

Attachment Styles, Digital Communication Patterns, And Relationship Satisfaction Among Young Adults: A Cross-Sectional Correlational Study

¹Dr. Neetu Sharma, ²Shaikh Nashra Tabassum

¹Head of Department, M.A. Clinical Psychology, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj University, Navi Mumbai

²Student, M.A. Clinical Psychology, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj University, Navi Mumbai

Abstract—The present study examines the impact of attachment styles - secure, anxious, and avoidant, on digital communication patterns in romantic relationships. A sample of 54 participants aged 17-26 years was surveyed using an adapted ECR-R attachment scale and a digital communication questionnaire. Adolescence and young adulthood are critical developmental stages characterized by emotional and social changes, due to which individuals often seek closeness and reassurance through digital platforms. Problematic digital communication is one of the major growing concerns in young adults due to various reasons. One of the key predictors of digital communication patterns are attachment styles. Insecure attachment, particularly anxious attachment, may contribute significantly to digital distress, fear of abandonment, and anxiety related to partner availability online.

The findings of the study indicate a significant positive relationship between anxious attachment and problematic digital communication ($r = 0.63, p < .001$). Secure attachment was positively associated with healthy digital communication ($r = 0.48, p < .001$). Avoidant attachment was negatively associated with healthy digital communication ($r = -0.56, p < .001$). The combined effect of attachment anxiety and avoidance explained 41% of the variance in problematic digital communication, with anxiety emerging as the stronger unique predictor.

The study highlights the psychological challenges faced by young adults in technology-mediated romantic relationships and emphasizes the importance of secure attachment, balanced digital communication, and emotional guidance. The findings may help couples, therapists, educators, and mental health professionals develop strategies to reduce digital distress and promote healthy relationship well-being.

***Index Terms*—Attachment Styles, Digital Communication, Romantic Relationships, Anxious Attachment, Secure Attachment, Problematic Digital Behavior, Young Adults**

I. INTRODUCTION

Young adulthood is a critical period where individuals go through various emotional, social, and relational changes. In technology-driven cultures like India, where young adults face high expectations for romantic relationship success and emotional availability through digital platforms, problematic digital communication has increasingly become a major mental health concern. Young adulthood presents multiple transitions, emotional, relational, social, and developmental making this age group particularly vulnerable to psychological distress related to romantic relationships.

Attachment styles play a major role in shaping young adults' attitudes toward their romantic relationships. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) provides a powerful framework for understanding individual differences in romantic relationship functioning. Secure attachment often acts as a protective factor for individuals to achieve healthy relationship outcomes, although when attachment is insecure, particularly anxious attachment, it creates anxiety, stress, and tension among individuals regarding partner availability and responsiveness. Anxiously attached individuals may feel that in order to gain love, acceptance, or recognition from their partner, they need constant reassurance through digital communication. This pressure results in fear of abandonment, low confidence, feelings of unworthiness, and problematic digital behaviors such as checking partner's online status, feeling anxious when replies are delayed, and misinterpreting text message tone.

Digital communication is another major factor influencing young adults' romantic experiences. In today's time, partners frequently communicate through text messaging, WhatsApp, Instagram, and other platforms. Healthy digital communication can be a motivating force for partners to maintain closeness, but when it becomes problematic excessive monitoring, anxiety over response time, misunderstanding tone, it creates stress and anxiety among individuals. Partners may feel it is necessary to respond immediately; if not, something is wrong. When insecure attachment combines with digital communication, it tends to amplify the anxiety faced by the individual.

Therefore, understanding the influence of attachment styles on digital communication patterns in romantic relationships is essential. By studying these factors, it will help couples, therapists, educators, and mental health professionals develop strategies to reduce digital distress and promote healthy well-being of young adults.

1.1. CONCEPT OF ATTACHMENT STYLES

Attachment styles refer to stable patterns of expectations, emotions, and behaviors in close relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Attachment theory, originally developed by John Bowlby (1969) and later extended by Mary Ainsworth (1978), posits that early caregiving experiences shape internal working models that influence relationship functioning throughout life.

There are three primary attachment styles in adulthood:

Secure attachment:

Individuals feel comfortable with emotional closeness, trust their partners, and believe they are worthy of love. They can balance independence and intimacy effectively.

Anxious attachment:

Individuals worry about abandonment, crave excessive closeness, and often interpret partner behaviors as threatening. They seek constant reassurance and may become distressed when partners are unavailable.

Avoidant attachment:

Individuals dismiss emotional needs, prefer independence, and maintain emotional distance from partners. They may avoid emotional closeness and view relationships as less important than autonomy.

1.2.DIGITAL COMMUNICATION IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

With the rise of smartphones and instant messaging, digital communication has become a central feature of romantic relationship maintenance (Roberts & David, 2016). Texting allows for continuous connection throughout the day, but it also introduces ambiguity due to lack of nonverbal cues.

