

Attachment Patterns, Dating Violence, and Coping Strategies as Predictors of Psychological Distress in University Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between Attachment Styles, Dating Violence, Coping Responses and Psychological Distress through a Correlational Cross Sectional Research Design. Purposive sampling was utilized to gather data from N=400 participants by using the Urdu translated version of the Attachment Styles Questionnaire, Brief Cope Scale, Dating Violence

Scale and Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale. It was hypothesized that there will be a positive relationship between anxious preoccupied attachment, fearful avoidant attachment, dismissive ambivalent attachment, verbal and physical violence, psychological violence, emotion focused coping responses and psychological distress and negative relationship between secure attachment, problem focused coping responses and psychological distress. Findings revealed that anxious- preoccupied attachment was positively related to depression, anxiety, and stress. Fearful-avoidant attachment is positively related to depression and stress, but negatively to anxiety. Secure attachment is negatively related to depression, anxiety and stress. Verbal and physical violence and psychological violence are positively related to depression anxiety and stress. Problem-focused coping is significantly positively related with depression, anxiety and stress. Regression analysis revealed that anxious preoccupied and fearful avoidant attachment are the significant positive predictors of depression. Verbal and physical violence and psychological violence are the significant positive predictors of anxiety. Avoidant coping is a significant negative predictor of stress. This study will have implication in designing interventions that promote healthy attachment and coping strategies among students.

Keywords: attachment styles, dating violence, coping responses, psychological distress, university students

Introduction

When a student transitions from college to university, they bring with them a complex blend of expectations, uncertainties, and emotional ambiguities (Rebecca, 2021). This shift marks a significant developmental milestone, often characterized by increased academic demands, greater personal responsibility, and a new social environment. When a student moves from one educational level to another, such as from elementary to middle school or to high school, this time can act as a source of excitement, anxiety, and anticipation. It opens new horizons of opportunities, gives chances to make new friends, and new experiences. Yet, they also bring a sense of the uncertainty, where unfamiliar surroundings, new academic expectations, and social adjustments are present and students are expected to adjust to them (Ephraim, 2023).

The university phase, therefore, is not just an academic progression but a transformative journey that can profoundly shape a student's personal, emotional, and psychological growth. Hence, university students face many emotional and mental health challenges. The findings of a study suggest that academic stress has a major impact on students' emotional wellbeing and their academic success, and the research greatly emphasizes the important impact of academic stress on both academic performance and emotional health. The study also lends credence to the idea that a student's emotional health has a significant impact on how well they perform academically (Abdullah, Ali, & Alam, 2024).

Moreover, a study also suggests that good relationships bring security and happiness, while unhealthy relationships cause stress or anxiety in students. Loving interpersonal relationships in this important phase of life can influence personal growth and development. They provide opportunities for self-discovery, enhance communication skills, build trust, and build empathy (Arora, 2023).

Around 86 million young people between the ages of 15-19 years have been accounted with a diagnosed mental health condition. 50 percent at the age of 14 years and 75 percent by mid-20s. It implies that emotional problems are especially prevalent in situations where students are at the peak of their academic blossoming: the transition from secondary school to college and University (International Medical University, 2023).

The psychosocial development theory proposed by Erik Erikson identifies eight lifespan stages that are characterized by a psychological conflict that defines personality. Starting with Trust vs. Mistrust (infancy), where hope is developed, then Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt, the development of confidence or doubt. Early childhood involves Initiative vs. Guilt which promotes the mastery of the environment whereas Industry vs. Inferiority (school age) emphasizes mastery of skill and competence. Teenagers experience Identity vs. Role Confusion, where there is the

need to have a sense of consistency, and young adults experience Intimacy vs. Isolation, which involves the establishment of intimate relationships. Generativity vs. Stagnation is faced in middle adulthood, which focuses on giving to the society, and lastly, in late adulthood, there is the Integrity vs. Despair, which focuses on evaluating life as either wise or regretful. Effective completion of every step facilitates the growth and wellbeing (Shuyan Sheng, 2024).

Attachment styles are based on experiences of the early childhood and therefore are very important determinants of emotional bonds and behavior of individuals in relationships at any point in life. Based on the attachment theory formulated by Bowlby, four major styles exist, namely secure, anxious, avoidant, and disorganized. Responsive caregivers help in achieving secure attachment, which subsequently results in trust, resilience and healthy relationships. In a longitudinal study conducted in the United States by Torghabeh, Leila & Arani, Somaye in 2024 on 144 dating couples, researchers studied the influence of attachment security on romantic relations. The results revealed that securely attached people were more secure in their relationship, more committed, more trusting and more satisfied than anxious and avoidant attached people. Further, securely attached individuals had positive emotions in relationships more often than negative emotions.

Anxious attachment is characterized by the fear of rejection and poor self-esteem, which results in disturbance and ambivalence towards the caregivers. Avoidant attachment is characterized by the lack of emotion and the inability to establish strong relationships, whereas disorganized attachment is characterized by contradictory attitudes towards intimacy and trust (Cherry, 2023). Killian K.D. (2018) also added five styles to it, namely, anxious-preoccupied (characterized by neediness and fear of being abandoned), fearful-avoidant (characterized by trauma and mistrust), merging (characterized by extreme emotional dependence), and dismissive-ambivalent (characterized by emotional distancing and self-reliance). These styles of attachment play a major role in adult romantic relationships, emotion regulation and social functioning and insecure attachments have mostly been associated with unstable relationships that are prone to conflicts. Moreover, although early abuse may predispose to intimate partner violence, the attachment styles provide a more comprehensive insight of relational patterns in relation to trauma only (Dutton & White, 2012).

Dating violence encompasses a spectrum of behaviors, including verbal, physical aggression, and emotional/ psychological manipulation, each with significant implications for individuals' well-being. Verbal aggression, often a precursor to physical violence, involves using words to harm, intimidate, or control a partner. Studies indicate that individuals who engage in verbal aggression are more likely to escalate to physical violence, highlighting the importance of addressing verbal abuse in preventing more severe forms of dating violence (Chung, 2011).

