

Anxious Attachment in Early Adulthood While Forming Emotionally Attached Relationships

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Abstract. Early adulthood romantic relationships are crucial for the development of emotional attachment and emotional control, yet people with anxious attachment frequently struggle to establish stable and secure partnerships. The purpose of this study was to better understand how young adults in emotionally linked relationships suffer apprehensive attachment. Five young adults who fit the research criteria participated in the study, which took a qualitative approach using a phenomenological method. Semi-structured interviews and documentation audio were used to gather data, which were subsequently subjected to interactive analysis methods. Six major themes emerged from the study's findings: relationship dynamics, emotional dysregulation, fear of abandonment, excessive need for closeness, attachment dynamics that obstruct the development of a stable base, and the pursuit of emotional reinforcement from a partner. According to these results, anxious attachment functions as a persistently active attachment system that influences how people regulate their emotions and become dependent on one another in romantic relationships. This study advances the fields of attachment psychology and interpersonal relationship studies by highlighting the significance of comprehending anxious attachment as a complicated relational experience.

Keywords: *Anxious attachment, Early adulthood, Romantic relationships*

1 Introduction

Early adulthood romanticism is a stage of development marked by the yearning for emotional stability, the formation of commitments, and the pursuit of intimacy. Attachment patterns that emerge during childhood and change throughout life have an impact on how a person views, reacts to, and sustains attachment in relationships (Blake & Najman, 2024). One of the most significant characteristics in early adulthood relationship dynamics is anxiety attachment, which involves a propensity to feel insecure, fear loss, require excessive reassurance, and interpret indicators of uncertainty as dangers to the sustainability of the relationship (Mosannenzadeh et al., 2024). People with anxious attachment frequently exhibit hypersensitivity to rejection cues, attachment system activation, and actions meant to keep closeness, even when they are inappropriate for the circumstance (Messina et al., 2023).

According to recent studies, emotional dependency, trouble regulating emotions, excessive relationship-maintaining behavior, and susceptibility to psychological stress are all linked to anxious attachment. For instance, anxious attachment is linked to young people's incapacity to regulate their emotions, which eventually affects their relational well-being (Plantade-gipch et al., 2023). The findings of Morales-sanhueza et al. (2024) were comparable. They claim that one of the key indicators of emotional suffering is anxious attachment. Individuals who suffer from high levels of anxious attachment are more likely to experience interpersonal disputes and require more assurance.

The same tendency is also shown in national research. According to Ajeng et al. (2025), worry, overthinking, emotional dependency, and trouble making decisions are characteristics signs of anxious attachment system activation. According to a different study by Putri et al. (2023), women who have ended violent relationships are extremely anxious about beginning a new intimate relationship because of their past experiences. Emotional dependency and fear of loss exacerbate this inclination. According to Corsini et al. (2024), insecurity in early adult relationships comprises self-comparison, lack of confidence, and fear of abandonment. They discovered a connection between anxious attachment and this insecurity.

Numerous other studies have linked the issue of "bucin" or love slave, which is the act of making excessive sacrifices in order to keep a relationship going, to extreme reliance. Mashuri & Patriasih (2023) claim that bucin behavior, which compels people to give in and satisfy all of their partner's requests in order to avoid being abandoned, is brought on by attachment problems, specifically the fear of abandonment. Victims of emotional abuse who have a propensity for neurotic compromise are more likely to remain in the relationship because of their emotional dependence and need for affection (Kristhi & Sukmaningrum, 2023). According to Ifthiharfi et al. (2024), those with relationship anxiety are more inclined to stick with a relationship even if it is bad since they have strong affective empathy. All things considered, our results show that anxiety bonds are linked to harmful relationship-maintenance activities in addition to anxiety when engaging with others.

Since the majority of research employ a quantitative methodology, they are only able to statistically characterize the relationship between variables. However, prior research has connected emotional dependency to a propensity to stay in toxic relationships and a fear of being abandoned. Few qualitative research have thoroughly examined how young adults with anxious attachment experiences, negotiate their demand for intimacy, and deal with anxiety dynamics in daily life, particularly in Indonesia. Furthermore, the growing prevalence of unhealthy relationships among young adults and the shifting landscape of romantic relationships in the digital age serve to further underscore the significance of this study.

