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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Attachment Style, Love Style, and Attachment Behaviour in University Students' Intimate Relationships, South Africa – A Brief Study

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Abstract:

Introduction:

Various studies have been conducted on attachment styles. The majority of these studies are from high-income countries and only a few focused on the relationship between attachment style, love style and attachment behaviour exhibited in intimate relationships or on this phenomenon in the context of a South African university. The aim of this study was to examine the relationship between attachment style (secure, anxious and avoidant), love style (passion, intimacy and commitment) and attachment behaviour (accessibility, responsiveness and engagement) in intimate relationships in a South African university sample.

Methods:

A cross-sectional, correlational research design was employed. A total of 317 university students were sampled through the randomisation sampling technique. Instruments used were: Experience in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R), Sternberg's Triangular Love Scale (STLS) and Brief Accessibility, Responsiveness and Engagement (BARE).

Results:

Data were statistically analysed. The male mean was 2.911 (SD = 0.496) and the female mean was 2.864 (SD = 0.499). The results suggest no significant relationship exists between attachment style, love style and attachment behaviour or gender differences regarding these variables. A significant positive correlation was reported between love styles (passion, intimacy and commitment) and attachment behaviour (accessibility, responsiveness and engagement). Intimacy significantly and positively correlates with passion ($r = .75$; $p < .01$) as well as commitment ($r = .79$; $p < .01$). Passion is also significantly and positively correlated with commitment ($r = .82$; $p < .01$).

Conclusion:

The study recommends attention to attachment styles among university students to improve how students relate to intimate partners. It concludes that knowledge about intimate partners is essential from a young age to lessen psychosocial issues in the future.

Keywords: Attachment behaviour, Attachment styles, Intimate relationship, Love styles, Intimate, Passion.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Relationship difficulties as well as failed marriages, have been regarded as the main contributors to deteriorating mental health, including depression, drug addiction and suicide [1]. Psychological impairment with failed marriages and relationship problems accounted for a rise in the rate of individuals' seeking mental health services [2]. Of these people, 92% sought medical treatment, 50% enrolled in counselling therapy and 60% needed medical treatment and

counselling. This means that most children are raised in relationships that are not stable and they are likely to fail to show love and affection to their intimate partners. Yet, a number of relationship studies have significantly ignored student relationships (mostly young adults) but have focused more on conflict resolutions and the revival of romance among married couples [1 - 3]. Therefore, attachment style, theorised by Bowlby (1988) [4], may be important in assisting couples to understand their own attachment style as well as that of their partner.

In South Africa, 10% of the 35% divorced population in the country reported insecure attachment styles (anxious and

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avoidant), which could be traced back to early attachment history formed with parents or primary caregivers [5]. It implies that marriages and divorces are on the increase, and individuals fall in love but later find that they are incompatible. The reason behind the escalating rate of divorce could be because of different attachment histories and experiences [6]. Infants who were rejected in their early years may be adamant about forming close relationships in the future [7]. Individuals with an avoidant attachment style may want to function on their own and 'be their own person' when having conflict or a disagreement in a relationship [8]. They may not talk about their feelings and may think that they have everything under control.

Gender is important in pursuing desired goals when experiencing negative emotions. Particularly, women were reported to be associated with greater difficulties in engaging in goal-directed behaviour when distressed [9, 10]. Moreover, women in romantic relationships in 38 states in the United States of America showed attachment anxiety and had difficulty controlling impulses during times of emotional distress [11]. Males are perceived and raised as leaders, which may influence how they love and behave in a romantic relationship [8]. Males may show love styles associated with passion and lack of availability due to the drive of providing financially for the family [12]. Contrarily, females are often raised as individuals who are caring, loving, and prepared for raising children and building a peaceful and happy family [13]. Therefore, females may show an anxious attachment style, love styles associated with commitment, intimacy and passion, as well as behaviours such as respect, obedience, gentleness and sensitivity [13].

