

Attachment Style Interactions and Their Influence on Adolescent Relationship Information

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Abstract:

Adolescence is a critical developmental stage during which adolescents go through profound emotional, social, and cognitive growth, as the development and formation of relationships become more meaningful and complex. Central to relational development is the attachment theory, explaining how bonds with caregivers in early childhood influence behaviors and emotional responses in later relationships. This review explores how the attachment styles such as secure, anxious, avoidant, and disorganized, interact and shape adolescent perceptions, interpretations, and storage of relationship information in both platonic and romantic contexts. Furthermore, this review highlights how securely attached adolescents demonstrated higher levels of empathy, emotional regulation, and healthier relationship outcomes. Conversely, insecurely attached adolescents often lead to relational dysfunction, conflict, and emotional dysregulation, increasing vulnerability to mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, as well as the formation of maladaptive coping strategies such as self-harm or disordered eating. Additionally, this review explores how digital communication, social media, and cultural shifts amplify or reinforce insecure attachment patterns, which further complicate interpersonal dynamics. Likewise, the findings in this review underscore the crucial role of empathy in relationships, as well as the impacts of gender and cultural influences. Limitations in current research include a lack of cross-cultural generality, a lack of population variability, such as people in the LGBTQIA+ population, and digital influences. Overall, future directions should contain longitudinal studies, culturally diverse populations, and encourage the development of attachment-informed educational programs.

Keywords: Attachment theory; adolescence; anxiety; empathy and moral judgement; platonic and romantic relationships.

1. Introduction

Adolescence is a critical developmental period where individuals go through significant changes in social, emotional, and relational dynamics. During this period, adolescents form deeper connections in both their friendships and romantic relationships, which are heavily influenced by attachment patterns developed from early childhood. The Attachment theory, described by the British psychologist Bowlby, is “lasting psychological connectedness between human beings.” [1], was originally proposed by Bowlby and later expanded by American-Canadian psychologist Ainsworth, then by American psychologists Main and Solomon. The attachment styles were then split into four distinct types: secure, anxious, avoidant, and disorganised. These attachment styles could strongly influence how adolescents perceive and interpret information about relationships.

Understanding the formation of adolescent relationships between different attachment styles that are developed early in childhood can be crucial, especially in a rapidly changing social world as it impacts the development of healthy interpersonal skills, self-regulation skills as well as emotional well-being not only during this period of growth but also into adulthood where one study demonstrated how attachment anxiety accounted for 60-64% of the persistence of anxiety and depressive symptoms from 14 to 21 [2]. Similarly, reliance on digital communication, the rise of social media, and the increase in mental health awareness influence more changes in societal norms, as it causes interpersonal dynamics in modern society to become more complex. Therefore, relevance of this research is to not only be able to inform parents, caregivers, educators and mental health professionals about the key areas that affect relational development, support insecurely attached adolescents and reduce risks of further persistence of mental health issues later on in adulthood, but is to also address gaps in literature regarding how different attachment styles interactions affect adolescent relationship outcomes which could encourage improvements in relationship education programs in the future.

This study aims to examine how different attachment style interactions affect the way adolescents gather, perceive, interpret, and store knowledge about relationships, not only platonic but also romantic. Specifically, this study aims to examine how different attachment style combinations could lead to different outcomes in the perception of relationships, both short-term and long-term. Correspondingly, some research questions that could be asked are: How do different attachment styles interact in friendship and romantic relationships? How do modern social factors influence these interactions between individuals? What

gaps remain in the current literature about these attachment styles?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

2.1.1 Attachment theory overview

Attachment theory, first introduced by John Bowlby in the 1960s and later expanded by Mary Ainsworth, Main, and Solomon is a foundational framework in developmental and relational psychology. This framework emphasises the profound impact of early childhood emotional bonds, particularly between infants and their primary caregivers, on an individual’s emotional and psychological development across their lifespan.

As stated by Galvano [3], Internal Working Models (IWM) are flowcharts that serve as cognitive blueprints, encapsulating individuals’ perceptions of relational dynamics formed during interactions with primary caregivers. These models relate to the attachment style patterns that develop as friendships and romantic relationships have greater emotional depth and influence how they respond or form relationships during adolescence. Likewise, adolescents with secure attachment IWM may have healthier relational understanding, whereas adolescents with insecure attachment IWM may experience issues such as mistrust, clinginess, or struggles with handling conflict.

