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**ATTACHMENT STYLES, SELF-ESTEEM AND REJECTION  
SENSITIVITY AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The study was conducted to examine: the association between attachment styles (i.e. secure, fearful, pre-occupied and dismissing), self-esteem and rejection sensitivity level among university students; and to explore the mediating role of self-esteem between relationship of preoccupied attachment style with rejection sensitivity. The sample consisted of 409 students (181 men and 228 women) with age range of 18-26 years from public and private universities of Rawalpindi, Islamabad and Lahore. Measures used were Relationship Scales Questionnaire (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994), Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) and Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (Feldman & Downy, 1996). Correlation analysis revealed that secure attachment style is significantly negatively related to rejection sensitivity level whereas fearful, preoccupied and dismissing attachment styles were significantly positively related to rejection sensitivity level among university students. Further, it is indicated that only preoccupied attachment style is found significantly negatively related to self-esteem. Furthermore, the mediation analysis showed that the relationship between preoccupied attachment style and rejection sensitivity was partially mediated by self-esteem.*

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**Keywords:** Attachment Styles, Self-Esteem, Rejection Sensitivity, University Students

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Establishing and sustaining positive bonds with others is a rudimentary human motivation (DeWall et al., 2012). Attachment is a connection or tie between an individual and his attachment figure (Prior & Glaser, 2006). Attachment is similarly an affectional link formed during infancy and childhood with primary and secondary caregivers (Cohan, 2005). First, Bowlby (1907- 1990) tried to understand the concept of attachment by studying the extreme anxiety undergone by newborn children who were isolated from their caregivers (Bowlby, 1969). Along with her contemporaries, Ainsworth was considered the first researcher to classify the orientations of attachment, which she described as three classification model i.e. anxious ambivalent, secure and avoidant attachment (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Later on, Hazan and Shaver (1987) were the first to begin to understand adults' relationships in terms of attachment processes. They implemented Ainsworth's three classification schemes as an outline for organizing individual variances in the way adults' reason, sense, and act in interactions with others.

Bartholomew (1990) established the four classification system for styles of attachment centered on four groupings attained through dividing the individual's intangible view of a person into negative (high dependency) or positive (low dependency) on one of the axis, whereas dividing the individuals' nonconcrete view of another subject into negative (high evasion) or positive (low evasion) on the other axis. Another four category model was given by Griffin and Bartholomew (1994) which is derived from Hazen and Shaver (1987), and Bartholomew and Horowitz's (1991) adult styles of attachment.

Secure individuals have a tendency to be at ease with closeness and these individuals are self-assured that significant others respect them whereas they have the ability to depend on substantial others for the required assistance (Collins & Feeney, 2000). These people uphold an extraordinary level of self-worth and are not threatened by intimacy. Individuals with preoccupied attachment style have undergone unresponsive and inconsistent care-giving during the early stages of their lives. Preoccupied individuals are exceedingly reliant, desire responsiveness and come to be distressed if the significant other is not willingly accessible in close interactions (Turner, 2008). Individuals with high score on fearful style of attachment are more expected to detach themselves from emotional circumstances because they have experienced unavailable and unresponsive caregivers (Besser & Priel, 2009). Dismissive

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individuals often escape attachment completely because they want a high level of freedom (Beyder-Kamjou, 2004; Turner, 2008). The later three attachment styles fearful, dismissing and preoccupied styles of attachment are also known as insecure attachment styles.

Rosenberg (1965) defined self-esteem predominantly as an attitude towards one's self centered on one's feelings of usefulness as an individual (Hojjat & Cramer, 2013). Self-esteem's significance is frequently realized in relation to such vital regions such as human enthusiasm, growth, presentation, managing ability, relationship establishment, psychopathology and mental well-being or overall health (Weiner & Craighead, 2010). Self-esteem is divided into two elementary types or levels; high and low. Each kind or level was categorized by a few rudimentary features, such as good quality of life or the occurrence of depression or nervousness (Mruk, 2006).

