



The Impact of Attachment Styles on Social Anxiety in Young Adults: An Analysis of Group Differences

¹**Navya Tyagi**, *Master's in Counselling Psychology, Amity Institute of Psychology and Allied Sciences (AIPS), Amity University, Noida, U.P.*

tyaginavya6@gmail.com

²**Dr. Ritu Raj**, *Assistant Professor-I, Amity Institute of Psychology and Allied Sciences (AIPS), Amity University, Noida, U.P.*

rraj@amity.edu

Abstract: This study examines how each of the four main styles identified by attachment theory—secure, anxious (preoccupied), avoidant (dismissive), and disorganized (fearful)—may affect the degree of social anxiety. 154 young adults (18-25 years), were evaluated using standardized instruments, namely, the Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS) and the Revised Adult Attachment Scale (R-AAS). The results through one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), revealed that social anxiety levels varied significantly throughout attachment patterns. Understanding the impact of early attachment experiences could help create more targeted and efficient therapies for socially anxious beings.

Keywords: *Attachment Styles, Social Anxiety, Secure Attachment, Anxious Attachment, Avoidant Attachment, Disorganized Attachment*

1. Introduction

People's attachment styles are shaped by their early interactions with primary caregivers, and these patterns have a big impact on their capacity to regulate their emotions and form and sustain relationships with others throughout their lives. In general, there are four main kinds of

attachment: disorganized (fearful), avoidant (dismissive), anxious (preoccupied), and secure. Social anxiety, a psychological condition marked by a persistent fear of social interactions and negative evaluation, has been linked to different forms of attachment in the past. Exploring this link enables more targeted therapy by revealing how attachment styles shape social anxiety.

1.1 Attachment Styles

When a person's attachment type is formed early in life, it stays with them and shows in the way they interact with people in intimate relationships and nurture their kids. Trusting that the attachment figure will be there to offer a solid base from which one can freely discover the world when not in danger and a secure refuge where one may seek solace, safety, and support when it's needed, is the objective. Individual differences in attachment-related patterns are referred to as "attachment styles".

1.1.2 Secure Attachment, according to Bowlby (1988), is the ability to connect with people in a safe and healthy way while also being able to act independently when necessary. Secure attachment is characterized by trust, an adaptive response to abandonment, and the belief that one is worthy of love. Infants that are securely bonded swiftly seek out and maintain contact with their moms, particularly during the reunion episode. It has been proposed that sensitive and responsive caring leads to secure attachment in children, while its absence causes insecurity.

1.1.3 Anxious/Preoccupied Attachment: Relationships marked by anxious attachment are typified by a fear that others won't feel the same way about you. When an infant discovers that their parent or caregiver is unpredictable and does not constantly respond to their needs, this happens. People who have an anxious/preoccupied attachment style are excessively worried about relationship uncertainty as adults. They believe that they are not as deserving of love as other people. A person may have high attachment anxiety if they worry a lot about being abandoned or uncared for.

1.1.4 Avoidant/Dismissive Attachment: Youngsters that have an avoidant attachment style typically don't communicate with their caregiver and don't seem upset when they are separated from them. Because the parent has ignored attempts at connection, the child may learn that they cannot rely on this or any other relationship. Individuals with this form of attachment have a positive view of themselves and a negative view of other people. As a result, they support fostering an intense feeling of independence and self-reliance, especially when it comes to emotions.

1.1.5 Disorganised/Fearful Attachment: Adults with this attachment style exhibit an ambiguous combination of anxious and avoidant relationship behaviors. They have a strong need for an intimate relationship with a love partner, despite their difficulty being open and emotional.

1.2 Social Anxiety

An acute, ongoing worry of being observed or evaluated by others in social settings is the hallmark of social anxiety. It can have a crippling effect on relationships and day-to-day living. Avoiding eye contact, being afraid to speak in front of others, overanalysing social situations, or feeling more self-conscious in social situations are just a few of the ways it might show up. Many people struggle with social anxiety in some situations, such as group discussions, interviews, or presentations, yet they are nevertheless able to operate well in day-to-day activities. Instead of being viewed as a clinical disease, social anxiety is characterized in this study as a psychological construct that differs in intensity among individuals.

Young adulthood, a time of major life changes, including, starting a job, attending college, and developing close relationships, is when social anxiety is most common. These unfamiliar and often demanding social settings can exacerbate social anxiety's core features, such as worries of shame, rejection, or unfavourable appraisal. Young adults may experience anxiety and avoidance behaviours as a result of the pressure to create a social identity, earn peer approval, and live up to society's expectations. If left unaddressed, social anxiety during this time might affect one's capacity to build meaningful relationships with others, progress in one's job, and achieve well academically. In order to identify risk factors and create early, focused interventions that can improve long-term psychological well-being, it is essential to comprehend how it manifests in this age range.