By using this model, 4 types of attachment styles can be identified: Anxious-Ambivalent Attachment, the fear of abandonment, heightened by emotional sensitivity or anxiety. Usually caused by inconsistent caregiving or having caregivers who are unpredictable in early childhood, resulting in adolescents being overly clingy, constantly having to seek reassurance, and being preoccupied with relationships. Avoidant Attachment is marked by emotional distance and attachment needs. Typically caused by caregivers who are emotionally unavailable or discourage emotional expression. As a result, adolescents could appear emotionally distant, show discomfort in intimacy, and overvalue independence. Disorganised Attachment displays of unpredictable or contradictory behavior, often linked to trauma in early childhood. Usually, this is caused by frightening, chaotic, or neglectful caregiving in early childhood and results in erratic behavior such as aggression, struggles with trusting others, which causes adolescents to form dysfunctional relationships. Secure Attachment is characterised by comfort with closeness and a healthy balance between independence and dependence. This attachment style develops when consistent, responsive, and emotionally available caregiving is present

in early childhood. This results in adolescents having high self-esteem, engaging in close relationships, and having a healthy balance of independence and intimacy.

2.1.2 Interpersonal dynamics

Adolescence is a period where interpersonal experience becomes increasingly complex as young adults begin to evaluate both platonic and romantic relationships with greater emotional depth and independence. Central to this process is the role of attachment styles, which not only shape an individual's behavior but also significantly influence interpersonal dynamics. Especially with the rapid growth of technology and social media, interactions between different attachment styles play a crucial role in how adolescents interpret and respond to relationship formation and development, which also impacts interpersonal dynamics going into adulthood.

2.1.3 Secure interpersonal dynamics

In a secure-secure pairing in platonic or romantic relationships often leads to open communication, emotional availability, and mutual trust. In this dynamic, both individuals interpret each other's actions with clarity and form balanced relationship information with minimal misunderstandings. In relationships like these, adolescents have high levels of mutual empathy and feel safe, which enables them to reflect on their relational experiences as well as have manageable conflict without fear of judgment, abandonment, and overall not threatening the relationship.

2.1.4 Insecure interpersonal dynamics

When one or both individuals have insecure attachment styles, the relationship may become dysfunctional, more conflict-prone, and negatively impact one's emotional well-being. Insecure attachment styles such as anxious, avoidant, and disorganized often result in maladaptive relational patterns such as overdependence, emotional withdrawal, miscommunication, and mistrust. When individuals with these insecure attachment styles interact, it could hinder the development of mutual trust and emotional safety. Over time, such interactions can negatively impact an adolescent's emotional well-being as they may experience lowered self-esteem, increased anxiety and depression, or reinforced negative beliefs about relationships. Without intervention, these dysfunctional patterns could damage current relationships while also influencing future interactions and the formation of new relationships towards adulthood.

For anxiously attached individuals, some perceived behaviors may include clinginess, constant need for reassurance, or fear of being left out. These behaviors may have relational impacts, such as making the other individual feel overwhelmed or having more frequent arguments,

which leads to more insecurity. As for the avoidantly attached individuals, behaviors include emotional distance, withdrawal when upset, and reluctance or hesitation to open up. These behaviors may impact any relationship as they may remain superficial or short-lived. Lastly, for disorganized attached individuals, a distinct behavior is the presence of mixed signals, craving connection but pushing people away. Individuals with this attachment style may affect a relationship as they may have unpredictable behavior, which may confuse the other individual, sparking conflict or isolating the other individual.

2.2 Attachment Style Interactions in Different Relationship Types

2.2.1 Platonic relationships

Platonic relationships play an important role in adolescents' identity development and social learning. Securely attached adolescents typically engage in reciprocal and supportive friendships that include mutual trust, open communication, and empathy. These securely attached adolescents are comfortable in both giving and receiving emotional support while also navigating through conflict constructively.