High self-esteem is defined as an association concerning the individuals' capabilities in dealing with the major encounters of life and worthiness in relation to happiness and doing so constantly over time (Prescott & Bogg, 2013). High level of self-esteem denotes to the feelings that an individual is worthy enough. The person modestly feels that he is a man of some importance; so he respects himself for whatsoever he is (Zeigler-Hill, 2013). Low self-esteem is described as seeing yourself in a negative manner. Low self-esteem is known to be a sequence of ambivalent feelings toward the self. Lower self-esteem is actually a way towards self-hatred, self-disgust, self-anger, self-exploitation, self-degradation, self-negligence and very self-overwhelming (Gerber, 2001). Individuals with low level of self-esteem often identify that their social beliefs in the eyes of significant others are unconvincing and they are much careful not to act in those ways that might lead others to reject them (Leary & Tangney, 2012).

Rejection sensitivity (RS) is usually described as a cognitive emotional action inclined to oversensitively anticipate, readily perceive and intense reaction towards supposed rejection by other people (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Rejection sensitivity has been displayed to have deleterious results over and above the influence of genuine experiences of rejection (Sandstrom, Cillessen, & Eisenhower, 2003). The rejection sensitivity model was formed out of attribution and attachment explanations of behavioral relationship. Its elementary belief is that initial incidents of rejection cause individuals to form anticipation of forthcoming rejection, along with the expected nervousness

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about the likelihood of such type of rejection even before it actually occurs (Downey, Khouri, & Feldman, 1997).

Gerard and Stephen (2001) said that younger adults who experience attachment nervousness and demonstrate avoidant conduct are because of negative childhood attachment related experiences. Extensive research specifies that protected sense of attachment is related with advance level of self-esteem and persons with anxious and avoidant attachment styles show the lesser level of self-esteem among all the groups of attachment styles (Foster, Kernis, & Goldman, 2007; Besser & Priel, 2009; Huntsinger & Luecken, 2004; Natarajan, Somasundaram & Sundaram, 2011). Erozkan (2009) found that all of the attachment styles had a substantial influence on the rejection sensitivity, while rejection sensitivity level of individuals having secure style of attachment is inferior as compared to rejection sensitivity level of persons with preoccupied, and fearful styles of attachment. Saricam, Gencdogan, and Erozkan (2012) observed that the students who have been high on rejection sensitivity, have lower level of self-esteem.

Khoshkam, Bahrami, Ahmadi, Fatehizade and Etemadi (2012) revealed that self-esteem mediates the relation between preoccupied, fearful styles of attachment and the level of rejection sensitivity. Besser and Priel (2009) conducted research to study the connection concerning attachment nervousness and induced imaginary romantic rejection with self-esteem working as a mediator. The results exhibited that self-esteem mediates the link between attachment anxiety and induced imaginary romantic rejection. Boldero, Hulbert, Bloom, Cooper, Gilbert, Mooney and Salinger (2009) studied rejection sensitivity, self-beliefs, adult attachment and borderline personality disorder. The results revealed that self-belief partially mediates anxious attachment style and fully mediates avoidant attachment style. Thus self-esteem plays a mediating role between attachment styles and rejection sensitivity.

Attachment styles have a crucial part in evolving rejection sensitivity among individuals as attachment is explicit conduct through which a person tries to sustain intimacy and interaction with others. The different styles of attachment predict the rejection sensitivity level of individuals and their impact on people. Studies show that persons having secure style of attachment also maintain an advanced level of self-esteem as compared to those having preoccupied, fearful and dismissing attachment styles (Huntsinger & Luecken, 2004). Attachment theory suggested a procedure that is consistent with the

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sociometer theory (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995) that liking by others lead people towards much optimistic self-appraisals (Srivastava & Beer, 2005). Certainly, studies have validated that insecure styles of adult attachment are linked with reduction in self-esteem level, that consequently increase depressing signs among university students (Hankin, Kassel, & Abela, 2005). Rejection sensitivity has been studied significantly with many disorders but the social environment in which it grows is given less consideration (Butler, Doherty, & Potter, 2007). In Pakistan, the studies on rejection sensitivity are not available according to the knowledge of author. University Students interact at larger level which may involve difficult and complex experiences. They interact with peers, teachers, parents and significant others for different purposes and are influenced by their behavior. That is why it is essential to know how their attachment styles influence self-esteem and rejection sensitivity in facilitating and hindering the communication. Hence, the present study was having the major objectives outlined as: First, examining the link between various attachment styles and self-esteem and rejection sensitivity among university students. Second, investigating the mediating role of self-esteem in pre-occupied attachment styles and rejection sensitivity relationship.

