RESEARCH ARTICLE

Attachment styles and psychosocial and emotional reactions to dating violence: mediating effects of active coping and self-criticism

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Abstract

Objective: To examine the mediating effect of active coping and self-criticism in the relationship of attachment styles and psychosocial and emotional reactions in young adults with dating violence.

Method: The cross-sectional study was conducted from January 1 to April 30, 2024, in Lahore, Pakistan, after approval from the ethics review committee of the Institute of Clinical Psychology, University of Management and Technology, Lahore. The sample was raised from among students of either gender aged 18-26 years studying at various public and private universities in Lahore. Data was collected using the Attachment Styles Scale, Dating Violence Scale, Self-Criticism Scale and the Psychosocial and Emotional Reactions Scale. Data was analysed using SPSS 25.

Results: Of the 284 participants, 105(37.4%) were males and 179(62.6%) were females. The overall mean age was 22.35±2.01 years. A significant negative association was found among attachment styles ($p<0.01$), active coping ($p<0.01$), self-criticism ($p<0.01$) and psychosocial and emotional reactions ($p<0.01$). Furthermore, active coping and self-criticism fully mediated ($p<0.001$) in the association of attachment styles and psychosocial and emotional reactions in young adults with dating violence.

Conclusion: Counsellors offering individualised treatment strategies and preventive measures may help their clients avoid major outcomes from their psychological and emotional responses to dating violence.

Key Words: Attachment styles, Coping mechanism, Self-criticism, Psychosocial and emotional reactions, Dating violence, Young adults.

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Introduction

Young adults face various challenges related to attachment styles impacting their psychosocial and emotional reactions. Adults with healthy and comfortable relationships exhibit more psychological healthy life patterns compared to singles, highlighting the protective role of close relationships in emotional stability.[1] Research has emphasised the importance of collectivistic values, such as family honour and social harmony, in shaping attachment styles and emotional wellbeing among young adults.[2] Attachment styles, rejection sensitivity, and emotion regulation are significantly interconnected among young adults, with close attachment styles influencing emotion regulation strategies.[3] A study among Pakistani young adults found that cultural values, such as respect for elders and family obligations, played a crucial role in mitigating the effects of attachment insecurity on emotional wellbeing.[4] Attachment insecurity, difficulty regulating emotions, and symptoms of dysfunctional breathing are positively correlated, emphasising the importance of exploring biological basis of attachment in mental health strategies for young adults.[5] Research in the context of Pakistani culture revealed that societal expectations, such as the importance of marriage and family, contributed to attachment insecurity and emotional dysregulation among young adults.[6]

Studies on the psychosocial and emotional reactions in young adults experiencing dating violence due to insecure attachment styles revealed that individuals with insecure attachment styles, such as anxious and avoidant attachments, are more prone to experiencing emotional abuse and cyber-dating violence. In particular, insecure attachment styles, particularly anxious attachment, have been linked to higher levels of psychological and physical victimisation by dating partners.[7] A study among Pakistani young adults found that attachment insecurity and emotional dysregulation were associated with increased risk of dating violence victimisation and perpetration.[8] Dismissive, fearful, preoccupied and secure attachment styles are associated with different emotional

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responses, with anger mediating the relationship between attachment styles and intimate partner violence perpetration in women.[9] Emotion dysregulation, impulsivity, and witnessing parental violence can exacerbate the association between attachment styles and perpetration or victimisation of intimate partner violence.[10] The bidirectional nature of violence in relationships is prevalent, indicating a complex interplay of factors contributing to psychosocial and emotional reactions in dating violence.[11]

Attachment styles play a crucial role in shaping coping mechanisms and emotional reactions. Insecure attachment styles, such as anxious and avoidant attachments, are associated with higher levels of dating violence perpetration and victimisation.[12] Individuals with insecure attachment styles may struggle while regulating their emotions, which further contributes to dating violence.[13] Furthermore, the association between teenage exposure to violence and functioning as an adult can be tempered by employment of avoidance-focussed coping mechanisms and unstable attachment throughout adolescence.[14] Findings have depicted that individuals with anxious and avoidant attachment styles are more likely to exhibit cyber-dating violence, including psychological and relational abuse. Insecure attachment styles are associated with difficulties in regulating emotions, which in turn contribute to both perpetration and victimisation of dating violence. Specifically, anxiety attachment significantly influences the tendency to engage in dating violence, highlighting the impact of attachment styles on behaviour in relationships.[15]