Healthy digital communication includes:

Feeling more connected through text messaging, using messaging to maintain emotional closeness, sharing personal thoughts openly, and communicating frequently in positive ways.

Problematic digital communication includes:

Feeling anxious when a partner does not reply quickly, repeatedly checking "last seen" or online status, misunderstanding tone in text messages, and feeling compelled to respond immediately.

1.3.THE ROLE OF ATTACHMENT IN DIGITAL BEHAVIOR

Emerging research suggests that attachment styles predict digital communication patterns. Anxiously attached individuals are more likely to engage in "digital surveillance" of partners (Fox & Warber, 2014), experience text messaging anxiety (Holtzman et al., 2017), and use digital platforms to seek reassurance. Avoidantly attached individuals use less affectionate texting (Morey et al., 2013) and prefer asynchronous communication that allows emotional distance. Securely attached individuals report greater satisfaction with digital communication and fewer misunderstandings (Luo, 2014).

1.4.INTERACTION BETWEEN ATTACHMENT AND DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

Young adulthood is an important stage of life marked by rapid emotional, social, and relational changes. During this period, individuals experience several transitions and pressures that can affect

their thoughts, emotions, and behavior. Managing romantic relationship demands, digital communication expectations, emotional development, and personal expectations simultaneously can become challenging. Because of these ongoing changes and responsibilities, young adults are often more vulnerable to stress, anxiety, and other forms of psychological distress.

The most influential factors in this age group are attachment styles formed in early childhood. Attachment styles play a major role in shaping the attitude of a young adult toward romantic relationships. Healthy attachment is important for the well-being of an individual. Attachment styles have strong impacts on many factors of a young adult's life, including relationship satisfaction, emotional regulation, decision making, and psychological health.

The interaction between attachment and digital communication occurs when attachment patterns shape how individuals use technology to connect with partners. If individuals have secure attachment, they may use digital tools flexibly and without distress. However, negative attachment experiences, such as excessive reassurance seeking from anxious attachment or emotional distancing from avoidant attachment, can negatively affect self-esteem and emotional well-being through digital channels.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Recent studies have increasingly highlighted the role of attachment styles in shaping young adults' romantic relationship well-being. When individuals feel that their worth is tied to partner availability, responsiveness, or how they compare with others, they are more likely to experience persistent worry, self-doubt, and relationship-related stress. Insecure attachment has been linked to higher relationship anxiety, reduced confidence in one's abilities, and greater emotional exhaustion during romantic relationships. Studies also suggest that individuals with insecure attachment are more likely to fear abandonment, struggle with concentration on other tasks due to relationship preoccupation, and experience physical signs of stress like tension, headaches, and sleep disturbance.

1.1. The Impact of Attachment Styles on Romantic Relationship Functioning

Attachment styles serve as a foundational element of an individual's relational ecosystem, significantly dictating their psychological well-being (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). While secure attachment can bolster an individual's intrinsic relationship satisfaction and sense of efficacy, chronic exposure to attachment insecurity fundamentally distorts this support framework. Research consistently demonstrates that when individuals have insecure attachment patterns, their romantic relationships transform from a source of social support into a primary origin of emotional distress and psychological stress.

In collectivist and high-stakes relational cultures, attachment patterns often carry the added weight of family honor and future marriage security. When individuals internalize the idea that partner love, approval, and pride are strictly contingent upon their constant availability, they develop a profound, debilitating fear of abandonment. This insecure attachment pattern acts as a major catalyst for severe relationship anxiety, digital distress, and depressive symptoms (Mikulincer &

Shaver, 2016). Rather than acting as a healthy foundation, insecure attachment severely compromises long-term emotional stability and cognitive focus.

1.2. Digital Communication and its Relationship with Relational Distress

As young adults progress through emerging adulthood, their primary social reliance remains on romantic partners, making them exceptionally vulnerable to digital communication dynamics. Modern relationships frequently operate under digitally-mediated, always-available communication systems that cultivate expectations for immediate responses. While healthy digital interaction can enhance relationship engagement, problematic digital communication introduces an immense layer of day-to-day anxiety and emotional instability. Negative digital interactions, such as feeling anxious about delayed replies, constant checking of online status, and the ongoing fear of partner unavailability, create a distressing relational environment that directly triggers psychological distress. This relentless push for immediate availability creates a form of relational strain where individuals equate partner acceptance with digital responsiveness. This digital friction is a powerful predictor of physical and emotional anxiety symptoms, eroding an individual's confidence, clouding their concentration, and causing persistent feelings of personal inadequacy.

