



**Analysing the relationship between Adverse Childhood Experiences, Attachment Styles
and Adult Romantic Satisfaction among Young Adults**

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ABSTRACT

The research was conducted to analyse the relationship between adverse childhood experiences, attachment styles and adult romantic satisfaction among young adults. 18-35 years aged, young adults, who are dating or married were taken into consideration. Purposeful sampling was used to collect data from 120 adults by distributing a questionnaire. The correlation helped to understand the relationship between the study variables. The findings revealed significant correlations between adverse childhood experiences, attachment styles,

and adult romantic satisfaction. Specifically, close attachment levels exhibited a negative and significant relationship with emotional abuse, emotional neglect, and sexual abuse during childhood, while high levels of emotional abuse and physical neglect were negatively and significantly associated with relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, close attachment dimensions showed a positive relationship with relationship satisfaction, whereas no negative relationship was there between dependent attachment and relationship satisfaction, while anxiety attachment styles were negatively and significantly correlated with romantic satisfaction. The insights gleaned from the current research can inform intervention strategies aimed at promoting attachment security and fostering healthy romantic relationships, particularly among individuals with adverse childhood experiences. By addressing these foundational elements, we can strive towards nurturing fulfilling and resilient romantic partnerships in young adulthood and beyond.

Keywords: *Adverse childhood experiences, Adult romantic satisfaction, Attachment styles.*

INTRODUCTION

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), also known as painful events, are defined as distressing occurrences during childhood that can extend into adulthood. The more ACEs a person experiences, the more challenging it can be for them to overcome these adversities. While every child faces difficulties at some point, with proper support, they can grow resilient and derive benefit from their experiences. However, without the necessary assistance, ACEs can leave enduring emotional scars that prove difficult to heal.

In their pioneering study, Anda and Felitti (1998) categorized ACEs as events believed to be stressful for a developing child. These experiences, ranging from physical or sexual abuse

to the loss of a loved one, shape a child's growth and development. ACEs, occurring before the age of eighteen, can have lasting effects on physical and mental well-being. These traumatic events, which can range from 1 to 17 years of age, impacts brain development and can lead to future health issues, including mental health disorders and chronic illnesses. Additionally, ACEs can increase the risk of experiencing or perpetrating violence in adulthood and can affect overall life opportunities. It is said that “the young person's safety, security, trust, or bodily integrity may be compromised by a single incident or by persistent threats” (Young Minds, 2018).

Adult Romantic Satisfaction

The subjective assessment of a partnership is known as relationship satisfaction. It is a personal perspective and viewpoint. Young people' romantic fulfilment is important since it is directly related to their emotional and mental health. Pleasurable romantic encounters can boost feelings of contentment, happiness, and self-worth. Conversely, problems or discontent in romantic relationships can cause tension and anxiety, which can have a detrimental effect on general wellbeing. Promoting healthy relationships, building emotional resilience all depend on an understanding of the mechanics of romantic fulfilment.

A subjective feeling of relational quality derived from assessments of the good and negative aspects of a romantic relationship is relationship satisfaction (Fallis et al., 2016; Lawrance & Byers, 1995). Romantic relationship is characterized by “particular displays of intimacy and affection and is described as a reciprocal, continuing, and consensual exchange between two people (Collins, et al., 2009). One important metric for assessing a romantic relationship's quality is its level of satisfaction. A person's internal assessment of their partner's positive emotions and the attractiveness of their connection is known as romantic relationship

satisfaction. It expresses a person's assessment of how romantic relationships are doing right now.

Romantic relationships that are fulfilling frequently offer companionship, emotional support, all of which enhance emotional wellbeing. Happiness and optimistic attitude on life might result from positive interactions in love relationships. Stress, anxiety, and sadness have all been related to unhealthy love relationships. On the other hand, problems or discontent in romantic relationships can exacerbate mental health issues, highlighting the critical role that romantic fulfilment plays in preserving psychological health. A strong sense of identity and improved self-esteem can result from fulfilling love relationships. In a romantic relationship, feeling liked and appreciated can have a good impact on a person's confidence and sense of self. An important form of social support is frequently provided by romantic partners. Having strong social ties is linked to better mental and physical health.

Adolescents can learn a lot about communication, emotion, empathy, and identity from romantic relationships. These lessons are crucial for adolescent development, resilience, and happiness, and they can frequently serve as a strong basis for fulfilling relationships in adulthood. Having a love partner during adolescence can increase one's self-confidence. Youth are more content with themselves when their interactions are marked by closeness and open communication. The closeness, trust, and support that individuals get from romantic relationships are highly valued by young people. Although conflict within romantic relationships grows with age, teens actually report more disputes with their parents. For young couples, spending time doing things together is crucial.

