



**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ATTACHMENT STYLE,
SELF-ESTEEM AND SEXUAL SATISFACTION IN WOMEN**

ELIZA, NICOLAESCU^a ZINA SILVIA, LIPAT^a

^a*Hyperion University, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences
Department of Psychology*

Abstract

The present study aims to deepen the relationship between attachment style formed during childhood and subsequently consolidated throughout development, including during adulthood, and another fundamental aspect for maintaining a high quality of life, namely self-esteem, and the dimension of sexual satisfaction among the female population. Based on recent findings in the specialized literature, there is an emerging need to enrich scientific knowledge regarding the weight that emotional background and relational abilities, both with oneself and with others, have in shaping the subjective feeling of relational satisfaction in general and sexual satisfaction in particular. Starting from the two proposed psycho-behavioural constructs, which are in constant transformation and evolution throughout life, the main objective of this research is to investigate the relationship between attachment style, self-esteem, and sexual satisfaction in women. Despite humanity advocating for authentic, intimate, and long-lasting interpersonal relationships, very few people manage to experience them at a deeper level due to emotional barriers that limit them.

Keywords: *attachment style, self-esteem, sexual satisfaction*

1. INTRODUCTION

This work emerged from observing the curiosities of modern humans, who are in a continuous search for self-discovery, with an emerging need to know themselves, correct their behaviours, emotions, and experiences in order to achieve authentic, long-lasting, and satisfying relationships.

Thus, this research aims to delve into these constructs concretely and pragmatically to provide a clearer understanding of primary needs and the necessity of fulfilling them for a better quality of life. Attachment theory is considered a theory about the imperative need to find a partner for reproduction and to protect each other from imminent dangers that may arise along the way. However, recent research suggests that it can also be seen as a theory of emotional structuring and regulation.

The term ‘attachment’ refers to a complex intercommunication structure with a person (idea, ideology, or group). It contains strong affective symbolic elements and involves complex behavioural expressions: disinterest, desire for giving, protection,

Corresponding author: Lipat Zina Silvia

Email address: silvialipat90@gmail.com

and defense. According to Ann Birch (2000), attachment can be defined as a lasting connection oriented toward a specific individual.

British psychiatrist John Bowlby (1951) was the first theorist of attachment, describing it as a 'long-lasting psychological connection between human beings' 2. His theory largely focuses on relationships and connections among people, especially in long-term relationships, including those between parents and children and romantic partners. Attachment theory was developed in response to certain Freudian psychoanalytic theories regarding human development, which emphasize two primary instincts: eros (sexual instinct) and thanatos (death instinct).

John Bowlby's observations in the 1940s demonstrated, contrary to psychoanalysis, that the attachment relationship between mother and child has a primary nature (meaning it is based on an innate autonomous system) and does not represent a secondary derivative of the child's primary need for nourishment from the mother (oral gratification). He observed that children often experience strong emotional discomfort when separated from their mothers, even if they are well-fed and physically cared for by others.

Bowlby aimed to demonstrate, and succeeded in doing so, that real-life events such as loss, separation, and fear of separation have a significant impact on child development and later on adult personality characteristics. The first year of life, early childhood, and adolescence are considered sensitive (critical) periods during which attachment behaviour develops normally or dysfunctionally in accordance with an individual's personal experience with the primary attachment model.

Attachment theory proposes that intimate relationships in childhood serve as the foundation for shaping an individual's attachment later in life, influencing feelings and behaviours in adult romantic relationships Ainsworth et al., (1978); Bowlby, (1982). Therefore, these early relationships can help couples acquire the necessary skills to assertively communicate with each other about their intimate desires and needs.

Research on early childhood from the late 20th century, as Alain Schore from the University of Los Angeles asserted, focused on the socio-emotional development of infants, their interactions with caregivers and attachment figures, the social-cultural influences on the development of young children and their families, as well as the conditions that place children and/or families at risk for optimal development.

