



Emotional Dependence, Attachment Anxiety and Toxic Relationships among Young Adults

Anchal Kaushik, *Masters, Clinical Psychology, Amity Institute of Psychology and Allied Sciences, Noida, India*
anchalkaushik@outlook.com

Abstract: This study examined emotional dependence, attachment anxiety, and toxic relationship patterns among young adults and explored gender differences in these variables. Emotional dependence refers to relying on a partner for emotional validation and security, while attachment anxiety involves fear of abandonment and sensitivity to relationship instability. Both can contribute to unhealthy relationship dynamics. The study included 186 participants aged 18–30 (93 males and 93 females). Data were collected using three self-report measures: the Emotional Dependence Questionnaire (CDE), the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale–Short Form (ECR-S), and the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS). Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and independent samples t-tests were used for data analysis. The findings revealed significant gender differences. Males reported higher levels of emotional dependence and attachment anxiety, while females reported greater experiences of toxic relationships. Emotional dependence and attachment anxiety were strongly positively correlated, indicating that individuals who are more emotionally dependent also tend to experience higher attachment insecurity. Both variables were negatively associated with healthy relationship functioning. Overall, the results highlight the complex relationship between emotional vulnerability and romantic relationship experiences among young adults. The findings emphasize the importance of addressing emotional dependence and attachment insecurity in counselling and mental health interventions to promote healthier relationships and emotional resilience.

Keyword: *Emotional Dependence, Anxiety, Attachment, Toxic Relationship, Young Adults*

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

In young adulthood, romantic connections are crucial for psychological health, identity formation, and emotional growth. In this phase, people develop strong interpersonal bonds while pursuing both closeness and independence. When characterised by insecurity and dysfunctional attachment patterns, these connections can cause discomfort even if they can foster emotional support and personal development. Excessive reliance on a spouse for emotional security and validation is known as emotional dependence, and it frequently leaves people susceptible to relationship instability and separation anxiety. This is closely associated with attachment anxiety, an insecure attachment style marked by heightened emotional sensitivity, reassurance-seeking behaviours, and dread of abandonment. These behaviours in adult relationships are influenced by early relational experiences, according to attachment theory.

Together, emotional reliance and attachment anxiety may make a person more susceptible to toxic relationships, which entail manipulation, emotional abuse, and undesirable interpersonal dynamics. People who are more emotionally vulnerable could find it difficult to identify or end such detrimental connections.

Additionally, research indicates that gender variations affect the experiences of toxic relationships, emotional reliance, and attachment anxiety. How men and women express their emotional needs and react to relationship hardship may be influenced by social and cultural conventions. These tendencies, however, can change depending on the cultural setting.

In order to better understand relational vulnerabilities and promote healthier relationship functioning, the study emphasises the significance of looking at emotional reliance, attachment anxiety, and toxic connections among young adults.

1.2 Definitions

1.2.1 Emotional Dependence

Emotional dependence is an overreliance on another person for validation, identity, and self-worth, especially in love relationships. Individuals in this situation frequently struggle with independence and obtain their satisfaction exclusively from their partner. Maladaptive emotional dependence is defined by a fear of desertion, low self-esteem, and a proclivity to sacrifice personal demands in favour of the partner's. It may result in behaviours such as frequent reassurance seeking and emotional overinvestment, which can affect decision-making and emotional regulation over time.

1.2.2 Attachment Anxiety

Attachment anxiety is a type of insecure attachment based on attachment theory that emphasises how early caregiving experiences shape adult relationships. Individuals with high attachment anxiety perceive relationships as fragile, anticipating abandonment even in the absence of actual dangers, resulting in hypervigilance and a strong desire for reassurance. They frequently use hyper activating techniques like clinginess and emotional sensitivity, misinterpreting neutral behaviours as indicators of rejection.

