

ATTACHMENT ANXIETY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AMONG GEN Z YOUNG ADULTS: THE SERIAL MEDIATING ROLES OF REJECTION SENSITIVITY AND AFFECTIVE DEPENDENCY

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KEYWORDS:

Attachment Anxiety, Rejection Sensitivity, Affective Dependency, Psychological Distress, Gen Z, Pakistan

CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Ayub, B., Amin, S. I., Syed, L. M., Mufti, M., & Fatima, M. (2026). Attachment anxiety and psychological distress among Gen Z young adults: the serial mediating roles of rejection sensitivity and affective dependency. *Pakistan Journal of Positive Psychology*, 3(8), 178-187.

ABSTRACT

In Pakistan, Gen Z youth are increasingly experiencing relational and emotional stressors which can lead to higher levels of psychological stress. In the current research, it was explored whether rejection sensitivity and affective dependency mediated the relationship between attachment anxiety and psychological distress among Gen Z young adults. A cross-sectional correlational design was adopted and 300 youthful grown-ups aged from 18 to 25 years (58.7% feminine) were recruited from Lahore by means of convenience sampling. All participants answered the Experiences in Close Relationships Relationship Structures questionnaire, Adult Rejection sensitivity questionnaire, Affective Dependence Scale, and Kessler Psychological Distress scale. Attachment anxiety was positively associated with rejection sensitivity ($r = .62$), affective dependency ($r = .61$), and psychological distress ($r = .69$) and rejection sensitivity ($r = .65$) and affective dependency ($r = .66$) were positively linked to psychological distress. Results of serial mediation analysis with PROCESS Model 6 and 5,000 bootstrap samples indicated that there were significant indirect effects through rejection sensitivity ($B = 1.05$, 95% CI [0.65, 1.47]), through affective dependency ($B = 0.73$, 95% CI [0.43, 1.07]), and through both mediators in sequence ($B = 0.37$, 95% CI [0.20, 0.58]). The direct effect was significant, suggesting that the indirect effects accounted for approximately 50% of the total effect and suggested partial mediation. The results indicate that young adults with anxious attachment styles become upset, in part, because they are worried about being rejected by the partner and also are overly dependent on the partner, which has implications for interventions in university counselling and for relationships-oriented interventions aimed at young adults.

I. INTRODUCTION

Generation Z (Gen Z) are people born since 1997, who were born into an era of smartphones and constant connectivity online. Members of generation Z (18 to 29 years old) are entering a new phase known as emerging adulthood where their identities are being explored, relationships are unstable, and close relationships are shifting

(Arnett, 2000). The age of 24 years is a time of vulnerability as about three fourths of all mental health issues start during this period (S. Imran & Jackson, 2022). Similarly, University students of this age group in Pakistan are also experiencing demands which are affecting their well-being such as academic pressure, career decision and adjustment demands (Anwar et al., 2024). These pressures often manifest themselves as psychological distress, or emotional suffering, which is primarily characterised by symptoms of depression and anxiety (Drapeau et al., 2012). These symptoms tend to emerge in adolescence, and continue through into early adulthood, so understanding the relational processes which sustain these symptoms is a research priority (Blake et al., 2025). The theory of attachment is helpful in explaining why some people are at a higher risk for mental health issues than others (Murray et al., 2021).

