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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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A STUDY OF ATTACHMENT STYLES AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN PUNJAB, INDIA: PREVALENCE AND GENDER-BASED DISTRIBUTION

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ABSTRACT

This study explores attachment styles such as secure, dismissive, preoccupied, and fearful among undergraduate students in Punjab, India, focusing on their prevalence and variations by gender. Conducted in a culturally rich region, the research uses survey methods to assess how early bonding influences psychological well-being in emerging adults. Using Revised Adult Attachment Styles scale by Collins (1996). Researchers aim to quantify attachment distribution in this population and identify gender disparities, addressing gaps in Indian-context studies. Findings could inform counseling programs tailored to gender differences. Attachment theory, pioneered by Bowlby and Ainsworth, links early caregiver interactions to lifelong relational patterns. In Punjab's collectivist society, gender norms may shape these styles differently, offering insights for mental health support amid rising student stress. Depicting how attachment styles differ in close relations and among gender.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the important aspects during the early years of social and emotional development is to develop a sense of security which otherwise gets compromised if children do not get a safe and conducive environment at home and surroundings (Rosmalen *et al* 2016). Secure home environment nurtures a secure, confident, autonomous individual that helps in the development of emotional bonds with parent, and it also determines attachment styles among children (Daral *et al* 2016). The quality of an infant's interactions with their primary caregivers is referred to as attachment. These early exchanges serve as the foundation for the development of a stable relationship that, if internalized, can offer a sense of security during trying times (Bowlby 1988). A person's childhood attachment pattern will carry over into adulthood (Davies 2004). Attachment styles are largely consistent, however there is some flexibility in how people relate to each other. According to Marcus and Swett (2002), adults who experienced support, empathy, warmth, and compassion as children are less likely to have violent relationships as adults and are more likely to be able to firmly bond to primary figures. Attachment can have a major impact on a child's ability to learn, explore the environment, and foster the growth of an independent adult (Lubiewska 2019). A child's attachment develops over time as a result of both natural resources and environmental influences. From birth, the child has a number of systems in place that allow it to develop relationships with significant people. There is an innate tendency to react in a particular way to different signs that other people provide.

The set of behavioral mechanisms involved in the development of attachment make this process relatively constant as a child grows up in a regular family situation (Bowlby 2016). Children's attachment serves four crucial purposes: it fosters emotional expression and social interaction, provides a sense of safety, helps regulate affect and arousal, and acts as a secure base for exploration (Davies, 2004). However, attachment issues may negatively affect a child's ability to develop healthy peer, social and romantic connections in the future (Doyle and Cicchetti 2017). Adult attachment style was defined by Bartholomew (1990) as a positive or negative perception of oneself and others based on avoidance and dependent dimensions. Four attachment orientation styles—secure, dismissive, preoccupied, and fearful—are produced by varying combinations of these components. Komorowska (2016) reviewed previous research that showed the importance of particular parenting styles for ongoing human development. These studies show that having a secure attachment style is associated with higher levels of self-worth, trust, emotional maturity, openness to others, and the belief that one can rely on others for support, as well as a strong sense of security in later life. It is also linked to greater levels of competence, creativity and social skills. The preoccupied attachment style is linked to a lower degree of emotional maturity, a sense of alienation and withdrawal, shyness, elevated susceptibility to stress, low self-esteem, increased vigilance, helplessness and decreased sense of security. A dismissive attachment style is characterised by issues with interpersonal connections, insecurity, distrust, impulsivity and irritability and aggression that manifests later in life. Significant consequences of dysregulation and disrupted attachment include a poor self-concept, a sense of the world

as dangerous and help as unavailable or futile (Van der Kolk 2005). Young adulthood is thought of as the volitional years since it provides the best chance to find one's identity in terms of relationships, professions, and viewpoints (Arnett 2000). Establishing their autonomy, identities, emotional stability, careers, and intimate relationships, starting a home and learning how to manage a household, joining a group or community, having children and raising them, adjusting to a new marriage or relationship, and improving as a parent are just a few of the developmental tasks that young adults must complete during this time (Havighurst 1972). As a result, young adulthood is seen as a crucial period for a person's social and psychological development since it exposes them to a variety of life's problems and changes (McAdams 1995). Therefore, the goal of the current study is to investigate various attachment styles among college students. The development and maintenance of relationships in adulthood are impacted by early experiences with attachment patterns. In all intimate relationships, such as those with family, close friends, and romantic partners.

