

Effect of Loneliness on Attachment Styles in Young Adults during Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Loneliness can be understood as the perceived feeling of being alone. Attachment styles are the ways in which we form bonds or connections with people in social relationships. This study aims to establish the effect of loneliness on attachment styles in young adults during pandemic. A sample of 148 adults was taken between the age group of 18 to 35 years. Two psychological tools were used: UCLA's Loneliness Scale by Russell, Peplau & Ferguson (1978) and Measure of Attachment Style by Ahmad, Jahan & Imtiaz (2016). Findings show that loneliness has an effect on ambivalent insecure, secure and avoidant insecure attachment styles.

Keywords: Loneliness, Adults, Attachment Styles

Loneliness is defined as “distressing experience that occurs when a person's social relationships are perceived by that person to be less in quantity, and especially in quality, than desired”. It may be a perceived emotion of being alone. This can happen with or without a group of people around. Often, people feel lonely when surrounded by a number of people. This happens when their emotional needs of having someone is not fulfilled. There may be both internal and external reasons for feeling lonely. The external reasons may be non-availability of someone at the time of need. The internal reasons can be numerous like having people around to share thoughts with, but still not being able to share them and feel lonely. During the current situation of pandemic due to COVID-19, there has been an increase in the levels of loneliness among people. This might be due to the norms of social distancing, lockdown, and isolation. This can add up to be the external reason for one feeling lonely. However, due to this or other issues like stress, a lot of people have started living in isolation and stopped interacting with those around. This might also hint towards internal reasons of being lonely.

Some prominent theories related to loneliness are: Behavioural theory; Cognitive theory and the theory based on Bowlby's Attachment Theory.

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Attachment

Attachment refers to the connection or bond we form with people in social relationships. Recent studies found an increase in loneliness levels of people due to social isolation and the pandemic. Family support was seen to influence how people combat the current pandemic. This study further investigates whether attachment styles are associated with loneliness. Attachment is defined as “a deep enduring bond between two people in which each seeks closeness and feels more secure when in the presence of the attachment figure”. It can be understood as the connect we feel with people around us.

Types of Attachment

- Secure Attachment
- Ambivalent Insecure Attachment
- Avoidant Insecure Attachment
- Disorganized Attachment
- Theories of Attachment are Bowlby’s Attachment Theory; Harlow’s Attachment Theory; Erik Erikson’s Theory; Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Theory and Evolutionary Theory of Attachment.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Akdoğan (2017) studied the relationship between loneliness, insecurities and feelings of being inferior. Inferiority turns out to be a predisposing factor for loneliness. Insecurity triggers loneliness via inferiority. Therefore, all three are related in the way that “A” causes “C” via “B”.

Fujimori et al., (2017) found that loneliness was negatively correlated with family support. Greater the support, lesser lonely the person feels. Also, secure attachment style was dominant in those who had greater family support and coherence. Loneliness was positively correlated with avoidant and ambivalent insecure attachment. There was significant gender difference in loneliness score of subjects.

Sahin et al., (2017) studied loneliness and attachment styles along with various different variables in university students. It was found that students who has low socioeconomic status, and lacked strong psychological support had more loneliness. Males who had better psychological support from those around had lesser levels of loneliness. Loneliness was seen to have low negative correlation with dismissing attachment and secure attachment. Loneliness has low positive correlation with preoccupied attachment. This research was done on a sample of 247 students.

Hosseinalhashemi (2016) concluded that ambivalent and avoidant insecure attachment styles are positively correlated with emotional loneliness. Ambivalent insecurity has highest correlation. Resilience is negatively correlated with loneliness. Men show higher levels of loneliness than females. The study was conducted on 200 students. Questionnaires were used to collect data.

Pereira et al., (2014) studied loneliness and its impact on relationship satisfaction. It was found that loneliness was indirectly related to avoidant insecure attachment style. Satisfaction in relationship acted as a link between loneliness and avoidant insecure attachment. The data was collected on 345 students who were committed to a relationship. Self-report questionnaires including UCLA loneliness scale was used.

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Givertz, et al. (2013) investigated the impact of insecurities on relationship quality. Results show that insecurities causes bad relationship with their partners. The partner's report about relationship quality was affected by their significant other's insecurities. This poor relation led to an increase in loneliness. A sample of 255 couples was used.