Bowlby (1969) suggested that early relationships with caregivers influence internal working models of self and others that influence subsequent relationships. There are two dimensions to adult attachment, attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance (Brennan et al., 1998). Attachment anxiety involves ongoing feelings of rejection and abandonment and rumination on whether others will be able to satisfy one's emotional needs (Blake et al., 2025). Hyperactivating coping strategies have been used by anxiously attached persons, including hypervigilance for cues of partner's unavailability and hyperintense seeking of proximity (Mikulincer et al., 2003). Two interpersonal processes, rejection sensitivity and affective dependency, have been linked to both insecure attachment and psychological symptoms (Etxaburu et al., 2024; Simmons, 2021). Rejection sensitivity refers to anxiously expecting, perceiving, and reacting to rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Affective (emotional) dependency is an ongoing, maladaptive behavioral pattern that involves seeking to meet affective needs through close relationships (Urbiola et al., 2017, as cited in Etxaburu et al., 2024). It is described by Sirvent-Ruiz et al. (2022) as a pattern that has addictive characteristics (craving, addiction), and bonding (accommodation to the relationship, loss of autonomy). The current study aimed to investigate the serial mediation of the relationship between attachment anxiety and psychological distress in Gen Z young adults in Pakistan, following the Murray et al. (2021) approach of serial mediation.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a clear relationship between attachment anxiety and psychological distress among youth, across studies (Blake et al., 2025; Colonnello et al., 2022). For those born in the same period, the attachment anxiety at age 21 explained approximately 64% of the continuity of anxiety and depressive symptoms from age 14 to age 21 (Blake et al., 2025). Among 267 Italian medical students, the anxious attachment dimensions of need for approval and preoccupation with relationships were related to depressive symptoms (Colonnello et al., 2022). The findings of the studies in Pakistan are consistent (Anwar et al., 2024; S. K. Imran, 2022; Irfan et al., 2023). In the year 2022, S. K. Imran (2022) found that there is a strong positive correlation between anxious attachment and perceived stress in 200 undergraduate students of Lahore. A total of 350 students in Lahore were included in the study by Irfan et al. (2023), who found a positive correlation between anxious attachment and social anxiety ($r = .44$). R. 670 undergraduates in Karachi showed a correlation between anxious attachment and interpersonal rejection distortions ($r = .47$) and loneliness ($r = .38$) (Anwar et al., 2024). One possible initial link in this chain of events is the sensitivity to rejection that was suggested to result from the same early rejections that underlie insecure attachment (Feldman & Downey, 1994). In a systematic review of 27 studies, 24 studies showed significant associations of attachment with rejection sensitivity, specifically, the most robust effect was for anxious attachment (Simmons, 2021). Similarly, Kumar and Mahapatra (2024) reported that anxious attachment was positively associated with rejection sensitivity for 80 Indian young adults. Rejection sensitivity, in turn, is consistently related to psychological distress (Gao et al., 2017). The 75 studies in the meta-analysis showed moderate correlations between rejection sensitivity and depression ($r = .33$) and anxiety ($r = .41$) (Gao et al., 2017). Among 1,804 European youth (15–22 years of age), rejection concern was most strongly associated with anxiety and depression, in part due to repetitive negative thinking (Frommelt et al., 2025).

Rejection sensitivity can also drive people to become affective dependent (Song, 2019). The relationship between childhood trauma and relationship addiction tendency within a Korean sample of adults ($N = 465$) was fully mediated by rejection sensitivity (Song, 2019). Downey and Feldman (1996) further demonstrated that rejection sensitive individuals are insecure in their relationships, and react to inconclusive partner behaviour with jealous

and controlling behaviour. However, Kumar and Mahapatra (2024) did not find any significant relationship between rejection sensitivity and dependency, indicating that this relationship remains controversial. Affective dependence is also linked to distress (Etxaburu et al., 2024). Kumar and Mahapatra (2024) found a positive correlation between dependency and anxious attachment and negative correlation between dependency and secure attachment. In 940 Spanish adolescents, emotional dependence was a mediator between attachment and symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression (Etxaburu et al., 2024).