On the contrary, insecurely attached adolescent pairings may complicate friendship dynamics, which include Anxious-anxious pairing, these friendships may feel intense and overwhelming as emotions are overly involved between the two individuals' lives, causing jealousy, fear of exclusion, and overdependence. Avoidant-avoidant pairing, these friendships may lack emotional depth and mutual vulnerability, often leading to only surface-level or activity-based friendships. Anxious-avoidant, these friendships are particularly unstable as the anxiously attached individual seeks constant reassurance while the avoidantly attached individual is emotionally unavailable or distant, often leading to misunderstandings and emotional tension. Disorganized-disorganized/anxious/avoidant/secure pairing, these friendships may include unpredictable behaviours where one or both individuals cycle between closeness and distance, often leading to conflict or even harmful interactions.

A fascinating study done in the United States suggests that empathy was an important factor in friendships among adolescents [4]. Correspondingly, more securely attached adolescents were more likely to have friends who openly sought their support. These securely attached adolescents also made more support-seeking calls and were also more emotionally responsive, providing empathic support that matched their friends' needs. This suggests a reciprocal dynamic where securely attached adolescents not only offer emotional support but also attract or encourage friends

to seek help from them, reinforcing positive and supportive friendships. In this study, 184 students were followed from ages 14 to 18, with annual peer interactions coded for empathic support. The attachment security was measured at age 14 using a 60-minute-long interview called the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI), and a 6-minute Supportive Behavior Task (SBT) was used to provide a behavioural measure of empathy. In this study, it was indicated that securely attached adolescents at 14 years old already had higher levels of empathic support, which remained stable, while less securely attached adolescents had lower levels of empathic support, which increased over time and were able to gradually “catch up” with the securely attached peers at 18 years of age. This study not only highlights the importance of empathy in friendships but also emphasises the importance of early childhood relationships between caregivers that can lead to how adolescents interact with one another to form and develop healthy friendships.

2.2.2 Romantic relationships

Romantic relationships during the adolescent period can often be the most powerful and impactful experiences any individual has. Secure romantic relationships in adolescents may include open or honest communication, mutual trust or respect, interdependence, and balanced intimacy. These romantic relationships often activate core relational attachment dynamics as emotional intensity, vulnerability, and potential rejection or intimacy are gradually involved. In contrast, romantic relationships involving adolescents with insecure attachment styles may further complicate these romantic relational dynamics, which include: Anxious-avoidant pairing, the most common insecure interpersonal dynamic is the anxious-avoidant pairing, where one partner (anxious) seeks closeness and reassurance while the other (avoidant) emotionally withdraws, creating a push and pull cycle. Anxious-anxious pairing, the anxious-anxious pairing is where overdependence and fear of abandonment can escalate the emotional intensity of both individuals and create conflict. Avoidant-avoidant pairing, the avoidant-avoidant pairing consists of emotional disconnect or suppression of emotions of both individuals, resulting in a cold and disengaged relationship. Disorganized-disorganized/anxious/avoidant/secure pairing, the disorganized-disorganized/anxious/avoidant/secure pairing consists of unpredictable or erratic behaviour of one or both individuals with disorganized attachment and can lead to emotionally chaotic or even harmful interactions between the two individuals.

An intriguing study was done in Israel, where researchers tested whether there was a link between moral judgment – the evaluation of actions as good or bad, guiding social

behaviors and attachment styles [5]. This study involved 230 Israeli adolescents who were 14 to 18 years old and took self-reporting questionnaires such as the Moral Profile Assessment Questionnaire to measure moral judgment and the Basic Empathy Scale, or BES, to measure empathy [6, 7]. Similarly, higher empathic levels predict higher moral judgment, indicating that empathy, similarly to platonic relationships, is a key factor in moral awareness and decision-making in relationships in general. Additionally, illustrated the gender differences in which girls scored higher than boys in empathy and moral judgement, illustrating the fact that girls tend to be more influenced by relational and emotional factors in decision-making, while boys were more influenced by justice-oriented and decisions that would give them more pleasure. A key and interesting finding of this study was that it showed that there was a strong correlation between empathy and moral judgement; however, there was no significant link between moral judgement and attachment styles. However, moral judgment and adequate decision-making are still an important part of maintaining healthy romantic relationships, so it is crucial that adolescents understand appropriate moral judgment and learn empathic skills.

