



# Modeling the prediction of the level of emotional and sexual satisfaction in romantic relationships based on the attachment style to parents, considering the mediating role of guilt in romantic relationships

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** This research aimed to predict the level of emotional and sexual satisfaction in romantic relationships based on the attachment style to parents, considering the mediating role of guilt in romantic relationships.

**Materials and Methods:** The statistical population of the present study included all married individuals living in Mashhad, Iran, in 2023-2024. So, 400 people were selected using the multi-stage cluster sampling method. The research tools included Larson Sexual Satisfaction Questionnaire (LSSQ), Marital Intimacy Scale (MIS), Hazan and Shaver Attachment Styles Questionnaire, Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire (IGQ-67). We analyzed the data using LISREL 8.80 software and a path analysis model.

**Results:** The general indicators indicated the fitness of model. The path coefficient from secure and ambivalent attachment style to guilt was statistically significant. Also, the path coefficient from guilt to emotionality was negative and significant ( $P < 0.01$ ). The results of the indirect coefficients of attachment style on emotional and sexual satisfaction with the mediation of guilt were not significant; in other words, guilt did not play a mediating role in the relationship between attachment styles and emotional and sexual satisfaction in romantic relationships.

**Conclusion:** According to the results, we suggest that couple-therapists and family counselors pay more attention to attachment styles and guilt as influencing variables to better understand the problems of couples.

**Keywords:** Attachment style, Emotion, Guilt, Sexual satisfaction, Romantic relationships

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## Introduction

Proper communication between couples can not only be the basis for satisfying the needs and mental growth of the couple and feeling happy, but in the shadow of a healthy relationship combined with the satisfaction of the couple, it is easier to face the problems and challenges of life and healthier children are delivered to the society (1).

One of the important issues in the field of health-related to couples is sexual satisfaction, which includes a situation in which couples enjoy a healthy, appropriate, and normal sexual relationship (2). Sexual satisfaction is defined as "an emotional response to the subjective evaluation of the positive and negative aspects associated with sex life." It is a key factor in sexual health and overall satisfaction with people's lives (3).

Sexual satisfaction can directly or indirectly affect many aspects of a couple's life, and lack of sexual satisfaction reduces stability in marital relationships, and increases marital disputes and marital infidelity (4). Another factor related to the health of couples is emotional satisfaction. Emotional satisfaction is one of the basic needs of married life.

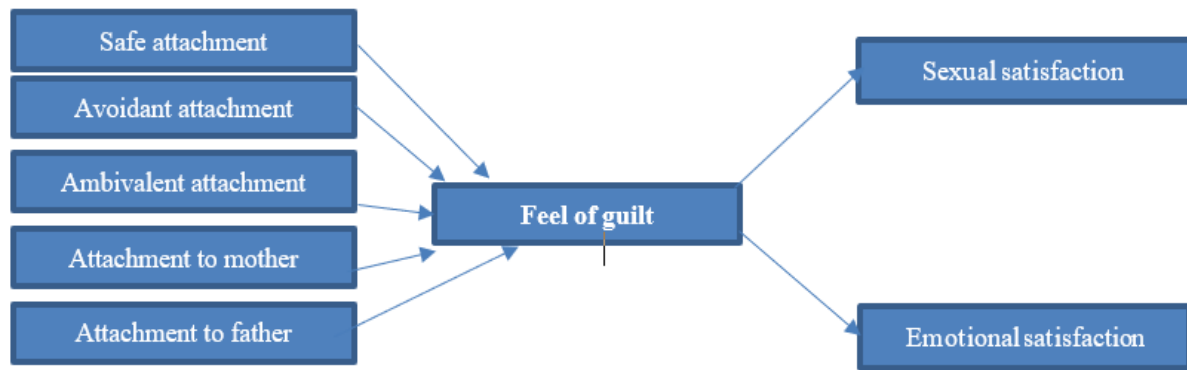
At the same time, it is the key to having a successful marriage and an important source for marital continuity. Emotional connection increases positive interaction, strengthens relationship longevity, deepens relationship quality, and increases satisfaction (5).

