



The Role of Attachment and Emotional Loneliness in Relationship Instability Among Emerging Adults

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Abstract: Romantic relationships during emerging adulthood are often emotionally intense yet uncertain. This stage of life involves exploration of identity, intimacy, and independence, which can create both meaningful connections and relational instability. The present study examined whether attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, and emotional loneliness significantly contribute to relationship instability among emerging adults aged 18–30 years. A sample of 150 participants was recruited using convenience sampling. Data were collected using the Experiences in Close Relationships – Short Form (ECR-Short), the UCLA-3 Emotional Loneliness Scale, and a researcher-constructed Relationship Instability Scale. Pearson correlation analysis revealed significant positive relationships between attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, emotional loneliness, and relationship instability (all $p < .001$). Multiple regression analysis indicated that these variables collectively explained approximately 40% of the variance in relationship instability. All three predictors contributed independently to instability. The findings suggest that both attachment insecurity and perceived emotional disconnection play a meaningful role in shaping romantic relationship stability during emerging adulthood. The study highlights the importance of understanding emotional dynamics in promoting healthier and more secure romantic relationships.

Keywords: *Attachment Anxiety, Attachment Avoidance, Emotional Loneliness, Relationship Instability, Emerging Adulthood*

1. Introduction

Attachment Theory and Adult Romantic Relationships

Attachment theory proposes that individuals develop relatively stable attachment orientations that influence emotional regulation and interpersonal behavior (Cindy Hazan & Phillip Shaver, 1987). In adult romantic relationships, attachment is commonly conceptualized along two dimensions: attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance.

Attachment anxiety is characterized by fear of abandonment, excessive reassurance seeking, and heightened emotional sensitivity. Individuals high in attachment anxiety often perceive relationships as unpredictable and may engage in behaviors that intensify relational stress (Mario Mikulincer & Phillip R. Shaver, 2007).

Attachment avoidance reflects discomfort with emotional closeness and reliance on others. Avoidantly attached individuals tend to suppress emotional needs and maintain psychological distance, which may hinder intimacy and emotional connection (Kim Bartholomew & Leonard Horowitz, 1991). Emotional loneliness refers to the perceived absence of close emotional bonds and intimate attachment figures. Unlike social loneliness, emotional loneliness emphasizes the quality rather than quantity of relationships (Robert S. Weiss, 1973).

In romantic relationships, emotional loneliness may occur when emotional needs are unmet due to poor communication, lack of responsiveness, or emotional withdrawal by partners (Louise Hawkley & John T. Cacioppo, 2010). Prolonged emotional loneliness can reduce relationship satisfaction and increase contemplation of relationship dissolution.

2. Review of Literature

Arnett (2004) expanded the concept of emerging adulthood by emphasizing instability and exploration in romantic relationships during the ages of 18 to 30 years. The study highlighted that individuals in this developmental stage frequently experience changes in commitment, emotional involvement, and relationship expectations. Romantic relationships during emerging adulthood were found to be emotionally intense but less stable compared to later adulthood, making this phase particularly vulnerable to relationship instability.

Arnett (2000) introduced emerging adulthood as a distinct developmental period characterized by identity exploration, self-focus, and instability. Arnett proposed that romantic relationships during this stage are often experimental and transitional, contributing to frequent

relationship changes and emotional uncertainty. This framework provides an important developmental context for understanding relationship instability among young adults¹¹

Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) proposed a four-category model of adult attachment based on individuals' internal models of self and others. Their findings suggested that individuals with insecure attachment patterns experienced greater discomfort with intimacy and dependence. These attachment patterns were associated with emotional distancing, interpersonal difficulties, and increased risk of unstable romantic relationships¹²

3. Methodology

3.1 Objectives

- a) To examine the relationship between attachment anxiety and relationship instability.
- b) To examine the relationship between attachment avoidance and relationship instability.
- c) To assess the relationship between emotional loneliness and relationship instability.
- d) To determine the predictive role of attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, and emotional loneliness in relationship instability.

3.2 Hypotheses

H1: There will be a positive relationship between attachment anxiety and relationship instability.

H2: There will be a positive relationship between attachment avoidance and relationship instability.

H3: There will be a positive relationship between emotional loneliness and relationship instability.

H4: Attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, and emotional loneliness will significantly predict relationship instability.

3.3 Variables

Independent Variables: Attachment Anxiety, Attachment Avoidance, Emotional Loneliness

Dependent Variable: Relationship Instability

3.4 Sample

The final sample consisted of 150 emerging adults aged 18–30. Participants were selected through convenience sampling.

3.5 Statistical Analysis

A correlational research design was employed. Data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analysis were conducted. Assumptions for regression were checked and met.

3.6 Description of the tools

Experiences in Close Relationships – Short Form (ECR-Short)

Attachment was assessed using the Experiences in Close Relationships – Short Form (ECR-Short), which consists of 12 items. The scale measures two dimensions of adult attachment: attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance, with six items each. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Emotional Loneliness Scale (UCLA-3)

Emotional loneliness was measured using the three-item version of the UCLA Loneliness Scale (UCLA-3). This scale assesses feelings of emotional isolation, lack of companionship, and perceived disconnection from others. Responses were recorded on a 3-point scale ranging from 1 (hardly ever/never) to 3 (often).

