

Avoidant Attachment and Intimate Relationships: The Mediating Role of Self-Disclosure

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Abstract: Attachment, particularly avoidant attachment, plays a crucial role in intimate relationship satisfaction. This study investigated the relationship between avoidant attachment and intimate relationship satisfaction among college students, and the mediating role of self-disclosure. A convenience sample of 845 college students from six universities in Jiangxi and Guangdong provinces. Results showed that avoidant attachment was significantly negatively correlated with both self-disclosure and relationship satisfaction, whereas self-disclosure was positively correlated with relationship satisfaction. Results revealed that avoidant attachment significantly and negatively predicted relationship satisfaction and self-disclosure, while self-disclosure significantly and positively predicted relationship satisfaction. Self-disclosure partially mediated the association between avoidant attachment and relationship satisfaction. Implications for intervention and mental health education are discussed.

Keywords: Avoidant attachment; Intimate relationship satisfaction; Self-disclosure

1. Introduction

Attachment refers to a bond characterized by trust and security between an individual and their partner^[1]. In intimate relationships, attachment shapes an individual's cognitive patterns, emotional experiences, and behavioral responses. Attachment is commonly categorized into three types: secure, avoidant, and anxious, with the latter two collectively referred to as insecure attachment. According to attachment theory, early attachment experiences in parent-child relationships form internal working models that persist throughout development^[2]. Individuals with an anxious attachment style tend to fear rejection or abandonment by their partner, whereas those with an avoidant attachment style typically refrain from relying on or trusting their partner, resulting in difficulties in establishing close emotional bonds with others^[3]. Empirical research has demonstrated a close association between attachment style and intimate relationship satisfaction^[4]. In avoidantly attached individuals, obsessive thinking, extreme negative emotions, and irrational beliefs during conflicts in romantic relationships may exacerbate interpersonal tension^[5]. Furthermore, individuals with avoidant attachment tend to interpret their partner's behavior in a negative light, thereby reducing relationship satisfaction^[6]. Therefore, the present study primarily investigates the effect of avoidant attachment on intimate relationship satisfaction and proposes Hypothesis 1: Avoidant attachment significantly and negatively predicts intimate relationship satisfaction.

Self-disclosure plays an important role in the relationship between avoidant attachment and intimate relationship satisfaction. Self-disclosure refers to the process by which an individual expresses personal thoughts and feelings to another person during interpersonal interactions^[7]. According to social penetration theory^[8], self-disclosure is a critical condition for the formation and development of intimate relationships. As self-disclosure between partners deepens, they become better able to understand and fulfill each other's needs, thereby enhancing relationship satisfaction. Serving as a "lubricant" for the establishment and growth of intimacy, self-disclosure constitutes an essential component of closeness and security^[9]. Therefore, self-disclosure act as a protective factor in the pathway through which avoidant attachment influences intimate relationships. Within romantic relationships, self-disclosure is key to emotional bonding and is also a necessary process for developing secure attachment^[10]. Research has shown that secure attachment is significantly positively correlated with self-disclosure, whereas insecure attachment is significantly negatively correlated with self-disclosure^{[11][12]}. Additionally, self-disclosure is significantly positively correlated with intimate

relationship satisfaction^{[13][14][15]}. Based on this evidence, the present study proposes Hypothesis 2: Self-disclosure mediates the relationship between avoidant attachment and intimate relationship satisfaction.

2. Methods

2.1 Participant

Using convenience sampling, the study recruited college students currently in a romantic relationship from six universities in Jiangxi and Guangdong provinces. A total of 900 questionnaires were distributed, and 845 valid responses were returned, yielding an effective response rate of 93.88%. The sample consisted of 347 male participants (41.07%) and 498 female participants (58.93%).

