THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ROMANTIC ATTACHMENT AND SELF-ESTEEM IN YOUNG ADULTS

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between romantic attachment anxiety and self-esteem in young adults aged 20 to 40, a life stage marked by emotional intimacy and identity consolidation. The sample included 86 participants (70 women, 16 men), who completed two validated self-report measures: the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) and the Experiences in Close Relationships Revised (ECR-R). Pearson correlation analysis revealed a statistically significant negative association between attachment anxiety and self-esteem (r = –.322, p = .003), while simple linear regression confirmed that attachment anxiety is a significant predictor of self-esteem, accounting for 10.4% of the variance (R² = .104, p = .003). These findings highlight the psychological cost of attachment-related insecurity, suggesting that individuals with anxious relational patterns may struggle with internalized self-doubt and reduced personal value. The results underscore the relevance of addressing attachment anxiety in psychological interventions designed to enhance self-esteem and emotional resilience in early adulthood.

Keywords: romantic attachment, attachment anxiety, self-esteem, young adults, emotional vulnerability

1. INTRODUCTION

Romantic attachment represents a core dimension of human relational functioning, shaping how individuals experience intimacy, closeness, and emotional regulation in adulthood. Rooted in Bowlby's attachment theory (1969), and later adapted to adult romantic contexts by Hazan and Shaver (1987), attachment is understood as a dynamic system that influences beliefs, expectations, and behaviors within close relationships. Over time, these patterns consolidate into relatively stable attachment orientations, typically described along two dimensions: anxiety and avoidance (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000).

Individuals high in attachment anxiety tend to worry about being rejected or not being sufficiently valued by their partners, while those high in attachment avoidance are uncomfortable with closeness and rely on deactivating strategies to maintain emotional

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distance. These dimensions influence not only relationship satisfaction and stability, but also internal psychological structures, such as self-esteem.

Self-esteem, as conceptualized by Rosenberg (1965), refers to one's general sense of self-worth and personal value. A growing body of research has emphasized the interdependence between attachment and self-esteem, highlighting how early experiences of security or insecurity are internalized as cognitive-affective models of the self and others (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Attachment anxiety has often been linked to low self-esteem, rooted in fears of abandonment and negative self-perception, while attachment avoidance is frequently associated with a defensive, self-reliant stance that may mask deeper insecurities (Park et al., 2004; Orth et al., 2012).

Although many studies have explored the influence of attachment on various aspects of well-being, there is limited empirical data in Eastern European contexts, particularly among young adults navigating modern romantic dynamics outside of long-term or marital relationships. In this age group, relationships may fluctuate in intensity, formality, and emotional investment, which makes the investigation of inner attachment patterns and self-perception particularly meaningful. Given the centrality of both self-esteem and attachment in shaping relational and emotional development during early adulthood, exploring their relationship can offer valuable insight into affective vulnerability, resilience, and the broader emotional landscape of romantic involvement.

2. OBJECTIVE AND HYPOTHESES

2.1. OBJECTIVE

This study aims to explore how romantic attachment dimensions, specifically anxiety and avoidance relate to self-esteem in young adults aged 20 to 40. Both constructs play a central role in shaping how individuals perceive themselves and navigate intimate relationships. Insecure attachment patterns, often marked by high anxiety or avoidance, are associated with negative self-views and relational difficulties, which may in turn undermine self-esteem. While the connection between attachment and self-esteem has been explored in various populations, limited research exists in Eastern European contexts. Moreover, gender differences have been noted, with women often reporting higher attachment anxiety and men higher avoidance. Investigating these dynamics in a contemporary, non-clinical Romanian sample may offer valuable insights for psychological theory and relational well-being.

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To explore the relationship between attachment anxiety and self-esteem in young adults.
2. To investigate whether attachment anxiety serves as a significant predictor of self-esteem.

2.2. HYPOTHESES

Based on the theoretical framework and previous research, the study proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: There is a statistically significant negative correlation between attachment anxiety and self-esteem among young adults.

H2: Attachment anxiety significantly predicts self-esteem in young adults.

