

Attachment Anxiety and Internalized Misogyny as Predictors of Relationship Instability in Young Women

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to investigate how attachment anxiety and internalized misogyny predict relationship instability among young women.

Methods and Materials: A correlational descriptive design was employed with 460 female participants from Slovenia, aged 18 to 30. Standardized self-report measures were utilized to assess relationship instability (dependent variable), attachment anxiety, and internalized misogyny (independent variables). Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 27, focusing on Pearson correlation to explore bivariate associations and multiple linear regression to determine the combined predictive value of attachment anxiety and internalized misogyny on relationship instability. All participants provided informed consent prior to their inclusion, and anonymity was ensured throughout the study.

Findings: Pearson correlation analyses indicated that both attachment anxiety and internalized misogyny were significantly and positively associated with relationship instability ($p < .001$). Multiple linear regression analysis further revealed that attachment anxiety emerged as the stronger predictor ($\beta = .54$, $p < .001$), although internalized misogyny also made a significant contribution ($\beta = .31$, $p < .001$). The overall model was statistically significant, $F(2, 457) = 194.35$, $p < .001$, explaining approximately 46% of the variance in relationship instability ($R^2 = .46$, adjusted $R^2 = .45$). These results highlight the importance of both psychosocial and ideological factors in predicting instability in young women's romantic relationships.

Conclusion: Attachment anxiety and internalized misogyny significantly contribute to relationship instability, reinforcing the need to address not only individual emotional vulnerabilities but also internalized gender biases when supporting young women in romantic contexts. Interventions targeting the reduction of attachment-related fears and challenging harmful beliefs about women may promote more stable and satisfying romantic partnerships.

Keywords: Attachment anxiety, internalized misogyny, relationship instability.

1. Introduction

Attachment theory, originally developed by Bowlby, provides a foundational framework for understanding how early relational experiences shape adult relationship behaviors and expectations. Individuals high in attachment anxiety tend to harbor intense fears of abandonment and rejection, which often translate into hypervigilance and emotional dependency in romantic contexts. These tendencies can disrupt relational harmony, particularly when partners feel overwhelmed by excessive demands for closeness and reassurance. Numerous studies have highlighted the maladaptive consequences of attachment anxiety in romantic partnerships, including greater emotional reactivity, lower satisfaction, and higher breakup rates (Çarıkçı-Özgül & Işık, 2024; Clark et al., 2020; Lee & Chung, 2022). Notably, attachment anxiety has been associated with heightened jealousy, interpersonal distrust, and relational insecurity, all of which are linked to greater instability in romantic relationships (Deng et al., 2023; Kim & Lee, 2023; Lincoln et al., 2024).

The mechanisms underlying the association between attachment anxiety and relational difficulties are both cognitive and affective. For example, individuals high in attachment anxiety often engage in negative self-appraisals and hyper-focus on cues of rejection, thereby misinterpreting benign partner behaviors as signs of disinterest or disloyalty (Holte et al., 2024; Lee & Kim, 2023). These distorted cognitive patterns can lead to excessive reassurance seeking, conflict escalation, and emotional volatility—all of which erode relationship stability. Moreover, the co-occurrence of attachment anxiety with other psychological vulnerabilities, such as low self-esteem and intolerance of uncertainty, further compounds its detrimental effects (Clark et al., 2020; Set, 2019). Lincoln et al. (Lincoln et al., 2024) emphasize that attachment-related anxiety undermines self-esteem, which in turn mediates social anxiety and fear of rejection, creating a relational feedback loop characterized by chronic instability.

Internalized misogyny, defined as the internalization of sexist beliefs by women, represents another intrapersonal factor with profound implications for romantic relationships. This construct reflects how societal messages that devalue women become embedded within a woman's own belief system, often manifesting as distrust of other women, discomfort with femininity, or endorsement of traditional gender roles that privilege male dominance (Reiser et al., 2019; Rodríguez et al., 2020). Although much research on

misogyny has focused on its external expressions, internalized misogyny has been increasingly recognized as a subtle but powerful predictor of self-concept and interpersonal functioning in women. Women who internalize misogynistic beliefs may struggle with asserting their needs, tolerating emotional vulnerability, or establishing equitable partnerships—all of which can lead to cycles of dissatisfaction and emotional detachment in romantic contexts (Li et al., 2022; Yan et al., 2022).