2.3 Contextual and Social Factors in Recent Years

2.3.1 Digital communication

In recent years, social media has become a central platform for adolescents to explore their identity, communicate with others, and develop relationships. While social media offers opportunities for connection and self-expression, it may also amplify attachment insecurities. These platforms tend to magnify interpersonal dynamics and reinforce incorrect patterns of thinking in already insecurely attached adolescents.

For instance, anxiously attached adolescents may misinterpret ‘Seen’ messages without replies as personal rejection, loss of approval, or reassurance. This indicates that social media tends to intensify the overthinking and anxiety when it comes to interpersonal dynamics for these anxiously attached adolescents. In a similar vein, social media enables the avoidantly attached adolescents to indulge in their emotionally detached selves. This reinforced the idea that vulnerability is unsafe, like they were taught in early childhood. However, avoidantly attached adolescents may also feel emotional distress when they witness others forming close relationships that highlight their own emotional detachment. Instead of addressing these feelings, they may use social media as a distraction or further withdraw from social engagement.

Interestingly, a study done in Japan in 2022 demonstrated

that attachment avoidance was significantly associated with Problematic Internet Use or PIU [8], which is the excessive or uncontrollable internet use that interferes with daily life. In this study, excessive internet use was measured using the 20-question questionnaire, Internet Addiction Test (IAT), and avoidant attachment was measured by how much adolescents felt uncomfortable with intimacy using the questionnaire (ECR-RS). Some reasons that may suggest why avoidantly attached adolescents had a higher association with PIU are the emotional disconnect between the adolescents' caregivers. This lack of emotional security may have led these adolescents to find an escape through the internet, such as social media or online gaming. Similarly, the internet provides a controlled environment where the avoidantly attached adolescents can avoid real-life intimacy but still interact socially.

2.3.2 Cultural shifts and mental health awareness

Significant cultural shifts are becoming increasingly common as family structures evolve, gender norms change, mental health awareness increases, and technology advances, affecting how adolescents in recent years form and navigate interpersonal relationships. These transformations have significantly influenced how attachment styles interact in youth and influenced the development of both romantic and peer relationships among adolescents. For instance, in Generation X (1965-1980), not only were work hours long, but divorce rates were also high, which suggests that more children faced emotional neglect or inconsistent caregiving, causing many children to develop insecure attachment styles. As a result, there was a higher prevalence of avoidant or anxious attachment style patterns. While mental health and psychology were continuously being studied during this period, emotional expression was not as encouraged, and therefore led to many issues for adolescents that went into adulthood as they suppressed their emotions and experienced trust issues, as well as vulnerability in relationships. As for Generation Y or Millennials, there was an increased focus on mental health, and many were beginning to seek therapy as technology was advancing. At the same time, many were more open to recognising and addressing attachment issues. However, due to the rise in digital connectivity and communication, anxious attachment style patterns became more prominent as digital overexposure and comparison increased. For adolescents in Generation Z, mental health issues have become more normalized as more adolescents are willing to speak out about their experiences in the hyper-digital age. While insecure attachments mainly stem from early childhood, it has also been proven that insecure attachment patterns are starting to manifest more digitally, such as obsessive social media checking. Similarly, there

have been higher reports of anxiety, depression, and eating disorders, where research shows that attachment anxiety is directly related to disordered or restrained eating as well as body dissatisfaction. In this study [9], 40-60% of pre-adolescent girls report weight concerns, and approximately 80% of adolescent girls report fear of weight gain and looking bigger. While it is an improvement from past generations that adolescents have greater openness to attachment theory and therapy, overexposure to relationship models online can affect how adolescents interact, form, or develop interpersonal relationships with each other, as insecurities and unrealistic expectations could be reinforced or enhanced.