1.2.3 Toxic Relationships

Toxic relationships are defined by detrimental patterns that have a negative impact on a person's emotional and psychological well-being, including persistent hostility and manipulation. Control, jealousy, gas lighting, and emotional withdrawal are common behaviours in these partnerships, as opposed to usual confrontations. Individuals may find it difficult to recognise or leave these dynamics, which are frequently aggravated by emotional reliance, due to the subtlety and normalisation of poison. Such relationships cause major mental health difficulties such as anxiety and despair, and they are a rising source of concern among young adults since they affect identity development and future relationships.

1.3 Difference Between Toxic and Healthy Relationships

Romantic relationships exist on a continuum ranging from supportive and nurturing to unhealthy and harmful. While conflict and emotional fluctuations are common in any close relationship, toxic relationships differ significantly from healthy ones in emotional tone, communication style, power balance, and psychological impact.

1.3.1 Emotional Climate***Healthy Relationships***

Healthy relationships are generally characterised by emotional safety, mutual respect, and reassurance. Even during disagreements, a stable foundation of trust and care remains. Such relationships tend to enhance emotional well-being and promote psychological growth.

Toxic Relationships

In contrast, toxic relationships often involve ongoing emotional tension and distress. Individuals may frequently feel anxious, drained, or unsettled. Instead of providing security, the relationship may create instability and emotional discomfort.

Key Difference: Healthy relationships promote emotional safety, whereas toxic ones create emotional strain.

1.3.2 Communication Patterns***Healthy Relationships***

Communication in healthy relationships is typically open, respectful, and constructive. Partners feel comfortable expressing thoughts and emotions without fear of ridicule. Conflicts are approached with the goal of understanding and resolution.

Toxic Relationships

Communication in toxic relationships may involve criticism, manipulation, gas lighting, or emotional invalidation. Discussions can escalate quickly into blame or defensiveness, often leaving one partner feeling unheard or dismissed.

Key Difference: Healthy communication strengthens connection, while toxic communication harms self-esteem.

1.3.3 Conflict Resolution

Healthy Relationships

In healthy partnerships, conflict is viewed as a normal part of intimacy and is addressed through compromise and mutual respect. Partners are willing to apologise, reflect, and work toward solutions.

Toxic Relationships

Toxic relationships often involve recurring and unresolved conflicts. Disagreements may repeatedly resurface without closure, and discussions may be dominated by blame, avoidance, or emotional withdrawal.

Key Difference: Healthy relationships resolve disagreements, whereas toxic ones recycle unresolved tension.

2. Review of Literature

Castillo-González, et. al (2024) According to the study investigating the connection between dating violence and emotional dependence among 3,203 young college students in Ecuador, both genders can experience dating violence. Women appear to be more emotionally dependent than men. Strengths and weaknesses of the study have been identified and it can be concluded that there is a correlation between dating violence and emotional dependence.

Forth, et. al. (2022) A small survey of the effects of psychopathy in a romantic relationship indicated that there were ample numbers of people with psychopathic characteristics that experienced various types of abuse (e.g., emotional, physical) and expressed negative emotional (e.g., depression, anxiety) and physical (e.g., poor health, poor sleep) manifestations. Adaptive coping was found to be associated with lower levels of depression, while maladaptive coping and increased severity of psychopathy were associated with poorer

PTSD and higher levels of depression. Regression analyses revealed that the type of victimization victimized individuals experience significantly predicts the severity of symptoms of PTSD and depression.

Cnossen, Harman, & Butterworth (2019) A study involving 216 female participants explored the link between attachment styles and relationship satisfaction, highlighting that attachment avoidance and anxiety about sexual pleasure were mediated by mutuality beliefs. The findings revealed that participants' relationship efficacy and social efficacy beliefs were shaped by their past experiences with love, impacting mutuality beliefs. Women with insecure attachment, characterized by low caregiving and care-seeking tendencies, reported lower relationship satisfaction than those with secure attachment styles. The study suggests continued investigation into the interaction of attachment representations and efficacy belief systems in future research.

