

# Unveiling the Hidden Barrier: Investigating the Existence and Impact of Approach Anxiety in Men's Social Dating Behaviors

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## **Abstract**

This thesis was aimed to clarify the construct of "approach anxiety" (AA) in the context of men's social dating behaviors through a comprehensive review of the academic literature to (a) evaluate whether AA is a legitimate and distinct psychological construct and (b) to examine the factors that may contribute to AA. The origin of the term AA remains unclear, but it likely emerged within American dating culture in the late 1990s, potentially reflecting mainstream dating norms and related terminology. The present review is the first to examine early interaction dynamics, such as social anxiety, dating anxiety, fear of rejection, and heterosocial competence, to define AA and review theoretical frameworks to understand AA. My results show a gap in academic literature with zero papers concerning AA directly, despite the widespread recognition of AA in popular media and self-help platforms. 83 papers were identified concerning psychological dynamics of the initial phase in social interaction. AA is shaped by a complex interplay of sex differences, attachment styles, cultural expectations, and individual psychological factors. In this thesis a first conceptual model of AA is introduced that highlights the role of interpersonal performance, social interaction deficits, and psychological challenges as critical determinants of AA. The model connects evolutionary, sociocultural, and psychological underpinnings of AA, and offers directions for future research to establish the validity of AA as a distinct phenomenon.

**Keywords:** Approach Anxiety, Dating Anxiety, Social Anxiety, Fear of Rejection, Heterosocial Competence

## Introduction

Mainstream media like *The Economist* emphasize that dating remains a key focus for many people due to both social evolution and the effects of technology (eHarmony, 2023). Modern dating has expanded relationship possibilities and challenges traditional norms as it allows people to connect beyond their usual social circles, yet certain dynamics seem to withstand those changes. One notable and persistent expectation is that men should initiate romantic interest, an action often accompanied by psychological challenges (Mcnamara and Grossman, 1991), which encompasses a range of emotional barriers, such as fear, uncertainty, shyness, and avoidance, which the collective coined "approach anxiety" (AA).

AA lacks a formal definition; a self-identified health website described AA as an *"irrational fear that can stop you from engaging in conversation with strangers. Approach anxiety generally causes you to overthink and fear most interactions"* (Betterhelp, 2024). A dating website asks whether users *"rather hide than approach an attractive woman? This feeling is called 'approach anxiety' in the dating world, and it's no fun. AA isn't just a challenge for introverted guys — no matter how extroverted they are, men rarely love sticking their necks out with strangers"* (Anderson, 2024). Despite the prevalent use of AA in popular media, the true nature and underlying mechanisms of AA have rarely been studied scientifically, as this thesis shall document below.

This thesis was aimed to clarify the construct of AA through a comprehensive review of the academic literature to (a) evaluate whether AA is a legitimate psychological entity and (b) to examine the factors that may contribute to AA. Below I first outline a historical overview of both evolutionary and societal changes in dating and dating norms and needs, and potential sex-differences. This overview suggests that AA is more prevalent among men who are expected to initiate dating, and we examine factors that may facilitate AA by studying differences in age, culture, or dating experiences, and psychological differences leading to dating problems. Below I first present my methods and results followed by an integrative discussion with recommendations on how to understand and advance AA research.

## **The Evolving Landscape of Relationship Initiation: A Historical Perspective**

Pre-industrial societies perceived relationships through the lens of family, religion and community networks, who also initiated the relationship (Bode and Kushnick, 2021). In arranged marriages families selected partners for their children, which was and still is common practice in various cultures across Eurasia (e.g., ancient India, China, Mongolia, Greece and Rome, and most parts of Europe, see Tahir, 2021). Family arrangements were often based on factors such as social status, economic considerations, and family alliances, and are still in practice in some areas of the modern world (Allendorf & Pandian 2016). Societies that transitioned from agrarian to industrial economies often showed a gradual shift towards more individualized approaches to relationship initiation (Luo et al., 2020). Traditional customs and norms still played a significant role, however, and many cultures preserve courtship rituals, such as formal introductions and chaperoned dates, as common practices (Frost, 2015). These rituals often involved strict adherence to social etiquette and expectations.

Only in the early 20th century dating became popular as a distinct social activity in Western societies (Fass, 1977). Dating provided opportunities for individuals to meet potential partners in a less formal setting, allowing for greater autonomy and choice in relationship initiation. However, sex differences and societal expectations still shaped the dynamics of dating; men traditionally took on the roles of organizing, financing, and initiating dates, a pattern evident in surveys dating back to the early 1980s (Noel et al., 2016). Early 2000, most women agreed that early in a relationship, men should take responsibility for initiating dates, handling transportation, and covering expenses (Mongeau et al., 2004). Hence, for most of the twentieth century, date initiation was the active task of the male (Bailey, 1988; Cate & Lloyd, 1992). Additionally, a greater proportion of dates initiated by men were accepted compared to those initiated by women (Grossman & McNamara, 1991).

While traditional dating norms persist, there is increasing acceptance of women initiating relationships, potentially a result of the second wave of feminism in the mid-20th century that challenged more specifically sex differences and women's role in society (Lindeman, 2023; Jackson, 1993). In one

study, nearly 80% of men and 60% of women reported that they had been on a date that was introduced by the woman (Mongeau et al., 1993; Kelley et al., 1981). Most men (88%) had been asked out on a date by a woman at least once, and most women (74%) had asked a man for a date at least once (Lottes, 1993).

Notably, over half of the women in another study reported initiating dates, supporting previous research that shows women are increasingly willing to take an active role in dating, rather than passively waiting for men to initiate (Grossman & McNamara, 1989). Despite this shift, these studies also revealed that college men remain more active and successful in initiating dates (McNamara & Grossman, 1991; Larsen, 2025), and within certain cultural contexts traditional norms of the man being the initiator persist (also Barhana et al., 2015). Women across societal groups convened that a “date” was characterized by the expectation that the man initiates the date, handles the logistics (such as arranging transportation), and covers any expenses (Noel et al., 2016, building on the findings of Mongeau et al., 2004). Such gendered expectations underscore that enduring norms underlie dating dynamics, and men are (still) typically seen as initiator, planner, and financier in early relationship stages.

Evidently there is tension between traditional courtship norms and the increasing prevalence of more egalitarian ideals in heterosexual relationships (Lamont, 2014). Drawing on in-depth interviews with college-educated women, Lamont (2014) highlights how courtship scripts, rooted in the model of an assertive, breadwinning male (“provider”) and a responsive, dependent female (“caretaker”), remain entrenched, despite women’s growing financial independence and commitment to equality. Participants often described deferring to men in initiating romantic gestures, such as asking for dates or proposing marriage, viewing these actions as natural or biologically driven. This adherence to traditional norms reflects essentialist beliefs about men’s “need to pursue” and women’s desire to “be chosen” (Lamont, 2014), and underscore the enduring influence of sex differences, even among progressive and economically independent women.

Relationship initiation is generally imbalanced and one partner is often perceived as doing more of the work than the other (Guynn et al., 2008). Women are more likely to report their male partners as the

initiators. These reports align with traditional sex roles where men are expected to be the pursuers and providers (Buss, 1989). Furthermore, dating advice books often reinforce traditional sex differences and stereotypical dating behavior (e.g., Rose & Frieze, 1989), which encourages men to act as initiators, planners, and financiers, and women to focus on looking attractive and limiting intimacy. A study of more recent dating advice books (2005-2010) including bestsellers and those by celebrity authors yielded similar patterns and largely maintained the “outdated” gender script (Eaton & Rose, 2011).

### **The Digital Age: Online Dating and Virtual Relationships**

The advent of the internet and the proliferation of online dating platforms have revolutionized how people initiate relationships. Studies of online dating suggest that individuals experiencing psychosocial difficulties tend to prefer online interactions as they perceive mediated communication as more comfortable and less intimidating than face-to-face communication (Reid & Reid, 2007, Shalom et al., 2015). A 2024 survey of 923 married adults living in the United States showed that approximately half reported meeting their spouse through an online dating platform (Liesel et al, 2024). Online dating has democratized the dating world, allowing individuals equal chances finding and connecting with potential partners from around the world. Online dating also challenges traditional sex differences as women are increasingly initiating contact and pursuing relationships online. The anonymity and control offered by online platforms might empower women to be more proactive in contacting and pursuing potential partners (Sprecher et al., 2008).

While younger women are more assertive and secure about behaviors in the online world, the idea of generational differences in dating behaviour might still hold true in contemporary and traditional dating. Research has shown that traditional norms still play a significant role in online dating. Men are more likely to send the first message on dating platforms such as Tinder or OKCupid (Finkel et al., 2012, Rosamond, 2017), and frequently adopt a "shotgun" approach and initiate contact with many potential matches (Finkel et al., 2012). Together these findings clearly suggest that online trends align with broader offline dating

behavior demonstrating how traditional courtship patterns persist in these expanding digital contexts (Rosamond, 2017).

Thus far, research indicates that dating dynamics have undergone significant transformations over the past century. However, certain traditional gender roles appear to persist, with men frequently assuming the role of initiator. This raises the question of how well scientific literature has examined contemporary dating behaviors and whether these patterns hold meaningful significance in modern relationships.

### **Why dating-research is more important than ever**

Digital dating researchers often claim that “online dating [has] fundamentally altered the dating landscape for the better” (Finkel et al., 2012). Evidence from other fields challenges this optimism, however, and highlights the growing concerns of loneliness and solitary living as complex and nuanced phenomena shaped by individual, societal, and cultural factors (Swader, 2019; Smith & Victor, 2019). One systematic review revealed significant variability in loneliness across 113 countries, with some populations experiencing chronic or severe loneliness (Surkalim et al., 2022). Additionally, the rise of single-person households has been documented as a historical shift, particularly in affluent nations (Kersten et al., 2024). In Northern Europe, for example, single-person households now account for over 40% of all households in certain regions, an unprecedented trend that marks profound social change (Esteban, 2020).

Increasingly single-households seems to come with a reduction in overall friendship engagement as individuals spending less time in social companionship, linked to a decline in social skills, particularly as individuals increasingly disengage from mixed-sex social groups (Glick and Rose, 2011; Haidt, 2024). These groups traditionally serve as crucial environments for adolescents—and increasingly, emerging adults—to develop and refine skills related to opposite-sex communication and dating initiation (Sigelman et al., 2018). Consequently, reinforcing the decline in offline social and romantic experiences, dating-related anxiety poses a significant challenge for adolescents (La Greca and Mackey, 2007), which highlights the importance of AA as a key domain of romantic competence.



An online survey showed that perceptions of being labeled as "creepy" significantly impacted American men's willingness to interact with women, and 44% of 1000 men reported that this fear reduces their likelihood of initiating contact (Evie-Magazine, 2022), especially single men (~53%). Ambiguous social rules contributed to this hesitation, as many men expressed uncertainty about which behaviors might be perceived as inappropriate or "creepy" which hampered their contact initiation and social and romantic engagement.

The interplay between loneliness, diminishing companionship, and opaque societal expectations around relationships underscores the need for a deeper examination of sex difference dynamics. Lasting traditional gender norms may still prescribe men to take the lead in romantic initiation, while unclear scripts may have made this role become fraught with pressure. By understanding the psychological and societal barriers men face in early dating initiation (the dating distress also known as AA), researchers can uncover critical insights into how modern dating landscapes impact mental health and social cohesion. Addressing these issues is key to foster healthier relational patterns and may help combat what has been labeled the “loneliness epidemic” which affects a third of adults in industrialized countries and is associated with ~26% increase in risk of premature mortality (Cacioppo et al., 2018).

