

Research Paper

Experiences in Close Relationship, Self-Esteem, and Loneliness Among Undergraduate Students: Gender Difference

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ABSTRACT

In today's fast-paced world, the mental well-being of university students is becoming an increasingly urgent concern, particularly when it comes to feelings of isolation, relational attachment patterns, and self-worth. While these aspects have been studied individually in depth, there is limited research exploring how they interact, especially through the lens of gender differences. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining the connections between attachment styles, loneliness, and self-esteem among university students aged 18 to 25. To assess these factors, participants completed standardised measures, including the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, 1996), the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (1965), and the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R). The results revealed distinct gender-based trends: female students were more likely to exhibit anxious attachment tendencies, report higher levels of loneliness, and experience lower self-esteem compared to their male peers. Male students, on the other hand, showed a greater inclination toward avoidant attachment, often suppressing feelings of loneliness through emotional detachment. Across both genders, self-esteem was identified as a key factor influencing loneliness, with secure attachment styles associated with reduced feelings of isolation and improved self-worth. These findings highlight the intricate ways psychological and relational dynamics shape emotional health during the challenging transition to university life. The study emphasises the need for gender-sensitive approaches to support students in building healthier relationships, boosting self-esteem, and reduce loneliness. By designing mental health programs and creating supportive environments that address the unique needs of male and female students, universities can play an important role in promoting overall well-being during this critical developmental phase.

Keywords: *Mental Health Initiatives Loneliness, Attachment Style, Self-Esteem, gender sensitivity, intervention, university students*

The lives of university students are profoundly shaped by three interconnected psychological factors: self-esteem, loneliness, and attachment style. These elements influence how students interact socially, perform academically, and maintain their overall well-being. Self-esteem acts as a personal anchor, helping individuals face challenges with confidence and resilience. However, during significant transitions like

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starting university, low self-esteem can leave students feeling uncertain about their abilities, making it harder for them to adapt to new environments. However, loneliness can have a negative impact on mental health, frequently resulting in increased levels of stress, anxiety, or even depression. Their scholastic performance suffers as a result of this emotional burden, which causes procrastination, lack of focus, and falling grades. An additional layer of complexity is introduced by attachment types, which are influenced by early experiences and influence how adolescents build relationships, ask for help, and have faith in others. While insecure attachment patterns, including anxious or avoidant tendencies, can result in communication difficulties, trust concerns, and strained relationships, secure attachment styles promote emotional stability and healthy connections. For students to successfully navigate the highs and lows of university life, it is essential to comprehend these dynamics. Think of a student with an anxious attachment relationship, for instance, who is always concerned about being liked or accepted by their peers. Their fear of rejection or criticism may cause them to overanalyse every contact, which can drain their emotional state and provoke the feelings of inadequacy. On the other hand, an individual with an avoidant attachment style may completely avoid social events or group initiatives, make them feel that they don't need any assistance or connection. Both situations have the potential to increase loneliness and block academic achievement, resulting in a dangerous cycle that is difficult to escape. In a similar vein, low self-esteem often prevents people from developing deep connections. Students who question their relationship value may be reluctant to seek for help, participate in networking activities, or join campus clubs, losing out on chances to create a community of support. Universities must act proactively to create spaces where students feel connected and appreciated in order to solve these issues. Students might be empowered to examine their actions and make constructive adjustments by attending workshops on subjects including enhancing interpersonal skills, gaining self-confidence, and comprehending relational patterns. Peer mentorship programs, which link first-year students with upperclassmen who have experienced similar challenges and can provide insight, can also be quite helpful. Additionally, Students can also be encouraged to talk about their concerns without worrying about being judged by others by establishing safe spaces like counselling centres, student-led support groups, or mental health awareness campaigns. In addition to improving students' current experiences, universities that address these psychological concerns head-on give them tools that they can use as adults. In the end, students can take control of their wellbeing by realising the complex connections between loneliness, attachment style, and self-esteem. Students are better prepared to manage the demands of college life when they actively attempt to enhance these areas, whether through self-compassion exercises, extracurricular activity participation, or therapy. In addition to helping individual students, our aim is to foster a more welcoming and caring campus community. Imagine a university where everyone has the confidence to succeed not only academically but also socially and emotionally. We ought to make an effort to establish such an atmosphere. Self-esteem is the general feeling of one's own value and self-assurance, which affects one's drive and capacity for problem-solving. It includes views about oneself such as I am competent, I am loveable and conversely, I am inadequate or I am unworthy. High self-esteem is linked to confidence, resilience, and an optimistic attitude on life, whereas low self-esteem is frequently related with feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt, and susceptibility to negative emotions. According to research, self-esteem has a significant impact on interpersonal dynamics. For example, people who have strong self-esteem are more inclined to assert themselves in relationships, create healthy boundaries, and seek out supportive social networks and Those with low self-esteem, on the other hand, may be more sensitive to rejection, fearful of abandonment, or prone to self-sabotaging actions that