Physical aggression during dating is characterized by slapping, pushing, or weapon aggression. Centers of disease control and prevention state that physical violence involves the aimful use of physical force that may result in injury. The rates of prevalence in college students show that one out of every 20-37% dating relationships involves physical aggression (Chung, 2011).

Emotional control and manipulation are two forms of dating violence that may have significant psychological consequences on the victims, although these are subtle and have the power to cause significant changes in victims. Individuals who fall under the category of statements like "Threatening to marry someone else" fall under the category of emotional manipulation and control. This indicates the use of psychological strategies aimed at inducing guilt, fear, or insecurity to dominate or control the partner. These behaviors involve systematic attempts to undermine a partner's sense of self-worth, autonomy, and decision-making capacity through psychological means. The emotional manipulation does not leave much trace, unlike physical aggression, and that is why it is especially difficult to detect and deal with (McNaughton, 2021).

However, research focusing specifically on college populations reveals more complex patterns, with one study reporting that 71.4% of college males endorsed engaging in psychological aggression, 18.2% endorsed engaging in physical assault, 33% endorsed engaging in sexual coercion, 7% endorsed injuring their partner, and 70% reported stalking behaviours. These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of dating violence and the need for comprehensive approaches to understanding and addressing these behaviours. Research examining emotion regulation in dating violence perpetration has revealed important connections between maladaptive coping strategies and aggressive behaviours in intimate relationships. These findings suggest that those who experience dating violence may also develop problematic coping patterns as a result of their trauma (Ali, 2011).

According to the COPE Inventory by Charles Carver (1989), coping strategies can be divided into three main types: problem-centered, emotion-centered, and avoidant coping. Problem oriented coping is working on the stressor, acting to respond or transform the stressor like planning, active coping and instrumental support. Emotion-focused coping is supposed to manage emotional distress as opposed to altering the stressor, such as seeking emotional support, acceptance, and positive reinterpretation. Poor coping mechanisms, including emotional release, withdrawal, and emotional distraction are some of the avoidant coping strategies that tend to worsen stress with time. The model created by Carver points out that people use different coping strategies depending on situations and effectiveness of different coping strategies and it varies based on whether the stressor is controllable or not.

Attachment theory claims that insecure attachment styles e.g., anxious or avoidant attachment can lead to the increased likelihood of experiencing dating violence. Such attachment styles can result in the development of maladaptive coping mechanisms by the individuals, including denial or withdrawal, in case of relationship stressors. Yet, these coping attempts might not be as effective as to reduce the impact, and this cycle of repeated attachment insecurity, dating violence, and coping problems can cause certain psychological distress, such as depression, anxiety and stress. Nikolov and Stoykov in 2025 used the Coping Strategies Inventory (CSI) and the Experiences in Close Relationships Questionnaire-Revised (ECR-R), they found significant associations between anxious attachment and maladaptive coping. Adolescents with higher levels of attachment-related anxiety were significantly less likely to engage in problem-focused coping strategies such as problem-solving, emotional expression, or seeking social support. Instead, they showed a strong tendency to rely on maladaptive emotion-focused strategies, including wishful thinking, self-criticism, and social withdrawal. Having a history of insecure attachment can lead to dating violence, which provokes coping mechanisms, but an ineffective coping mechanism leads to permanent mental health issues (Finch, 2024).

The term psychological distress is used to refer to the existence of emotional and mental health issues that may incorporate symptoms like depression, anxiety and stress. It implies that an individual is unable to cope with emotional or mental issues effectively which usually results in complications in everyday life. In recent times, psychological distress has received a lot of focus as a significant social problem particularly among the youth as they undergo individual transformations and tough social circumstances. In a study conducted by Declercq and Willemssen in 2006 in Belgium regarding the relationship between adult attachment style and psychological distress among 544 professionals who work in high-risk occupations, the researchers focused on the two groups, security company employees and representatives of the Belgium Red Cross. The findings indicated that secure attachment was linked to reduced psychological distress, which implies that it was protective in difficult workplaces. Insecure attachment styles on the other hand were associated with increased distress. The results of these studies emphasize that secure attachment is a protective factor against distress. Whereas insecure attachments, especially fearful-avoidant, can make individuals more susceptible to distress after exposure to stressful and dangerous work-related conditions.

Depression can make life difficult, as it causes one to be constantly sad, hopeless, self-demeaning and uninterested in doing the things that previously brought pleasure. It may affect sleep, appetite, concentration and even the ability to do daily tasks in more severe instances. People also tend to fear being abandoned and unsupported in case of unresolved emotional issues and this increases the effects of depression as well. More so, people with insecure attachment styles or dating violence

victims are susceptible to depressive symptoms, especially, when they lack effective coping mechanisms (Wang, 2023).

Research Question

What Is the Relationship Between Attachment Styles, Dating Violence, Coping Strategies and Psychological Distress in University Students?

Objectives

- To find out the relationship between Dating violence and coping responses.
- To explore the relationship between coping responses and psychological distress.

Implications

The results of the research have significant implications on universities and mental health care practitioners and policymakers who are interested in student wellbeing. Through studying the impact of the attachment styles on dating violence and depression, this study demonstrates the need to discuss the relational styles and the coping strategies of the university students. Such understandings can be used in counselling practice to inform the creation of interventions that facilitate safe attachment and more coping skills, which ultimately lessen the probability of violence and depressive consequences. Besides, the research highlights on the importance of enlightenment and peer-support programs that provide safer and conducive university settings. On a wider scale, the results can help policymakers and educators to develop unified campus-based systems that should integrate psychological incentives with violence-prevention strategies to enhance the personal resilience of individuals and the general wellbeing of the so-called higher education centers.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is to investigate the relationship between attachment styles, dating violence, coping responses and psychological distress in university students. University life marks a pivotal developmental phase filled with academic pressure, identity exploration, and evolving interpersonal relationships, all of which contribute to increased psychological vulnerability. As students transition into adulthood, they often face emotional challenges stemming from academic stress, changing social environments, and the complexities of romantic relationships. Despite the serious consequences of dating violence and poor coping strategies on mental health, many universities lack integrated frameworks that examine how these elements interact and influence student well-being (Nicoletti & Alexandra, 2025).

