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EMOTIONAL IMPULSIVITY AND ATTACHMENT: A COMPARATIVE STUDY BY GENDER

Fatemeh Shadi Zekriyazdi[1]*, & Nicolas Combalbert[2]
[1]EA 2114, PAVeA, University of Tours (France)
[2]U 1253, iBrain, University of Tours, Inserm, Tours (France)

Abstract

Impulsivity is widely recognized as a central construct in personality psychology. This study investigates how emotional dimensions of impulsivity, as measured by the UPPS-P model, differ across four distinct attachment styles, with gender included as a comparative variable. A total of 693 women and 206 men, ranging in age from 18 to 84, completed the Relationship Scale Questionnaire to assess attachment patterns and the S-UPPS-P to evaluate impulsivity traits. Results indicate that the dismissive-avoidant attachment style was consistently associated with the lowest levels of impulsivity compared to the other styles. Statistically significant differences were observed between the dismissive-avoidant and preoccupied styles concerning both positive and negative urgency across both genders. These findings underscore the subtle yet meaningful associations between attachment styles, emotional impulsivity, and gender, offering valuable insight into the psychological underpinnings of impulsive behavior.

Keywords: *Attachment, emotional impulsivity, gender comparison.*

1. Introduction

Impulsivity represents a central personality dimension with strong associations to various forms of psychopathology and is frequently identified as a diagnostic criterion in the DSM (Cyders, 2015). This research centers on the UPPS-P model of impulsive personality traits, with a particular emphasis on emotional impulsivity. Specifically, it examines *negative urgency*—the propensity to act rashly under distress—and *positive urgency*—the tendency to engage in impulsive behavior during heightened positive emotions (Whiteside & Lynam, 2001; Cyders et al., 2007). These constructs capture how affective states may shape impulsive actions.

Attachment styles, conceptualized as affect regulation frameworks (Vrticka et al., 2012), appear to influence these impulsive tendencies. Prior findings (Barbara & Naomi, 1999) suggest that emotional experiences differ in intensity depending on one's attachment orientation. Individuals with secure or dismissing attachment tend to report less intense emotional reactions, whereas those with preoccupied or fearful attachment often experience greater emotional intensity. Additional research reinforces these associations: preoccupied attachment correlates with elevated negative emotional responses, while avoidant attachment is linked to blunted positive affect (Cohen & Shaver, 2004; Rognoni et al., 2008). These variations in affective intensity and regulatory strategies—whether hyperactivating or deactivating—may, in turn, influence expressions of emotional impulsivity.

Gender is another important factor that may shape how impulsive traits are expressed. Previous studies have consistently reported that men score higher in positive urgency (Coskunpinar et al., 2013; Cyders, 2013), whereas women tend to report greater negative urgency (Billieux et al., 2012). Despite this growing body of evidence, the intersection between attachment styles and the UPPS-P framework has yet to be explored in depth. This study therefore seeks to fill that gap by examining how emotional components of impulsivity, as captured by the UPPS-P model, vary across different attachment styles—both secure and insecure—while also considering differences among the three insecure subtypes.

Regarding these aims, we formulated the following hypothesis:

* Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Fatemeh Shadi Zekriyazdi, EA 2114, Université de Tours, 3 rue des Tanneurs, BP 4103, 37041 Tours Cedex 01, France.
Email: shadi.zekri@yahoo.com; zekriyazdi@univ-tours.fr

H_1 : Both male and female preoccupied individuals would report higher scores than dismissing avoidant individuals for the emotional dimension of UPPS-P (*negative and positive urgency*)

2. Method

This study was approved by the local Research Ethics Committee (no. CER 2021-03-01).