Interestingly, a 50-year review of studies completed from different regions of the world was written [10], which demonstrated the differences in self-coping mechanisms of adolescents with insecure attachments, suggesting that cultural shifts and values shape self-coping mechanisms, such as listening to music and its effectiveness. In this review, there was a diverse range of longitudinal, cross-sectional, and qualitative studies in which most researchers used self-reporting scales such as the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), which measures symptoms of depression, or the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), which measures perceived stress. Some key findings of this review suggest that self-coping mechanisms were consistently used as a protective barrier against stress, anxiety, and depression by promoting healthier emotional regulation and reducing self-criticism. Likewise, fear of self-compassion or high self-criticism can act as barriers to emotional healing and therapy success. Correspondingly, parental self-compassion and early attachment patterns can influence the development of healthy self-coping mechanisms or behaviors.

2.4 Current Research Findings

2.4.1 Summary of key empirical studies

Some of the key empirical studies include the longitudinal study on empathy among friendships [4], demonstrating that adolescents with secure attachment had more stable and supportive friendships, while adolescents with insecure attachment began with lower levels of empathy but were able to gradually improve over time, emphasising the important role of empathy in relationships. Another study examined moral judgment and attachment in romantic relationships in adolescence, which suggested that empathy predicted moral judgment quality, but did not correlate much with attachment theory [5]. Again, highlighting the importance of empathy in any relationship. Lastly, a study in Japan examining attachment avoidance and PIU was done, showing the significant association between them [8].

2.4.2 Patterns in data

A clear pattern in data demonstrates how secure attachment style in adolescence is consistently linked to healthier interpersonal dynamics, including open communication, mutual trust, empathy, and emotional closeness or availability. On the other hand, insecure attachment styles, anxious, avoidant, and disorganized, in adolescence tend to produce maladaptive relational patterns such as clinginess, emotional distance, mistrust, and increased conflict.

Another pattern in data shows the role of empathy as a critical mediator in both healthy platonic and romantic relationships, influencing moral judgment and relationship quality. Here, gender plays a large role as girls usually score higher than boys in empathy level. Furthermore, this pattern in data could imply that the overall life satisfaction would be higher if interpersonal dynamics had empathy during the development and formation of relationships during adolescence. An interesting study on life satisfaction in adolescence supports this [11], as results demonstrated that the insecure attachment styles, anxious, avoidant, and disorganized, could significantly predict an adolescent's life satisfaction, which, overall, attachment styles explained 36.6% of the variance in life satisfaction among 510 adolescents aged 14 to 18. Correspondingly, this puts emphasis on the importance of supporting adolescents with a secure attachment style for more positive outcomes.

Likewise, cultural and generational shifts influence attachment patterns and the coping mechanisms, as well as the increase in mental health awareness, affecting adolescent relational development. This perfectly ties to the rise of technology and social media, with digital communication platforms amplifying insecure attachment patterns, which could sometimes lead to more serious issues such as eating disorders or self-injury. A recent study revealed that adolescents with insecure attachment styles, anxious, avoidant, and disorganized, had a higher risk of self-harm [12]. According to Homayoon et al., this was due to the fact that insecurely attached adolescents often had emotional dysregulation, struggles with identifying, expressing, or controlling emotion effectively, and as a result, these insecurely attached adolescents would often turn to maladaptive coping mechanisms to disperse emotional distress or to gain a sense of control over their emotions.

2.4.3 Limitations in current research

One limitation of current research includes the lack of studies that contain cross-cultural generalizability, as many studies are region-specific, such as Japan or the U.S, which limits the ability to generalize findings globally. In a similar vein, more research is needed on gender, sexual orientation (LGBTQIA+), and cultural diversity, which

interact with attachment styles and relationships during adolescence. Likewise, another limitation may also be that studies use a wide variety of tools for measurement, such as the AAI and self-report questionnaires. These measurement tools differ in approach, depth, and what they measure, and so this may affect consistency or may make it more difficult when comparing across different studies.

A different limitation may also be that there is a lack of studies on the influences of digital communication and social media. While the internet's role is recognized among these studies, empirical research on its nuanced effects on attachment and relationship development among adolescents has yet to be done, as it is an emerging factor in today's world.

