



## Attachment Styles and Relationship Quality among Young Couples

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### ABSTRACT

This research was aimed to study the relationship between attachment style and relationship quality among young couples. A correlational research design was adopted to answer the objectives of this study. A total of 257 students of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), Sarawak participated in this study. Two types of questionnaire were used in this study; the Experience in Close Relationship (ECR) to measure the attachment styles, and Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI) to measure the relationship satisfaction of the couples. The results showed that there was a significant relationship between attachment style and relationship quality among the young couples in UNIMAS. Attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety had a significant effect on the relationship quality of the young couples. It is suggested for future studies to consider selecting the samples by using simple random sampling as the targeted population would be able to represent the whole population and the result would be more accurate.

*Keywords:* Attachment avoidance; attachment anxiety

### BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Attachment theory was first proposed by Bowlby (1969). According to John Bowlby's theory, the caregiver would have a direct effect on an infant's attachment styles (Fraley, 2010). The

caregiver's behaviour and their responses towards the infants would determine his or her internal working model. This working model would be used by the infants when they interact with their peers in later relationship formation (Fraley, 2010).

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Attachment theory was further expanded in adult romantic relationship by Cindy Hazan and Philip Shaver (Fraley, 2010). There were four attachment styles that were identified which were secure, pre-occupied, dismissive and fearful (Bar-

tholomew and Horowitz, 1991). These four attachment styles were constructed from the two dimensions; avoidance and anxiety. Hazan and Shaver (1994) described anxiety attachment style as people that are lack of confident when they interact with others for instance, their partner or peers. They described that this type of individuals would constantly seek approval from their partners and are overly attached and dependent on their partners. In contrast, individuals with avoidant attachment would keep themselves from being attached to anyone as they usually see themselves as insufficient and not needing any intimate relationship (Hazan and Shaver, 1994).

## PROBLEM STATEMENTS

This research aimed to study the relationship between attachment styles and relationship quality among young couples in Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). Based on the previous research done, most of the respondents involved were married couples or married individuals. Besides that, most of the research that had been done was conducted in other countries such as Canada, Iran and Germany. There was limited research done in the context of Malaysia. The research done by Butzer and Campbell (2008) proved that individuals who reported high level of anxiety or those with anxious partners had lower levels of marital satisfaction. The study also found out that individuals with high levels of avoidance also reported to have lower levels of marital satisfaction (Butzer & Campbell, 2008). In addition, the study conducted by Fard and Sehhat (2015)

among married female students in Islamic Azad University Roudehen also proved that the avoidance style of an individual reduces the marital satisfaction.

Collins and Read (1990) research supported that the attachment style of an individual has the tendency to influence relationship quality. It is stated that women who have higher score in anxiety generally have lower relationship satisfaction level. However, man with higher scores in secure attachment reported higher level of relationship satisfaction (Collins & Read, 1990). Secure attachment style in husband and wife has positive effect towards relationship satisfaction while preoccupied, dismissing and fearful have negative effects towards relationship satisfaction (Banse, 2004). Banse (2004) also concluded that the finding is consistent with the previous study done by Collins and Read (1990) which proved that relationship satisfaction between married couples is affected by their attachment style.

There was research done on unmarried individuals. However, the instruments used in the previous research were different from this research. The research done by Simpson (1990) stated that woman who scored high in anxiety attachment would have negative impact in their relationship quality. However, the research showed that the score obtained by men do not affect men's level of relationship satisfaction as much as women. This showed that gender will affect relationship quality satisfactions among couples. The instruments that were used

**Table 1: Gender of Research**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	91	35.4	35.4	35.4
	Female	166	64.6	64.6	100.0
	Total	257	100.0	100.0	

in the study is done by Simpson (1990) where 13 sentences contained within Hazan and Shaver (1987) adult attachment measure in order to measure attachment style while satisfaction levels of an individuals was assessed by 11-item that measure satisfaction with the partner on 11 different dimensions (Simpson, 1990). On top of that, Hammond and Flether (1991) stated in their study that individual with low score in avoidance and anxiety would have a positive impact or in other words, have a higher level of relationship satisfaction. The instrument that was being used to measure attachment style were items derived from Hazan and Shaver (1987) and modified by Shaver and Hazan (1994). Relationship satisfaction of individuals was measure using free-response relationship description.