Ihan (2012) conducted a study on sexuality, loneliness and attachment styles. It was found that masculinity was a predicting factor for loneliness among men. Loneliness can be predicted by fearful attachment, and secure attachment. There is no gender difference in levels of loneliness. The study was conducted on 188 undergraduate students. Questionnaires on sexuality, loneliness, and attachment styles were used to collect data.

Bernardon, et al. (2011) studied the impact of attachment styles on loneliness. The results show that secure attachment leads to lesser loneliness. Insecure attachment leads to greater loneliness of all types in people. Data was collected on 173 students using self-report questionnaires.

Erozkan (2011) studied loneliness, attachment styles, and depression. Depression was seen to have significant relationship with loneliness. Loneliness was affected by attachment styles. Data was collected on 652 students. Self-report questionnaires were used. Pearson's correlation was used for statistical analysis.

Rationale

The current situation of a pandemic has led to an increase in intrapsychic conflicts, insecurities in relationships, loneliness, and conflicts within people of different communities. Social isolation and physical distancing has made it difficult for people to socialize and interact. Hence, people have increased sense of perceived loneliness. Whenever one feels insecure or has feelings that someone they love are cheating on them, or ignoring them, it is a common thing for people to say that do not think about it and instead involve yourself somewhere. Also, "an empty mind is a devil's workshop". Therefore, maybe we can say that loneliness can lead to increased insecurities.

Hence, the aim of this study is to establish that loneliness and attachment styles are significantly correlated to each other. Through this study, we will also find the direction of correlation, and predict how change in one variable can affect the other variable (s).

METHODOLOGY

Aim:

- To investigate the effect of loneliness on attachment styles in young adults during pandemic.

Objectives:

- To study the effect of loneliness on Secure-Attachment style in young adults during pandemic.
- To study the effect of loneliness on Ambivalent Insecure- Attachment style in young adults during pandemic.
- To study the effect of loneliness on Avoidant Insecure- Attachment style in young adults during pandemic.
- To study the gender difference in their level of loneliness and attachment styles during pandemic.

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Hypotheses:

- There will be a significant effect of loneliness on Secure-Attachment style among young adults during pandemic.
- There will be a significant effect of loneliness on Ambivalent Insecure- Attachment style among young adults during pandemic.
- There will be a significant effect of loneliness on Avoidant Insecure- Attachment style among young adults during pandemic.
- There will be a significant difference among males and females in their level of loneliness and attachment styles during pandemic.

Sample and its selection

The below mentioned table shows the selection criteria of sample. The Sample size (N) = 148 (61 males, 87 females).

Table 1: Sample data

Confidence level	93%
Margin of error	7%
Population proportion	67.9%
Population size	132.45 crore
Recommended sample size	146

Sampling Method

Convenience Sampling method has been used in this study.

Tools used

UCLA's Loneliness Scale by Russell, Peplau & Ferguson (1978). It is a 20-item scale designed to measure one's subjective feelings of loneliness as well as feelings of social isolation. Participants rate each item as either O ("I often feel this way"), S ("I sometimes feel this way"), R ("I rarely feel this way"), N ("I never feel this way"). Scoring is done in a four-point scale, ranging from 3 to 0. A score of 3 is given for each O response, 2 for S response, 1 for R response, and N gets 0. The total number of scores are added to get the loneliness score. The maximum score possible is 60, and minimum is 0. The scale is found to be reliable according to internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.89 to 0.94) and test-retest ($r = 0.73$) reliability, over a period of one year. Convergent validity and construct validity is also established.

Measure of Attachment Style by Ahmad, Jahan & Imtiaz (2016). It has 27 items designed to measure the attachment style of a person. The three styles are Avoidant Insecure, Anxious/Ambivalent Insecure and Secure attachment. The tool measures attachment across three dimensions of attachment. It is a five-point rating scale, ranging from 5 to 1. Each dimension has 9 items. Therefore, the maximum score possible for each dimension is 45, and the minimum score possible is 9. Five items have reverse scoring (Item no. 12, 16, and 27 in Secure Attachment, Item no. 2 in Ambivalent Insecure Attachment, Item no. 14 in Avoidant Insecure Attachment). Each individual gets a score for each dimension, and the dimension with highest score is the dominant attachment style of the person. The dimensions are not additive and hence no single score can be found for a person. The scale is found to be reliable according to internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha is 0.80). Construct Validity of the tool is also established.

