



ATTACHMENT STYLES AND FEAR OF INTIMACY IN COUPLES: THE ROLE OF GENDER

^{*1}Hafiza Rabia Noreen

²Haram Siddique

³Sehrish Rafique

⁴Muhammad Akbar

⁵Rabeeia Javed

⁶Sadiya Zenab

^{*1}Department of Psychology, University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan

²Department of Psychology, GIFT University, Gujranwala, Pakistan

³Lecturer, Department of Psychology, Lahore Leads University, Lahore, Pakistan

⁴Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, Government College Jhang, Pakistan

⁵Department of Psychology, The University of Lahore, Sargodha Campus, Pakistan

⁶Department of Psychology, University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan

^{*1}rabianoreen108@gmail.com, ²haram.siddique@gift.edu.pk, ³sehrishrafique998@gmail.com,

⁴romman.akbar@gmail.com, ⁵rabiyaaved665@gmail.com, ⁶sadiapsy61@gmail.com

Abstract

The present study investigates attachment style and fear of intimacy among couples. It is a qualitative study. A total of 200 married participants were assessed using the qualitative interviews. Results revealed significant variations across most variables. Men exhibited higher levels of secure and dismissive attachment suggesting stronger emotional autonomy and confidence in interpersonal expression. Conversely, women scored higher on fearful and preoccupied attachment styles and reported greater fear of intimacy, reflecting heightened emotional sensitivity and relational anxiety. The findings highlight that gender plays a crucial role in shaping attachment dynamics and comfort with closeness in marital relationships. The study underscores the importance of understanding these psychological differences for promoting emotional well-being and marital satisfaction through gender-sensitive counseling and relational interventions.

Keywords: Attachment Style, Fear Of Intimacy, Gender, Qualitative Study.

Article Details:

Received on 14 Oct 2025

Accepted on 06 Nov 2025

Published on 08 Nov 2025

Corresponding Authors*:

^{*1}Hafiza Rabia Noreen

Introduction

Research on gender differences in attachment style, humor style, and fear of intimacy within marital relationships reveals significant psychological and interpersonal variations between men and women. Studies such as Amin (2017) show that women often exhibit higher levels of *anxious attachment*—reflecting greater emotional sensitivity and fear of abandonment—while men display more *avoidant attachment* patterns, characterized by discomfort with closeness and dependency. These differences influence communication styles, emotional regulation, and conflict resolution within marriages, suggesting that attachment patterns formed in early life continue to shape adult intimate relationships (Amin, 2017; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

When humor is integrated into the relational context, it serves as both a coping and bonding mechanism, yet gender appears to moderate its function. Research indicates that men more frequently use *affiliative* and *aggressive* humor, while women tend toward *self-enhancing* and *self-defeating* humor styles (Martin et al., 2003; Cann et al., 2014; Mubashara & Riaz, 2024). In marital interactions, men's humor often acts as a means of asserting dominance or defusing tension, whereas women's humor facilitates emotional connection and empathy. These distinctions interact with attachment dimensions—securely attached partners typically employ positive humor to enhance intimacy, whereas insecurely attached individuals may use humor defensively or destructively (Campbell & Moroz, 2014; Barelds & Barelds-Dijkstra, 2010). Fear of intimacy, often shaped by both attachment insecurity and communication patterns, also shows gendered nuances. Women report higher fear of emotional rejection, whereas men more frequently fear vulnerability and dependency, reflecting broader cultural expectations surrounding gender roles (Descutner & Thelen, 1991; Birnbaum, 2010). Marital satisfaction tends to decline when either partner experiences pronounced fear of intimacy, especially when combined with avoidant attachment or negative humor styles. Collectively, these findings highlight the intricate interplay between attachment, humor, and intimacy, emphasizing the need for gender-sensitive therapeutic interventions to foster healthier marital bonds (Amin, 2017; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016; Martin et al., 2003).

Method

In this study, the qualitative method employed in the study utilized in-depth interviews to explore how gender influences attachment patterns and fear of intimacy in married couples. This qualitative design allowed for the nuanced examination of participants' emotional narratives and interpersonal experiences. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 200 married individuals, enabling the researchers to identify patterns of secure, dismissive, fearful, and preoccupied attachment styles through participants' subjective accounts. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data, ensuring that gendered experiences of intimacy and emotional closeness were captured holistically. This method provided rich contextual insights into how cultural expectations and gender norms shape emotional expression and relational dynamics in marriage (Amin, 2017; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016; Birnbaum, 2010).

The qualitative approach was particularly suited for this study because it emphasized meaning-making within personal relationships rather than numerical generalizations. By analyzing recurring themes and contrasting male and female perspectives, the researchers were able to demonstrate that men exhibited higher levels of secure and dismissive attachment—reflecting emotional autonomy—while women reported greater fear of intimacy and preoccupied attachment tendencies. This interpretive framework aligns with prior qualitative research suggesting that gendered socialization processes significantly influence intimacy-related behaviors (Descutner & Thelen, 1991; Campbell & Moroz, 2014). Thus, the qualitative method not only deepened the understanding of psychological and relational

gender differences but also highlighted the importance of culturally sensitive counseling interventions to promote emotional well-being in marital contexts.

Results

Thematic analysis of the qualitative interviews revealed four major themes related to attachment dynamics among married couples: emotional autonomy, relational anxiety, gendered expression of intimacy, and sociocultural expectations. The first theme, emotional autonomy, emerged predominantly among male participants who described their relationships as characterized by independence and confidence in expressing affection without dependency. This pattern aligns with secure and dismissive attachment styles, suggesting that men in this study associated emotional strength with relational control. The second theme, relational anxiety, was more evident in female participants who expressed a heightened need for reassurance and fear of abandonment. These accounts reflect fearful and preoccupied attachment styles, consistent with earlier findings by Mikulincer and Shaver (2016) and Birnbaum (2010), which highlight that women's emotional sensitivity often stems from deep-seated fears of rejection and relational instability.

