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Loneliness as a Moderator between Emotional Dysregulation and Love Addiction in a Romanian Sample: Implications for Theory, Practice, and Education

Luisa-Diana ANTONIAC [1]
Tudor-Daniel HUȚUL [2,*]
Andreea HUȚUL [3]
Adina KARNER-HUȚULEAC [4]

[1] "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași, Romania; https://orcid.org/0009-0006-1521-007X; antoniacluisadiana@gmail.com
[2] "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași, Romania; https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9670-080X; tudordanielhutulpsih@gmail.com
[3] "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași, Romania; https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1726-6465; andreeahutulpsih@gmail.com
[4] "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași, Romania; https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4402-7649; adina.karner@uaic.ro
*corresponding author: tudordanielhutulpsih@gmail.com

Abstract: *This study aims to examine the link between love addiction, emotional dysregulation, and loneliness in a Romanian sample, as well as to test the moderating role of loneliness in the relationship between emotional dysregulation and love addiction. The present research involved 453 volunteers from Romania, aged between 18 and 56 years (M = 20.82; SD = 3.98). The majority of participants were female (62.5%) and from urban areas (52.5%). Our findings suggest significant positive associations between love addiction, emotional dysregulation, and loneliness. Furthermore, the direct effect of emotional dysregulation on love addiction was moderated by loneliness. Our results highlighted the crucial role of emotional dysregulation and loneliness in the development and maintenance of love addiction. The present study discusses theoretical and practical implications and offers several recommendations for education.*

Keywords: *love addiction; emotional dysregulation; loneliness; moderation analysis; Romania.*

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Introduction

The experience of love, integral to human existence, has been a core component of our emotional landscape throughout history. Driven by a natural inclination toward forming profound, affectionate bonds with others, love can sometimes take on an addictive nature, reflecting the intense and fundamental role love plays in our lives. Love's compelling allure, often characterized by an overwhelming attraction and idealization, lays the groundwork for profound emotional connections, highlighting parallels between the magnetic draw of love and the dynamics of addiction. Consequently, in certain instances, individuals may exhibit a pathological persistence in their infatuation, developing an affective dependency (Sirvent-Ruiz et al., 2022). This is classified as a form of behavioral addiction without substance, referred to in specialized literature as "love addiction" (Costa et al., 2021; Rogier et al., 2024). In this context, love addiction is understood as an intense, compulsive need for romantic relationships, where individuals persistently seek emotional connection and validation from a partner, even when these attachments lead to personal harm or adverse outcomes (Reynaud, 2010). It is also important to mention that love addiction can occur regardless of age, manifesting in adolescents, young adults, or older adults.

However, it is important to note that love addiction is a relatively new concept. Despite not being officially recognized at present, love addiction meets several criteria that define substance use or behavioral addiction disorders (APA, 2000) The proposed diagnostic criteria for love addiction include aspects such as (I) *desire to stop* (reduce or stop contact or end the relationship), (II) *inability to stop* (unsuccessful efforts to reduce or stop contact), (III) *frequency*, (IV) *intensity*, (V) *interference* (interference with activities at work, school, or home due to continued contact), (VI) *problems caused or exacerbated*, (VII) *excessive reliance or withdrawal*, (VIII) *continued contact despite unhealthy partner behavior*, (IX) *maladaptive behavior*, (X) *relapse to prevent emotions*, and (XI) *relapse to reduce emotions* (Redcay & Simonetti, 2018). Furthermore, several theorists have suggested that love addiction can be integrated into established theoretical frameworks, such as Griffiths' model of behavioral addiction (Griffiths, 2005; Griffiths, 2020), which identifies six core components: (I) *salience*, (II) *mood modification*, (III) *tolerance*, (IV) *withdrawal*, (V) *conflict*, and (VI) *relapse*.

On other note dependency driven by love addiction often compels individuals to prioritize romantic closeness over their own well-being, leading to neglect of self-care and other critical areas of life. This condition manifests in various maladaptive behaviors, including obsessive thoughts, heightened

anxiety related to abandonment (Fisher et al., 2016), and difficulty detaching from toxic or unhealthy relationships (Reynaud et al., 2010). Such patterns highlight the profound impact of love addiction, where the pursuit of affection and intimacy can override rational decision-making and disrupt personal boundaries.

