Hidden Emotions: Sex Differences in Alexithymia
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ABSTRACT
In the world today, communication is often instant and public. It is therefore important for individuals to be able to recognize and express their emotions. Alexithymia is a clinical condition in which individuals lack this emotional awareness. Individuals with alexithymia may therefore have difficulties with interpersonal communication. These issues may be compounded by possible sex differences in alexithymia. Studies have shown that men have higher levels of alexithymia (Levant, Hall, Williams & Hasan, 2009). Moreover, alexithymia functions differently in the brains of men and women. For men, alexithymia is associated with a certain pattern of neurotransmitter activity (Spitzer, Branda, Roseb & Nauckob, 2005) and with deficiencies in right hemispheric function and inter-hemispheric transfer (Lumley & Siekyl, 2000). These associations are not found for women (Lumley & Siekyl, 2000; Spitzer et al., 2005). The purpose of this research is to determine if sex differences in alexithymia can be replicated in an online environment.

INTRODUCTION
Communication depends on our ability to read and interpret different emotional expressions. It is also critically important for individuals to be able to express their own emotions. Individuals with alexithymia may lack the level of emotional awareness that is necessary for effective communication. Alexithymia literally means “without words for emotion.” Alexithymia includes difficulty distinguishing between different emotions, difficulty describing feelings, and difficulty differentiating between physical and emotional sensations (Sifneos, 1972; Kooiman, Spinhoven, & Trip, 1994). The most commonly used assessment of alexithymia is the 20-item Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20; Bagby, Parker, & Taylor, 1994) is a 20-item self-report questionnaire that contains three subscales: Difficulty Identifying Feelings, Difficulty Describing Feelings, and Externally Oriented Thinking. Participants completed the TAS-20 as part of a larger online study. Men scored higher than women on all three TAS-20 subscales. However, the Externally Oriented Thinking subscale was the only one where the sex differences were statistically significant.

This study demonstrated that men are less likely than women to think about emotions in their daily activities and to use their emotions to help them solve problems. This may be a barrier to effective communication. If men are less able to examine their own emotions, this may prevent them from effectively expressing their motivations and goals. In addition, it is possible that sex differences in alexithymia correspond with difficulty in understanding and recognizing others’ emotions. This may further impede communication. Future research should examine the relationship between alexithymia and successful interpersonal communication, and should determine if sex differences in alexithymia contribute to sex differences in communication skills.

METHOD
Participants
A total of 216 undergraduates (149 females, 67 males) completed this study. The Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20; Bagby, Parker, & Taylor, 1994) is a 20-item self-report questionnaire that contains three subscales: Difficulty Identifying Feelings, Difficulty Describing Feelings, and Externally Oriented Thinking. Participants completed the TAS-20 as part of a larger online study. Men scored higher than women on all three TAS-20 subscales. However, the Externally Oriented Thinking subscale was the only one where the sex differences were statistically significant.

RESULTS
Table 1 presents the results of the independent samples t-tests. The grouping variable was sex and the dependent variables were the scores on the three subscales.

DISCUSSION
This study demonstrated that men are less likely than women to think about emotions in their daily activities and to use their emotions to help them solve problems. This may be a barrier to effective communication. If men are unable to examine their own emotions, this may prevent them from effectively expressing their thoughts and feelings. In addition, it is possible that sex differences in alexithymia correspond to difficulty in understanding and recognizing others’ emotions. This may further impede communication. Future research should examine the relationship between alexithymia and successful interpersonal communication, and should determine if sex differences in alexithymia contribute to sex differences in communication skills.

REFERENCES