In view of the above mentioned objectives and existing literature following hypotheses were formulated:

1. Attachment styles (secure, fearful, preoccupied and dismissive) will be related with rejection sensitivity among university students.
2. Attachment styles (secure, fearful, preoccupied and dismissive) will be related with self-esteem among university students.
3. Self-esteem would mediate the relationship attachment styles (secure, fearful, preoccupied and dismissive) and rejection sensitivity among university students.

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### **METHOD**

#### ***Participants***

A purposive sample of university students ( $N = 409$ ) was taken from the premises of Rawalpindi, Islamabad and Lahore. The data was collected from students of different universities of public and private sector. Respondents included both men ( $N=181$ ) and women ( $N=228$ ) students with the age ranging from 18 to 26 years ( $M= 22$ ,  $\pm SD= 5.65$ ). The education level of the participants ranged from the graduation up to M.Phil level.

#### ***Measures***

##### **Relationship Scales Questionnaire**

The Relationship Scales Questionnaire (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994) assesses individuals' attachment styles. It measures secure, preoccupied, fearful and dismissing attachment styles. This scale consisted of thirty items to be rated on five-point scale ranging from *Not at all* (1) *Rarely* (2) *Somewhat* (3) *Often* (4) *Very Much* (5). Possible score ranges from 5-25 for secure attachment style, 4-20 for fearful attachment style, 4-20 for preoccupied attachment style and 5-25 for dismissive attachment style. High scorers on each attachment style show more level of that attachment style. It has a reliability ranges from .41 to .71. Some items are reversed scored too.

##### **Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale**

Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) assesses individuals' global self-esteem. This scale consisted of ten items to be rated four-point scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree* (1) *Disagree* (2) *Agree* (3) *Strongly Agree* (4). Possible score ranges from 10-40. High scorers on this scale represent high self-esteem. It has a reliability of .82. Some items are reversed score too.

##### **Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire**

Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (Downy & Feldman, 1996) assesses the individuals' perception about the possible level of rejection by significant others and actual rejection. It comprises of 18 suppositious situations in which a person requests to a noteworthy individual which makes

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that person susceptible to possible denunciation. Individuals are requested to assess their degree of conformity on each situation using a six point Likert scale. Participants specify (a) their appeal (nervousness over expected refusal; *Very Unconcerned* =1 to *Very Concerned* =6), and also (b) their personal prospect guess that individual in every setting will essentially answer optimistically to them (anticipations of approval: *Very Unlikely* =1 to *Very Likely* =6). Downey and Feldman (1996) reported a reliability of .83 for this scale. This scale was adapted into the cultural context with the permission of authors. Four SMEs were contacted and after establishing reliability, data was collected for main study.

### ***Procedure***

First of all, permission was taken from the respective authors for the use of the scales. The participants were approached and briefed about the purpose of the study. Participants who were willing to participate signed the consent form and provided their demographic information on the demographic sheet. The researcher ensured the participants that their information will be kept confidential and will be used only for the study purposes. The participants were instructed to read the statements carefully and mark the level of agreement that corresponded with their opinion. After data entry, statistical analysis was carried out.

### ***Statistical Analysis***

The descriptive statistics and Alpha values of scales were determined for the sample. Confirmatory factor analysis was done for the Rejection Sensitivity Scale on Pakistani Sample. Correlation analysis was used to find out the relation between Attachment Styles, Self-esteem and Rejection sensitivity. Mediation Analysis was applied to test the mediational hypothesis.

### ***Operational Definitions of Variables***

#### **Attachment Styles**

*Secure attachment style.* It is defined as having increased level of safety in personal connections, greater level of confidence on self and others too, extraordinary level of relaxation in intimacy, and capability of maintaining interconnectedness in relations while retaining personal independence

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(Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). In the present study, secure attachment style will be measured through secure attachment subscale of Relationship Scales Questionnaire (RSQ) (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994).

*Fearful attachment style.* Fearful attachment style is marked as bad image of the self as well as negative image of other people (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). In the present study, fearful attachment style will be measured through fearful attachment subscale of Relationship Scales Questionnaire (RSQ) (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994).