The study's theoretical foundation is provided by attachment theory (Bowlby; Hazan & Shaver). According to this idea, anxious attachment results from a negative internal functioning model, which is the conviction that one is unworthy of love and that one's partner is unreliable. This paradigm suggests that people are extremely sensitive to rejection and have

a tendency to hyperactively seek security and intimacy. The emotion regulation model supports the idea that anxious attachment activation results in maladaptive regulating techniques that impact relationship dynamics (Messina et al., 2023).

This study is to investigate in detail the subjective experiences of young adults with anxious attachment when developing romantic emotional attachments, as stated in the description above. This experiences include the kinds of anxieties that emerge, how people engage, relationship-maintenance techniques, and the interpretation that people make of the attachment dynamics experience. It is believed that this research will offer both practical advantages for psychological intervention and education on healthy relationships in early adulthood, as well as theoretical meaning in the setting of attachment.

2 Methods

In order to fully comprehend the participants' life experiences in relation to anxiety-bound tendencies in romantic relationships, a qualitative approach employing phenomenological approaches was employed in this study. Because it enables researchers to investigate the subjective meanings that people create from their own experiences, the phenomenological technique was selected. From gathering data, comprehending the context, reacting to interaction dynamics, and interpreting the meanings that surfaced, the researcher was the primary instrument used in the research process. Therefore, the researcher's awareness of emotional states, verbal and nonverbal cues, and the interview's environment was crucial to guaranteeing the accuracy of the data collected. In order to avoid influencing the interpretation process while conducting the research, the researcher also tries to use bracketing, which is the practice of keeping presumptions or personal experiences to themselves.

Five young adults, ages 18 to 25, who were in or had recently been in romantic relationships and exhibited a propensity for anxious attachment were included in this study. Purposive sampling was utilized in the phenomenological study to choose participants depending on how well they fit the features of the phenomenon under investigation. A small sample size enables researchers to carefully examine each participant's story because phenomenological research emphasizes in-depth investigation of experiences. A number of inclusion criteria, including willingness to engage in interviews, verbal expression of experiences, and signs of anxious attachment based on self-reports or basic preliminary screening, were used to choose participants.

As the primary tools in research, researchers are in charge of gathering data, analyzing it, and overseeing the entire process. Additionally, throughout interviews, researchers keep an eye on social and emotional dynamics. The data for this project includes audio recordings and other documents that participants can access, as well as semi-terstructured interview instructions that serve as reference to flexibly investigate participants' experiences.

Audio recordings and semi-terstructured interviews were the methods employed to acquire data for this study. The primary method utilized to investigate participants' experiences with anxious attachment, fear of abandonment, reassurance-seeking techniques, and the dynamics of their relationships with partners was semi-terstructured interviews. The interview lasted 60 to 120 minutes and were recorded. With the participants' permission, audio recordings were included to the interview data.

The interactive model created by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana was continuously applied to the data until it reached saturation. Data collecting, data presentation, and conclusion drafting were all phases of the analysis process. The researchers gathered and narrowed the data during the data reduction stage by looking for keywords, categories, and topics associated with the phenomena of anxious attachment. To make it easier to comprehend the patterns of the participants' experiences, the condensed data was then

displayed in thematic tables. The researchers then made initial findings based on the patterns that surfaced, which they then confirmed again as fresh information became available. Conclusions were drawn gradually until the heart of the consistent occurrence could be identified and the experiences of the participants accurately described.

The study was carried out in phases, beginning with the development of the research focus, the management of ethical permits in the form of informed consent, the creation of supporting instruments, and the selection of participants using purposive sampling. After the individuals fulfilled the requirements, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews. The Miles and Huberman method was used to examine the data after the verbatim transcriptions of the interview recordings were completed. The researchers cross-checked with the participants and validated the data on a regular basis to guarantee appropriate interpretation. The complete process was then combined into a conclusion that explained the significance of early adulthood anxious attachment experiences in romantic relationships.

3 Results

The data analysis revealed six major elements that characterize people's early encounters with anxiety in emotional connection. Emotional dysregulation, fear of abandonment, attachment dynamics that interfere with the formation of a secure base, an excessive need for closeness, relationship dynamics, and seeking emotional reinforcement from a partner are the six themes. Each theme is made up of a number of sub-themes that emerged from data reduction-based categorization and naming.