Considering the aspects outlined above, love addiction has the potential to affect multiple domains of life, including both personal and professional spheres. Individuals with love addiction may find themselves neglecting responsibilities and compromising their overall quality of life in favor of maintaining or prioritizing an attachment to a romantic partner. This dependency often leads to impaired judgment, diminished self-care, and challenges in balancing the demands of daily life. Such behaviors highlight the broader impact of love addiction, emphasizing the need for further understanding and intervention strategies. Despite the significant negative outcomes associated with love addiction, research on the topic remains limited, primarily because it is a relatively new concept in psychological and behavioral studies. Investigating love addiction further is essential to better understand its mechanisms and to develop interventions that mitigate its impact on individual and societal well-being.

Literature review

Academic literature has identified several factors associated with love addiction, including emotional dysregulation (Salani et al., 2022) or loneliness (Fisher et al., 2016). Emotional dysregulation refers to difficulties in managing emotional responses, often leading to excessive or inappropriate reactions (Thompson, 2019). Key characteristics of emotional dysregulation include intense emotional responses, challenges in returning to a baseline emotional state, and difficulties in understanding or expressing emotions constructively (D'Agostino et al., 2017; Fisher et al., 2016). The connection to love addiction arises as individuals with higher levels of emotional dysregulation may use relationships as a coping mechanism to soothe their emotional instability (Gori et al., 2023). Consequently, they are more prone to developing love addiction because individuals seek external validation and comfort, which makes them vulnerable to unhealthy dependencies on romantic partners (Earp et al., 2017).

Similarly, loneliness, a subjective experience of feeling socially or emotionally isolated, is another significant factor associated with love addiction (Sanches & John, 2019). Literature identifies loneliness as a state characterized by perceived inadequacies in social connections or companionship, even when surrounded by others (Heinrich & Gullone,

2006). Individuals with higher levels of loneliness may exhibit an increased susceptibility to love addiction because they overinvest in romantic relationships to compensate for their sense of isolation (Sease et al., 2024). These individuals often idealize their partners and relationships, striving to fulfill their emotional void through external validation and intimacy (Niehuis et al., 2011).

Methodology

Participants and procedure

In this study, 453 participants took part, aged between 18 and 56 years (M = 20.82; SD = 3.98). The majority of participants were female (62.5%) and from urban areas (52.5%). Most participants were individuals with ongoing university studies (86.1%). Regarding marital status, most participants were in a relationship (49.7%), with relationship durations ranging from 0 to 360 months (M = 15.58; SD = 33.75). The participants' characteristics are detailed in Table 1.

Our study utilized the snowball sampling technique, employing a convenience sample of Romanian participants. Data collection occurred between October 15 and 30, 2024. A set of instruments was administered via the online platform Google Forms, and the survey link was disseminated on social media through groups with diverse backgrounds (e.g., student groups, groups of residents in major Romanian cities, and communities of psychology aficionados). In accordance with recommendations provided in previous works, efforts were made to disseminate the Google Forms link across diverse social media groups to recruit volunteers from a variety of socio-demographic backgrounds (Huţul & Karner-Huţuleac, 2024a, 2024b). The average time required to complete the questionnaire was approximately 10 minutes. The inclusion criteria for this study were as follows: (I) being at least 18 years old at the time of completing the questionnaire and (II) self-declaring oneself as being in love at the time of completing the battery of instruments. All participants took part voluntarily and were provided with information regarding data confidentiality and protection prior to completing the questionnaire. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without any repercussions. The study adhered to ethical guidelines established by the authors' affiliated faculty and complied with the principles outlined in the 2013 Declaration of Helsinki from 1995, revised at Edinburgh in 2000.

The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association (APA) for the treatment of human

participants, with the research protocol approved by the ethics committee of the university to which all authors are affiliated.

Table 1. The characteristics of the participants

		N	%
Gender	Female	283	62.5
	Male	170	37.5
	Non-binary	0	0
Place of origin	Rural	215	47.5
	Urban	238	52.5
Education level	Pre-university education	50	11
	In-progress university studies	390	86.1
	Postgraduate studies	13	2.9
Marital status	Married	11	2.4
	Without relationship	217	47.9
	In a relationship	225	49.7

Measures

The tools were translated from English into Romanian using the Backward method. Recommendations for translation and adaptation of the scales were made according to protocol (Maneesriwongul & Dixon, 2004; Sousa & Rojjanasrirat, 2011).