2.2 Materials

2.2.1 The Close Relationships Scale

The Experience in Close Relationships Scale, translated and revised by Li Tonggui et al^[16], was used to assess avoidant attachment and anxiety attachment. The scale comprises 36 items (18 per dimension; sample items: “I worry about being abandoned” for anxiety, “I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down” for avoidance). Items are rated on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree), with 13 reverse-scored. Higher scores indicate greater avoidant attachment or anxiety attachment. In this study, the Cronbach’s α of Close Relationships Scale was 0.89.

2.2.2 The Intimate Relationship Satisfaction Scale

The revised Intimate Relationship Satisfaction Scale by Patrick and Knee^[17] consists of 7 items (e.g., “Our relationship is going well”), rated on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Higher scores indicate greater relationship satisfaction. In this study, Cronbach’s α was 0.87.

2.2.3 The Self-Disclosure Scale

Self-disclosure was measured using the Self-Disclosure Scale developed by Miller^[18], which includes 10 items (e.g., “My personal habits”) rated on a 5-point scale (1 = never tell, 5 = tell in full detail). Higher scores reflect higher levels of self-disclosure. The Cronbach’s α for this scale was 0.85.

3. Result

3.1 Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis

As shown in Table 1, attachment avoidance was significantly negatively correlated with self-disclosure, and intimate relationship satisfaction. Self-disclosure was significantly positively correlated with both perceived partner responsiveness and intimate relationship satisfaction. The research results preliminarily verified our hypothesis.

Table 1 The results of descriptive statistics and correlation analysis

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1 Avoidant attachment	3.45	.64	1		
2 Self disclosure	3.39	.56	-.39***	1	
3 Intimate Relationship Satisfaction	5.46	.92	-.47***	.43***	1

Notes: *M* : Mean, *SD*: Standard deviation, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

3.2 The mediation analysis

The mediation hypothesis was tested using the PROCESS macro for SPSS, employing a bootstrap resampling procedure with 5,000 resamples to estimate the indirect effect and its confidence interval. The results indicated that avoidant attachment significantly and negatively predicted intimate relationship satisfaction ($\beta = -0.68$, $p < .001$), suggesting that higher levels of avoidant attachment were associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction. Additionally, avoidant attachment also significantly and negatively predicted self-disclosure ($\beta = -0.38$, $p < .001$), indicating that individuals with higher avoidant attachment tended to disclose less to their partners. In turn, self-disclosure

significantly and positively predicted intimate relationship satisfaction ($\beta = 0.29, p < .001$), meaning that greater self-disclosure was associated with higher relationship satisfaction. The mediation analysis, together with the corresponding path diagram (presented in Figure 1), demonstrated that self-disclosure significantly mediated the relationship between avoidant attachment and intimate relationship satisfaction. This finding supports the hypothesized indirect pathway, whereby avoidant attachment not only directly undermines relationship satisfaction but also does so indirectly by reducing the level of self-disclosure between partners.