Relationship Instability Scale

Relationship instability was measured using an 8-item researcher-constructed Relationship Instability Scale. The items assessed frequent doubts about the relationship, emotional disengagement, conflict, fluctuating commitment, and thoughts of relationship dissolution. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

3.7 Procedure

The questionnaire was administered offline as well as online mode using survey and Google Forms. Participants were provided with information about the purpose of the study, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation. After providing consent, participants completed the socio-demographic form followed by the standardized questionnaires.

4. Analysis of Results

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables*

Variable	M	SD
Attachment anxiety	3.92	1.18
Attachment avoidance	3.54	1.06
Emotional Loneliness	10.95	2.99
Relationship Instability	27.03	8.21

Interpretation

The mean scores indicate moderate levels of attachment insecurity and emotional loneliness among participants. Relationship instability also demonstrated variability within the sample, suggesting meaningful differences in relational experiences among emerging adults.

Table 2. *Pearson Correlations Among Study Variables*

Variables	1	2	3	4
Attachment anxiety				
Attachment avoidance	.47			
Emotional loneliness	.49	.45		
Relationship instability	.45	.47	.49	

$p < .001$.

Correlation Interpretation

Pearson product-moment correlations revealed that relationship instability was significantly and positively associated with attachment anxiety, $r(146) = .45, p < .001$, attachment avoidance, $r(146) = .47, p < .001$, and emotional loneliness, $r(146) = .49, p < .001$. These findings indicate that higher levels of attachment insecurity and emotional loneliness are related to greater instability in romantic relationships. Thus, Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 were supported.

Table 3: *Multiple Linear Regression Predicting Relationship Instability*

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	P
Attachment anxiety	1.95	.48	.28	4.05	< .001
Attachment avoidance	2.29	.55	.30	4.16	< .001

Emotional Loneliness	.70	.20	.27	3.64	< .001
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$R = .63, R^2 = .40, \text{Adjusted } R^2 = .38$

$F(3, 144) = 31.39, p < .001$

Regression Interpretation

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine whether attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, and emotional loneliness significantly predicted relationship instability. The overall model was statistically significant, $F(3, 144) = 31.39, p < .001$, explaining approximately 40% of the variance in relationship instability ($R^2 = .40$).

All three predictors contributed significantly to the model. Attachment avoidance emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = .30, p < .001$), followed by attachment anxiety ($\beta = .28, p < .001$) and emotional loneliness ($\beta = .27, p < .001$). These results indicate that each variable independently contributes to instability even when controlling for the others.

Therefore, Hypothesis 4 was supported.

5. Discussion

The present study sought to examine how attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, and emotional loneliness contribute to relationship instability among emerging adults. Romantic relationships during this life stage are often emotionally intense yet uncertain. Individuals between 18 and 30 years are navigating identity, independence, and intimacy simultaneously, which makes romantic bonds particularly complex. Therefore, understanding the psychological factors that contribute to instability in these relationships is important both theoretically and practically.

The findings of this study provide clear evidence that emotional insecurity and feelings of loneliness are meaningfully linked to instability in romantic relationships.

Interpretation of Findings

All three variables, attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, and emotional loneliness, showed significant positive relationships with relationship instability. This means that as levels of attachment insecurity and emotional loneliness increased, relationship instability also increased.

The regression analysis further demonstrated that these three variables together explained approximately 40% of the variance in relationship instability. In psychological research, this represents a substantial proportion of explained variance, suggesting that these emotional factors play a powerful role in shaping relational outcomes during emerging adulthood.

Importantly, each predictor remained significant even when controlling for the others. This indicates that attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, and emotional loneliness each contribute uniquely to relationship instability.

Attachment Anxiety and Instability

Individuals high in attachment anxiety tend to worry about abandonment, seek reassurance frequently, and become emotionally reactive in relationships. The present findings suggest that such heightened emotional sensitivity may contribute to instability.

When individuals consistently fear rejection or interpret neutral behaviors as signs of withdrawal, relational tension may increase. In emerging adulthood, where relationships are already in a phase of exploration and uncertainty, anxious tendencies may intensify doubts and conflicts. Thus, insecurity rooted in fear of loss appears to be one pathway through which instability develops.

Attachment Avoidance and Instability

Attachment avoidance also significantly predicted relationship instability. Avoidantly attached individuals often maintain emotional distance, value independence strongly, and feel uncomfortable with deep emotional reliance.

Although emotional distance may function as a coping mechanism, it can reduce intimacy and emotional responsiveness within the relationship. Over time, partners may perceive this withdrawal as lack of commitment or emotional investment, which may increase uncertainty about the future of the relationship.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study demonstrates that attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, and emotional loneliness significantly contribute to relationship instability among emerging adults. Emotional insecurity and perceived emotional disconnection appear to play central roles in shaping relational uncertainty.

Understanding these psychological mechanisms may help researchers, clinicians, and young adults themselves foster healthier and more stable romantic relationships.

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