2. Review of Literature

The study conducted by Lincoln, Tip and Garcia (2024), investigated the connection between attachment-related anxiety and social anxiety. This was tested by recruiting a sample of 63 persons, mostly women (79.4%), using social media, university course groups, and snowball sampling. An online survey comprising a shorter version of the Social Interaction Anxiety Scale, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised Scale's anxiety subscale was filled out by participants. Self-esteem, social anxiety, and attachment-related anxiety were found to significantly correlate with one another, according to statistical analysis,

including Pearson correlation tests. This exploration aligns with theoretical perspectives suggesting that individuals with attachment-related anxiety may experience heightened social anxiety due, in part, to negative self-perception.

The study conducted by Sudhir (2020) examined interpersonal sensitivity and attachment types in connection to social anxiety. The Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ), Interpersonal Sensitivity Measure (IPSM), Social Interaction Anxiety (SIAS), and Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II) responses of 30 community members and 43 individuals with a primary diagnosis of social anxiety were examined. Anxious and avoidant attachment styles were positively connected with higher levels of social anxiety, whereas secure attachment styles were linked to lower levels of social anxiety.

A systematic review of the relationship between attachment insecurity and social anxiety was conducted by Manning, Dickson, Palmier-Claus, et al., (2017) using the databases MEDLINE, PsycINFO, and Web of Science. The findings revealed a consistent pattern: 28 out of 30 studies demonstrated a positive association between attachment insecurity and social anxiety. The link was especially pronounced while examining attachment anxiety.

3. Methodology

3.1 Aim

To ascertain the variations in social anxiety levels among young adults across different attachment styles.

3.2 Research Objectives

- To evaluate young adults' social anxiety levels and attachment types.
- To determine whether people with different attachment styles have significantly varied levels of social anxiety.
- To offer suggestions for treatments or interventions aimed at those with social anxiety and attachment-related vulnerabilities.

3.3 Hypothesis

- 1) There will be significant differences in social anxiety levels among individuals with different attachment styles.
- 2) Individuals with anxious attachment style will report highest levels of social anxiety.

3.4 Rationale

Young adulthood is a time of greater social expectations, transitions, and identity construction, making social anxiety especially pertinent during this time. Young adults often find themselves in circumstances where they are assessed by peers, authoritative figures, or possible partners, whether they are navigating scholastic environments, achieving independence, forging love connections, or joining the employment. Attachment styles, which are frequently influenced by early life events, start affecting how young adults establish and preserve social ties. Researching this age range offers valuable insights into how early attachment impacts emotional functioning during a period of social transition and increased self-awareness. The findings of such studies can guide prompt actions meant to promote secure relationship patterns and lessen the effects of social anxiety before it takes on more persistent manifestations.

3.5 Research Design

The current study used a quantitative, between-subjects, and cross-sectional research design to look into the impact of attachment styles on social anxiety levels in young adults. Quantitative approaches were used because they enable objective measurement and statistical analysis of the variables. Since the study's goal was to compare social anxiety levels across different attachment style groups—a between-subjects design was appropriate. The study was feasible within the allocated time frame and resources because of its cross-sectional design, which allowed data to be collected at a single moment in time.

3.6 Sample

The sample for this study comprised of 154 participants ranging from 18 to 25 years, of which 112 were females and 42 were males. An online survey was used to gather data, and convenience sampling was utilized to choose participants based on their availability and willingness to take part. Although women make up the majority of the sample, this imbalance results from the recruitment process, which encouraged more women to take part in the study. While this gender disparity might be viewed as a restriction, the objectives or results are not anticipated to be much compromised because the study does not explicitly test for gender differences in social anxiety or attachment styles. To understand and complete the questionnaires, participants were expected to have basic fluency in English to understand and answer the questionnaire. There were no particular exclusionary requirements for taking part.

3.7 Measures

Standardized self-report measures were employed to evaluate the study's two main constructs—social anxiety and attachment styles. These metrics were selected due to their proven reliability and validity in earlier studies. The scales are discussed below.

The self-reporting instrument used to assess the attachment style is the ***Revised Adult Attachment Scale*** (R-AAS; 1996), developed by Nancy Collins and Stephen Read. The 18 items on the measure are rated on a 5-point Likert scale. It assesses the "Secure", "Preoccupied", "Dismissive", and "Fearful" adult attachment types and are determined by an individual's scores on three dimensions—close, depend and anxiety. In terms of internal consistency, the scale's items consistently measure the same things with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.7 to 0.8. The test-retest correlations for the AAS range from 0.6 to 0.7.