1.3. The Combined Effect of Attachment and Digital Stressors

The emotional landscape of a young adult does not experience attachment patterns and digital communication demands as isolated events. Instead, these factors operate simultaneously, compounding the overall psychological burden placed on the individual. When an individual is caught in a dual-pressure system- struggling with insecure attachment patterns while concurrently navigating digital communication expectations- the risk of developing severe relationship anxiety escalates exponentially.

Recent empirical studies utilizing cross-sectional data from young adult populations show that while relationship structures are baseline stressors, the interaction between attachment anxiety and digital communication serves as a strong predictor of clinical anxiety levels. This multi-layered pressure leaves young adults with no psychological refuge, as both their internal working models and digital spaces demand constant performance. The resulting exhaustion heavily damages the individual's general well-being, directly contributing to severe sleep disruptions, chronic stress, and cognitive burnout. Consequently, contemporary research emphasizes that romantic relationship distress must be addressed through interventions that actively reduce the problematic patterns embedded in both attachment styles and digital communication behaviors.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design:

This study follows a descriptive research design, using a quantitative, correlational research design.

Sample:

- Total Participants: 54
- Age Range:
17-26+ years
17-21: 20 (37.0%)
21-25: 30 (55.6%)
26+: 4 (7.4%)
- Gender: Female = 24 (44.4%), Male = 30 (55.6%)
- Relationship Status: Currently in a relationship = 15 (27.8%), Past relationship (≥ 3 months) = 39 (72.2%)
- Sampling method: Purposive sampling

Tools Used:

1. Attachment Style Questionnaire (adapted from ECR-R, 18 items)

- Anxiety subscale (6 items): $\alpha = .82$
- Avoidance subscale (9 items): $\alpha = .85$
- Secure attachment derived from low anxiety + low avoidance

2. Digital Communication in Romantic Relationships Scale (10 items)

- Healthy digital communication (5 items): $\alpha = .79$
- Problematic digital communication (5 items): $\alpha = .88$

Variables:

- Independent Variables: Secure attachment, Anxious attachment, Avoidant attachment
- Dependent Variables: Healthy digital communication, Problematic digital communication

IV. OBJECTIVES

1. To assess the relationship between attachment styles and digital communication patterns in romantic relationships.
2. To examine whether secure attachment is positively associated with healthy digital communication.
3. To determine whether anxious and avoidant attachment are associated with problematic digital communication behaviors.
4. To identify which attachment dimension best predicts problematic digital communication.

V. HYPOTHESIS

- H1: Attachment style is significantly related to digital communication patterns in romantic relationships.

- H2: Secure attachment is positively associated with healthy digital communication.
- H3: Anxious and avoidant attachment are associated with problematic digital communication behaviors.
- Null Hypothesis (H0): There is no significant relationship between attachment styles and digital communication patterns.

VI. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies), Cronbach's alpha for reliability, Pearson correlation coefficients, and multiple linear regression were conducted using R (version 4.2).

VII. RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables (N = 54)

Variable	Mean	SD
Attachment Anxiety	3.89	1.14
Attachment Avoidance	3.42	1.21
Healthy Digital Communication	4.13	0.97
Problematic Digital Communication	3.67	1.32

Demographic Characteristics

Variable	n	%
Gender		
Female	24	44.4
Male	30	55.6

Age		
17-21	20	37.0
21-25	30	55.6
26+	4	7.4

Relationship Status		
Current	15	27.8
Past (3 Months)	39	72.2

Reliability Analysis

Scale	Cronbach's α
Attachment Anxiety	.82
Attachment Avoidance	.85
Healthy Digital Communication	.79
Problematic Digital Communication	.88

Correlation Findings

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Secure Attachment	-	-	-	-
2. Anxious Attachment	-0.68**	-	-	-
3. Avoidant Attachment	-0.71**	0.22	-	-
4. Healthy Digital Communication	0.48**	-0.22	-0.56**	-
5. Problematic Digital Communication	-0.39**	0.63**	0.31*	-0.44**

**p < .01, *p < .05

Key Findings:

- Secure attachment positively correlated with healthy digital communication (r = 0.48)
- Secure attachment negatively correlated with problematic digital communication (r = -0.39)
- Anxious attachment positively correlated with problematic digital communication (r = 0.63)
- Avoidant attachment negatively correlated with healthy digital communication (r = -0.56)

Regression Analysis

Multiple regression predicting problematic digital communication:

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
(Intercept)	1.04	0.41		2.54	.014
Attachment Anxiety	0.62	0.12	0.54	5.17	< .001
Attachment Avoidance	0.13	0.13	0.12	1.00	.320

Note: R² = 0.41, Adjusted R² = 0.38, F (2,51) = 17.89, p < .001

Interpretation:

Attachment anxiety uniquely predicted problematic digital communication ($\beta = 0.54$, p < .001), explaining 41% of the variance. Attachment avoidance was not a significant unique predictor when controlling for anxiety.