Attachment theory is a developmental pathway that can predict later attachment behaviour in relationships based on early experiences [12]. Attachment theory reveals how human infant attachment correlates with attachment styles in adult relationships [13, 14]. Attachment unfolds from an individual's early years to adulthood [15, 16]. Attachment behaviour, perception about love and attitudes are shaped by factors from as early as infancy [12 - 18]. These factors include attachment styles, parenting styles and birth order. Human history is very complex; therefore, factors extend beyond those previously mentioned to personal experiences such as trauma [18, 19].

Leaving a relationship may be traced to the relationship between childhood abuse and adult attachment [20]. An attempt was made to identify insecure adult attachment styles and their relationship with childhood physical abuse by means of questionnaires administered to university students (552 females, 294 males) [21]. Further reported that their history of childhood abuse was related to other variables; ii) a history of physical abuse was related to attachment avoidance, iii) there is an association between physical abuse and attachment anxiety; and iv) a history of childhood abuse was very significant and had specific impacts on an intimate adult love relationship with social support serving as protective factors. Apart from this,

changes in adult attachment style may influence love styles [21].

Love styles are models that combine attachment style and behaviour attachment, used in interpersonal relationships [17]. Disturbances that may occur in the formulation of attachment between infants and mothers could result in pathology or problems in future relationships [18]. It is therefore important to investigate the relationship between attachment styles, love styles and attachment behaviour in the intimate relationships of university students. To achieve the aim, the study investigates the significant relationship between attachment style (anxious, secure and avoidant), love style (intimacy, passion and commitment) and attachment behaviour (accessibility, responsiveness and engagement) in intimate relationships of university students in South Africa. The study also focuses on significant gender differences in attachment styles, loves styles and attachment behaviour in intimate relationships of university students.

1.1. Objective of the Study

The aim of this study was to examine the relationship between attachment style (secure, anxious and avoidant), love style (passion, intimacy and commitment) and attachment behaviour (accessibility, responsiveness and engagement) in intimate relationships in a South African university sample. The study hypothesised that there is a significant relationship between attachment style (anxious, secure and avoidant), love style (intimacy, passion and commitment) and attachment behaviour (accessibility, responsiveness and engagement) in intimate relationships among North-West University students in Mafikeng.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study used quantitative research and cross-sectional design; a correlational research design was employed to examine the relationship between attachment styles, love style and attachment behaviour in intimate relationships among South African university students.

2.1. Setting

The study was conducted at the North-West University, South Africa, in 2019. The recruitment of participants took four weeks and data collection took place in the fifth week after participants had fully consented.

2.2. Participants

The population consisted of 317 students and a random sampling strategy was employed. A demographic information form was utilised to collect demographic information of the participants (males = 50.4%, females = 49.5%); the majority of the participants were from the Faculty of Humanities (35.4%) and most (303/317) of the participants were single (95.6%) (Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic information of participants.

-	Category	N = 317	Frequency (%)
Gender	Male	160	50.4
	Female	157	49.5
Faculty	Natural and Agricultural Science	69	21.8
	Health Science	18	5.7
	Law	22	7
	Education	71	22.5
	Economic and Management Sciences	24	7.6
	Humanities	112	35.4
Marital Status	Single	303	95.6
	Married	8	2.5
	Separated	6	1.6
Age	Average age	21.98	-

2.3. Ethics

Institutional approval to conduct the research was obtained before commencing the study. All ethical principles were followed and after the consent process had been completed, permission was obtained from the Department of Psychology Ethics Committee of the NWU (NWU-HS-2017-0185) before commencing with the study. Quantitative data were collected from participants in the university setting. Participants were given an opportunity to ask questions relating to the questionnaires. Questionnaires were completed in approximately 20 minutes or less under the supervision of a trained research assistant and the principal researcher.

