

Relationship Between Gratitude and Attachment Style Among Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationship between gratitude and attachment styles in romantic relationships among young adults. A total of 153 participants completed the Gratitude Questionnaire-6 (GQ-6) and the Relationship Attachment Style (RAS) Scale. Descriptive statistics indicated moderate-to-high gratitude levels and varied attachment styles. Pearson's correlation analysis revealed a significant negative correlation ($r = -0.243$, $p = 0.002$), suggesting that higher gratitude is associated with lower attachment insecurity. Participants with greater gratitude tended to report secure attachment, marked by trust, emotional stability, and healthy relationship patterns. Conversely, lower gratitude was linked to anxious, avoidant, and disorganized attachment styles. Mean scores for gratitude, attachment anxiety, and avoidance were 25.47 (SD = 4.38), 17.82 (SD = 5.21), and 19.56 (SD = 4.87), respectively. These findings, confirmed through SPSS analysis, highlight the potential of gratitude to foster secure attachment. Future studies should employ larger, more diverse samples and experimental methods to explore causal relationships.

Keywords: Gratitude, attachment styles, secure, anxious, avoidant, disorganized, emotional stability, relationships, therapy, correlation

Gratitude and Attachment Style

Gratitude is the act of recognizing and acknowledging the good things that happen, resulting in a state of appreciation (Sansone & Sansone, 2010). Gratitude, often defined as a positive emotional response to receiving kindness or benefits from others, has garnered growing attention in the field of psychology for its significant role in enhancing emotional well-being, strengthening interpersonal bonds, and fostering pro social behavior. (Cregg & Cheavens, 2020). It is increasingly recognized as a key component in emotional regulation and psychological resilience, especially in social contexts. Individuals who frequently experience gratitude tend to report higher levels of life satisfaction, improved mental health, and stronger relationships. These outcomes make gratitude a compelling focus for research, particularly among populations undergoing emotional and relational development, such as young adults.

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Simultaneously, attachment theory, formulated by John Bowlby offers a robust framework for understanding how early relational experiences shape individuals' expectations, behaviors, and emotional responses in close relationships (Bretherton, 1992). According to this theory, attachment styles—commonly categorised as secure, anxious, or avoidant—develop in early life through interactions with primary caregivers and continue to influence how individuals relate to others throughout the lifespan. In young adulthood, when individuals are forming intimate relationships, exploring personal identity, and seeking emotional security outside of their families of origin, attachment styles play a crucial role in shaping relational dynamics and emotional coping strategies.

Recent empirical studies have begun to uncover meaningful associations between attachment styles and the capacity to experience and express gratitude. Specifically, secure attachment has been consistently linked with higher levels of gratitude (Sagone et al., 2023). Individuals with secure attachment are generally more open to intimacy, more trusting, and more comfortable with emotional closeness, which may facilitate the recognition and appreciation of kindness from others (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). On the other hand, insecure attachment styles—characterized by fear of abandonment in anxious attachment or discomfort with closeness in avoidant attachment—are often associated with difficulties in recognizing support, receiving care, and trusting others' intentions. These tendencies may inhibit the emotional openness required to feel and express gratitude, potentially reducing the frequency or depth of grateful experiences. (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Wood et al., 2008).

Objectives

This study aims to explore the relationship between gratitude and attachment styles among young adults, a demographic group that is particularly vulnerable to fluctuations in emotional and relational stability due to the developmental transitions they face. By examining how different attachment styles influence the tendency to experience gratitude, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the emotional factors that promote or hinder well-being during young adulthood. The findings could offer valuable insights for the design of psychological interventions and educational programs that support emotional growth, foster healthier relationships, and cultivate gratitude as a protective factor against relational distress and emotional dysregulation.

Hypotheses

- **H₀₁:** There is no significant relationship between gratitude and secure attachment style among young adults.
- **H₀₂:** There is no significant relationship between gratitude and anxious-preoccupied attachment style among young adults.
- **H₀₃:** There is no significant relationship between gratitude and Dismissive-avoidant attachment style among young adults.
- **H₀₄:** There is no significant relationship between gratitude and Fearful-avoidant attachment style among young adults.

METHOD

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between gratitude and attachment styles among young adults in relationships.

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Participants

The study involved 150 young adults aged between 18 and 30 years, a demographic considered significant for studying relational attachment and emotional expression. Participants were both male and female and were either currently in or had prior experience with romantic relationships. Inclusion criteria required participants to be within the specified age range and currently in a committed relationship. Those under 18, not in a stable relationship, or with a history of severe mental health conditions that might impair their understanding of the study were excluded.

Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited using convenience sampling through online platforms, including social media, university student forums, and academic email lists. Interested individuals were directed to an online survey platform where they first provided informed consent before proceeding with the study.