The previous study conducted on adult attachment styles and couples' relationship satisfaction had proven that attachment insecurity; avoidance and anxiety would have negative impacts on couples' relationship quality (Ayenew, 2016). The research showed that individual who obtained high score in avoidance and anxiety was associated with lower relationship satisfaction (Ayenew, 2016). The instrument that was used by Ayenew (2016) to measure attachment

style of an individual was Experience in Close Relationship-Revised (ECR-R) which is the shorter version of ECR. Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS) was used to access the relationship satisfaction among couples.

This study was conducted to understand how attachment styles of an adult would relate with their relationship quality. The study focused on young unmarried couples in Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). Besides that, the instrument that was used to access attachment style and relationship quality is Experience in Close Relationship (ECR) and Couple Satisfaction Index (CSI) respectively.

## OBJECTIVES

This research aimed to study the relationship between attachment style and relationship quality among young couples in Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS).

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study adopted a correlational research design in order to study the relationship between attachment styles and relationship quality; attachment avoidance and relationship quality and at-

tachment anxiety and relationship quality.

### **Participants**

A total of 257 that were involved in a relationship participated in this study. The participants that were chosen were the young couples in Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). The participants age range between 20 to 24 years old. This study focused on unmarried couples.

### **Measures**

#### **Experience in Close Relationship (ECR)**

The Experience in Close Relationship (ECR) questionnaire was developed by Brennan & Shaver in 1998. This instrument consist of 36 items which uses 7-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree to 7= strongly agree) to assess attachment dimensions; attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety of an individual. There are a total of 10 items that are reversely scored which are items 3, 5, 19, 22, 25, 27, 29, 31, 33 and 35. The odd number questions which compromised of 18 items were used to measure attachment avoidance while the even number questions were used to measure attachment anxiety. Attachment avoidance is to measure individual's degree of discomfort with emotional closeness and openness. (Ayenew, 2016). Attachment anxiety is to measure individual's fear of being neglected and ignored by their partners. (Ayenew, 2016). This questionnaire also measured four types of adult attachment styles. (Yahya, 2013).

The instrument was back translated. The translated version was reviewed by two expert panels for conceptual and content equivalence. The validity of the instrument was confirmed using concurrent validity. A pilot study was conducted using the final version of the instrument. A total of 30 Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) students were employed in the pilot study. The instrument had high levels of internal consistency and validity, with constructive validity and internal consistency being 9.0. The test-retest reliability was 0.692 for ECR Avoidance and 0.798 for ECR Anxiety. This pilot test value is considered high which showed that the questionnaire is suitable to be used among the young couples in UNIMAS. For the real study, the questionnaire was also tested for its reliability. The Cronbach's Alpha value for avoidance scale is 0.77 and for anxiety scale is 0.85.

#### **Couple Satisfaction Index (CSI)**

This questionnaire was used to measure individual's relationship satisfaction (Funk and Rogge, 2007). This questionnaire consisted of questions that ask participants to rate their satisfaction with their spouses and whether they have ever considered divorce or break up (Graham, Diebels & Barnow, 2011) This questionnaire consisted of 32 items which used Likert scale to indicate their satisfaction level (Funk and Rogge, 2007). 1 item used 7-point Likert scale (0= extremely unhappy to 6= perfect) while 31 items used 6-point Likert scale.

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### **Population, Sample & Sampling Procedure**

The population of this study was the young couples in Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). This study focused on unmarried couples. The sampling technique that was used was convenience sampling. The estimated number of couples in UNIMAS was 1600 students and therefore the sample that would be used is 310 individuals. The sample size is selected according to Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table for determining sample size for research activities. A total of 320

questionnaires were distributed to the young couples in UNIMAS. However, only 257 questionnaires were returned. Therefore, the total participants that were involved in this research were 257 students that were in a relationship.