Rationale of the Study

Previous studies have focused on the individual components of the proposed chain; that is, the relationship between attachment and rejection sensitivity (Simmons, 2021), between rejection sensitivity and distress (Gao et al., 2017), or between attachment and emotional dependence and psychological symptoms (Etxaburu et al., 2024). The relationship between rejection sensitivity and dependency is also inconsistent as Song (2019) found a significant mediation effect in Korea, whilst Kumar and Mahapatra (2024) did not find a significant correlation in India. The current studies conducted in Pakistan have been direct associations of attachment with stress, social anxiety, and loneliness (Anwar et al., 2024; S. K. Imran, 2022; Irfan et al., 2023). The results of western samples cannot be directly transferred to Pakistan where family involvement has a significant influence on close relationship (Qadir et al., 2005). The testing of the serial pathway may therefore provide a pathway for counselling targets such as rejection sensitivity and affective dependency, as previously stated, interventions need to be directed at attachment anxiety in young people, (Blake et al., 2025).

Hypotheses

1. Attachment anxiety will be positively associated with rejection sensitivity, affective dependency, and psychological distress among Gen Z young adults.
2. Rejection sensitivity will be positively associated with affective dependency and psychological distress among Gen Z young adults.
3. Affective dependency will be positively associated with psychological distress among Gen Z young adults.
4. Rejection sensitivity will mediate the relationship between attachment anxiety and psychological distress among Gen Z young adults.
5. Affective dependency will mediate the relationship between attachment anxiety and psychological distress among Gen Z young adults.
6. Rejection sensitivity and affective dependency will serially mediate the relationship between attachment anxiety and psychological distress among Gen Z young adults.

III. METHOD

The present study adopted the quantitative, cross-sectional and correlational survey design to examine the associations among the study variables and to test a serial mediation model, which did not involve the manipulation of any variables.

Participants

The sample comprised 300 Gen Z young adults aged 18-25 years ($M = 20.34$, $SD = 1.57$) students and working people were recruited from Lahore, Pakistan from various universities, workplaces, and community settings through convenience sampling. An a priori power analysis using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) for multiple regression analysis with 3 predictors, medium effect size ($f^2 = .15$), $\alpha = .05$, and power = .95 was conducted, and the sample size was increased to enhance the test of indirect effects, and to provide for incomplete responses. Participants were included if they (a) were 18-29 years old; (b) could read and understand English; and (c) were in, or had recently been in, a romantic relationship with someone (including having been engaged to and/or married). And exclusion criteria. People were not included if they (a) were under 18 or over 29 years old, (b) failed to provide informed consent, or (c) refused to answer more than 10% of the items on one of the scales.

Measures

Information on age, gender, education, occupation, family system, place of residence, family income, social relationships, breakup histories, and daily social media usage were recorded on a demographic sheet. The following four self-report scales were then administered. [I] *Experiences in Close Relationships–Relationship Structures Questionnaire*, Anxiety subscale (ECR-RS). The ECR-RS was created by Fraley et al. (2011) for measuring attachment orientations in close relationships. The scale defines attachment anxiety as a concern that the others do not care about the self and that they will be abandoned by others. In the present study, the three anxiety items (items 7-9) assessed a person's feelings of anxiety regarding general close relationships were used. Items are rated on a 7 point likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). There is no reverse scoring of the anxiety items, and the score is the average of the three items (range 1-7), higher scores indicating higher levels of attachment anxiety. Previous studies have reported Cronbach's alpha values between .75 and .91 for the anxiety domain, while the Brazilian validation reported a Cronbach's alpha of .88 to .91 in all the relationship domains. [II] *Adult Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (A-RSQ)*. The A-RSQ was created by Berenson et al. (2009) to be an adult version of the Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (Downey & Feldman, 1996) to assess vulnerability to rejection (hypersensitivity to rejection) in adults. Each item is followed by a situation in which there is some possibility that the person will be rejected, and respondents rate (a) how concerned they are about rejection (very unconcerned to very concerned) and (b) how likely they feel they are to be accepted (very unlikely to very likely). There are no reverse-keyed items, but the score for each of the situations is $(a) \times (7 - b)$; the nine products are then averaged to provide a score ranging from 1 to 36, with higher scores representing higher rejection sensitivity. Cronbach's alpha values have been reported previously between .69 and .91 (Frommelt et al., 2025).