A clinically shared concept within interdisciplinary clinical work is that of biological and psychological regulation, which applies to models of normal/abnormal functional structuring.

Longitudinal studies on securely attached children show positive outcomes in their development, according to Cassidy & Shaver, (1999). These include facilitating emotional flexibility, social functioning, and cognitive abilities. Attachment security fosters resilience in the face of future adversities.

Studies suggest that different forms of insecure attachment (avoidant, anxious/ambivalent) can be associated with emotional rigidity, difficulty in social relationships, impaired attention, difficulties in understanding others' moods, and risky behaviours. According to Schore, A. N. (1994), suboptimal attachment

experiences can predispose a child to psychological vulnerability, partly through altering the brain's neuroendocrine response to stress.

Another crucial psycho behavioural construct necessary for a better quality of life is high self-esteem. According to Branden (1987), self-esteem consists of the sum of self-confidence and self-respect. Branden describes it as a consequence of each person's way of facing life's challenges, understanding and solving problems, and seeking happiness. Research has shown that high self-esteem correlates with intuition, creativity, rationality, flexibility, independence, and the ability to acknowledge and correct errors. Conversely, low self-esteem is generally associated with defensive reactions, fear of the new and unknown, irrationality, servile or tyrannical behaviour, anxiety, and hostility.

Mark Leary (1998, 2007) likens our feelings to a fuel gauge. Relationships allow survival and prosperity. Thus, our self-esteem indicator warns us of the threat of social rejection and motivates us to act prudently in relation to others. Studies confirm that social rejection leads to decreased self-esteem and a stronger desire for approval from others. When disappointed or hurt, we feel unattractive or inadequate to others. This pain can motivate action, self-improvement, and the search for acceptance and inclusion elsewhere.

Another highly significant factor affecting self-esteem is the success-failure dynamic in interpersonal and intimate contexts. Research indicates that people experience a decline in self-esteem following rejection by a partner in a romantic relationship, and they may even develop aggressive behaviours as a result of the same stimulus.

Maintaining high self-esteem, deep self-knowledge, acceptance, authenticity, and the ability to shape life according to one's own needs are essential assets for a well-adjusted life. A healthy sense of self does not exclude caring for others or being influenced by them. It is expansive and inclusive, not rigid. The only dictate of authenticity is that we, not external expectations, should be the true authors and authorities of our lives. Being seen and accepted for who we are creates an intrinsic tension between these two essential needs.

Although both needs are equally important, there is a hierarchical order: in the early stages of life, attachment always tops the list. Our authentic self is gradually used in transactions where we ensure physical or emotional survival by sacrificing who we are and what we feel. We often don't consciously choose these adaptive mechanisms, nor can we easily remove them when they no longer serve us—they become part of us. The perceived need to conform to societal expectations becomes entangled with our understanding of who we are and how we seek love.

Sexual satisfaction, intimacy between two individuals, and the fulfilment of these needs can be influenced by the attachment style formed during childhood and fluctuating self-esteem.

2. OBJECTIVES AND HYPOTHESES

2.1. OBJECTIVES

The current research aims to identify the relationships between sexual satisfaction and marital status, explore the connection between anxious/ambivalent attachment style and sexual satisfaction, and observe how emotional self correlates with the degree of sexual satisfaction.

2.2. HYPOTHESES

H1. We assume that the distribution of sexual satisfaction rankings among individuals in a relationship differs from the distribution among those who are not in a relationship.

H2. We assume that there is a statistically significant correlation between sexual satisfaction and anxious/ ambivalent attachment.

H3. We assume that there is a statistically significant correlation between sexual satisfaction and emotional self.

3. METHOD

3.1. GROUP OF PARTICIPANS

The researched sample consists of 100 respondents, with an average age of 30 years. In terms of education level, 40% of the respondents have completed secondary education, while 60% have higher education. Regarding marital status, the sample includes 40% of respondents who are not in a relationship and 60% who are in a relationship.