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Procedure

Based on the literature review, the hypotheses were formulated. After finalizing the research design, the appropriate sample size was calculated. The data was collected using google forms. Analysis was done using statistical tools. SPSS software was used for analysis

Statistical Analysis

It comprises of calculating Mean & Standard Deviation (SD); Pearson's Correlation and independent sample t- Test for comparison

RESULTS

Table 2: The following table shows the descriptive statistics that is mean and SD of the variables under study.

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Loneliness	26.87	15.88
Secure-Attachment style	29.07	5.48
Ambivalent Insecure - Attachment style	27.62	6.95
Avoidant Insecure - Attachment style	26.59	5.75

Graph 1: The bar graph shows the variables mean and SD of loneliness and attachment styles

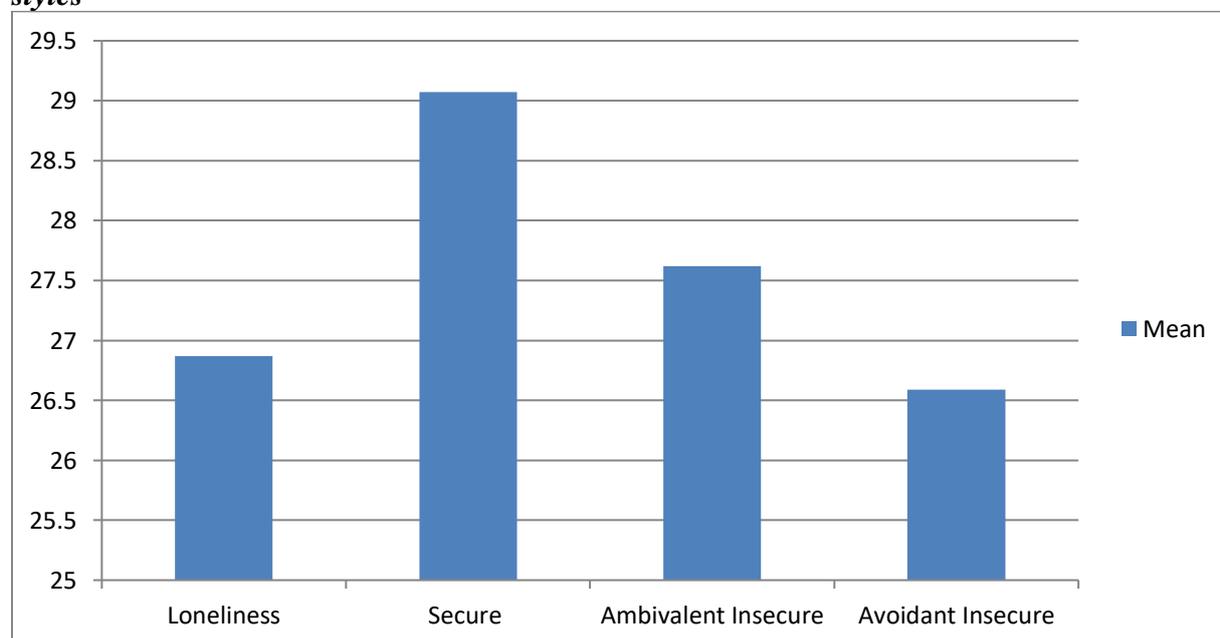


Table 3: The following table shows the descriptive statistics that is mean and SD of the variables under study, based on the gender (Male and Female).

		Loneliness	Secure-Attachment style	Ambivalent Insecure - Attachment style	Avoidant Insecure - Attachment style
Female	Mean	26.5402	29.3908	28.1609	25.8506
	Std. Deviation	15.38786	5.38593	6.60668	5.85588
Male	Mean	27.3607	28.6230	26.8525	27.6557
	Std. Deviation	16.68436	5.63963	7.40233	5.48296

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Graph 2: The following graph shows the mean of loneliness and attachment styles, based on sex.