[III] *Affective Dependence Scale (ADS-9)*. Sirvent-Ruiz et al. (2022) created the affective dependence scale (ADS-9) to assess affective dependence in romantic relationships. It consists of 9 items that fall into two factors: Craving (items 1, 2, 4, 6, and 9) – a strong desire for the partner and Submission (3, 5, 7, and 8) – accommodation and subjugation to the partner. Responses are on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). There are no reverse-scored items on the scale and the scale is scored as the mean of the nine items (range 1 to 5) with higher scores indicating a greater affective dependency. In the 762 adult Spanish sample that was used for validation, the alpha for the total scale varied between .867 and .892 (Sirvent-Ruiz et al., 2022). [IV] *Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10)*. The K10 is a non-specific psychological distress measure that was created by Kessler et al. (2002). Includes 10 items related to symptoms of anxiety and depression that occurred over the last 4 weeks (5-point Likert scale (0 = none of the time to 4 = all of the time)). There are no reverse-scored items in the K10, and there are no questions that are marked as either right or wrong, instead the score is the sum of all the items (range 10-50), with higher scores meaning more distress. Cronbach's alpha of .93 was reported in the original validation (Kessler et al., 2002).

Procedure

Where necessary, permission to use the scales was secured from the developers and approval from the Ethics Review Committee of the Department of Professional Psychology, Bahria University was secured. The A-RSQ items #3 and #7 were checked with the supervisor for cultural appropriateness prior to data collection. Eligible participants were approached face-to-face, provided with information about the study, a booklet with the consent form, demographic sheet, ECR-RS anxiety items, A-RSQ, ADS-9, and K10. All participants were instructed to follow the same written instructions, and it took approximately 10-15 minutes to complete the booklet. The study adhered to APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (American Psychological Association, 2002). Participation was voluntary and informed written consent was obtained from all participants, who were free to opt out of any question or to drop out at any point. No names were requested, answers were anonymous and respondents were not deceived. Those participants who expressed distress when asked a question about distress or relationships were given the opportunity to stop and reach out to the researcher for information on support services. For descriptive analysis, for Cronbach's alpha and for Pearson correlations (Hypotheses 1, 2 and 3) the data were analysed in SPSS 27. The hypotheses testing procedures 4–6 were tested using Hayes' (2013) PROCESS macro, 5,000 bootstrap samples were generated, and an indirect effect was inferred when the 95% CI did not include zero.

IV.RESULTS

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 300)

Variables	f	%
Gender		
Male	115	38.3
Female	176	58.7
Prefer not to say	9	3.0
Education		
Intermediate	26	8.7
Undergraduate (BS)	223	74.3
Graduate (MS/MPhil)	43	14.3
Other	8	2.7
Current status		
Student	168	56.0
Employed	62	20.7
Student and employed	55	18.3
Unemployed	15	5.0
Family system		
Nuclear	187	62.3
Joint	113	37.7
Area of residence		
Urban	243	81.0
Rural	57	19.0
Currently living		
With family	145	48.3
Hostel	101	33.7
Alone	39	13.0
Other	15	5.0
Monthly family income (PKR)		
Below 50,000	61	20.3
50,000–100,000	113	37.7
100,001–200,000	101	33.7
Above 200,000	25	8.3
Marital status		
Single	211	70.3
Engaged	47	15.7
Married	22	7.3
Other	20	6.7
Currently in a romantic relationship		
Yes	175	58.3
No	125	41.7
Ever experienced a breakup		
Yes	133	44.3
No	167	55.7
Daily social media use		
Less than 1 hour	27	9.0
1–3 hours	94	31.3
3–5 hours	124	41.3
More than 5 hours	55	18.3

Note. Participants were aged 18 to 25 years ($M = 20.34$, $SD = 1.57$). f = frequency; PKR = Pakistani rupees.

The demographic characteristics of the sample are given in Table 1. The majority of participants were female (58.7%) and majority were undergraduate students (74.3%). The majority of the participants were from urban

areas (81.0%) and nuclear families (62.3%). Over half of them were in a relationship (58.3%), over half have been in a breakup (44.3%), and more than half use social media more than 3 hours per day (59.6%).