Operational Definitions: The emotional connection or link that people have with important people in their lives is referred to as attachment types. People have a deep psychological bond with one another. The purpose of this study is to assess the impact of trauma on attachment types or intimate relationships with family, close friends, and romantic partners. In relationships with family, love partners, and close friends, attachment usually takes the following forms:

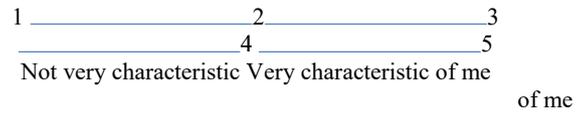
- 1. Attachment with Family:** An individual's attachment style is based on their attachment to family members, especially their primary caregivers, who are typically parents. Later in life, it affects how people view and handle relationships. People feel comfortable expressing their feelings and asking family members for consolation when they are upset.
- 2. Attachment with Romantic Partner:** Attachment in romantic relationships builds upon early experiences with caregivers. It involves emotional intimacy, trust and a deep connection between partners. Partners feel safe to be vulnerable with each other and offer each other support in times of need.
- 3. Attachment with Close Friends:** Attachment in friendships is characterized by emotional closeness, trust and mutual support. Close friends serve as sources of companionship, validation and emotional support. Friends feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and feelings, knowing they will be understood and accepted.

METHODOLOGY

There were 420 undergraduate students in the sample, equally divided between males and females. For this study, undergraduates between the age group of 18 and 22 years belonging to middle-income group were considered for the sample.

Research tool

Revised adult attachment scale (RAAS): The Revised Adult Attachment Scale (RAAS), developed by Collins in 1996, is a popular instrument for assessing adult attachment patterns. Participants complete the RAAS questionnaire by responding to each of the 18 statements on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (not at all typical of me) to 5 (very characteristic of me). People might think about the typical feelings and behaviors they display in close relationships through this process. To score the RAAS, one must determine the average score for each of the three dimensions. Higher scores on the close and depend dimensions often reflect a more secure attachment style, whereas higher scores on the "Anxiety" dimension signal a more anxious attachment type. The responses were recorded as placing a number between 1 and 5 in the space provided adjoining the statement. The numbers reflect intensity of relatability of given characteristic to an individual such as:



The guidelines for classification of RAAS scale total scores:

Classification				
Sub-dimensions	Secure	Dismissive	Preoccupied	Fearful
Closeness	High(18-30)	High(18-30)	Low (6-17)	Low (6-17)
Dependency	High(18-30)	Low (6-17)	High(18-30)	Low (6-17)
Anxiety	Low (6-17)	Low (6-17)	High(18-30)	High(18-30)

Individuals are classified into four primary attachment styles: secure, dismissive, preoccupied, and fearful. A 'secure attachment' is characterized by high scores in both closeness and dependency, along with low anxiety. This profile indicates a healthy balance in relationships, where individuals feel comfortable with intimacy and rely on others without fear. In contrast, the 'dismissive attachment style' is marked by high scores in closeness but low scores in dependency and anxiety. Individuals with this style may appear comfortable with emotional connection yet prefer to maintain independence, often minimizing the importance of relationships. The 'preoccupied attachment style' is identified by low scores in closeness, high scores in dependency, and high anxiety levels. This indicates a strong desire for intimacy combined with significant fear of abandonment, leading to heightened emotional expressions. Lastly, the 'fearful attachment style' features low scores in closeness and dependency, alongside high anxiety. Individuals in this category often crave connection but are hindered by fear of rejection, resulting in avoidance of intimacy despite their desire for closeness.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The goal of the current study was to determine how common attachment types and childhood trauma were among undergraduate students in Ludhiana, Punjab, as well as how these two factors related to one another. Undergraduates chosen from several colleges in Ludhiana City provided the data. Data was gathered while taking the study's goals into consideration, scored, and then statistically analyzed.

Overall distribution of respondents across different dimensions of attachment styles: The table 1 presents data on various dimensions of attachment styles within a sample of 420 respondents. Attachment styles describe how people form emotional bonds and interact in relationships, categorized here into four types: dismissive, fearful, preoccupied and secure.