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jeopardise their relationships. Thus, self-esteem affects not only how people perceive themselves, but also how they interact with others. A perceived absence of meaningful social relationships can lead to the uncomfortable experience of loneliness, which can have an impact on both academic performance and mental health, the subjective feeling of being socially alone or disconnected, regardless of one's actual amount of social contact. Unlike solitude, which can be a deliberate and even enriching experience, loneliness is characterised by a sensation of emptiness and a desire for connection. Chronic loneliness has been related to a range of negative effects, including depression, anxiety, cardiovascular disease, and even early death. While loneliness is frequently attributed to external situations such as living alone or not having close friends, it is also influenced by internal characteristics such as attachment type and self-esteem. Example Individuals with insecure attachment patterns, for example, may struggle to form deep, satisfying relationships, putting them at risk of loneliness. Similarly, people with poor self-esteem may believe they are unworthy of love or belonging, aggravating their feelings of loneliness. People's attachment relationship, which are formed in early life, influence how they build relationships and look for help when they need it. It is crucial for college students in particular to comprehend these factors as they traverse new social settings and personal development. Attachment theory, which was first put forth by psychologist John Bowlby, a person's expectations and behaviours in subsequent relationships are influenced by the kind of care they receive as a baby. The four main attachment styles that people usually belong to are secure anxious-preoccupied, dismissive avoidant or fearful-avoidant. People who are securely attached typically have good opinions of both themselves and other people, which helps them build dependable, trustworthy connections. Those with insecure attachment styles, on the other hand, frequently struggle with intimacy, trust, and communication, which can make it difficult for them to sustain meaningful connections. These individuals may exhibit anxiety, avoidance, or a mix of these traits. As a result, people use their attachment style as a fundamental lens to traverse their social environments. Psychological elements that impact emotional well-being include loneliness, attachment types, and self-esteem. A person's sense of self-worth is reflected in their self-esteem, and their interpersonal interactions are shaped by their attachment types where we can see how secure, anxious, and avoidant they are. Feelings of social and emotional isolation, or loneliness, are frequently associated with low self-esteem and insecure attachment. Gender differences are important; women tend to be more socially isolated and anxious about connection, while men are more emotionally isolated and avoid attachment. (DivyaTet al., 2016). A person's psychological well-being is greatly influenced by loneliness, self-esteem and attachment styles for college students. While self-esteem indicates confidence in their capacity to overcome obstacles, self-esteem also relates to one's overall feeling of self-worth. A subjective sense of loneliness has also been connected to low self-esteem and issues in their attachment styles These characteristics are influenced by gender; women frequently report feeling more alone and has more insecurities than men do (SalehA.,2012)

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Studying the connection between loneliness, anxiety, avoidance, and self-esteem has become more and more important in psychology, especially when it comes to college students. Numerous investigations have looked into the ways in which these psychological concepts interact and support emotional health. This section examines the body of research on these factors and how they relate to one another. Weiss (1973) defined loneliness as a subjective experience of social isolation or dissatisfaction with social relationships. Research has shown that university students frequently experience loneliness due to major life