3.2. INSTRUMENTS

1. AAS (Adult Attachment Style) Questionnaire: The Collins and Read (1990) questionnaire measures attachment and differentiates individuals based on their attachment style. It consists of 18 items, with 6 for each attachment type (secure, avoidant, anxious-ambivalent).

2. Toulouse Self-Esteem Scale (E.T.E.S.): Developed in 1991 by N. Obayrie, C. Safont, and M. De Leonardis, this scale was published in the Journal of Applied Psychology in 1994. Inspired by existing unidimensional and multidimensional scales, it reflects a person's perception—whether more or less positive—regarding various aspects of self-identity. These aspects include emotional self, social self, physical self, academic self, and prospective self. The scale comprises 60 items with dichotomous forced-choice responses, evenly distributed across the five subscales.

3. Female Sexual Satisfaction Questionnaire: This questionnaire includes 10 items with dichotomous responses to assess women's satisfaction levels (high satisfaction, moderate satisfaction, and low satisfaction).

3.3. PROCEDURE

The questionnaires were introduced using the Google Forms platform, and respondents received an access link to complete them. The completion of the questionnaires was done online by the participants, ensuring compliance with both ethical codes and GDPR legislation. All participants were informed about the research and provided consent, fully aware of the anonymity of their identities and the research's purpose, along with the strictly statistical processing of results at the sample level.

3.4. EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

For the research design, the following variables were analysed:

1. Dependent variables: sexual satisfaction, anxious/ambivalent attachment style, emotional self (SE).
2. Independent variables: marital status.

The design of the research follows the following model:

N_{1,2}: O_{1,2,3}

Where N_(1,2)-represents the sample divided according to marital status; O_(1,2,3)- represents the answers to the three instruments used for measurements.

4. RESULTS

Our study investigated the similarity among relationship status, attachment style, sexual satisfaction, and emotional self in a sample of 100 participants. The results revealed that women who were not in a relationship had an average sexual satisfaction rank of 31.22, while women in a relationship had an average rank of 46.07. The statistical Z value of -2.850 and a p-value of 0.004 indicated a significant difference between the two groups, suggesting that relationship status significantly influences women's experiences or behaviours.

Regarding sexual satisfaction and anxious/ambivalent attachment style, a Cohen's d coefficient of approximately 1.843 indicates a very large effect, suggesting a significant difference between the variable sexual satisfaction and anxious/ ambivalent attachment style, with a p-value of 0.001, confirming the statistical and practical significance of this correlation.

Additionally, a moderate positive correlation was found between sexual satisfaction and emotional self, with an r coefficient of 0.249 and a p-value of 0.026. A Cohen's d coefficient of approximately 0.046 indicates a small effect size, and has more statistical than practical value, indicating that higher emotional self-esteem can positively influence a person's sexual experience to some extent.

4.1. TABLES AND FIGURES

H1. We presume that the distribution of sexual satisfaction rankings among individuals in a relationship differs from the distribution among those who are not in a relationship.

Table 1 – Mann-Whitney test results for H1

Ranks				
	Marital status	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Sexual satisfaction	Single	40	31,22	936,50
	In relationship	a 60	46,07	2303,50
	Total	100		

Test Statistics^a	
	Sexual satisfaction
Mann-Whitney U	471,500
Wilcoxon W	936,500
Z	-2,850
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	,004

a. Grouping Variable: Marital status

Analysing the study results, we observe that the average sexual satisfaction rank for women who are not in a relationship (denoted as m1) is 31.22. Conversely, the average sexual satisfaction rank for women in a relationship (denoted as m2) is 46.07. This difference is highlighted by the statistical Z value of -2.850, which exceeds the standard confidence interval of +/-1.96. Additionally, the p-value of 0.004, significantly lower than the conventional threshold of 0.05, leads us to accept hypothesis H1 and reject the null hypothesis. Therefore, we can conclude that there is a significant difference in the distribution of sexual satisfaction ranks between women in a relationship and those who are not, indicating that relationship status impacts the measured ranks in the study. These findings suggest that women in a relationship may have experiences or behaviours that differentiate them from those who are not in a relationship—an aspect worth further exploration in future research.