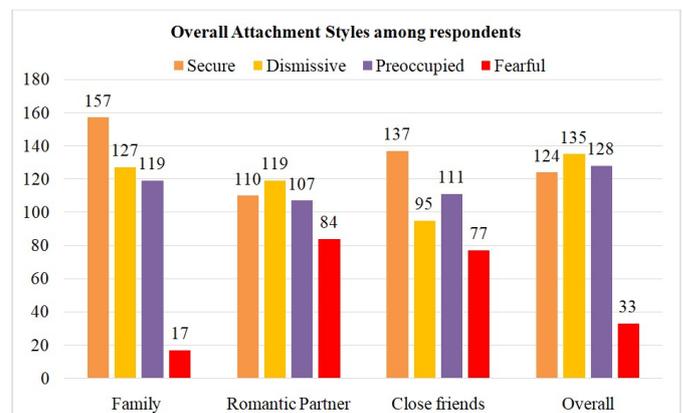


Figure (a). Overall distribution of respondents across different dimensions of attachment styles

Table 1. Overall distribution of respondents across different dimensions of attachment styles

Dimensions of attachment styles	Total population (n=420)	
	Frequency <i>f</i>	Percentage (%)
Family		
Secure	157	37.38
Dismissive	127	30.24
Preoccupied	119	28.33
Fearful	17	4.05
Romantic partners		
Secure	110	26.19
Dismissive	119	28.33
Preoccupied	107	25.48
Fearful	84	20.00
Close friends		
Secure	137	32.62
Dismissive	95	22.62
Preoccupied	111	26.43
Fearful	77	18.33
Overall		
Secure	124	29.52
Dismissive	135	32.14
Preoccupied	128	30.48
Fearful	33	7.86

Family: The table 1 presents distribution of respondents across attachment styles with family members. The largest proportion of total sample had a secure attachment style i.e. 157 (37.38%), suggesting that they feel comfortable with intimacy and trust within their family relationships. Latterly in dismissive attachment, 127 (30.24%) respondents were characterized by a tendency to avoid closeness and maintain emotional distance from family members and preoccupied attachment was displayed by 119 (28.33%) respondents suggesting significant number marked by dependency and anxiety about relationships with family. Among the sample, small number of respondents i.e. 17 (4.05%) displayed a fearful attachment style, indicating a small proportion who experience anxiety and fear of rejection within their family relationships. Young adults' interpersonal interactions are known to be significantly impacted by attachment representations to parents (Cherrier *et al.*, 2023). Bowlby (1988) noted the importance of insecure attachment representations to parents in predicting low-quality interpersonal relationships and proposed that working models of secure interactions with parents early in life serve as a basis for future close relationships with others. According to Carcedo *et al.* (2023), people with insecure attachment representations to their parents tend to be emotionally detached, avoid reciprocal connections with their romantic partners, and have greater levels of mistrust and are less able to sustain positive affection with their friends.

Romantic partners: The table 1 presents distribution of respondents across attachment styles with romantic partners. In this context, a greater number of respondents i.e. 119 (28.33%) exhibited dismissive attachment style, preferring independence and emotional distance in romantic relationships. An equivalent proportion of respondents i.e. 110 (26.19%) exhibited secure attachment styles, showing a balanced and trusting approach to romantic relationships and preoccupied attachment style was shown by 107 (25.48%) respondents, indicating a significant number who were overly dependent and anxious about their romantic relationships, while a notable i.e. 84 (20.00%) respondents displayed fearful attachment style, experiencing anxiety and fear of rejection in their romantic relationships. According to Miljkovitch *et al.* (2021), young adults who were insecurely tied to their parents reported feeling less happy and satisfied with their friends, having less intimacy with intimate partners, and having more trouble sustaining romantic relationships.

Close friends: The table 1 presents distribution of respondents across attachment styles with close friends. Majority of respondents had secure attachment style i.e. 137 (32.62%), means they feels comfortable and trusting in their close friendships and a sizable portion 111 (26.43%) of respondents had preoccupied attachment

style, characterized by dependency and anxiety about their friendships. The dismissive attachment style was exhibited by 95 (22.62%) respondents that indicates an avoidance for close emotional connections with close friends followed by fearful attachment style that was displayed by 77 (18.33%) respondents, indicating a noticeable portion of the sample that experiences anxiety and fear of rejection in their friendships. Adolescent friends can act as a safe haven and a foundation for creating a good self-image, as well as a place to explore and do research-both of which are crucial for the formation of adolescent identity. Adolescents who have a strong bond with a friend-especially if that friend is also a parent-tend to have a greater sense of self-worth and a more positive self-concept across most or all of the dimensions (Van Ijzendoorn and Sagi 2008).