The first theme found in the study was attachment dynamics that obstruct the development of a secure base. There are two sub-themes within this theme. The first sub-theme, imbalance in connection to family, explains how the informants lacked the essential foundation of security since they were not emotionally close to their parents as children. This is evident from the informant's statement,

"kalau misal dibilang dekat secara fisik mungkin sering dekat kayak eee di rumah itu sering aktivitas bareng dan lain-lain sebagainya cuman kalau untuk cerita tentang kehidupanku gimana tentang problemku yang saat ini aku alami itu apa mungkin aku jarang sekali buat cerita ke beliau" (S1:I1:10).

The second sub-theme, emotional attachment to parents, on the other hand, depicts a more cordial and transparent relationship with the mother or one of the parents. Nevertheless, this selective attachment leads to an imbalance in the control of emotions. One Source statement,

"Oke, sama abah aku cukup dekat juga tapi gak sedekat sama ibu. Untuk cerita-cerita juga ke ibu sih, ke abah gak terlalu banyak" (S2:I1:15).

Emotional dysregulation is the second theme, and it is followed by four sub-themes. Control of emotional expression, the first sub-theme, addresses informants' propensity to attempt to regulate their emotions, particularly in public.

"aku pendam dulu kalau memang aku nggak kuat untuk memendamnya misal kalau lagi di posisi di publik aku pasti bisa untuk memendam rasa sedih itu" (S1:I1:25), provides evidence for this.

The informant's comment,

“aku kadang gak tak bales gitu. Tapi aku mikir, aku nangis” (S5:I1:215),

exemplifies the second sub-theme, maladaptive emotional reactions, which illustrates how the informants struggle to regulate feelings of hurt and envy. Disruption of daily functioning is the third sub-theme, demonstrating how worry and negative emotions affect focus, sleep, and everyday productivity.

The informant’s statement,

“jam tidurku lebih singkat jadi tidurku lebih sering malem banget” (S1:I1:320), lends credence to this. Relational scars, which characterize the emotional experiences of relationships that result in severe wounds and trauma, are the theme’s last sub-theme. According to a source, *“susah trauma itu hilang, gak bisa hilang bahkan mungkin sampe aku tua”* (S5:I1:2270).

Three sub-themes surfaced within the third theme, fear of abandonment.

“ketika aku sakit hati itu kan pada saat melihat dia friendly ya otomatis kan aku jealous kemudian aku sakit hati” (S1:I1:300),

this phrase exemplifies extreme jealousy of a partner’s actions, which is a description of the first sub-theme, which is rejection sensitivity. The second sub-theme is attachment anxiety, which is defined as worrying about your partner’s lack of assurance. A quote from a source that reads,

“tiba-tiba aku kepikiran takut kalau dia itu ninggalin aku” (S1:I1:590) demonstrates this. According to the informant, *“Dan dia itu kayak tarik ulur”* (S5:I1:2495),

the last sub-theme in this subject is instability in emotional intimacy, which denotes fluctuations in the dynamics of the relationship.

The fourth theme in the study’s findings is excessive need for closeness/bucin behavior, which leads to four sub-themes. The first sub-theme is the replacement of emotional support, which highlights the shortcomings of family support and makes partners the primary people to share with. A quote from a source that reads,

“dia ngedengerin apa yang ku ceritakan ya, terus selanjutnya dia kasih Solusi” (S1:I1:945) support this.

Excessive emotional reliance, or the habit of constantly feeling the need to be near one’s spouse, is the second sub-theme. For instance, the source states,

“Bener-bener kayak, setiap dia ngajak itu, aku mau, aku mau, aku mau” (S5:I1:315).

According to the source, the third sub-theme is self-sacrifice in relationships, which is defined as an attempt to modify oneself in order to preserve harmony in the relationship,

“aku beli lalapan itu kayak, Di mall itu ya harganya Emang 28-30an kan Satu porsi belum minum. Terus abis itu aku milih sing Harganya biasa-biasa aja ya Soalnya mikir omongannya dee” (S5:I1:385).