Insecure attachment styles leads to self-criticism, and insecure attachment styles, such an anxious and avoidant attachments, have been associated with higher level of dating violence victimisation and perpetration.[16] Individuals with a history of childhood sexual abuse may exhibit elevated levels of self-criticism, impacting their romantic relationship satisfaction, and contributing to attachment avoidance.[17] Neurobiological studies suggest that danger responses and mental images during self-criticism are modulated by attachment mechanisms; secure attachment is positively correlated with activation of the lingual gyrus, while avoidant attachment is negatively correlated with it. Attachment styles and self-criticism are intertwined factors influencing dating violence behaviours in young adults.[18]

Self-criticism has a significant role in the psychosocial and emotional reactions of young adult experiencing dating violence. Studies have shown that the relationship between emotional abuse in childhood and problems in romantic relationships is mediated by self-criticism, highlighting its impact on relationship quality and psychological distress.[19]

Research on sexual and gender minority individuals participating in violence studies revealed that gender minority participants with higher levels of minority stress and adverse childhood experiences reported more negative emotional reactions, indicating the influence of self-criticism on emotional responses.[20] Young adults experiencing dating violence may employ various coping strategies and exhibit diverse emotional reactions where the individuals exposed to domestic violence in childhood may have complex romantic relationship experiences, influenced by past trauma and developmental timing.[21] Research has highlighted that young people's attitudes towards dating violence can impact their perpetration and victimisation rates, with males showing higher tolerance levels. Individuals with a diverse childhood experiences and minority stress, especially gender minority participants, may have higher negative emotional reactions to participating in violence research.[22]

The current study was planned to examine the mediating effect of active coping and self-criticism in the relationship of attachment styles and psychosocial and emotional reactions in young adults with dating violence.

Subjects and Methods

The cross-sectional study was conducted from January 1 to April 30, 2024, in Lahore, Pakistan, after approval from the ethics review committee of the Institute of Clinical Psychology, University of Management and Technology, Lahore. The sample size was determined based on earlier recommendations suggesting that a minimum of 30 participants against each predictor is required to achieve reliable estimates of regression coefficients[23] with sufficient statistical power to detect moderate-size effects and relationships. The sample was raised using non-probability purposive sampling technique from among students of either gender aged 18-26 years studying at various public and private universities in Lahore. Those included were individuals who had intimate relationships for at least last two years, while those who had suffered breakups in their intimate relationship were excluded.

After taking informed consent from the participants, data was collected using a demographic form that included age, gender, education level, birth order, family system, employment status, living status, relationship status and history of violence. The 13-item Attachment Styles Scale (ASS)[24] was used that was scored on a 7-point scale ranging from 'strongly agree to 'strongly disagree'. The total score ranged 13-91, and its Cronbach alpha

reliability was 0.89.

Coping strategies were determined using the Dating Violence Scale (DVS).[25] It had 29 items with 2 subscales; 16 items of active coping, and 13 items of passive coping. It had a 4-point rating scale; 0 = not at all, 1 = seldom, 2 = often and 3 = more often. The total score ranged 29-116, and its Cronbach alpha reliability was 0.94.

Of the 61-item Self-Criticism Scale for University Students[26], 3 subscales were used; hopelessness, rejection and oversensitivity. It was scored on a 5-point likert scale; 1 = never), 2 = rare, 3 = to some extent, 4 = very often and 5 = always. The total score ranged 61-305, and its Cronbach alpha reliability was 0.91.

The 23-item Psychosocial and Emotional Reactions Scale (PSERS)[27] was used to measure psychosocial and emotional reactions of individuals to dating violence. It consisted of 2 subscales; irritability with 13 items, and emotional outburst with 10. It was scored on a 4-point Likert scale, with 0 = not at all, 1 = sometime, 2 = often, and 3 = more often. The overall score ranged 23-92, and the scale's Cronbach alpha reliability was 0.89.

The students were contacted through their respective university admission, and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. It took them about 20 minutes to fill the data-collection proforma. All the participants were given a debriefing session at the end.

