

PAYING ATTENTION TO YOUR EMOTIONS

A Mixed-Methods Study on Alexithymia and Emotional Dysregulation in Adults with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

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Introduction

ADHD is increasingly being framed as an **emotion regulation disorder**

- **Emotion dysregulation (ED)** is frequent and intense in those with ADHD¹

Emotions and executive functions interact in the brain²

- Symptoms of ADHD and ED could interact to form a **positive feedback loop**



Alexithymia (difficulty identifying, describing, differentiating emotions) is prevalent in those with ADHD³

- Awareness of emotions is necessary to regulate them³
- Alexithymia may **strengthen the feedback loop** between ADHD symptoms and ED, leading to even more severe ED and ADHD symptoms

Hypotheses and Research Question

H1: ADHD symptom severity will positively correlate with emotional dysregulation

H2: Alexithymia will moderate (strengthen) this correlation

RQ1: How do adults with ADHD describe their emotions in relation to their symptoms?

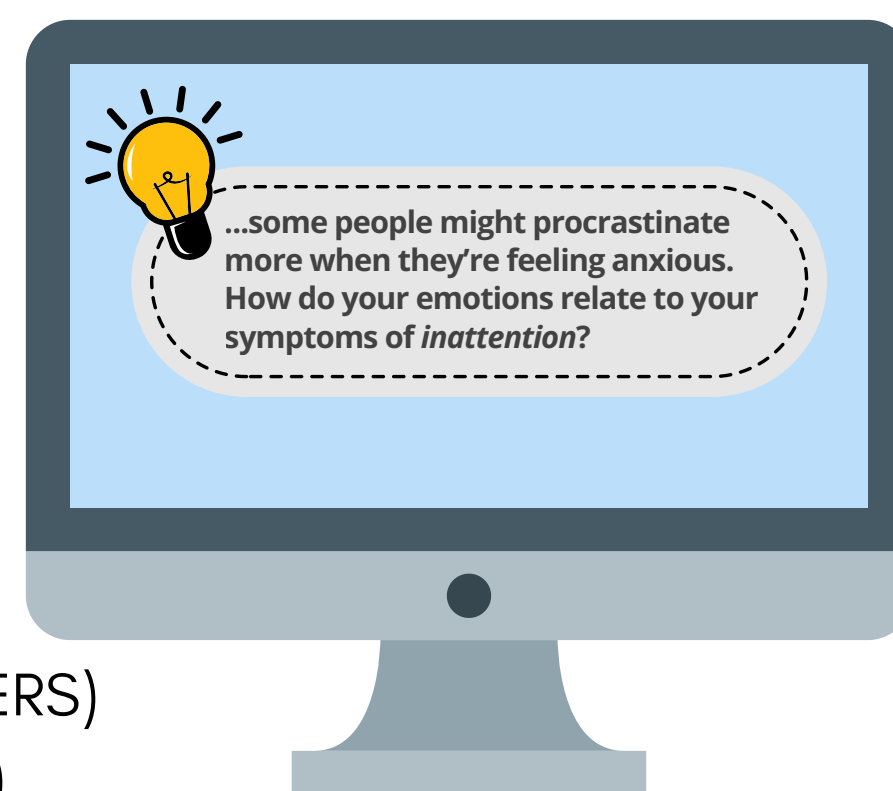
Methods

Participants & Procedure:

- n=100 students recruited using RPS at SFU
- Online survey
- Mean age 19.4 years (SD=2.7)
- 83% women, 14% men, 3% gender-diverse

Measures:

- Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20)
- Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS)
- Conners Adult ADHD Rating Scale (CAARS)
- Autism Quotient (AQ-10)
- Self-developed open-ended questions