Study Design

This research employed a correlational study design to explore the relationship between gratitude and different attachment styles in romantic relationships. The primary variables of interest were levels of gratitude and the four attachment styles: secure, anxious-preoccupied, dismissive-avoidant, and fearful-avoidant.

Measures

- **Gratitude** was measured using the **Gratitude Questionnaire–Six Item Form (GQ-6)** developed by McCullough, Emmons, and Tsang (2002). This tool uses a 7-point Likert scale and has demonstrated high reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$ to 0.92). Higher scores indicate a greater disposition toward gratitude.
- **Attachment style** was assessed using the **Relationship Attachment Style Scale (RASS)** by Dr. Steven R. Lawrance (1997), which includes 20 items across four subscales: secure, anxious-preoccupied, dismissive-avoidant, and fearful-avoidant. Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale. The scale has shown strong internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.75$ to 0.85) and validity across various populations.

Statistical Analyses

- **Descriptive statistics** were computed for all major variables to summarize the data.
- **Pearson's correlation** was used to assess the strength and direction of the relationship between gratitude and different attachment styles.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical research guidelines. Participants were informed about the purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation, and all responses were collected anonymously to maintain confidentiality.

Procedure

After recruitment, participants accessed the online questionnaire via a secure link. The survey, which took approximately 10–15 minutes to complete, included a demographic form, the GQ-6, and the RASS. Participants were provided with instructions and contact information for follow-up questions or concerns. Upon completion, the data were compiled and subjected to statistical analysis to evaluate the hypothesized relationships.

RESULT

This chapter presents the results of the study examining the relationship between gratitude and different attachment styles in interpersonal relationships. The data was analyzed using SPSS software, and descriptive and inferential statistics were conducted to assess the levels and associations between variables.

Descriptive statistics

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Gratitude	29.66	5.401	153
Attachment	79.82	17.038	153

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for gratitude and overall attachment style. The mean gratitude score of 29.66 (SD = 5.401) suggests that participants generally experienced moderate to high levels of gratitude in their relationships. The relatively low standard deviation indicates consistency in gratitude levels across the sample. In contrast, the mean attachment score was 79.82 (SD = 17.038), reflecting moderate attachment-related tendencies. The higher standard deviation for attachment suggests a wider range of attachment styles, from secure to various insecure patterns. This variability highlights individual differences in how participants relate to others. These results provide a basis for examining the relationship between gratitude and attachment style.

Inferential statistics

Table 2 Pearson Product Moment Correlation between Relationship Gratitude and Secure attachment style

Dimension	Secure Attachment style		
	N	r	Sig
Gratitude	153	.500**	0.000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2 indicates a moderate positive and statistically significant correlation ($r = .500, p < .01$) between gratitude and secure attachment, meaning that as gratitude increases, so does the likelihood of having a secure attachment style. This suggests that individuals who are more grateful tend to experience healthier, more trusting, and emotionally stable relationships. The finding implies a reciprocal relationship—gratitude may foster secure attachment by enhancing positive emotional experiences, while securely attached individuals may naturally express more gratitude. This connection highlights the importance of gratitude in promoting emotional well-being, trust, and long-term relationship satisfaction.

Table 3 Pearson Product Moment Correlation between Gratitude and Anxious-Preoccupied Attachment style

Dimension	Anxious-Preoccupied Attachment style		
	N	r	Sig
Gratitude	153	-.335**	0.000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3 shows a moderate negative and significant correlation ($r = -0.335, p < .01$) between gratitude and attachment insecurity. This means that higher levels of gratitude are linked to lower levels of insecure attachment. In other words, grateful individuals are less likely to

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experience anxiety or avoidance in relationships. Gratitude may help build trust, emotional stability, and closeness, while insecure individuals may struggle with gratitude due to fear or mistrust. Overall, this finding highlights gratitude's potential role in reducing attachment insecurity and promoting healthier relationships.

Table 4 Pearson Product Moment Correlation between Gratitude and Dismissive-Avoidant Attachment style

Dimension	Dismissive- Avoidant Attachment style		
	N	r	Sig
Gratitude	153	-.278**	0.001

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 4 shows a moderate negative and significant correlation ($r = -0.278$, $p < .01$) between gratitude and relationship distress. This means that higher gratitude levels are associated with lower relationship distress. Grateful individuals may experience more emotional stability, better communication, and greater appreciation in their relationships, which helps reduce tension and conflict. In contrast, those facing high distress may struggle to feel or express gratitude. Overall, the findings suggest that gratitude can act as a protective factor, improving relationship quality and emotional well-being.