This study will help universities and mental health professionals understand how attachment styles contribute to dating violence and psychological

distress. It will assist counsellors in developing interventions that promote secure attachment and healthier coping strategies. This study will help in designing awareness programs and peer-support initiatives to address dating violence and student wellbeing.

Hypothesis

- There will be a positive relationship between anxious preoccupied attachment, fearful avoidant attachment, dismissive ambivalent attachment, verbal and physical violence, psychological violence, emotion focused coping responses and psychological distress.
- There will be a negative relationship between secure attachment, problem focused coping responses and psychological distress.
- Anxious preoccupied attachment, fearful avoidant attachment, dismissive ambivalent attachment, verbal and physical violence, psychological violence, emotion focused coping responses will be positive predictors of psychological distress.
- Secure attachment, problem focused coping will be negative predictors of psychological distress.

Conceptual Framework

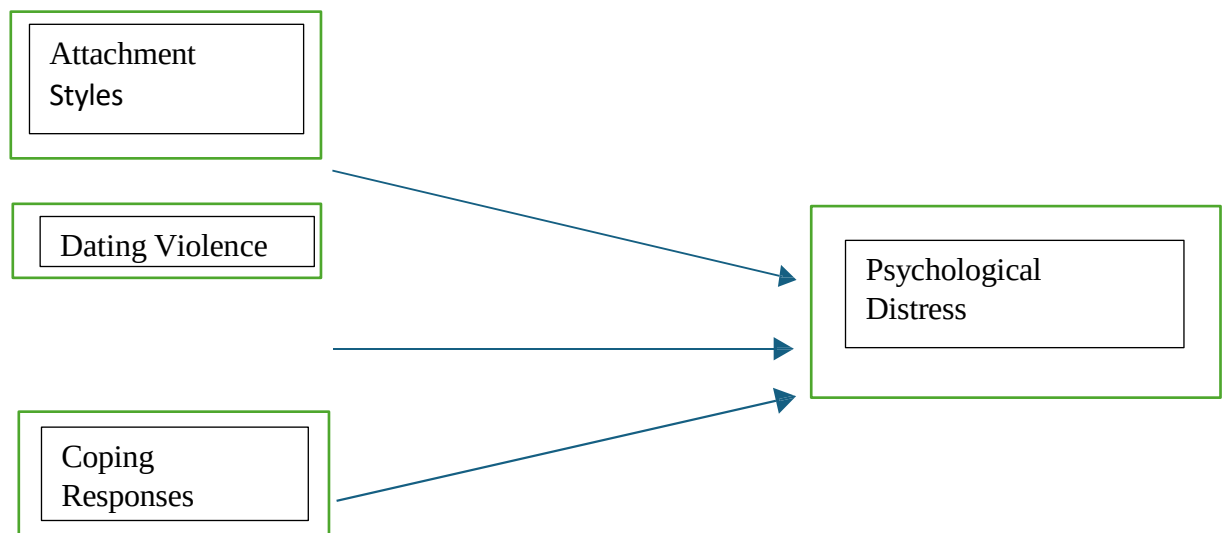


Figure 1: Hypothetical Model of Attachment Styles, Dating Violence, Coping Responses and Psychological Distress in University Students

Method

Research design

A correlational cross-sectional research design was used to examine the relationships between attachment styles, dating violence, coping responses, and psychological distress among university students in Lahore.

Sampling strategy

In the study, purposive sampling is used, which is defined by Bisht (2024) as a non-random method in which the participants are selected based on the expertise and the knowledge of the researcher on purpose.

Sample size

A total of 400 university students, aged between 18 to 25 years, were included in the sample. Of these, 200 participants were from private universities and 200 from government universities in Lahore, equal proportion of gender ensuring a balanced representation across institutional types.

Inclusion

- University students aged 18-25
- Currently in or previously involved in a romantic relationship

Exclusion

- The selected participant must not have any physical or psychological disabilities.
- Participants who are unwilling to discuss aspects of their romantic relationships will be excluded.

Measures

Demographic Sheet

A self-constructed demographic sheet was used in this study to collect background information from the participants. It included age, gender, education level, family system, relationship status, duration of last relationship, experience of dating violence, and type of dating violence experienced.

Attachment Style Questionnaire (Killian K.D., 2018)

Attachment Styles Questionnaire (ASQ) is a standardized self-report questionnaire by the researcher Kyle D. Killian (2018), based on previous models by Collins (1996) and Griffin & Bartholomew (1994) to measure the attachment styles in

adults. The scale has 20 items. ASQ scale has been further divided up in to 5 subscales names as preoccupied anxious attachment, fearful avoidant attachment, secure attachment, merging attachment and finally dismissive-ambivalent attachment. In this research the Urdu translated version of the scale has been used.

Brief COPE Inventory (Carver, 1979)

This is a standardized self-report scale developed by Carver (1997) to assess coping strategies. It consists of 28 items in total. The scale contains 3 subscales, including problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and avoidant coping strategies. Urdu translated version was used.

Dating Violence Scale (Rehman S., Saleem S. & Zahra S.T., 2024)

This is a indigenous self-report scale designed to assess individuals' experiences of dating violence within romantic relationships. The scale consists of 34 items and divided up into 2 subscales namely verbal and physical aggression while the other one being emotional or psychological aggression.

Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995)

This is a standardized scale developed by Lovibond (1995) to assess psychological distress across three subscales: depression, anxiety, and stress. The scale contains 21 items, with 7 items for each subscale. Participants responded to each item using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 to 3. Urdu translated version was used.

Procedure

Departmental permission was taken to conduct the present study. Permissions were taken from the relevant authors to use the tools. Permission was also taken from different public and private universities for data collection. Before initiating the process of main study, pilot study was conducted to assess the level of comprehension of the questionnaire's items. During the data collection the questionnaires were distributed to the university students of the different departments after taking the informed consent. The data was analyses through Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS-26).