Brenk-Franz, et. al. (2018) The theory of attachment describes the various ways that different styles of attachment can influence a person's health behavior and how they cope and receive care. Using a 12-item short form of the Experience in Close Relationships-revised (ECR-R-D) scale to compare the short and long form of the ECR-R in a sample of 249 patients from 10 general practice settings in Germany, the Cronbach's alpha and exploratory factor analyses demonstrated that the short and long versions of the ECR-R are consistent with one another. This finding suggests that primary care settings would be able to use the ECR short version as an effective means of identifying patients' attachment styles.

Neumann, E. (2017) Both current and past interpersonal challenges relate to numerous personality disorders. One study of 110 people found that people diagnosed with personality disorders according to Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5) exhibited a significant relationship with having been emotionally abused as a child. Children with an anxious or avoidant attachment style; anxious attachment style was found to be the strongest predictor. The problems diagnosed as personality disorders are consistently related to continuing problems in close relationships. These persistent issues stem from attachment issues resulting from being emotionally abused as children and exist through adulthood.

2.1 Research Gap

Existing literature has widely studied emotional dependence, attachment anxiety, and relationship dysfunction separately, as well as their links with romantic satisfaction, emotional regulation, psychological distress, and dating violence. Cross-cultural research has also examined how early relationship experiences and interpersonal beliefs influence adult romantic relationships.

However, a major research gap remains because most studies examine these constructs individually rather than exploring how emotional dependence, attachment anxiety, and toxic relationship dynamics interact together. Additionally, much of the existing research is based on Western or Latin American samples, with limited studies in collectivistic cultures such as India.

There is also a lack of research focusing specifically on young adults, particularly college students who are experiencing romantic relationships for the first time. Therefore, further research is needed to better understand how emotional dependence and attachment anxiety relate to toxic relationship behaviors among young adults across different cultural contexts.

3. Methodology

3.1 Aim

The primary aim of the present study was to examine gender differences in emotional dependence, attachment anxiety, and toxic relationship patterns among young adults.

3.2 Objective

- To evaluate young adults' levels of emotional attachment towards one another and to assess the differences between males and females in terms of their emotional dependency.
- To also evaluate young adults' attachment anxiety in their romantic relationships and evaluate the differences between males and females in regards to their attachment anxiety.
- To evaluate the incidence of toxic relationship patterns among young adults and to assess how these differ between males and females.
- To determine how emotional dependence and anxiety affect the development of adaptive or maladaptive relational patterns.

3.3 Hypothesis

Hypothesis 1: Emotional Dependence

H0: There is no significant gender difference in emotional dependence among young adults.

H1: There is a significant gender difference in emotional dependence among young adults.

Hypothesis 2: Attachment Anxiety

H0₂: There is no significant gender difference in attachment anxiety among young adults.

H1₂: There is a significant gender difference in attachment anxiety among young adults.

Hypothesis 3: Toxic Relationships

H0₃: There is no significant gender difference in toxic relationship involvement among young adults.

H1₃: There is a significant gender difference in toxic relationship involvement among young adults.

3.4 Variables

Independent Variable- Emotional Dependence and Attachment Anxiety

Dependent Variable- Toxic Relationship Pattern

3.5 Sample

A total of 186 young adults: male & female, comprised the sample in this study that was sized properly to maximize the ability to test for gender differences and relationships between emotional dependence, attachment anxiety/avoidance, & toxic relational patterns. Data on the sample was collected through convenience & voluntary sampling via the Internet.

Inclusion Criteria:

Young adults aged 18–25 years with current or past romantic relationship experience, both genders, English proficiency, and voluntary consent.

Exclusion Criteria

Participants outside the age range, without relationship experience, incomplete responses, or lack of consent were excluded.

3.6 Research Design

Quantitative Research design

3.7 Description of the Test

CDE – Emotional Dependency Questionnaire

Developed by Lemos M. and Londoño N. H., the Cuestionario de Dependencia Emocional (CDE) (2006) is a self-reported instruments used to measure emotional dependence within romantic partnerships. Items are rated on a Likert-type scale, with higher scores indicating greater levels of emotional dependence. CDE has been found to have adequate reliability and validity to measure maladaptive emotional attachment behaviours for both young and older adults.