There are two sub-themes within the fifth theme, relationship dynamics. Relational conflict is the first sub-theme, and it is characterized by disputes that arise inside relationships. The phrase

“ternyata dia buat SG ini dapet 2 hari atau 3 hari aku minta blok, aku gak bisa komunikasi kan ya, itu nge-post cewek” (S4:I1:340) reflect this.

The informant bears a heavier load than their partner, as seen by the second sub-theme of role imbalance,

“semisal dia butuh, aku mesti ready, aku mesti fast respon, sedangkan dia di aku kayak setengah-setengah” (S5:I1:1195).

In the study’s findings, the sixth topic is the last one. Three sub-themes are covered by the pursuit of emotional support from partners. The expectation of emotional reinforcement, which explains how crucial it is for the informants to get verbal affirmation or assurance from their spouses, is the first sub-theme,

“Minta tolong buat Waktunya sebentar gitu Buat ngasih kabar” (S1:I1:1195), reflect this.

Self-esteem vulnerability is the second sub-theme, indicating that the informants frequently feel unworthy and require assistance from their partners.

“pertama dari fisik, kemudian untuk insecure apalagi ya dari fisik kemudian mungkin dari kecerdasan akademik, prestasi non-akademik kemudian background keluarga” (S1:I1:365), is a quotation that exemplifies this.

Unstable emotional validation is the final sub-theme. The informant adds,

“bilanganya emang kayak, iya aku ngerti kok, ngerti kok perasaan kamu. Tapi ujung-ujungnya gak ngerti” (S2:I1:535). This quotation demonstrate the partner’s inconsistent validation.

4 Discussion

The study’s findings demonstrate apprehensive attachment tendencies in romantic partnerships during early adulthood. Early attachment imbalance, emotional dysregulation, an overwhelming need for intimacy, abandonment anxiety, complicated relationship dynamics, and the desire for emotional support from partners are all regularly linked to these patterns. According to John Bowlby’s attachment theory, which Hazan and Shaver later extended in the context of adult attachment, early interactions with primary figures create internal working models that govern expectations, relationship tactics, and an individual’s ability to control their emotions throughout their life. According to attachment theory, romantic relationships are a continuation of the attachment system that has been in place since childhood, as a result, this system has an impact on how adults regulate their emotions and connect with others (Mosannenzadeh et al., 2024).

The first theme is attachment dynamics that obstruct the development of a secure base, such as imbalances in family relationships and emotional attachment to parents. These dynamics demonstrate how early experiences with caregivers that are inconsistent or unresponsive can lead to an anxious attachment pattern. This support earlier findings that

inconsistent or traumatic caregiving experiences are the root cause of insecure attachment pattern (Maçkalı et al., 2025). This supports the empirical finding that early attachment imbalances impact practical patterns of emotional experiences in romantic relationships, such as unequal emotional openness in families that may impact the pursuit of romantic closeness, in addition to the statistical background of adult relationships.

Second, issues with expression control, inappropriate reactions, reduced day-to-day functioning, and relational scars are all part of the topic of emotional dysregulation. Recent studies have demonstrated a connection between poor emotional control and insecure attachment, which includes anxiety. It was discovered that people with insecure attachment, which includes anxiety, frequently depend on their relationships or exhibit hyperactivity in reaction to their emotional needs without making appropriate strategies for adaptation. Mosannenzadeh et al. (2024) found that attachment insecurity is linked to a lack of flexibility in emotion regulation, specifically a propensity to rely on unbalanced interpersonal emotional control when a partner is available. Secure attachment, on the other hand, can offer more contextual and adaptable emotional control.

The third theme depicts worry or fear of being left behind. This anxiety is characterized by sensitivity to negative emotional cues and excessive worry over the potential loss of a spouse. This is consistent with the theory of hyperactivating strategies in attachment literature, which holds that people with insecure attachment styles typically make more effort to find partnerships in order to lessen their insecurity. The hyperactivating technique is how an individual perceives emotional uncertainty as a relationship danger, which ultimately results in intensive attempts to seek proximity, according to the psychodynamic mechanism characteristic of anxious attachment (Mosannenzadeh et al., 2024). Insecure dependency, including anxious types, frequently leads to problematic emotional regulation styles when confronted with interpersonal stress, which can intensify feelings of dependency and anxiety in romantic relationships, according to extensive research on dependency and emotion regulation (Eilert & Buchheim, 2023). According to these study results, relationship-related anxiety seems to be a dynamic that affects how people view intimacy and loss rather than just being a theoretical idea.