Despite its widespread use across various platforms, there is no formal academic definition of “approach anxiety” or the associated phenomenon, as outlined in this thesis. In the following paragraphs the literature on AA in men in social dating contexts is perused and synthesized, to identify the key themes and gaps in AA research, the implications of AA, and to address the four following exploratory questions:

1. What is the current state of research on “approach anxiety” in social dating among men?
2. What psychological factors are associated with “approach anxiety” in social dating?
3. How have different studies conceptualized/measured “approach anxiety” in social dating contexts?
4. What are the gaps in the existing literature on “approach anxiety” in men?

## Methods

### Search Strategy

We performed a systematic literature review to ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant studies. Articles were identified using a search strategy that covered different electronic databases: Smartcat (university platform), PsycINFO (mainly for psychology related subjects), SociINDEX (used mainly for social sciences), MEDLINE (databased with medical background), Web of Science (more broader in science), Scopus (general science), PubMed (medical articles), and Google Scholar for some additional general information.

The search terms included combinations of keywords that revolved around "approach anxiety", "dating anxiety", and "first encounter", and the full list of search terms is summarized in Table 1. Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to refine the search results, mainly with the searchterms "male, men, man, masculinity, boy, boys" and "dating". The robustness of the search strategy was supported in a consultation with a RUG (University of Groningen) librarian specialist on psychology and behavioral sciences who provided feedback on the selection of databases, keyword combinations, and inclusion of additional subject headings when applicable, before we executed our final search.

### Inclusion Criteria

To ensure relevance and quality, the following inclusion criteria were applied:

1. First, peer-reviewed articles published between 1990 and 2025 were scrutinized, later we broadened the scope from 1900 to 2025.
2. Empirical studies that focused on adolescence and adult populations without an upper age limit (not opinion pieces, editorials, or reviews).
3. Articles had to be available in English.

4. Research that examined the initial process of dating, pre-dating, and/or psychological problems with regard to dating.

The exclusion criteria included:

1. Non-empirical papers, such as opinion pieces or editorials.
2. Phd thesis
3. Articles with insufficient methodological and statistical setup

### **Screening and Selection**

The initial search yielded 824 articles. After removing 145 duplicates, and 197 articles that did not fulfill our inclusion criteria, we included 482 articles. Titles and abstracts were screened for relevance, and 232 articles were perused in full-text. Following a detailed evaluation based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria, we included 83 articles in the final review, and each is presented in Table A, Appendix 1.

### **Data Extraction and Synthesis**

Key data were extracted from the selected studies, including authors, publication year, sample size, intervention type, study design, outcome measures, main findings, and the date when each source was last searched or consulted.

The extracted data were organized into thematic categories to synthesize common findings and identify gaps in the literature. A narrative synthesis approach was adopted, highlighting methodological strengths, limitations, and areas for future research.

## Results

An online search for the term “approach anxiety” conducted on Google on October 23, 2024, yielded approximately 80.800 results, with an additional 14.800 results on YouTube, including a dedicated website, [approachanxiety.com](http://approachanxiety.com). However, a comprehensive search across major academic databases revealed zero direct matches for the term “approach anxiety”. This absence of academic recognition for AA is a striking and significant finding.

To ensure that the concept of AA had not been previously explored under a different name or described indirectly, an extensive literature review was conducted. A detailed summary of the search results is provided as an Excel sheet in Appendix 1. The initial literature search was restricted to studies published from 1990 onward, but after discovery of the number and relevance of research predating this timeframe, the search parameters were expanded to include all empirical studies published as early as 1900 to 2025, thus an academic discourse that spans 125 years.

The current thesis was limited to empirical articles (that offer data) and were published in peer-reviewed journals or equivalent, and written in English. Table 1 presents 29 of the most relevant searchterms to offer insights into the potential mechanisms behind the AA phenomenon and to lay the groundwork for an AA research agenda; 232 papers could be identified as potential sources for the general problem of men’s struggles in dating. Only a fraction of these studies zoom into relationship initiation, and none target a potential anxiety or fear of men to approach women.

Given the vast scope of dating research (and the limitations of the present thesis), only the most frequently cited constructs and psychological theories are discussed in detail, organized over five different parts; (a) the different anxieties in men (54 papers), the (b) fear of rejection (5 papers), (c) possible roles of attachment problems (6 papers), (d) social avoidance (4 papers), and (e) the role of shyness (14 papers).

Table 1: Overview of the Main Searchterms

Searchterms		
“Approach Anxiety”	“Interaction Avoidance”	“Specific Anxiety”
“Attachment Anxiety”	“Interpersonal Anxiety”	“State Anxiety”
“Behavioral Inhibition in Social Context”	“Interpersonal Performance”	“Social Anxiety”
“Dating Anxiety”	“Mate Selection”	“Social Anxiety, Anticipatory”
“Dating Competence”	“Romantic Competence”	“Social Phobia”
“Fear of Social Interaction”	“Romantic Initiation Anxiety”	“Social Phobia in Romantic Contexts”
“Fear of Rejection”	“Romantic Relationship Initiation”	“Social Competence”
“Heterosocial Anxiety”	“Relationship Initiation”	“Social Interaction Anxiety”
“Initiation Behaviour”	“Shyness” + “Men”	“Social Approach Anxiety”
“Interaction in First Encounters”	“Shyness in Social Interaction”	

Overview of all used main searchterms during the literature review. The complete list is to be found in the Appendix 1.

### **Approach Anxiety: Examining Its Validity as a Distinct Form of Anxiety or a Manifestation of Broader Psychosocial Dynamics**

The literature review identified various forms of anxiety that may be linked to difficulties with initiation in social or romantic contexts. These include *social anxiety* as broad term encompassing feelings of nervousness and discomfort in social situations; *dating anxiety* or feeling nervous, fear, or insecure when interacting with potential romantic partners; *heterosocial anxiety* or fear or discomfort experienced in social situations, particularly when interacting with individuals of the opposite sex; and more specific anxieties, each of which could contribute to the underlying challenges associated with approach behaviors.

## Social Anxiety

Social anxiety can become persistent and intense enough to interfere with daily functioning, and develop into Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD), a clinically recognized condition outlined in both the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) and International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11). Social anxiety disorder is also the only form of anxiety in the current thesis that is found in the DSM-5 and ICD-11. During the literature review, both general social anxiety and Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) were considered, which were covered in 17 papers included in this review.

Research demonstrates that individuals with high social anxiety engage in fewer other-sex interactions, perform poorly in social situations, and report lower satisfaction in these interactions compared to low-anxiety peers (Dodge et al., 1987). These negative effects also extend to same-sex interactions; for example, highly socially anxious men face greater challenges in forming same-sex friendships and experience broader adjustment difficulties than less anxious individuals (Himadi et al., 1980). Socially anxious individuals, compared to their non-anxious counterparts, are less likely to initiate interactions with physically attractive people and more likely to engage with those they perceive as less physically attractive (Wenzel, 2009). Furthermore, they consistently estimate that others are less likely to initiate interactions with them. These findings suggest that socially anxious individuals' low self-perceived mate value (individual's overall desirability as a reproductive partner, based on factors such as physical attractiveness, resources, etc.) may influence their choice of partners and the relationships they pursue.

Anxiety research consistently indicates higher levels of anxiety symptoms and disorders among women compared to men (Bourdon et al., 1988; Costello et al., 2004; Craske, 2003; Dowbiggin, 2009; Farhane-Medina et al., 2022). Recent studies have sought to elucidate these differences through the lens of sex difference, highlighting the roles of cultural and developmental factors (Craske, 2003; McLean & Anderson, 2009; McLean et al., 2011). Visible symptoms are sex dependent. Men with severe anxiety often report somatic symptoms, including headaches, appetite loss, and trembling, as well as sensations of losing

control. In contrast, women are more likely to experience social and interpersonal distress, including tearfulness and relational disruptions (Auerbach et al., 2012; Bender et al., 2012). These findings suggest that cognitive and emotional vulnerabilities manifest differently across sexes, increasing the probability of externalized physical symptoms in men and internalized social distress in women. Qualitative studies reinforce this dichotomy; men typically describe anxiety as a persistent, externalized force, conceptualized as uncontrollable and enduring (Drioli-Phillips et al., 2020a).

Social anxiety and 'social phobia' are often used interchangeably. Social phobia, especially Generalized Social Phobia, is characterized by intense fear and anxiety in social settings. Three papers in this review used 'social phobia' consistently (see Table 1, Appendix), aligning with the DSM-5 (Prisbell, 1988; Cox, 2009). Social phobia, which implies a more clinically significant level of distress. This fear leads to avoidance behaviours, impacting daily life and significant fear and anxiety in social situations. This fear can be so intense that it leads to avoidance of social interactions. No sex-differences have been found (Cox, 2009). High communication apprehension, which is closely related to social phobia, is associated with fewer heterosocial skills, more conditioned anxiety, and more heterosocial apprehension.

### **Heterosocial anxiety**

Due to the nature of their relation, the concepts heterosocial anxiety and heterosocial competence have been combined here, and were described in 18 papers. Preliminary research suggests that heterosocial skills, while closely related to general social skills, does represent a distinct subset (Grover, Nangle, & Zeff, 2005). This overlap is expected, as both same-sex and other-sex relationships require core competencies such as initiating and maintaining conversations, resolving conflicts, and demonstrating socially appropriate behavior (Kelly, 1982).

High levels of heterosocial anxiety can result in fewer social interactions, a reduced social performance, and lower satisfaction in these interactions (Grover, 2002). Additionally, heterosocial anxiety

may contribute to more widespread issues, such as depression, alcoholism, and sexual dysfunction (Grover, 2005). Anxiety can also impede the development of heterosocial skills, as anxious individuals may avoid social situations, limiting their opportunities to learn and practice these skills. Anxiety can disrupt the effective use of skills that have already been acquired.

Heterosocial skills encompass behaviors essential for effective interactions with the opposite sex in contexts that range from casual conversation to romantic relationships. Most often during adolescence the skills are developed through social learning processes such as observation, reinforcement, and naturalistic experiences (Grover, 2007; 2012). Disruptions in these skill-acquisition processes can lead to deficits, and result in adolescent males facing unique challenges during the transition to mixed-sex peer groups, which introduces new social expectations (Grover, 2007). Factors that hamper skill-acquisition include anxiety, negative cognitive evaluations, and perceptions of physical attractiveness. An adolescent male's self-assessment of his physical attractiveness, for example, may affect his confidence and willingness to engage in interactions with females (Chee & Conger, 1989).

Heterosocial competence is thought to emerge from the foundation of same-sex peer interactions and social skills (Connolly et al., 2000; Dunphy, 1963; Nangle & Hansen, 1998). Dunphy (1963) theorized that adolescents transition from small same-sex cliques to mixed-sex groups, which facilitate romantic connections. Supporting this, research shows that the size of same-sex peer groups predicts the size of other-sex networks, and more popular adolescents tend to have larger networks of other-sex friends (Connolly et al., 2000; Bukowski et al., 1999). Additionally, same-sex social skills, popularity, and perceived competence correlate positively with similar traits in other-sex interactions (Miller, 1990). Nangle and Hansen (1998) proposed that socially competent adolescents join larger networks, which offer more opportunities to develop heterosocial skills, and to transition to mixed-sex groups.