Data was analysed using SPSS 25. Prior to analysis, data were checked for normality using the skewness and kurtosis values, indicating data normally. Continues variables were expressed as mean ± standard deviation, while categorical variables were presented as frequencies and percentages. The relationship among attachment styles, active-coping, self-criticism and psychosocial and emotional reactions was examined using Pearson product moment correlation. Mediation analysis was conducted by using Hayes'[28] bootstrapping approach, utilizing the PROCESS macro plugin, to explore the mediating role of active coping and self-criticism in the association of attachment styles and psychosocial and emotional reactions. Bootstrapping approach was used to observe active coping and self-criticism as mediator between attachment styles as an independent variable, and psychosocial and emotional reactions as a dependent variable. This was done with 5,000 bootstrap samples by taking estimates at a 95% confidence interval (CI). The bias-corrected and accelerated CI (BCa CI) values were used. P=0.05, p=0.001 and p=0.01 were used as cut-off value of significance for inferential analysis.

Results

Of the 284 participants, 105(37.4%) were males and 179(62.6%) were females. The overall mean age was 22.35±2.01 years. Among the subjects, 129(45%) were undergraduate students and 155(54%) were postgraduate students. Besides, 62(22%) subjects were first born, 80(28%) were middle born, 57(20%) were last born and 85(30%) were the only child. Subjects from nuclear family system were 111(39%), 173(61%) were living in the joint family system, 108(38%) were employed, 176(62%) were unemployed, 156(55%) were living with both parents, 62(22%) were living with single parents, 23(8%) were living independently, 43(15%) were living in hostel in shared rooms, 91(32%) were committed, 193(68%) were in intimate relationships, 168(59%) had a history of violence, and 116(41%) were without any history of violence.

There was a significant negative association among attachment styles (p<0.01), active coping (p<0.01), self-criticism (p<0.01) and psychosocial and emotional reactions (p<0.01), indicating that those having strong attachment style experienced less active coping, less self-criticism and less psychosocial emotional reactions (Table 1).

Table-1: Inter-correlationvalues among attachment styles, active coping, self-criticism and psychosocial and emotional reactions (n= 284).

	Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	AS	28.62	8.04	-	-.34**	-.49**	-.45**	-.41**	-.38**	-.37**
2	CS-AC	56.14	5.76		-	.49**	.48**	.40**	.32**	.32**
3	SC	147.43	15.08			-	.92**	.82**	.74**	.77**
4	SC-H	78.85	8.93				-	.59**	.56**	.76**
5	SC-R	44.93	5.37					-	.55**	.61**
6	SC-OS	23.63	3.19						-	.49**
7	PSER	90.38	9.52							-

M: Mean, SD: Standard deviation, AS: Attachment styles, CS-AC: Coping Strategies-Active Coping, SC: Self-criticism, SC-H: Self-criticism-Hopelessness, SC-R: Self-criticism-rejection, SC-OS: Self-criticism-oversensitive, PSER: Psychosocial and Emotional Reactions, *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Table-2: Regression coefficient, standard error (SE) and model summary information for attachment styles (AS), active coping (AC), self-criticism (SC) and psychosocial and emotional reactions(PSER).

		Consequent M (AC)				M2 (SC)				Y (PSER)		
Antecedent		**β**	**SE**	**P**		**β**	**SE**	**P**		**β**	**SE**	**P**
AS (X)	a1	-.34	.02	.000	a2	.36	.08	.000	c	-.00	.03	0.900
AC (M1)									b1	-.07	.04	0.001
SC (M2)									b2	.81	.01	0.001
Constant	I	63.19	.74	.000	i	113.64	5.47	.000	i	21.69	3.45	0.001
		R^2=.11, F(1,722)= 96.70 P=.000***				R^2=.36, F(2,721)= 209.27 P=.000***				R2=.60, F(3,720)= 367.25 P=.000***		

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001.

There was a significant relationship among attachment styles, active coping, self-criticism and psychosocial and emotional reactions (Table 2).