The impact of internalized misogyny on relationship stability is multifaceted. On one hand, these beliefs may contribute to diminished self-worth and increased self-criticism, which can foster dependence on male partners for validation. On the other hand, internalized misogyny often coexists with rigid gender expectations and hostility toward perceived female weakness, prompting women to reject emotional intimacy or view vulnerability as a liability (Kang & Jo, 2023; Urban, 2020). These conflicting impulses may result in inconsistent relational behaviors, undermining trust and emotional safety within the partnership. Furthermore, internalized misogyny has been shown to mediate the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and later mental health outcomes, suggesting that its effects may be deeply rooted in early relational trauma and persistently expressed through adult romantic behaviors (Reiser et al., 2019).

Although both attachment anxiety and internalized misogyny have been studied independently, their combined influence on relationship instability remains underexplored. This gap is significant because the two constructs may interact in a manner that amplifies relational dysfunction. For instance, a woman high in attachment anxiety may simultaneously seek closeness while harboring internalized beliefs that devalue feminine emotional expression, leading to cognitive dissonance and inconsistent relational strategies. Lee and Chung (Lee & Chung, 2022) found that the interplay between attachment-related traits and perceived support predicted parenting anxiety, highlighting how attachment styles interact with contextual and internalized beliefs. Similarly, Liang (Liang, 2024) demonstrated that attachment anxiety predicted maladaptive technology use through the mediating role of fear of separation and low emotional regulation—a pattern that may extend to romantic relational functioning.

Recent literature also suggests that both constructs are linked to emotional regulation difficulties, which further exacerbate romantic instability. Individuals with high attachment anxiety often struggle to manage intense

emotions, relying instead on maladaptive coping strategies such as protest behavior or emotional suppression (Kim & Lee, 2023; Lee, 2023). At the same time, internalized misogyny has been associated with perfectionism and shame—traits that hinder open communication and emotional responsiveness in intimate settings (Kang & Jo, 2023; Sękowski & Prigerson, 2022). These emotion regulation difficulties can create a toxic relational environment marked by blame, withdrawal, or heightened sensitivity to perceived threats, ultimately destabilizing the relationship (Urban, 2020; Wang, 2023).

It is also important to consider sociocultural factors that may shape the prevalence and effects of these variables. In cultures where traditional gender norms are highly salient, women may be more likely to internalize misogynistic beliefs and experience conflict between relational interdependence and individual autonomy. This cultural tension can magnify the effects of attachment anxiety, particularly in societies where emotional expression is discouraged or stigmatized. Research by Chen et al. (Chen et al., 2021) highlighted the influence of peers, parents, and teachers in shaping anxiety outcomes in adolescents, demonstrating the relevance of broader relational systems in the development of intrapersonal vulnerabilities. Additionally, Park et al. (Park et al., 2019) showed that gratitude and perceived partner support predicted decreases in attachment anxiety, reinforcing the notion that relational environments can either buffer or intensify these internal traits.

The theoretical framework guiding this research draws upon attachment theory, feminist psychology, and emotion regulation models to understand how intrapersonal factors influence relational dynamics. Specifically, the study posits that attachment anxiety and internalized misogyny function as psychological risk factors for relationship instability, both independently and interactively. As previous studies have documented the role of attachment patterns in mediating various forms of psychopathology and interpersonal conflict (Olsavsky et al., 2020; Rodríguez et al., 2020), and given the emerging recognition of internalized misogyny as a barrier to relational empowerment (Douglas et al., 2020), it is imperative to empirically investigate their predictive roles in romantic instability among young women.