Overall: The table 1 presents distribution of respondents across attachment styles in all relations. In the total sample, A comparable major proportion of respondents exhibited dismissive attachment styles i.e. 135 (32.14%), preferring independence and emotional distance in various relationships and preoccupied attachment styles was displayed by 128 (30.48%) respondents, indicating a significant portion who were overly dependent and anxious about their relationships. The secure attachment style was exhibited by 124 (29.52%) respondents, suggesting that they generally feel comfortable and trust in their relationships. A smaller percentage of respondents i.e. 33 (7.86%), displayed fearful attachment style that indicates experience of anxiety and fear of rejection in their relationships by the respondents. Difficulties in friendships and romantic relationships can exacerbate depressive symptoms and insecurity of attachment to parents, but these conditions can also exacerbate depressive symptoms (Goodman *et al.*, 2019).

Gender differences in percent distribution of respondents across different levels of Attachment Styles: The table 2 presents overview of gender differences in the percentage distribution of undergraduates across various dimensions of attachment styles. The dimensions include attachment within family, romantic partners, close friends and overall attachment. The data is categorized by the levels of attachment: dismissive, fearful, preoccupied and secure. For each attachment style, the frequencies and percentages for both female and male undergraduates are provided, along with Z-values indicating the statistical significance of the gender differences.

Family: The data showed that within the 'family' attachment styles dimension, there was a noteworthy significant gender difference in the percentage of dismissive attachment style where females (35.71%) were higher as compared to males (24.76%) with a statistically significant difference ($Z=2.443, p<0.05$), females were more prone to display dismissive attachment, which suggests a greater propensity to emotionally remove oneself from relationships with family members. Although secure (males 40.48% and females 34.29%), preoccupied (27.14% females and 29.52% males) and fearful (2.86% females and 5.24% males) attachment styles showed insignificant gender differences but, in all aspects, males outweighed the females. While attachment to one's mother or father has been demonstrated to have distinct effects on several areas of psycho-social functioning in adolescence (Van Ijzendoorn and Sagi 2008), these findings are contrary to the present study. Young people' romantic relationship quality was better predicted by attachment representations to their mothers than by those to their fathers (Pflieger, 2009).

Romantic partners: The analysis of data revealed that in 'romantic partners' attachment styles, there were a statistically significant gender differences in secure and dismissive attachment styles whereas in secure attachment style males (31.43%) were substantially more likely than females (20.95%) with significance difference ($Z= 2.500, p<0.05$), indicating a higher degree of emotional stability and trust and in dismissive attachment style the proportion of females (32.86%) were greater than males (23.81%) with significant gender difference ($Z=2.053, p<0.05$), which suggests that they want to keep their emotions at aside. There was no significant difference in the percentage of females and males who reported having preoccupied

and fearful attachment styles, however in the prevalence of preoccupied attachment style 28.57% of females outnumbered 22.38% of males and in fearful attachment style males (22.38%) surpassed females (17.62%). Nonetheless, earlier studies have demonstrated that, regardless of secure attachment representations to the mother, secure attachment representations to the father were linked to positive romantic relationships (Dalton *et al.*, 2006). Compared to those with secure attachment representations to their mothers, young people with secure attachment representations to their fathers showed superior romantic connections and were more adept at forming tight bonds with their intimate partners (Dalton *et al.*, 2006).

Positive self-image and others and processing of affective and cognitive information are characteristics of securely attached individuals (Wigman *et al* 2008). However, jealousy can also be a personality trait that makes people more attached to their relationships, depending on how the jealous person handles it. Yumbulet *al* (2010) found that people with anxious attachment styles expressed the most jealousy in romantic relationships, followed by those with avoidant and secure attachment styles (Bouthillier *et al* 2002). The depiction of data states that within the dimension of 'close friends', there were no statistically significant gender differences in the prevalence of secure, dismissive, preoccupied and fearful attachment styles.

