

## Attachment Styles and Proneness to Guilt and Shame among Young Adults

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### ABSTRACT

This study aimed to understand the relationship between attachment styles and proneness to guilt and shame among young adults (18-25 years). Shame and guilt are the two emotions closely linked with attachment-related dynamics. Attachment styles play a crucial role in determining and molding an individual's intimate relationships. The predisposition towards guilt and shame can heavily influence how an individual behaves within their relationship, therefore making it necessary to understand how attachment styles are associated with an inclination toward guilt and shame. A sample of 100 young adults (50 females, 50 males) completed the Adult Attachment Scale and the Guilt and Shame Proneness Scale. Data analysis involved the use of correlation and independent samples t-test. The results indicated while there is no significant relationship between attachment styles and guilt-proneness, proneness to shame was significantly related to it. Furthermore, no significant sex differences were found in terms of proneness to guilt and shame. These results provide valuable insights into the associated dynamics between attachment styles, guilt-proneness and shame-proneness.

**Keywords:** Attachment Styles, Guilt Proneness, Shame Proneness, Young Adults

Typically spanning between the ages of 18 and 25, young adulthood is a period of transition and growth wherein the individual encounters numerous significant events, obstacles, and changes in life. This is also a phase during which their characteristic attachment styles play a significant role in partially determining the type of relationships they will form. Attachment styles are often associated with the level of inclination an individual has towards shame and guilt, and these two emotions often play a significant role in determining the type of attachment a person depicts in their relationship. Despite usually being considered functional and adaptive, the dysregulation of guilt and shame may result in psychopathological and attachment issues.

### Shame

Considered a self-conscious emotion, shame has been defined as "a particularly intense, negative emotion involving feelings of powerlessness, inferiority, self-consciousness, and a

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strong desire to conceal one's deficits'' (Tangney, Wagner, Hill-Barlow, Marschall, and Gramzow, 1996b). Consisting of a social or external cognitive component, an internal self-evaluative component, an emotional component, and a physiological component, shame is considered a multifaceted experience (Gilbert, 2002). It has been categorized in numerous ways, with some researchers distinguishing between internal and external shame (Gilbert, 1998, 2000, 2003), while others focused on proneness to shame (Tangney et al., 1989). Shame-prone individuals have a negative self-perception and are overly critical of themselves. Overall, shame is a global, painful, and devastating experience in which the self, not just the behavior, is painfully and negatively evaluated (Linsay-Hartz, 1984; Tangney, 1989).

### **Guilt**

Guilt, arising from the violation of one's moral or ethical standards or breaking social norms or laws, is an emotion characterized by feelings of regret and repentance for something that one has either done or failed to do. According to Tangney (1991), 'guilt is associated with specific controllable behaviors that violate the individual's internal standards, resulting in a state of tension, remorse, and regret.' Guilt proneness is a personality characteristic indicative of 'a predisposition to experience negative feelings about personal wrongdoings, even when the wrongdoing is private'' (Cohen et al., 2012). Guilt, however, can function as a positive emotion when the individual is prompted to amend their behavior and avert future harm.

### ***Proneness to guilt and shame and sex difference***

An individual's inclination to experience guilt and shame refers to their natural tendency to feel these emotions in certain situations. Although both shame and guilt are negative self-aware emotions, they differ in their underlying causes and purpose. The primary difference in being prone to guilt and shame lies in whether the individual negatively evaluates a specific behavior or negatively assesses their entire self. Guilt typically stems from regretting a specific action, whereas shame is centered around one's perceived personal inadequacies.

Numerous studies have been conducted to explore the differences between females and males in terms of their inclination towards the two emotions. Many studies indicated that females might be more prone to experiencing them due to various factors such as societal expectations emphasizing empathy and nurturing. However, these dissimilarities are not absolute or deterministic. Individual differences, personal experiences, cultural variations, and societal contexts play significant roles in determining the inclination towards both these emotions. Moreover, societal changes and evolving gender roles may influence these dynamics over time.

### **Attachment theory**

The characteristic patterns of behaviors and attitudes that individuals develop towards their primary caregivers during childhood, which shape their approach to close relationships throughout their lives, are referred to as attachment styles. As defined by the American Psychological Association, attachment styles are "the characteristic way people relate to others in the context of intimate relationships, which is heavily influenced by self-worth and interpersonal trust".