The current study addresses a critical gap in the literature by simultaneously examining the influence of attachment anxiety and internalized misogyny on relationship instability in a population of young adult women.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study design and Participant

This study employed a correlational descriptive design to examine the predictive roles of attachment anxiety and internalized misogyny on relationship instability in young women. The sample consisted of 460 participants recruited from various universities and social networks across Slovenia. The sample size was determined using the Morgan and Krejcie table (1970), ensuring an adequate number for statistical power and generalizability. Inclusion criteria were self-identified women aged between 18 and 30 who were currently in or had recently experienced a romantic relationship. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and informed consent was obtained from all individuals prior to data collection.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Relationship Instability

To assess relationship instability, the Relationship Instability Scale (RIS) developed by Rusbult, Johnson, and Morrow in 1986 was employed. This measure is part of the broader Investment Model Scale and is designed to evaluate an individual's tendency to consider ending their romantic relationship. The RIS comprises 7 items, each rated on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 9 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating greater instability or inclination toward relationship dissolution. This scale focuses on the perceived likelihood and contemplation of leaving a relationship rather than actual breakups. The scale has demonstrated excellent internal consistency in past research, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients typically above .80, and its convergent and predictive validity have been confirmed in multiple studies examining romantic commitment and relationship dynamics (Gharehbaghy & Tavakoli, 2019; Gholami Gherashiran et al., 2022; Sadafi et al., 2019).

2.2.2. Attachment Anxiety

Attachment anxiety was measured using the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R) questionnaire, developed by Fraley, Waller, and Brennan in 2000. The ECR-R is a widely-used self-report instrument that assesses adult attachment styles along two dimensions: attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. For the purposes of this study, only the attachment anxiety subscale was utilized. The

full measure consists of 36 items—18 for each dimension—but the anxiety subscale includes 18 items that evaluate the extent to which individuals worry about being rejected or unloved by close partners. Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), with higher scores reflecting higher attachment anxiety. The ECR-R has consistently demonstrated excellent internal consistency ($\alpha > .90$) and strong construct validity across diverse populations and relationship contexts (Holte et al., 2024; Lee & Chung, 2022; Liang, 2024).

2.2.3. Internalized Misogyny

Internalized misogyny was assessed using the Internalized Misogyny Scale (IMS) developed by Piggot in 2004. This 17-item scale captures women's internalization of sexist beliefs and attitudes toward femininity, competition among women, and devaluation of women. The IMS includes three subscales: devaluation of women, distrust of women, and gender bias in favor of men. Items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating stronger internalized misogynistic attitudes. The scale has demonstrated strong psychometric properties, with reported Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .85 to .91 across subscales. Its construct and discriminant validity have been supported in various studies focusing on women's gender attitudes, mental health, and interpersonal relationships (Erenoğlu et al., 2023; Sözbir et al., 2020).

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics version 27. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages) were calculated for demographic variables. To test the associations between the dependent variable (relationship instability) and each independent variable (attachment anxiety and internalized misogyny), Pearson correlation coefficients were computed. Furthermore, a multiple linear regression analysis was performed to examine the combined predictive power of attachment anxiety and internalized misogyny on relationship instability. Prior to conducting these analyses, all assumptions for parametric testing—including normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and absence of multicollinearity—were examined and met.

3. Findings and Results

The final sample consisted of 460 young women from Slovenia aged between 18 and 30 years ($M = 23.61$, $SD = 3.41$). Among them, 258 participants (56.08%) were university students, 129 (28.04%) were employed full-time, 53 (11.52%) were part-time workers, and 20 (4.35%) were unemployed. In terms of relationship status, 332 participants (72.17%) reported being in a committed relationship, while 128 (27.83%) had recently ended a relationship within the past six months. Regarding education level, 198 participants (43.04%) held a high school diploma, 206 (44.78%) were pursuing or had completed a bachelor's degree, and 56 (12.17%) were enrolled in or had obtained a postgraduate degree.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables (N = 460)

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Relationship Instability	5.62	1.14
Attachment Anxiety	5.94	1.02
Internalized Misogyny	4.37	1.21

Participants reported a relatively high level of relationship instability ($M = 5.62$, $SD = 1.14$) and attachment anxiety ($M = 5.94$, $SD = 1.02$), with slightly lower scores on internalized misogyny ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 1.21$). These values suggest that participants experienced considerable insecurity in their romantic relationships and moderately internalized gendered beliefs (Table 1).