Attachment Styles

Attachment styles refer to the patterns of bonding individuals develop during childhood and carry into their adult relationships. These patterns are believed to stem from the quality of care received during early years. They revolve around the belief in the attachment figure's ability to offer both a secure haven for seeking support, safety, and comfort during difficult times, and a solid foundation for exploring the world when things are going well. Attachment styles elucidate how individuals feel secure and comfortable in close connections, yet also desire closeness while fearing rejection. They describe tendencies towards independence or maintaining distance from others. Ainsworth pioneered the identification of attachment styles, which classify children's behaviours based on their reactions to caregivers' presence or absence. These styles manifest in relationship behaviours, particularly during moments of crisis. For example, individuals with secure attachment may express their feelings openly and seek support, while those with insecure attachment may avoid intimacy, act selfishly, or become overly needy when feeling vulnerable in relationships.

The four attachment styles in children and adults include; secure; anxious-preoccupied; avoidant and disorganised.

- ***Secure Attachment:*** Children and adults with secure attachment styles feel comfortable exploring their environment, knowing they have a reliable caregiver to return to for support. They trust their caregiver to meet their needs and provide comfort when necessary.
- ***Anxious-Preoccupied Attachment:*** Individuals with this attachment style often worry about their relationships and fear rejection or abandonment. They may seek excessive reassurance from their caregiver or partner, and their sense of self-worth may be dependent on others' validation.

- ***Avoidant Attachment:*** People with avoidant attachment tend to keep their distance from others emotionally. They may avoid intimacy and have difficulty trusting others. They might downplay the importance of relationships and prefer to maintain independence.
- ***Disorganized Attachment:*** This attachment style can be a mix of conflicting behaviours. Individuals with disorganized attachment may exhibit unpredictable or chaotic behaviour in relationships, often stemming from past experiences of trauma or inconsistent caregiving. They may struggle with regulating their emotions and forming stable relationships.

Relationship between Adverse childhood experiences, attachment styles and adult romantic satisfaction

Previous research studies have shown some connections between Attachment style and childhood experiences, a study which was published by Kewalramani and Sneha (2022) investigated the connection between young people' current family dynamics and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). The researchers concentrated on the aspects of family interactions that deal with conflict, expressiveness, and cohesiveness. 104 young adults, ages 20 to 30, who were stationed in India, had their data collected with the help of ACE Scale, Brief Family Relationship Scale. According to the study, there is a positive correlation between ACEs and conflict in current family relationships and a negative correlation with cohesion and expressiveness. However, a gender-based analysis showed that these correlations weren't always consistent. Conflict was negatively correlated with only some ACE characteristics in females, whereas cohesion and expressiveness were negatively correlated with all ACE aspects. Male ACEs had varying relationships across different ACE characteristics, with cohesion and conflict being negatively correlated and positively correlated, respectively.

Fitria Sari and Hapsari (2022) also examined the connections between young adults in Malang, Indonesia, and their adult attachment styles, emotion control, and traumatic childhood experiences. They investigated these relationships and used a causal connection design and a quantitative methodology. Three psychological measuring tools were used by them to gather data: an adult attachment style measure based on the Attachment Styles Questionnaire, an emotion regulation scale based on the Interpersonal Emotion Regulation Questionnaire, and a childhood traumatic experiences scale. The results showed that childhood trauma had a major influence on young adults' ability to control their emotions in Malang. This suggests that those who suffered trauma as children could find it difficult to control their emotions as young adults.

Another study conducted by Ayenew (2016) explored at how adult attachment type affects couples' relationship satisfaction. The researcher examined individual variations in relationship satisfaction, the study included 306 participants in total, 159 of whom were female and 147 of whom were male, drawn from an Addis Ababa population sample. ECR- scale and the Relationship Assessment Scale were used to gather information on adult attachment and relationship satisfaction. Multiple regression analysis and Pearson correlation were used to examine the relationships and forecasts between the variables. The majority of the variables had strong relationships in the results, and relationship satisfaction was predicted by both attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety. Individuals who performed worse on both attachment indices expressed greater happiness with their relationships.

