

Relationship between Attachment Styles and Regulation of Emotions among Malaysian Single Early Adults

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ABSTRACT

Regulation of emotions has been a focus of many psychology researchers interested in investigating how individuals manage their emotions. This study examines the relationship between attachment styles and the regulation of emotions among single Malaysians in the early adulthood lifespan stage. This study used the convenience sampling method, using social media platforms, namely *Facebook*, *Instagram*, and *WhatsApp*, to recruit respondents. A total of 435 respondents who were Malaysian singles and in the early adulthood stage of their lifespan volunteered to participate in this study and completed *Google Forms* questionnaire. Respondents who were eligible for this study agreed to informed consent before proceeding to complete the questionnaires. Questions relating to personal background, attachment styles, and emotional regulation were distributed to respondents. Overall, results showed that there is a significant negative relationship between attachment styles, specifically *avoidant attachment style* ($r = -.15^{**}$, $p < .001$) and *anxious attachment style* ($r = -.160^{**}$, $p < .001$) with *cognitive reappraisal* regulation of emotion. However, there was only a significant positive relationship between *avoidant attachment style* and *expression suppression* regulation of emotion ($r = .327^{**}$, $p < .001$). Findings indicated the important relationship between attachment styles and emotional regulation. This suggests the importance of identifying attachment styles in helping individuals develop emotional regulation techniques. There are two basic implications for the field of psychology and practice. Findings indicated the importance of expanding research on attachment styles and emotion regulation. Besides that, findings can be beneficial for helping professionals such as counsellors, therapists, and social workers dealing with empowering clients with emotion regulation strategies. Therefore, future research needs to investigate and explore further the importance of attachment styles and the strategies for regulation of emotions in empowering individuals.

INTRODUCTION

Emotions are a crucial aspect of a human being and have made human beings unique. It has many functions, including survival and well-being (Plutchik, 1980). Despite its important functions, strong emotions experienced during long periods and not managed effectively, such as anger, sadness, and worry, are destructive. Difficulty regulating emotions may lead to serious problems and affect an individual's overall well-being. These include problems with social relationships, psychological well-being (Han & Kim, 2024; Gross & Cassidy, 2019; Kwon & Kim, 2019; Rogier et al., 2019; Scafuto et al., 2024), and health (Finley et al., 2024; Gross & Cassidy, 2024; Tsujimoto et al., 2024).

Therefore, emotional regulation has been researched to understand human behaviour in various settings. Emotional regulation has also been studied in understanding personality (Ferraro, & Taylor, 2021), mental health (Enav, et al., 2025), well-being and health (Stockinger, et. al, 2025), health (Low et al., 2021), education settings (Dugué, Sirost, & Dosseville, 2021; Ozeren, 2022; Frenzel, Goetz, & Stockinger, 2023), eating habits and stress (Dakanalis et al., 2023), and service interaction from emotion patterns (Bromuri, 2021).

Hence, the critical role of emotional regulation in understanding individuals, more and more studies investigate the development of emotional regulation with attachment styles. Studies have shown that attachment styles are important to understand how emotional regulation is related to or affects individuals' cognitive processes and behaviour (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019). To illustrate, difficulties in regulating emotion among individuals were found to be negatively correlated with secure attachment styles and conversely, related positively to insecure attachment styles (Ozeren, 2022). Henschel et al. (2020) also found that individuals with anxious attachment styles were prone to have difficulty in regulating their emotions. is positively (Henschel, 2020). Nielsen et al. (2017) also found that attachment styles contribute to the difficulty of regulating emotions and not anxiety disorders. Results from this study may expand the knowledge of emotional regulation and attachment styles in psychology. This may guide helping professions such as therapists, counsellors, and social workers in assisting clients with emotional regulation and attachment style issues. Hence, this study aims to investigate the relationships between attachment styles and emotional regulation.

METHOD

Research design

This study has applied the explorative research design using questionnaires to collect data.

Sample and sampling

This study used a convenience sampling method to gain data. Respondents were recruited voluntarily by distributing posters via social media: Facebook, *Instagram*, *Twitter*, and *WhatsApp*. The inclusive criteria for respondents in this study were single, Malaysian, literate, and had a smartphone. A total of 435 participants volunteered and agreed to participate in this study.