Results**Table 1**

Frequencies and Percentages of Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Participants (N= 400)

Variables	<i>f</i>	%
Gender		
Male	160	40
Female	240	60
Educational level		
BS	368	92
MS/ MPhil	32	8
Family system		
Nuclear	278	69.5
Joint	122	30.5
Duration of relationship		
Less than 6 months	82	20.5
6-12 months	72	18.0
1-2 years	147	36.8
More than 2 years	99	24.8
Type of dating violence		
Verbal and physical	261	65.3
Psychological	139	34.8

Note. *f*=Frequency, %= Percentage.

The frequency distribution table shows that 400 participants were used as a sample and 40 percent of them were males and 60 percent were females. Most of them (92 percent) were undertaking BS programs and 8 percent offered MS/M.Phil. The majority of respondents were found to be living in nuclear families (69.5%), whereas the other 30.5 percent lived in joint family systems. Individuals in

relationships, 20.5 percent had been together less than six months, 18 percent 6 to 12 months, 36.8 percent one to 2 years and 24.8 percent more than 2 years. Regarding the dating violence experiences, 65.3 and 34.8 have experienced verbal and physical, and psychological violence respectively.

Table 2

Mean and Standard Deviation of Age of Participants (N=400)

Variable	M	SD
Age	21.20	1.883

Note. M = mean, SD = standard deviation

The above table indicates that the mean age is 21.20 and the standard deviation is 1.88.

Table 3

Psychometric Properties for Anxious Preoccupied, Fearful Avoidant, Secure, Merging, Dismissive Ambivalent Attachment, Verbal and Physical Dating Violence, Psychological Dating Violence, Problem Focused Coping, Emotion Focused Coping and Avoidant Coping, Depression, Anxiety, Stress. (N=400)

Variables	M	SD	5% trimmed mean	Skewness	Kurtosis	α
Anxious Preoccupied Attachment	8.85	3.74	8.89	0.12	-0.95	0.60
Fearful Avoidant Attachment	7.04	2.44	7.02	0.24	-0.59	0.61
Secure Attachment	6.15	3.18	6.04	0.23	0.04	0.70
Merging Attachment	7.41	3.52	7.30	0.42	-0.81	0.66
Dismissive Attachment	8.46	3.40	8.33	0.52	-0.79	0.84
Verbal and Physical Violence	23.83	8.28	23.44	0.39	0.91	0.84

Psychological Violence	51.02	10.69	51.30	-0.56	-0.74	0.87
Problem Focused Coping	13.74	4.38	13.95	-1.01	0.65	0.61
Emotion Focused Coping	20.52	5.92	20.68	-0.45	-0.15	0.64
Avoidant Focused Coping	10.73	4.66	10.93	-0.32	1.78	0.60
Depression	11.28	5.03	11.36	-0.39	-0.69	0.76
Anxiety	9.24	5.12	9.18	0.04	-0.94	0.80
Stress	11.53	4.58	11.59	-0.21	-0.88	0.72

Note. *M* = mean, *SD* = standard deviation, α = Chronbach's alpha

The descriptive statistics for the study variables are presented in Table 3. The finding indicates that the values of mean and 5% trimmed mean are almost equal. Moreover, the skewness kurtosis value lies between the range of +3 to -3 which confirms that data is normally distributed.

This table shows the descriptive statistics and reliabilities of the subscales of study variables. It shows that the anxious preoccupied attachment, fearful avoidant attachment, secure attachment, merging attachment has a good value of reliability. Whereas, dismissive ambivalent attachment has a very good value of reliability as 0.84. Verbal and physical violence and psychological violence also has a very good value of reliability. Problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and avoidant coping also have a good value of reliability. The values of depression, anxiety, and stress also lie between a good to very good range of reliability.

Table 4

Inter-factor correlations among attachment styles, dating violence, coping responses, and Psychological Distress in university students

Measures	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Anxious Preoccupied Attachment	8.85	3.74	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2. Fearful Avoidant Attachment	7.04	2.44	.58***	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
3. Secure Attachment	6.15	3.18	.19***	.38***	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

4. Merging Attachment	7.41	3.52	.48***	.37***	.14***	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
5. Dismissive Ambivalent Attachment	8.46	3.40	.30***	.29***	.39***	.26***	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
6. Verbal and Physical Violence	23.83	8.28	.41**	.17***	-.13***	-.06	-.37***	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
7. Psychological Violence	51.02	10.69	.03	.07	-.33***	-.26***	-.27***	.62***	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
8. Problem Focused Coping	13.74	4.38	.41***	.29***	.28***	.27***	.02	.37***	.05	-	-	-	-	-	-
9. Emotion Focused Coping	20.52	5.92	.32***	.15***	.22***	.25***	.23***	.23***	.14***	.73***	-	-	-	-	-
10. Avoidant Coping	10.73	4.66	.24	.23	.08	.24	.02	.30	.14	.68	.68	-	-	-	-
11. Depression	11.28	5.03	.36***	.16***	-.09	-.18***	-.29***	.61***	.51**	.49***	.36***	.23***	-	-	-
12. Anxiety	9.24	5.12	.30***	-	-.24***	-.07	-.32***	.69***	.53**	.35***	.34***	.35***	.67***	-	-
13. Stress	11.53	4.58	.32***	.12***	-.07	.19***	.07	.31***	.48**	.34***	.40***	.21***	.65***	.54***	-

Note. M= mean, SD= standard deviation.