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transitions, such as leaving home, building new social networks, and adjusting to academic pressures (Diehl et al., 2018). Studies indicate that loneliness is associated with adverse mental health outcomes, including anxiety and depression (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008), emphasising the importance of understanding its underlying psychological mechanisms. Rosenberg (1965) conceptualised self-esteem as an individual's overall sense of self-worth and confidence. High self-esteem is linked to better social interactions, a greater sense of belonging, and improved coping with stress (Orth & Robins, 2014). Conversely, low self-esteem increases susceptibility to loneliness, as individuals with diminished self-worth often fear rejection and struggle with forming meaningful connections (Twenge & Campbell, 2001). Gender disparities in self-esteem have also been widely studied, with findings suggesting that women tend to report lower self-esteem levels due to societal pressures related to appearance, achievement, and social competence (Chaplin & Aldao, 2013). Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth, 1978) provides a foundational framework for understanding how early caregiver interactions shape individuals' attachment styles secure, anxious, and avoidant which influence their interpersonal relationships throughout life. Securely attached individuals tend to have higher self-esteem and experience less loneliness, whereas anxious attachment is associated with heightened fears of abandonment and increased loneliness. Avoidant attachment, characterised by emotional detachment and reluctance to seek support, may mask loneliness but ultimately contribute to social isolation (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Bartholomew & Horowitz (1991) expanded on attachment theory by identifying the role of attachment behaviours in relational satisfaction. Their research highlighted that individuals with insecure attachment styles experience greater emotional distress and struggle with forming stable relationships, increasing their vulnerability to loneliness. Additionally, gender differences in attachment patterns have been observed, with women typically placing greater emphasis on relational harmony, whereas men are more likely to suppress emotional needs in accordance with cultural expectations (Del Giudice, 2011).

Mahoney et al. (2020) explored gender-specific coping mechanisms in response to loneliness and self-esteem challenges among university students. Their findings suggest that women, despite reporting higher levels of loneliness, are more likely to use adaptive coping strategies, such as seeking social support, compared to men, who may rely on emotional avoidance. These findings underscore the importance of considering gender-based perspectives when examining the psychological effects of loneliness and attachment styles. Diehl et al. (2018) examined the impact of life transitions on loneliness in university students, emphasising that moving away from home and adjusting to a new social environment significantly influence feelings of isolation. Their research highlighted that students with lower self-esteem and insecure attachment styles were more likely to experience chronic loneliness. Additionally, they found that supportive social networks and adaptive coping strategies could buffer against loneliness, reinforcing the importance of self-esteem and secure attachment in maintaining emotional well-being.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

Male and female university students between the ages of 18 and 25 were the subjects of the study; in order to guarantee balanced representation, there were 30 male and 30 female participants. Social media and several departments within the university were used to attract participants. They were made aware about what research has been conducted prior data collection, informed consent was acquired, and participation was entirely voluntary. Strict

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confidentiality protocols were followed when collecting data in the university. After obtaining ethical approval, participants were free to leave at any moment without facing any repercussions.

Measures

- **Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R):** A 40-item self-report and likert type scale which measure two dimensions of attachment type: anxiety and avoidance. Scores on these dimensions were used to categorise participants into either an anxious attachment style (high anxiety, low avoidance) or an avoidant attachment style (high avoidance, low anxiety). To obtain a score for attachment-related anxiety items 1 –20 was scored. However, because items from 9 and 11 are reverse scored (high numbers represent low anxiety rather than high anxiety) and to obtain a score for attachment-related avoidance items from 21 - 40. Items 20, 22, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 33, 34, 35 and 36 need to be reversed scored before you compute the average.
- **Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES):** A 10-item scale measuring global self-worth. Higher scores indicate higher self-esteem. Scoring involves a method of combined ratings. Low self-esteem responses are disagree or strongly disagree on items 1, 3, 4, 7, 10. And strongly agree or agree on items 2, 5,6, 8, 9. Two or three out of three correct responses to items 3, 7, and 9 are scored as one item. One or two out of two correct responses for items 4 and 5 are considered as a single item; items 1,8, and 10 are scored as individual items; and combined correct responses (one or two out of two) to items 2 and 6 are considered to be a single item. The scale can also be scored by totalling the individual 4 point items after reverse scoring of the negatively worded items.
- **UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3):** A 20-item scale designed to measure subjective feelings of loneliness and social isolation which used likert type scale to measure that the Higher scores indicate greater loneliness. Reserved scored questions were Q1, Q5, Q6, Q9, Q10, Q15, Q16, Q19, and Q20. Reverse scored items are worded in the opposite direction of what the scale is measuring. The formula for reverse-scoring an item is:
(Number of scale points) + 1) - (Respondent’s answer)