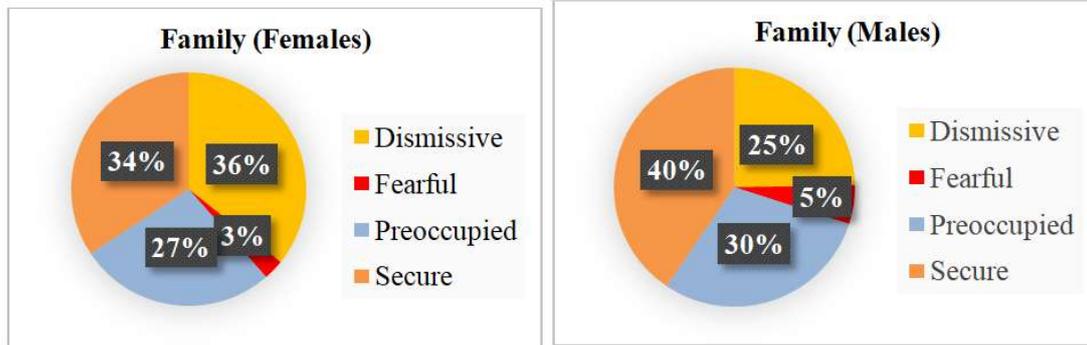


Figure 2. Gender differences in percent distribution of respondents across different levels of attachment styles with family

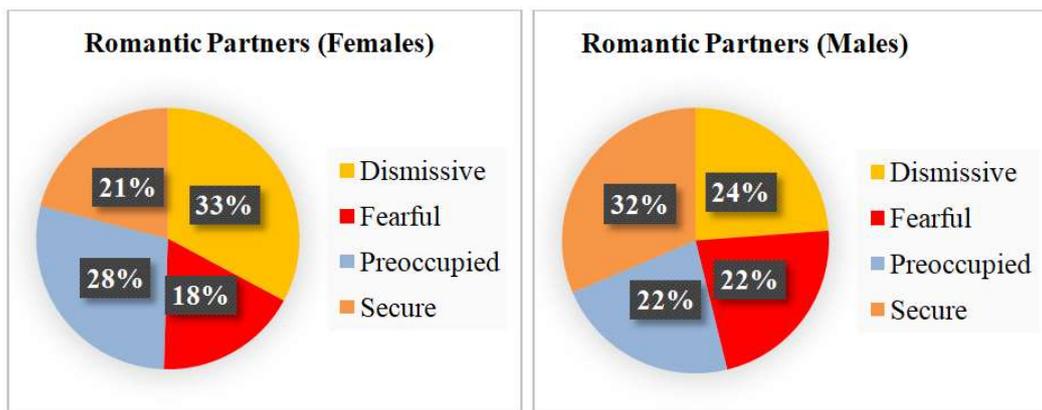


Figure 3. Gender differences in percent distribution of respondents across different levels of attachment styles with romantic partners

Table 2. Gender differences in percent distribution of respondents across different levels of attachment styles

Dimensions of attachment styles	Female ($n_1=210$)		Male ($n_2=210$)		Z-value
	Frequency f	Percentage %	Frequency f	Percentage %	
Attachment styles with family					
Secure	72	34.29	85	40.48	1.311
Dismissive	75	35.71	52	24.76	2.443*
Preoccupied	57	27.14	62	29.52	0.541
Fearful	6	2.86	11	5.24	1.237
Attachment styles with romantic partners					
Secure	44	20.95	66	31.43	2.442*
Dismissive	69	32.86	50	23.81	2.053*
Preoccupied	60	28.57	47	22.38	1.456
Fearful	37	17.62	47	22.38	1.219
Attachment styles with close friends					
Secure	70	33.33	67	31.90	0.313
Dismissive	44	20.95	51	24.29	0.569
Preoccupied	63	30	48	22.86	1.659
Fearful	33	15.72	44	20.95	1.388
Overall attachment styles					
Secure	54	25.71	70	33.33	1.712
Dismissive	68	32.38	67	31.90	0.105
Preoccupied	72	34.29	56	26.67	1.699
Fearful	16	7.62	17	8.10	0.183