2.1. Sample and procedure

The study included 915 individuals aged between 18 and 84 years. Among them, 693 identified as female (M = 27.03, SD = 11.03) and 206 as male (M = 26.82, SD = 10.75). Participants were recruited via an online questionnaire distributed through the Sphinx platform across multiple regions in France. The average educational attainment corresponded to approximately 14 years of formal education, aligning with the second year of undergraduate studies. No statistically significant differences emerged between male and female participants regarding educational level, $t(954) = 1.45$, $p = .14$. Similarly, gender differences were not significant with respect to relationship status—whether single, married, in a civil partnership, cohabiting, or in a registered union ($\chi^2 = 1.9$, $p = .06$)—nor with respect to living arrangements, including living alone, with a partner, or in shared housing ($\chi^2 = 0.5$, $p = .06$).

2.2. Instruments

2.2.1. Relationship Scale Questionnaire (RSQ). Attachment styles were assessed using the Relationship Scale Questionnaire (RSQ), initially developed by Griffin and Bartholomew (1994) and adapted for French populations by Guédeney, Fermanian, and Bifulco (2010). The RSQ consists of 30 self-report items, each rated on a 5-point Likert scale. For the purposes of this study, the framework outlined by Feeney and Hohaus (2001, Model 3B) was applied. This model differentiates between avoidance (items 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 10, 14, 26, 30) and anxiety (items 5, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13, 16, 17, 18, 21, 23, 25, 28) dimensions, with Cronbach's alpha values of .68 for avoidance and .79 for anxiety dimensions.

2.2.2. Short UPPS-P Impulsivity Scale. The abbreviated version of the UPPS-P Impulsivity Scale (S-UPPS-P) was employed to evaluate five impulsivity components: negative urgency (NU), positive urgency (PU), lack of premeditation (LPL), lack of perseverance (LPER), and sensation seeking (SS). Each subscale comprises four items, rated on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 ("Strongly agree") to 4 ("Strongly disagree"). This investigation focused exclusively on the NU and PU dimensions, which demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha scores of .83 and .76, respectively.

2.3. Data analyses

Participants were categorized into four attachment groups through a median split approach based on their anxiety and avoidance scores. These groups included: secure (low anxiety, low avoidance), preoccupied (high anxiety, low avoidance), dismissive-avoidant (low anxiety, high avoidance), and fearful-avoidant (high anxiety, high avoidance). All statistical analyses were carried out using IBM SPSS Statistics version 29 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY).

3. Results

Table 1. Summary of Means, Standard Deviations, Mean ranks of UPPS-P traits in four attachment styles.

	Secure (n=142)		**Preoccupied** (n=172)		**Dismissing** (n=205)		**Fearful** (n=180)	
Women	**Mean (SD)**	**Mean rank**	**Mean (SD)**	**Mean rank**	**Mean (SD)**	**Mean rank**	**Mean (SD)**	**Mean rank**
NU	9.01(3.07)	299.93	10.81 (3.31)	412.82	8.88(2.81)	293.59	10.38(2.96)	393.75
PU	11.45(2.51)	346.08	12.44 (2.51)	419.17	10.62(2.75)	289.15	11.55 (2.56)	356.30
	Secure (n=42)		**Preoccupied** (n=55)		**Dismissing** (n=63)		**Fearful** (n=47)	
Men	**Mean (SD)**	**Mean rank**	**Mean (SD)**	**Mean rank**	**Mean (SD)**	**Mean rank**	**Mean (SD)**	**Mean rank**
NU	9.33(3.14)	106.43	10.38(3.08)	127.17	7.60(2.53)	72.13	9.77(2.68)	117.44
PU	11.59(2.56)	118.08	11.00(2.58)	106.01	9.79(2.86)	81.32	11.55(2.43)	119.47

Table 2. Comparison of UPPS-P Dimensions Across Four Adult Attachment Styles: Kruskal-Wallis Test and Dunn's.