An important factor that has been paid attention to in recent years and has a significant impact on emotional and sexual satisfaction in romantic relationships is the person's early experiences with their parents or the type of emotional relationship a person had with his parents during childhood. Attachment theory is one of the influential theories in examining emotional relationships. Bowlby (1973) believes that the nature of early emotional relationships, i.e., mother-infant, determines the nature of a person's emotional relationships throughout life. Early childhood experiences and understanding of parental conflicts have detrimental consequences for future adjustment, especially for attachment and couple relationships in adulthood (6). Various studies have reported a negative correlation between avoidant and anxious attachment style with relationship satisfaction (7,8). Hazen and Shaver proposed three attachment styles that

describe interactions between romantic partners in adulthood. Internal working models are developed from experiences with the primary caregiver through which the child learns about self-worth and the reliability and responsiveness of caregivers in situations of distress and need. Such internal models are attachment-related experiences that help guide adult behavior and emotional regulation and reflect general expectations about the child's sense of worthiness and availability to others (10). Raby et al. found that insecure attachments demonstrates individual differences. Avoidant attachment has a fear of closeness and dependence, while ambivalent attachment has a fear of abandonment and a preoccupation with closeness (11).

One of the related variables to both attachment styles and couples' satisfaction is guilt. It can be considered a mediator of the relationship between attachment style and sexual and emotional satisfaction. According to Freud's structural model, the feeling of guilt shows the collision between the realistic sense of self (ego) and moral prohibitions (superego), which leads to mistreatment of oneself (12) and according to Jung, guilt is a risk factor for aggression in intimate relationships. Feelings of guilt can affect marital conflicts and intensify them (13). Feelings of guilt appear when a person commits a specific act that violates the prevailing norms and values while that act is evaluated as a wrong action within him/herself (14). Tolmacz et al. showed that worry played a mediating role in the relationship between attachment style and marital satisfaction (6). Also, Zagefka et al. concluded that attachment to parents is important in adulthood and is related to life satisfaction (15).

Considering the importance of the balanced functioning of the family and preventing its disintegration, it seems necessary to know the factors related to marital satisfaction, which is the foundation of strengthening family life. Therefore, if we pay attention to the factors affecting marital satisfaction, many psychological, emotional, and social problems of families and society as a whole will be reduced by increasing the level of marital satisfaction. In this research, we investigated the role of attachment style to parents on sexual and emotional satisfaction and the quality of care of couples with the mediation of guilt in romantic relationships.



**Figure 1.** The conceptual model of research

## Materials and Methods

The current research method is descriptive of the correlation type (path analysis). The statistical population included all married individuals living in Mashhad who referred to family counseling centers in Mashhad in 2023-2024. To calculate the sample size, there are different views from experts in this field. Klein (2011) recommends a sample size of at least 200 people and the rule of 20 people for each parameter in the model ideal for calculating the sample size in the structural equation method (16). Considering the research parameters, the sample size of this research was 400 people. For this purpose, the questionnaires were designed online on the first site of the form, and then, using the multi-stage cluster sampling method, 5 regions were randomly selected from the regions of Mashhad, and 2 counseling centers were randomly selected from each region. The questionnaire link was available for the clients to complete. The inclusion criteria included being married, having been married for at least one year, the age range of 20 to 55 years, willingness to participate in the research, and the exclusion criteria included unwillingness to participate in research. We analyzed the data using LISREL 8.80 software and a path analysis model.

### Research instruments

*A) Larson Sexual Satisfaction Questionnaire (LSSQ):* Larson, Anderson, Hellman, and Nieman created this questionnaire in 1998. It has 25 statements, which include five choice options based on the Likert scale (never, rarely, sometimes, most of the time, always). The scores are between 25 and 125. Bahrami et al. localized and psychometrically analyzed this tool in Iranian couples. The internal consistency of this questionnaire was calculated with

Cronbach's alpha value of 0.70. Also, the construct validity of this questionnaire was confirmed using exploratory factor analysis in 4 factors (tendency to have sexual relations, sexual attitude, quality of sexual life, and sexual compatibility) (17).

*B) Marital Intimacy Scale (MIS):* Walker and Thompson developed this 17-item scale in 1983. The items are scored on a seven-point Likert scale from never (1) to always (7). The score on the intimacy scale varies between 17 and 119 (18). In Mohammadi et al.'s research, this scale has good internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.91 to 0.97 (19).