Fourth, the issue of “bucin” conduct, or an excessive demand for proximity, illustrates how research participants attempt to make up for their uncertainty by sacrificing themselves for their relationships, becoming highly dependent on them emotionally, and substituting support for them. This is in line with studies that link insecure attachment styles to heightened emotional reliance. Because of the urge to make sure that one’s partner is constantly there, this might then be connected to the maintenance or strengthening of unsuitable partnerships. For instance, Momeñe et al. (2024) demonstrate how insecure attachment and emotional dependence on a spouse might be mediated by a lack of emotional regulation.

The fifth theme illustrates how relationship factors like role imbalance and relational conflict affect attachment uncertainty in romantic partnerships. According to attachment theory, conflict in partnerships frequently triggers unfulfilled attachment needs. People with anxious attachment typically take on greater emotional responsibility to preserve the connection and frequently compromise their personal needs, which results in role imbalance and emotional conflict. This lends credence to the theory that an emotionally unbalanced relationship, in which one partner assumes the role of the protector of proximity while the other assumes a passive role, is the result of anxious attachment. This is in line with other qualitative research findings that insecure attachment styles, whether avoidant or fearful, are linked to high relational conflict and dynamic relationship instability, as well as a negative correlation with romantic satisfaction and couple adjustment (Reggia & Laksmiwati, 2025).

Lastly, the theme of seeking emotional reinforcement from one’s partner demonstrates how internal working models arising from early attachment patterns influence

how an individual assesses themselves and seeks recognition from their partner. This theme includes self-esteem vulnerability, expectations of emotional reinforcement, and unstable emotional validation. According to attachment theory, romantic relationships are the primary source of emotional support for adults and act as attachment figures. In contrast to secure attachment patterns, which enable improved internal emotional regulation, dependence on partners as a source of emotional validation demonstrates how insecure attachments can persist in emotional dynamics that make a person's sense of self-worth reliant on their partner's reactions.

All things considered, the six themes that emerged from the research findings can be seen as layered expressions of the same theoretical system, which is a system of linkages that are always triggered since there is no intrinsic secure base. In addition to discussing each theme separately, attachment theory clarifies the connections between them. Inter-theme interactions include, for instance, early attachment disorders, emotional control disorders, fear of abandonment, an excessive demand for intimacy, unbalanced relationship dynamics, and the need of emotional validation. The study's findings are consistent with existing research showing that insecure attachment, particularly anxious attachment, is statistically associated with emotional maladaptation and has a major impact on people's subjective experiences of how they feel, perceive, and act in romantic relationships. This builds on earlier research that was mostly quantitative or measurable in terms of particular factors. This study is based on attachment mechanisms that have been internalized since childhood and provides a narrative interpretation of the relationships between each theme. The pattern of early adult emotional experiences with widespread anxious attachment is revealed by this study, which is one of its scientific benefits. Additionally, this study offers contextual factual proof that this phenomena, which affects not only one sided relationships but also emotional regulation and overall relationship quality, has its roots in complicated attachment dynamics.

5 Conclusion

Anxious attachment in early adulthood in emotional attachment relationships is a systematic and ongoing pattern of experience that stems from early struggles to build a stable internal foundation in connections with important people. The symptoms of anxious attachment are not limited to a yearning for intimacy or a dread of being abandoned. Additionally, it serves as a continuous attachment system that affects romantic relationship dynamics, self-esteem, and emotional regulation. Relational dependence, emotional dysregulation, and imbalanced relationships are the results of unstable internal functioning models. These results suggest that the main source of emotional control and self-validation for those with anxious attachment is their partners. The primary goal of this psychological study is to understand anxious attachment as a contextual and real process of relational emotional regulation, as opposed to just a type of attachment style or personality trait.

The conceptual model that emerged from this study should be tested and developed utilizing a variety of methodological techniques and wider relational contexts, according to recommendations for more research. The creation of psychological interventions aimed at enhancing intrapersonal emotional regulation, lowering emotional reliance on partners, and fortifying the internal secure base can also be based on the findings. The development of psychological theories and procedures that are more centered on people's experiences of emotional attachment may also benefit from these findings.

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