The attachment theory was a result of the joint efforts of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. Bowlby posited that attachment represents a natural biological inclination that develops in infants as a means to address their fundamental requirements for safety, reassurance and

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solace. In this context, infants establish an attachment connection with their primary caregivers, often their mothers, as a mechanism to guarantee the fulfilment of their basic needs and to have a sense of security and protection from possible harm.

“Attachment styles result from a process of the individual internalizing a specific history of attachment experiences, which creates a systematic pattern of relational expectations, emotions, and behaviors” (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). Attachment is a gradual process that develops in a series of phases, moving from a baby’s general preference for human beings to a partnership with primary caregivers. Four phases of attachment were identified by Bowlby, the first one known as the pre-attachment phase wherein the infants recognize and distinguish between different people but haven’t formed attachments with the primary caregiver. The second phase is characterized by infants forming stronger bonds with their caregivers and is known as the attachment-in-the-making phase. During the third phase, called the clear-cut attachment phase, the infants form clear-cut attachments with their caregivers. Finally, during the formation of reciprocal relationships phase, infants develop more complex and reciprocal relationships with their caregivers.

The theory was further expanded by Mary Ainsworth, who conducted the “Strange Situation” study in which she observed children aged 12 to 18 months as they responded to a situation in which they were separated briefly and then reunited with their mother. Based on this study, she identified three main styles of attachment in children- secure, ambivalent-insecure, and avoidant-insecure. Later a fourth style, known as disorganized-insecure, was introduced by researchers Main and Solomon.

Children with secure attachment styles seek comfort and are happy in the presence of their caregivers, and show visible distress when they are separated from them. Those having an ambivalent-insecure style tend to be highly wary of strangers and show significant distress in the absence of their caregivers but do not feel reassured even when their caregivers return. Avoidant-insecure children have a tendency to ignore their caregivers and do not actively seek comfort from their caregivers. Lastly, children with a disorganized attachment style depict unclear and inconsistent attachment behaviors, often displaying a mix of avoidance and resistance towards their caregiver.

Childhood attachment patterns can influence patterns of attachment and behaviors in adulthood (Feeney, 2008; Fraley, 2002). Although the patterns observed in adult relationships may differ from those observed in childhood since a significant amount of time has passed, and other life experiences and intervening factors may impact the individual, it has been established that early attachment patterns can help predict patterns of behavior in adulthood.

### Adult Attachment

Adult attachment refers to the emotional bond that occurs between adults in close relationships, such as romantic partnerships, friendships or relationships with family members. Attachment theory suggests that the quality of early attachment experiences with caregivers forms an individual and internal model of working relationships that may influence how they develop and maintain relationships in adulthood. Adults’ attachment styles reflect their comfort and trust in close relationships, their fear of rejection and desire for closeness, and their preference for assertiveness or distance in relationships.

The attachment model developed by Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) attempted to explain how people develop attachment styles in adulthood based on their early experiences with

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caregivers. They extended attachment theory by introducing a model that includes four adult attachment styles. This model was based on the two-class fixed model of Bowlby and the three-class model of Ainsworth. It proposed four different attachment styles based on two dimensions: the first dimension is the degree of anxiety caused by closeness to others, and the second dimension is the degree of avoidance of closeness in interpersonal relationships. The model also emphasized the importance of understanding both anxiety and avoidance in relationships and how they interact to create different attachment styles. The four styles are secure, preoccupied, dismissive, and fearful attachment.

People with a secure attachment style feel comfortable with closeness and independence. They can trust and rely on others and are not afraid to be alone. Furthermore, they tend to think positively about themselves and others and believe that their needs will be met in the relationship. Those with a preoccupied style tend to be overly dependent on their relationships and often feel anxious or insecure about their partner and their feelings for them. Such individuals may also have low self-esteem along with a negative self-image. This style is often associated with inconsistent early experiences with caregivers. People with dismissive attachment styles prefer independence over closeness and may feel emotionally distant or detached from their relationship. This style is often associated with a lack of emotional responsiveness from caregivers during childhood. Also, people with a dismissive attachment style may have high self-esteem and a positive attitude toward themselves, but this may come at the expense of developing deep connections.

Secure people have a positive image of themselves and a positive view of others, while fearful people have a negative image of themselves and others. preoccupied (also known as anxious) individuals, on the other hand, are characterized by a negative attitude toward themselves and a positive attitude toward others. Adults with dismissive or avoidant attachment styles usually tend not to form supportive relationships.