*C) Hazan and Shaver Attachment Styles Questionnaire:* Hazan and Shaver developed this questionnaire in 1978 and revised it in 1993. This scale has 24 questions scored on a five-point Likert scale from very low (1) to very high (5). Questions related to avoidant attachment style, including questions (2,5,8,11,14), secure attachment style (questions 1,4,7,10,13), and ambivalent attachment style (questions 3,6,9,12,15), for attachment to mother, and questions (16,17,18), for attachment to father (18-20), and for attachment to friends (questions 22,23,24) have been considered. Besharat validated this questionnaire and found that the retest stability with a two-week interval was 0.60, and found the Cronbach's alpha coefficient 0.70 for the revised adult attachment scale (the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for secure, avoidant, and ambivalent styles as 0.74, 0.71, and 0.69, respectively). In the retest, the correlation coefficient between the two implementations was 0.92, which indicates the very good reliability of the questionnaire (20).

*D) Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire (IGQ-67):* O'Connor, Berry, Weiss, Bush, and

Sampson developed this questionnaire in 1997. It has 67 questions, which include four components: residual guilt, guilt of separation, guilt of omnipotence, and guilt of self-hatred. Each question has five options on the Likert scale from 1 to 5, and items 10, 16, 23, 27, 34, 35, 37, 42, 46, 47, 50, 52, and 56 are in reverse order are scored.

The reliability of the test was calculated by O'Connor et al. with Cronbach's alpha method for the residual guilt component of 0.85, separation guilt of 0.82, absolute power guilt of 0.83, and self-loathing guilt of 0.87 (21). Abbasi obtained the reliability of the test by

retesting the method for the whole scale of 0.87 and Cronbach's alpha of 0.86 (22).

## Results

In this research, 400 people with the mean age of  $32.22 \pm 8.34$  years participated, of which 250 people (62.5%) were women and 150 people (37.5%) were men. The education of 93 people (23.3%) had a diploma, 67 people (16.8%) had an associate degree, 182 people (45.5%) had a bachelor's degree, and 58 people (14.5%) had a master's degree and above. Table 1 presents mean, standard deviation, and correlation coefficients between research variables.

**Table 1.** Mean, standard deviation, and correlation coefficients between research variables

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Attachment to mother	7.73	1.69	1							
2. Attachment to father	7.65	2.08	0.43**	1						
3. Safe attachment	14.25	3.24	0.19**	0.19**	1					
4. Avoidant attachment	13.51	3.42	0.25**	0.26**	-0.22**	1				
5. Ambivalent attachment	12.47	4.35	0.31**	0.22**	0.13**	0.58**	1			
6. Emotional satisfaction	90.06	13.19	-0.08	-0.09	0.11**	-0.10**	-0.12**	1		
7. Sexual satisfaction	118.02	13.85	-0.31**	-0.15**	0.02	-0.16**	-0.28**	0.53**	1	
8. Feel of guilt	192.70	18.19	0.05	-0.04	-0.10**	0.22**	0.42**	-0.08	-0.21**	1

We observed a significant positive correlation between ambivalent and avoidant attachment styles with guilt. Also, we found a significant negative correlation between ambivalent and avoidant attachment styles with emotional satisfaction and sexual satisfaction. Before testing the model, the assumptions of normality, colinearity, and independence of errors were examined. We used the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test to assess the normality of the data. The assumption of normality of the data was confirmed ( $P > 0.05$ ). Also, a tolerance index of 0.1 or less indicates collinearity. Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) is another method of detecting collinearity, if the value of the variance inflation factor is higher than 10, it indicates collinearity. In the current research, the values obtained from the calculation of the variance inflation factor were less than 10, and the tolerance coefficient was more than 0.1, which showed that the phenomenon of collinearity in the research

variables did not occur. The results are presented in Table 2. Based on this, it is possible to ensure the assumption of non-collinearity. Also, the value of Watson-Durbin is 2.44, which is less than 4, and it can be said that the assumptions have not been violated. Therefore, according to the obtained indicators, it can be concluded that the test conditions have been met. Figure 2 presents Standardized coefficients in the proposed model.

