). And, a significant indirect effect was found between attachment anxiety and job performance via burnout ( $.01$ ; 95% CIs  $[-.03, -.00]$ ).

To test our moderation hypotheses, we first mean-centred attachment avoidance, anxiety and leader neuroticism. No support was found for Hypothesis 5 as a non-significant interaction effect was found between attachment avoidance and leader neuroticism on LMX quality ( $\beta = .04$ ,  $p = .31 > .05$ , *n.s.* in

TABLE 6 Study 3 multivariate regression results.

	LMX quality			LMX ambivalence			Self-efficacy			Burnout			Performance	
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8	M9	M10	M11	M12	M13	M14
Follower neuroticism	-.15** (.04)	-.09+ (.04)	-.05 (.04)	.26** (.04)	.19** (.05)	.14** (.04)	-.23** (.03)	-.19** (.03)	-.19** (.03)	.30** (.03)	.22** (.03)	.20** (.03)	-.05 (.03)	.06* (.03)
Avoidance		-.31** (.05)	-.29** (.04)		.05 (.05)	.03 (.04)		-.05+ (.03)	-.05+ (.03)		.19** (.03)	.18** (.03)	-.02 (.03)	.05 (.03)
Anxiety		.07 (.05)	.12* (.05)		.21** (.05)	.17** (.05)		-.10** (.03)	-.09** (.03)		.09* (.04)	.06 (.04)	-.19** (.04)	-.14** (.04)
Leader neuroticism			-.29** (.03)		.35** (.03)				-.03 (.02)			.16** (.03)		
Anxiety × Leader neuroticism			.06 (.04)		.10* (.04)				-.02 (.03)			.00 (.03)		
Avoidance × Leader neuroticism			.04 (.04)		-.02 (.04)				.00 (.03)			-.07 (.03)		
LMX Quality														.07* (.03)
LMX Ambivalence														-.05* (.03)
Self-efficacy														.31** (.05)
Burnout														-.16** (.04)
R <sup>2</sup>	.02**	.09**	.18**	.06**	.09**	.26**	.12**	.14**	.15**	.11**	.18**	.23	.06**	.22**
ΔR <sup>2</sup>	.07**	.10**	.10**	.03**	.03**	.17**	.03**	.03**	.01	.05**	.05**	.05**	.05**	.16**

Note: N = 643. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ . Standard error estimates listed in parentheses.

Abbreviations: LMX, leader-member exchange; M, model.

Model 3). However, in support of Hypothesis 6, a significant interaction effect was found between attachment anxiety and leader neuroticism on LMX ambivalence ( $\beta = .10, p = .02 < .05$ , in Model 6), explaining an incremental 17% of the variance in LMX ambivalence. We probed these interaction effects using the Johnson–Neyman technique and the plotted moderation effect is shown in Figure 3. No support was found for Hypothesis 7 as no interaction effect was found between attachment avoidance and LMX quality and thus it made no difference to the indirect effect.

Hypothesis 8 was again supported as a larger indirect effect was observed between attachment anxiety and job performance via LMX ambivalence when leader neuroticism was high ( $-.02$ , 95% CIs  $[-.03, -.00]$ ) than when it was low ( $-.003$ , 95% CIs  $[-.01, .00]$ ), and the difference was significant with 95% CIs not including zero  $[-.02, -.00]$ .

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Despite its popularity in the social sciences, attachment theory has been underutilized as a lens for understanding how employees think, feel and behave at work. The aim of the current research was to advance theory in this area by drawing on the attachment system dynamics model (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003) in conjunction with recent advances in the relational leadership literature to develop a more nuanced interpersonal (i.e., relational) explanation of *how* and *when* followers' attachment anxiety and avoidance may differentially impact their job performance via distinct interpersonal mechanisms. In line with our hypotheses, across all three studies, attachment avoidance was found to predict LMX quality and attachment anxiety was found to predict LMX ambivalence. Furthermore, we found largely consistent support for our hypothesized mediational hypotheses. Specifically, we found support for an indirect effect between attachment anxiety and both leader-rated (Study 2) and self-rated (Study 3) job performance, via LMX ambivalence, while accounting for the alternative intrapersonal mediating mechanisms of burnout (Studies 2 and 3) and self-efficacy (Study 3). Furthermore, as predicted, this indirect relationship was stronger when leaders were higher in neuroticism (Studies 2 and 3). Thus, the combination of higher follower attachment anxiety and higher leader neuroticism was especially likely to induce LMX ambivalence and undermine job performance. We also found mixed support for our hypothesized indirect relationship between attachment avoidance and job performance via LMX quality