Pearson correlation was used to check the relationship between attachment styles, dating violence, coping responses and psychological distress. The results revealed that there is significant correlation between attachment styles, dating violence, coping responses and psychological distress. There is a significant positive relationship of anxious preoccupied attachment with depression, anxiety and stress. Fearful avoidant attachment has significant positive relationship with depression and stress and significant negative relationship with anxiety. Secure attachment has negative relationship with depression and anxiety and stress. Merging attachment has significant negative relationship with depression and anxiety significant positive relationship with stress. Dismissive ambivalent attachment has significant negative relationship with depression and anxiety and significant positive relationship with stress. Verbal and physical violence has significant positive relationship with depression, anxiety and stress. Psychological violence has significant positive relationship with depression, anxiety and stress. Problem focused coping has significant positive relationship with depression, anxiety and stress. Moreover, emotion focused coping and avoidant coping has significant positive relationship with depression, anxiety and stress.

Table 5

Multiple Linear Regression of Anxious Preoccupied, Fearful Avoidant, Secure, Merging, Dismissive Ambivalent Attachment, Verbal and Physical Dating Violence, Psychological Dating Violence, Problem Focused Coping, Emotion Focused Coping and Avoidant Coping with Depression in University Students (N=400)

Variables	B	SE	95% CI		β
			LL	UL	
Anxious Preoccupied Attachment	0.56	0.07	0.430	0.70	0.42***
Fearful Avoidant Attachment	0.09	0.09	-0.07	0.27	0.05
Secure attachment	-0.11	0.06	-0.22	0.02	-0.06
Merging Attachment	-0.49	0.06	-0.60	-0.39	-0.34***
Dismissive-Ambivalent Attachment	-0.44	0.06	-0.56	-0.32	-0.30***
Verbal and Physical Violence	-0.01	0.03	-0.08	0.05	-0.03
Psychological violence	0.14	0.21	0.10	0.19	0.30***
Problem-focused Coping	0.508	0.60	0.389	0.63	0.44***
Emotion-focused coping	0.17	0.05	0.08	0.26	0.21***
Avoidant coping	-0.27	0.05	-0.37	-0.18	-0.25***
R ²					0.68
F					83.25

Note. B= Unstandardized Beta, β = Standardized Beta, SE= Standard Error, LL= Lower Limit, UL= Upper Limit, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

The regression analysis was conducted to find predictors of Depression. The results suggested that all these independent variables jointly accounted for 68% variance on depression subscale of DASS-21. Furthermore, anxious preoccupied attachment and fearful avoidant are significant positive predictors of Depression while secure, merging and dismissive attachment are significant negative predictors of depression. Verbal and physical violence act as negative predictor of Depression while psychological Violence is a significant positive predictor of depression. Furthermore, Problem focused and emotion focused are significant positive predictors of depression while avoidant coping is significant negative predictor of Depression.

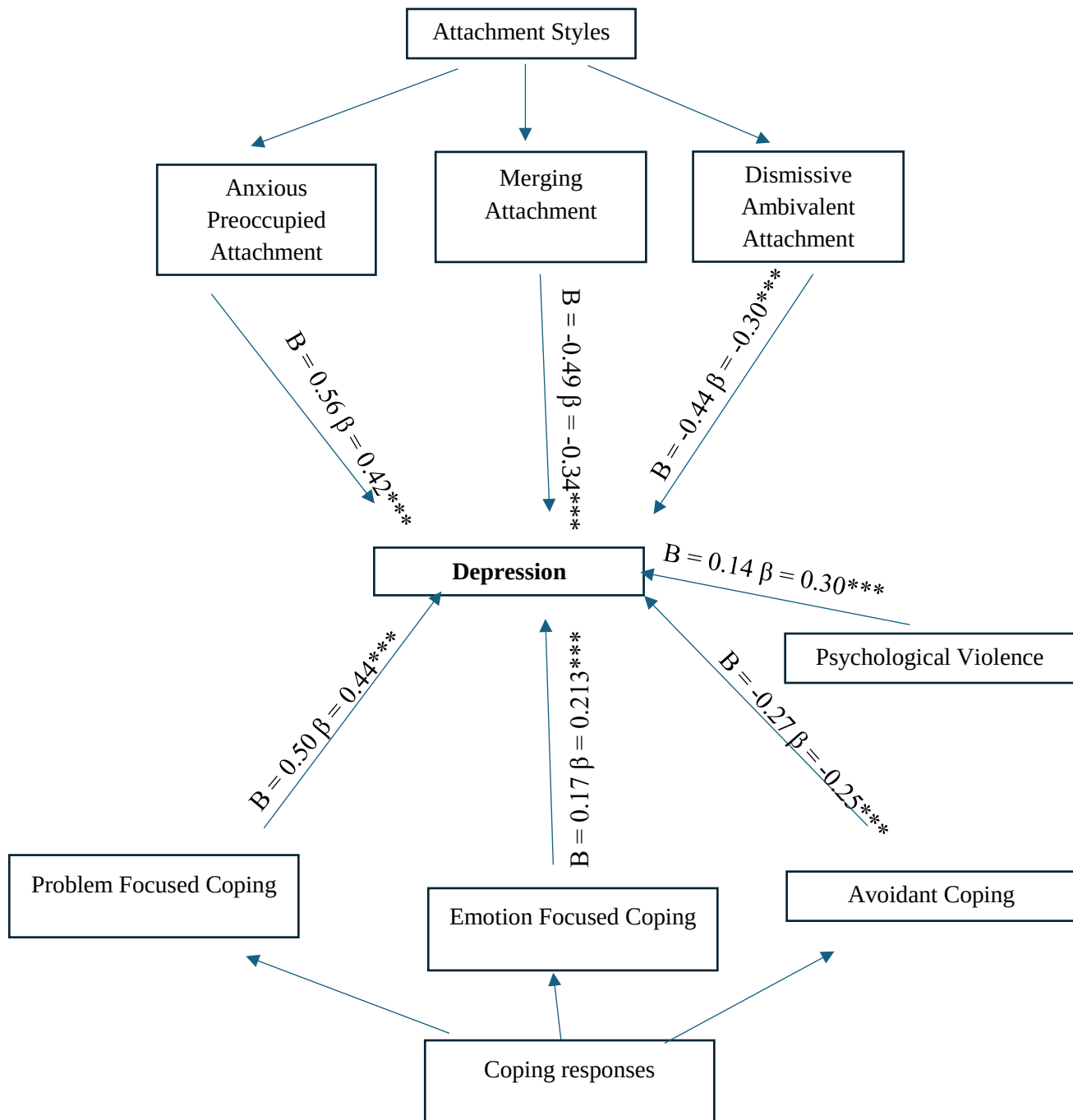


Figure 2: Emerged model representing predictive relation of anxious preoccupied, merging, dismissive ambivalent, psychological violence, problem focused coping, emotion focused coping, and avoidant coping responses to depression.