	Kruskal-Wallis test	**Post Hoc Test**					
	H (df)	**Dunn's post hoc test**					
Women		1-2	1-3	1-4	3-2	3-4	2-4
NU	50.23***(3)	-112.85***	6.43	-93.81***	-119.19***	-100.16***	19.04
PU	39.51***(3)	-73.81***	56.94	-10.22	-130.02***	-67.16***	62.86**
Men							
NU	28.82***(3)	-20.74	-34.30**	-11.01	-55.05***	-45.31***	9.74
PU	14.73**(3)	12.07	36.77**	-1.38	-24.69*	-38.15***	-13.46

Note. 1: Secure attachment style, 2: Preoccupied attachment style, 3: Avoidant Dismissing attachment style, 4: Avoidant Fearful attachmeent style; ** $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$*

As presented in *Table 2*, the Kruskal-Wallis test indicated statistically significant differences in emotional impulsivity scores across attachment styles for both female and male participants.

Women : In the female subsample, scores on *negative urgency (NU)* differed significantly according to attachment style, $H(3) = 50.23$, $p < .001$. However, no significant differences were observed between participants with secure and avoidant-dismissing styles, or between those with preoccupied and fearful attachment. Women classified under the preoccupied style displayed the highest NU scores, whereas the avoidant-dismissing group recorded the lowest levels of emotional impulsivity. Regarding *positive urgency (PU)*, the Kruskal-Wallis test also revealed significant group differences, $H(3) = 39.51$, $p < .001$. Post hoc comparisons showed that only the avoidant-dismissing group significantly differed from all other styles, reporting the lowest levels of PU. **Men** : Among male participants, a similar pattern was observed. For *NU* ($H(3) = 28.82$, $p < .001$), significant differences were found solely between avoidant-dismissing, which exhibited the lowest levels, and all other attachment styles. The same pattern was observed for *PU*.

4. Discussion

The present study investigated how attachment styles relate to the emotional facets of impulsivity, as conceptualized by the UPPS-P model, in male and female participants. Results confirmed the initial hypothesis, showing significant variations in impulsivity across attachment categories. Specifically, individuals with a dismissing-avoidant attachment style exhibited the lowest levels of emotional impulsivity, significantly differing from those with preoccupied and fearful attachment patterns, both of which were associated with elevated impulsivity scores.

4.1. Preoccupied attachment and emotional impulsivity

These results are consistent with prior findings that link attachment-related anxiety—central to preoccupied attachment—with higher levels of *negative urgency* (Cyr et al., 2018; Estévez et al., 2018). The preoccupied style is marked by emotion regulation strategies that amplify affective responses (Kobak & Bosmans, 2019; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019; Tammilehto et al., 2023; Verhees et al., 2021). Such hyperactivating strategies lead to heightened negative emotional states and elevated emotional baselines (Dančík et al., 2021; Dugan et al., 2022; Kerr et al., 2019; Tammilehto et al., 2023). When considering *positive urgency*, individuals scoring high on attachment anxiety tend to display weaker inhibitory control mechanisms compared to those with dismissing attachment tendencies (Dewitte, 2011). Evidence also suggests that they exhibit reduced inhibition of facial responses to positive stimuli and may exaggerate expressions of positive emotion to foster closeness and fulfill attachment-related needs (Gillath et al., 2006).

4.2. Dismissing-avoidant attachment and emotional impulsivity

Participants with a dismissing-avoidant attachment style consistently reported the lowest levels of both *negative* and *positive urgency*, across both genders. This outcome aligns with Iliceto et al. (2012), who found a negative though nonsignificant correlation between avoidance and impulsivity. Avoidant attachment styles are typically associated with deactivating strategies, such as emotional suppression, avoidance of threat cues, and downregulation of emotional responses (Gentzler et al., 2010; Kobak & Bosmans, 2019; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019). These strategies serve to suppress attachment-related needs and reduce the likelihood of system activation (Bowlby, 1980). As a result, individuals employing deactivation mechanisms may experience lower levels of emotional arousal, which in turn decreases impulsive reactions to emotionally charged situations (Dančík et al., 2021; Dugan et al., 2022; Tammilehto et al., 2023). The systematic suppression of emotional expression and experience may not only contribute to lower impulsivity but also limit opportunities for emotional correction, potentially reinforcing avoidant tendencies and distancing behaviors over time.

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