From the total number of data collected (N=275), 35.4% (n=91) are male participants and 64.6% (n=166) are female participants. Based on the ethnicity, the Chinese participants have the highest percentage which is 52.5% (n=135). Seconded by the Malay participants with a percentage of 30.7% (n=79). Followed by the Natives of Sarawak which have a percentage of 9.7% (n=25) and Natives of Sabah with a percentage of 4.3% (n=11). Indian participants have the lowest percentage which is only 2.3% (n=6). Last but not least, there is a total of 0.4% (n=1) of participants reported to be of other race and it was stated in the questionnaire that the participant is a Javanese. There are a total of 35.0% (n=90) of Muslims participants in this research. The Muslims participants have the highest percentage as compared to other religions. Followed by Buddhist participants which consists of 31.5% (n=81). Christian participants also have a high percentage which are 26.5% (n=68). However, the Catholics participants have a low percentage which is 3.5% (n=9) and Hindu participants occupied the lowest percentage which is 1.9% (n=5). Moreover, there is a small portion of participants, with a percentage of 1.2% (n=3) categorized as others but their data was not stated in the research.

The questionnaires were distributed throughout the university and the data collected was recorded. From the nine faculties in Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development (FCSHD) has the highest percentage as compared to other faculties. FCSHD has a total percentage of 32.7% (n=84). The faculty with second highest percentage is Faculty of Social Science (FSS) which has a total percentage of 23.0% (n=59). Faculty of Economics and Business (FEB) has a percentage of 17.9% (n=46) while the Faculty of Engineering (FENG) has a percentage of 7.8% (n=20). 6.6% (n=17) are participants from the Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts (FACA) meanwhile 4.7% (n=10) come from the Faculty of Computer Science and Information Technology (FCSIT). Faculty of Language Studies and Communication Studies (FLSCS) has a percentage of 3.9% (n=10). 2.3% (n=6) are participants from Faculty of Resource Science and Technology (FRST) and Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences (FMHS) has a percentage of 1.2% (n=3). FMHS has the lowest percentage of participants as compared to the other eight faculties.

The participants need to respond in the questionnaire whether they are involved in short distance or long distance relationship. A total of 57.2% (n=147) of participants reported that they are involved in long distance relationship while only 42.0% (n=108) of participants mentioned that they are involved in a short distance relationship. There is a total of 0.4% (n=1) of participant did not

report their status in the questionnaire. From the data collected it can be concluded that majority of the young couples in UNIMAS are involved in a long distance relationship. From the 257 participants collected, 37.3% (n=97) of the participants were involved in the relationship for one year. Participants that were involved in one year relationship had the highest percentage as compared to others. 20.2% (n=52) of the participants were recorded to be involved in the relationship for two years. This is followed by participants that were involved in a relationship for five years or above. The percentage for participants that were involved in a relationship for more than five years is 17.9% (n=46). Participants that were involved in three and four years of relationship had the same percentage which is 12.1% (n=31).

### **Data Collection Procedure**

Step 1 is gaining excess and identifying the respondent. The sample size would be determined prior to the distribution of questionnaire. The targeted populations were among the young couples in Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). The researcher obtained a verbal consent from the respondent prior the distribution of questionnaire. This was to ensure that the participants understand the content of the questionnaire they are answering. Step 2 is the distribution of questionnaires. A brief explanation was given to the respondents to reduce the chance of misunderstanding while answering the questionnaire. The questionnaires were distributed to the participants after the researcher obtained their consent. The

researcher was present when the participants were answering the questionnaire distributed. This was to ensure that the participants were able to ask any questions when they were attempting the questionnaire.

### Data Analysis

The data collected was analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) version 22.0. The data obtained from the questionnaire was entered into SPSS. The relationship between the dependent variable and the independent variable was determined by using Pearson Correlation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Based on the result shown in Table 2, there is a strong negative relationship between attachment avoidance and relationship quality. The value of  $r_s(257)$  is  $-0.61$  and  $p = 0.00$ . The  $p$  value is lesser than the significance value of  $p = 0.050$ . It was hypothesized that attachment avoidance would affect the relationship quality. In other words, those that ob-

tained higher score in avoidant attachment would have a lower satisfaction level. This finding is consistent with previous research conducted by Ayenew (2016); Fard and Sehhat (2015); and Hammond and Flether (1991). Hammond and Flether (1991) mentioned in their study that individuals that are satisfied with their relationship are less anxious and less avoidance are more secure. Ayenew (2016) also stated that individuals with lower score in relationship satisfaction would have higher score in attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety. Fard and Sehhat (2015) reported that there is a negative relationship between attachment avoidance and relationship quality. This means that when the score for attachment avoidance increases, the relationship quality decreases. This may be due to the characteristics of individuals with attachment avoidance which is also known as dismissing. They are uncomfortable in forming new relationships with others and they faced difficulties trusting others.