Before conducting the main analyses, statistical assumptions for Pearson correlation and multiple linear

regression were tested and confirmed. The Shapiro-Wilk test indicated that the residuals of all variables approximated a normal distribution ($p > .05$). Scatterplots demonstrated linear relationships between the independent variables and the dependent variable, while the Durbin-Watson statistic was 1.89, indicating no autocorrelation. Homoscedasticity was assessed via the Breusch-Pagan test, yielding non-significant results ($\chi^2 = 2.16$, $p = .14$), confirming equal variance of residuals. Multicollinearity was not a concern, as

variance inflation factor (VIF) values were 1.36 for attachment anxiety and 1.42 for internalized misogyny, both well below the recommended threshold of 5. These results

support the appropriateness of conducting Pearson correlation and linear regression analyses.

Table 2

Correlation Matrix Between Variables

Variable	1. Relationship Instability	2. Attachment Anxiety	3. Internalized Misogyny
1. Relationship Instability	—	.61** (p < .001)	.48** (p < .001)
2. Attachment Anxiety	.61** (p < .001)	—	.42** (p < .001)
3. Internalized Misogyny	.48** (p < .001)	.42** (p < .001)	—

As indicated in Table 2, relationship instability was significantly and positively correlated with attachment anxiety ($r = .61$, $p < .001$) and internalized misogyny ($r = .48$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, attachment anxiety and

internalized misogyny were also significantly correlated with each other ($r = .42$, $p < .001$), suggesting shared variance between these intrapersonal vulnerabilities.

Table 3

Summary of Regression ANOVA

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	F	p
Regression	152.47	2	76.24	.68	.46	.45	194.35	< .001
Residual	179.59	457	0.39					
Total	332.06	459						

The model was statistically significant, $F(2, 457) = 194.35$, $p < .001$, and explained 46% of the variance in relationship instability ($R^2 = .46$, Adjusted $R^2 = .45$). This

indicates that attachment anxiety and internalized misogyny together contribute substantially to understanding instability in romantic relationships among young women (Table 3).

Table 4

Multiple Regression Coefficients for Predicting Relationship Instability

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	1.48	0.26	—	5.69	< .001
Attachment Anxiety	0.63	0.05	.54	12.47	< .001
Internalized Misogyny	0.32	0.04	.31	8.06	< .001

Attachment anxiety was a stronger predictor of relationship instability ($\beta = .54$, $t = 12.47$, $p < .001$) compared to internalized misogyny ($\beta = .31$, $t = 8.06$, $p < .001$). These results confirm that both variables significantly contribute to instability, but attachment anxiety has a more pronounced effect on the dependent variable (Table 4).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to explore the extent to which attachment anxiety and internalized misogyny predict relationship instability among young women. Using a correlational descriptive design and a sample of 460 participants from Slovenia, findings revealed significant positive correlations between relationship instability and

both independent variables. Specifically, Pearson correlation coefficients indicated that higher levels of attachment anxiety were associated with greater relationship instability. Similarly, internalized misogyny showed a significant positive relationship with instability in romantic partnerships. Furthermore, results from the multiple linear regression analysis demonstrated that both attachment anxiety and internalized misogyny significantly predicted relationship instability, with attachment anxiety emerging as the stronger predictor.