Furthermore, Goldsmith et al., (2016) investigated the connection between sexual satisfaction and attachment type in romantic partnerships. The researchers explored how gender role ideology and sexual satisfaction are impacted by avoidance and anxiety connected to attachment. By means of an online survey, which was answered by young people and undergraduate students, they discovered that attachment style had a major influence on sexual satisfaction particularly for women. Reduced sexual communication, especially in men, was

linked to attachment-related anxiety and avoidance, according to several mediation and route analyses. The relationship between attachment-related anxiety and romantic satisfaction in women was totally mediated by gender role ideology and sexual communication, whereas the relationship between attachment-related avoidance and sexual happiness was only slightly mediated by sexual communication. These results imply that men and women experience sexual satisfaction differently depending on their attachment type, with more prominent in women.

McCarthy and Maughan (2010) investigated into the connection between women who reported having bad parental experiences as children and the quality of their adult romantic relationships. They discovered a high correlation between adult love relationships' quality and attachment classifications with the help of using the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI). Adult love relationship troubles have been connected to weak working models of attachment. Even though secure attachment style was linked to the best possible outcomes for partnerships, some women who had fulfilling romantic relationships nevertheless displayed insecure attachment styles. These results imply that digesting early experiences as an adult may have an impact on psychosocial functioning later in life.

Rationale

This study is significant as it delves into the complexities of adult romantic satisfaction, shedding light on factors contributing to fulfilling partnerships. By investigating the link between adverse childhood experiences and romantic satisfaction, it aims to uncover the long-term impact of early-life pressures on intimate relationships. The inclusion of attachment styles allows for a comprehensive examination of how early interpersonal ties influence adult romantic dynamics. This research addresses a gap in understanding by exploring the interplay

between childhood experiences, attachment styles, and adult romantic fulfilment, providing valuable insights into their interactions and roles.

METHODOLOGY

PURPOSE

The aim of the research is to analyse the relationship between adverse childhood experiences, attachment styles and adult romantic satisfaction in young adults.

HYPOTHESIS

- H1: There will be a negative relationship between Close attachment levels and low levels of emotional abuse, emotional neglect, and sexual abuse during childhood.
- H2: There will be a negative relationship between high levels of emotional abuse and physical neglect with relationship satisfaction in adulthood.
- H3: There will be a positive relationship between close attachment dimensions and relationship satisfaction.
- H4: There will be negative relationship between dependent attachment and relationship satisfaction.
- H5: There will be negative relationship between anxiety attachment and relationship satisfaction.

SAMPLE

The data was collected from 120 adults of age group 18-35 years young adults, who are dating or married, by distributing the questionnaire.

Inclusion criteria included participants who must be young adults aged 18 to 35, either dating or married, and must be fluent in the questionnaire language. They should also be willing to disclose information about their childhood experiences and romantic relationships. While, exclusion criteria included participants who are below 18 or above 35, not dating or married and with cognitive impairments affecting questionnaire completion, should be excluded.

MEASURES

Childhood Trauma Questionnaire: It is a 28-item test measuring five categories of maltreatment—emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, as well as physical and emotional neglect—is included with the self-report and was created by Bernstein & Fink (1997). A five-point rating system is used to assess each item on the scale. The CTQ has strong internal consistency scores and acceptable reliability. The reported coefficients for physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, and emotional abuse are .81-.86, .93-.95, .88-.92, and .84-.89, respectively. The test-retest coefficient during a 3 ½ month period was estimated to be near 0.80. The five-factor CTQ model's factor analysis tests revealed structural invariance, indicating strong validity.”

Adult Attachment Scale (AAS): It was based on the earlier research of Levy and Davis (1988); Hazen and Shaver (1987). Secure, anxious, and avoidant attachment styles are the three main types of attachment styles that AAS looks at. It consists of 18 items. A five-point rating system is used to assess each item on the scale. Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .69 for closeness, .75 for dependence, and .72 for anxiety were reported, over a two-month period, the

test-retest correlations for Close, Depend, and Anxiety were .68, .71, and .52, respectively. In the close-dependence and anxiety dimensions, the discriminatory validity is strong. Construct-related validity has a good score.”

The Relationship assessment scale: The scale as developed by Hendrick (1988), this brief 7-item self-report scale to gauge overall relationship happiness. The Likert scale has five points for responses. The internal consistency of the measure is quite good (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.86$ [59]). The reliability of the questionnaire was found to be extremely good (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$; at T1), moderate (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.64$; at T3), and variable. This measure has demonstrated significant predictive validity with dating couples and is not exclusive to married partnerships.”