Table II: Normality and Psychometric Properties of the Study Variables (N = 300)

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	α
Attachment anxiety	4.47	1.08	1.67-7	.93
Rejection sensitivity	6.94	4.77	1-26.67	.97
Affective dependency	2.50	0.58	1-4.33	.95
Psychological distress	27.97	6.71	12-50	.96

Note. α = Cronbach's alpha. Standard error of skewness = 0.14; standard error of kurtosis = 0.28.

All four scales were highly internally consistent (Cronbach's Alpha ranging from .93 to .97) as displayed in Table 2. All variables except rejection sensitivity had a kurtosis value within ± 2 , while a value of 2.37 was obtained for the Kurtosis of rejection sensitivity. It was not a problem because the indirect effects were tested using bootstrapping, which does not require a normal sampling distribution (Hayes, 2013).

Table III: Pearson Correlations Among the Study Variables (N = 300)

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Attachment anxiety	—	.62**	.61**	.69**
2. Rejection sensitivity		—	.59**	.65**
3. Affective dependency			—	.66**
4. Psychological distress				—

** $p < .01$

As hypothesized in Hypothesis 1, attachment anxiety was significantly and positively correlated with rejection sensitivity ($r = .62$, $p < .01$), affective dependency ($r = .61$, $p < .01$), and psychological distress ($r = .69$, $p < .01$), as indicated in Table 3. To confirm Hypothesis 2, rejection sensitivity was significantly and positively associated with affective dependency ($r = .59$, $p < .01$) and psychological distress ($r = .65$, $p < .01$). Psychological distress was also found to be significantly and positively related to affective dependency ($r = .66$, $p < .01$) lending support to Hypothesis 3.

Table IV: Serial Mediation of Rejection Sensitivity and Affective Dependency Between Attachment Anxiety and Psychological Distress (PROCESS Model 6, N = 300)

Predictors	Rejection sensitivity		Affective dependency		Psychological distress	
	<i>B</i>	95% CI	<i>B</i>	95% CI	<i>B</i>	95% CI
Constant	-5.24***	[-7.06, -3.41]	1.25***	[1.03, 1.47]	7.39***	[4.81, 9.97]
Attachment anxiety	2.72***	[2.33, 3.12]	0.22***	[0.16, 0.28]	2.14***	[1.52, 2.76]
Rejection sensitivity	—	—	0.04***	[0.03, 0.05]	0.38***	[0.25, 0.52]
Affective dependency	—	—	—	—	3.33***	[2.21, 4.46]
R^2	.38		.45		.60	
<i>F</i>	182.33***		119.75***		150.35***	

Note. *B* = unstandardized coefficient; CI = confidence interval. Each pair of columns shows one outcome variable in the same PROCESS Model 6 run. *** $p < .001$.

As demonstrated in Table 4, attachment anxiety was a significant predictor of rejection sensitivity ($B = 2.72$, $p < .001$) with 38% of the variance in rejection sensitivity explained. Attachment anxiety ($B = 0.22$, $p < .001$) and rejection sensitivity ($B = 0.04$, $p < .001$) both significantly predicted affective dependency and the two variables

together accounted for the variance of 45% of affective dependency. The final model revealed attachment anxiety ($B = 2.14$, $p < .001$), rejection sensitivity ($B = 0.38$, $p < .001$) and affective dependency ($B = 3.33$, $p < .001$) were considered significant predictors of psychological distress and accounted for 60% of its variance.