Higher anxiety in mixed-sex group interactions was associated with delayed dating experiences (Boyle and O'Sullivan, 2013). Adolescents transitioning from other-sex friendships to romantic relationships face the challenge of navigating complex emotions and new situations. Research indicates



that young adults perceive interactions with romantic partners as more difficult than those with close same-sex friends (Buhrmester et al., 1988).

A retrospective analysis found that individuals with a history of social anxiety experienced heightened self-consciousness in social situations during junior high school, and had fewer dating partners compared to a control group between the ages of 12 and 21 (Albano et al., 1995). Dating anxiety was linked to a later age of first dating relationship and fewer sexual experiences (Boyle and O'Sullivan, 2013). Additionally, adolescents who rarely dated often showed diminished social skills, increased social withdrawal, and romantic dysfunction in adulthood, reflecting developmental continuity (Collins & Sroufe, 1999; Nangle & Hansen, 1998).

The exploration of dating, social, and heterosocial anxieties highlights how these interconnected forms of anxiety impede social and romantic interactions potentially leading to the feeling of rejection.

### **Dating anxiety**

In the present thesis, 16 papers mentioned at least once the combination of dating anxiety and early initiation of relationships. Surveys from the late 20th century suggest that 30% to 60% of college students (both sexes) identify as highly anxious or shy when interacting with the opposite sex (Arkowitz et al., et al. 1978; Zimbardo, 1977). McNamara and Grossman (1991) reported high levels of anxiety related to dating, with 83% of men and 76% of women describing themselves as moderately to very anxious. However, these findings, derived from an early and methodologically constrained study of U.S. undergraduate psychology students, require careful interpretation. Neumann et al. (1988), have highlighted the experiences of men specifically seeking help for discomfort in interactions with women.

The findings align with more recent and culturally diverse studies (both sexes), such as Ethiopia and Saudi Arabia, which reported prevalence rates of discomfort of 71% and 71.9%, respectively (Garcia-Moreno et al., 2006 Sani et al. 2012). The United States and Australia reported 57% and 53% prevalence of discomfort, respectively (Wiersma-Mosley et al. 2019, Stallman et al., 2009). In contrast,

studies in Canada, Malaysia, Kenya, and Ethiopia report much lower rates, ranging from 10.8% to 41.9% (Adlaf et al., 2004, Rachel et al., 2012, Dessie et al., 2013, Shimekaw et al., 2013). Additionally, studies from France, Norway, and Iceland reported even lower prevalence rates of dating-related stress, with figures of 25.7%, 22.9%, and 22.5%, respectively (Verger et al., 2010, Nerdrum et al., 2014, Talbert et al., 2020 Bernhardsdóttir and Vilhjálmsson, 2013). It shows the emphasis on discomfort with the opposite sex globally and the need for critical research of men's approaching behaviour.

Notably, the prevalence of dating anxiety in college students appears to be quite high. Some surveys suggest that between 30 and 60% of college students (both sexes) report being either very anxious or shy with the opposite sex (Rossmann, 1991). Grover (2002) indicates that up to 37% of US college-aged males report significant anxiety related to dating. A more recent study was found to be a striking 88% (Muhwezi et al., 2020), which they explained with factors such as acculturation, globalization, and the affective responses to stressors and hormonal fluctuations in young adults.

Although both sexes report dating-related anxiety, studies reveal distinct patterns. Women exhibit significantly higher anxiety on the "Active Intentions for Dating" subscale (Calvert et al., 1987), suggesting heightened apprehension regarding initiating romantic interactions. This dynamic may reinforce traditional sex differences, wherein men are perceived as the primary initiators in dating scenarios. Without male action, such interactions may fail to materialize due to mutual anxieties.

These discrepancies suggest that cultural, environmental, and contextual factors, such as societal values, university settings, and local experiences of stress, may contribute to variations in the reported prevalence of dating-related stress across different regions.

### **The Role of Rejection in Relationship Initiation**

Rejection is a profoundly painful experience that humans are strongly motivated to avoid (Eisenberger et al., 2003; MacDonald & Leary, 2005). Consequently, the desire for romantic connection often conflicts with the goal of minimizing the emotional pain associated with rejection (Clark & Beck,

2010; Murray et al., 2006). This fear can significantly hinder relationship initiation; for example, 76% of undergraduate participants (both sexes) in one study reported that fear of rejection had at least once prevented them from pursuing a romantic relationship, and 54% indicated that it had completely stopped them from doing so (Vorauer & Ratner, 1996).

Rejection significantly influences dating behavior through its impact on individuals' sense of belonging and self-esteem, creating a complex interplay of approach-avoidance motivations. Social exclusion triggers two conflicting responses: a cautious effort to restore social bonds and an active avoidance of further rejection. For individuals with unmet belonging needs, this regulation process can lead to heightened susceptibility to social influence, as they align their attitudes with peers perceived as potential sources of affiliation (DeWall et al., 2010).

The theory of belonging regulation in line with Baumeister and Leary's (1995) model of belonging as a fundamental need, posits that threats to belonging cannot be mitigated by unrelated affirmations. Instead, individuals prioritize actions that specifically restore social connections. However, this pursuit of new bonds is often contingent on low fear of negative evaluation, limiting the capacity of rejected individuals to engage socially (Maner et al., 2007).

Low self-esteem exacerbates these dynamics, as it is tightly linked to chronic feelings of exclusion and heightened sensitivity to rejection. Fear of negative evaluation from dating partners—often tied to lower self-esteem—can inhibit their ability to approach women due to concerns about being judged unfavorably (McClure et al., 2010). Sociometer theory suggests that self-esteem functions as a gauge of relational quality, and individuals with low self-esteem experience even mild rejection as profoundly threatening (Collins & Ford, 2010). Such individuals prioritize self-protection, avoiding risks associated with new connections, and exhibit conservative decision-making, even in non-relational contexts. These patterns suggest that belonging regulation interacts with broader regulatory systems, influencing both social and nonsocial behavior.

These findings underscore the intricate ways rejection and its associated fears shape dating behaviors, reflecting individual differences in self-esteem, strategies for belonging regulation and attachment style.

### **Attachment Theory on Approach Anxiety: Exploring the Impact of Early Bonds on Romantic Pursuit**

Attachment theory (Bowlby) suggests that early relationships with caregivers shape our ability to form relationships later in life, including secure, anxious, avoidant, and disorganized types. This review identified six papers about attachment influence on early initiation behaviour.

Attachment styles significantly influence dating behavior, particularly in men (Toma, 2022). Secure attachment leads to confidence in approaching others. Avoidant attachment is associated with lower partner-specific desire, leading men high in this trait to experience greater difficulty initiating romantic approaches and feel less attracted to their partners (Blumenstock, 2023). However, avoidant individuals may exhibit a heightened desire for attractive non-partners, as their discomfort with intimacy and closeness often steers them toward less emotionally involved encounters (Coffey et al., 2022). This aversion to intimacy may also discourage them from entering committed relationships. In the context of online dating, avoidant individuals may find these platforms advantageous for expressing their intentions openly, potentially reducing negative experiences compared to traditional offline dating (Coffey et al., 2022).

People with an anxious-preoccupied attachment style have a strong desire for intimacy but often doubt its reciprocation. Guynn et al. (2008) found that they initiate relationships more often, perhaps driven by a fear of being alone. This anxiety might drive them to take the initiative in forming relationships. The study also found that secure individuals were not the most likely to initiate relationships, contrary to the researchers' initial hypothesis. The authors suggest that securely attached ones are not anxious about being single and therefore don't feel pressured to initiate and are comfortable with initiating, leading to a more balanced role in the initiation process.

Attachment anxiety is a general fear of abandonment or rejection that can occur across different attachment styles and is marked by a hyperactive attachment system and a strong motivation to affiliate. It can become activated during relationship initiation, even in those without anxious tendencies (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

One study found that attachment anxiety had a negative relationship with success for men, meaning that more anxious men made fewer matches than their less anxious counterparts (McClure et al., 2010). However, for women, there was no relationship between anxiety and the number of matches made. Argued by the authors, the sex difference is likely due to anxious men being less popular and who therefore struggled to make matches.

Sex differences exacerbate these challenges. Societal expectations often position men as initiators in dating scenarios, placing additional pressure on them to approach women (Eaton and Rose, 2011). Conversely, women, traditionally viewed as "gatekeepers," are more selective in partner choices (Larsen et al., 2025), which heightens men's apprehension about potential rejection.

Attachment-related anxiety reflects the preferences regarding female initiation strategies. Men who believe women should take a more direct approach to initiating relationships are found to have higher relationship anxiety compared to those who prefer women to use more indirect strategies (Barhana, 2015). This suggests that men who support female initiation strategies may do so because it alleviates their own fears and anxieties related to the initiation process as a compensatory mechanism (Barhana, 2015).

In summary, the challenges men face in approaching women during dating scenarios are shaped by a complex interplay of attachment styles, fear of rejection, societal expectations, and traditional sex difference dynamics. These factors collectively influence men's confidence, behaviors, and experiences in romantic pursuits.

## **Intersocial Avoidance**

One paper presented four studies of heterosocial avoidance in college males and how these men initiated interactions (Twentyman, 1981). The researcher compared frequent daters with those who rarely or never date on their social skills, anxiety levels, and perceptions of social cues. Daters were more likely to initiate conversations and were perceived as more socially skilled, while nondaters, despite reporting lower anxiety, were less likely to initiate interactions, and scored lower on social skills (studies I and II). Importantly, the only notable behavioral difference between daters and nondaters occurred during the phone call: nondaters were less likely to secure a date after an initial refusal. However, the researchers suggested that this difference primarily reflected daters' greater willingness to take the initiative in pursuing further interaction. Study III revealed that nondaters had less accurate perceptions of social norms related to initiating interactions, although both groups recognized effective approaches. Finally, Study IV confirmed that nondaters were more likely to avoid interactions in real-world settings, supporting the notion that their avoidance extended beyond controlled environments. These findings reveal that nondaters were significantly more likely to avoid initiating interactions with women in these real-world settings. The researchers also highlight the need for in vivo observations to validate laboratory findings and emphasize the importance of combining laboratory measures of specific skills with real-world observations to better understand heterosocial avoidance in naturalistic settings.

## **The Role of Shyness**

This review identified 14 papers that covered the association between AA and shyness. Shyness might play a significant role in hindering men's ability to initiate relationships. Shy individuals often harbor negative self-beliefs, which lead to a pervasive fear of rejection and reluctance to engage in self-disclosure (Bruch, 1995). Additionally, shy men seem prone to a pessimistic attributional style, interpreting negative relationship outcomes as internal, stable, and global, while dismissing positive outcomes as external, unstable, and situation-specific (Johnson, 1995). This cognitive pattern exacerbates

their difficulty in forming and maintaining healthy connections. Societal norms surrounding masculinity further compound the issue. Cultural expectations often discourage men from expressing emotions openly, a challenge that is particularly pronounced for shy men, who already struggle with emotional expression (Bruch, 1998). This lack of emotional openness hinders their ability to build deep and meaningful bonds. Moreover, shyness negatively impacts interpersonal competence, making basic social interactions, such as initiating conversations or effectively expressing feelings, difficult (Bruch, 1998). This deficit in social skills further complicates their navigation of relationships.

