

## Research Paper

## Addiction and Attachment in Romantic Relationships: A Study on Young People

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Received: 16 Oct 2024

Accepted: 05 Mar 2025

Publish: 01 Jul 2025

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## Introduction

The existence and quality of relationships are the main indicators of happiness and satisfaction in all developmental stages from infancy to old age [1]. People establish relationships with others through their search for love, belonging, and emotional closeness [2]. The dependency developed in romantic relationships can be defined as a behavioural situation that arises due to the need for intimacy and belonging and is effective in the individual's emotional and cognitive context [3]. Furthermore, emotional dependence, which is accepted as the cornerstone of romantic relationships, is also defined as the harmonisation of emotional experiences and behaviours that occur in close relationships over time [4]. Addiction in romantic relationships negatively impacts the individual's life. In the case of addiction, the individual cannot get out of the relationship and becomes trapped in a cycle. He or she sees his or her partner as an addictive substance. Addiction in romantic relationships is characterized by maintaining unhealthy and painful relationships, suffering in the absence of a loved one, and making the relationship the centre of life [3].

It is argued that partners in romantic relationships can change and influence each other's emotions due to frequent interactions, meet their emotional needs, and thus develop emotional dependence by harmonising their emotions over time [4]. Columbus and Molho [5] explained that dependency in romantic relationships has three dimensions based on the dependency theory. These dimensions are interdependence or the degree to which both individuals control each other's behaviour, conflict of interest and compatibility or the degree to which one individual's gain is the other's loss, and relative power or the degree to which one individual has more control over the other's behaviour.

Romantic relationships benefit young adults' lives in many ways [6]. When romantic relationships are healthy and positive, they enable the development of healthy social relationships, provide a source of support, increase longevity, affect life satisfaction, support subjective well-being, are effective in reducing the risk of depression and anxiety, protect against psychological distress, and are even associated with positive physical health outcomes [7, 8]. Furthermore, emotional dependence in romantic relationships can lead to a range of negative emotional outcomes, including dating violence, anxious-depressive symptoms, obsessive thoughts, sleep disturbances, and withdrawal from social relationships [9, 10]. Young people in romantic relationships tend to be serious and feel

strongly in love [11]. Research shows that young people under the age of 25 often experience unhealthy romantic relationships [12]. Accordingly, it is important to support young people in developing healthy romantic relationships and to ensure that they gain awareness. In this context, it has been observed that educational activities positively impact the development of competence skills in romantic relationships [13, 14].

One of the most stressed variables in the context of romantic relationships is attachment style, which influences the feelings, thoughts, and behaviours of the person in the romantic relationship [15]. Bowlby and Bowlby [1] believed that the experience of early parent-child relationships shapes people's internal working patterns. There are four types of attachment relationships in early childhood: Secure, avoidant, anxious-ambivalent, and chaotic. While the sense of trust in caregiving is at the forefront of attachment in infancy or childhood, the reciprocal relationship is at the forefront of attachment in adulthood [16]. Research has shown that attachment experience strongly predicts romantic relationships in adulthood. Securely attached people easily form intimate relationships and rarely worry about being approached or rejected by someone.

In contrast, insecurely attached people accept that others do not like them, and romantic relationships are difficult to find and rarely survive [17, 18]. Attachment styles also affect individuals' partner choices, thoughts about marriage, mate selection criteria, preferences, and perspective on their partner [19, 20]. Accordingly, these individuals may exhibit different behaviours in adult romantic relationships. Research results have shown that secure attachment has a positive effect on addiction in romantic relationships as well as on all processes of life [21, 22].

Establishing and maintaining romantic relationships is one of adulthood's most important developmental tasks [23]. Romantic relationships and their satisfaction are positively associated with individuals' wellbeing, happiness and life satisfaction [24]. It is believed that people's romantic relationships give meaning to their lives and it has been scientifically established that romantic relationships have various effects on human life [24]. In this context, given the importance of secure attachment of individuals to people who are important to them in adulthood, as in all stages of life, it is believed that determining the relationship between addiction and attachment styles in romantic relationships and identifying the predictor variables will benefit public mental health. In the relevant literature, it has been observed that addiction and attachment styles in romantic relationships have

been addressed in different studies. Still, no study has examined these two variables together. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the relationship between addiction in romantic relationships and attachment styles of young people. Another aim of this study is to show whether addiction in romantic relationships and attachment styles differ according to the sociodemographic characteristics of young people. The other objectives defined under this main objective are as follows:

1) What are the addiction levels of young people in romantic relationships? 2) What is the attachment style of young people? 3) Are there any relationships between the addiction and attachment styles of young people in romantic relationships and their demographic characteristics? 4) Are there any relationships between young people's addictions in romantic relationships and their attachment styles?