3. METHOD

3.1 THE PARTICIPANTS

The study involved a total of 86 participants, aged between 20 and 40 years, corresponding to the young adult developmental stage. The sample included 46 women and 40 men. Inclusion criteria required that participants fall within the specified age range and voluntarily agree to participate. No additional selection criteria were applied.

The sample included individuals from both urban and rural areas across various regions of Romania. Data collection was conducted online through self-administered questionnaires, which participants completed individually using electronic devices.

Prior to participation, all individuals provided informed consent, having been clearly informed about the voluntary nature of their involvement, the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw at any time without any consequences. The procedures followed established ethical standards for psychological research involving human subjects.

3.2 INSTRUMENTS

To evaluate the psychological variables under investigation, two widely recognized and psychometrically validated self-report instruments were employed:

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), originally developed by Rosenberg (1965), is a 10-item unidimensional measure designed to assess global self-worth. Items are rated on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 ("Strongly disagree") to 3 ("Strongly agree"), with items 3, 5, 8, 9, and 10 reverse-scored to control for response bias. The total score ranges from 0 to 30, with higher scores indicating higher levels of self-esteem. A Romanian recalibration of the scale was conducted on a representative adult sample (N = 413), showing strong internal consistency (α = .836) and acceptable factorial structure (Vasiliu, 2019). These results support the scale's use in both research and applied psychological settings.

Experiences in Close Relationships Revised (ECR-R) was developed by Fraley, Waller, and Brennan (2000) to assess adult romantic attachment on two dimensions: attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance. The Romanian adaptation by Rotaru and Rusu (2013) includes 31 items after eliminating five due to poor psychometric performance. Seventeen items measure anxiety and fourteen measure avoidance. Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 ("Strongly disagree") to 7 ("Strongly agree"), with higher scores indicating greater attachment insecurity. Several items are reverse keyed. The Romanian version demonstrated strong reliability (α > .86 for both subscales) and confirmed the two-factor structure through both exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses. The ECR-R has been widely used in adult populations and is sensitive to cultural variations in relational styles.

3.3 PROCEDURE

Data collection was conducted online via a self-administered Google Forms survey. Participants completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) and the Experiences in Close Relationships – Revised (ECR-R) individually, in their own environment and at their own pace. On average, completion took approximately 15 minutes.

To ensure comprehension, the form included clear instructions and brief section prompts. Participants were informed that responses were anonymous, that participation was voluntary, and that they could withdraw at any time. No supervision or real-time guidance was provided.

Informed consent was obtained electronically prior to participation. After data collection, responses were exported and analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 29. Statistical procedures included descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and simple linear regression to examine the relationship between attachment anxiety and self-esteem.

4. RESULTS

4.1 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Descriptive statistics were calculated for the main variables of interest: attachment anxiety, self-esteem and age.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Attachment anxiety	86	17	108	45.72	20.99
Self esteem	86	14	34	24.42	4.33
Age	86	21	40	32.8	4.27
Valid N (listwise)	86				

The descriptive analysis indicated that the average self-esteem score among participants was M = 24.42, a value that falls within the moderate range of the scale.

This suggests that most young adults in the sample maintain a generally positive, but realistically grounded self-image, consistent with healthy self-evaluation patterns typically observed in non-clinical populations.

The mean attachment anxiety score was M = 45.72, with a wide score range and elevated standard deviation (SD = 20.99), indicating substantial variability in the degree of emotional insecurity experienced in romantic contexts. While some participants reported low anxiety, others endorsed higher levels of fear of abandonment, need for reassurance, and emotional volatility in intimate relationships.

The mean age of the sample was M = 32.80, confirming the focus on young adults, typically defined as individuals between 20 and 40 years old. This developmental stage is marked by the consolidation of identity, relational commitment, and increased psychological autonomy, making the exploration of attachment patterns and self-esteem especially relevant.

4.2 PEARSON CORRELATION ANALYSIS

To test the relationship between self-esteem and attachment anxiety, a Pearson correlation analysis was performed.