If  $\chi^2/df$  is less than 2, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) is less than 0.10, and Normed Fit Index (NFI), Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), and Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) indices are greater than 0.90, the test has a high fit (23). As can be seen, most of the indicators showed the appropriate fit for the hypothetical model. In the following, their direct and significant path coefficients and indirect path coefficients are presented to investigate the mediating role of guilt (Table 3).

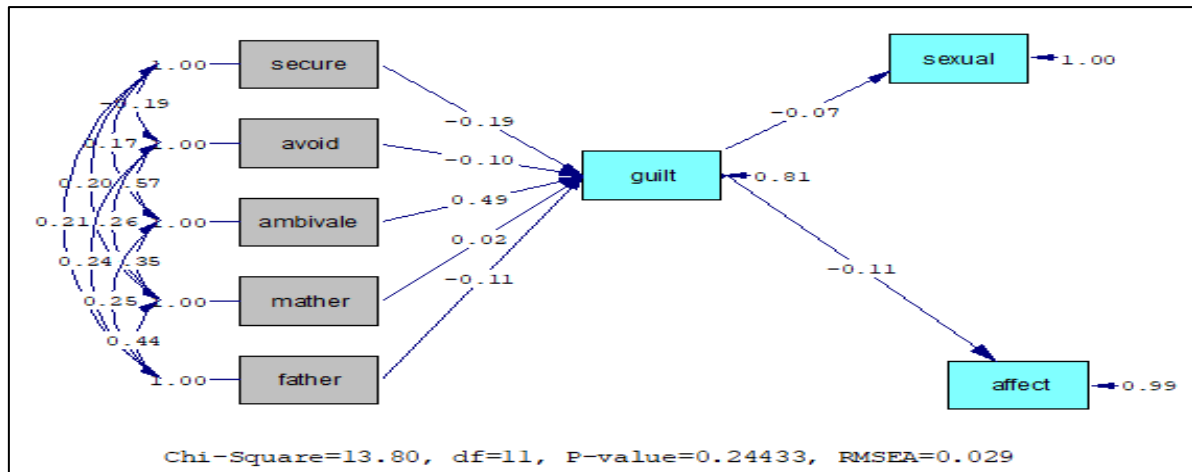


Figure 2. Standardized coefficients in the proposed model

Table 2. The goodness of fit indices of the proposed model

$\chi^2$	df	$\chi^2/df$	RMSEA	GFI	AGFI	NFI	CFI
13.80	11	1.25	0.02	0.99	0.96	0.96	0.99

Table 3. Direct path coefficients

Pathways	Estimate	S.E	t	Standard coefficients
Safe attachment → Feel of guilt	-1.64	0.05	-3.25*	-0.19
Ambivalent attachment → Feel of guilt	3.20	0.45	7.07*	0.49
Avoidant attachment → Feel of guilt	-0.79	0.57	-1.38	-0.10
Attachment to father → Feel of guilt	-0.09	0.35	0.26	0.02
Attachment to mother → Feel of guilt	-0.54	0.30	-1.81	-0.11
Feel of guilt → Emotional satisfaction	-0.09	0.08	-1.99*	-0.11
Feel of guilt → Sexual satisfaction	-0.03	0.02	1.17	-0.07

According to Table 3, the path coefficient from secure (-0.19) and ambivalent (0.49) attachment style to guilt was significant. Also, the path coefficient from guilt to emotion (-0.11) was negative and statistically significant. As can be seen in Table 4, the results of the

indirect effect of attachment style on emotional and sexual satisfaction with the mediation of guilt were not significant; in other words, guilt did not play a mediating role in the relationship between attachment styles and emotional and sexual satisfaction in romantic relationships.