H2. We assume that there is a statistically significant correlation between sexual satisfaction and anxious/ ambivalent attachment.

Table 2 – Spearman correlation results for H2

Correlations				
			Sexual satisfaction	Ambivalent anxieties
Spearman's rho	Correlation Coefficient		1,000	-,391**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.	,000
Sexual satisfaction	N		100	100
	Correlation Coefficient		-,391**	1,000

Ambivalent anxieties	Sig. (2-tailed) N	,000 100	.	100
-------------------------	----------------------	-------------	---	-----

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

Table 3 – Descriptive analysis for H2 variables

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Sexual satisfaction	100	1	10	7,53	2,585
Ambivalent anxieties	100	6	29	15,35	5,419
Valid N (listwise)	100				

Our analysis involved 100 participants and aimed to investigate the relationship between sexual satisfaction and anxious/ ambivalent attachment style. The results revealed a Cohen’s d coefficient of approximately 1.843 indicates a very large effect, suggesting a significant difference between the variables sexual satisfaction and anxious/ ambivalent attachment style. The results revealed a moderate negative correlation, with a coefficient r of -0.391, suggesting an inverse proportional relationship between these two studied variables: as sexual satisfaction increases, anxious/ambivalent attachment tends to decrease, and vice versa. This finding is supported by a p-value of 0.001, significantly lower than the standard threshold of 0.05, confirming the statistical significance of the observed correlation.

Our study results highlight a significant link between sexual satisfaction and anxious/ ambivalent attachment style, emphasizing the impact attachment styles can have on intimate aspects of life. The discovery that anxious/ ambivalent attachment is associated with reduced sexual satisfaction could have important implications for couples’ therapy and psychological interventions. Despite the large effect size, we reject the null hypothesis. This suggests that addressing attachment issues in therapy may contribute to improving sexual satisfaction and strengthening intimate relationships. Research consistently shows that people with insecure (versus secure) attachment styles tend to have less satisfying sex. The reason for dissatisfying sex: Insecure attachment styles can prevent sexual mindfulness.

H3. We assume that there is a statistically significant correlation between sexual satisfaction and emotional self.

Table 4 – Spearman correlation results for H3

Correlations				
Spearman's rho	Sexual satisfaction	Correlation Coefficient	Sexual satisfaction	SE
		Sig. (2-tailed)	1,000	,249*
		N	.	,026
	SE	Correlation Coefficient	100	100
		Sig. (2-tailed)	,249*	1,000
		N	,026	.
			100	100

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

Table 5 – Descriptive analysis for H3 variables

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Sexual satisfaction	100	1	10	7,53	2,585
SE	100	0	12	7,40	3,038
Valid N (listwise)	100				

Our study included 100 participants and aimed to explore the relationship between sexual satisfaction and emotional self. The analysis revealed a moderate positive correlation, with a coefficient r of 0.249, indicating a connection between these two variables, a Cohen's d coefficient of approximately 0.046 indicates a very small effect size, suggesting that the difference between the variables sexual satisfaction and emotional self has more a statistical than practical value. Despite the small effect size, the analysis is supported by a p -value of 0.026, significantly below the conventional threshold of 0.05, leads us to accept hypothesis H3 and reject the null hypothesis. Therefore, we can conclude that there this confirming the statistical significance of the observed correlation.

The results suggest a modest link between sexual satisfaction and emotional self, highlighting that a person's emotional state can influence their sexual experience to some extent. Although the percentage of variance in sexual satisfaction explained by emotional self is small, it underscores the importance of emotional factors in sexual perception and experience. This finding has implications for therapeutic approaches targeting sexual health, emphasizing the need to consider emotional aspects in sexual treatment and counselling. Furthermore, the discoveries suggest that exploring other psychological variables could contribute to sexual satisfaction.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Our study explored the relationship between relationship status, attachment style, and sexual satisfaction, involving a sample of 100 participants. The results highlighted significant differences between women who are in a relationship and those who are not, with average satisfaction rank scores of 31.22 and 46.07, respectively. The statistical Z value of -2.850 and a p-value of 0.004 indicate a significant difference between the two groups, suggesting that relationship status significantly influences women's experiences or behaviours.