*Preoccupied attachment style.* Preoccupied attachment style is marked as undesirable image of the self but positive image of other individuals (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). In the present study, preoccupied attachment style will be measured through preoccupied attachment subscale of Relationship Scales Questionnaire (RSQ) (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994).

*Dismissive attachment style.* Dismissive attachment style is marked as optimistic image of the self whereas bad image of other people (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). In the present study, dismissive attachment style will be measured through dismissing attachment subscale of Relationship Scales Questionnaire (RSQ) (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994).

## **Self-Esteem**

Rosenberg (1965) defined self-esteem primarily as an attitude towards one's self based on one's feelings of worth as a person (Hojjat & Cramer, 2013). In the present study, Self-esteem will be measured through Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965).

## **Rejection Sensitivity**

Rejection sensitivity (RS) is the cognitive emotional action inclined to oversensitively anticipate, readily identify and intense reaction towards supposed rejection by other people (Downey & Feldman). In the present study, RS will be measured through Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (RSQ; Downey & Feldman, 1996).

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### RESULTS

As the rejection sensitivity questionnaire was adapted into cultural context, so confirmatory factor analysis was done to check goodness of fit indices.

**Table 1**  
*Model fit indices of Rejection Sensitivity Scale for Pakistani Sample (N=409)*

GOODNESS OF FIT							
Indexes	$\chi^2$	$\chi^2/df$	GFI	IFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
Model	484.73	2.19	.90	.95	.95	.95	.054
df= 221							
$p=.000$							

*Note.* GFI = Goodness of Fit; IFI = Incremental Fit Index; CFI = Comparative Fit Index; RMSEA= Root Mean Square Approximation.

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**Table 2**  
*Descriptive Statistics and Alpha Values for Study Variables (N=409)*

<b>Variables</b>	$\alpha$	<b>Items</b>	<b>Range</b>		<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
			<b>Actual</b>	<b>Potential</b>		
Secure	.69	5	4-21	5- 25	10.74	3.99
Fearful	.67	4	3-16	4-20	11.26	3.16
Preoccupied	.72	4	3-16	4- 20	9.46	3.32
Dismissing	.61	5	4-21	5-25	13.56	3.77
Self- Esteem	.78	10	9-36	10- 40	24.94	5.10
Rejection Sensitivity	.91	21	49-352	42- 252	171.50	63.90

*Note:*  $\alpha$ = Reliability; M= Mean; SD = Standard Deviation.

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**Table 3**  
*Correlation among Study Variables (N=409)*

<b>Variables</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Attachment Styles</b>						
<b>Secure</b>	-	.03	-.12*	-.21**	.03	-.11*
<b>Fearful</b>		-	.28**	.39**	-.05	.13*
<b>Preoccupied</b>			-	.57**	-.11*	.17**
<b>Dismissing</b>				-	-.04	.15**
<b>Self-Esteem</b>					-	-.15**
<b>Rejection Sensitivity</b>						

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$

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**Table 4**  
*Mediating effect of Self-Esteem in predicting Rejection Sensitivity through Preoccupied Attachment Style (N=409)*

Variables	Rejection Sensitivity		
	Model 2		
	Model 1 B	$\beta$	95% CI
<b>Constant</b>	101.36***	150.16***	(76.51, 223.81)
<b>Preo</b>	3.72***	3.28**	(1.25, 5.29)
<b>SE</b>		.65**	(-3.37, -.78)
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	.075	.098	
<b>ΔR<sup>2</sup></b>	.023		
<b>F</b>	3.47*** (9, 386)	4.19*** (10, 385)	
<b>ΔF</b>	0.72		

Note. Preo = Preoccupied Attachment Style; SE = Self-Esteem

\*\*\*=p<.001, \*\*=p< .01

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### **DISCUSSION**

Key findings are as such: results revealed that secure style of attachment is significantly negatively associated with rejection sensitivity among university students (Table 3). Prior literature has shown significant negative relationship concerning level of rejection sensitivity and the secure style of adult attachment (Erozkan & Komur, 2006; Kennedy, 1999). Rejection sensitivity level of persons having secure style of attachment was reported to be lesser as compared to rejection sensitivity level of individuals having anxious and avoidant styles of attachment. Further, rejection sensitivity is positively related with fearful attachment style in students (Table 3). Erozkan (2009) also concluded that the participants with fearful attachment style had a higher level of rejection sensitivity as compared to those having other styles of attachment. As these individuals experience uncaring and unavailable caregivers, so they avoid closeness because of fear of rejection (Collins & Feeney, 2000).