The instruments were translated from English into Romanian utilizing the back-translation method to ensure both linguistic accuracy and cultural appropriateness. In accordance with established protocols for the translation and adaptation of psychological scales, two independent teams conducted the initial translations: (1) psychotherapists with expertise in the constructs investigated in the study, and (2) certified professional translators. The resulting preliminary Romanian versions were subsequently compared and reconciled through detailed discussions, yielding a unified preliminary version for each scale. These preliminary versions were then back-translated into English by two independent teams of authorized translators. The back-translated versions were rigorously compared with the original English scales, with any discrepancies systematically reviewed and resolved. This comprehensive process ensured that the final Romanian versions of the scales retained the conceptual and theoretical integrity of the original instruments.

Love addiction. This concept was measured using the "Love Addiction Inventory" (LAI; Costa et al., 2021), an instrument designed to assess

tendencies and behaviors associated with love addiction. The scale comprises 24 items, with sample statements such as, "*I feel incomplete without my partner*". Responses are recorded on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 ("*never*") to 5 ("*very often*"). The LAI has been widely used in previous research to evaluate patterns of love dependency and has demonstrated strong psychometric properties, including high internal consistency across diverse populations (Dineen & Dinc, 2024; Maglia et al., 2023). In the present study, the scale showed excellent reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.94. Higher scores indicate a greater level of love addiction.

Loneliness. This concept was measured using the "*UCLA Loneliness Scale*" (UCLA; Russell et al., 1980), a widely recognized instrument comprising 20 items (e.g., "*My interests and ideas are not shared by those around me*"). Responses are recorded on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 ("*I never feel this way*") to 3 ("*I often feel this way*"). This scale has previously demonstrated robust psychometric properties, including in studies involving Romanian populations (Huţul et al., 2024). In the present study, the scale exhibited excellent reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.89. Higher scores indicate a greater level of loneliness.

Emotional dysregulation. This concept was assessed using the short form of the original 36-item self-report scale, the "*Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale*" (DERS; Gratz & Roemer, 2004). The short version employed in this study (DERS-18; Victor & Klonsky, 2016) consists of 18 items (e.g., "*When I'm upset, I believe that I will remain that way for a long time*"), rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("*almost never*") to 5 ("*almost always*"). This scale has previously demonstrated robust psychometric properties, including in studies involving Romanian populations (Antoniac et al., 2024; Bostan & Zaharia, 2016). In the present study, the scale showed excellent reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.89. Higher scores indicate a greater level of emotional dysregulation.

Socio-demographic data. Participants provided socio-demographic information, including their age, gender, place of residence (rural or urban), level of education, and marital status.

The present study

Building on existing literature, the present study aims to expand academic knowledge regarding love addiction and its relationship with emotional dysregulation and loneliness. By examining these factors, the study seeks to address a gap in the literature, contributing both theoretically by providing new insights into the main variables and the influencing factors of their relationship, and practically by offering valuable insights into individualized psychotherapeutic interventions aimed at reducing the

symptoms of love addiction. Moreover, this study contributes by highlighting the importance of education regarding love addiction. The research could shed light on how emotional dysregulation and loneliness interact to intensify love addiction, emphasizing the compounding effects of emotional instability and unmet social needs in fostering dependency behaviors. To achieve our objective, we have formulated the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis

H1: There is an association between emotional dysregulation, love addiction, and loneliness.
H2: The relationship between emotional dysregulation and love addiction is moderated by loneliness. We expect that, at a higher level of loneliness, the relationship between emotional dysregulation and love addiction will be stronger.

The novelty of our study lies in: (1) loneliness as a moderator — emphasizing the role loneliness plays as a moderator in this process and suggesting that individuals struggling with both emotional dysregulation and loneliness may be more vulnerable to developing addictive relationship patterns; and (2) contextualizing love addiction—by focusing on a Romanian sample, our study aims to uncover culturally specific patterns in emotional regulation and attachment, thereby advancing the understanding of how sociocultural factors shape psychological vulnerabilities.

Results

Overview of the statistical analysis

First, we assessed the normality of data distribution using the Skewness and Kurtosis coefficients. Next, we employed Pearson correlation to examine the association between the research variables – loneliness, emotional dysregulation, and love addiction. Finally, we tested whether loneliness has a moderating effect on the relationship between emotional dysregulation and love addiction by using PROCESS macro in SPSS 26 (George & Mallery, 2019) – Model 1 (Hayes, 2017).

