

Intertwined: Discerning Connections Between Anxiety, Attachment Patterns and Digital Exposure in Key Interpersonal Relationships

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INTRODUCTION

Objectives

Anxiety rates in the Middle East and North Africa, particularly in the UAE, have increased over the past eight years. This anxiety significantly impacts attachment styles among students in the region. Conflict and political instability can lead to heightened anxiety, causing anxious and avoidant attachments. The digital aspect of war, including distressing news and social media, can exacerbate these issues. Digital connectivity can also contribute to disconnection and isolation, leading to social withdrawal and exacerbated attachment issues.

Literature Review

- Attachment generally refers to the bond between 2 human beings. Bowlby (1969) identified 4 types of attachment: secure, insecure anxious-avoidant, insecure disorganized, insecure ambivalent.
- An insecure-ambivalent attachment style in children was linked to the development of ineffective emotion regulation, coping skills, and anxiety disorders for adults (Esbjorn et al, 2021).
- Manning and Colleagues also found a positive association between insecure attachment style and social anxiety (Manning et al, 2016).
- Additionally, individuals who were classified as having an anxious attachment style exhibited greater social anxiety, greater depression rates, and reduced life satisfaction compared to those with secure attachment styles (Eng et al., 2002).

RESEARCH QUESTION

Is there a correlation between anxiety and attachment in interpersonal relationships?

HYPOTHESIS

- H1: Students would report high levels of anxiety.
- H2: Students will report poor interpersonal relationships.
- H3: Students will report insecure attachment styles
- H4: Students who report high levels of anxiety will report poor interpersonal relationships
- H5: Students who report high levels of anxiety will report insecure attachment styles.

METHODS

Participants were 327 students from a convenience sample of Psychology 101 and 102 and received 0.2 credits. The students belonged to different academic standing.

MATERIALS

Hamilton Anxiety Rating Scale (HAM-A) (Hamilton, 1959).

- The HAM-A measures the severity of anxiety symptoms. It is comprised of 14 items and scored on a 5- point Likert scale ranging from '0: Not present, to '4: Very severe. The HAM-A has a high inter-rater reliability of 0.92.

Relationship Structures (ECR-RS) Questionnaire (Fraleley et al.,2011).

- The ECR-RS is used to evaluate attachment patterns in interpersonal relationships (mother/father/romantic partner/best friend). It consists of 9 items, which are scored using a 7- point Likert scale ranging from '1: strongly disagree' to '7 strongly agree' with reverse scoring on items 1-4. The ECR-RS has a high test-retest reliability of .80.

PROCEDURE

- Approved by Institutional Research Committee.
- Extra credit for PSY 101 and PSY 102.
- Used Sona & Qualtrics platforms to deliver the consent form and study materials.
- Minimal to no risks were involved.
- Statistical analyses were performed using Jamovi and Excel.

RESULTS

Results revealed that students' mean score on the HAM-A was 17.5. The mean for attachment-related anxiety from the ECR-RS questionnaire was 2.62. The mean for attachment-related avoidance from the ECR-RS questionnaire was 2.48. Results revealed a weak positive linear correlation between the anxiety scores and the attachment-related avoidance scores in students ($r = 0.29$, $p = 0.001$). There was also a weak positive linear correlation between the anxiety scores and attachment-related anxiety scores in students ($r = 0.16$, $p = 0.004$). The results indicate that as students anxiety increases, we are likely to see poorer interpersonal relationships and insecure attachment styles.

Figure 1: Correlation scatterplot between HAM-A and ECR-RS Avoidant Attachment Scores

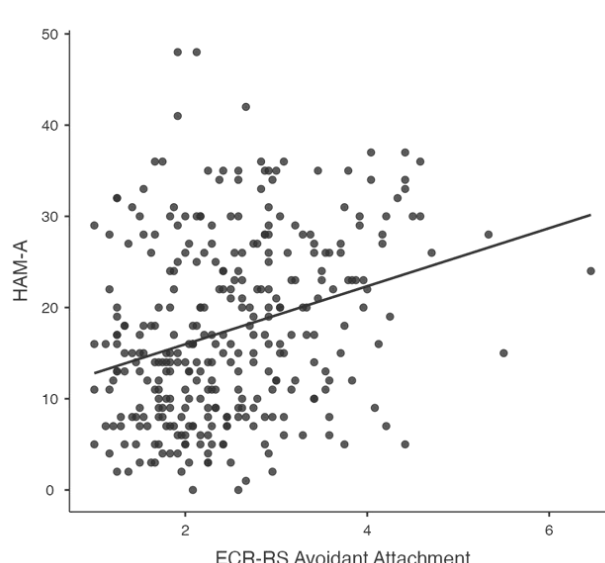
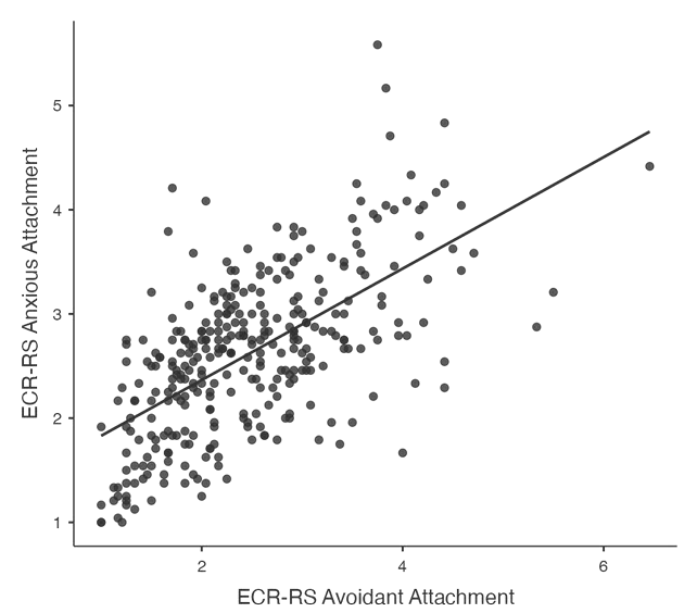


Figure 2: Correlation scatterplot between HAM-A and ECR-RS Anxious Attachment Scores



CONCLUSIONS

- Our results indicate that as students' anxiety increase, we are likely to see poorer interpersonal relationships and insecure attachment styles. In other words, students with high anxiety are likely to lack supportive connections with others. These students need counseling to help them reduce their anxiety and form meaningful and healthy relationships.
- These results could incentivize universities to offer programs which target and reduce anxiety and improve mental health amongst university students. In that spirit, we created and conducted a program called Anxiety Awareness Day where we presented our research to inform students of the prevalence of anxiety, how it affects them and methods to help alleviate their symptoms.
- Additionally, given that females tend to report more symptoms of anxiety than males, future studies could replicate this study to decipher if there is a significant relationship between gender, attachment and quality of interpersonal relationships.
- And finally, we propose digitally delivered Progressive Muscle Relaxation as an effective technique to reduce anxiety.

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