### Attachment, guilt, and shame

Attachment, guilt, and shame are all related concepts that can affect a person's emotional and psychological well-being. An individual with an insecure attachment style may feel guilty or ashamed about expressing their needs or feelings, or feel guilty for not being able to meet their partner's needs. Studies have emphasized that childhood attachment experiences can affect a person's ability to regulate emotions such as guilt and shame in adulthood. For example, individuals with a secure attachment style may be more likely to experience healthy feelings of guilt in response to moral transgressions, while individuals with an insecure attachment style may experience stronger feelings of shame and may have difficulty regulating these emotions healthily. Understanding these associations can help in the management and regulation of relationships.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Research on the association between attachment styles and proneness to guilt and shame has yielded diverse outcomes.

- Park, C.J. (2022) examined childhood attachment insecurity as a predictor of shame-proneness in adulthood. The study consisted of 340 adults aged 18 and over. The results of this study indicated that certain attachment styles, anxiety, and disorganization were significantly related to shame-proneness whereas avoidance was not. Secure attachment was negatively related to shame-proneness, but the relationship was statistically insignificant.

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- Sedighimornani, N., Rimes, K., & Verplanken, B., (2020) studied the factors contributing to the experience of shame and shame management: adverse childhood experiences, peer acceptance, and attachment styles. The sample consisted of 240 participants and its results indicated that individuals with a secure attachment style had lower levels of shame, while shame was positively and significantly associated with fearful and anxious attachment styles.
- Sarah A. H. & Atkins, M.S. (2016) conducted a study on 271 university students to assess the relationship between shame and attachment styles. Their study revealed that students exhibiting an insecure attachment style (i.e., preoccupied, fearful, or dismissive) reported significantly more state and trait shame compared to students showing a secure attachment style after the shame MIP.
- Passanisi, A., Gervasi, A.M., Madonia, C., Guzzo, G. & Greco, D. (2014) focused on attachment, self-esteem, and shame in emerging adulthood among a sample of 209 students within the age range of 19 to 24. The results of this study indicated that securely attached students reported a higher level of self-esteem and a lower level of shame than insecurely attached students.
- Tokus T. (2014) explored the role of attachment styles and shame-proneness on relational models among a sample of 386 young adults aged between 18 and 30. It was found that secure participants scored lower on shame proneness than insecurely attached ones. Preoccupied and fearful individuals had higher levels of shame-proneness.
- Muris, P., et al. (2013) examined the topic Bound to Feel Bad About Oneself: Relations Between Attachment and the Self-conscious Emotions of Guilt and Shame in Children and Adolescents. The study consisted of children between the ages of 9 to 13 years and the results indicated that children who classified themselves as insecurely attached displayed higher levels of shame and maladaptive types of guilt as compared to securely attached children.
- Akbağ, M. & Imamoğlu, E. (2010) studied the prediction of gender and attachment styles on shame, guilt, and loneliness in a sample of 360 university students. They found that insecure and dismissing attachment styles predicted shame whereas guilt was predicted only by dismissing attachment. Furthermore, the study found that females were more prone to experiencing shame than males.
- Cohen, S.S. (2009) studied implicit shame and the emotional Stroop task: regulation of shame in relation to attachment style and interpersonal rejection, among a sample of 103 adults within the age range of 18 to 35 years. It was revealed that individuals with fearful attachment styles reported significantly higher levels of shame than those with secure, preoccupied, or dismissive attachment styles in pre- and post-MIP.
- Pollock, E.L. (2002) focused on the topic of unraveling attachment's contribution to the regulation of shame. The study investigated the relationship between internalized shame and shame proneness with attachment dimensions by taking a sample of 200 undergraduate students. It concluded that attachment relationships modify individual shame levels, with friendship and romantic ambivalence contributing the most to internalized shame.
- Gross, C.A. & Hansen, N.E. (2000) conducted a study on the topic clarifying the experience of shame: the role of attachment style, gender, and investment in relatedness. The study included 204 college undergraduates and inferred that secure attachment was negatively associated with shame while preoccupied and fearful attachments were positively correlated. Dismissing attachment style, on the other hand, did not have any impact on shame. Significant gender differences were found in shame

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scores, with women reporting higher levels than men. However, these gender differences disappeared when controlling for the mediating effects of investment in relatedness.