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Between Attachment Anxiety and Self-Esteem

		1.	2.
1. Attachment anxiety	Pearson Correlation	1	-.322**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.003
	N	86	86
2. Self esteem	Pearson Correlation	-.322**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.003	
	N	86	86

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

The Pearson correlation analysis revealed a statistically significant and moderate negative association between self-esteem and attachment anxiety (r = −.322, p = .003). This coefficient reflects a moderate effect size, with the squared correlation (R² = .104) suggesting that approximately 10.4% of the variance in self-esteem scores can be explained by fluctuations in attachment anxiety.

From a psychological perspective, this result supports the theoretical assumption that individuals with higher levels of attachment anxiety tend to have lower levels of self-esteem. Anxious individuals often struggle with persistent fears of abandonment, doubt their own worth in relationships, and exhibit emotional dependence, all of which can undermine a stable and positive self-image.

In the context of young adults, who are still navigating identity consolidation and relational autonomy, elevated attachment anxiety may act as a psychological vulnerability, eroding confidence and increasing self-doubt. These findings emphasize the need for interventions that target internal working models of self and others, aiming to reduce attachment-related anxiety and foster healthier self-perception as a foundation for emotional well-being and relational stability.

4.3 SIMPLE LINEAR REGRESSION ANALYSIS

To determine whether attachment anxiety predicts self-esteem, a simple linear regression analysis was conducted. The Coefficients Table is presented below.

Table 3. Linear Regression Coefficients Predicting Self-Esteem from Attachment Anxiety

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	27.454	1.070		25.65	.000
	Attachment anxiety	-.066	.021	-.322	-3.117	.003

a. Dependent Variable: Self Esteem score

The linear regression model revealed that attachment anxiety significantly predicts self-esteem in young adults. The standardized beta coefficient (β = –.322, p = .003) indicates a moderate and statistically significant predictive relationship. The unstandardized coefficient (B = –0.066) suggests that for every one-point increase in attachment anxiety, the self-esteem score decreases by approximately 0.07 points. The model explained 10.4% of the total variance in self-esteem (R^2 = .104), a proportion considered modest but meaningful in behavioral research, reflecting the psychological impact of attachment-related anxiety on self-perception.

From a psychological standpoint, these findings support the theoretical assumption that individuals with higher levels of attachment anxiety tend to have lower levels of self-esteem. Anxiously attached individuals often experience persistent fears of rejection and abandonment, emotional insecurity, and negative self-appraisals, all of which erode a stable and positive sense of self-worth.

In the context of young adults, who are still navigating identity consolidation and emotional autonomy, elevated attachment anxiety may act as a psychological vulnerability fueling self-doubt and diminishing self-confidence. These results highlight the need for therapeutic interventions focused on restructuring internal working models of attachment and fostering a more secure and compassionate self-view. Reducing attachment-related anxiety may help individuals develop healthier relationships with themselves and others, contributing to greater emotional well-being and relational stability.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the relationship between attachment anxiety and self-esteem among young adults aged 21 to 40. The results revealed a statistically significant negative correlation between the two constructs (r = –.322, p = .003), and confirmed that attachment anxiety is a significant predictor of self-esteem, accounting for approximately 10.4% of the variance in self-esteem scores (R^2 = .104).

These findings suggest that individuals who experience higher levels of anxiety in romantic attachment tend to report lower levels of self-worth. Psychologically, attachment anxiety functions as an emotional vulnerability that intensifies fears of rejection and reduces the individual's capacity to maintain a stable and positive self-image.

In early and middle adulthood a stage marked by identity consolidation, relational autonomy, and the pursuit of emotional intimacy, self-esteem plays a vital role in emotional regulation, the formation of healthy relationships, and psychological stability. Therefore, interventions targeting attachment-related insecurities may help strengthen self-esteem and promote greater emotional and relational well-being.

Based on these insights, the study recommends the implementation of psychological support programs for young adults, focusing on restructuring dysfunctional internal working models of attachment, fostering a more compassionate and realistic self-view, and enhancing relational competence.

Nevertheless, the study has certain limitations, including its cross-sectional design and the exclusive use of self-report measures, which may be susceptible to subjective bias. Future

research should consider longitudinal designs and incorporate additional contextual variables (such as parental bonding or relationship history) to better understand how attachment anxiety influences self-esteem within the broader context of romantic partner selection.

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