2.4. Study Size

The randomisation sampling technique was considered suitable because each participant has an equal chance to participate in the study. Participants were randomly selected through individual administration of questionnaires from libraries and computer reading laboratories across the six faculties and lecture halls. Using Raosoft's sample size calculator at a marginal error of 5% and 95% confidence level, a sample size of 374 was determined for the study. Following Raosoft's (2004) estimation, 400 questionnaires were distributed among the students at the NWU Mafikeng Campus. Out of the 400 distributed questionnaires, 23 were not returned despite several reminders and 60 were incomplete and not usable. Only 317 were found usable for the study, representing a 10.6% response rate, which was an adequate sample size of the population. Once understanding was established and targeted people expressed interest in participating in the study, they were screened for eligibility based on the inclusion criteria of willingness to participate, language proficiency (English or Setswana), age (18 years was the youngest, and 40 years was the oldest in the current study), being registered students at NWU, Mafikeng with a proof of student card, and being in or having been in an intimate relationship before. Any participant who did not meet the above mentioned inclusion criteria was excluded from the study.

2.5. Measures

Three measuring instruments were used to collect data for the study. These were an attachment style questionnaire, namely the Experience in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-

R), a love style questionnaire, namely Sternberg's Triangular Love Scale (STLS), and an attachment behaviour questionnaire, namely the Brief Accessibility, Responsiveness and Engagement (BARE) questionnaire. All scales were available in the public domain for use.

The ECR-R is a self-report scale consisting of 42 items designed to measure romantic attachment [20]. The scale is divided into three categories, each comprising 14 questions, including anxious, secure, and avoidant attachment styles. In a study in New Zealand, Sibley and Fischer (2005) indicated a Cronbach alpha of 0.90 for the scale, showing good reliability and validity [21]. No evidence could be found that this scale has been used in South African studies. The Cronbach alpha of 0.72 was reported for the present study.

The STLS of Sternberg (1986) was developed to assess love styles in intimate relationships. STLS is a 45-item scale of which 15 items measure intimacy, 15 passion and 15 commitment [22]. In a study on 13 Brazilian states, the scale obtained a very high level of reliability ($\alpha = 0.98$) [23]. The scale has been used in a South African study on "Love styles and marital satisfaction" [24]. An acceptable alpha coefficient of 0.74 was indicated in the present study.

The BARE is a short self-report tool for measuring attachment behaviours in couple relationships [25 - 28]. The scale comprises six items that measure accessibility, responsiveness, engagement, partner's accessibility, partner's responsiveness and partner's engagement. The scale was administered only on individuals and not on couples as it aims to assess the overall attachment behaviour and perception of the other partner's attachment behaviour in an intimate relationship. The reliability and validity of the BARE scale were tested in Brigham university students (USA) and the Cronbach alphas ranged from .66 to .85 for all six self and partner's attachment behaviour scores [25]. No evidence could be found that the scale has been used in South African studies. An alpha coefficient for the BARE in this study was 0.58; according to the criteria, it is an acceptable alpha coefficient in research of this nature [27]. To further support this argument, we reported that correlation (p) is significant at the 0.01 level; medium effect size (r) = > 0.30; and large effect size (r) = > 0.50.

3. DATA ANALYSIS

Pearson Product Moment Correlation statistics and independent T-test were employed. The relationships among variables in the study were tested using correlational analysis and to test for differences between samples. All data were analysed using SPSS version 25 (IBM Corp, 2017). A statistician was also consulted to assist with the analysis and identify missing data, which were subsequently deleted.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Characteristics of Respondent

Table 1 reveals that 50.4% were males and 49.5% were females. Most participants were from the Faculty of Humanities (35.4%), Education (22.5%) and Natural and Agricultural Sciences (21.8%). The smallest number was from the Faculty of Health Sciences (5.7%). Sixty (60) questionnaires were incomplete and were not usable.