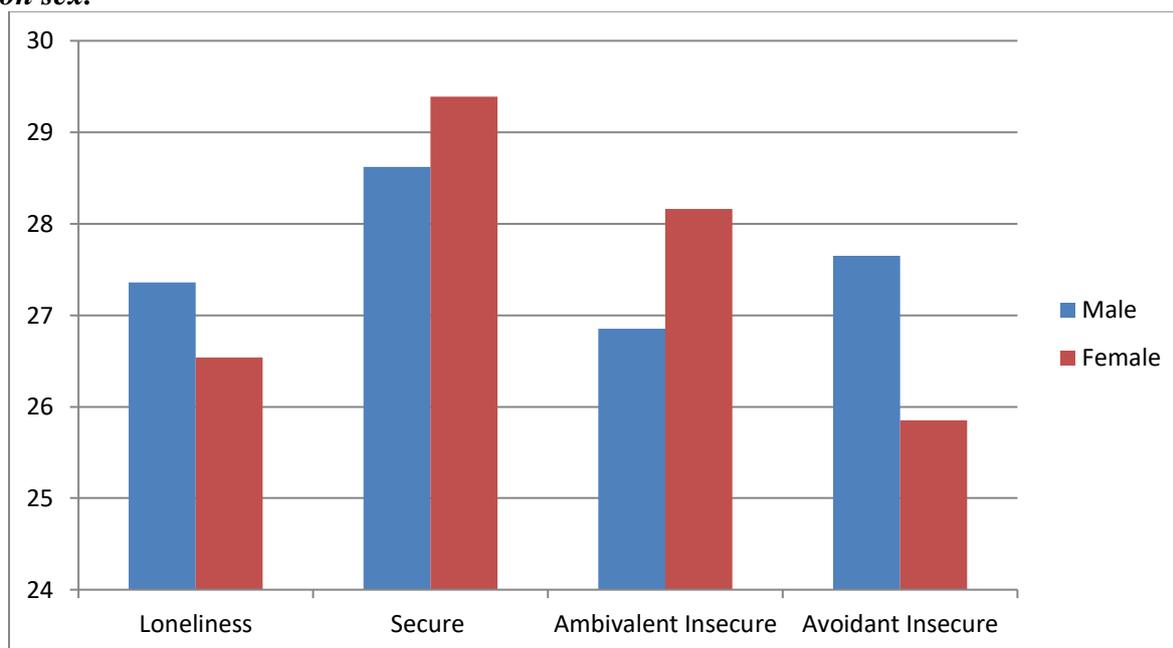


Table 4: The following table shows the correlation among different dimension of variables under the study.

	Loneliness	Secure-Attachment style	Ambivalent Insecure Attachment style	Avoidant Insecure Attachment style
Loneliness	1	-.204*	.549**	.212**
Secure-Attachment style	-.204*	1	0.01	0.24**
Ambivalent Insecure Attachment style	.549**	0.01	1	0.342**
Avoidant Insecure Attachment style	.212**	0.24**	0.342**	1

**Significance at 0.01 levels

*Significance at 0.05 levels

Table 5: The following table shows the regression among different styles of attachment and Loneliness.

Loneliness		F	Sig.
	Secure	6.317	.013
	Ambivalent Insecure	63.039	<.001
	Avoidant Insecure	6.848	.010

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Table 6: The following table shows the independent sample t- test among different styles of attachment and Loneliness in males and females.

	t-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Loneliness	.308	.758
Secure-Attachment style	-.837	.404
Ambivalent Insecure - Attachment style	-1.128	.261
Avoidant Insecure - Attachment style	1.895	.060

DISCUSSION

The current study aims to study the effect of loneliness on attachment styles, among males and females of age range of 18 to 35 years. It also attempts to find the gender difference that exists in levels of loneliness and attachment styles among the sample. Data was collected and for analysis, SPSS software was used.

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics where the mean loneliness score for the sample is 26.88 out of 60. This implies that the mean of loneliness score for the sample of 148 people ranging from 18 years to 35 years falls under the category of below average level of loneliness (44.8%). The mean for secure attachment style is 29.07; it is 27.62 for ambivalent insecure attachment and 26.59 for avoidant insecure attachment style. The mean for secure attachment style is the highest and it is lowest for avoidant insecure attachment style. This implies that the dominant attachment style for the sample is secure attachment. Each individual has all three attachment styles; however, the style with maximum score can be called the dominant attachment style for the person. The difference between the mean scores of all three attachment styles, however, is not significantly high.

The variance score in data (Table 2) shows that scores are more spread out for loneliness scale than is for attachment styles. Among attachment styles, data is most spread out for ambivalent insecure attachment style, and least spread out for secure attachment style. Variance is greater among men than women for all scores except avoidant insecure attachment style. This means that the scores of men are more scattered and deviated from the normal curve. For avoidant insecurity, women have higher variance than men.