Table V: Total, Direct, and Indirect Effects of Attachment Anxiety on Psychological Distress (N = 300)

Effect	Path	B	SE	95% CI
Total effect	AA → PD	4.28	0.26	[3.77, 4.80]
Direct effect	AA → PD	2.14	0.31	[1.52, 2.76]
Total indirect effect		2.14	0.25	[1.67, 2.65]
Indirect effect 1	AA → RS → PD	1.05	0.21	[0.65, 1.47]
Indirect effect 2	AA → AD → PD	0.73	0.16	[0.43, 1.07]
Indirect effect 3	AA → RS → AD → PD	0.37	0.10	[0.20, 0.58]

Note. AA = attachment anxiety; RS = rejection sensitivity; AD = affective dependency; PD = psychological distress. Indirect effects were tested with 5,000 percentile bootstrap samples, and their *SE* values are bootstrap standard errors. An effect is significant when its 95% CI does not include zero.

The indirect path of attachment anxiety on psychological distress was significant via the mediator of rejection sensitivity, as seen in Table 5 ($B = 1.05$, 95% CI [0.65, 1.47]), thus supporting Hypothesis 4. The indirect effect via affective dependency was also significant ($B = 0.73$, 95% CI [0.43, 1.07]), thus favoring Hypothesis 5. It was not only the serial indirect effects, but also the serial indirect effects via rejection sensitivity and then affective dependency that were significant ($B = 0.37$, 95% CI [0.20, 0.58]), lending support to Hypothesis 6. The direct effect of attachment anxiety on psychological distress was still present ($B = 2.14$, $p < .001$), so rejection sensitivity and affective dependency partially mediated this effect, and the total indirect effect was approximately 50% of the total effect of attachment anxiety on psychological distress.

V. DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to assess the serial mediation of affective dependency with rejection sensitivity between attachment anxiety and psychological distress among young adults of Gen Z in Pakistan. All six hypotheses were confirmed and rejection sensitivity and affective dependency accounted for approximately 50% of the variance in the impact of attachment anxiety on psychological distress. As expected in assumption 1, the younger adults with higher attachment anxiety had a higher score on rejection sensitivity, affective dependency, and psychological distress. This aligns with a systematic review where 24 out of 27 studies reported significant associations between attachment and rejection sensitivity with the highest associations seen with anxious attachment (Simmons, 2021), and with Kumar and Mahapatra (2024) who reported associations between anxious attachment and rejection sensitivity and dependence among Indian young adults. Similarly, there was a strong association between attachment anxiety and psychological distress ($r = .69$), which is consistent with the longitudinal studies which have shown that attachment anxiety is associated with anxiety and depressive symptoms throughout early adulthood (Blake et al., 2025), and with the previous Pakistani studies which have correlated attachment anxiety with social anxiety, loneliness and anxiety symptoms (Abbas & Jilani, 2026; Anwar et al., 2024; Irfan et al., 2023). But all of the studies do not support this trend. When self-esteem is included as a mediator, Hannanisa and Rinaldi (2026) found that anxious attachment did not have a significant direct effect on rejection sensitivity among 156 college students, and in three of the 27 studies Simmons (2021) reviewed, there was no significant association. These differences may be due to the various attachment measures used and the integration of self-esteem, which could serve as part of the relationship between attachment anxiety and rejection fear.

Hypothesis 2 was also confirmed. The association between rejection sensitivity and psychological distress ($r = .65$) was greater than the pooled associations with depression ($r = .33$) and anxiety ($r = .41$) reported in a meta-analysis of 75 studies (Gao et al., 2017), perhaps because the K10 includes items on anxiety and depression. This is in line with evidence indicating that concern about rejection is closely correlated with anxiety and depression among