Table 2 reveals that no significant correlation was found between attachment styles and love styles or between attachment styles and attachment behaviour. However, a

significant positive correlation was observed between love styles (passion, intimacy and commitment) and attachment behaviour (accessibility, responsiveness and engagement). The love styles correlate with one another: intimacy significantly and positively correlated with passion ($r = .75$; $p < .01$) as well as commitment ($r = .79$; $p < .01$). Passion also significantly and positively correlated with commitment ($r = .82$; $p < .01$). In addition, passion positively correlated with attachment behaviour at the medium effect size ($r = .34$; $p < .01$). Intimacy positively correlated with attachment behaviour at the medium effect size ($r = .43$; $p < .01$); commitment also positively correlated with attachment behaviour at the medium effect size ($r = .41$; $p < .01$).

Table 3 reports the gender difference and attachment behaviour in intimate relationships of university students. The results show no significant mean difference for gender as related to attachment behaviour in intimate relationships. There was no significant mean difference for gender regarding attachment behaviour in intimate relationships, namely the male mean at 2.911 (SD = 0.496) and the female mean at 2.864 (SD = 0.499).

Table 2. Correlational analysis between attachment styles, love styles and attachment behaviour (N = 317).

-	-	Intimacy	Passion	Commitment	BARE
Anxious	Correlation Coefficient	-0.032	-0.008	-0.021	0.019
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.575	0.890	0.707	0.739
Secure	Correlation Coefficient	0.072	0.042	0.025	0.028
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.204	0.424	0.653	0.614
Avoidant	Correlation Coefficient	-0.005	-0.020	-0.048	0.091
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.925	0.726	0.393	0.107
Intimacy	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.746**	.788**	.434**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	-	0.000	0.000	0.000
Passion	Correlation Coefficient	-	1.000	.812**	.337**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	-	-	0.000	0.000
Commitment	Correlation Coefficient	-	-	1.000	.405**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	-	-	-	-
BARE	Correlation Coefficient	-	-	-	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	-	-	-	-

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

Table 3. Independent T-test on the difference in attachment styles, love styles and attachment behaviour between males and females.

Variable	Gender	N	Mean	Std Deviation	df	t	p
Anxious	Male	157	0.4033	0.23298	315	-0.233	0.816
	Female	160	0.4094	0.23421	315	-	-
Secure	Male	157	1.0632	0.38770	315	0.299	0.765
	Female	160	1.0509	0.34674	315	-	-
Avoidant	Male	157	0.9768	0.62820	315	-0.810	0.419
	Female	160	1.0313	0.56809	315	-	-
Intimacy	Male	157	6.3333	1.67560	315	-1.701	0.090
	Female	160	6.6529	1.66929	315	-	-
Passion	Male	157	6.4654	1.55427	315	-0.308	0.758
	Female	160	6.5213	1.66726	315	-	-

(Table 3) contd.....

Variable	Gender	N	Mean	Std Deviation	df	t	p
Commitment	Male	157	6.4981	1.86834	315	-0.552	0.582
	Female	160	6.5213	1.91781	315	-	-
BARE	Male	157	2.9114	0.49640	315	0.846	0.398
	Female	160	2.8641	0.49936	315	-	-

5. DISCUSSION

The study reveals that no statistically significant relationship was found between attachment styles and love styles or between attachment styles and attachment behaviour. Likewise, no statistically significant gender difference was found with regard to attachment behaviour in intimate relationships. Hypothetically, the results revealed no relationship between attachment style and love style and attachment behaviour. This implies that for instance, there is no gender difference in interactions among university students; however, there might be cultural gender differences in connection with attachment security, love styles, intimate relationship experiences and subjective well-being. Theoretically, gender attachment behaviour to cultural stereotypes of the role of males and females in the society. The theory explains how individuals in society become gendered, particularly from an early age and the significance of this gendering on people's cognitive and categorical processing throughout their lifetime [13]. Contrary to the results, a relationship was found between attachment styles, love styles and attachment behaviour in an intimate relationship [26].