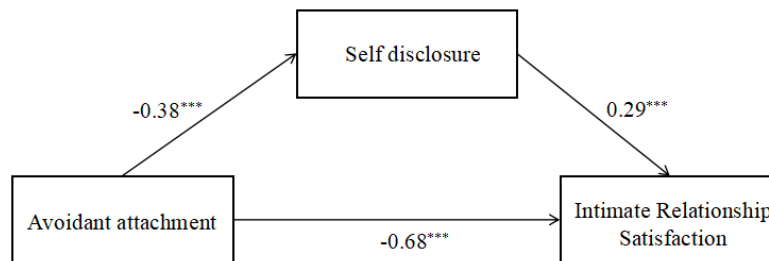


Fig. 1 The mediating effect of self disclosure

4. Discussion

4.1 The relationship of Avoidant attachment and intimate relationship satisfaction

This study investigated the relationship between avoidant attachment and intimate relationship satisfaction, as well as the underlying psychological mechanism that explains this association. The results revealed that avoidant attachment significantly and negatively predicted intimate relationship satisfaction, indicating that individuals with higher levels of avoidant attachment tend to report lower levels of satisfaction in their romantic relationships. This finding is consistent with previous empirical research^[19], which has similarly demonstrated a detrimental effect of avoidant attachment on relationship quality. Attachment theory posits that attachment, serving as a fundamental basis for interpersonal relationship development, exerts a profound and lasting influence on intimate relationships throughout the lifespan. Specifically, early parent-child interaction experiences shape an individual's internal working model of self and others—a cognitive and affective framework that guides expectations, emotions, and behaviors in subsequent close relationships. This internal working model, once formed, tends to persist and influences how individuals perceive, interpret, and respond to their romantic partners. In the context of daily interactions with their partners, college students who exhibit high levels of avoidant attachment tend to adopt an avoidant stance: they are reluctant to trust their partners, maintain both physical and psychological distance, and refrain from seeking emotional closeness or support. As a consequence of this distancing strategy, these individuals report significantly lower intimate relationship satisfaction compared to their securely attached counterparts^[20]. In contrast, individuals with high anxious attachment display a markedly different pattern. They strongly desire closeness and intimacy with their partner yet simultaneously experience intense fears of abandonment and rejection. This approach-avoidance conflict leads them to overestimate relational threats—such as interpreting ambiguous partner behaviors as signs of impending rejection—while underestimating their partner's commitment and availability. These cognitive biases perpetuate chronic fears of being abandoned, which in turn erode their sense of security and ultimately diminish their own relationship satisfaction^[21].

4.2 The mediation role of self-disclosure

The present study further confirmed that self-disclosure partially mediates the relationship between avoidant attachment and intimate relationship satisfaction. That is, avoidant attachment not only exerts a direct negative effect on relationship satisfaction but also indirectly influences satisfaction through its impact on self-disclosure. This mediating pathway suggests that reduced self-disclosure serves as one mechanism by which avoidant attachment undermines romantic relationship quality. On one hand, when an individual with avoidant attachment engages in emotional disclosure—sharing personal thoughts, feelings, or concerns with the partner—this act of openness can foster a sense of trust in the partner. The partner perceives the disclosure as a sign of vulnerability and reliance, which in turn promotes reciprocal openness. Once mutual trust is established between partners, a greater sense of emotional security emerges, providing a foundation for relationship satisfaction. On the other hand, as

the depth (how personally significant the disclosed information is) and breadth (the range of topics disclosed) of self-disclosure increase over time, partners achieve greater mutual understanding and acceptance. They become more aware of each other's needs, preferences, and emotional states, which reduces misunderstandings and conflicts. This deepening of understanding and acceptance thereby enhances intimacy—the feeling of closeness and connectedness that is central to satisfying romantic relationships. Existing research has consistently demonstrated that self-disclosure can mitigate the negative effects of insecure attachment styles. For example, through self-disclosure, individuals may reduce emotional suppression (i.e., holding back or concealing true feelings), increase their willingness to voluntarily share personal experiences and emotions, and receive constructive feedback and emotional support from their partners^{[22][23]}. Such feedback and support can correct negative expectations (e.g., “my partner will reject me if I open up”) and reinforce positive relational interactions. Thus, individuals with avoidant attachment, despite their tendency to distance themselves, may benefit from engaging in self-disclosure. By releasing negative emotions that might otherwise accumulate and lead to relationship withdrawal, they can enhance self-awareness—gaining a clearer understanding of their own emotional states and relational needs—and consequently promote the development of more satisfying and stable intimate relationships.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that avoidant attachment significantly and negatively predicts intimate relationship satisfaction, and that self-disclosure partially mediates this relationship. Specifically, avoidant attachment not only directly undermines relationship satisfaction but also indirectly reduces it by suppressing self-disclosure. These findings suggest that enhancing self-disclosure—through fostering emotional expression, mutual trust, and understanding—may help alleviate the detrimental effects of avoidant attachment on romantic relationship quality. Although the cross-sectional design and sample limitations warrant caution, the results highlight self-disclosure as a promising target for intervention in mental health education and couple therapy for young adults.

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