## Methods

### Research model and study participants

This descriptive, cross-sectional, and correlational study was conducted in Turkey between January and June 2024. In this study, the convenience sampling method was applied. The study participants comprised 456 volunteer students attending undergraduate programmes related to health sciences at a university. The sample size was determined using G\*Power software, version 3.1.9.7, which is used when the population is known. Convenience sampling, rather than probability sampling, was used to increase participation in the research. As a result, the generalisability of the research results is limited. The study was carried out voluntarily, and each participant was asked to agree to participate voluntarily. The inclusion criteria were being 18 years or older, volunteering for the study, and finishing the forms completely. The exclusion criteria were the opposite.

### Data collection tools

Demographic information form, addiction in romantic relationships scale (ARRS) and three-dimensional attachment style scale (TDASS) were used as data collection tools.

### Demographic information form

The researchers prepared the demographic information form. It consists of questions about the sociodemographic characteristics of young people.

### ARRS

The ARRS was developed by Atlam et al. [25] to measure the level of dependency in romantic relationships. The 4-point Likert-type scale has 13 items: 1=never, 2=sometimes, 3=frequently, 4=always. There are no reverse items in the scale. The scale has three dimensions: Dedication, withdrawal and obsession. The total Cronbach  $\alpha$  value of the scale was found to be 0.87, 0.82 for the dedication dimension, 0.83 for the deprivation dimension, and 0.74 for the obsession dimension, as the score obtained from the scale increases, relationship dependency increases.

### TDASS

The TDASS was developed by Erzen [26] to measure attachment styles. The 5-point Likert scale has 18 items: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=partially agree, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree. There are no reverse items in the scale. The scale consists of 3 dimensions: Secure attachment style, avoidant attachment style, and anxious-ambivalent attachment style. The Cronbach  $\alpha$  coefficients are 0.80, 0.69 and 0.71 for avoidant, secure and anxious-ambivalent attachment styles.

### Data collection and analysis

The data were collected during the students' free time outside of class hours at school. The questionnaire form was completed by the students in small groups at school. Each student took about 20 minutes to complete the form.

Descriptive analyses were performed using percent-ages and means. Skewness and kurtosis tests were used to determine whether the data were normally distributed. Differences between binary variables were assessed by a t-test in independent groups, and three or more variables were evaluated by a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). The Tukey post hoc test was used to determine which group was responsible for the difference. The Pearson correlation coefficient assessed the relationship between variables. The statistical significance level was set as 0.05 and SPSS software, version 25 was used in the analyses. The cut-off points used in interpreting the correlation coefficients obtained are as follows: 0.00-0.19 very low, 0.20-0.39 low, 0.40-0.69 moderate, 0.70-0.89 high and 0.90-1.00 very high correlation.

## Results

Of 456 participants who participated in the study, 96.1% (n=438) were female and 3.9% (n=8) were male. Most participants were aged 20-21 years (41.4%). Although there were more undergraduate students (71.7%), most participants (43.4%) were in their first year. More than half of the participants (56.8%) were in a romantic relationship and the relationship duration was mostly between 0 and 1 year.

The mean addiction score in romantic relationships of the young people participating in the study was determined as 2.03. The mean participants' dedication score in romantic relationships was lower than the others (1.79), and as the score obtained from the scale increases, relationship dependency increases. Therefore, since it has the highest mean score, it can be said that participants have obsessive addiction in their romantic relationships (2.29). In addition, the findings show that most participants have a secure attachment style (3.83) (Table 1).