The present study observed a significant and positive correlation between love styles and attachment behaviour. The three love styles, as hypothesised, showed a positive correlation with one another. This finding is contrary to previous research; it found that it is unrealistic to expect all three components of love to be high all the time [27]. The three love styles also had a positive relationship with attachment behaviour in an intimate relationship. Contrary to these findings, no relationship was found between love styles and attachment behaviour. Factors such as environment, developmental stage, socio demographics, culture and personality could have played a role in the findings of the present study [25].

The developmental stage as well as the socio-demographic factors play a significant role in love style and attachment behaviour in an intimate relationship regardless of the acquired attachment style from childhood [17]. The present study reported that 96% of individuals were single and ranged from 18–40 years of age. Peers and lifestyles may have influenced individuals who were at a higher tertiary education institution as they are still in the process of finding themselves and their values [10]. For example, an individual who has formed an anxious or avoidant attachment style from childhood may be reassured by friends when entering university and have a supportive structure such as a church, family and friends, resulting in a positive perception of love and relationships. On the contrary, an individual who has formed a secure attachment style from childhood may find themselves around peers who have negative perceptions about love, which may ultimately influence how they view love and relationships [29]. Culture plays a role and includes aspects such as religion, norms, and

adopted societal rules and beliefs. For example, an African woman may see it as disrespectful to question her partner's ways or address her concerns, as women tend to be submissive due to the adopted culture regardless of the attachment style they posit [30]. Therefore, such individuals would not act based on what they desire but on how they are expected to behave because of inundated beliefs, even when it is against their wishes or feelings.

Moreover, personality can also explain why there is no significant relationship between attachment styles, love styles and attachment behaviour as personality remains stable over time [31]. Regardless of one's attachment style and experiences, one has certain personality traits that tend to remain the same over time. Furthermore, an individual may tend to isolate themselves in interactions, not because they have an avoidant attachment style or they do not have a positive perception about love, but mainly because it is their character and they prefer to be in their own space.

In addition, there are reasons to suggest why the three love styles are positively associated with one another in the study. According to Social, Developmental and Clinical perspectives [12], passion marks the beginning of intimacy as it allows an individual to be vulnerable, following a strong attraction towards someone. In support of this stance, the study reported that high passion takes place when intimacy is felt to be growing speedily [22]. As such, passion is perceived early in an intimate relationship because of the essence of love and the foundation upon which intimate love is cultivated.

Nurturing is expected to propel the relationship into intimacy [32] and is the aspect of love that appears dominant, especially when couples have been in a relationship for a long time. The duration of time invested in an intimate relationship enables people to begin to decide on managing and sustaining that relationship. Consequently, commitment sets in and it is that component in the relationship that ties passion and intimacy together, known to be the cognitive aspect that enables the individual to make decisions regarding maintaining the relationship [33]. Therefore, the results of the study are in line with theoretical expectations as proposed by the triangular theory of love, which submits that love styles are divided into three components that are able to interrelate [22].

Another possible reason for the positive correlation among all three love styles may be linked to sample specifications. The participants of the study are not only university students but are also regarded as young adults. People in this age range fall within a period classified in development as a stage of intimacy versus isolation [22].

While a positive relationship exists between all three love styles, a significant positive relationship was also observed between love style and attachment behaviour. According to the results of the study, passion has a positive relationship with

attachment behaviour. Passion and attachment behaviour are related as passionate love comprises cognitive, emotional and behavioural components [14].

Love styles have a positive relationship with attachment behaviour as an individual behaves how they feel in an intimate relationship [9]. If an individual feels connected to their partner, they tend to become more intimate and accessible, unlike those that do not feel connected to their partners.

In addition, there was no statistically significant difference found between males and females with regard to attachment behaviour. This was contrary to previous studies' findings that reported a connection between gender and attachment behaviour in intimate relationships [34 - 36]. However, findings are in line with those of the present study and reported no relationship between gender and attachment behaviour in intimate relationships [37].