Shyness was negatively correlated with direct relationship initiation in all four settings studied: social gatherings ( $r = -.49$ ), bars/nightclubs ( $-.47$ ), work/class ( $-.31$ ) and Facebook ( $-.19$ , Sprecher et al., 2019). The negative association between shyness and direct relationship initiation was stronger for men than for women in all but the Facebook setting. Social gatherings and bars/nightclubs can be considered relationship-initiating or “open-field” settings. Shy people may be especially hesitant to use direct strategies that could be interpreted as romantic overtures in settings where there is a higher risk of rejection.

A protective self-presentation style is another notable characteristic of shy men. They often prioritize avoiding negative evaluation over seeking approval, which results in a diminished willingness to initiate social interactions or disclose personal information. This cautious approach restricts their opportunities for romantic connections (Bruch, 1998; Manning, 1993). Compounding this, shy men may exhibit more permissive sexual attitudes but show limited engagement in relational sexual behaviors. This suggests that, while they may have an interest in exploring their sexuality, they struggle to do so within the context of a relationship. Consequently, they may resort to solitary sexual activities, such as watching pornography or masturbating, as an alternative to pursuing romantic relationships (Luster, 2013).

One study investigates shyness mindset on two dimensions of social anxiety: performance anxiety (fear of being scrutinized) and interaction anxiety (fear of social interaction; Valentiner, 2011). Shyness mindset moderated the stability of performance anxiety, with a fixed mindset predicting stable or increasing

anxiety and a growth mindset associated with decreased anxiety. However, shyness mindset did not moderate the stability of interaction anxiety. While a growth mindset seems beneficial for performance anxiety, the same might not be true for interaction anxiety. The researchers speculate that interaction anxiety might be more strongly influenced by other factors, such as genetics (personality) or early childhood experience.

Research with children has identified a range of characteristics that impact their social interactions and development, pointing out the mediating role of shyness (Davis & Buss, 2012; Baardstu et al., 2023). Shy children are less likely to initiate social interactions with peers, talk less, and demonstrate poorer expressive, pragmatic, and receptive language skills. Consequently, they often display lower social competence and fewer social skills in group settings.

Together, these factors illustrate the multifaceted ways in which shyness can obstruct men's ability to foster close relationships, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to address both social and emotional barriers.

## **Discussion**

The term "approach anxiety" has gained significant traction within the dating and coaching industries, evidenced by its widespread usage across numerous websites and self-help platforms. This thesis was aimed to critically examine the academic foundations of this concept, investigating its presence - or lack thereof - in the scientific literature. Initial exploration and consultations with subject-matter experts revealed a striking gap: the term "approach anxiety" is notably absent from established scholarly literature. This is particularly surprising given the frequent reports by dating advisors, coaches, and authors on the challenges men face when initiating romantic encounters. The null finding raises an intriguing question: Is



AA merely a construct popularized by mainstream media, does the academic literature conceptualize it under a different term, or does this represent the emergence of a fundamentally new research domain?

For purposes of exposition, the discussion part is organized under four main parts. First, the question of the correct terminology. Second, an overview is provided of the main findings summarized into a new model. Third, a theoretical approach towards a new concept of AA is outlined, and finally, I provide suggestions for new hypotheses and research avenues.

### **A: Rethinking 'Approach Anxiety': Is the Term Missing the Mark?**

The term "approach anxiety" appears to have originated in the American pickup artist community who focus on techniques to attract and seduce romantic or sexual partners, although pinpointing an exact first use of "approach anxiety" is challenging based on the provided search results. The book of Neil Strauss (2005) was probably one of the first ones describing the fear of approaching women. This suggests that the term gained popularity within that context, likely somewhere between the end of the 1990 to mid 2000-s when pick-up-artist culture became more mainstream.

Using the term AA is inherently problematic and paradoxical, as it conflates situational discomfort with a medicalized condition. By labeling the hesitation or distress some men experience when approaching women as "anxiety" the term implies a clinical or pathological issue that may not exist in most cases. Anxiety, in medical terms (DSM-5), refers to a chronic or pervasive state of mental distress (APA, 2013), which is not necessarily the experience of every man facing difficulty in approaching women. Instead, this term can overgeneralize and pathologize what might otherwise be a natural, situational response to social pressures or fear of rejection. Furthermore, framing the issue as "anxiety" may discourage men from recognizing that this discomfort is often rooted in a lack of confidence, experience, or preparation—factors that are entirely within their control to address. Two conclusions arise, first, adopting

a more precise and empowering term would better capture the nature of this challenge while avoiding the unnecessary stigmatization associated with clinical language.

A second question is whether AA represents a genuine concept or reflects a misinterpretation rooted in the challenges of the American dating lifestyle? Limited research has explored the extent to which American dating culture influences other native cultures and whether the use of specific terminology may contribute to the creation of questionable or potentially non-existent psychological constructs. In other words, it is important to consider the possibility that the absence of "approach anxiety" in the scientific literature may be attributable to its potential status as an artificial construct, shaped by factors such as the influence of dating industries, language barriers, or sociocultural differences unique to American culture compared to others. Further research is critically needed, but below I aim to apply existing knowledge to analyze the potential concept of AA.

#### **B: From Insights to Innovation: A Progressive Model of Approach Anxiety**

In light of the literature gap, the present thesis endeavored to establish a foundation for systematic inquiry into the dynamics of dating initiation. While dating remains a heavily researched domain, the initial stages of romantic interactions have received comparatively little attention. The complexity of the initial stages stands out as a key area of inquiry. Due to the lack of direct literature on this topic, 29 alternative terms with potential relevance to men's fear of initiating relationships were identified. **Figure 1** provides a graphical depiction of the potential main-terms influencing AA within initial encounters. Given the limitations of the present thesis in time and resources, the preliminary conceptual framework is a first attempt to map the influences on AA, and future research will aim to analyze these components in greater detail.

Figure 1 distinguishes between direct effects (represented by solid lines) and indirect effects (dashed lines) on AA, which underscores the complexity of the relationships among interpersonal competence, emotional responses, and avoidance behaviors. These pathways highlight the interplay between skills deficits, anxiety, and maladaptive coping strategies, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of AA anxiety in

social and romantic contexts. At the center of the model is AA, potentially linked to interpersonal performance represented on the left, encompassing factors such as social skills and competence.

The literature review pointed out that certain concepts play a more critical role than others in understanding AA; social competence has been extensively studied, for example, with findings highlighting that heterosocial skills significantly affect how men approach women and how secure they feel in doing so (Kelly, 1982; Grover et al., 2005). As the results showed, more interaction leads to better skills resulting in better homo- and heterosocial competence (Grover, 2007). Also, interpersonal competence was negatively associated with dating anxiety, meaning individuals with higher interpersonal competence experienced less dating anxiety (Adamczyk and Segrin, 2016). Based on this evidence, social skills appear to play a significant role in AA, although more research is needed to confirm this relationship and expand our understanding. Given the literature, special focus should be given to the research of adolescents (Connolly et al., 2000; Nangle & Hansen, 1998), building the ground of heterosocial competence and a direct outcome towards AA.

Another term is interaction avoidance, which refers to the deliberate or unconscious tendency to evade or minimize interpersonal exchanges, which was researched by Twentyman (1981). Nondaters are less knowledgeable about social cues and norms and are more likely to avoid interactions, even when they possess adequate social skills. This might show the direct influence of dating repetitions, communication skills, and a potential link with AA.

On the right side of Figure 1 potentially psychological contributors to AA are presented that were identified in the review, such as social anxiety, dating anxiety, and specific anxiety (e.g., anticipatory social anxiety but due to the limits of the current thesis, these will not be further analysed). Second, fear of rejection and fear of social interaction. And third, social phobia. Finally, Attachment styles, which are presented as mechanisms that exert direct or indirect effects on AA. The following paragraphs will try to explain the potentially individual contributions to AA.

**Anxiety.** The concept of approach “anxiety” logically suggests beginning with an examination of anxiety itself, whether men experience a generalized fear when approaching women. The necessity for focused research into AA versus dating anxiety is underscored by its prevalence and potential to impose significant limitations on individuals' social lives, with studies indicating that 30% to 60% of college students experience significant anxiety or shyness in opposite-sex interactions, particularly among men, who often struggle with initiating romantic approaches (McNamara & Grossman, 1991; Arkowitz et al., 1978; Grover, 2002).

Social anxiety research highlights specific difficulties men face in social and romantic contexts. Individuals with high social anxiety tend to avoid other-sex interactions, perform poorly in social situations, and report lower satisfaction in these interactions compared to those with lower anxiety levels (Dodge et al., 1987). For men, this avoidance behavior may stem from a combination of low self-perceived mate value and fear of rejection, leading them to favor interactions with individuals they perceive as less physically attractive (Wenzel, 2009). Moreover, socially anxious men often believe others are less likely to engage with them, reinforcing a cycle of avoidance and missed opportunities to approach women. Additionally, socially anxious men often struggle to form same-sex friendships and broader social networks (Himadi et al., 1980), depriving them of opportunities to build self-esteem and practice the interpersonal skills necessary for romantic contexts. The compounding effects of low self-perceived mate value, fear of rejection, and limited social competence suggest that anxiety can be a significant obstacle for men in approaching women, further highlighting the importance of addressing social anxiety within the framework of romantic relationship initiation.

Anxiety can become so intense that it physically inhibits the individual. While research consistently finds that women report higher levels of anxiety than men (Bourdon et al., 1988; Costello et al., 2004; Farhane-Medina et al., 2022), the nature of anxiety symptoms differs significantly between the sexes. Men often externalize anxiety through physical symptoms, such as headaches, trembling, and a sensation of

losing control (Auerbach et al., 2012; Bender et al., 2012). This externalization can create a barrier to acknowledging or addressing anxiety's impact on interpersonal interactions, including approaching potential romantic partners.

Next to mental and physical origins, cultural and developmental factors tied to sex socialization may exacerbate these struggles. Men are often socialized to mask emotional vulnerabilities, which can limit their willingness to seek help or openly discuss anxieties related to dating and relationships (Craske, 2003; McLean et al., 2011). Qualitative studies further emphasize that men tend to perceive anxiety as an uncontrollable, externalized force, which could lead to a sense of helplessness in addressing the fear of initiating romantic interactions (Drioli-Phillips et al., 2020). This perception may discourage them from developing the social skills needed to approach women confidently.

Returning to the initial question of whether AA is a genuine psychological construct or simply a form of anxiety, only future research can provide clarity and answer this uncertainty.

**Fear.** It is not necessarily required that AA manifests itself as severe anxiety; it could also be a more immediate, situational fear response. Research indicates that fear of rejection significantly impacts dating dynamics, with 76% of undergraduates reporting that it has prevented them from pursuing a romantic relationship at least once, and 54% stating it has completely deterred them (Vorauer & Ratner, 1996). This fear aligns with the theory of belonging regulation, which builds on Baumeister and Leary's (1995) conceptualization of belonging as a fundamental human need. According to this theory, fear of rejection is a direct threat to social belonging. These findings suggest a potential link between AA and fear of rejection, underscoring the need for further exploration of this relationship. Adding the finding into the model in figure one, fear may have a direct influence on AA or indirectly via the lack of social skills.

**Phobia.** Social phobia might be the extreme form of men struggling to approach women. Closely tied high communication apprehension is linked to lower social skills with the opposite sex, greater anxiety, and

increased fear of social interactions. Together, these factors often lead to avoidance in dating situations, especially when approaching women (Cox, 2009). Additionally, individuals with high communication apprehension often perceive themselves as less physically attractive, further exacerbating their reluctance to initiate social interactions. The existing literature on social phobia and its impact on dating remains limited, with no studies specifically addressing AA. Another potential factor to consider for inclusion in the model presented in Figure 1 is the possibility that a certain percentage of men may indeed develop something akin to AA.