These findings align closely with existing literature emphasizing the detrimental impact of attachment anxiety on romantic relationship outcomes. As anticipated, participants with elevated attachment anxiety exhibited

higher levels of relational insecurity, emotional reactivity, and fears of abandonment—all of which are hallmarks of unstable romantic connections. This corroborates findings by Lincoln et al., who emphasized that attachment anxiety undermines emotional security and increases susceptibility to interpersonal conflict, particularly in romantic contexts (Lincoln et al., 2024). Similarly, Holte et al. demonstrated that attachment anxiety mediates the relationship between fear of missing out and the need to belong, pointing to the pervasive nature of insecurity in social bonds and its emotional toll on relational functioning (Holte et al., 2024). The present study's results support the conclusion that attachment anxiety manifests not only as an intrapersonal vulnerability but also as a relational destabilizer, particularly for young women navigating the complexities of emotional intimacy.

The regression analysis also highlighted the significant role of internalized misogyny in predicting relationship instability. Women who endorsed higher levels of internalized misogynistic attitudes—such as discomfort with vulnerability, distrust of other women, and endorsement of traditional gender hierarchies—reported more unstable romantic experiences. This is consistent with research by Reiser et al., who found that internalized sexist beliefs were associated with emotional suppression and increased psychological distress in women with histories of relational trauma (Reiser et al., 2019). Similarly, Rodríguez et al. observed that schemas rooted in gendered self-concepts impacted depression and relationship satisfaction among Latinx women, further demonstrating the relational consequences of internalized sexism (Rodríguez et al., 2020). The current study expands upon these findings by establishing a direct empirical link between internalized misogyny and instability in romantic relationships.

The additive predictive value of both variables suggests that relationship instability is best understood through a multidimensional lens that accounts for both psychological attachment patterns and internalized social ideologies. The co-occurrence of attachment anxiety and internalized misogyny may create a particularly volatile relational dynamic. Women with attachment anxiety may yearn for closeness yet simultaneously hold beliefs that devalue their own emotional needs, resulting in internal conflict and inconsistent behaviors toward romantic partners. Lee and Chung emphasized that when attachment insecurity interacts with perceived lack of support or self-compassion, individuals experience greater relational anxiety and withdrawal behaviors (Lee & Chung, 2022). Moreover,

Kang and Jo illustrated how internalized shame and perfectionism—often rooted in both attachment insecurity and misogynistic beliefs—mediate satisfaction within romantic relationships (Kang & Jo, 2023). These overlapping mechanisms likely contribute to the observed instability among participants high in both predictors.

Additionally, the present findings reaffirm the emotional regulation difficulties associated with attachment anxiety. Participants reporting greater attachment anxiety may experience intensified emotional responses and struggle with regulating relational fears, leading to protest behaviors such as clinginess or emotional withdrawal (Kim & Lee, 2023; Lee, 2023). These patterns are echoed in the work of Wang, who reported that attachment-related anxiety elevates vulnerability to anxiety and depressive symptoms, thereby disrupting interpersonal harmony (Wang, 2023). Similarly, Urban highlighted that the emotional dysregulation associated with attachment insecurity often leads to cyclical relational ruptures (Urban, 2020). This aligns with the current study's observation that anxious attachment contributes significantly to ongoing instability in romantic dynamics.

With respect to internalized misogyny, the present study's findings echo literature documenting its association with diminished self-worth, perfectionism, and avoidance of emotional intimacy. Yan et al. identified affective empathy as a mediator in the relationship between insecure attachment and depressive symptoms, pointing to emotional distancing as a core outcome of relational insecurity (Yan et al., 2022). In women who internalize misogyny, a similar emotional distancing may occur—not out of fear of abandonment, but out of internalized beliefs that emotional vulnerability is weak or unfeminine. This ideological conflict may lead to rigid behavioral expectations in romantic partnerships, reduced emotional expressiveness, and eventual dissatisfaction or disengagement from the relationship. Set similarly demonstrated that rejection sensitivity and self-esteem act as regulatory variables linking attachment styles and psychopathology—further indicating the layered nature of internalized beliefs and emotional dynamics (Set, 2019).