Due to the data size, only those findings with significant differences were included in the analysis results Table. According to the results, the dedication levels of the males participating in the study were significantly higher (mean=2.10,  $P<0.05$ ), and the anxious-ambivalent attachment levels of the females were significantly higher (mean=2.74,  $P<0.05$ ). In addition, participants who continue their associate degree education have significantly higher levels of addiction in romantic relationships (mean=2.13,  $P<0.05$ ) and obsessional addiction in romantic relationships (mean=2.54,  $P<0.05$ ). Avoidant attachment levels (mean=2.48,  $P<0.05$ ) and anxious-ambivalent attachment levels of participants who continue their associate degree education are significantly higher than those of the others (mean=2.95,

$P<0.05$ ). Participants in romantic relationships had significantly higher levels of addiction in romantic relationships (mean=2.20,  $P<0.05$ ), dedication (mean=1.85,  $P<0.05$ ), withdrawal (mean=2.39,  $P<0.05$ ) and obsession (mean=2.49,  $P<0.05$ ). In addition, the secure attachment style of young people with romantic relationships is significantly higher (mean=3.89,  $P<0.05$ ). In addition, the anxious-ambivalent attachment levels of participants without romantic relationships were significantly higher than the others (mean=2.89,  $P<0.05$ ). As a result of the analysis by grade, it was found that the anxious-ambivalent attachment levels of the participants were significantly higher in favour of the participants in grade 1 (mean=2.90,  $P<0.05$ ) (Table 2).

According to the results of the correlation analysis, there is a significant, positive, and moderate relationship between the presence of a romantic relationship and the duration of the relationship ( $r=0.687$ ,  $P<0.001$ ). There is also a significant, negative, and weak relationship between the variables of addiction ( $r=-0.310$ ,  $P<0.001$ ), withdrawal ( $r=-0.387$ ,  $P<0.001$ ), and obsession ( $r=-0.263$ ,  $P<0.001$ ) in romantic relationships (Table 3).

There is a significant, positive and high correlation ( $r=0.855$ ,  $P<0.001$ ) between the addictions of participants in romantic relationships and dedication ( $r=0.814$ ,  $P<0.001$ ) and obsession ( $r=0.855$ ,  $P<0.001$ ), and a significant, positive and very high correlation ( $r=0.911$ ,  $P<0.001$ ) with withdrawal (Table 3).

There is a significant, positive, and very weak relationship between participants' addiction in romantic relationships and avoidant ( $r=0.095$ ,  $P<0.005$ ) and anxious-ambivalent attachment styles ( $r=0.146$ ,  $P<0.005$ ) (Table 3).

**Table 1.** Scale results

Scales	No.	Min	Max	Mean±SD
Addiction in romantic relationships	456	1	4	2.03±0.654
Dedication	456	1	4	1.79±0.626
Withdrawal	456	1	4	2.11±0.817
Obsession	456	1	4	2.29±0.872
Secure attachment style	456	1	5	3.83±0.585
Avoidant attachment style	456	1	5	2.31±0.678
Anxious-ambivalent attachment style	456	1	5	2.73±0.825



**Table 2.** Results of independent samples t-test, one-way ANOVA test and Tukey post hoc test analyses according to participants' gender, school type, romantic relationship status and grade variables

Variables			No.	Mean	ss	t	df	P
Gender	Dedication	Female	438	1.77	0.615	-2.179	454	0.030*
		Male	18	2.1	0.812			
	Anxious-ambivalent attachment style	Female	438	2.74	0.811	2.083		0.038*
		Male	18	2.33	1.08			
Academic degree	ARRS	Associate degree	129	2.13	0.69	2.087	454	0.037*
		Undergraduate	327	1.99	0.636			
	Obsession	Associate degree	129	2.54	0.915	3.983		0
		Undergraduate	327	2.18	0.834			
	Avoidant attachment style	Associate degree	129	2.48	0.684	3.404		0.001*
		Undergraduate	327	2.25	0.664			
	Anxious-ambivalent attachment style	Associate degree	129	2.95	0.918	3.607		0.001*
		Undergraduate	327	2.64	0.77			
Romantic relationship status	ARRS	Yes	259	2.20	0.602	6.957	454	0
		No	197	1.79	0.648			
	Dedication	Yes	259	1.85	0.616	2.556		0.011*
		No	197	1.71	0.631			
	Withdrawal	Yes	259	2.39	0.789	8.931		0
		No	197	1.75	0.704			
	Obsession	Yes	259	2.49	0.801	5.816		0
		No	197	2.02	0.893			
	Secure attachment style	Yes	259	3.89	0.503	2.727		0.007*
		No	197	3.74	0.669			
	Anxious-ambivalent attachment style	Yes	259	2.61	0.809	-3.718		0
		No	197	2.89	0.820			
Grade			No.	Mean	ss	F	P	Difference
Anxious-ambivalent attachment style	1 <sup>st</sup> grade		198	2.9	0.873	5.171	0.002*	3<4<1
	2 <sup>nd</sup> grade		109	2.65	0.822			
	3 <sup>rd</sup> grade		62	2.54	0.679			
	4 <sup>th</sup> grade		87	2.58	0.749			
	Total		456	2.73	0.825			