Preliminary data analyses

We computed Skewness and Kurtosis to assess the normality of data distribution. All the values were within the 2/-2 limits suggested by George & Mallery (2010). The statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS software, Version 26 (George & Mallery, 2019).

Association between variables

The results of the Pearson correlation analysis suggest that there are significant positive associations between love addiction, emotional dysregulation, and loneliness. The results can be observed in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and the association between research variables

Variables	M	SD	Skewness (SE)	Kurtosis (SE)	1	2	3
1. Love addiction	65.15	20.86	-.25 (.11)	-.20 (.22)	-		
2. Emotional dysregulation	53.26	13.49	.16 (.11)	-.36 (.22)	.30*	-	
3. Loneliness	23.94	6.21	.01 (.11)	-.07 (.22)	.13*	.43*	-

*Note: *p < .001*

The moderating role of loneliness on the relationship of emotional dysregulation and love addiction

We used the PROCESS macro in SPSS 26 – Model 1 (Hayes, 2017) to investigate the potential moderating role of loneliness on the relationship of emotional dysregulation and love addiction. The results suggest that the direct effect of emotional dysregulation on love addiction was moderated by loneliness, as their interactions was significant, $b = .01$; $SE = .006$; $p = .03$; with a R^2 brought by this interaction of .8%. At a higher level of loneliness, $b = .61$; $SE = .10$; $p < .001$; 95% CI [.41; .81], the association between emotional dysregulation and love addiction was stronger compared to those with a moderate, $b = .48$; $SE = .07$; $p < .001$; 95% CI [.33; .63], or low level of loneliness, $b = .33$; $SE = .10$; $p = .001$; 95% CI [.12; .53].

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to explore the relationships between love addiction, emotional dysregulation, and loneliness, as well as the moderating role of loneliness in the relationship between emotional dysregulation and love addiction.

Our results suggested significant positive associations between love addiction, emotional dysregulation, and loneliness. This finding can be understood in light of the fact that individuals with higher emotional dysregulation often struggle to process and manage their emotions, leading

them to seek external validation and comfort through romantic relationships (Fávero et al., 2021). These relationships may act as a temporary buffer against their emotional instability, thus fostering dependency patterns. Another potential explanation is that loneliness, marked by a lack of perceived meaningful connections, heightens the desire for intimacy and external validation, further increasing susceptibility to love addiction (Danvers et al., 2023). Our findings are consistent with the existing literature, which has shown associations between love addiction, emotional dysregulation, and loneliness (Fisher et al., 2016; Salani et al., 2022). Our results can also be explained by the fact that individuals with higher levels of emotional dysregulation are more susceptible to using relationships as a coping mechanism (Gori et al., 2023), seeking love addiction through external validation, which makes them more vulnerable to dependent behaviors in romantic relationships (Earp et al., 2017). Moreover, in the case of loneliness, the link with love addiction can be explained by the fact that higher levels of loneliness may increase the susceptibility to love addiction, as the relationship makes individuals compensate for isolation and idealize their partners and relationships (Sease et al., 2024), striving to fulfill their emotional void through external validation and intimacy (Niehuis et al., 2011).

Regarding the moderation analysis, our findings suggest that the direct effect of emotional dysregulation on love addiction was significantly moderated by loneliness. Specifically, at higher levels of loneliness, the association between emotional dysregulation and love addiction was stronger compared to moderate or low levels of loneliness. This result can be explained by the fact that loneliness amplifies emotional vulnerabilities, making individuals more likely to overinvest in romantic relationships as a means of coping with their emotional distress (Gori et al., 2023). Furthermore, heightened loneliness may exacerbate the cognitive biases associated with love addiction, such as idealizing a partner or clinging to unhealthy relationships, in an attempt to avoid feelings of abandonment and isolation (Sease et al., 2024). Another plausible explanation is that individuals experiencing both high loneliness and emotional dysregulation may have diminished emotional resilience, making them less capable of forming healthy relationship dynamics and more prone to addictive behaviors (Earp et al., 2017).

In sum, our discoveries highlight the complex interplay between emotional and social factors in the development of love addiction and underscore the importance of addressing both emotional dysregulation and loneliness in this context.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we can note that love addiction has multiple facets and represents an important construct for contemporary society, with numerous individuals struggling to function due to the associated symptomatology. Furthermore, the interaction between love addiction, emotional dysregulation, and loneliness is highly significant, highlighting the intrapsychic difficulties of individuals with higher scores in love addiction. Our results align with and complement the existing knowledge in the literature regarding this concept, contributing to the development of a more comprehensive framework.