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

The Short Form of the Experience in Close Relationships Scale, developed by Wei et al. (2007), is a self-report scale that measures attachment styles in romantic relationships. Two key features of attachment styles are measured with items representing anxiety about being abandoned or security in your relationship. It also measures level of avoidance, or discomfort interacting emotionally with other people in intimate relationships. The ECR-S demonstrates both high reliability and validity, making it a common instrument for research on romantic attachments in young adults.

Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS)

Created by Susan S. Hendrick in 1988, the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS) is just one part of a larger Research Instrumentation System (RIS) to assess relationship quality and satisfaction amongst individuals in romantic relationships. The RAS consists of a number (typically around nine) of simple Likert-type items that ask participants to provide subjective appraisals of their current romantic relationship by assessing their level of satisfaction, commitment, love and any potential problems in their relationship. As a general rule, participants who score higher on the RAS have a generally more positive view of their relationships, while anyone who scores low on the RAS would generally be considered dissatisfied or unhappy with their relationship.

3.8 Procedure

Data were collected by using a self-report survey about emotional dependency, attachment anxiety, and toxic relationship individuals through an online survey using convenience sampling. Participants provided demographic information and completed the questions after giving consent. Survey data were anonymous and incomplete responses were removed before statistical analysis was conducted.

4. Result

This study examined emotional dependence, attachment anxiety, & toxic relationships for males and females ages 18-30. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse data collection and compare male and female groups using independent t-tests for all variables examined within the scope of this research project. Findings indicate a significant correlation between all three variables, and there also exists a significant difference between males and females with respect to emotional dependence, attachment anxiety, and toxic relationships.

Table 1: Group Statistics

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Emotional Dependence	1	93	73.74	27.782	2.881
	2	93	57.78	20.459	2.122
Attachment Anxiety	1	93	46.02	10.356	1.074
	2	93	39.83	11.321	1.174
Toxic Relationship	1	93	22.86	5.543	.575
	2	93	25.04	3.659	.379

Emotional Dependency, Attachment Anxiety, and Toxic Relationship scores reveal notable gender differences.

Men reported higher Emotional Dependency ($M = 73.74$, $SD = 27.78$) compared to women ($M = 57.78$, $SD = 20.46$), indicating greater reliance on spouses for emotional support.

Males also exhibited higher Attachment Anxiety ($M = 46.02$, $SD = 10.36$) than females ($M = 39.83$, $SD = 11.32$), suggesting increased fears of insecurity.

Conversely, females scored higher on Toxic Relationships ($M = 25.04$, $SD = 3.66$) than males ($M = 22.86$, $SD = 5.54$), indicating more experiences of maladaptive dynamics.

Overall, men display higher emotional reliance and attachment anxiety, while women report greater experiences with toxic relationships.

Table 2: Independent Samples t-Test

		Levene’s test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means						
95% Confidence Interval of the Difference										
		F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2- Tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Emotional Dependence	Equal variance assumed	13.031	.000	4.460	184	.000	15.957	3.578	8.898	23.016
	Equal variance not assumed			4.460	169.109	.000	15.957	3.578	8.898	23.030

Attachment Anxiety	Equal variance assumed	1.710	.193	3.893	184	.000	6.194	1.591	3.055	9.332
	Equal variance not assumed			3.893	182.557	.000	6.194	1.591	3.054	9.333
Toxic Relationship	Equal variance assumed	14.294	.000	-3.169	184	.002	-2.183	.689	-3.542	-.824
	Equal variance not assumed			-3.169	159.379	.002	-2.183	.689	-3.543	-.823

Gender differences in emotional reliance, attachment anxiety, and toxic relationship patterns among young people (N = 186) were assessed using independent samples t-tests. Significant findings revealed that men reported higher levels of emotional reliance (mean difference = 15.957, $p < .001$) and greater attachment anxiety (mean difference = 6.194, $p < .001$) compared to women. Conversely, women reported more toxic relationship experiences (mean difference = -2.183, $p = .002$). Overall, the study indicates that gender significantly affects young people's relationship dynamics.