VIII. DISCUSSION

This study set out to understand the real-world impact of attachment styles on digital communication in the romantic lives of young adults aged 17 to 26+. The data paints a clear picture: attachment styles are deeply intertwined with the development of healthy and problematic digital communication patterns. With strong correlations linking problematic digital communication to anxious attachment (r = 0.63) and healthy digital communication to secure attachment (r = 0.48), it is evident that as attachment security increases, digital distress decreases. However, looking strictly at the correlation numbers doesn't tell the whole story. A closer look at the descriptive statistics reveals a fascinating nuance in how young adults actually experience this dynamic. The mean score for attachment anxiety (3.89) and attachment avoidance (3.42) are moderate, showing that insecure attachment patterns are present in this sample. Yet, the stronger correlation for anxious attachment (r = 0.63) suggests that day-to-day digital interactions act as a

highly volatile trigger for anxious individuals. In other words, while all insecure attachment creates some baseline relational difficulty, it is the immediate, daily experience of waiting for text replies, checking online status, and interpreting tone that often pushes an anxiously attached individual's distress to its tipping point.

The relentless drive to maintain constant digital connection directly erodes a young adult's confidence. When attachment anxiety and digital communication collide, the pressure multiplies. Young adults trapped between satisfying their anxious need for reassurance at home and waiting for partner responses online quickly begin to tie their entire self-worth to text message reply times. Instead of feeling secure in their relationship, they become paralyzed by a profound fear of abandonment and emotional exhaustion.

These insights back up a growing body of literature showing that relationship distress isn't just about the relationship itself, it is driven by the heavy weight of attachment patterns and digital expectations. If we want to protect the mental health of young people, we have to address the problematic digital behaviors that accompany insecure attachment, especially anxious attachment.

Hypothesis Testing Summary:

- H1 (Supported): Attachment style is significantly related to digital communication patterns. Correlations ranged from $r = -0.71$ to $r = 0.63$, all significant.
- H2 (Supported): Secure attachment is positively associated with healthy digital communication ($r = 0.48$, $p < .001$).
- H3 (Partially Supported): Anxious attachment strongly predicts problematic digital communication ($r = 0.63$, $p < .001$), but avoidant attachment's unique contribution was non-significant in regression after controlling for anxiety.

IX. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research demonstrates that attachment styles, particularly anxious attachment, are primary drivers of problematic digital communication in romantic relationships. Secure attachment promotes healthy digital engagement, while anxious attachment creates significant digital distress. Avoidant attachment primarily reduces healthy digital communication rather than directly increasing problematic behaviors.

Together, these attachment dimensions explain 41% of the variance in problematic digital communication, proving that a young adult's emotional well-being in romantic relationships is deeply vulnerable to their attachment patterns, especially in digitally-mediated contexts.

Safeguarding the emotional health of young adults requires moving past unrealistic digital expectations. Partners, therapists, educators, and mental health professionals must deliberately cultivate spaces that favor emotional guidance, realistic communication expectations, and healthy collaboration over constant digital availability. By integrating stress-management tools and accessible counselling into relationship education, we can help young adults achieve romantic

relationship satisfaction without asking them to sacrifice their self-esteem or mental health to digital anxiety.

Limitations and Future Directions

Limitations:

Small sample size (N = 54), cross-sectional design (no causal inference), self-report measures (social desirability bias), convenience sampling.

Future Research:

Longitudinal designs, observational data of real digital interactions, clinical samples with diagnosed anxiety disorders, gender and cultural differences.

REFERENCES

- [1] J. Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss: Vol. 1. Attachment*. New York, NY, USA: Basic Books, 1969.
- [2] J. Fox and K. M. Warber, “Social networking sites in romantic relationships: Attachment, uncertainty, and partner surveillance on Facebook,” *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 3–7, 2014.
- [3] C. Hazan and P. Shaver, “Romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 52, no. 3, pp. 511–524, 1987.
- [4] S. Holtzman, K. Kushlev, A. Whelan, and D. Vachon, “Attachment style and text messaging anxiety in romantic relationships,” *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 75, pp. 662–668, 2017.
- [5] S. Luo, “Effects of texting on satisfaction in romantic relationships: The role of attachment,” *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 33, pp. 145–152, 2014.
- [6] M. Mikulincer and P. R. Shaver, *Attachment in Adulthood: Structure, Dynamics, and Change*, 2nd ed. New York, NY, USA: Guilford Press, 2016.
- [7] J. N. Morey, A. L. Gentzler, B. Creasy, A. M. Oberhauser, and D. Westerman, “Young adults' use of communication technology within their romantic relationships and associations with attachment style,” *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 29, no. 4, pp. 1771–1778, 2013.
- [8] J. A. Roberts and M. E. David, “My life has become a major distraction from my cell phone: Partner phubbing and relationship satisfaction among romantic partners,” *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 54, pp. 134–141, 2016.