RESULTS

Table 1. Mean and SD Scores of Male and Female Student

Variable	Female	Male	Mean (Female)	Mean (Male)	STD Deviation (Female)	STD Deviation (Male)
Anxiety	2.00	1.00	61.9333	61.1667	5.08502	6.73172
Avoidant	2.00	1.00	58.8333	61.1333	6.05198	3.88395
Loneliness	2.00	1.00	63.7333	66.2333	5.25182	5.02191
Self Esteem	2.00	1.00	33.6333	32.9333	5.56146	6.18638

Table 2. t-Scores of Male and Female Students

Variable	t value	df	p value
Anxiety	0.49	df = 58	P = 0.621
Avoidance	1.752	df = 58	P= 0.085
Loneliness	1.884	df= 58	P= 0.065
Self Esteem	0.647	df= 58	P= 0.520

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Attachment type (Anxiety): From Table 1, females ($F = 61.9333$, $SD = 5.08502$) scored slightly higher than males ($M = 61.1667$, $SD = 6.73172$). This suggests that females may experience slightly more anxiety factor than males, though the difference is minimal. The standard deviation indicates that male responses were more varied compared to females.

However, Table 2 shows that the independent samples t-test ($t = 0.49$, $p = 0.621$) found no statistically significant difference between genders. Since the p-value is much greater than 0.05, we conclude that any differences in anxiety scores are likely due to chance rather than a meaningful gender difference.

Attachment types (Avoidance): In table 1, males ($M = 61.1333$, $SD = 6.05198$). This suggest that males makes parents more of this particular avoidant factor compare to females, meaning their score were more spread out while male score were more consistent. In table t-value is 1.752 and a p-value is 0.085, which is close to statistical significance but still above the conventional 0.05 threshold. This suggest that there may be a trend where male score higher on avoidance than females, but the evidence is not strong enough to conclude it true gender difference.

From Table 1, males (Male = 66.2333, $SD = 5.02191$) reported higher loneliness than females (Male = 63.7333, $SD = 5.25182$). This implies that males in this sample tend to feel lonelier than females on average. The standard deviations are very similar, indicating comparable variability in responses across genders. According to Table 2, the t-value is 1.884, and the p-value is 0.065. This means the difference in loneliness scores between males and females is close to statistical significance but still not strong enough to be considered a confirmed difference. However, it does suggest that males may be experiencing more loneliness than females.

In Table 1, females ($F = 33.6333$, $SD = 5.56146$) had slightly higher self-esteem than males ($M = 32.9333$, $SD = 6.18638$). This indicates that females in this sample reported marginally greater self-esteem, but the difference is small. Males also showed slightly greater variability in their self-esteem scores. In Table 2 reports that t-value of 0.647 and a p-value of 0.520, indicating no significant gender difference in self-esteem. The high p-value suggests that any observed differences are likely due to chance rather than a real effect.

DISCUSSION

In this study, four psychological variables—attachment types (anxiety, avoidance), loneliness and self-esteem were examined for possible gender differences. Although there are discernible variations in the mean scores of boys and girls, the results indicate that these variations are not statistically significant. Nevertheless, these findings are not to be completely disregarded, since they offer important new perspectives on gender-related psychological characteristics.

According to the findings, women scored somewhat higher on the anxiety scale than men did, indicating that they might be more prone to attachment disorders like anxiety or avoidance. Nonetheless, there was no statistically significant difference found by the t-test ($t = 0.49$, $p = 0.621$), suggesting that gender has no bearing on this characteristic. This is consistent with earlier research that suggests a variety of contextual and individual factors, rather than just gender, may influence attachment-related behaviour like anxiety or avoidance.

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According to the results, men scored higher on the avoidance than women did, indicating that men in this sample were marginally more anxious. The p-value ($p = 0.085$) was not low enough to indicate a statistically significant gender difference, although being near the traditional significance threshold. The trend is noteworthy, though, because earlier research has frequently concentrated on the fact that anxiety is more common in women. This implies that many social and environmental factors may impact or underreport anxiety-related experiences in men.

The study found that men in the sample felt more lonely than women, which is consistent with other research that suggests men may feel more socially isolated or have a harder time articulating their feelings. According to the t-test ($t = 1.884$, $p = 0.065$), this difference is only barely significant, indicating that more research is necessary. Although not statistically significant, this finding raises a significant psychological and social issue that warrants more investigation, especially in light of gendered societal expectations and emotional display.