Moreover, the cultural context may amplify these associations. Slovenia, like many societies, is influenced by both traditional and progressive gender norms. Women may internalize conflicting messages about femininity, autonomy, and emotional expression, especially during emerging adulthood. Lee et al. found that university students high in insecure attachment experienced significant

emotional ambivalence and social anxiety, which may be exacerbated in gendered environments where emotional regulation is culturally devalued or misunderstood (Lee, 2023). Similarly, Liang's study on nomophobia revealed that attachment anxiety increases reliance on external validation and digital reassurance, suggesting a broader pattern of vulnerability to perceived rejection (Liang, 2024). In real-world relational contexts, these dynamics likely manifest as emotional inconsistency and chronic uncertainty, thereby undermining relational continuity.

Importantly, the results highlight that attachment anxiety had a slightly stronger predictive weight than internalized misogyny in the regression model. This may reflect the foundational nature of attachment schemas, which originate early in development and influence virtually all subsequent relational experiences (Chen et al., 2021; Olsavsky et al., 2020). However, internalized misogyny may reinforce and perpetuate these relational patterns by shaping self-perceptions and behavioral expectations in adult partnerships. Clark et al. emphasized that intolerance of uncertainty mediates the relationship between attachment anxiety and reassurance-seeking behavior—a pattern that internalized misogyny may further intensify by discrediting emotional needs as inherently “weak” or undesirable (Clark et al., 2020). As such, both constructs contribute to a cyclical pattern of instability that becomes self-perpetuating over time.

The findings also underscore the importance of considering emotion regulation strategies in understanding relationship instability. Emotional suppression, hypervigilance, and shame have emerged as key mediators across multiple studies linking attachment anxiety and misogynistic beliefs to relational outcomes (Lee & Kim, 2023; Sękowski & Prigerson, 2022). When women are unable to identify, express, or validate their emotional experiences—either due to fear of abandonment or internalized devaluation of femininity—romantic relationships are likely to suffer. The present study provides empirical support for these theoretical connections by showing that both attachment-related and ideological factors contribute significantly to the experience of instability in young women's romantic lives.

5. Limitations and Suggestions

Despite its strengths, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the use of a cross-sectional design precludes any causal conclusions. While the

findings reveal significant associations between the variables, they do not determine directionality or potential bidirectional effects. Second, the reliance on self-report instruments introduces the possibility of social desirability bias, particularly in measuring sensitive constructs such as internalized misogyny. Third, the sample was limited to young women from Slovenia, which may restrict the generalizability of the results to other populations with different cultural, gender, or age profiles. Additionally, the study did not control for relationship length, prior trauma history, or attachment to current versus former partners, all of which may have influenced participants' responses.

Future studies should consider employing longitudinal designs to assess how attachment anxiety and internalized misogyny evolve over time and impact relationship trajectories. It would also be valuable to explore how these constructs interact with contextual variables such as partner attachment style, cultural values, and relational conflict resolution strategies. Additionally, qualitative or mixed-method approaches may uncover more nuanced insights into the lived experiences of young women who struggle with these psychological and ideological patterns. Researchers are encouraged to replicate the current findings in more diverse populations, including women from different age groups, gender identities, and cultural backgrounds. Expanding the research to include interventions targeting internalized misogyny and attachment-related concerns would also contribute to applied knowledge in therapeutic contexts.

Professionals working in counseling, psychotherapy, and relationship coaching should consider screening for attachment anxiety and internalized misogyny when addressing romantic instability in young women. Therapeutic interventions might benefit from integrating attachment-based approaches with feminist-informed practices that challenge internalized sexist beliefs and promote emotional empowerment. Psychoeducational programs could help women develop secure relational strategies, cultivate emotional awareness, and dismantle harmful gender norms. Relationship education curricula may also be tailored to address the intersection between individual attachment patterns and broader sociocultural ideologies. Ultimately, equipping young women with the tools to understand and reshape their relational schemas can foster healthier, more stable partnerships.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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