Regarding sexual satisfaction and anxious/ambivalent attachment style, a moderate negative correlation was observed with a coefficient r of -0.391, indicating an inverse proportional relationship between these variables. The results revealed a Cohen's d coefficient of approximately 1.843 indicates a very large effect, suggesting a significant difference between the variables sexual satisfaction and anxious/ ambivalent attachment style, with a p-value of 0.001, confirming the statistical and practical significance of this correlation.

Additionally, a moderate positive correlation was found between sexual satisfaction and emotional self, with an r coefficient of 0.249 and a p-value of 0.026. A Cohen's d coefficient of approximately 0.046 indicates a very small effect size, suggesting that the difference between the variables sexual satisfaction and emotional self has more a statistical than practical value.

The study results underscore the importance of relational context and emotional factors in sexual perception and experience. These findings suggest that psychological interventions and couples' therapy should consider attachment styles and emotional well-being to enhance sexual satisfaction and strengthen intimate relationships. Furthermore, the results highlight the need to further explore other psychological variables that could contribute to sexual satisfaction, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics between emotional and intimate aspects of life. In light of these discoveries, developing therapeutic strategies that address these complex aspects is essential for improving sexual health and well-being.

It is also noteworthy that recent studies on attachment insecurity, emotional regulation and sexual satisfaction, found that attachment insecurity, particularly anxious attachment, was negatively associated with sexual satisfaction. It also identified emotional regulation as a key mediator in this relationship. This study highlights the importance of considering psychological factors and communication in therapeutic settings to enhance sexual health and relationship quality, consistently with the findings of Lee & Reiner (2021). Additionally, the present study found a negative correlation between anxious attachment and sexual satisfaction and also highlighted that effective sexual communication can mitigate the negative effects of anxious attachment on sexual satisfaction, consistently with the findings of Davis & Shaver (2021).

REFERENCES

- Ainsworth, M., McWaters, E., & Wall, S. (1978). *Patterns of Attachment: Assessed in the Strange Situation and at Home*. Hillsdale, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Bowlby, J. (1982). *Attachment and Loss, Vol I: Attachment*. New York: Basic Books.
- Branden, N. (1987). *How to Raise Your Self-Esteem*. Bantam Books.
- Birch, A. (2000). *Psychology of Development: From the First Year of Life to Adulthood*. Bucharest: Tehnică.
- Cassidy, J., & Shaver, P. (1999). *Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Corneanu, M. (n.d.). *Attachment Styles and Defense Mechanisms*. Iași: UAIC.
- Gâtej, L. M.-R. (2019). *Psychology and Social Psychopathology*. Bucharest: SPER.
- Psychology Review. Leary, M. R., Twenge, J. M., & Quinlivan, E. (2006). Interpersonal rejection as a determinant of anger and aggression. *Personality and Social*
- Mate, G. (2022). *The Myth of Normal: Trauma, Illness, and Healing in a Toxic Culture*. Bucharest: Herald.
- Schore, A. N. (1994). *Affect Regulation and the Origin of the Self: The Neurobiology of Emotional Development*.
- Stan, V. O. (2002). *Attachment and Community Systems in Mental Health*. Timișoara: Eurobit.
- Șchiopu, U. (Ed.). (1997). *Dictionary of Psychology*. Bucharest: Babel.

Copyright: Submission of a manuscript implies that the work described has not except in the form of an abstract or as part of a published lecture, been published before (or thesis) and it is not under consideration for publication elsewhere; that when the manuscript is accepted for publication, the authors agree to automatic transfer of the copyright to the publisher.