2.4.4 Future directions

Future research should include longitudinal studies across a diverse range of different cultures to better understand how attachment styles and interpersonal dynamics evolve over time across different cultural contexts. By doing research like this in the future, researchers can get more information on whether adolescents from different cultural contexts with insecure attachment may require different approaches to help them become more securely attached. At the same time, further investigation of the effects of digital media should be considered, as it is gradually becoming a significant part of today's society. It is crucial that researchers gather more information on whether digital media can alter attachment-related behaviors, influencing the way adolescents form or develop relationships. Similarly, future studies should consider including diverse populations such as adolescents with different sexual orientations (LGBTQIA+) or different cultural backgrounds to ensure findings are inclusive and applicable.

Additionally, solutions to insecure attachment, such as designing and examining relationship education programs tailored to different attachment style interactions to prompt healthier adolescent relationships, could provide beneficial data. Likewise, introducing moral judgment or empathy training may also be beneficial, as empathy predicts moral judgment [5]. Future research could explore interventions that enhance empathy and moral reasoning in adolescents. By designing these interventions, researchers could gather more information on how one may approach any adolescent with an insecure attachment and how one can support these insecurely attached adolescents, helping them become more securely attached.

3. Conclusion

Adolescence is a period of emotional, social, and cognitive development where the foundations of interpersonal

relationships are solidified. This review has explored the influence of attachment styles, secure, anxious, avoidant, and disorganized, on how adolescents perceive, interpret, and store relational information. Through reviewing the theoretical frameworks, empirical findings, and contextual factors, it has become evident that these attachment styles significantly impact both platonic and romantic relationships, shaping the social skills, longer-term relational patterns, and overall emotional well-being of adolescents. Likewise, this review demonstrates the fact that secure attachment was consistently linked to healthier, more empathetic, and emotionally fulfilling relationships, while insecure attachments often led to dysfunctional dynamics, struggles with emotional regulation, and long-term relational struggles.

The findings from the empirical studies of this review provide a deeper understanding of the influence of how early caregiving environments from parents or caregivers influence adolescents' ability to build trust, manage conflict constructively, and express empathy, leading to the formation of insecure or secure attachment styles. Insecure attachment styles were shown to not only impair the quality of adolescent relationships but also increase the likelihood of mental health challenges, PIU, and maladaptive coping mechanisms such as self-harm or disordered eating. Furthermore, contextual elements like digital communication and shifting cultural norms continue to shape how these attachment dynamics are expressed, often amplifying existing insecurities or enabling more emotional avoidance and social comparison.

The implications of these findings are especially relevant for educators, caregivers, and mental health professionals seeking to support adolescents in navigating their relationships more effectively. By increasing awareness of attachment theory and how different attachment styles manifest in relationships, early interventions can be implemented to lower the risks associated with insecure attachment. For instance, school-based relationship education programs could incorporate content that is tailored to help adolescents understand their own attachment patterns and recognise those in others. Likewise, empathy-building exercises and emotional regulation strategies can be taught to improve relational outcomes. Since empathy has been proven to be a critical mediator in both moral judgment and interpersonal satisfaction, improving this trait in adolescence may serve as a protective factor against poor relational and emotional outcomes.

Understanding attachment style interactions in modern society is becoming increasingly important as interpersonal dynamics continue to evolve. In today's hyper-digital environment, adolescents are forming relationships in contexts vastly different from those of previous generations.

Factors such as social media, online communication, and increased mental health awareness play a crucial role in how intimacy, conflict, and trust are perceived, as attachment style patterns may alter these experiences in adolescent relationships. This is due to the fact that adolescents are often exposed to idealised relationship models, peer validation, and unrealistic digital intimacy. Therefore, understanding the underlying psychological factors of adolescents' attachment patterns becomes more urgent than ever before. Without a clear framework or solution to these issues, adolescents may risk the development of internalised maladaptive patterns or the development of unrealistic expectations about relationships.

Ultimately, recognizing and addressing the attachment style interactions will encourage healthier relational development, reduce long-term emotional struggles, and promote resilience among adolescents. While secure attachment is not a fixed trait, it can be improved over time through supportive environments and intervention strategies. As society becomes more attuned to the emotional needs of young people, integrating attachment theory into educational, therapeutic, and familial contexts can possibly serve as a guide for more connected, empathetic, and emotionally intelligent adolescents in future generations.

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