Three possibilities may account for no difference in gender concerning attachment behaviour in intimate relationships. Such possibilities include modernisation and changed beliefs, age and responsibilities. Although a theoretical perspective emphasises gender roles and societal expectations, recent studies highlight that the world is constantly evolving; people's perceptions and beliefs also change as they become more modernised [31]. Men are now able to express themselves just like women without being viewed as 'weak' [31]. This makes it easier for both genders to communicate effectively about their feelings, vulnerabilities, insecurities and concerns.

Secondly, age may also account for no significant difference in attachment behaviour regarding gender in the present study. This study focused on young adults whose ages ranged from 18–40 and who are at university. Individuals at this age want to belong, are still lively and ambitious and are at a higher tertiary institution, which makes it easier for them to be accessible to their partners, unlike those who are separated because of work [16, 34]. Individuals have almost similar schedules (academically) [15]. For example, they can see one another during break times or school holidays and weekends, unlike a couple that works odd hours and lives apart from one another. Therefore, it might be easier (based on convenient academic schedules) or more difficult (based on factors such as schoolwork pressure, exams, and doing different courses) for both genders to be accessible and responsive to one another.

Thirdly, responsibilities may also play a role in the lack of significant gender difference with regard to attachment behaviour in an intimate relationship [16]. In recent times, women have been allowed to pursue their academic dreams and build their careers, thus enabling them to work. In support of this, couples must negotiate about chores, communication and spending time together by looking at their schedules; both should consider their plans with regard to making the relationship work. This kind of communication may promote empathy and support in the relationship [34].

6. LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a need for future research to establish other factors, such as culture, that could also determine love styles and attachment behaviour in intimate relationships. This is

because culture may also predict love styles and attachment behaviours. Likewise, future researchers need to extend their investigation of love and attachment behaviour in intimate relationships to other provinces in South Africa. This might assist in identifying if similar factors influence love and attachment behaviour in the provinces. It would be interesting to conduct the same study with a population that is on a different developmental stage to see if there will be any difference in how individuals love and behave in intimate relationships.

Future studies could also compare individuals' attachment styles, love styles and attachment behaviours according to marital status (*e.g.*, single, engaged to be married, married and divorced) to see if there is a significant difference in how these individuals love and behave in intimate relationships. It would also be interesting to look at only one category of marital status in comparison to years spent in marriage. This exploration could assist in determining whether there is a difference, why there could be a difference in categories, and what other categories could do to enhance their relationships.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of this study, attachment style appears to not be a predictor of love styles and attachment behaviour in intimate relationships. However, a statistically significant positive relationship was found between love styles and attachment behaviour. No significant gender differences were found regarding attachment behaviour. These findings provide an improved understanding of intimate relationships amongst the student population of the study. It is suggested that periodic psycho-education programmes at the university level be put in place to provide knowledge, sensitise people regarding intimate relationships, and facilitate mutual understanding. This will potentially promote more satisfying relationships and lead to fewer psychological problems for couples in the future.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

T.P.T, P.E. and V.K. wrote and partly analysed the findings of the study. W.F.T. revised the manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

ETHICS APPROVAL AND CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of the Health Sciences Research Committee (HREC) North-West University (protocol code NWU-HS-2017-0185 and date of approval: 2017).

HUMAN AND ANIMAL RIGHTS

No animals were used for studies that are the basis of this research. All the humans were used in accordance with the ethical standards of the committee responsible for human experimentation (institutional and national) and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2013 (<http://ethics.iit.edu/ecodes/node/3931>).

CONSENT FOR PUBLICATION

All human subjects gave their informed consent for

inclusion before they participated in the study.

STANDARDS OF REPORTING

STROBE guidelines were followed.

AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIALS

Not applicable.

FUNDING

None.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise.

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