Instruments

This study distributed online questionnaires to gain data. The questionnaires consisted of three main sections, namely, section A: background information, section B: attachment styles, and section C: regulation of emotions.

Section A: Personal Background Information

This section consisted of questions about personal background information to understand the type of respondents involved in this study. Questions related to sex, ethnic group, age, education level, work sector, experience in a relationship, and reasons for being single were presented for the respondents to answer.

Section B: Attachment Styles

This section presents questions relating to attachment styles from the Adult Attachment Questionnaire (AAQ) (Simpson et al., 1996) to assess attachment styles. This questionnaire went through a process, back-to-back translation (English-Malay). There were 17 items on this scale. This scale is divided into two main subscales: the *avoidance attachment style* with eight items and the *anxiety attachment style* with nine items. Respondents were given a choice to respond to each item using a seven-point Likert scale, “1” as “strongly disagree” and “7” as “strongly agree”. Higher scores for each subscale show greater avoidance attachment styles and anxiety attachment styles, respectively. Lower scores on both subscales indicate greater security attachment. Reliability for this scale is acceptable for data collection with $\alpha = .78$ for *avoidance attachment* and $\alpha = .75$ for *anxious attachment*.

Section C: Regulation of Emotions

Questions regarding emotion regulation were presented to respondents. This study used the ERQ-CA Malay version Mohd Ali et. al (2022). This scale consisted of 20 items with two subscales to measure emotional regulation – 1) *cognitive reappraisal* – with six items and 2) *expressive suppression* – four items. Each item was given a choice of a seven-point Likert scale. For instance, “1” – “strongly disagree” and “7” – “strongly

agree”. Higher scores indicate higher emotional regulation for each subscale. Reliability for this scale is acceptable for data collection with $\alpha = .79$ for *cognitive reappraisal* and $\alpha = 0.73$ for *expressive suppression*.

Procedure

Questionnaires in the form of Google Forms were distributed via social media such as *Facebook*, *Instagram*, and *WhatsApp*. In addition, respondents who volunteered to participate in this study were also given a QR code to enable them to access and complete the questionnaire. All responses were collected using *Google Forms*.

Analysis

Data collected in this study were then analysed using the IBM Statistical Package Social Sciences (IBM SPSS). Descriptive analyses, such as frequency, percentage, mean score, and standard deviation, were carried out. Pearson correlation analysis has also been carried out to determine relationships between attachment styles (*avoidant attachment* and *anxious attachment*) and regulation of emotion (*cognitive reappraisal* and *expression suppression*).

RESULTS

The results of this study were divided into two main sections. Firstly, the descriptive analysis results and followed by the inferential analysis results.

Descriptive Results

Overall, 435 individuals volunteered and agreed to participate in this study. More than half were females ($n=266$) with the remaining males ($n=169$). Most participants were Malays (58.4%) followed by Chinese (19.8%). Most of the participants also ranged from 18-27 years old (71.03%). The majority of participants possessed an undergraduate degree, followed by a master’s degree. In addition, many of the participants were also still studying (35.2%), followed by working in the private sector (28.3%). Almost half of the participants have no experience in close relationships (48.3). Besides that, more than half reported that they are single involuntarily (57.2%).

Table 1 Demography profile of respondents

Profile demographic		Kekerapan (N)	Peratusan (%)
Sex	Male	169	38.9
	Female	266	61.1
Ethnic	Malay	254	58.4
	Chinese	86	19.8
	Indian	56	12.9
	Others	39	9.0
Age	18 years - 27 years	309	71.03
	28 years - 37 years	111	25.52
	38 years - 47 years	15	3.45
Level of education	Malaysian Certificate of Education	9	2.1
	Malaysian Higher School Certificate / Matriculation	15	3.4
	Diploma	48	11.0
	Undergraduate	306	70.3
	Masters	54	12.4
	PhD	3	0.7
Job Sector	Government sector	93	21.4
	Private sector	123	28.3
	Self-employed	45	10.3
	Not working	21	4.8

	Studying	153	35.2
Experience in relationships	None	210	48.3
	1 to 5 years	183	42.1
	5 until 10 years	35	8.0
	More than 10 years	7	1.6
Reasons for remaining single	Involuntary	249	57.2
	Voluntary	186	42.8