Social anxiety was assessed using the ***Social Interaction Anxiety Scale*** (SIAS), created by Mattick and Clarke (1998). It is a 20-item self-report questionnaire used to evaluate anxiety primarily associated with social interactions, like meeting and conversing with people. Each item is rated by participants using a 5-point Likert scale, with 0 representing "not at all characteristic of me" and 4 representing "extremely characteristic of me." With a reported Cronbach's alpha of 0.93 (Mattick & Clarke, 1998), the SIAS has shown good reliability and outstanding internal consistency. Additionally, it was discovered that test-retest reliability was strong over a 4-week period ($r = .92$). The SIAS has demonstrated strong discriminant and convergent validity, which allows it to successfully separate people with social anxiety disorder from non-clinical populations.

3.8 Procedure

Using a convenience sample technique, participants were gathered via a mix of in-person meetings and internet resources by sharing the google form link. Preceding the participation, an informed consent form was obtained—outlining the study's objectives, guaranteeing response confidentiality, and highlighting the fact that participation was entirely optional. The google form was only filled out by those who consented. The Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS) and the Adult Attachment Scale (AAS) were the standardized measures that came after the demographic items on the questionnaire. About 10-15 minutes were needed to finish the entire survey. Prior to submission, participants were made aware of their freedom to withdraw at any time without incurring any penalty. Every response was safely kept for the sole use in research. The collected

data was then statistically assessed through one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and post-hoc analysis, following which, the results were formulated and discussed.

3.9 Statistical Analysis

For this study, *IBM SPSS* (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software was employed to carry out one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) in order to examine the data that was gathered. The dependent variable was social anxiety scores, while the independent variables were attachment types. *Tukey's HSD* test was applied for post hoc comparisons in order to identify the particular groups that differed from one another. For every analysis, the threshold for statistical significance was established at $p < .05$.

4. Results

A one-way analysis (ANOVA) was performed to determine whether there were statistically significant variations in social anxiety levels across the four attachment styles: dismissive (avoidant), fearful (disorganised), preoccupied (anxious) and secure.

Table 1: *One-Way ANOVA Results for Social Anxiety by Attachment Styles*

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig. (p-value)
Between Groups	4513.533	3	1504.511	9.623	<0.001
Within Groups	23452.395	150	156.39		
Total	27965.929	153			

According to the ANOVA's findings (Table 1), which showed a statistically significant main effect of attachment style on social anxiety [$F(3, 150) = 9.623, p < .001$], social anxiety scores among the four attachment style groups varied significantly.

Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) post-hoc test (Table 2) was utilised to investigate the nature of these differences. The mean social anxiety scores of the attachment type groups varied significantly in a number of ways, according to the results of the pairwise comparisons.

Table 2: *Tuckey's HSD Post-Hoc Comparisons of Social Anxiety across Attachment Styles*

Attachment Style (I)	Attachment Style (J)	Mean Difference (I-J)	Standard Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval
Dismissive	Fearful	-15.48837*	2.94611	<0.001	-21.1314
	Preoccupied	-13.62069*	3.23031	<0.001	-22.0132
	Secure	0.94118	2.84767	.987	-6.4572
Fearful	Dismissive	15.48837*	2.94611	<.001	9.8453
	Preoccupied	1.86768	3.00456	.878	-3.2630
	Secure	16.42955*	2.58876	<0.001	10.1553
Preoccupied	Dismissive	13.62069*	3.23031	<0.001	5.2281
	Fearful	-1.86768	3.00456	.878	-6.9984
	Secure	14.56187*	2.90810	<0.001	7.0064
Secure	Dismissive	-0.94118	2.84767	.987	-8.3396
	Fearful	-16.42955	2.58876	<0.001	-22.7038
	Preoccupied	-14.56187	2.90810	<0.001	-22.1173

*The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level

In particular, people with preoccupied attachment style (Mean = 46.62) reported much higher levels of social anxiety, followed by fearful attachment style (Mean = 38.48), dismissive attachment style (Mean = 33.00) (Mean Difference = 15.49, $p < .001$) and secure attachment style (Mean = 32.07) (Mean Difference = 16.42, $p < .001$) with least levels of social anxiety.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to ascertain the variations in social anxiety levels among young adults across different attachment styles. The results validated the idea that social anxiety is strongly influenced by attachment style. The ANOVA results showed a substantial main effect of attachment style on social anxiety scores [$F(3, 150) = 9.623$, $p < .001$]. Tukey's HSD post-analysis further elucidated these discrepancies.

In particular, the highest levels of social anxiety were reported by those with a preoccupied attachment style. This result is consistent with attachment theory, which holds that people who are preoccupied are more prone to social concerns and anxieties because they are overly preoccupied

with relationships with others and getting approval from them. The current study's findings are in line with those of Irfan, Munir, and Majeed (2023), who discovered that people with insecure attachment styles had noticeably greater levels of social anxiety than people with securely attached styles. In their study of Pakistani undergraduate students, they found a statistically significant positive relationship between social anxiety and anxious attachment, with anxious attachment accounting for 19% of the variation in social anxiety levels. This lends credence to the idea that increased fear, and social avoidance may be a result of attachment insecurity, especially when it manifests as anxiety about interpersonal connections.