Table 6

Multiple Linear Regression of Anxious Preoccupied, Fearful Avoidant, Secure, Merging, Dismissive Ambivalent Attachment, Verbal and Physical Dating Violence, Psychological Dating Violence, Problem Focused Coping, Emotion Focused Coping and Avoidant Coping with Anxiety in University Students (N=400)

Variables	B	SE	95% CI		β
			LL	UL	
Anxious preoccupied attachment	0.600	0.069	0.438	-0.846	0.44***
Fearful avoidant attachment	-1.019	0.08	-1.19	-0.846	-0.48***
Secure attachment	0.040	0.061	-0.080	0.159	0.025
Merging Attachment	-0.06	0.053	-0.165	0.043	-0.04
Dismissive ambivalent Attachment	-0.207	0.062	-0.328	-0.086	-0.13**
Verbal and physical violence	0.169	0.03	0.104	0.234	0.28***
Psychological violence	0.144	0.022	0.101	0.186	0.30***
Problem focused coping	0.601	0.60	-0.059	0.180	0.052
Emotion focus coping	0.051	0.045	-0.037	0.139	0.059
Avoidant coping	0.180	0.049	0.084	0.276	0.16***
R ²					0.69
F					85.24

Note. B= Unstandardized Beta, β = Standardized Beta, SE= Standard Error, LL= Lower Limit, UL= Upper Limit, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Qualitative Interpretation

The regression analysis was conducted to find predictors of anxiety. The results suggested that all these independent variables jointly accounted for 69% variance on anxiety subscale of DASS-21. Furthermore, anxious preoccupied attachment and secure attachment are significant positive predictors of anxiety while fearful avoidant, merging and dismissive attachment are significant negative predictors of anxiety. Verbal and physical violence and psychological Violence act as significant positive predictors of anxiety. Furthermore, Problem focused, emotion focused and avoidant coping are significant positive predictors of anxiety.

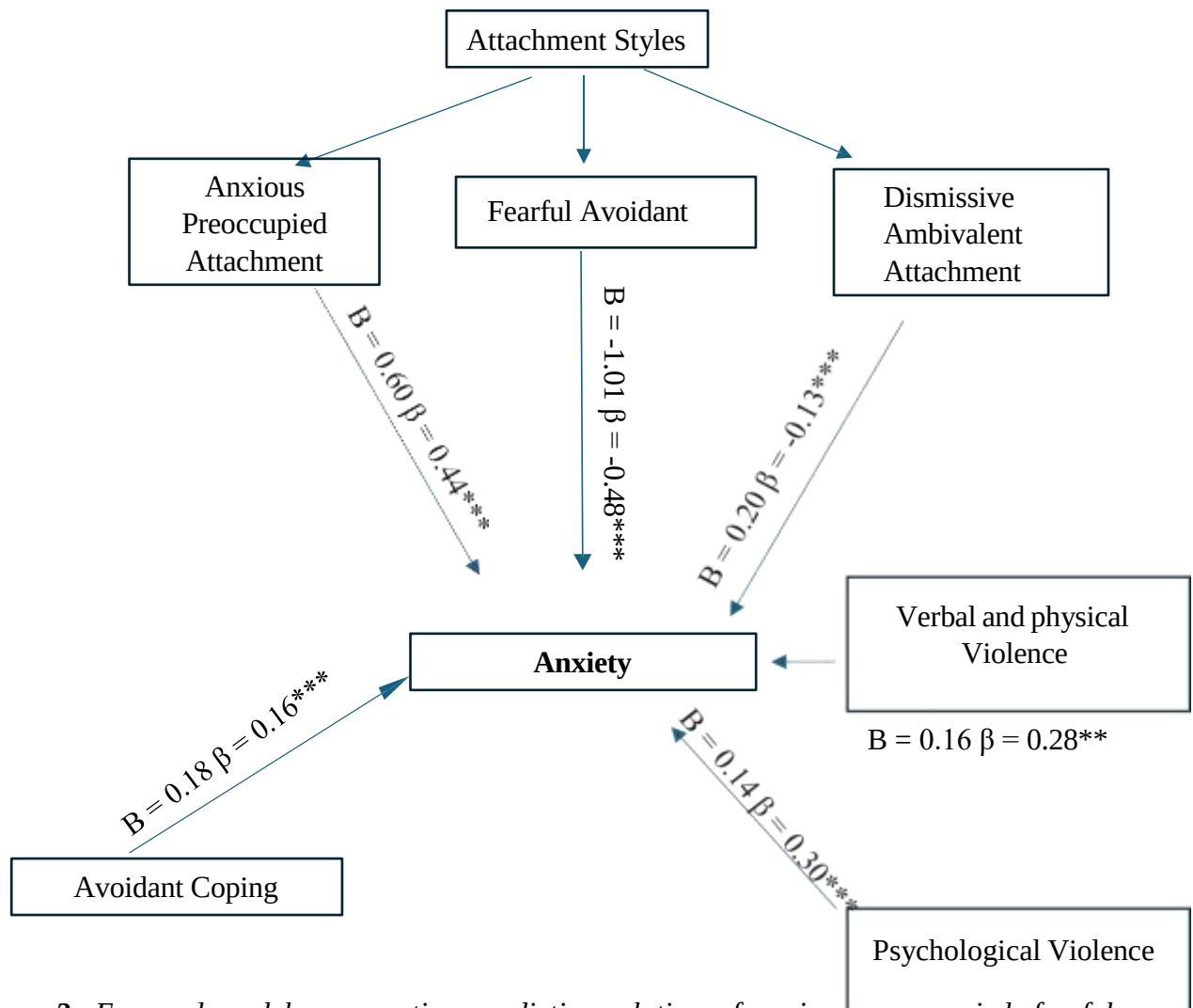


Figure 3: Emerged model representing predictive relation of anxious preoccupied, fearful avoidant, dismissive ambivalent, verbal and physical violence, psychological violence, and avoidant coping responses to anxiety.