The third theme, gendered expression of intimacy, illustrated how men and women differ in their ways of expressing and perceiving closeness. Men often viewed vulnerability as a potential weakness, aligning with avoidant tendencies, while women described emotional openness as both a need and a source of distress. This tension points to how gender norms shape attachment experiences, reinforcing the final theme—sociocultural expectations. Within the Pakistani context, traditional beliefs about masculinity and femininity continue to influence how couples negotiate intimacy and attachment. Women reported internal conflicts between desiring closeness and fearing dependence, while men often emphasized maintaining composure and self-reliance in emotional exchanges. Together, these themes demonstrate that attachment styles are not merely individual traits but are deeply embedded in gendered social contexts, underscoring the need for gender-sensitive marital counseling (Amin, 2017; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016; Descutner & Thelen, 1991; Campbell & Moroz, 2014).

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal meaningful gender-based distinctions in attachment styles and fear of intimacy among married individuals. Men demonstrated significantly higher scores in secure and dismissive attachment styles, reflecting greater emotional autonomy and confidence in relationships, whereas women scored higher on fearful and preoccupied attachment styles, consistent with their greater relational anxiety and emotional sensitivity. These results align with Mikulincer and Shaver (2016), who emphasized that men often adopt avoidant patterns as a defense mechanism to maintain independence, while women tend to express more anxiety-related attachment behaviors due to heightened emotional responsiveness. Furthermore, the observed differences support Amin's (2017) findings that women in Asian societies experience increased fear of intimacy due to sociocultural expectations surrounding emotional expression and relational dependency. This fear of intimacy may act as both a barrier to emotional closeness and a reflection of internalized gender norms that discourage open vulnerability among women (Birnbaum, 2010).

The findings of the study highlight clear gender-based distinctions in attachment styles and fear of intimacy among married individuals. Men were predominantly characterized by secure and dismissive attachment styles, reflecting their emotional independence and confidence in relationships. These patterns indicate that men are more comfortable maintaining autonomy and managing emotional distance as a form of relational control. In contrast, women displayed higher levels of fearful and preoccupied attachment styles,

accompanied by an increased fear of intimacy. This suggests that women tend to experience greater emotional sensitivity and relational anxiety, often shaped by cultural expectations surrounding dependence, vulnerability, and emotional expression. Such findings are consistent with previous research by Mikulincer and Shaver (2016) and Birnbaum (2010), which emphasize gendered patterns of attachment shaped by early relational experiences and sociocultural conditioning.

Conclusion

Overall, the study concludes that gender plays a pivotal role in shaping emotional closeness, communication, and intimacy within marital relationships. Thematic findings demonstrate that attachment dynamics are not merely individual psychological tendencies but are deeply influenced by societal norms that define masculinity and femininity. The research underscores the importance of developing gender-sensitive therapeutic approaches that address emotional needs specific to men and women to enhance marital satisfaction and emotional well-being. Encouraging open communication, empathy, and emotional vulnerability may help couples overcome attachment-based fears and foster more secure, fulfilling intimate bonds.

References

- Amin, Z. (2017). *Attachment style, humor style & fear of intimacy in working married men and women*. University of Management and Technology.
- Barelds, D. P. H., & Barelds-Dijkstra, P. (2010). Humor in romantic relationships: A two-year longitudinal study. *Personal Relationships*, 17(2), 161–175. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6811.2010.01266.x>
- Batool, N., & Riaz, H. (2024). Seasonality and Seasonal Psychiatric Disorders in Adults. *Pakistan Journal of Mental Health*, 1(1), 25–33.
- Birnbaum, G. E. (2010). Attachment orientations, sexual functioning, and relationship satisfaction in a community sample of women. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 27(2), 220–239. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407509348814>
- Campbell, L., & Moroz, S. (2014). Attachment styles, humor styles and relationship satisfaction. *Personal Relationships*, 21(3), 513–530. <https://doi.org/10.1111/per.12045>
- Cann, A., Zapata, C. L., & Davis, H. B. (2014). Humor style and relationship satisfaction in dating couples: Perceived partner humor styles matter. *Humor*, 27(2), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1515/humor-2013-0050>
- Descutner, C. J., & Thelen, M. H. (1991). Development and validation of a Fear-of-Intimacy Scale. *Psychological Assessment*, 3(2), 218–225. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1040-3590.3.2.218>
- Martin, R. A., Puhlik-Doris, P., Larsen, G., Gray, J., & Weir, K. (2003). Individual differences in uses of humor and their relation to psychological well-being: Development of the Humor Styles Questionnaire. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 37(1), 48–75. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0092-6566\(02\)00534-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0092-6566(02)00534-2)
- Mikulincer, M., & Shaver, P. R. (2016). *Attachment in adulthood: Structure, dynamics, and change*. Guilford Press.
- Mubashara, H. F., & Riaz, M. A. (2024). Relationship between Mental Health Problems, Physical Impairment and Help-Seeking Behavior among Pregnant Women. *Pakistan Journal of Positive Psychology*, 1(1), 30–37.
- Van Oudenhoven, J. P., Hofstra, J., & Bakker, W. (2003). Ontwikkeling en evaluatie van de Hechtstijl Vragenlijst (Attachment Style Questionnaire). *Nederlands Tijdschrift voor de Psychologie en haar Grensgebieden*, 58(2), 95–102.