Inferential Results

Pearson correlation analysis has been carried out to determine attachment styles (*avoidant attachment* and *anxious attachment*) and regulation of emotion (*cognitive reappraisal* and *expression suppression*). Results show that there is a significant, positive but weak correlation between *avoidant attachment* and *cognitive reappraisal* ($r = .15^{**}$, $p < .001$). Results also found that there is a significant and negative but weak relationship between *anxious attachment* and *cognitive reappraisal* ($r = -.160^{**}$, $p < .001$). Results are shown as follows in Table 2.0

Table 2.0 Pearson Correlation Results Between Attachment Styles And *Cognitive Reappraisal*

Variable	<i>Cognitive Reappraisal</i>	<i>P value</i>
<i>Avoidant Attachment</i>	.15*	.002
<i>Anxious attachment</i>	-.16*	.001

** $p < .001$

Pearson correlation analysis was also performed between attachment styles (*avoidant attachment* and *anxious attachment*) and the regulation of emotion, specifically, *expression suppression*. Results show that there were significant, positive but weak relationships between *avoidance attachment* and *expression suppression* ($r = .327^{**}$, $p < .001$). However, there is no significant relationship between *anxious attachment* and *expressive suppression*.

Table 3.0 Pearson Correlation Results Between Attachment Styles and *Expression Suppression*

Variable	<i>Expression Suppression</i>	<i>P value</i>
<i>Avoidant Attachment</i>	.327*	.000
<i>Anxious attachment</i>	.001	.980

* $p < .001$

DISCUSSION

Findings in this study infer significant relationships between *attachment styles* and *emotional regulation*. Specifically, individuals prone to *avoidant attachment styles* are less likely to use the *cognitive reappraisal* of emotional regulation. To illustrate, individuals with an *avoidant attachment style* are characterized by individuals who find it easy to get close with, however, comfortable having others depend on them. Furthermore, *avoidant attachment style* individuals do not like people getting too close and find it difficult to trust others completely. They are also nervous whenever anyone gets too close. On the other hand, *cognitive reappraisal* of regulating emotions includes managing emotions by changing the thinking process when experiencing certain types of emotions during that time. This includes changing the way to interpret mishaps to something positive instead of focusing on the negative emotions.

Conversely, findings also indicate that individuals who are more *anxious* in their attachment styles are less likely to use *cognitive reappraisal* of emotional regulation. *Anxious attachment style* individuals are characterized by worrying about not having close relationships with people, worrying about being left alone,

and not having partners love as much as they do. They are less likely to manage their emotion by changing the way they think about the emotions that they are experiencing. This leads them to decrease the use of *cognitive reappraisal* of emotional regulation.

Other than that, findings also suggest that individuals prone to *avoidance* attachment styles and more likely to adopt expression suppression of emotional regulation. Expression suppression includes individuals who do not share emotions with people, especially negative emotions such as sadness, anger, or worry.

This research shows that there are important relationships between specific attachment styles and emotional regulation strategies. Although this research is correlational, however indicates the importance of pursuing further investigation on the two important psychological variables.

Future research should consider using a qualitative or longitudinal research design to enable an extensive understanding of attachment styles and emotional regulation. Qualitative research design allows for a more enriched information attachment styles and emotional regulation. In addition, longitudinal research design allows for investigation of cause and effect. Longitudinal research design, if applied to future research, may also indicate a more accurate sequence of development of attachment styles and the emotional regulation process.

Conversely, sampling methods for future studies should also consider stratified or random sampling, allowing for more sound generalization for the specific sample researched. Since this study only focuses on avoidant and anxious attachment styles, future research should also examine secure attachment styles to be studied together with emotional regulation. This would allow a more comprehensive analysis and conclusion regarding attachment styles and emotional regulation. Therefore, helping professionals, for example, therapists, counsellors, and social workers, develop interventions that are suited for clients struggling with emotional regulation issues. Finally future research

CONCLUSION

Overall, findings suggest that there are important relationships between emotion regulation and attachment styles. Although relationship analysis does not infer cause and effect, it suggests that the two psychological variables, emotional regulation and attachment styles, are worth researching. This study has two important implications towards expanding attachment styles and emotional regulation within the field of psychology, specifically developmental psychology, among early stages of adulthood. In addition, this study has implications for practice, helping professions such as therapists, counsellors, and social workers working with empowering individuals. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate attachment styles and the regulation of emotions in specific cultures across the human lifespan in future research studies.

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