

UNDERSTANDING EMPATHY AVOIDANCE TO PROMOTE SUSTAINABLE PSYCHOSOCIAL INTERVENTIONS: ROLES OF PERCEIVED EFFORT, AVERSION, EFFICACY, AND CLOSENESS

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01. INTRODUCTION

- Empathy avoidance impedes prosocial behaviours and underlies phenomena such as compassion fatigue and burnout in care settings.¹
- Its cognitive mechanisms (perceived effort, aversion, and efficacy) have been established in cognitive empathising.²
- However, these mechanisms in psychosocial interventions remain understudied.

02. METHODS

- 78 participants in a within-subjects experimental study.
- Read vignettes of mental distress
 - Vignettes were refined posts written by real users on letstalk.mindline.sg
- Outcome variable
 - Self-reported inclinations to avoid or comfort the writer (Empathy Avoidance Index)
- Predictors
 - Perceived effort, aversion, and efficacy of comforting the writer (Adapted NASA Task Load Index)
 - Interpersonal closeness (Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale)
 - Helping attitudes (Helping Attitudes Scale)
 - Prosociality (Other-Oriented Empathy and Helpfulness; Prosocial Personality Battery).
- Data analytic plan: linear mixed effects model using R package “lme4”

Example vignette

“I feel really anxious about a reference check for an upcoming job interview. Many interviews require a reference check, but I’m hesitant to provide one because I didn’t perform well in my previous job. There were so many factors, poor mental health and mentality being the main ones, and I’m scared this might lower my chances of getting my dream job, or even any job in the future. I know reference checks are important and help employers gauge performance, but the thought of it gives me so much anxiety. I worry that leaving the reference section blank or having potential employers learn about my past might lead to rejections. It’s hard because I believe people can change, but what if employers don’t see it that way? To be honest, I’m also scared that the struggles I faced in my last job might also appear in a future job. I’ve lost a lot of confidence in myself. I wish I could figure out how to move past this.”

03. RESULTS

Two parallel models (see table below) were run to investigate significant main effects.

Model	Predictors Included	Predictor(s) Excluded due to multicollinearity	Random Effects Structure
1	Effort**, Aversion**, Efficacy***, IOS***, Helpfulness, OOE***, Clinical Condition, Perceived Benefit	HAS	(Effort + Aversion + efficacy + IOS + Helpfulness Participant_ID)
2	Effort**, Aversion**, Efficacy***, IOS***, HAS***, Clinical Condition, Perceived Benefit	OOE, Helpfulness	(Effort + Aversion + efficacy + IOS Participant_ID)

Notes: IOS = Inclusion of Other in the Self scale, OOE = Other-Oriented Empathy, HAS = Helping Attitudes Scale

** p < .01, *** p < .001

Lower effort and aversion, as well as greater efficacy, interpersonal closeness (IOS), other-oriented empathy (OOE) and helping attitudes (HAS) are associated with lower avoidance.

04. CONCLUSION

Implications:

- Reduce aversion and enhance perceived efficacy to support emotionally sustainable psychosocial interventions
- Leverage social closeness to maintain engagement in care settings
- Prioritise efficacy-building in formal/professional contexts where closeness is not a natural motivator

Future Directions:

- Caregiver and lay supporter training should normalise the emotional cost of empathising without dismissing it
- Examine generalisability beyond vignette-based paradigms to real-world helping behaviour