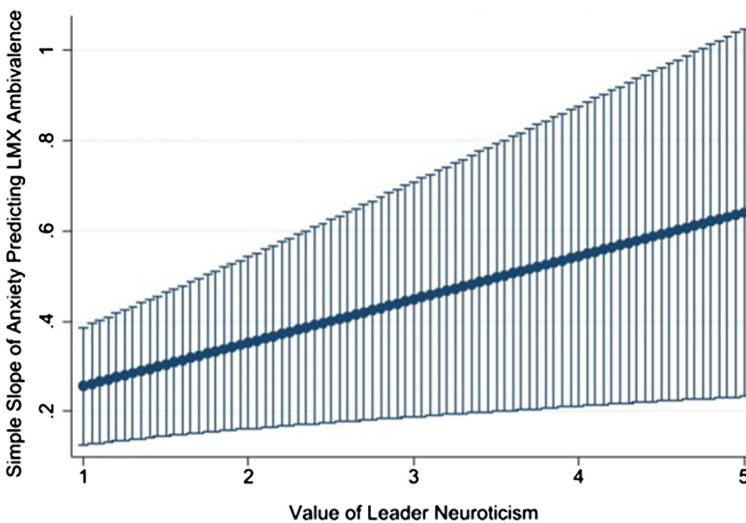


FIGURE 3 The plotted moderation effect at 95% CIs Johnson–Neyman technique between attachment anxiety and leader neuroticism on LMX Ambivalence (Study 3).

(in Study 3, but not Study 2). However, contrary to our prediction, leader neuroticism did not moderate the negative relationship between attachment avoidance and LMX quality.

An ancillary aim of our research was to explore relational mechanisms (i.e., LMX quality and ambivalence) alongside, previously explored (Kale, 2020; Virgã et al., 2019) intrapersonal mediators, namely burnout and self-efficacy. Overall, our findings suggested some evidence that both intrapersonal and interpersonal mechanisms may play a role in explaining the association between attachment styles and job performance. Specifically, in Study 3, we found evidence of an indirect effect between attachment avoidance and performance via burnout. We also found an indirect effect between attachment anxiety and performance via self-efficacy and burnout. To our knowledge, our research provides the first test of parallel mediators of attachment styles in relation to performance. Our findings suggest the importance of continuing this approach, in accordance with calls in the wider organizational behaviour literature highlighting the need for more research exploring multiple mediators (both within and between categories) to refine current understanding and move towards more parsimonious, powerful and useful models (e.g., Hughes et al., 2018).

## Theoretical implications

These findings have important theoretical implications for attachment styles, job performance and LMX literature. Our primary contribution to attachment theory lies in delineating two distinct relational mechanisms explaining how followers' anxious and avoidant attachment styles negatively influence their job performance. As such, we advance theoretical understanding of attachment system dynamics in two fundamental ways. First, extant theory and research have not accounted for the possibility that the nature of the leader–follower relationship may help explain the attachment insecurity–job performance association. Instead, scholars have primarily focused on intrapersonal explanations – based on intrapsychic cognition or affect (Kale, 2020; Virgã et al., 2019). In developing the extant theory, we invoke a relational perspective and shift the focus beyond the individuals themselves to the impact on their relationships with others, namely the leader. By doing so, we draw attention to the unique role that the leader–follower relationship plays in explaining the complex link between attachment styles and job performance, beyond that of cognitive and affective mechanisms, which have so far, failed to provide a sufficiently comprehensive explanation.

Second, we go further by developing a theoretical model that provides a nuanced explanation of this mediational process at the dimension level. In doing so, we challenge the prevailing assumption in extant theory and research on attachment insecurity in the workplace: that different dimensions of attachment insecurity (i.e., attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety) can work through the same causal mechanism. By contrast, we agree with the logic of van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013, p. 16) that 'for a multidimensional mediation model to make theoretical sense it must include theory that explains the role of each individual element of [attachment styles] and the mediation processes by which each affects outcomes'. In other words, given the dimensionality of attachment insecurity, a coherent explanation should account for distinct mediational pathways for avoidant and anxious attachment styles. By integrating the attachment systems dynamic model (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003) with recent advances in relational leadership (Lee et al., 2019), we propose that these unique attachment styles exert their effects through contrasting relational strategies that differentially impact the types of relationship individuals develop with their leader, and, ultimately, their performance on the job. Specifically, in cases of avoidant attachment, individuals are more likely to employ a deactivating strategy that culminates in a low-quality LMX relationship, whereas, in cases of anxious attachment, individuals tend to adopt a hyperactivating strategy that elicits a more ambivalent LMX relationship. Furthermore, we found support for these dimension-specific mediational pathways, thereby providing a more refined theoretical explanation for the attachment style–job performance link that crucially is coherent with the multidimensional nature of attachment theory. Although our relational perspective underscores the importance of the leader–follower relationship per se, it is possible that other kinds of relationships at work (e.g., with peers or



customers) may also play an explanatory role. While this idea is beyond the scope of the present research, it merits further investigation.