- Lopez, F.G., Gover, M.R., Leskela, J., Sauer, E.M., Schirmer, L. & Wysmann J.(1997) focused on attachment styles, shame, guilt, and collaborative problem-solving orientations among a sample of 142 undergraduate students. The results of this study indicated that shame was more prone amongst preoccupied and fearful attachment styles than secure and dismissive styles.
- Magai, C., Distel, N., & Liker, R. (1995) explored the topic of emotion socialization, attachment, and patterns of adult emotional traits among 129 participants. The results of this study pointed out that anxious attachment was associated with trait fear and shame.

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### *Objectives*

- To assess the relationship between attachment styles and proneness to guilt and shame.
- To examine the difference between males and females in terms of proneness to guilt and shame.

#### *Hypotheses*

- H<sub>1</sub>: There will be a significant relationship between attachment styles and proneness to guilt and shame.
- H<sub>2</sub>: There will be a significant difference among female and male young adults in terms of guilt and shame proneness.

#### *Research Design*

The current study followed a correlational research design.

#### *Participants*

The total sample size consisted of 100 participants aged 18-25 years, from various colleges/institutions of Delhi-NCR, out of which 50 were females and 50 were males. The participants were selected using the convenience sampling method.

#### **Inclusion criteria**

- Young adults in the age range of 18-25 years.
- Individuals residing in Delhi-NCR.
- Individuals who were fluent in the English language.

#### **Exclusion criteria**

- Individuals below and above the ages of 18 and 25 respectively.
- Individuals residing outside the areas of Delhi-NCR.
- Individuals who were not fluent in the English language.

#### *Instrument*

The revised version of the Adult Attachment Scale developed by Collins and Read along with the Guilt and Shame Proneness Scale by Taya R. Cohen were used in the present study. The original version of the Adult Attachment Scale was developed in 1990 and revised in 1996. The revised version of the scale (close relationship version) consists of 18 items which are

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scored on a 5-point Likert scale. It measures adult attachment style dimensions using its three subscales- Close, Depend, and Anxiety. The CLOSE scale measures the extent to which a person is comfortable with closeness and intimacy. The DEPEND scale measures the extent to which a person feels she/he can depend on others to be available when needed. The ANXIETY subscale measures the extent to which a person is worried about being abandoned or unloved.

The Guilt and Shame Proneness Scale (GASP) is a self-report test that measures individual differences in the propensity to experience guilt and shame across a range of personal transgressions. It consists of 16 items measured on a 7-point Likert scale. The GASP contains four 4-item subscales, which are Negative-Behavior-Evaluation (NBE) along with Guilt-Repair, constituting the guilt-proneness scale and Negative-Self-Evaluation (NSE), and Shame-Withdraw, constituting the shame proneness scale. Each item on the scale is a short description of an everyday transgression asking the respondent to imagine themselves in that particular circumstance and indicate their experience.

### Procedure

The study involved collecting data from 100 participants to assess their attachment styles and proneness to guilt and shame. Firstly, informed consent was taken from the participants before the test administration. The questionnaires were then provided after a proper rapport formation, with all the essential instructions related to the scales and the way of responding. Participants were instructed to choose the responses that described their experiences in the best way possible. It was made sure that the confidentiality of the participants was maintained and proper ethical conduct was duly followed. Analysis of data was done using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

## RESULTS

**Table 1: Frequencies of attachment styles**

	Secure	Anxious	Avoidant
N	42	37	21

Table 1 depicts the frequencies of different attachment styles present within the sample. 42 participants had a secure attachment style, a preoccupied or anxious attachment style was found among 37 participants and 21 had a dismissive or avoidant attachment style.

**Table 2: Relationship between different attachment styles and proneness to guilt and shame**

Style	Negative behavior evaluation	Guilt repair	Negative self-evaluation	Shame withdraw
Secure	.010	.132	-.342*	-.321*
Preoccupied	.251	-.032	.337*	.412*
Dismissive	.398	.107	.303	-.076

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

Table 2 highlights the association between the three attachment styles and proneness to guilt and shame.

The results show that there is no significant correlation between secure attachment style and guilt-proneness. However, a significant negative correlation at the 0.05 level exists between this style of attachment and both the subscales of shame proneness.

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No significant correlation exists between preoccupied attachment style and proneness to guilt. This attachment style, however, has a significant positive correlation at the 0.05 level with both dimensions of shame proneness.

No significant correlation was found between the dismissive attachment pattern and either of the dimensions, indicating that this style doesn't share any significant relationship with either guilt or shame proneness.