The findings revealed that although women's self-esteem was somewhat greater than men's, the difference was not statistically significant ($t = 0.647$, $p = 0.520$). In line with recent studies showing that gender disparities in self-esteem are less noticeable as a result of changes in societal standards and gender roles, this shows that self-esteem levels are generally comparable across genders.

Even if none of the results were statistically significant, this does not imply that the study is without value. The findings point to important patterns that might be investigated further in subsequent research using a bigger sample size or alternative approaches. The lack of discernible gender differences may suggest that contextual and personal factors, rather than gender alone, have a greater influence on psychological qualities including anxiety, loneliness, and self-esteem. Furthermore, gender differences in loneliness and anxiety may exist, but they would need to be completely recognised by a bigger or more diverse sample, as shown by the results' near-significance. This emphasises how crucial it is to carry out further study in this area, especially to comprehend the ways that emotional expression, social expectations, and mental health support networks affect psychological well-being in both genders.

Implications

The results of this study show no significant relationship between college students' attachment types, loneliness, and self-esteem. Although earlier studies have indicated links between these psychological characteristics, the absence of noteworthy results in this investigation implies that other factors might be more important in determining loneliness and self-esteem. This demonstrates the intricacy of human emotions and interpersonal connections and the necessity of more research into other elements like personality traits, social support, and mental health issues from a practical perspective, the findings imply that rather than supposing a straight connection to attachment types, treatments meant to boost self-esteem or lessen loneliness may need to concentrate on a wider range of factors. University mental health programs and counselling services ought to think about implementing holistic approaches that address a variety of student well-being issues, including social skill development, coping mechanisms, and stress management. Furthermore, the results point to the need for more customised interventions rather than gender-based ones, as they imply that gender differences might not play a significant role in influencing feelings of self-worth, loneliness, or connection.

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Limitations and Future Directions

It is important to recognise a number of limitations even if this study sheds light on attachment types, loneliness, and self-esteem. First, it's possible that the sample size was insufficient to identify minute correlations between the variables. Stronger statistical analysis and a better comprehension of any trends would be possible with a bigger and more varied sample. To increase the findings' generalisability, future studies should involve more people from other academic institutions and cultural backgrounds. Self-report measures were used in the study, which might not always fully reflect participants' actual experiences or sentiments. Responses may be influenced by elements like self-perception errors and social desirability bias. To better understand these psychological constructs, future research could use different evaluation techniques like behavioural observations or interviews. The cross-sectional approach restricts the capacity to identify causal linkages or long-term patterns. It does not follow that there are no lasting relationships just because no meaningful ones were discovered at one particular moment. In order to monitor changes in self-esteem, loneliness, and attachment styles over long periods of time, longitudinal studies may be able to identify patterns that were not apparent in a single data collection. Unmeasured factors might also have affected the outcomes. In contrast to attachment patterns alone, psychological variables such as depression, anxiety, resilience, and social support may be more important in understanding feelings of loneliness and low self-esteem. For the purpose of creating a more thorough model of student well-being, future studies ought to incorporate these extra variables. Even though the results are not particularly noteworthy, this study adds to the expanding corpus of research on undergraduate students' attachment types, loneliness, and self-esteem. The findings make clear the necessity for more research into the intricacies of these psychological concepts and motivate scholars to look into additional variables that can help explain students' social and emotional experiences.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to investigate how psychological factors such as avoidant, anxiety, loneliness, and self-esteem differed by gender. Men and women may perceive these psychological features in rather comparable ways, according to the results, which shows that although there are some discernible variations between the sexes, none of them attained statistical significance. While there were differences between the mean scores of males and females for several categories, the absence of significant t-test results indicates that gender might not be a powerful predictor of these psychological aspects on its own. Human emotions and behaviours are complicated and probably impacted by a variety of interrelated factors, including social support networks, personality, and environment, the study lays the groundwork for future investigations by pointing up patterns that might be investigated in further detail using bigger and more varied populations. In order to better understand individual experiences, future research should employ qualitative methods, employ longitudinal methods to evaluate changes over time, and try to adjust for other confounding factors. To conclude, the psychological qualities do differ between genders, although they might not be as noticeable as is generally assumed. The need for a more deeper approach to mental health and psychological well-being that prioritise individual differences above generalisations based on gender is further supported by this.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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