We should note that although our results across all three studies, as predicted, consistently demonstrated distinct mediational pathways for attachment styles (i.e., avoidant–LMX quality; anxious–LMX ambivalence), there is also some evidence (albeit weaker and less consistent) for crossover effects. Namely, there was a small positive correlation between avoidance and LMX ambivalence (but only in Study 3), and a small negative correlation between anxiety and LMX quality (but not in Study 1). These findings regarding LMX quality are generally in line with previous research. For example, in Fein et al. (2020) review of attachment and LMX, the authors report that: ‘...in respect to associations between follower anxious attachment and LMX, there was mixed evidence across eight studies, with three of the studies reporting negative effects between follower anxious attachment and LMX...and the other studies reporting no effect’. (pg. 119). The authors go on to note that ‘These findings do not necessarily contradict the expectations of other researchers (e.g., Keller & Cacioppe, 2001), rather, they suggest that the influence of attachment on the leader–subordinate dyad can be more complicated and may be influenced by additional moderating or mediating factors under some circumstances’ (Kafetsios et al., 2014; Richards & Hackett, 2012) (pg. 119). Indeed, this was a motivation for our study as we felt that including LMX ambivalence (alongside LMX quality) would better account for how anxious attachment might translate into follower’s performance outcomes than LMX quality.

A further major theoretical implication of the current research is that it advances our understanding of not only how but also when attachment anxiety, in particular, impacts job performance – a link that so far has yielded inconsistent findings based on our own meta-analyses (see [Supplementary Materials](#)). This is important because knowledge of what triggers the activation and amplification of the attachment behavioural system is seriously underdeveloped in organizational research (Yip et al., 2018). Attachment scholars have not considered the role of the leader as a moderating influence on the follower attachment anxiety–job performance relationship. Our findings show the value of adopting this contingency-based approach. Across both studies 2 and 3, higher levels of leader neuroticism accentuated the relationship between follower attachment anxiety and LMX ambivalence, and, subsequently, follower job performance. The attachment systems dynamics model together with theory and research on LMX ambivalence provides a cogent explanation of the underlying process. Namely, when a potential threat emanates from an attachment figure, it amplifies the attachment system in those more anxiously attached and sets in motion hyperactivating regulatory behaviour (e.g., excessive proximity seeking, rumination and relationship hypervigilance) – the kind of approach–avoidance behaviour that is characteristic of ambivalent LMX relationships. It is worthwhile drawing attention to our novel conceptualization of leader neuroticism as an attachment-relevant contextual cue that can signal relationship threat. We surmised that more neurotic leaders will display emotional volatility and more intense negative reactions to unpleasant events (i.e., anxiety and stress) across situations and over time (Gross et al., 1998; Hisler et al., 2020), which may be perceived, particularly by anxious followers, as threatening to the LMX relationship, and, thus, activate and intensify the dysfunctional regulation of attachment system dynamics. In developing contingency-related theory, we redress the overemphasis in the literature on the universality of attachment styles and underscore the importance of moderating influences. However, our model goes further, and in line with our relational approach, incorporates the characteristics of both members of the relationship (i.e., follower anxious attachment style x leader neuroticism). In doing so, we shift the focus of theory and research beyond the individual actor to a more systemic (actor x partner) understanding of attachment dynamics in the workplace.

Contrary to expectations, however, we found no corresponding evidence of moderation for attachment avoidance. Upon reflection, this unanticipated finding may be explained by key differences in the detection and encoding of attachment threats by anxious and avoidant individuals. With respect to anxious attachment, rejection-related expectations and emotion regulation strategies have been shown to produce hypervigilance towards relationship threats (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003; Simpson & Rholes, 2012), thereby enhancing sensitivity to partners’ negative emotions. For instance, research shows that highly anxious adults are more likely to detect the onset of facial expressions of emotion