Limitations and future directions

Despite the numerous strengths of our study, it is essential to address several significant limitations that are critical for understanding our results and guiding future research on the concept of love addiction. Firstly, our study included a significantly higher proportion of women (62.5%), which may limit the generalizability of the findings across genders. Consequently, future studies should aim for a more balanced gender distribution to improve the representativeness and applicability of the results. Secondly, it is important to acknowledge that our primary recruitment method was the snowball sampling technique, relying on a convenience sample. As such, the population included in this study cannot be considered fully representative. Future research should employ a wider range of recruitment strategies to reach a more diverse and varied sample, which would enhance the external validity of the findings. Thirdly, the cross-sectional design of our study presents certain limitations, particularly the inability to establish causal relationships or observe changes over time. Longitudinal designs, in contrast, would be more effective in capturing the long-term interactions between variables, providing insights into the evolving nature of love addiction and its potential consequences.

Additionally, it is important to note that, given that love addiction has been primarily studied over the past decade, there are still many aspects that warrant further exploration. For example, researchers could consider conducting a meta-analysis on the relationship between love addiction and emotional dysregulation, taking into account the results of the present study and the role of emotions in the process of love addiction. Moreover, we believe that the topic of love addiction remains of great interest, and future studies could also focus on other variables that may be involved in the development and maintenance of love addiction. These variables include coping styles, attachment styles, and positive/negative emotions, among others. Therefore, any research conducted in this area could contribute significantly to the further

development of insights into love addiction and even to the creation of a theoretical model.

Finally, we consider that future research can enhance the field of study on love addiction by distinguishing between individuals who self-identify as being in love at the time of the research and those who self-identify as not being in love at that moment. This differentiation could provide highly valuable insights into how individuals function during periods of heightened and intense emotionality. Furthermore, comparisons can be made between the negative effects of love addiction on functioning and those of other addictions studied both globally and in the specific Romanian context, such as drug addiction (Fields, 2021; Karner-Huțuleac & Huțul, 2023), alcohol addiction (Carr et al., 2024; Matei-Mitacu et al., 2024), pornography consumption (Burtăverde et al., 2021; Grubbs et al., 2019), gambling addiction (Calado & Griffiths, 2016; Estevez et al., 2020; Huțul et al., 2024), or workaholism (Andersen et al., 2023; Butucescu & Uscătescu, 2013). Such a comparative analysis could offer valuable insights for psychotherapists and contribute to the fight against addictions in contemporary society.

Theoretical and practical implications

From a theoretical perspective, the results of the present research highlighted the profound insights into the relationships between love addiction, emotional dysregulation, and loneliness. Furthermore, the findings underscore how emotional dysregulation and loneliness can increase vulnerability to love addiction. These observations provide an important theoretical foundation for constructing and developing theoretical frameworks regarding love addiction.

From a practical perspective, our results can be utilized by mental health professionals addressing love addiction in their practice. Specifically, our findings may inform psychotherapeutic interventions aimed at managing emotional dysregulation and loneliness, as these factors are closely interconnected with love addiction. Additionally, our results may be valuable for non-governmental organizations advocating for greater understanding and psychoeducation about what constitutes and symbolizes healthy love, as well as how it can be developed and sustained.

Implications for education

Our findings may also be relevant in an educational context, particularly with regard to love addiction, emotional dysregulation, and loneliness, potentially having a significant impact on the emotional and academic development of students. The study of these constructs underscores

the importance of integrating these themes into education to promote better mental health and healthier interpersonal relationships.

The promotion of love addiction in the educational context can assist students in recognizing unhealthy relationship patterns and learning strategies for developing healthy attachments. This approach may contribute to the prevention of long-term relational and psychological difficulties. Both love addiction and emotional dysregulation, as well as loneliness, can interfere with the learning process and hinder students' ability to regulate stress, learn effectively, and form healthy relationships. Understanding these concepts and integrating them into the educational curriculum is essential for promoting overall well-being. Consequently, teachers could be trained to recognize signs of emotional stress in students and either provide support or refer them to a qualified professional, such as a clinical psychologist or psychotherapist. In conclusion, education that proactively addresses issues such as love addiction, emotional dysregulation, and loneliness can contribute to creating a more supportive and healthy educational environment. By learning strategies to manage these emotional challenges, students will be better equipped to form healthy relationships and thrive both academically and personally.

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