**Attachment styles.** Attachment theory is a well-established area of research with significant insights into dating dynamics; however, its application to the earliest stages of romantic initiation remains relatively underexplored. Avoidant attachment is linked to lower desire for partners, making it harder for men with this trait to initiate romantic approaches and leading them to seek less emotionally involved encounters (Blumenstock, 2023; Coffey et al., 2022).

Studies show that more anxious attached men make fewer matches, likely due to their lower popularity, while anxiety had no effect on women's match success (McClure et al., 2010). Societal expectations position men as initiators, increasing their pressure and anxiety. Additionally, men who prefer women to take a more direct approach in dating tend to have higher relationship anxiety, reflecting their own insecurities and attachment style (Barhana, 2015). On the contrary, one study found the opposite, secure men having no issues getting approached by the women. Guynn et al. (2008) found that securely attached individuals do not initiate romantic interactions at a higher rate (preoccupied individuals do), feel more at ease being single, refraining from initiating, or allowing women to take the lead in initiating. Replicating these studies is essential to thoroughly investigate the authors' suggestions, with a specific focus on understanding and refining men's behavior when they are approached by women.

Finalizing the discussion on attachment theory and its connection to AA, Meng et al. (2015) found that 40–60% of the American population is securely attached. If securely attached individuals are less

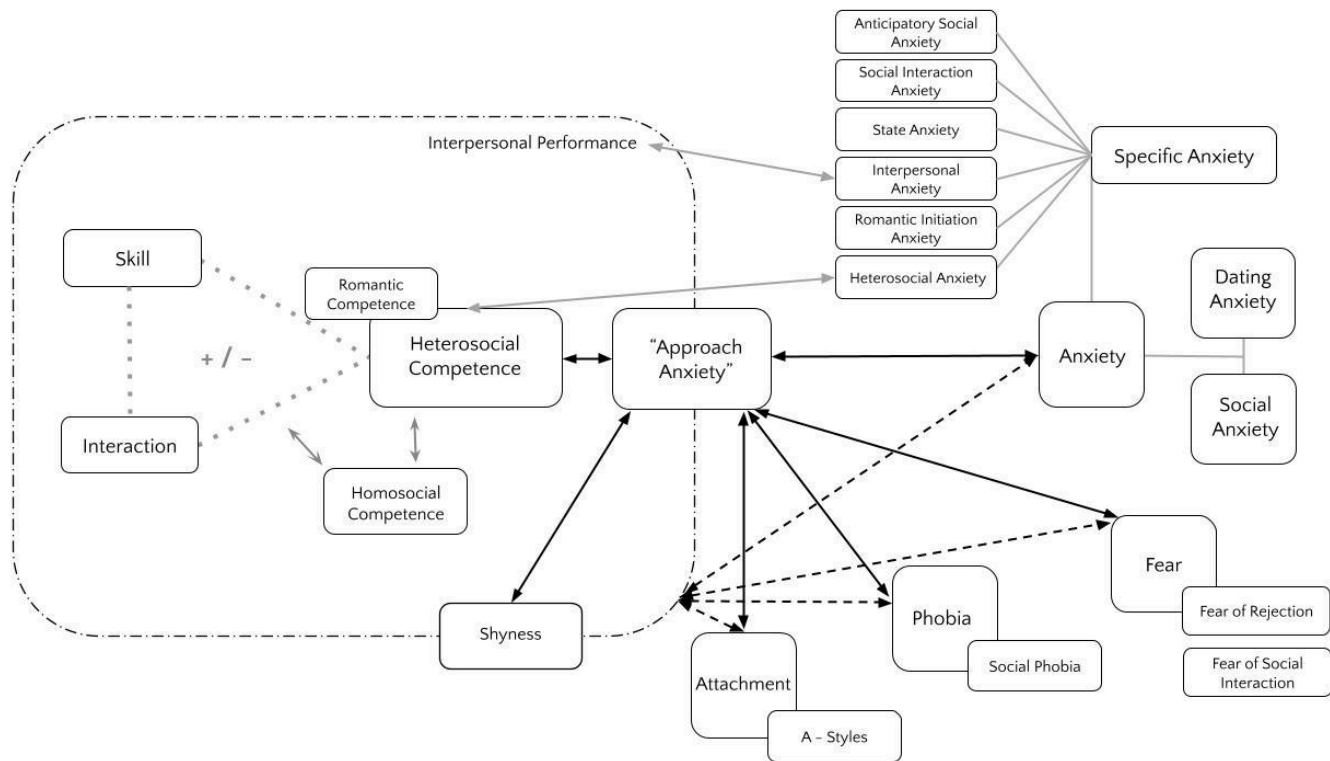
likely to experience AA, this statistic could provide an important clue about whether AA is a universal experience among men or primarily affects those with attachment insecurities. If a significant portion of the population does not experience AA, this would suggest that AA may not be a general phenomenon but rather one tied to insecure attachment styles. This insight could help clarify whether AA is a widespread issue or one that disproportionately affects a subset of men.

At last, if it turns out that not all men experience AA, it could suggest that the “anxiety” is not a universal experience but rather a specific reaction influenced by personality traits, such as shyness. Potentially, the interpersonal abilities are either strengthened or limited by shyness (Davis & Buss, 2012; Baardstu et al., 2023), which plays a dual role: it can mediate interpersonal performance or exert a direct influence on AA. Shyness can negatively impact interpersonal competence, making it difficult to initiate conversations or express feelings effectively (Bruch, 1998). These difficulties could increase anxiety in social situations, making the prospect of approaching a woman even more daunting.

Also, shy individuals often harbour negative self-beliefs, leading to a fear of rejection and reluctance to engage in self-disclosure (Bruch, 1995). This fear of rejection could be a major component of AA, as highlighted in the discussion of social anxiety, dating anxiety, and fear of rejection. A shy man might anticipate rejection, leading to anxiety and avoidance of approaching women altogether. Overall, the literature of shyness in regard to the early states of dating is scarce but given knowledge it could be a special link in the model (Figure 1) combining problems in interpersonal communication and other personality traits.

Figure 1.

*Overview of potential interactions effects on approach behaviour*



*Note:* This figure illustrates the potential mechanism underlying approach anxiety (AA), within initial encounter. Dashed lines mark indirect effects, full lines a direct effect. At the center, the model places AA, which is influenced by the left box -interpersonal performance (IP), including hetero and homosocial competence. On the right, multiple factors relating to anxiety, fear, phobia and attachment could show a direct or indirect effect on AA. Shyness has a special function potentially mediating IP or having direct influence.



## **Toward a Comprehensive Framework for Understanding Male Behavior in Romantic Initiation**

The evident absence of "approach anxiety" from academic literature opens a critical opportunity for scholarly investigation if such a construct really existed. Establishing the validity and scope of this construct is imperative, as it may shed light on the liability of the mainstream literature and an undiscovered clinical aspect for potentially suffering men. To initiate research into a potential fear in men, it is essential to first establish and understand relevant theoretical principles. A critical consideration is the context of this "fear", as it inherently involves the interaction of two individuals. As a dyad, the effects can be partitioned into three components: those attributable to the perceiver (P), those associated with the observed target (T), and the emergent effects resulting from the unique interaction between P and T. Historically, researchers and theorists have acknowledged that attraction is influenced by both internal processes within the perceiver—such as motivation, comparison levels, and personality—and external characteristics of the target, such as physical attractiveness (summarized in Sprecher et al., 2008). This interplay underscores the complexity of understanding interpersonal dynamics in the context of fear and attraction.

Given the present literature review and existing theoretical frames of dating, future researchers developing a theory of male behavior during initial romantic encounters could synthesize insights from Social Penetration Theory (SPT), the Intimacy Process Model (IPM), and Stimulus-Value-Role Theory (SVR) to address the interplay of cognitive, emotional, and social dynamics in these interactions (following a brief discussion, more details in Appendix 2).

Social penetration theory (Altman and Taylor's, 1973) highlights the gradual deepening of relationships through reciprocal self-disclosure, while the intimacy process model (Reis and Shaver, 1988) emphasizes responsiveness and validation as key to fostering intimacy. These frameworks suggest that initial encounters are shaped by men's navigation of societal expectations, anxiety about rejection, and the perceived receptivity of their partner. Stimulus-value-role theory (Murstein, 1970) focuses on the sequential stages of attraction (stimulus), shared values (value), and defined roles (role), and provides an

additional lens to examine how men prioritize different cues and behaviors during these early stages.

Taking together, all 3 theories together might help to develop a fundamental theory to understand AA.

A future theory might propose that men's behavior in initial encounters is driven by adaptive strategies to mitigate perceived risks and maximize relational rewards. Drawing from social penetration theory men likely engage in shallow, low-risk disclosures to test compatibility while avoiding vulnerability. The intimacy process model provides the concept of responsiveness, which highlights the importance of feedback; positive signals from a potential partner can alleviate AA and encourage further interaction, while negative or neutral responses may inhibit engagement. Stimulus-value-role theory contributes to understanding AA by framing how men evaluate potential partners across stages, focusing first on surface-level stimuli (e.g., appearance or social cues), then exploring shared values, and only later considering long-term role alignment.

This integrated framework could further explore how external influences, such as sex difference and prior experiences, shape men's approach strategies. For instance, societal expectations may pressure men to initiate contact, amplifying anxiety, while responsiveness from a partner may serve as a critical factor in overcoming this barrier. Similarly, cultural and individual factors, such as attachment styles or previous relationship successes, might influence the degree of risk men are willing to take.

By combining these theories, a future model could offer a dynamic, context-sensitive understanding of male behavior in romantic initiation. This framework would not only highlight the complexity of early-stage interactions but also suggest interventions—such as social skills training or re-framing societal norms—to support men navigating these pivotal moments in forming connections.

To test a potential theory, the literature review identified several surveys relevant to the assessment of heterosocial interactions and competencies. Please see Appendix 3 for a detailed explanation. These include the Dating Anxiety Survey (DAS) by Calvert et al. (1987), which focuses specifically on measuring anxiety within dating contexts, offering targeted insights into this unique social domain. The

Survey of Heterosexual Interactions by Twentyman and McFall (1975) provides a broader evaluation of heterosexual social interactions, making it particularly useful for examining general heterosocial dynamics. The Heterosocial Skills Inventory for Women by Kolko (1985) is designed to assess heterosocial skills specifically in women, offering a sex-specific perspective on social competence. Finally, the Measure of Heterosocial Competence by Groer (2012) evaluates heterosocial competence comprehensively, capturing a wide range of social abilities in mixed-sex interactions. These instruments collectively provide valuable tools for studying various facets of heterosocial behavior and anxiety.

### **Inborn or Learned? New Hypothetical Approaches to Understand Complex Behaviour.**

A key question remains: Is AA a real construct and if so, the reluctance to approach women an innate, evolutionarily driven behavior, or a learned response shaped by societal norms? Evolutionary psychologists, such as Buss and Schmitt (1993), suggest that differences in relationship initiation strategies between men and women stem from evolutionary factors related to reproductive opportunities and constraints (also Larsen et al., 2025). According to this perspective, males employ direct tactics as a means of attracting females, whose reproductive success may be influenced by access to resources. Higher social status is associated with greater reproductive success for men, primarily through lower risk of childlessness (Zhang & Santtila, 2022). Females tend to use more indirect approaches (Sprecher, 2019), like asking a friend for an introduction or waiting for the other person to make a move. But also emphasizing health and youthfulness, to appeal to males, who face constraints related to finding fertile partners. As females are evolutionarily inclined to prioritize partners with qualities like economic status, warmth, and trustworthiness (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991, 1992; Sprecher et al., 2008). Men may experience heightened anxiety in scenarios where they perceive themselves as lacking in these domains, reflecting a sensitivity to cues of potential rejection.