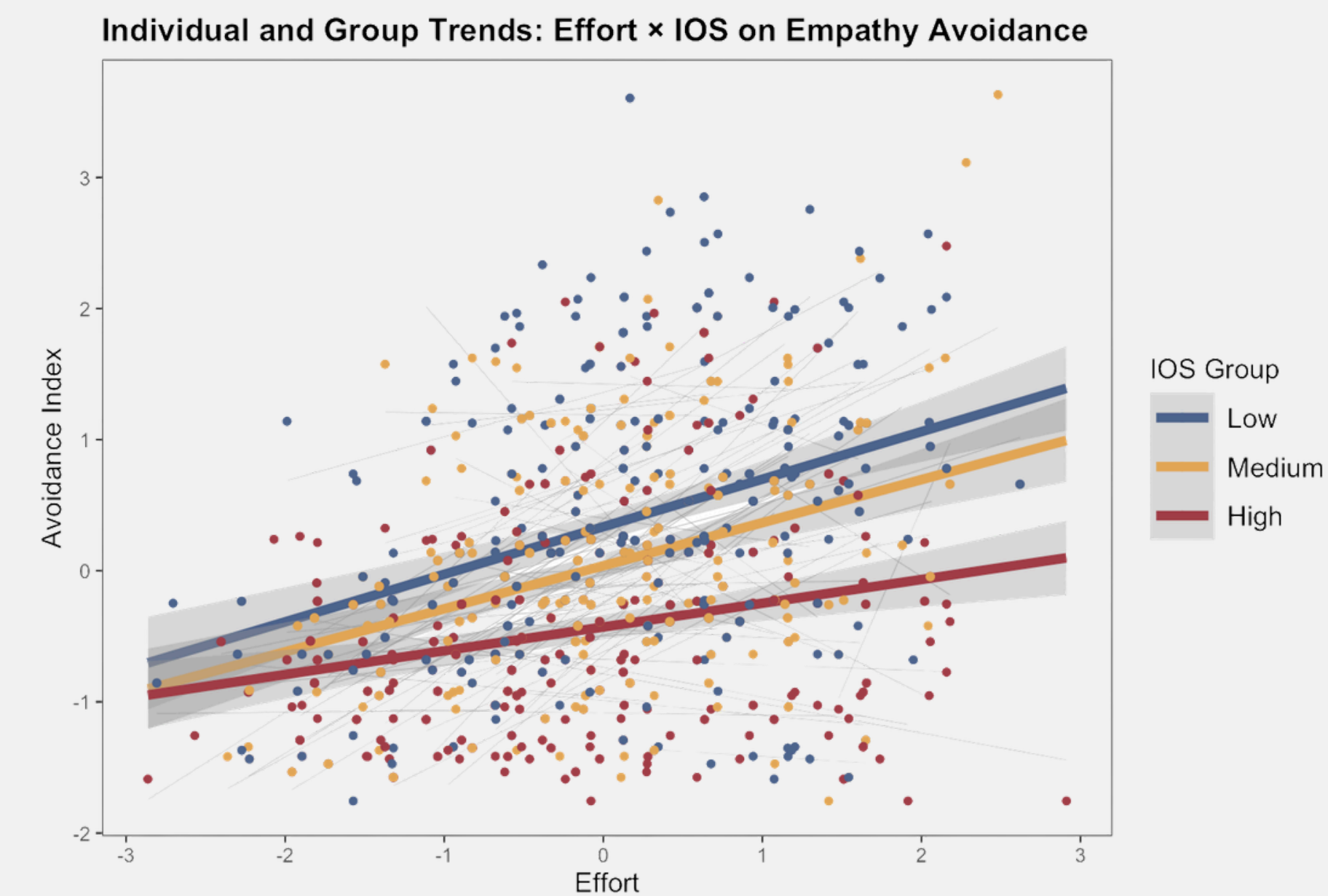
References

1 Howick, J., & Rees, S. (2017). Overthrowing barriers to empathy in healthcare: empathy in the age of the Internet. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 110(9), 352–357. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0141076817714443>

2 Cameron, C. D., Hutcherson, C. A., Ferguson, A. M., Scheffer, J. A., Hadjiandreou, E., & Inzlicht, M. (2019). Empathy is hard work: People choose to avoid empathy because of its cognitive costs. *Journal of Experimental Psychology. General*, 148(6), 962–976. <https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0000595>

Across interaction models, two effects emerged consistently (ps < .05).