\*P&lt;0.05.

Table 3. Correlation analysis results

Variables	1	2	3	3a	3b	3c	4a	4b	4c
1. Romantic relationship status	1								
2. Romantic relationship duration	0.687**	1							
3. ARRS	-0.31**	0.078	1						
3a. Dedication	-0.119*	0.065	0.814**	1					
3b. Withdrawal	-0.387**	0.084	0.911**	0.574**	1				
3c. Obsession	-0.263**	0.032	0.855**	0.553**	0.715**	1			
4a. Secure attachment style	-0.127**	-0.009	0.064	0.052	0.054	0.063	1		
4b. Avoidant attachment style	0.027	-0.06	0.095*	0.051	0.059	0.157**	-0.038	1	
4c. Anxious-ambivalent attachment	0.172**	-0.09	0.146**	0.214**	0.070	0.108*	-0.097*	0.343**	1

\*P&lt;0.05, \*\*P&lt;0.01.



There is a significant, positive, and weak relationship between participants' dedication in romantic relationships and anxious-ambivalent attachment styles ( $r=0.214$ ,  $P<0.001$ ). There is a significant, positive, and very weak relationship between participants' obsession in romantic relationships and avoidant ( $r=0.157$ ,  $P<0.001$ ) and anxious-ambivalent attachment styles ( $r=0.108$ ,  $P<0.005$ ) (Table 3).

## Discussion

As a result of this research, which was conducted to examine the relationship between young people's addictions in romantic relationships and attachment styles, important findings were yielded. First, although the young people who participated in the research developed addiction in romantic relationships to a moderate extent, they developed obsessive addiction to a greater extent. Another important finding is that most of them have a secure attachment style. Positive perceptions of self and others dominate the secure attachment style. Adults with a secure attachment style have no problems trusting others, see others as well-meaning and easy to relate to. They see themselves as worthy of being loved. When all these characteristics come together, securely attached individuals can easily establish intimacy with others and can easily cope with being alone [27, 28]. In this context, high levels of secure attachment are effective in moderate levels of addiction and obsession in young people's romantic relationships.

Another important finding was that men had higher levels of dedication and women had higher levels of anxious-ambivalent attachment in their romantic relationships. Anxious-ambivalent attachment is characterised by high levels of avoidance and anxiety about intimacy. People with this attachment style worry about rejection, preventing them from forming a relationship even if they want to. In addition, those in relationships may not benefit from them in the same way as those securely attached because they use less effective strategies to seek support [29]. A review of the literature revealed studies that conclude that women have higher levels of anxious-ambivalent attachment [30-32]. In addition to these, a few studies have also concluded that men have higher levels of anxious-ambivalent attachment [22, 30]. In addition, Çetin and Arslan [33] found that men had higher levels of self-dedicated attachment in their romantic relationships than women. When considered in a general context, these research findings in the literature support the results obtained.