European youth (Frommelt et al., 2025). The positive correlation between rejection sensitivity and affective dependency corroborates with Song's (2019) research finding that the effect of childhood trauma on the relationship addiction tendency was fully mediated by rejection sensitivity. Kumar and Mahapatra (2024) on the other hand, did not observe any significant relationship between rejection sensitivity and dependency. This study, with 300 participants (Sirvent-Ruiz et al., 2022) and a study with a small sample of 80 young adults, could have led to different results. In line with Hypothesis 3, affective dependency was positively related to psychological distress, which agrees with Etxaburu et al. (2024), who found that emotional dependence was related to stress, anxiety, and depression among 940 Spanish adolescents. Hypotheses 4 and 5 were confirmed as both mediators had significant indirect effect. The indirect pathway through rejection sensitivity was the largest ($B = 1.05$), consistent with the findings of Bintaş-Zörer and Dirik (2023) who showed that rejection sensitivity mediated the association between attachment working models and social anxiety among 557 university students and With Fomelt et al. (2025) who found that rejection sensitivity was associated with poorer mental health, in part through repetitive negative thinking. This indirect pathway via affective dependency is consistent with the finding by Etxaburu et al. (2024) that emotional dependence acted as the mediator between attachment and psychological dysfunction. As predicted by attachment theory for hyperactivating strategies (Mikulincer et al., 2003), these findings indicate that anxiously attached young adults are stressed, in part because they believe that they will be rejected and in part because of their reliance on their partners to satisfy their emotional needs.

Hypothesis 6 was supported by the significant serial indirect effect which indicated that attachment anxiety was positively associated with rejection sensitivity, rejection sensitivity was positively associated with affective dependency, and affective dependency was positively associated with psychological distress. This sequence builds on previous serial mediation research on attachment anxiety and depression (Murray et al., 2021) and the hyperactivating attachment strategies that are associated with heightened vigilance towards rejection and reliance on others (Mikulincer et al., 2003). The direct effect of attachment anxiety remained significant, as also reported among British young adults with self-esteem (S. Imran & Jackson, 2022), an effect which did not make the mediation a complete, but rather partial. Abbas and Jilani (2026) also investigated emotional dysregulation as a mediator between insecure attachment and anxiety symptoms in 400 youth in Rawalpindi and Islamabad, Pakistan, and reported that emotional dysregulation fully mediated the direct link between insecure attachment and anxiety symptoms, indicating that this direct link is accounted for by emotional regulation. These pathways could also be a reflection of the Pakistani cultural context as family involvement is highly influential in shaping these relationships (Qadir et al., 2005). In practice, counselling services for young adults in the Gen Z generation might focus on the fear of rejection and on the excessive emotional dependency on partners as called for in interventions with young people to address attachment anxiety (Blake et al., 2025).

Limitations and Suggestions

The present study is one of the first studies conducted in Pakistan that tested rejection sensitivity and affective dependency as serial mediators between attachment anxiety and psychological distress and adopted reliable measures (alpha range of .93 to .97) and bootstrapped indirect effects (Hayes, 2013). There are some restrictions to be mentioned here. First, the order of the proposed pathway is not confirmed by the cross-sectional design and needs to be confirmed by longitudinal studies. Secondly, the sample was taken from Lahore, and the sample included the majority of undergraduates in the age group of 18-25 years, which may not represent older Gen Z adults or rural populations. Third, the measures of all variables were self-report measures, which could be sensitive to social desirability and common method variance. Fourth, a small number of three items on the attachment anxiety scale was used and the ADS-9 was not validated in Pakistan. Fifth, participants' relationship histories were only evaluated by measuring current relationship status and breakup experience; the nature of the relationship on which participants reported affective dependency ratings could not be confirmed completely. Finally, the low alpha score for the A-RSQ (.97) may suggest some item redundancy and rejection sensitivity scores were slightly leptokurtic. Future studies should adopt the longitudinal design, validate the ADS-9 and A-RSQ in Urdu, and investigate other mediators like emotion regulation, self-esteem.

VI.CONCLUSION

The findings indicated that there was a significant positive correlation between attachment anxiety and psychological distress in Gen Z young adults of Pakistan, both directly and indirectly. The indirect effect was mediated by rejection sensitivity, affective dependency, and a sequential pathway (attachment anxiety to rejection sensitivity to affective dependency to psychological distress). Thus, it is important to include young adult's concern about rejection and over-dependency on partners in addition to attachment anxiety in university counselling services or mental health services in order to minimize psychological tension.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

The author received no funding from any organizations.

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