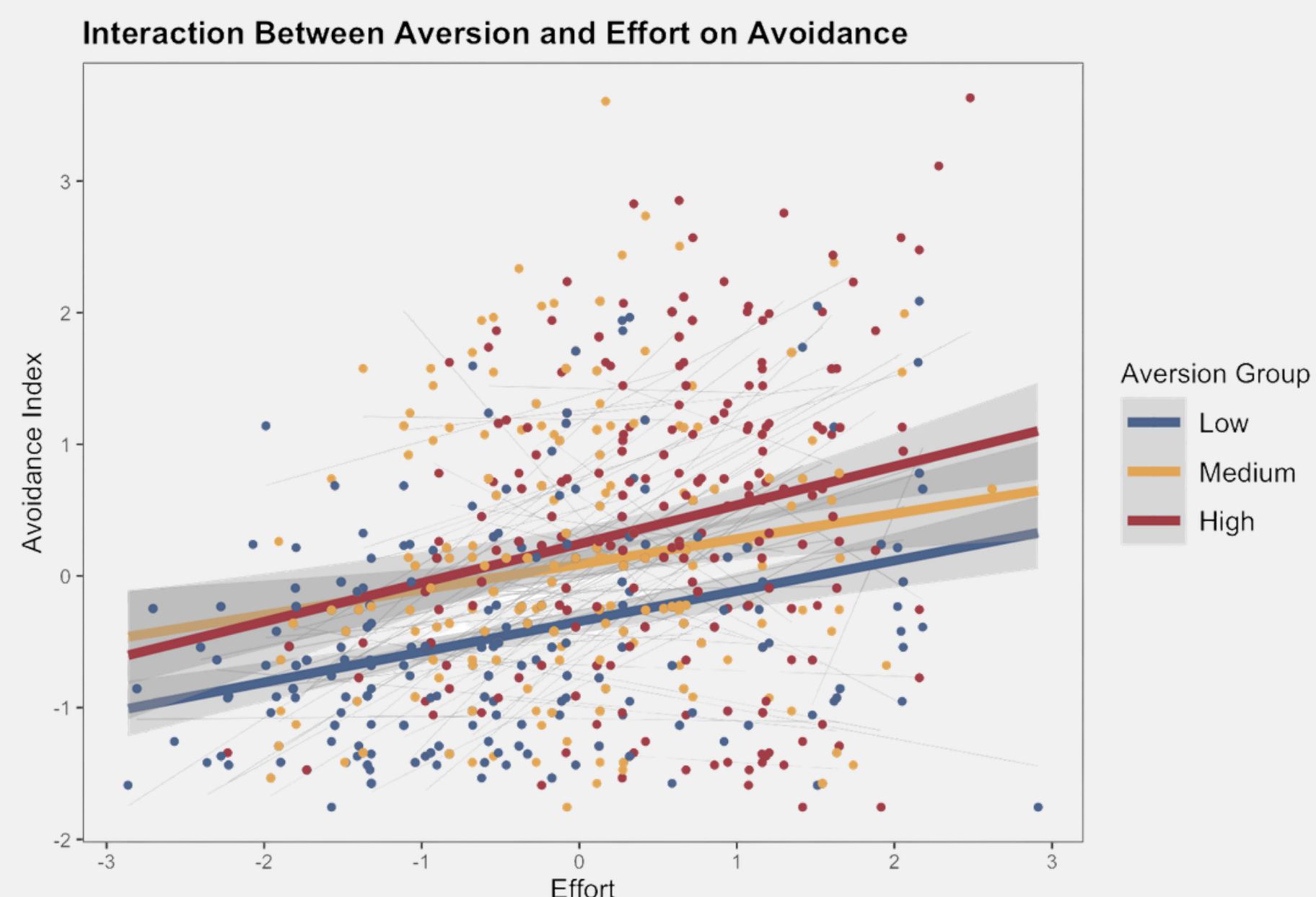
1. Perceived effort × interpersonal closeness