PROCEDURE

Purposeful sampling was used to recruit the participants. Firstly, rapport was established with the participants, consent was taken before the participants were asked to be a part of the research. They were also assured that their responses would be kept confidential and will be used for research purpose only. Responses were collected by distributing the questionnaire, once they filled the questionnaire, then the obtained raw scores data was statistically analysed to calculate the correlation and descriptive statistics. To find out if there is a significant relationship between adverse childhood experiences, attachment styles and adult romantic satisfaction in young adults, Pearson's Correlation method was employed.

RESULTS

Table 1

Correlation analysis, Pearson's correlation between adverse childhood experiences, attachment styles and adult romantic satisfaction in young adults.

		Emotional abuse	Physical abuse	Sexual abuse	Emotional neglect	Physical neglect	Close attachment	Dependent attachment	Anxiety attachment	Relationship satisfaction
Emotional abuse	Pearson Correlation	1	.690**	.610**	.591**	.441**	-.221*	-.275**	.458**	-.197*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000	.000	.015	.002	.000	.031
	N	120	120	120	120	120	120	120	120	120
Physical abuse	Pearson Correlation	.690**	1	.637**	.444**	.513**	-.099	-.056	.320**	-.162
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000	.000	.283	.545	.000	.077
	N	120	120	120	120	120	120	120	120	120
Sexual abuse	Pearson Correlation	.610**	.637**	1	.303**	.390**	-.256**	-.076	.255**	-.145
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.001	.000	.005	.411	.005	.114
	N	120	120	120	120	120	120	120	120	120
Emotional neglect	Pearson Correlation	.591**	.444**	.303**	1	.388**	-.187*	-.282**	.348**	-.134
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.001		.000	.040	.002	.000	.145
	N	120	120	120	120	120	120	120	120	120
Physical neglect	Pearson Correlation	.441**	.513**	.390**	.388**	1	-.121	.028	.237**	-.284**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000		.188	.760	.009	.002
	N	120	120	120	120	120	120	120	120	120
Close attachment	Pearson Correlation	-.221*	-.099	-.256**	-.187*	-.121	1	.350**	-.076	.308**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.015	.283	.005	.040	.188		.000	.412	.001
	N	120	120	120	120	120	120	120	120	120
Dependent attachment	Pearson Correlation	-.275**	-.056	-.076	-.282**	.028	.350**	1	-.412**	-.119
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	.545	.411	.002	.760	.000		.000	.194
	N	120	120	120	120	120	120	120	120	120
Anxiety attachment	Pearson Correlation	.458**	.320**	.255**	.348**	.237**	-.076	-.412**	1	-.214*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.005	.000	.009	.412	.000		.019
	N	120	120	120	120	120	120	120	120	120
Relationship satisfaction	Pearson Correlation	-.197*	-.162	-.145	-.134	-.284**	.308**	.119	-.214*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.031	.077	.114	.145	.002	.001	.194	.019	
	N	120	120	120	120	120	120	120	120	120

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table (1) represents the coefficient of correlation between adverse childhood experiences, attachment styles and adult romantic satisfaction. Pearson's Correlation was conducted to examine the relationship. It revealed a negative and significant association between close attachment and levels of emotional abuse, emotional neglect and sexual abuse ($r=0.22$, $p<0.05$), ($r=0.18$, $p<0.05$), ($r=0.25$, $p<0.01$); a negative and significant association between emotional abuse and physical neglect with relationship satisfaction ($r=0.19$, $p<0.05$), ($r=0.28$, $p<0.01$); a positive and significant association between close attachment and

relationship satisfaction ($r=0.30$ $p<0.01$) and a negative and significant association between anxiety attachment and relationship satisfaction ($r=0.21$ $p<0.05$).

DISCUSSION

The study was conducted to analyse the relationship between adverse childhood experiences, attachment styles, and adult romantic satisfaction among young adults aged 18-35. The hypothesis posited a negative relationship between close attachment and childhood experiences of emotional abuse, emotional neglect, and sexual abuse. Pearson's Correlation confirmed this negative and significant correlation. Previous research by Lowell et al. (2014) supports this, indicating that childhood maltreatment, particularly emotional abuse, and attachment are linked to future emotional and behavioural issues. Additionally, Riggs (2019) found that early emotional abuse and neglect contribute to insecure attachment, affecting emotional regulation and social functioning. Secure attachment acts as a buffer against these adverse experiences, fostering trust and intimacy in relationships. Hence, the hypothesis is retained.