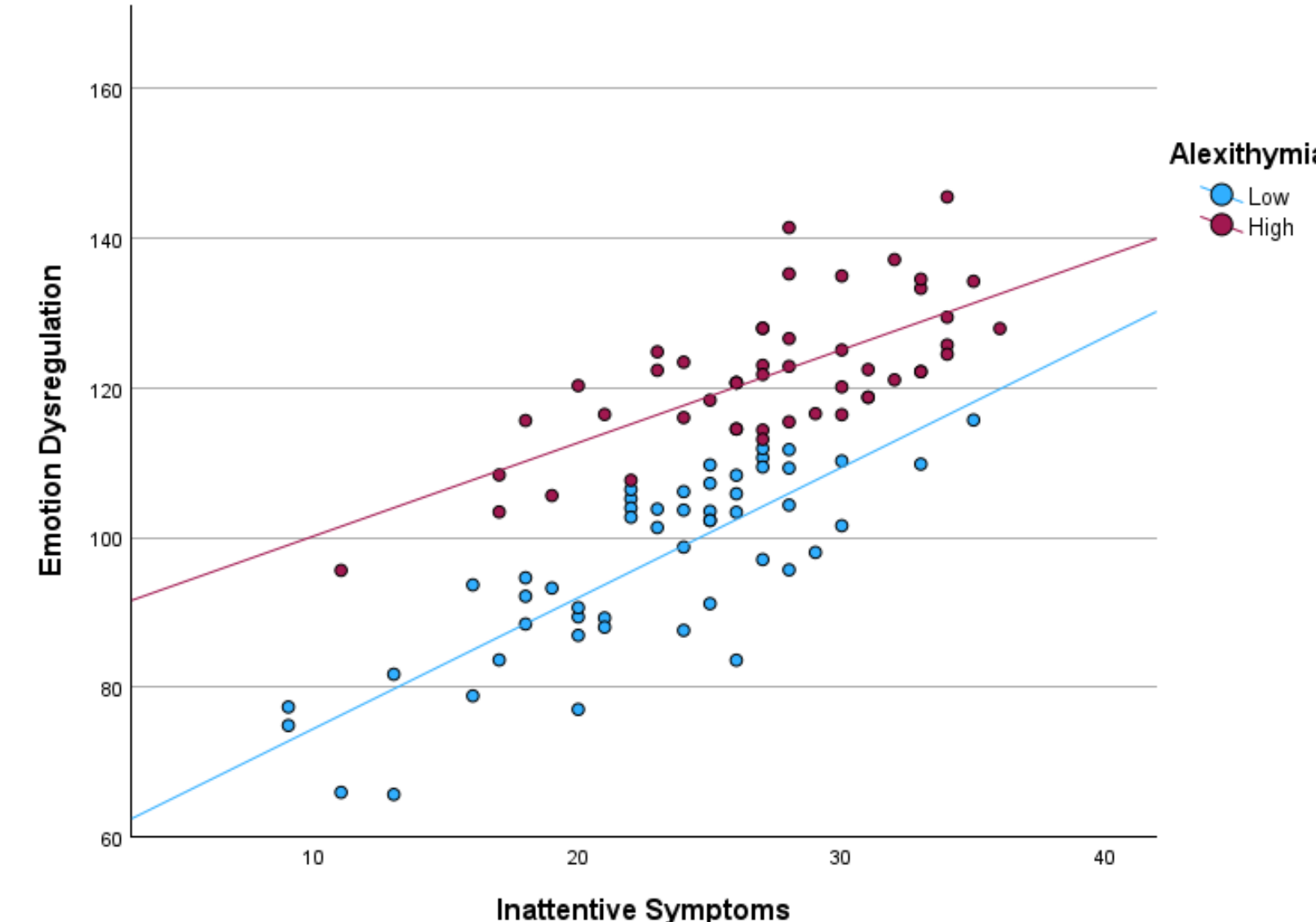


Convergent parallel mixed-methods design



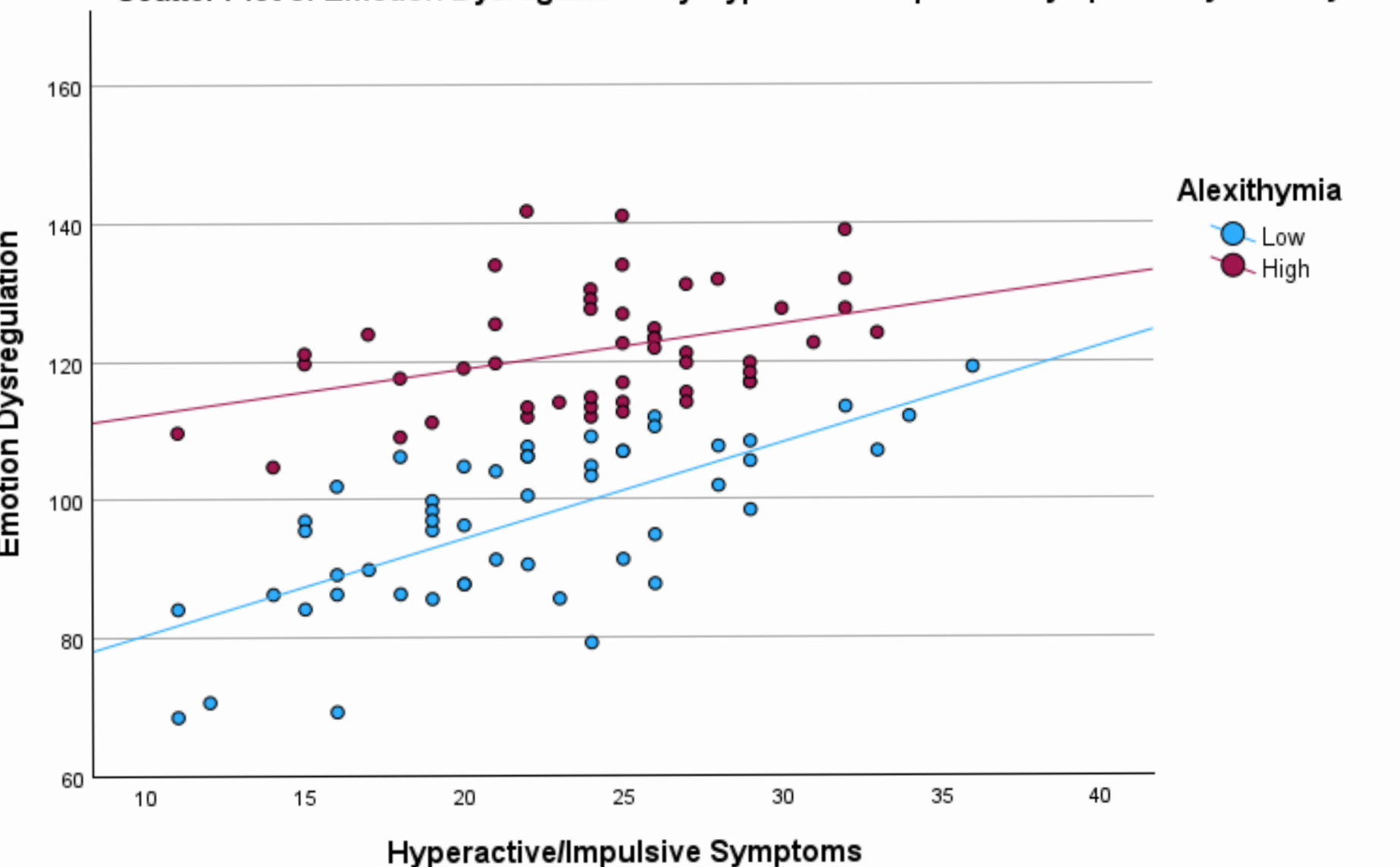
Results

Scatter Plot of Emotion Dysregulation by Inattentive Symptoms by Alexithymia



	R ²	ΔR ²	Sig. (p)
Inattentive Symptoms			
Controls (gender, age, AQ-10 score)	.138	.138	.008
Predictors (CAARS DSM-IV Inattentive Score and TAS-20 Score)	.530	.392	<.001
Interaction Term (CAARS DSM-IV Inattentive x TAS-20)	.532	.002	.546
Hyperactive/Impulsive Symptoms			
Controls (gender, age, AQ-10 score)	.138	.138	.008
Predictors (CAARS DSM-IV Hyperactive/Impulsive Score and TAS-20 Score)	.517	.378	<.001
Interaction Term (CAARS DSM-IV Hyperactive/Impulsive x TAS-20)	.517	.000	.818

Scatter Plot of Emotion Dysregulation by Hyperactive/Impulsive Symptoms by Alexithymia



Major Themes

Emotion Dysregulation and ADHD Symptoms Form a Reinforcing Loop

"I'll usually end up focusing more on the fact I'm stressed instead of trying to actually solve the problem. This leads to never ending loops of distractions." -RPS23

"I find it really hard to know what I'm feeling and acknowledge it. Even with therapy, it feels impossible to express my feelings." - RPS5

Alexithymia is a Struggle

Emotions are Core to the ADHD Experience

"I find it difficult to regulate my emotions generally, and this ties in with my ADHD symptoms pretty heavily. Extreme emotions seem to correlate to more extreme ADHD symptoms." -RPS27

"sometimes when I'm feeling extremely upset about something, I feel as if I have no control over what I'm feeling, thinking, or behaving" -RPS10

Lack of Control Over Emotions, Attention, and Behaviour.

Interpersonal Impacts of ADHD and Emotion Dysregulation

"I get very emotional with my ADHD, specifically with anger. I get irritable really fast and act impulsively. It's ruined a lot of relationships with my friends and family." -RPS9

Discussion

✓ H1: ADHD symptom severity positively correlates with ED

✗ H2: Alexithymia does not moderate (strengthen) the association between ADHD symptoms and ED

- Instead, alexithymia has an additive effect

RQ1: Young adults with ADHD describe **emotional experiences** as **important** and a major **source of distress**

- Alexithymia affects many, but not all
- For some, hyper-focus on emotions can result in rumination
- Young adults with ADHD have unique challenges relating to their developmental stage

Implications:

- Clinicians should take a **holistic approach** to understanding the emotion-attention loop
- Emotion regulation and recognition **skills** are perceived as **useful** by those with ADHD which may facilitate treatment retention
- Adults and adolescents with ADHD may require **specific supports** to navigate the demands and responsibilities of adulthood.