Table 3 shows that the mean for loneliness is 26.54 for females and 27.36 for males. Men have slightly higher level of loneliness than women. However, on using t-test (Table 6) this difference was not found to be significant. A similar study was conducted earlier on the gender differences and loneliness across lifespan of men and women. Results found that there is no significant gender difference in variation of loneliness across the lifespan in people. (Maes M., Qualter P., Vanhalst J., Van den, Noortgate W., Goossens L., & Kandler C., 2019).

By referring to Table 3, we see that the mean for secure attachment style is 29.39 for females and 28.62 for males. Women have slightly higher secure attachment than men. The mean of ambivalent insecure attachment style is 28.16 for females and 26.85 for males. Women have higher ambivalent insecure attachment than men. The mean of avoidant insecure attachment style is 25.85 for females and 27.66 for males. Men have higher avoidant insecure type of attachment. The dominant style of attachment for both women and men is secure style of attachment. However, on using T-test analysis (Table 6), no

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significant gender difference was found in measure of attachment style among men and women.

Table 4 shows that there exists a negative correlation between loneliness and secure attachment styles (significant at 0.01 levels). Loneliness is positively correlated with ambivalent insecure attachment style ($r= 0.549$) and avoidant insecure attachment style ($r= 0.212$). This implies that as loneliness levels decrease, secure attachment style decreases. The correlation might be slightly stronger for loneliness and ambivalent insecure attachment style, than loneliness and avoidant insecure attachment. Further, regression analysis (Table 5) shows that loneliness can predict insecurity in relationships. If loneliness is higher, insecurity might be higher in relationships and vice-versa.

By referring Table 4, we see that there is a significant and negative correlation between loneliness and secure attachment style (significant at 0.05 levels). Loneliness is negatively correlated with secure attachment style ($r= -0.204$). This implies that as loneliness increases, secure attachment decreases and as loneliness decreases, security in relationships increase. Also as loneliness increases ambivalent insecure attachment style can be seen.

Further, linear regression (Table 5) shows that loneliness can predict security among relationships. If loneliness is higher, security in relationship might be lower, and vice-versa. Hypothesis 1, “there will be a significant association between loneliness and secure attachment” is proven. Loneliness has a significant and negative correlation with secure attachment style. Hypothesis 2, “there will be a significant association between loneliness and ambivalent insecure attachment” is accepted. Loneliness has a significant and positive correlation with ambivalent insecure attachment style. Hypothesis 3, “there will be a significant association between loneliness and avoidant insecure attachment” is verified and accepted. There exists a significant and positive correlation between loneliness and avoidant insecure attachment style. Hypothesis 4, “there will be a significant gender difference in loneliness and attachment styles” is rejected. No significant gender difference was found in the scores of loneliness and attachment styles. Therefore, gender has no role in the level of loneliness and Attachment styles during pandemic.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Thus, loneliness has an effect on different attachment styles of young adults during pandemic. Loneliness is positively related with ambivalent and avoidant insecure attachment styles and negatively related with secure attachment style. It has been reported in many researches that young adults are more affected by pandemic and for a secure attachment style to exist which is seen as a challenge in current times loneliness need to be low. More effort needs to be directed towards building relationships and social ties for a secure attachment.

Limitations

- This study was conducted during pandemic, and hence the sample size is too small to generalize the study on external population. Due to less number of people available, the confidence level is 93%. Also, randomized sampling was not possible. Hence convenience sampling was used.
- The sample consists of 87 females and 61 males. This could have been equal to get more clarity about the gender difference that might exist in loneliness and attachment style. For relationship status too, 107 single and 41 committed individuals were taken. There is a large difference in this number; hence not much can be said about

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the difference that arises in loneliness and attachment styles due to relationship status.

- Since the data was collected online, a few forms had to be dropped due to irrelevance of answers, and incomplete questions. Online data collection can always carry a risk of faking data from the end of the participant.

Future Implications

- This study establishes a relationship between loneliness and attachment style. Through this study, we can measure the average loneliness level of the population. We can also find whether pandemic has led to a rise in the level of loneliness among adults.
- We can find the dominant attachment style of the population and hence understand and predict the behaviours that arise from insecurities among relationships. It is found in the study that the mean level of loneliness of the sample is below average, and the dominant attachment style is secure attachment.
- Loneliness and insecurity both can lead to a number of disorders and hence, finding and predicting them can help manage these disorders. Using this study, it can be concluded that if loneliness level or attachment style is found out, we can predict the presence and level of the other variable.
- This may also be beneficial in understanding adolescent behavior and formation of romantic relationships. It can also be used for relationship counselling.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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