Table 7

Linear Regression of Anxious Preoccupied, Fearful Avoidant, Secure, Merging, Dismissive Ambivalent Attachment, Verbal and Physical Dating Violence, Psychological Dating Violence, Problem Focused Coping, Emotion Focused Coping and Avoidant Coping with Stress in University Students (N=400)

Variables		B	SE	95% CI		β
				LL	UL	
Anxious	preoccupied	0.37	0.07	0.21	0.52	0.31***
Attachment						
Fearful Avoidant Attachment		-0.41	0.10	-0.61	-0.212	-0.21***
Secure Attachment		0.40	0.061	-0.08	0.159	0.03
Merging Attachment		-0.06	0.053	-0.165	0.043	0.21***
Dismissive	Ambivalent	-0.207	0.062	-0.328	-0.08	0.028
Attachment						
Verbal And physical Attachment		0.169	0.03	0.104	0.234	-0.28***
Psychological Attachment		0.144	0.022	0.101	0.186	0.72***
Problem Focused Coping		0.601	0.60	-0.059	0.180	0.28***
Emotion Focused Coping		0.051	0.045	-0.037	0.139	0.14*
Avoidant Coping		0.180	0.049	0.084	0.276	-0.16**
R ²						0.49
F						36.73

Note. B= Unstandardized Beta, β = Standardized Beta, SE= Standard Error, LL= Lower Limit, UL= Upper Limit * $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$.

Qualitative Interpretation

The regression analysis was conducted to find predictors of stress. The results suggested that all these independent variables jointly accounted for 49% variance on stress subscale of DASS-21. Furthermore, anxious preoccupied, fearful avoidant, merging and dismissive attachment significant positive predictors of stress while secure attachment acts as a significant negative predictor of stress. Verbal and physical violence act as significant negative while and psychological Violence act as significant positive predictors of stress. Problem focused, emotion focused and are significant positive predictors of stress while avoidant coping responses act as significant negative predictor of stress.

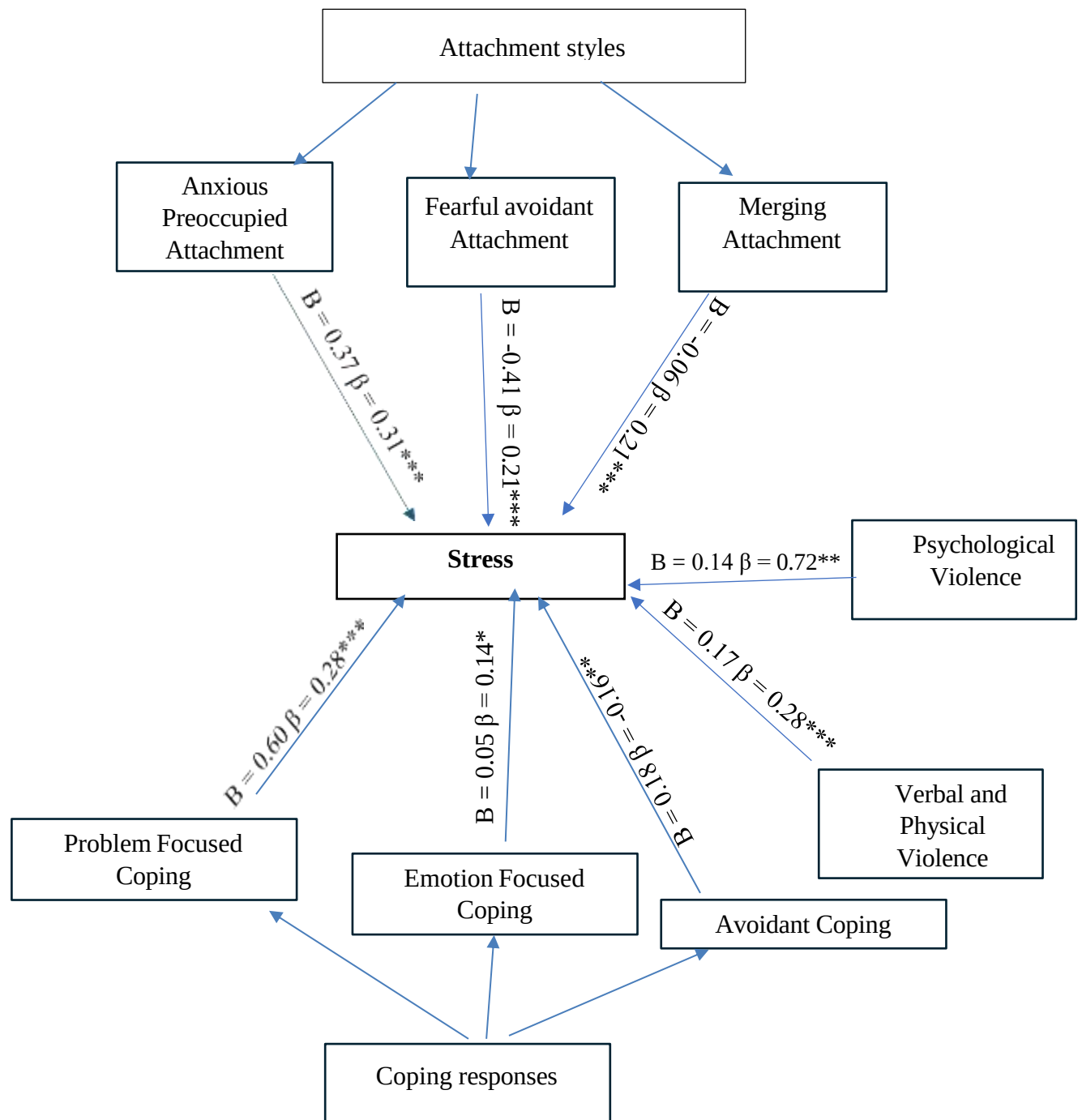


Figure 4: An emerged model representing the predictive relation of anxious preoccupied, fearful avoidant and merging attachment style, verbal and physical violence, psychological violence, problem-focused coping, emotion focused coping, and avoidant coping responses to stress

Discussion

The current research set out to determine a relationship between attachment styles and dating violence, coping and depression among university students. Validated scales were used to gather data on 400 students, and its findings were very insightful to explain how these variables interplay to influence mental health in young adults.