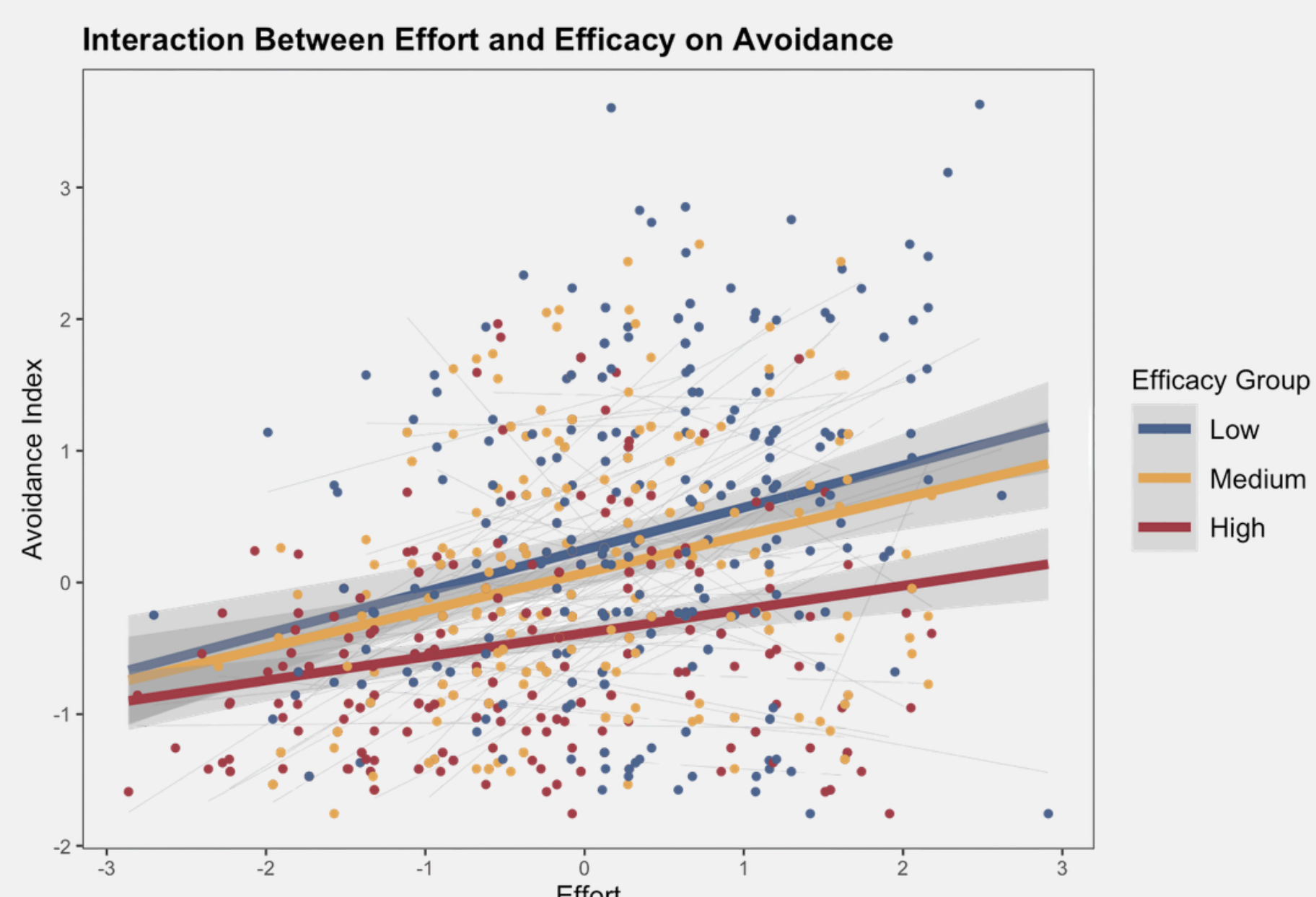
All pairwise IOS group comparisons significant at p < .001