Results further depicted that the rejection sensitivity is positively related to preoccupied attachment style among university students (Table 3). Indeed, previous researches has shown that preoccupied style of attachment is related with extreme behavioral reactions to rejection and social conflict and leads to more negative feeling, somatic indications and low level of self-esteem in reaction to imaginary rejection (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005; Besser & Priel, 2009). Moreover, when persons view annoyed faces accompanying with negative response, individuals with preoccupied attachment style show more activity in the amygdala, which is an emotional neural area acknowledged to channel frightening signals, predominantly face related expressions (Vrticka, Andersson, Grandjean, Sander, & Vuilleumier, 2008). Banytė and Pukinskaitė (2010) also found that significant positive link exist between sensitivity to rejection and preoccupied attachment style. Our findings also exhibited that dismissive style of attachment was positively related with the rejection sensitivity level in students (Table 3). Butler, Doherty, and Potter (2007) confirmed these findings that when the likelihood of rejection is maximum, people will also score high on dismissing attachment style.

Moreover, it was hypothesized that the adult styles of attachment will be associated with self-esteem level. Some interesting trends are found; only a significant negative relationship between preoccupied attachment style and self-esteem is evident (Table 3). Foster, Kernis and Goldman (2007) also found that preoccupied attachment style is connected with lower level of self-

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esteem. Young (2013) said that individuals with preoccupied attachment style may be predominantly at the risk of indulging in externalizing activities. Huntsinger and Luecken (2004) also reported that participants depicting preoccupied attachment style have lowest self-esteem level and high dependency on their relationships while exhibiting poor health behaviors. Findings of Collins and Read (1990), Downey and Feldman (1996), Hart, Shaver, and Goldenberg (2005) also depict negative association between insecure styles of attachment and level of self-esteem. This might be owing to their attachment style as they could not develop a positive self-esteem level due to uncaring or inconsistent caregivers.

It was also anticipated that the self-esteem mediates the link between adult styles of attachment and level of rejection sensitivity. Since, only preoccupied attachment style is found to be correlated to self-esteem. Hence, only mediational analysis for this is conducted. Results revealed that self-esteem partially mediates the relation between preoccupied attachment style and rejection sensitivity. These findings are in line with previous researches that supported the mediational role of self-esteem between preoccupied attachment style and rejection sensitivity (e.g., Khoshkam, Bahrami, Ahmadi, Fatehizade, & Etemadi, 2012; Lee & Koo, 2015; Lee & Hankin, 2009; Boldero, Hulbert, Bloom, Cooper, Gilbert, Mooney & Salinger, 2009). The findings suggest that adult styles of attachment and rejection sensitivity not only share a direct relationship with each other but also the one that is mediated by the self-esteem.

### ***Conclusion***

Present research adds on to our understanding about the background of rejection sensitivity. Furthermore, findings of the study support the importance of focusing on individual's styles of attachment for the improvement of rejection sensitivity interventions. As every individual experiences rejection at some stage in his life, so it is essential to have a secure and helpful channel for discussing the problem of rejection and different ways to deal with it. It further highlights the mediating role of self-esteem between preoccupied attachment style and rejection sensitivity. Thus, the interventions targeted on enhancing the self-esteem of persons having preoccupied style of attachment may be useful for reducing the level of rejection sensitivity.

Research was conducted only on the university students of Rawalpindi, Islamabad, and Lahore. In future data should be collected from several other

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cities of Pakistan to generalize the findings of the research in all over Pakistan. There is possibility that a cross cultural study can be conducted on these variables to know impact of culture on the studied variables. Future studies should concentrate on the association rejection sensitive individuals have with the person responsible for rejection after the occurrence of rejection. A longitudinal study would be considered best to understand the change of relationship between persons higher in rejection sensitivity and their closed ones after self-claimed rejection. Self-report based studies always have the disadvantage of uncertainty that how accurately the participating individuals are representing their conduct. For future researches, it would be considered beneficial to have a separate person that knows the participant and can rate his or her levels of rejection sensitivity and attachment styles.

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