H: Approach anxiety in men is influenced by evolutionary pressures stemming from female mate selectivity, which increases men's uncertainty about the success of their courtship attempts.

The concept of AA presents an intriguing paradox when considered alongside the strategic pluralism theory (Trivers, 1972; Gangestad & Simpson, 2000) which outlines that men are generally motivated to maximize reproductive opportunities by seeking multiple partners, while women's preferences in a partner are more context-dependent, varying based on whether they are pursuing a long-term or short-term relationship. AA, which hinders men's willingness to initiate interactions, seems to contradict this evolutionary perspective, raising questions about its origins and function.

A potential insight may lie in the observed sex differences in dating goals (Mongeau, 2004). Men, like women, want to get to know their date partner and reduce uncertainty. Men are interested in exploring the possibility of a romantic relationship, similar to women. But, men are more likely than women to report sexual activity goals, and these goals may be less tied to romantic interest. It is essential to recognise that not all men and women conform to these stereotypical goals. Both men and women look for similar qualities in short-term mates, with physical attractiveness being the top priority for both sexes (Li & Kenrick, 2006; Wiederman & Dubois, 1998). While men are more likely to seek short-term sexual relationships, both sex still pursue long-term committed partnerships (Sprecher et al., 2008). Taken together, AA could be a result of a learned and felt mismatch of dating goals leading to uncertainty and the feeling of satisfying wrong dating norms.

H: Approach anxiety stems from a perceived mismatch between personal dating goals and societal or partner expectations, leading to uncertainty and fear of rejection.

Also, men generally show higher variance in reproductive success compared to women. This means that some men have significantly more offspring than others, while women's reproductive success tends to be more evenly distributed (Ross et. al, 2023). An astonishing biological research group indicates that men typically have less variance in reproductive success compared to women (Favre and Sornette, 2012). Today's human population is descended from approximately 1.4 times as many women as men. They used

an agent-based model to investigate why the Time to the Most Recent Common Ancestor (TMRCA) based on human mitochondrial DNA, which is passed down from mothers to their children, is estimated to be twice that based on the non-recombining part of the Y chromosome, which is passed down from fathers to sons. Showing in a smaller male breeding population.

The higher variance in male reproductive success is attributed to sexual selection, where females can be more selective in choosing mates with higher status and resources, causing males to compete with each other for mates, which can lead to risk-taking behaviour and a higher death rate for males (Larsen et al., 2025). The prevalence of monogamy in humans, compared to polygyny in most mammals, contributes to lower reproductive skew among human males than in other mammalian species (Ross et.al, 2023).

A potential hypothesis suggests that AA acts as a regulatory mechanism, prompting caution in situations where the likelihood of rejection is high. This would have minimized wasted effort and social costs associated with failed courtship attempts in ancestral environments

H: Approach anxiety in men evolved as an adaptive response to the high variance in male reproductive success, serving to optimize the timing and context of courtship to increase the likelihood of mate acceptance.

H: Reluctance to approach women is positively correlated with cautious decision-making tendencies, suggesting a potential evolutionary role in risk aversion.

Might the phenomenon of AA be especially relevant during certain developmental stages? Emerging adulthood (ages 18-29) is a critical period for intimacy, as college students navigate dating, hookups, and the exploration of what they want in relationships (Davila et al., 2020). This stage of life involves making choices that can have lasting emotional and relational impacts, making AA particularly salient. Age and life experience also play a significant role in shaping AA. As individuals mature and gain more relationship experience, they may develop greater self-confidence and a better understanding of social dynamics, potentially reducing anxiety over time. However, for those with less experience or who are still developing

their social skills, AA may persist or even intensify, particularly in high-pressure social environments like college or the early stages of adulthood.

H: Emerging adults with less relationship experience will exhibit higher levels of AA compared to their more experienced peers. This effect will be more pronounced in high-pressure social environments, such as college settings, where dating and relationship exploration are more prevalent.

While the tendency to AA might be rooted in evolutionary theories, social learning might also have a strong influence on behaviour and perceptions. Howard et al. (1987) acknowledge the impact of sex role socialisation and power dynamics. Sadalla et al. (1987) also recognise the role of traditional sex difference in heterosexual attraction. This acknowledgement opens the door for social learning to shape anxieties and fears related to social interaction, including approaching women.

H: Men who report higher levels of reluctance to approach women will show greater physiological stress responses during social interactions, supporting an innate basis for this behavior.

H: Men exposed to traditional sex differences during upbringing will report higher reluctance to approach women, supporting a learned behavior model.

However, some behaviors may have an innate component that is then refined through social learning. Evolutionary agent-based simulations have demonstrated that genetic preparedness (an evolutionary adaptation) and social learning often co-evolve in dangerous environments, providing complementary benefits (Lindström et al., 2015). It is possible that AA arises from a combination of innate predispositions and learned behaviors, requiring an explanation that integrates both aspects.

### ***Avoidance behaviour a potential ingroup-outgroup dynamic***

Another potential aspect of men developing AA can be understood through ingroup-outgroup dynamics, as explained by Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This theory highlights how

individuals categorize others into "us" (ingroup) and "them" (outgroup) based on shared identity markers such as sex difference, race, or social roles. These categorizations often result in biases, including favoritism toward the ingroup and distrust or avoidance of the outgroup.

The ingroup (other men) is often perceived as safe, relatable, and non-threatening due to shared experiences and societal norms. Conversely, women, as the outgroup, may be perceived as "the other" and, at times, as threatening due to biological, cultural, or social differences. Some psychologists argue that avoiding unfamiliar outgroup members may have evolved as a survival mechanism (Van Vugt & Schaller, 2008). For early humans, this avoidance could have minimized risks of physical harm, competition, or social disruption.

Interestingly, men's avoidance of women may also stem from evolutionary strategies tied to male-male competition and coalition building. Dominant individuals, particularly males, are often perceived as threats by those outside their immediate group. This behavior is rooted in the ancestral need to protect against aggression or resource competition from rival males (Tooby & Cosmides, 2010). Men may have evolved to prioritize their standing within the male ingroup to maintain coalitional bonds and status, leading to fear not of women specifically but of behaviors that could risk their exclusion from the group.

Furthermore, research suggests that men evolved to perceive outgroup males as competitors, while women evolved strategies to avoid outgroup males to minimize risks (Van Vugt & Park, 2009). This evolutionary framework explains why women may subconsciously perceive unfamiliar men as more threatening than ingroup men and how this dynamic indirectly influences men's hesitation toward women. Over time, these ingrained behaviors and biases have shaped modern social interactions, contributing to avoidance behaviors in cross-group contexts.

H: Men are more likely to initiate conversations with women they perceive as part of their ingroup (e.g., same ethnicity, shared cultural background, mutual social circle) due to lower perceived social risk.

H: Men are less likely to approach women from outgroups because they associate them with higher social risk or rejection due to stereotypes.

H: Men are more hesitant to approach women they perceive as belonging to a high-status or "exclusive" outgroup because of greater fear of rejection or judgment.

### ***Traditional Effects on Men's Approaching Behaviour***

Coming back to the introduction of the current thesis, an alternative explanation for the differences in relationship strategies is rooted in sex differences. This perspective argues that men and women learn behavioral expectations through social interactions, internalizing societal norms that dictate appropriate behaviors based on sex difference. From this viewpoint, men and women may adopt different relationship initiation strategies because they are influenced by the roles and expectations established by their cultural and social environments resulting in a feeling of pressure, fear or even anxiety to approach the opposite sex. Additionally, people may reconstruct their relationship histories to align with societal sex differences (Veroff et al., 1993).

H: Approach anxiety varies significantly across men of different socioeconomic classes, educational levels, and demographic groups, rather than affecting all men equally.

H: The prevalence of reluctance to approach women is higher in societies with stricter social norms around sex difference compared to societies with more egalitarian norms.

While traditional narratives often portray men as active initiators and women as passive recipients in courtship, research suggests a more nuanced reality. Studies in naturalistic settings indicate that women often signal interest before men approach (Perper, 1985). The effectiveness of these conversational strategies is often attributed to women's ability to control the outcome of the interaction. Grammer et al. (2000) found that women who express high interest in a man do not send significantly more nonverbal



signals than women with low interest within the first minute of social interaction. This suggests that it is challenging for men to discern a woman's level of interest during the initial moments of an encounter. Anxiety might further impair cue recognition, creating a feedback loop that intensifies avoidance behaviors. Consequently, given men's uncertainty about their success in securing a date, both men and women perceive a direct approach as the most effective strategy (Clark et al., 1999). This finding is also stable under the ego depleted condition (Lewandowski et al., 2012).

Future research could explore whether “approach anxiety” influences the ability to read facial expressions and behavioral cues be important and makes the process of men approaching harder.

H: Men with higher approach anxiety are less effective at interpreting female nonverbal cues of interest, a challenge shaped by evolutionary conditions in which ambiguous signals could lead to reproductive failure.

H: Media exposure to negative portrayals of male approaches toward women correlates with increased self-reported barriers in initiating romantic interactions.

## **Limitations and Future View**

The main finding of this thesis is the lack of literature about AA. One plausible explanation is the inherent complexity of the subject, compounded by its interdisciplinary nature, which integrates psychological, sociological, and cultural dimensions. Another factor could be a lack of awareness within academic circles regarding potential barriers specifically faced by men in initiating romantic interactions. Notably, during the course of the present investigation, it became evident that a significant proportion of dating-related research has been conducted by female researchers. This observation raises questions about whether the research agenda in this field may, intentionally or unintentionally, reflect differing perspectives or priorities influenced by sex differences.

It is important to note that much of the literature on this topic draws on studies that date back several decades and must therefore be critically evaluated. The majority of this research relies on self-report questionnaires, self-assessments, or laboratory-based studies. However, the reliability of these methods is questionable, particularly given that individuals often lack clear insight into their own experiences and behaviors in the context of love and dating. This raises concerns about the validity of the findings and highlights the need for more robust methodologies in this field.

Due to the scope of this thesis, certain topics could only be addressed in a more limited capacity. However, the role of factors such as self-efficacy and self-esteem appears to be particularly significant and warrants further investigation. Additionally, some studies, such as Sprecher et al. (2008), have explored the concept of "need" in the context of dating, which could also be a valuable area to examine in relation to AA.

Also, not only men are affected, Grover (2002) found that college women most frequently reported fear and anxiety as their primary emotional responses to dating situations. To assess heterosocial anxiety among women, researchers developed a female version of the Survey of Heterosexual Interactions (SHI), which has shown strong correlations with other measures of anxiety and social skills. Women with higher

SHI scores (indicating lower anxiety) also demonstrated greater assertiveness. These findings suggest that heterosocial anxiety is not exclusive to men and that women face comparable challenges in managing dating and other-sex interactions. Another source criticises previous research for focusing on male heterosocial anxiety, pointing out that dating anxiety is a significant problem for both men and women (Calvert et al., 1987).