Another important finding obtained is that young people who continue associate degree education have higher levels of addiction in romantic relationships, obsessive attachment in romantic relationships, and both avoidant and anxious-ambivalent attachment levels. Associate's degree education is the level of education that is continued after high school and covers two years in the education system of our country. Undergraduate education also covers four years. Significant results were found between undergraduate and associate degrees in favour of those who continued associate degree edu-



cation. Similarly, Çevik [31] determined that the level of anxious attachment was higher in high school and associate degree students. In addition, Ustaosman [34] established a relationship between attachment style and age in his research, and according to the researcher, people between the ages of 18-22 are more obsessive/anxious attached. It is thought that the duration of education is important for the results obtained. The social environment of young people is important for their romantic relationships. In this context, the results of this study can be seen as an indicator of how important the duration of education is in terms of meeting, becoming friends, expanding, and maintaining the social circle in romantic relationships. In addition, the results of the analyses showed that the level of anxious-ambivalent attachment was higher among young people who had attended the first class. Thus, these two findings from the research seem to support each other.

Another important finding is that young people who are in romantic relationships have high levels of addiction, dedication, withdrawal, and obsession dependency in romantic relationships. When the literature was examined, some studies concluded that having a romantic relationship had a similar effect on the levels of addiction in romantic relationships [33-35]. Recent studies show that addiction in romantic relationships is comparable to other forms of addiction, such as substance addiction [36]. These data, based on behavioural, neurochemical, and neuroimaging evidence, highlight the importance of focusing on this type of addiction, which, due to its pervasive nature, has a strong negative impact on the lives of those who suffer from it, including high levels of psychological suffering and loss of control. Dedication, withdrawal, and obsession can be explained in this context. Indeed, individuals with addiction in romantic relationships tend to experience negative mood and emotional states when they are away from their partner [37]. There are also various research results suggesting that individuals' attachment styles are associated with fear of loss, anxiety, and obsession. Studies show that people with high levels of anxious-ambivalent and avoidant attachment also have increased anxiety levels [34, 38-40]. However, it was determined that individuals with secure attachment style have low anxiety levels [34, 38, 40] and separation anxiety [41].

Another important finding is that young people with romantic relationships have a secure attachment style, whereas those without romantic relationships have an anxious-ambivalent attachment style. Akdağ [42] found that individuals without romantic relationships

had higher levels of avoidant and anxious-ambivalent attachment. It can be said that fear of abandonment is at the root of this situation. According to Simpson [43], individuals with an anxious-ambivalent attachment style experience fear of abandonment in romantic relationships. In addition to this, Bartholomew and Horowitz [27] also stated that individuals with an anxious-ambivalent attachment style avoid romantic relationships because they believe that their ego will be damaged. In this context, the study results are consistent with the literature.

## Conclusion

When the findings obtained are evaluated in general, it can be said that having a secure attachment style has positive effects on the addiction levels of young people in romantic relationships. It has been observed that individuals with secure attachment style are more satisfied and happy in their relationships, which affects addictions such as obsession and deprivation. Romantic relationships are increasingly recognized as an important factor in the health of university students, and numerous studies have found that romantic relationships are demonstrably related to mental health. Therefore, more attention should be paid to developing social skills to help university students have secure attachment styles and get more satisfaction from their romantic relationships. In addition, as this is the first study, it makes an important contribution to the literature on romantic relationships, attachment style, and mental health of young people in Turkey.

## Study limitations

The current study has some limitations that need to be taken into account. First, the sample was unbalanced in terms of gender, with a clear dominance of women over men. Secondly, the study's cross-sectional nature does not allow us to test the exact causal relationship between variables, requiring longitudinal studies with large samples. Another limitation is that the participants were all healthy, unmarried young adults in higher education. Therefore, whether the results can be generalised to other samples, such as married couples, is unknown. Finally, the current study only included Turkish participants; how the findings can be generalised to different cultural contexts warrants future research.

## Ethical Considerations

### Compliance with ethical guidelines

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of [University of Health Sciences](#), Ankara, Turkey (Code: 03.01.2024 Code: 2024-12). The study was carried out following the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and the Spanish Society of Psychology. Participants gave informed consent to participate in the study. Informed consent to participate was obtained from all participants. Participation was voluntary and restricted to those aged ≥18 years. All data were collected anonymously.

### Funding

This research did not receive any grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or non-profit sectors.

### Authors' contributions

Conceptualization and methodology: All authors; Data collection: Aynur Uzun and Ayşe Akpınar; Software, validation, formal analysis, investigation, resources, data curation, analysis and writing: Alev Üstündağ.

### Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

### Acknowledgments

The authors wish to acknowledge the study participants for their contribution.

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