*Table 3: Sex-based comparison in terms of proneness to guilt and shame*

Variable	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	df	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
<b>Negative behavior evaluation</b>	Female	50	21.26	5.390	98	-.373	.710
	Male	50	21.66	5.348			
<b>Guilt repair</b>	Female	50	20.98	4.749	98	-.134	.894
	Male	50	21.10	4.191			
<b>Negative self-evaluation</b>	Female	50	19.12	6.362	98	.916	.362
	Male	50	17.88	7.150			
<b>Shame withdraw</b>	Female	50	15.70	7.075	98	-.990	.325
	Male	50	17.06	6.659			

Table 3 shows the difference between females and males in terms of guilt and shame proneness. The results suggest no significant differences exist between the two sexes.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study indicate that none of the attachment styles were significantly correlated to either of the dimensions of guilt-proneness. Secure attachment style was significantly correlated with both dimensions of shame proneness. The correlation was found to be negative which indicates that as an individual becomes more secure in their interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships the predisposition to negatively evaluate their entire selves and the tendency to socially withdraw themselves decreases. This results in the management of shame in a healthy manner.

The results depicted that both shame proneness dimensions were positively correlated with the preoccupied attachment pattern. An individual having this attachment style may tend to negatively gauge their entire selves even during minor transgressions. Moreover, they also withdraw themselves from social interactions due to them being sceptical about people judging them unfavorably.

Along with guilt-proneness, the dismissive or avoidant attachment style did not have a significant correlation with shame proneness as well. Since people with this type of attachment try to avoid emotional connections with others, they may also not care what people think of them and may not be particularly prone to guilt or shame.

Though various studies indicate that males and females differ significantly in terms of proneness to shame and guilt with females being more prone to both these affects, the results of this study indicate no such significant difference. This may be due to the difference in the times of the studies, the age group, or the difference in sample size and societal context.



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The research on this topic is ongoing and evolving. While the general trends suggest a different outlook, there are exceptions and variations among individuals. Each individual's experience of guilt and shame is unique and can be influenced by various factors beyond age and gender.

### *Implications and Suggestions for Future Research*

- Although this study suggests no significant relationship between styles of attachment and proneness to guilt, results may differ in the future depending on the sample size, age, geographic region, and other demographic details.
- No significant gender difference on the dimension of shame and guilt proneness was found in this research, although previous studies indicate that a significant difference exists.
- The present study was conducted on a small sample. So, it can lack response generalization. The sample includes participants from urban areas only which may result in the lack of generalization of the results of our study. Additionally, using a probability sampling method, instead of convenience sampling, can lead to stronger statistical inferences. Further studies by considering samples from diverse geographic regions may be planned, which may focus on a much bigger representative sample and cross-national comparative research.
- The study is limited in the form of a research design, sample chosen, and measures undertaken. Conducting further research using a much larger sample size and a diverse population may enhance the quality of the study and increase its generalizability.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study investigated the relationship between attachment styles and guilt and shame proneness among young adults; while also examining potential sex difference when it comes to proneness to guilt and shame. The rationale behind the study was to understand how attachment styles are related to proneness to guilt and shame among young adults. Through an extensive literature review, it was found that limited studies existed that explored the association between these three variables, especially in the Indian context.

The sample comprised 100 participants aged 18 to 25 years, all from urban areas. Two groups were created based on the sex of the participants. The method of convenience sampling was used for sample selection. Two hypotheses were formed based on the three variables, that is attachment styles, guilt-proneness, and shame proneness. The first hypothesis was that a significant correlation would exist between attachment styles and guilt and shame proneness, and the second was that there would be a significant difference between males and females in terms of proneness to guilt and shame.

The data was collected using the Adult Attachment Scale-Revised (close relationships version) and the Guilt and Shame Proneness Scale and analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation, and t-test with the help of SPSS software. The results indicated that none of the attachment styles were significantly correlated to guilt-proneness. However, shame proneness had a significant correlation with two of the attachment patterns. The secure attachment style shared a negative correlation with both the dimensions of shame proneness. Both of these dimensions had a positive correlation with the preoccupied attachment style. The dismissive attachment style did not have any significant correlation with either dimension of guilt and shame proneness. Additionally, no significant difference was found between males and

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females on the dimension of guilt and shame proneness despite previous studies indicating the contradiction, with females scoring higher on both dimensions.

The results of this study have provided critical insights into the relationship between patterns of attachments and proneness to the two affects, guilt and shame. However, more research, with a diverse sample, is needed to support and generalize the result at a higher population or the national level.

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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