



## Gender differences, attachment styles, self-esteem and romantic relationships in Thailand

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### ABSTRACT

In this study we explore the association between attachment dimension (anxiety and avoidance), attachment style (secure, preoccupied, fearful and dismissing), self-esteem and romantic relationships, as determined by relationship status, relationship satisfaction and the length of relationships in 398 young Thai people. For the results, males scored higher in terms of both attachment anxiety and avoidance than the females, and this is consistent with other Asian cultures when compared to their western counterparts. It was found that non-romantic attachment as well as self-esteem does not predict the status of a relationship; however, romantic attachment avoidance predicts the level of relationship satisfaction, though with no difference between men and women. The lack of variables associated with the length of a relationship and relationship satisfaction, highlight the fact that other involved factors remain unstudied. The limitations of the study are also discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Gender and attachment

Giudice (2011) meta-analyzed the role of gender with regard to attachment styles in a large sample of 66,132 participants covering various regions of the world, and discovered that most regions except East Asia show large gender and culture differences in terms of the attachment styles found in men and women (unfortunately the study did not cover Africa, South America and South or Southeast Asia). When these factors are linked to culture, it brings about complex results of romantic relationship scenarios. Schachner, Shaver, and Gillath (2008); for example, found an association between attachment anxiety and the relationship status of men (single or in a couple), but not women, speculating that this was the result of traditional gender roles in which men are expected to initiate relationships and thus run a greater risk of rejection than women. On the other hand, Bookwala (2003), Davila and Cobb (2004), Kirkpatrick and Davis (1994) and Kirkpatrick and Hazan (1994), found that avoidance increases the odds of being single and not of becoming involved in serious dating activities.

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### 1.2. Attachment, relationship satisfaction and length of relationship

With regard to relationship satisfaction, even though the vast majority of studies have revealed a significant link between attachment insecurity and relationship dissatisfaction – for both men and women across cultures (Carnelley & Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Shaver, Schachner, & Mikulincer, 2005; Simpson, 1990), some have found that anxiety and avoidance are equal predictors of the level of dissatisfaction experienced by women (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), whereas avoidance appears to be more consistently associated with relationship dissatisfaction than anxiety among men (Shaver et al., 2005). Unlike relationship satisfaction, few studies have found an association between attachment styles, gender and the length of relationships. Research has revealed that other factors mediate between attachment styles and the level of satisfaction with a relationship, or its length; for example, dyadic communication (Patricia Noller, Feeney & Ebrary, 2002), the wrong perception of a partner's signals (Noller & Feeney, 1994), empathic accuracy (Simpson, Ickes, & Grich, 1999) and conflict styles (Bouthillier, Julien, Dube, Belanger, & Hamelin, 2002).

### 1.3. Culture and attachment

In terms of culture influencing individual attachment levels, a number of studies have shown how it impacts differently on men and women's level of romantic attachment. Sprecher et al. (1994); for example, found that American men are more likely to assume a secure schema than are Russian or Japanese men, and that American and Japanese women are more likely to possess secure schemas than Russian women. Soon and Malley-Morrison (2000) argue that, in general, East Asians' orientations are less individualistic and more collectivist than their Western peers', so they are more likely to strive for self-acceptance via the approval of highly-respected others, while Hatfield and Rapson (2010) found that East Asians are prone to have preoccupied romantic attachments, a finding supported by the previous study of Schmitt et al. (2004). Güngör and Bornstein (2010) recently compared young Turkish and Belgian people and found that attachment avoidance develops differently across the two cultures. Earlier research also highlighted differences between collectivist and individualist cultures in terms of levels of attachment; however, most studies on attachment have been carried out in Western countries – with Caucasian samples, or have compared Middle Eastern or East Asian countries with Western countries, and few studies have been carried out in Southeast Asia. In fact, Schmitt (2002, 2006) carried out impressive worldwide research and revealed that some South East Asian countries, except for Thailand, including Malaysia, Vietnam and Indonesia seem to have inconsistent characteristics in terms of attachment across genders.

### 1.4. Self-esteem, attachment and romantic relationship

Another factor that has been studied with regard to romantic attachment is self-esteem, with almost of all studies finding that attachment anxiety (preoccupied or fearful) is associated with lower levels of this personality trait. Schmitt and Allik (2005) found a significant negative association between attachment anxiety and self-esteem in a study encompassing 49 countries, while Bartholomew and Horowitz looked at the relationship between attachment styles, self-esteem and sociability, finding that secure and dismissive attachment styles are associated with higher levels of self-esteem than anxious and fearful attachment styles. Furthermore, it has been found that those who demonstrate avoidance are relatively more likely than others to work to maintain their self-esteem and, perhaps as a consequence, relatively unlikely to be brought closer to their partner (Sharpsteen & Kirkpatrick, 1997). Since research on Thailand is lacking, our aim is to carry out the first study in this regard. Before proposing our hypothesis, we would like to give a brief overview of the sample of young Thai people used in our study.

### 1.5. Thai culture and Thai youths' romantic relationship

Thailand is a traditional Buddhist country in which being pleasant, friendly, caring, self-sacrificing and submitting to others' demands, especially to seniors, is valued socially (Klausner, 2002). Traditionally, males are expected to assume a leadership role in the family or in society, while females are expected not to be assertive about romantic relationships, as this might be viewed as unbecoming (Yoddumnern-Attig, Richter, Soonthornhdada, Sethaput, & Pramualratana, 1992; Klausner, 2002). However, Thailand is now in a transition – moving from rural to urbanized, from collectivistic to individualistic, from highly religious to less religious, from modest to self-confident and from male dominated to gender equal (Vuttanont, Greenhalgh, Griffin, & Boynton, 2006). This change includes the fact that young females now behave differently in terms of romantic relationships as compared to the traditional norm; for example, urbanized young females tend to live their lives more freely, as young males have traditionally done, and are more assertive in terms of expressing their desire to go on dates, especially those who are independent or away from their parents, even though this kind of behavior is unacceptable for a large part of the society, as reflected in the media's concern about the more direct expression of sexual behavior in young people (especially females), for fear that this will erode social values (Vuttanont et al., 2006). In the past, and today in some rural parts of Thailand, parents discourage their daughters from dating freely and engaging in sexual activity, because premarital sex is seen as unacceptable for females (Isarabhakdi, 1999; Podhisita and Pattaravanich, 1995; Sridawruang, Crozier, & Pfeil, 2010). Nowadays; however, going on a date is generally more accepted, in fact, the fact that young people go on dates has been put down to a number of reasons, including peer pressure, or the risk of feeling humiliated or

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