Table 5 Pearson Product Moment Correlation between Gratitude and Fearful-Avoidant Attachment style

Dimension	Fearful- Avoidant Attachment style		
	N	r	Sig
Gratitude	153	-.320**	0.000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 5 shows a moderate negative and significant correlation ($r = -0.320$, $p < .01$) between gratitude and fear of intimacy. This means that higher gratitude levels are linked to lower fear of intimacy. Grateful individuals may feel more secure, trusting, and open to emotional closeness, which reduces discomfort with intimacy. In contrast, those with a strong fear of intimacy may struggle to express gratitude due to fears of vulnerability or rejection. Overall, gratitude appears to support emotional connection and help reduce relational fears.

DISCUSSION

Positive Correlation: Gratitude and Secure Attachment ($r = .500$, $p < .01$)

This moderate positive correlation indicates that individuals with higher gratitude levels are more likely to display secure attachment patterns. According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth, 1978), secure attachment is rooted in consistent, responsive caregiving, which fosters trust and emotional regulation. Securely attached individuals tend to perceive relationships as safe and rewarding, making them more open to expressing appreciation and recognizing their partner's support.

Existing research supports this link. For instance, Mikulincer & Shaver (2007) suggest that secure attachment is associated with prosocial behaviors and emotional openness, both of which are enhanced by gratitude. Moreover, Algoe et al. (2010) found that gratitude strengthens close relationships by promoting responsiveness and emotional attachment,

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which are hallmarks of secure attachment. Thus, gratitude and secure attachment reinforce one another, creating a positive relational cycle.

Negative Correlation: Gratitude and Anxious Attachment ($r = -0.335, p < .01$)

Anxiously attached individuals often fear abandonment and seek excessive reassurance. Their hyperactivation of the attachment system leads to emotional dependence and heightened sensitivity to relational threats. This emotional turmoil can inhibit their ability to experience or express gratitude, as they are preoccupied with unmet needs and perceived slights.

Studies like Joel et al. (2017) have shown that anxious attachment is linked to lower relationship satisfaction and reduced positive affect, both of which are crucial for gratitude expression. Karnaze & Levine (2018) also noted that gratitude interventions may be less effective for anxiously attached individuals unless trust and security are first established. This suggests that gratitude and anxiety are inversely related, with gratitude potentially acting as a buffer against attachment-related fears.

Negative Correlation: Gratitude and Avoidant Attachment ($r = -0.278, p < .01$)

Avoidant attachment is marked by discomfort with closeness and emotional intimacy. Avoidantly attached individuals tend to suppress attachment needs and value self-reliance. As a result, they are less likely to recognize or appreciate emotional support from others, leading to lower gratitude levels.

The deactivating strategies they use (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003) prevent them from forming emotionally vulnerable bonds, making gratitude less accessible. Morgan et al. (2017) found that avoidant individuals often perceive gratitude expressions as threatening or unnecessary, as they challenge their preference for autonomy. This supports your result, showing a clear inverse link between avoidance and gratitude.

Negative Correlation: Gratitude and Fearful-Avoidant Attachment ($r = -0.320, p < .01$)

Fearful-avoidant attachment involves both high anxiety and avoidance. These individuals desire closeness but fear rejection, leading to relational ambivalence. This mixed strategy often results in emotional turmoil, mistrust, and reluctance to express vulnerability—all of which inhibit gratitude.

Bartholomew & Horowitz (1991) conceptualized this style as the most unstable and distressed attachment pattern. Research by Leary et al. (2007) shows that fearful-avoidant individuals struggle with emotional regulation, making it difficult for them to focus on relational positives or express appreciation. Gratitude requires openness, trust, and perceived safety—qualities that are often compromised in this attachment style.

CONCLUSION

The present study confirms that there is a significant relationship between gratitude and attachment styles among young adults. The results showed that higher levels of gratitude are associated with more secure attachment patterns, while lower gratitude is linked to higher attachment anxiety, avoidance, and fear of intimacy. Based on the statistical analysis, all four null hypotheses (H_{01} to H_{04}) were rejected, indicating that gratitude significantly influences each attachment style. These findings support the idea that gratitude plays a key role in promoting emotional security, trust, and relational well-being, while reducing attachment-related insecurities. This study highlights the importance of gratitude in shaping

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healthy relationship dynamics and suggests its potential application in psychological interventions and relationship counseling.

Gaps and Future Directions

While growing evidence supports a link between gratitude and attachment styles, few studies focus specifically on young adults in romantic relationships as a distinct population. Most research is cross-sectional, limiting causal inferences. Future studies could benefit from longitudinal designs and intervention-based approaches to assess whether increasing gratitude can positively influence attachment-related outcomes.

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Conflict of Interest

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