Sprecher et al. (2008) argued that modern Western men may no longer screen for fit, reproductive women but instead focus on less healthy women, as they are becoming increasingly rare. This shift in perception, where nearly all women are viewed as viable mates, could potentially heighten AA. Each interaction might feel more consequential, leading men to experience an intensified sense of responsibility to succeed. Rejection, in this context, could be perceived not only as a social setback but also as a missed reproductive opportunity. This increased pressure may amplify the fear of failure, reinforcing avoidance behaviors and perpetuating the cycle of AA. Conversely, the abundance of potential partners could have the opposite effect, reducing anxiety by lowering the stakes of any single interaction. If a man perceives that there are numerous opportunities available, he might feel less pressure to succeed in each individual approach, making rejection easier to accept and tolerate. Both very interesting hypotheses that need to be investigated in future research.

Recent shifts in dating practices have been shaped by broader life circumstances, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic, which limited in-person social interactions and increased reliance on online dating (Jeronimus, 2025). This shift has provided opportunities but also introduced challenges. Dating anxiety and perceived COVID-19 impact were both significantly associated with higher depressive symptoms (Dattilo et al., 2022). College students strongly impacted by COVID-19 may have experienced decreased exposure to social situations, which could lead to increased dating anxiety and, in turn, worsen depressive symptoms. Individuals with psychosocial issues, such as social anxiety, are more likely to prefer online communication due to its perceived safety and reduced social risk (Reid & Reid, 2007). A recent study showed that higher dating anxiety was associated with increased ease of communication motivation,

indicating individuals with dating anxiety find online communication easier (Sumter and Vandenbosch, 2019).

Another effect of online usage is the phenomenon of FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), with evidence suggesting that men exhibit significantly higher levels of FOMO in online context (Qutishat, 2020). This heightened fear may exacerbate issues related to AA, as the reliance on digital platforms could diminish opportunities to develop essential social communication skills. Consequently, problems tied to self-esteem and self-compassion may intensify. FOMO aligns with another study that suggests online daters often delay commitment due to the abundance of choices and the extended trust-building process necessitated by concerns over profile authenticity (Paul, 2014).

It seems not obvious how FOMO might have an effect on AA but findings such as - breakup rates were higher for couples who met online, particularly in non-marital relationships (Paul, 2014). This finding raises the question of whether individuals who use online dating platforms may exhibit lower levels of social competence and skills—traits that are essential for initiating and fostering healthy relationships (Raby et al., 2015). Also more recent research suggests an ongoing traditional behaviour of men approaching first with a ratio of 4:1 in online-dating (Kraeger et al., 2015) and showing the urgency of undergoing sex-specific research but also the growing online-dating field of research.

By addressing the gaps, future studies can contribute to the development of effective interventions that empower individuals to navigate the complex dynamics of modern romantic relationships.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis was initially conceived as a comprehensive literature review on the topic of “approach anxiety”. However, a significant gap in the existing literature was uncovered. As a result, the thesis pivoted towards providing a broad overview of dating research, while also proposing potential theoretical frameworks for future investigations. Based on the current knowledge summarized in this thesis, there is substantial evidence pointing toward AA as a genuine phenomenon affecting many men. However, only precise and targeted research can uncover the definitive answer to this intriguing question. This question presents substantial research challenges, particularly when considering the influence of various factors such as culture, religion, and societal norms. Despite these challenges, this thesis serves as an important first step in a burgeoning research area with vast potential to contribute to the understanding of men’s social and relational behaviors, and ultimately, to the development of effective interventions.

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## Appendix I

Link to the complete literature list:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1qh2gTY-bV4V3FRjNzIa61LZjNi6Iat0NH1sfZvwgEhs/edit?usp=sharing>

Table A: Overview of Literature Results

Searchterm	Title/Reference	Year	Authors
<b>Approach anxiety</b>	<b>0</b>		
<b>Attachment Anxiety</b>	When insecurity dampens desire: Attachment anxiety in men amplifies the decline in sexual desire during the early years of romantic relationships	2019	Mizrahi et al.
	A signal detection analysis of chronic attachment anxiety at speed dating: Being unpopular is only the first part of the problem.	2010	McClure et al.
	Online dating and psychological wellbeing: A social compensation perspective.	2022	Toma
	Abilities in romantic relationships and well-being among emerging adults.	2017	Weisskirch
	THE BALANCE OF WORK IN INITIATING RELATIONSHIPS	2008	Guynn et al.
	Sexual Experiences and Attachment Styles in Online and Offline Dating Contexts.	2022	Coffey et al.
<b>Dating anxiety</b>	Associations between body image, social physique anxiety, and dating anxiety in heterosexual emerging adults	2021	Swami et al.
	Problematic Internet use, loneliness and dating anxiety among young adult university students.	2010	Odacı and Kalkan
	The influence of dating anxiety on normative experiences of dating, sexual interactions, and alcohol consumption among Canadian middle adolescents	2012	Boyle and O’Sullivan
	The changing face of dating anxiety: Issues in assessment with special populations.	2008	Chorney and Morris
	Dating gone mobile: Demographic and personality-based correlates of using smartphone-based dating applications among emerging adults.	2019	Sumter and Vandenbosch
	Cortisol increases in response to brief social exchanges with opposite sex partners.	2017	Jaremka and Collins
	Associations between social anxiety, depression, and use of mobile dating applications	2021	Lenton-Brym et al.
	Dating Anxiety During the Global COVID-19 Pandemic: Implications for College Students	2022	Dattilo et al.

	Is my attachment style showing? Perceptions of a date's attachment anxiety and avoidance and dating interest during a speed-dating event.	2022	Tu et al.
	Appearance orientation and dating anxiety in emerging adults: Considering the roles of appearance-based rejection sensitivity, social physique anxiety, and self-compassion.	2022	Swami et al.
	Mate value discrepancy and attachment anxiety predict the perpetration of digital dating abuse.	2019	Bhagal and Howman
	Online dating is associated with sex addiction and social anxiety	2018	Zlot et al.
	Approach and avoidance tendencies in depression and anxiety disorders	2017	Struijs
	The Mediating Role of Romantic Desolation and Dating Anxiety in the Association Between Interpersonal Competence and Life Satisfaction Among Polish Young Adults	2015	Adamczyk and Segrin
	INITIATION OF DATES AND ANXIETY AMONG COLLEGE MEN AND WOMEN	1991	Mcnamara and Grossman
	The Challenge of Romantic Relationships in Emerging Adulthood: Reconceptualization of the Field	2013	Shulman and Connolly
	Placebo effects in the treatment of male dating anxiety.	1988	Neumann et al.
<b>Fear of Social Interaction</b>	Development and validation of measures of social phobia scrutiny fear and social interaction anxiety.	1998	Mattick and Clarke
	Sex matters: The interplay of sex hormones and oxytocin predicts fear of social interaction in high anxious individuals	2017	Schneider et al.
<b>Fear of Rejection</b>	Fear of Rejecting Others: An Overlooked Construct in Dating Anxiety	2021	Rizvi et al.
	How socially anxious people become compulsive social media users: The role of fear of negative evaluation and rejection	2021	Ali et al.
<b>Heterosocial Anxiety</b>	Heterosocial anxiety and contraceptive behavior.	1987	Bruch
	Self-statements and self-evaluations: A cognitive-response analysis of heterosocial anxiety.	1979	Cacioppo
	Purposefully biased interactions: Reducing heterosocial anxiety through self-perception theory.	1984	Haemmerlie
	Heterosocial anxiety in college females: A biased interactions treatment.	1983	Haemmerlie
	Self-perception theory and unobtrusively biased interactions: A treatment for heterosocial anxiety.	1982	Haemmerlie & Montgomery
	Ecological validity of role plays for assessing heterosocial anxiety and skill of male college students.	1979	Wessberg et al.
	Heterosocial anxiety and direction of attention in high school boys.	1989	Johnson & Glass
	The role of cognitive mediators in heterosocial anxiety: A test of self-efficacy theory.	1983	Barrios

	Self-perception theory and the reduction of heterosocial anxiety.	1986	Montgomery & Haemmerlie
	Effects of cue-controlled relaxation on the control of heterosocial performance anxiety among shy males.	1987	Belles et al.
	Social anxiety, sexual behavior, and contraceptive use.	1983	Leary and Dobbins
	Daily heterosocial interactions of high and low socially anxious college students: A diary study	1987	Dodge et al.
<b>Heterosocial Competence</b>	The measure of heterosocial competence: Development and psychometric investigation.	2013	Grover et al.
	Girl friend, boy friend, girlfriend, boyfriend: Broadening our understanding of heterosocial competence.	2007	Grover et al.
	The Measure of Adolescent Heterosocial Competence: Development and Initial Validation.	2005	Grover et al.
	Adolescent heterosocial competence revisited: Implications of an extended conceptualization for the prevention of high-risk sexual interactions.	1998	Nangle & Hansen
	Decision-making skills and heterosocial competence in college women: An information-processing analysis.	1992	Goddard & McFall
	The relationship between heterosocial and homosocial competence.	1989	Chee and Cohen Conger
	Heterosocial competence: Predictive and construct validity.	1980	Martinez-Diaz & Edelstein
	Adolescent perceptions of problematic heterosocial situations: A focus group study.	2003	Grover & Nangle
	Selection of heterosocial skills: I. Criterion-related validity.	1979	Kupke et al.
	Dating competence among college students.	1989	LeSure-Lester
	Another look at heterosocial behaviors: one side of the early intimate sexual behaviors coin.	2011	Braxter et al.
	MULTIVARIATE EFFECTS OF DEMAND CHARACTERISTICS ON THE ANALOG ASSESSMENT OF HETEROSOCIAL COMPETENCE	1979	Martinez-Diaz & Edelstein
	Global social skill ratings: Measures of social behavior or physical attractiveness?	1994	Hope and Mindell
	Decoding deficits and social competency: A continuous rating approach	1991	Cohen Conger et al.
	A functional assessment of heterosocial initiation behaviors in adults	1990	DiLorenzo et al.
	Improving same-sex and heterosocial interactions of emotionally disturbed adolescents	1985	Lee Swanson
	A Women's Heterosocial Skill Observational Rating System: Behavior-Analytic Development and Validation	1985	Kolko and Milan
	The contribution of initiation behaviors to dating frequency	1980	Lipton and Nelson