Although not as high as those with a preoccupied attachment style, people with fearful attachment style also showed higher levels of social anxiety. This outcome is anticipated as fearful attachment is typified by a desire for intimate connections and a fear of rejection, both of which increase social anxiety. Then followed by those with dismissive attachment style. The results of this study, which showed that people with insecure attachment styles had far greater levels of social anxiety, are corroborated by other studies that highlight the close connection between social anxiety and attachment instability. Notably, in a large sample of Turkish college students, Kozan and Arslan (2022) discovered that social anxiety was significantly predicted by both anxious and avoidant attachment styles. These results support the ANOVA-based findings of the current study.

Those who were securely attached exhibited the lowest levels. Positivity toward oneself and others is a hallmark of secure attachment, which offers emotional fortitude against the emergence of social anxiety. The current study's results, which showed that people with insecure attachment patterns had noticeably higher levels of social anxiety, are in line with an expanding corpus of global research that connects social anxiety to attachment insecurity. For instance, Yu, Liu, Song, et al. (2020) discovered that psychological resilience was a significant mediating factor in the relationship between reduced social anxiety and higher parent-child attachment among Chinese college students.

These results highlight how crucial attachment patterns are in influencing how people experience social anxiety. The findings specifically show how those with insecure attachment styles—particularly those who are preoccupied and fearful—are more likely to experience social anxiety. Secure attachment's protective function in reducing social anxiety is further highlighted by the findings.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the connection between social anxiety and attachment type and found a strong correlation between the two. The findings showed that those with scared attachment styles have lower levels of social anxiety than people with preoccupied attachment styles. Securely attached people, on the other hand, reported the least amount of social anxiety overall, while dismissive and secure people reported far lower amounts.

These results demonstrate how important attachment types are in determining social and emotional functioning. They imply that therapies that support stable attachment styles could be useful in lessening the symptoms of social anxiety. However, when interpreting the results, one should take into account the limitations of the study, such as its cross-sectional design and sample characteristics.

This study has a few limitations that should be noted despite its insightful conclusions. Firstly, the data's reliability may have been impacted by response biases such as social desirability or incorrect self-perception brought about by the use of self-report questionnaires. Secondly, some demographic imbalances—most notably, a disproportionate ratio of female participants compared to male participants—may have distorted the results or limited the generalizability across genders, making the sample less typical of the general population.

All things considered, this study contributes to the expanding corpus of research showing the role that early relational experiences and internal working models of attachment play in the emergence and maintenance of social anxiety. Future studies should investigate intervention techniques that target attachment-related vulnerabilities and work to better elucidate these correlations over time.

References

- Collins, N. L., & Read, S. J. (1990). Adult attachment, working models, and relationship quality in dating couples. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 58(4), 644–663. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.58.4.644>
- Irfan, H., Munir, M., & Majeed, S. (2023). Exploring the Relationship between Insecure Attachment Styles and Social Anxiety in Undergraduate Students. *Journal of Business and Social Review in Emerging Economies*, 9(3), 315-324. <https://doi.org/10.26710/jbsee.v9i3.2731>

- Kozan, H. İ. Ö., & Arslan, C. (2022). Social anxiety among college students: Predictive roles of attachment insecurity and emotional schemas. *International Journal of Psychology and Educational Studies*, 9(1), 22-31. <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/pes/issue/68410/1067529>
- Lincoln, J., Tip, L. M., & Garcia, S. D. L. F. (2024). Attachment-related anxiety and social anxiety: the mediating role of self-esteem. *medRxiv*, 2024-05. <https://doi.org/10.1101/2024.05.28.24308030>
- Manning, R. P., Dickson, J. M., Palmier-Claus, J., Cunliffe, A., & Taylor, P. J. (2017). A systematic review of adult attachment and social anxiety. *Journal of affective disorders*, 211, 44-59. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2016.12.020>
- Mattick, R. P., & Clarke, J. C. (1998). Development and validation of measures of social phobia scrutiny fear and social interaction anxiety. *Behaviour research and therapy*, 36(4), 455-470. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0005-7967\(97\)10031-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0005-7967(97)10031-6)
- Sudhir, P. M. (2020). Relational Schema in Social Anxiety: Role of Attachment Styles and Interpersonal Sensitivity. *Journal of the Indian Academy of Applied Psychology*, 46(1), 29-39.
- Yu, Y., Liu, S., Song, M., Fan, H., & Zhang, L. (2020). Effect of parent–child attachment on college students’ social anxiety: A moderated mediation model. *Psychological Reports*, 123(6), 2196-2214. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033294119862981>