*Significant at the 0.05 level

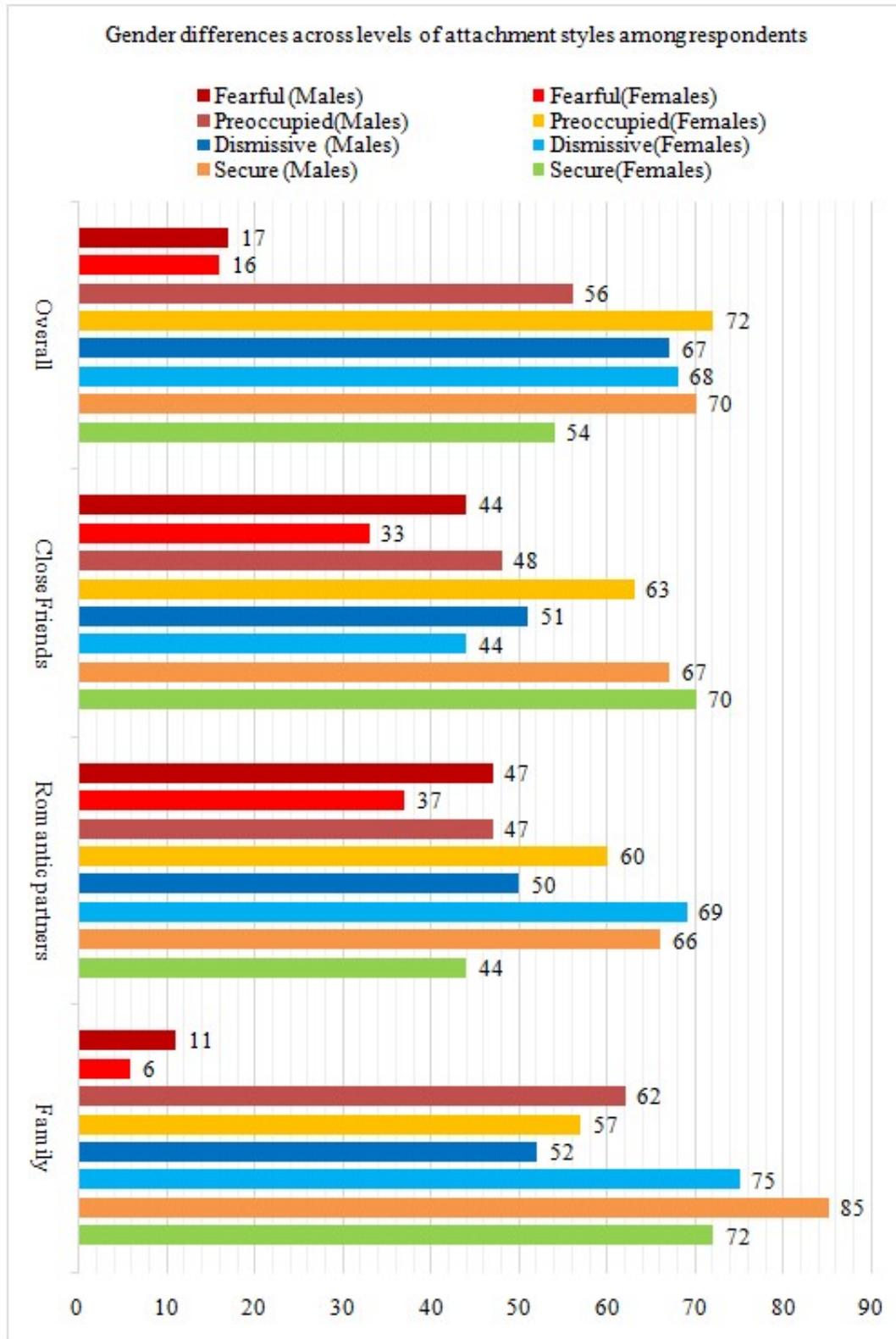


Figure 4. Gender differences in distribution of respondents across different levels of attachment styles

Secure (males 31.90% and females 33.33%) and preoccupied (males 22.86% and females 30%) attachment styles were higher among females as compared to males. In contrast, males were more inclined than females to have dismissive attachment style (24.29% males and 20.95% females) and fearful attachment style (20.95% males and 15.72% females). Comparable emotional stability and friendship trust were reflected in the equivalent levels of attachment styles reported by the two. Early insecure attachment representations to parents have been shown to predict subsequent low-quality romantic relationships, and early low-quality romantic partnerships have been shown to predict the formation of insecure attachment representations to parents in young adults (Suh & Fabricius, 2020).

Additionally, there is data that suggests that in young people, higher depression symptoms were predictive of more friendship and romantic relationship issues, and more friendship and romantic relationship issues were predictive of later depressed symptoms (Goodman *et al.*, 2019).

Overall: The data reveals that in the overall attachment styles, there were no significant gender differences observed regarding secure, dismissive, preoccupied and fearful attachment styles. Males tended to be had more secure (33.33% males and 25.71% females) attachment style, which may indicate more emotional stability in a variety of relationship settings.