5. Discussion

The study examined the differences in emotional reliance, attachment anxiety, and toxic relationship patterns among young adults, finding notable gender disparities. Men reported greater attachment anxiety and emotional reliance, suggesting a higher dependency on partners for emotional support, challenging stereotypes of women as more emotionally dependent. Women, conversely, reported more toxic relationship experiences, likely due to their heightened emotional awareness and tendency to recognize and report relationship issues. Overall, the findings highlight the interplay of emotional reliance and attachment anxiety with social influences and coping strategies, underscoring the importance of considering gender variations in understanding young adults' romantic dynamics.

6. Conclusion

Gender differences were explored in young adults' emotional reliance, attachment anxiety, and patterns of toxic relationships. The study revealed that males exhibited higher emotional dependency and attachment anxiety, reflecting a fear of abandonment, while females experienced toxic relationship dynamics more frequently, suggesting greater awareness of unhealthy patterns. There was a significant correlation among emotional reliance, attachment anxiety, and toxic relationship experiences, indicating that emotional insecurity can lead to adverse relationship outcomes. The findings underscore the necessity for gender-sensitive psychological interventions aimed at enhancing emotional regulation, secure attachment processes, and developing healthy relationship skills.

The study, however, faced several limitations, including potential response bias from self-report assessments, the constraints of a cross-sectional design that hinders causal inferences, and a sample primarily composed of young adults with academic backgrounds, which restricts applicability to other demographics. The lack of qualitative data further limited the understanding of individual relationship experiences.

Future research should consider utilizing attachment-based therapies and emotional regulation strategies with young adults facing relationship challenges. Psychoeducation targeting appropriate communication and boundaries may help mitigate toxic relationship patterns. Longitudinal and cross-cultural studies are recommended for better comprehension of the evolution of attachment anxiety and emotional reliance over time, as well as the exploration of factors such as social influences, coping mechanisms, and self-esteem to elucidate toxic relationship dynamics.

References

- Arriaga, X. B., Kumashiro, M., Simpson, J. A., & Overall, N. C. (2017). Revising working models across time: Relationship situations that enhance attachment security. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 21(1), 71–96.
- Brenk-Franz, K., Ehrental, J., Freund, T., Schneider, N., Strauß, B., Tiesler, F., ... & Gensichen, J. (2018). Evaluation of the short form of “Experience in Close Relationships” (Revised, German Version “ECR-RD12”)-A tool to measure adult attachment in primary care. *PloS one*, 13(1), e0191254.
- Castillo-González, M., Mendo-Lázaro, S., León-del-Barco, B., Terán-Andrade, E., & López-Ramos, V. M. (2024). Dating violence and emotional dependence in university students. *Behavioral Sciences*, 14(3), 176.

- Cnossen, F. S. J., Harman, K. A., & Butterworth, R. (2019). Attachment, efficacy beliefs and relationship satisfaction in dating, emerging adult women. *Journal of Relationships Research, 10*, e19.
- Forth, A., Sezlik, S., Lee, S., Ritchie, M., Logan, J., & Ellingwood, H. (2022). Toxic relationships: The experiences and effects of psychopathy in romantic relationships. *International journal of offender therapy and comparative criminology, 66*(15), 1627-1658.
- Lin, H. C., Yang, Y., Elliott, L., & Green, E. (2020). Individual differences in attachment anxiety shape the association between adverse childhood experiences and adult somatic symptoms. *Child abuse & neglect, 101*, 104325.
- Neumann, E. (2017). Emotional abuse in childhood and attachment anxiety in adult romantic relationships as predictors of personality disorders. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma, 26*(4), 430-443.
- Overall, N. C., Fletcher, G. J. O., Simpson, J. A., & Finkel, E. J. (2020). Attachment insecurity and relationship dynamics: Toward a dyadic perspective. *Current Opinion in Psychology, 13*, 50–55.