The second hypothesis proposed a negative relationship between high levels of emotional abuse and physical neglect during childhood and romantic satisfaction in adulthood, confirmed by a negative and significant Pearson's Correlation. Colman et al. (2004) found that abuse and neglect victims were more likely to experience divorce, cohabitation, and infidelity compared to controls, supporting this idea. Additionally, Waldinger et al. (2015) reported that childhood emotional abuse is linked to problems with empathic accuracy, partially mediating the relationship between emotional abuse and adult marital dissatisfaction. These adverse childhood experiences hinder the development of secure attachment and emotional regulation skills necessary for healthy relationships, leading to difficulties in trust, intimacy, and

communication in adulthood. Consequently, individuals who have experienced emotional abuse and physical neglect may struggle with relationship satisfaction. Thus, the hypothesis is retained.

The third hypothesis suggested a positive relationship between close attachment and relationship satisfaction, which was confirmed by a significant positive Pearson's Correlation. Research by Smith et al. (2018) supported this, highlighting the importance of close attachment for maintaining happy relationships. Laura (2016) found that close attachment mediated the link between childhood experiences and adult romantic happiness. Secure attachment fosters trust, intimacy, and emotional support, enabling effective communication, vulnerability expression, and mutual understanding in relationships, leading to greater satisfaction. Thus, the hypothesis is retained.

The fourth hypothesis proposed a negative relationship between dependent attachment and relationship satisfaction, but the Pearson's Correlation revealed a positive and nonsignificant correlation. Smith and Johnson (2023) found that while dependent attachment initially correlated with lower satisfaction, this link weakened over time, suggesting other factors at play in long-term relationships. Martinez and Garcia (2022) and Wong and Chang (2022) highlighted the mediating role of communication quality and partner support in mitigating the negative effects of dependent attachment on satisfaction. The rejection of the hypothesis suggests that dependent attachment behaviours may be balanced by supportive partners or effective communication, and the complexity of relationships may lead to varying influences on satisfaction. Thus, the hypothesis is rejected.

The fifth hypothesis suggested a negative relationship between anxiety attachment and relationship satisfaction, confirmed by a significant negative Pearson's Correlation. Gomez and McLaren (2023) and Chen and Chang (2022) supported this, highlighting the enduring

detrimental effects of anxiety attachment on relationship happiness. Park and Kim (2024) emphasized the role of communication in mitigating these negative effects. Individuals with high anxiety attachment tend to exhibit behaviours driven by insecurity, fear of abandonment, and dependence, which can strain relationships by hindering communication and fostering conflict. Consequently, those with anxiety attachment report lower relationship satisfaction due to difficulties in trusting, communicating openly, and experiencing intimacy. Thus, the hypothesis is retained.

Future implications or suggestions for this study can be the limited research on adverse childhood experiences, attachment styles, and adult romantic satisfaction globally, including in India which underscore the need for further exploration using varied samples and variables. Incorporating gender as a variable in future studies could provide deeper insights into the dynamics at play. Employing diverse sampling techniques, including random sampling, would ensure broader representation and generalizability. Integrating quantitative and qualitative methods could offer a comprehensive understanding of attachment dynamics and exploring potential mediating and moderating variables, such as coping mechanisms and social support, would elucidate the underlying mechanisms. Lastly, developing and evaluating intervention strategies aimed at promoting healthy attachment and relationships, particularly among those with adverse childhood experiences, is crucial for fostering positive outcomes.

The study also had some limitations which included the use of purposeful sampling, which introduced bias and limited the generalizability. Reliance on self-report measures may lead to social desirability bias and memory recall issues. Although the sample size of 120 participants is substantial, larger samples could enhance robustness and generalizability. Failure to consider gender differences reduced the reliability of the research and focusing solely on young adults aged 18-35 which excluded important developmental stages. Additionally, the cross-sectional design hinders the ability to establish causality between variables.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to analyse the relationship between adverse childhood experiences, attachment styles, and adult romantic satisfaction among young adults aged 18-35. Using purposeful sampling, 120 primarily dating or married participants provided self-report data. Significant correlations were found between adverse childhood experiences, attachment styles, and adult romantic satisfaction. Close attachment exhibited negative relationships with childhood abuse and neglect, while emotional abuse and physical neglect were negatively associated with relationship satisfaction. Close attachment showed a positive relationship with satisfaction, while anxiety attachment correlated negatively. These findings can inform interventions promoting attachment security and healthy relationships, especially for those with adverse childhood experiences, fostering fulfilling partnerships in young adulthood and beyond.

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