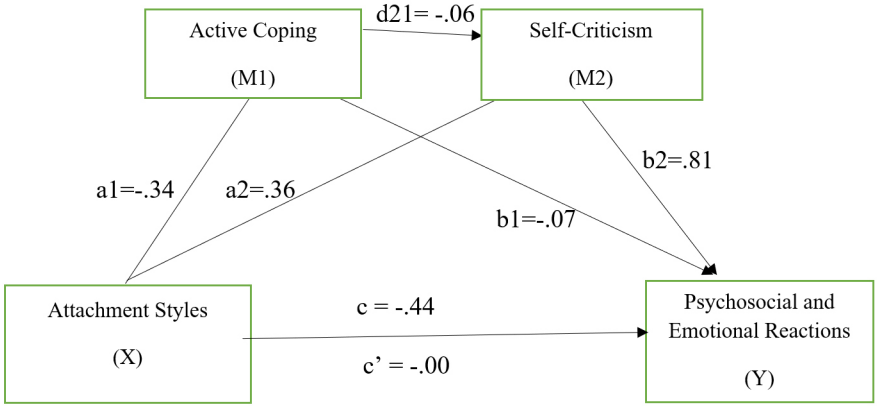

Figure: Mediating role of active coping (Mediators 1) and self-criticism (Mediators 2) in the association between attachment styles (X) and psychosocial and emotional reactions (Y).

Attachment styles had an effect on psychosocial and emotional reactions (β=-0.44, SE=0.04, p<0.001), active coping (β=-0.34, SE=0.02, p<0.001) and self-criticism (β=0.36, SE=0.08, p<0.001). The direct effect of active coping on psychosocial and emotional reactions (β=-0.07, SE=0.04, p<0.001) was significant, and the direct effect of self-criticism on psychosocial and emotional reactions (β=0.81, SE=00.01, p<0.001) was also significant. Active coping's effect on self-criticism (β=-0.06, SE=0.03, p<0.001) was also significant. Active coping and self-criticism significantly fully mediated the relationship between attachment styles and psychosocial and emotional reactions (β=0.00, SE=0.03, p<0.900) (Figure).

The total indirect effect of attachment styles on psychosocial and emotional reactions through active coping and self-criticism was significant (point estimate=-0.44; 95% BCa CI: -0.51- -0.38). The indirect effect of attachment styles on psychosocial and emotional reactions through active coping (point estimate=0.03; 95% BCa CI: .01-0.05) and through self-criticism (point estimate=-0.36; 95% BCa CI: -0.43--0.29) were also significant (Table 3).

Table-3: Indirect effects of attachment styles (AS) on psychosocial and emotional reactions (PSER) through active coping (AC) and self-criticism (SC).

	Product of Coefficients		Bootstrapping 95% Bias-Corrected and Accelerated Confidence Interval	
Effects	**Point Estimates**	**SE**	**Lower**	**Upper**
Total Indirect Effects	-.44	.03	-.51	-.38
AS—>AC—>PSER	.03	.00	.01	.05
AS—>SC—>PSER	-.36	.03	-.43	-.29
AS—>AC—>SC—>PSER	-.12	.01	-.15	-.09

SE: Standard error.

Discussion

There was a significant negative relationship among attachment styles, active coping, self-criticism and psychosocial and emotional reactions in young adults with dating violence. The findings were consistent with literature.[1] The finding that attachment styles, self-criticism and psychological distress were interconnected was also in line with an earlier study.[29] Also, the finding that there was an association among attachment styles, life satisfaction and psychological resilience in university students was consistent with literature.[30]

The current findings indicated that active coping and self-criticism were positive significant mediators in the association of attachment styles and psychosocial and emotional reactions in young adults with dating violence. This suggested that young adults with insecure attachment styles were more likely to engage in active coping strategies and self-criticism, which in turn

exacerbated their psychosocial and emotional reactions. The findings were consistent with literature.[31] Furthermore, the current finding that coping strategies were the significant mediator between the relationship of attachment styles and perceived stress was in line with earlier reports.[31]

The current research is a unique addition to the existing body of literature. The limitation of the study that participants were form different private and government universities of Lahore only and data was collected with great difficulties so it was difficult to maintain equal proportion of men and women. Despite the limitations, the current findings suggest that healthcare providers and student counsellors need to understand the negative psychosocial and emotional consequences for young adults living with dating violence, and provide appropriate psychological, emotional and social support.

Conclusion

There was a negative significant relationship among attachment styles, active coping, self-criticism and psychosocial and emotional reactions in young adults with dating violence. The active coping and self-criticism were significant mediators in the association of attachment styles and psychosocial and emotional reactions.

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SR: Concept, preparation, editing, revision, data collection, data entry, statistical analysis and data interpretation.
SS & STZ: Concept, preparation, editing and revision.