Close friends

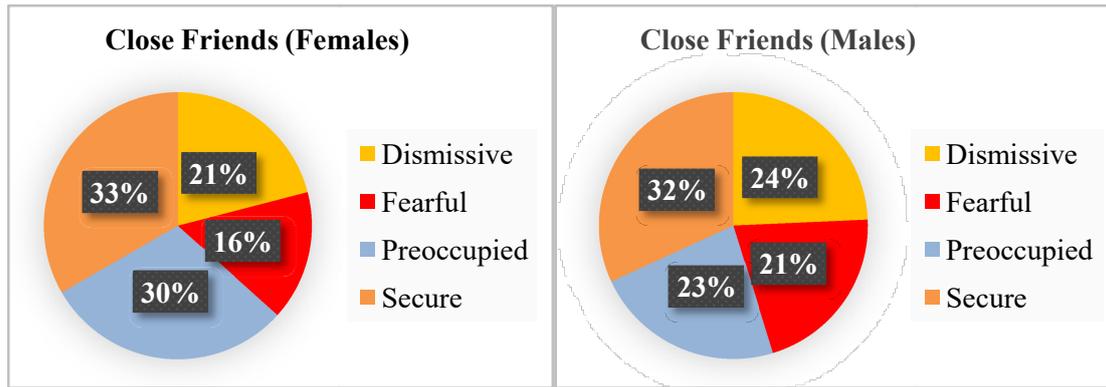


Figure 5. Gender differences in percent distribution of respondents across different levels of attachment styles with close friends

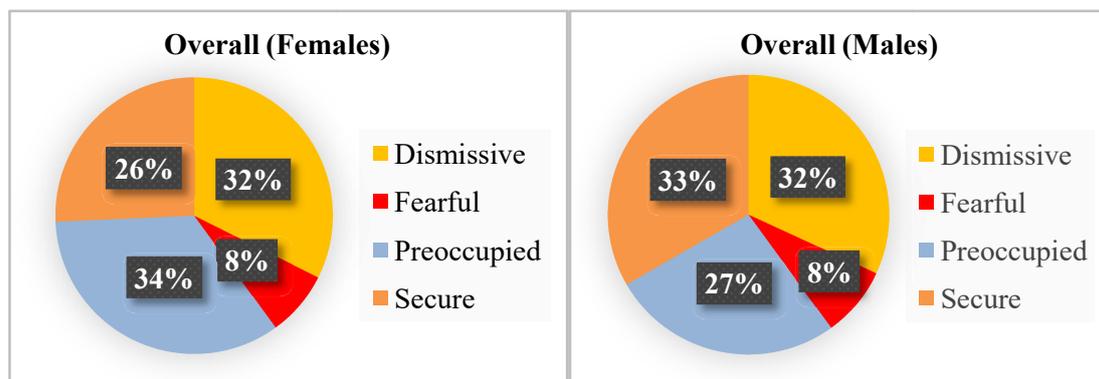


Figure 6. Gender differences in percent distribution of respondents across different levels of attachment styles

Whereas females were more inclined to have preoccupied (females 34.29% and males 26.67%) attachment style, which suggests that they worry more about relationships. Both dismissive (32.38% females and 31.90% males) and fearful (7.62% females and 8.10% males) attachment styles had a comparable proportion of respondents. When young individuals live independently, they typically spend a lot more time with their friends, and these relationships may be their main source of companionship (Chen *et al.*, 2022). According to Li *et al.* (2023), young adults consider their romantic partners to be their closest friends and believe that they offer comparable or even more support than their parents.

CONCLUSION

The present study provides valuable insights into the prevalence and gender-wise distribution of attachment styles among undergraduate students. The findings indicate that a range of attachment styles exists within the undergraduate population, reflecting the diverse emotional and relational experiences characteristic of young adulthood. The observed prevalence patterns suggest that attachment orientations continue to play a significant role during this developmental stage, influencing interpersonal relationships, emotional regulation, and psychosocial adjustment. Further, the gender-wise analysis reveals notable differences in the distribution of attachment styles across various dimensions. These variations may be understood in the context of differential socialization processes, emotional expression, and relational expectations experienced by male and female students. Understanding these patterns can inform the development of gender-sensitive counseling interventions, mental health programs, and relationship education initiatives for undergraduate students. Future research may build upon these findings by exploring the underlying psychosocial factors influencing attachment styles and examining their associations with academic functioning, mental well-being, and relationship quality.

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