Table 4. Indirect effects of attachment styles on sexual and emotional satisfaction with the mediation of guilt

Mediating variable	Criterion variables	Statistics	Predictor variables				
			Safe attachment	Ambivalent attachment	Avoidant attachment	Attachment to father	Attachment to mother
Feel of guilt	Emotional satisfaction	Coefficient	0.15	-0.30	0.07	-0.01	0.05
		Error	0.09	0.16	0.07	0.03	0.04
		t	1.64	-1.84	1.12	-0.26	1.34
	Sexual satisfaction	Coefficient	0.05	-0.10	0.03	0.00	0.02
		Error	0.05	0.09	0.03	0.01	0.02
		t	1.10	-1.16	0.89	0.25	0.98

## Discussion

This study aimed to predict the level of emotional and sexual satisfaction in romantic relationships based on attachment styles, considering the mediating role of guilt in romantic relationships. The results showed that the direct path of secure and ambivalent attachment style to guilt was significant. Also, the path coefficient from guilt to emotional satisfaction was negative and significant. These findings were consistent with the findings of Leonardi et al. (24) and Ural et al. (25). Teimurpur et al. concluded that attachment styles are related to feelings of guilt, so that secure attachment styles were associated with less guilt and insecure attachment styles were associated with more feelings of guilt (26). Ural et al. showed that people with an anxious attachment style express extreme vulnerability when the relationship is threatened, which leads to feelings of guilt in the romantic partner (25). Various studies point to the belief that high guilt may be the result of traumatic and adverse developmental experiences (27). Insecure attachment style has negative effects on people's performance and creates a general background for pathology (28). Attachment styles can affect self-beliefs, emotion regulation, and how to experience a traumatic event and its consequences (29). Because attachment style is effective in regulating emotions and coping with adversity by creating internal working models, it also plays a role in guilt. Attachment style can overshadow the way a person deals with problems that arise in different aspects of life, such as emotional issues, as well as the way of reaction and reactions and inner feelings against relationship problems and failures and the way of attitude. Slow to determine topics (30).

Also, the results showed that the indirect effect of attachment style on emotional and sexual satisfaction with the mediation of guilt was insignificant; in other words, guilt did not mediate the relationship between attachment styles and emotional and sexual satisfaction in romantic relationships. No research deals with the mediating role of guilt. Still, in this regard, it was inconsistent with the research of Tatum et al. (31) and Tolmacz et al. (32). Tatum et al. showed that shame had a mediating role in the relationship between avoidant attachment and sexual satisfaction (31). Tolmacz et al. showed that worry explained the relationship between attachment style and marital satisfaction (32). In order to explain this finding, it can be added that

depending on the type of attachment, relationship satisfaction can be seen differently and be affected based on the kind of attachment style of two people (33). Self-attack occurs when a person believes he/she is bad if something bad happens. People are unconsciously punishing themselves for the anxiety and guilt they experience because of their inner anger towards the subject of uncaring, abusive, and hurtful love (34). Guilt is distressing because it reflects self-criticism for immoral actions, although it may lead to positive consequences such as seeking forgiveness and restitution (35). It is a form of self-punishment that leads to rumination, worry, and low self-esteem (36). Therefore, guilt leads to great and pathological distress, which can be the core of psychological problems.

Like any other research, the current study faced limitations such as using self-report tools. On the other hand, this research was conducted in Mashhad, so one should be careful in generalizing the results. It is suggested that qualitative methods and the use of individual interview methods be given importance in future studies to obtain more detailed information. It is recommended that couple therapists and family counselors pay more attention to attachment styles and guilt as influencing variables to better understand the problems of couples and use the results obtained in this research to better understand interpersonal relationships.

## Conclusion

In general, secure and ambivalent attachment style is among the variables related to guilt in romantic relationships. The secure attachment style was positively significant, and the ambivalent attachment style was negatively significant, enabling the prediction of couples' feelings of guilt. Also, guilt is able to predict the emotional satisfaction of couples in a significantly negative way, but it does not play a mediating role in the relationship between attachment style and emotional and sexual satisfaction of couples.

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## Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

## Funding

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## Ethical Considerations

This research was approved by the ethics committee of Bojnord Islamic Azad University. The participants were assured of the confidentiality of the information.

#### Code of Ethics

IR.IAU.BOJNORD.REC.1402.014 from

#### Authors' Contributions

The first author was involved in implementing the research strategy, such as obtaining the

necessary permits and translating the article into English. The second author played a role in these cases, proposing the research title, designing the different stages of the study from the perspective of research methodology, editing the manuscript, and analyzing the texts. The third author provided advisory and corrective points to the first author, and proposing a research method.

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