Hypothesis 1 was that there is positive relationship between anxious-preoccupied attachment, fearful-avoidant attachment, merging attachment, dismissive-ambivalent attachment, verbal and physical violence, psychological violence, emotion-focused coping responses, and avoidant coping strategies and psychological distress (Wadman, 2019). Anxious preoccupied attachment, verbal/physical violence, psychological violence, emotion-focused, and avoidant coping were positively associated with distress, consistent with previous findings (Wadman, 2019; Ciocca, 2020; McClure & Parmenter, 2017; Tarriño, 2022; Pang & Thomas, 2019; Manolov & Stoyanov, 2025). However, fearful avoidant attachment was negatively related to anxiety, and merging and dismissive ambivalent attachments negatively related to depression and anxiety. Literature suggests avoidant individuals may underreport distress due to emotional suppression (Aslam, 2025; Tucker & Anders, 1998; Holland & Roisman, 2011). Merging attachment may increase relational tension but not necessarily manifest as clinical distress (Tucker & Anders, 1998). Dismissive individuals may appear emotionally detached, reducing reported distress (Jackson, 2025).

The hypothesis 2 was that the secure attachment and strategies of problem-focused coping would have a negative significant relationship with psychological distress. Secure attachment was negatively associated with distress, supporting the hypothesis. Prior studies suggest secure individuals manage conflict better and experience less chronic stress (Collins & Feeney, 2012). Unexpectedly, problem-focused coping showed a positive correlation with depression, anxiety, and stress. This may be due to the ineffectiveness of such coping in the context of dating violence, where problems are often outside one's control, leading to increased frustration (Follingstad, 2009).

Hypothesis 3 stated that anxious preoccupied attachment, fearful avoidant attachment, dismissive ambivalent attachment, verbal and physical violence, psychological violence, emotion focused coping responses are positive predictors of depression, anxiety and stress. The hypothesis was partially confirmed as for depression, positive predictors included anxious preoccupied and merging attachments, psychological violence, problem-focused and emotion-focused coping. Dismissive ambivalent attachment and avoidant coping negatively predicted

depression, possibly due to emotional disengagement (Riggs & Jacobvitz, 2002). For anxiety, anxious preoccupied and fearful avoidant attachments, psychological and verbal/physical violence, problem-focused and avoidant coping were positive predictors. Dismissive ambivalent was a negative predictor (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 2009; Garthe, 2018; Lazarus & Folkman, 2019). For stress, anxious preoccupied and merging attachment, psychological violence, and both coping strategies were positive predictors. Fearful avoidant attachment, verbal/physical violence, and avoidant coping negatively predicted stress, possibly due to desensitization or suppression effects (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2010).

The fourth hypothesis, which stated that secure attachment and problem-focused coping would be negatively predictive of psychological distress, was not completely supported. Secure attachment was not a significant protective factor, likely due to the overwhelming impact of psychological violence or severe insecure attachments (Karreman & Vingerhoets, 2012). Problem-focused coping again emerged as a positive predictor, supporting the notion that it can worsen distress when applied to uncontrollable stressors like relationship violence (Compas, 2001).

Limitations

- The use of self-report measures can contribute to social desirability and response bias on sensitive issues such as violence and psychological symptoms.
- The sample had been restricted to university students, which can be limiting to the generalizability to other age groups or socio-economic populations.
- The study relied only on self-report measures, which may have introduced response bias or social desirability effects.
- Other factors including social support, personality traits, and severity/time in experiencing violence were not taken into consideration in the study. Moreover, factors such as family background, socioeconomic status, or past trauma were not controlled for and may have influenced the results.

Recommendations

- There is a necessity of larger, more diverse samples that involve non-student audiences and other cultural backgrounds to enhance the potential of generalization.
- Future studies can be conducted with a larger number of participants to strengthen the reliability of the findings.
- Research should be extended to include participants from different age groups and backgrounds to make comparisons across populations.

- Longitudinal studies are recommended to explore how attachment styles and coping strategies influence distress over time.
- Awareness programs in universities can be designed to educate students about healthy coping and relationship patterns.

Conclusion

The current research paper aimed at exploring the multifaceted relationships between attachment styles, dating violence, coping mechanisms, and depression in the student population. These results indicated an increased depression level to be positively linked with anxious-preoccupied and merging attachment and psychological violence as well as problem-focused and emotion-focused coping responses. On the other hand, avoidant coping responses, and dismissive-ambivalent attachment were negatively associated with depression, and it is possible that detachment and avoidance restrain conscious awareness of depressive symptoms. Fearful-avoidant attachment was mixed, but not only had negative correlations with depression, but also positive correlations with depression in other cases, the paradoxical function of suppression-based coping.

Notably, the findings showed that psychological violence was equally harmful as verbal and physical violence, and it has become one of the powerful predictors of depression. Gender disparities were also used to note that there were more depressive symptoms among female students and exposure to violence. The factor of family structure also contributed as the joint family living was associated with higher levels of depression and lower levels of insecure attachment. Taken together, these results highlight the complex and even contradictory links between attachment styles, coping strategies and relational trauma. They also stress the necessity of further studies of the interaction of these variables in the development of depression in university students and the need to develop specific interventions that would alleviate the impact of dating violence and support the development of healthier attachment and coping styles in the academic environment.

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