	Improving heterosocial conversational skills of male psychiatric patients through a small group training procedure	1980	Kelly et al.
<b>Interaction avoidance</b>	Heterosocial avoidance in college males: Four studies.	1981	Twentyman
<b>Interpersonal Performance</b>	Social Anxiety and Self-Evaluation of Interpersonal Performance	1975	Clark and Arkowitz
<b>Shyness in Social Interaction</b>	Shyness, self-confidence, and social interaction.	1993	Manning and Ray
	Attractiveness and disclosure in initial encounters of mixed-sex dyads	1996	Stiles et al.
	CAUSAL ATTRIBUTION BIAS IN SHY MALES - IMPLICATIONS FOR SELF-ESTEEM AND SELF-CONFIDENCE	1981	Girodo et al.
	SHYNESS AND PUBLIC SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS - ADDITIVE OR INTERACTIVE RELATION WITH SOCIAL-INTERACTION	1995	Bruch et al.
	Shyness and self-disclosure among college students: the mediating role of psychological security and its gender difference	2022	Li et al.
	Shyness and Social Anxiety Assessed Through Self-Report: What Are We Measuring?	2019	Brook and Willoughby
	Shyness mindset: Applying mindset theory to the domain of inhibited social behavior.	2011	Valentiner et al.
<b>Shyness + Men</b>	Shyness, masculine ideology, physical attractiveness, and emotional inexpressiveness: Testing a mediational model of men's interpersonal competence.	1998	Bruch
	Shyness and gender. Physical, emotional, cognitive, behavioral consequences and strategies of coping with shyness by women and men of different gender identity.	2008	Mandal
	Shyness and sociability	1981	Cheek
	Scrutinizing the relationship between shyness and social phobia	2002	Chavira
	Attributional style and symptoms of shyness in a heterosocial interaction	1995	Bruch
	Mating performance: Assessing flirting skills, mate signal-detection ability, and shyness effects.	2019	Apostolou et al.
	Attributions of shy persons in romantic relationships.	1995	Johnson et al.
	Shyness and love on a college campus.	1982	Maroldo
<b>Social anxiety</b>	Predictors of social anxiety among online dating users	2020	Pitcho-Prelorentzos
	Social anxiety and the semantic structure of heterosocial interactions.	1984	Goldfried et al.
	Social anxiety increases visible anxiety signs during social encounters but does not impair performance	2019	Thompson et al.
	Social anxiety changes the way we move—A social approach-avoidance task in a virtual reality CAVE system	2019	Lange and Pauli
	Complementary Neural Circuits for Divergent Effects of Oxytocin: Social Approach Versus Social Anxiety	2018	Steinman

	To text or talk in person? Social anxiety, media affordances, and preferences for texting over face-to-face communication in dating relationships.	2024	Chen and Toma
	Dating with social anxiety: An empirical examination of momentary anxiety and desire for future interaction.	2020	Asher and Aderka
	Coping with rejection concerns in romantic relationships: An experimental investigation of social anxiety and risk regulation.	2015	Afram and Kashdan
	It's a guy thing: Sex as a moderator of the relationship between social anxiety and perception of interpersonal warmth in initial heterosexual interactions.	2022	Goh and Ong
	Out of my league: Dating preferences of individuals with social anxiety disorder.	2024	Shechter Strulov et al.
	Rejection sensitivity and male violence in romantic relationships.	2000	Downey et al.
	Social Anxiety and Liking: Towards Understanding the Role of Metaperceptions in First Impressions.	2021	Tissera et al.
	Swipe right, swipe left: Initial interactions in social anxiety disorder.	2022	Rozen and Aderka
	The importance of behavioral and cognitive factors in heterosexual-social anxiety.	1980	Curran et al.
	Dating With Social Anxiety: An Empirical Examination of Momentary Anxiety and Desire for Future Interaction.	2020	Asher and Aderka
	Exploring linguistic correlates of social anxiety in romantic stories	2016	Fernandez et al.
	Courage: A Potential Mediator of the Relationship Between Personality and Social Anxiety	2022	Abdollahi et al.
	The behavioral assessment of social competence in males	1975	Arkowitz et al.
<b>Social phobia</b>	Social anxiety and romantic relationships	2015	Starr & Davila
	The relationship between generalized social phobia and avoidant personality disorder in a national mental health survey	2009	Cox et al.
	HETEROSOCIAL COMMUNICATIVE BEHAVIOR AND COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION.	1982	Prisbell

## Appendix II

### **What kind of theories of Initiation do we know?**

Research on relationship initiation has been informed by several theoretical frameworks, each offering unique insights into how romantic connections are formed (Clark et al., 2009). These theories explore different aspects of attraction, compatibility, and the processes underlying relationship development. However, critics argue that these theories remain incomplete, often failing to fully encapsulate the complexities of relationship initiation.

#### ***Social Penetration Theory***

Altman and Taylor's (1973) Social Penetration Theory highlights the critical role of self-disclosure in relationship initiation. This theory posits that relationships deepen as individuals gradually share more personal information, both in breadth (variety of topics) and depth (intimacy of topics). Early stages of relationship development involve rapid disclosure, but the rate slows as the relationship matures. Reciprocity, where both partners equally share personal information, is essential for the progression of intimacy. The theory underscores self-disclosure as a mechanism for building trust and connection in early interactions.

#### ***Intimacy Process Model***

Reis and Shaver (1988) conceptualized intimacy as a dynamic, reciprocal process involving self-disclosure and partner responsiveness. Their model suggests that the initiation of intimacy depends on the ability of a partner to listen empathetically, demonstrate understanding, and respond with care and acceptance. Such responses encourage further disclosure, creating a positive feedback loop that fosters intimacy and relationship growth. The model also introduces the concept of "interpretive filters," acknowledging that individuals' perceptions of their partner's actions influence the development of intimacy.

### ***Stimulus-Value-Role Theory***

Proposed by Murstein (1970), the Stimulus-Value-Role (SVR) theory conceptualizes romantic relationship development as a staged process. In the initial stimulus stage, attraction is largely based on superficial characteristics, such as physical appearance or initial impressions. As the relationship progresses, shared values, beliefs, and attitudes (the value stage) become more influential. Ultimately, long-term compatibility depends on the roles each partner assumes (the role stage), such as those related to career, family, or household dynamics. This theory underscores how relationships evolve from surface-level attraction to deeper emotional and functional compatibility.

### ***ABCDE Model***

Levinger and Snoek's (1972) ABCDE Model provides a sequential framework for understanding relationship progression. The model outlines five stages:

Attraction: Initial impressions, influenced by appearance, behavior, and nonverbal cues.

Building: Exploration of shared personality traits, values, and interests to foster connection.

Continuation: Strengthening the relationship through trust, affection, and commitment.

Deterioration and Ending: While part of the model, these latter stages are not central to the initiation of relationships.

The ABCDE Model emphasizes the early importance of physical and emotional commonalities in building connections, with later stages focusing on relationship maintenance and breakdown.

### **Investment Theory of Commitment**

Developed by Rusbult (1980, 1983), the Investment Theory of Commitment examines the factors contributing to relationship commitment, which often emerge during the later stages of relationship initiation.

Drawing on principles of interdependence theory, it identifies key determinants of commitment:

- Satisfaction: The balance of rewards and costs in the relationship.
- Investments: Time, effort, and resources that would be lost if the relationship ended.
- Alternatives: The perceived quality of other potential partners.
- Norms: Social and personal expectations about staying in a relationship.
- Comparison Level: Standards for evaluating what a relationship should provide.

The theory emphasizes that early relationship development is influenced by the interplay of these factors, shaping decisions to pursue or deepen romantic connections.

## **Appendix III**

### **Availability of testing**

The literature review identified several surveys relevant to the assessment of heterosocial interactions and competencies. These include the Dating Anxiety Survey (DAS) by Calvert et al. (1987), which focuses specifically on measuring anxiety within dating contexts, offering targeted insights into this unique social domain. The Survey of Heterosexual Interactions by Twentyman and McFall (1975) provides a broader evaluation of heterosexual social interactions, making it particularly useful for examining general heterosocial dynamics. The Heterosocial Skills Inventory for Women by Kolko (1985) is designed to assess heterosocial skills specifically in women, offering a sex-specific perspective on social competence. Finally, the Measure of Heterosocial Competence by Groger (2012) evaluates heterosocial competence comprehensively, capturing a wide range of social abilities in mixed-sex interactions. These instruments collectively provide valuable tools for studying various facets of heterosocial behavior and anxiety.

### ***Dating Anxiety Survey***

Dating Anxiety Survey (DAS), a questionnaire developed to assess dating anxiety in both men and women (Elliot et al., 2007). The authors underscore the importance of addressing dating anxiety as a prevalent issue among college students, referencing prior research that identifies it as a substantial concern in this population. They also critique the overemphasis on men in studies of heterosocial anxiety, stressing that dating anxiety significantly affects individuals across genders and requires a balanced approach to understanding its impact.

The evaluations show the psychometric properties of the Dating Anxiety Scale (DAS) through two studies. Study 1 established the DAS's factor structure and high internal consistency (0.90), confirming its reliability for measuring dating anxiety in men and women. The 23 items were derived from interviews with college students and existing measures of male heterosocial anxiety. Study 2 assessed the DAS's validity by correlating it with social anxiety and dating history. Results showed significant associations

between DAS subscales and social anxiety but not with self-consciousness unrelated to social interactions, supporting its concurrent validity. Furthermore, the DAS subscales correlated with dating frequency metrics, even after controlling for social anxiety, demonstrating its incremental validity in capturing a unique dimension of dating anxiety.

The DAS enables a deeper understanding of how dating anxiety manifests in diverse ways and affects individuals' dating experiences within the college setting.

### ***Survey of Heterosexual Interactions***

The Survey of Heterosexual Interactions (SHI), developed by Twentyman and McFall in 1975, is designed to evaluate individuals' abilities to navigate challenging situations in heterosexual interactions. The SHI begins with a general questionnaire, followed by 20 specific items where respondents rate their perceived ability to manage the described scenarios on a 7-point scale. Lower scores indicate a lesser self-assessed capability. The SHI's interitem correlations range from 0.147 to 0.779, with a median correlation of 0.345, all of which are statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). The scale demonstrates strong reliability, with a split-half reliability coefficient of 0.85 and a test-retest reliability over four months also at 0.85.

Additionally, Twentyman and McFall found that the SHI correlates negatively with reported anxiety in heterosocial situations ( $r = -0.42$  to  $-0.69$ ) and positively with self-reported social behaviors ( $r = 0.79$  to  $0.84$ ). These findings suggest that the SHI is an effective tool for identifying individuals who may face challenges in heterosexual social interactions.

### ***Social Interaction Anxiety Scale***

The Social Interaction Survey (SIS) was a modification of the SHI, developed by Heimberg and colleagues in 1992, is a widely used instrument designed to assess anxiety in a variety of social settings, including those involving unfamiliar or heterosocial interactions. The SIAS evaluates broader social

discomfort, such as fear of embarrassment or rejection, making it particularly useful for studying individuals with social anxiety disorder. Scores on this scale range from 10 to 40, with higher scores indicating greater self-esteem. The SIAS exhibits excellent reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.88 to 0.94, and a test-retest reliability of approximately 0.86 over several months. Additionally, its strong correlations with other established measures of social anxiety underscore its validity as a diagnostic and research tool.

### ***Heterosocial Skills Inventory for Women***

The Heterosocial Skills Inventory for Women (HSIW) was developed to address the need for a sex-specific measure of social skills and anxiety in heterosocial interactions (Kolko, 1985). The HSIW is designed to evaluate a range of behaviors relevant to interactions with the opposite sex, including the ability to initiate conversations, sustain dialogue, and express emotions appropriately. The inventory has demonstrated strong psychometric properties, with internal consistency reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) typically exceeding 0.80. Furthermore, test-retest reliability analyses have shown that the HSIW produces stable scores over several weeks, supporting its robustness as a measurement tool in both research and applied settings.

### ***Measure of Heterosocial Competence***

The Measure of Heterosocial Competence (MHC) was designed by Grover et al. in 2012 to assess individuals' skills and confidence in interactions with the opposite sex, focusing on behaviors and attitudes that contribute to effective social engagement. The 40-item test evaluates domains such as verbal and nonverbal communication, assertiveness, and the ability to navigate typical social situations. Developed to address heterosocial anxiety and enhance social competence measures, it has demonstrated strong reliability (Cronbach's alpha > 0.80) and validity through correlations with social anxiety and dating behaviors. The MHC is widely used in research and interventions targeting social skill development and



anxiety reduction in mixed-sex interactions. Different versions are available from the author, one for adolescents and one for adults.