earlier than less anxious adults (e.g., Fraley et al., 2006). Furthermore, Mikulincer et al. (2002) demonstrated that anxiously attached individuals tend to exhibit highly accessible cognitive representations of attachment figures even in the absence of an external threat, suggesting chronic activation of the attachment system. Conversely, with respect to avoidant attachment, there is some evidence that deactivating regulatory strategies can at least, in part, act in a pre-emptive (i.e., diverting of attention away from, or shallow encoding of, attachment-related threat) rather than in a post-emptive (i.e., suppression of attachment-related threat already encoded) manner (Fraley et al., 2000). Put simply, if a person is less attentive to threatening cues, then they will be less affected by them. Relatedly, research shows that avoidant individuals inhibit attention to emotional expressions (Dewitte, 2011) and emotionally relevant information (Edelstein & Gillath, 2008). Supporting these notions, Simpson et al. (2011) found that, in relationship-threatening situations, highly avoidant individuals were poor judges of their partner's emotional and cognitive states, whereas those who were highly anxious were good judges. Thus, it is plausible that leader neuroticism provoked hyperactivating strategies in anxiously attached employees but did not accentuate deactivating strategies in avoidant employees. For avoidant employees, it is possible that leader neuroticism, and its associated behaviours signalling lack of availability, may not represent enough of a threat to circumvent pre-emptive strategies and sufficiently stimulate the attachment system dynamics. While this explanation seems plausible, it awaits further investigation.

Our findings also have important implications for the LMX literature. Our research helps advance the understanding of LMX ambivalence, a construct recently introduced to the leadership literature (Lee et al., 2019). To our knowledge, this is the first empirical study to explore the antecedents of LMX ambivalence and, thus, represents an important extension of this construct's emergent nomological network. In three separate studies, we found that attachment anxiety was significantly and consistently positively associated with LMX ambivalence. Study 1 also provided some support for the causal link by showing that the former predicted the latter over a period of 6 months, controlling for baseline levels of LMX ambivalence. Conversely, and as anticipated, attachment avoidance demonstrated a non-significant relationship (or in the case of Study 1, a significant, albeit weak, negative relationship) with LMX ambivalence when regressed alongside attachment anxiety. This is an interesting finding, as it suggests that attachment avoidance may be less detrimental to workplace outcomes than attachment anxiety, given that LMX ambivalence was negatively associated with job performance (both self-rated and leader rated). This negative association was found over and above LMX quality and burnout (Studies 2 and 3) and self-efficacy (Study 3). Hence, these findings build on Lee et al. (2019) findings that LMX ambivalence better predict employee performance than LMX quality. Indeed, in Study 2, we showed that LMX quality did not predict leader-rated job performance beyond the effects of LMX ambivalence and burnout (although a modest positive association was found with self-rated job performance in Study 3). Thus, our results further highlight the theoretical importance of LMX ambivalence for understanding the performance implications of relational leadership. In alignment with Lee et al. (2019), LMX ambivalence may matter more than quality.

## Limitations and future directions

While we believe that the research presented here provides several important contributions, we are also mindful of its limitations. First, despite conducting three independent, temporally ordered, tests of the hypothesized relationships, only a randomized controlled experiment can confirm the proposed causal links between the variables. This is an important goal for future research. Second, in Study 3, our variables were measured from the same source, and while we included a time lag between the independent variables (i.e., attachment style) and the mediators, the mediators and dependent variable were collected at the same time, risking common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2012). In Study 3, we also collected data via the Prolific online platform. While this way of recruiting participants has many advantages, it is difficult to collect matched data from multiple sources such as a leader and follower. As such, we

were not able to obtain leader evaluations of follower job performance and instead asked participants to self-rate their own level of performance. However, it is important to acknowledge that there are advantages and disadvantages to both self-rated and leader-rated performance measurement and one is not necessarily superior to the other. For instance, Conway and Lance (2010) argue that it is a misconception to assume that relationships in self-report measures are upwardly biased and concur with Kammeyer-Mueller et al. (2010) that other reports are not necessarily superior. They suggest that authors can argue why self-reports are appropriate and can take steps to consider common method bias when designing studies. This is something we tried to do in our research by including a time separation in our measurement. That said, research suggests that self-ratings of performance are usually higher than supervisor ratings (Heidemeier & Moser, 2009).

Third, it is also important to highlight that, while we positioned our primary mediating variables as interpersonal/relational, in contrast to previously studied intrapersonal constructs such as burnout and self-efficacy, both LMX quality and LMX ambivalence represent *follower* perceptions of their leader–follower relationship. Often, follower and leader perceptions do not strongly align (Sin et al., 2009), suggesting that leaders and followers may view their relationships differently. That is not to say that followers' evaluations do not matter. How they view their relationship will affect how they behave, but it would be interesting for future research to explore how both followers and leaders view the relationship as a consequence of follower attachment style. Finally, future studies should also seek to replicate our findings and explore additional consequences of LMX ambivalence, including the possible benefits of LMX ambivalence (e.g., Melwani & Rothman, 2022; Rothman et al., 2017).