**Table 2: Correlation between Attachment Avoidance and Relationship Quality**

		Avoidance	Relationship Quality
Avoidance	Pearson Correlation	1	-.611**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	257	257
Relationship Quality	Pearson Correlation	-.611**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	257	257

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

**Table 3: Correlation between Attachment Anxiety and Relationship Quality**

		Anxiety	Relationship Quality
Anxiety	Pearson Correlation	1	-.149*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.017
	N	257	257
Relationship Quality	Pearson Correlation	-.149*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.017	
	N	257	257

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**Table 4. Correlation between Relationship Duration and Relationship Quality**

		Relationship Duration	Relationship Quality
Relationship Duration	Pearson Correlation	1	-0.006
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.921
	N	257	257
Relationship Quality	Pearson Correlation	-0.006	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.921	
	N	257	257

From Table 3, the value of  $r_{s(257)}$  is -0.15 and the p value is 0.01. This showed that the value of p is smaller than the significant value which is 0.05. There is a weak relationship between attachment anxiety and relationship quality. From the finding, it was showed that the anxiety level had a weak negative relationship with relationship quality among young couples. This finding is consistent with the finding of Butzer and Campbell (2008). Butzer and Campbell (2008) reported that partners that scored high for anxiety have lower score in relationship satisfaction. This theory is supported by Hazan and Shaver (1987) in their research where individuals with insecure attachment; attachment anxiety would have lower satisfaction level towards their relationship and it would be harder for the individuals to find happiness and

confidence in their relationship. Besides that, from the previous finding between attachment styles and relationship satisfaction, lower satisfaction level in relationship is related with attachment anxiety. This may be due to the characteristics of the individuals with insecure attachment styles. Individuals with attachment anxiety, preoccupied, have the desire to form new relationships with others but they are often afraid of rejection. Therefore, they would have difficulties in forming satisfied relationships.

Based on Table 4, the value of  $r_{s(257)} = 0.006$  and the p-value is 0.921. The p-value is greater than the alpha value, 0.05. Since the p-value is greater than the significant value, it can be concluded that there is no significant relationship between relationship duration and rela-



relationship quality. The duration of relationship did not affect the relationship quality of the individuals. From the result obtained in this research, it was showed that there is no significant difference between relationship duration and relationship quality. The previous research conducted by Ayenew (2016) also showed that there is no significant difference between relationship duration and relationship quality. The finding is consistent with the previous research conducted by Ayenew (2016). According to the research done by Ayenew (2016), there were no significant relationship between duration and satisfaction. The attachment style of an individual was formed when he or she was still a child (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). This attachment style will affect the child's later relationships with other people. Therefore, the duration of the relationship may not affect the relationship quality as relationship quality may be mainly determine by the individuals attachment style. They may be involved in a long-term relationship, but they may not be satisfied provided their attachment style is not secure.

## CONCLUSION

The objective of this research was to study the relationship between insecure attachment; attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety and the relationship quality among young couples in UNIMAS. Therefore, the researcher is interested in investigating whether the finding will be consistent with the previous study done by using public university students as participants. In addition to

that, this study would be able to contribute in the field of counseling. By understanding the attachment style of young couples, the counselors would be able to assist the couple to resolve conflict that arises from the dissatisfaction in relationship. It would be able to provide insight for the couples and they would be able to understand more about their partners. The result showed that there is a strong and negative relationship between attachment avoidance and relationship quality. Besides that, there is a weak and negative relationship between attachment anxiety and relationship quality. This research focused on the young unmarried couples of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). Therefore, this research cannot be generalized to other young unmarried couples from other public or private universities. In addition, the lengthy questionnaire may cause confusion among the participants. The questionnaire should be revised in future research to avoid the confusion of the participants. Last but not least, researcher should be aware of the language used in the questionnaire to make sure it is understandable by the participants.

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