2. Perceived effort × aversion × efficacy

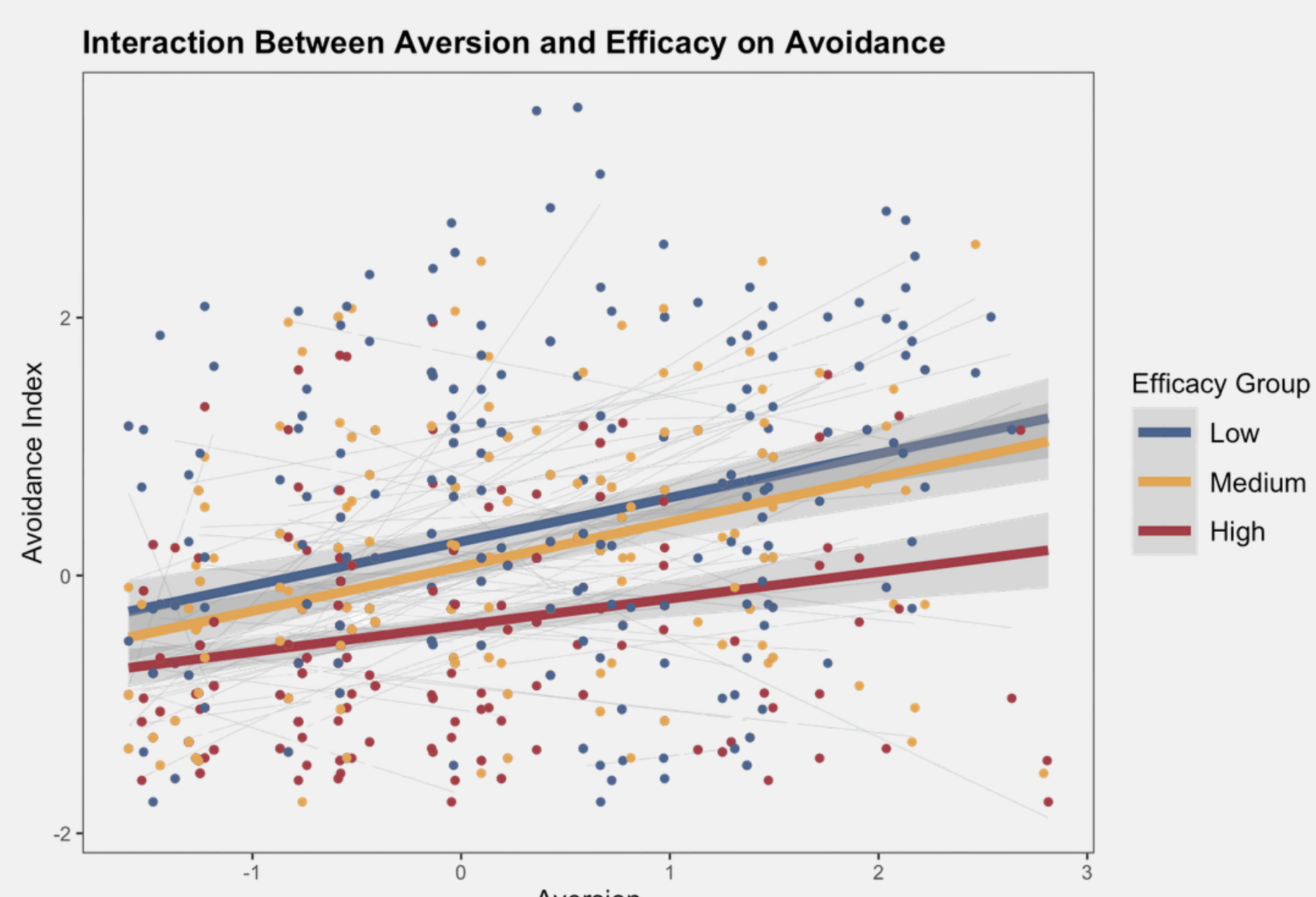
This was probed by testing each pair of variables separately using tertile groups.



Only Low vs High aversion p < .05



Low vs Medium and High efficacy p < .05; Medium vs High ns



Only Low vs High efficacy p < .05