Relatedly, the LMX construct has recently been critiqued (see Gottfredson et al., 2020, 2022; Scandura & Meuser, 2022), with scholars arguing that the construct and associated research have several flaws. Based on this, we suggest that future research could look to explore the association between attachment styles and the leader–follower relationship with different measures and methodologies that go beyond survey-based designs. For example, it would make sense to use experimental methods to reduce the threat of endogeneity that is present in most LMX research. We would also concur with Gottfredson et al. (2020, 2022) that new measures of LMX should be developed, particularly those that allow for an extended typology of relationships which includes good, bad, ambivalent and indifferent to be captured (see Uchino et al., 2004).

Fourth, in examining relational mechanisms to explain the association between attachment styles and job performance, we focused on the leader–follower relationship. Clearly, other important relationships exist in the workplace and may also help explain how and when attachment is linked to employee performance. Thus, we would encourage future research to consider using a social network perspective to extend our understanding of the role that attachment styles may play in the development and maintenance of a range of workplace relationships. Given that our studies focused on individual level of analysis, it would be interesting to also look at attachment style at the group level of analysis to see how, for example, the average levels of attachment avoidance and anxiety might influence group processes such as LMX differentiation.

Finally, we suggest that future research can further explore the link between attachment styles and LMX (quality and ambivalence). In particular, it would be interesting to better understand how and why follower (and leader) attachment style influences the LMX relationship. For example, whether attachment styles influence relational behaviours such as feedback seeking, information sharing and communication or whether it is more of a biased cognition regarding relationships.

## Practical implications

Our findings suggest that employees' attachment styles influence the nature of their relationships with their leaders and, in turn, their job performance levels. Given that job performance is considered to be one of the most crucial metrics in organizations (Babalola et al., 2021), attachment style represents an important individual difference, beyond that of the personality, to be considered by

leaders and organizations. While the psychometric assessment of attachment styles seems unrealistic in practice, our findings suggest that organizations should pay close attention to the expectations that individuals have for their leader–follower relationships, and in what ways followers engage with and seek support from their boss. Such conversations could take place as part of the onboarding process, as well as ongoing employee development initiatives, to help draw leaders’ attention to how followers perceive such relationships. Where anxious or avoidant tendencies are either expressed or observed, our findings suggest that it would make sense that organizations pair such followers with leaders who adopt a more supportive and development style, particularly leaders higher in emotional stability. Indeed, prior research has found that individuals high in avoidance and anxiety have been shown to benefit from ‘secure-base’ support from leaders, reflected in the form of leader availability, encouragement and non-interference (Wu & Parker, 2017). While we did not measure leader behaviours directly, our findings suggest that it could be valuable to encourage leaders to recognize anxious attachment styles in their followers and pay closer attention to how they support and respond to such followers (e.g., providing reassurance and demonstrating consistency in word and deed, and signalling availability) in order to enhance relational dynamics and promote job performance (Moss et al., 2009).

## CONCLUSION

To better understand the complex link between employee attachment style, the leader–follower relationship and job performance in the workplace, the current research provides the first step in integrating attachment theory with recent advances in the relational leadership literature. Guided by the attachment system dynamics model, we found that followers with more avoidant attachment styles were less likely to develop and sustain a high-quality LMX relationship, while followers with a more anxious attachment style were more prone to experiencing LMX ambivalence. We also found some evidence that LMX quality mediated the negative association between attachment avoidance and job performance, whereas LMX ambivalence consistently mediated the negative association between attachment anxiety and job performance. In addition, through the hyperactivating strategies it provoked in anxious followers, both self-reported and perceived leader neuroticism accentuated the relationship between attachment anxiety and LMX ambivalence. Overall, our findings highlight the importance of considering both intrapersonal but also previously neglected relational explanations for better understanding the multidimensional effects of attachment style on job performance in the workplace, as well as accounting for situational cues that may activate and amplify such effects.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

**Allan Lee:** Writing – original draft; writing – reviewing and editing; formal analysis. **Joanne Lyubovnikova:** Writing – original draft. **Geoff Thomas:** Conceptualization; writing – review and editing. **Gary Schwarz:** Data curation; formal analysis; methodology; writing – review and editing. **Jie Cao:** Data curation; formal analysis; methodology.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

None declared.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of our studies (i.e., studies 1, 2 and 3) are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

### Data S1.

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