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## Insecure Attachment and Self-Esteem of In-School Adolescents in Secondary Schools in Okpe Local Government Area of Delta State

**Ekedama, K.**

Department of Guidance and Counselling (Educational Psychology Unit), Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria

Corresponding author email: [kateekadama@delsu.edu.ng](mailto:kateekadama@delsu.edu.ng)

### Abstract

This study investigated the association between insecure attachment and self-esteem of in-school adolescents in secondary school students. The formulation of four objectives, research questions, and hypotheses guided the study. The study was anchored on the attachment theory, with a correlational research design employed to examine the variables. The study's population was 1,590 students from private and public schools in the study area, with a sample size of 320 informed by Taro Yemem's formula for determining sample size. Data was collected using the Insecure Attachment and Self-Esteem Questionnaire. The reliability coefficient of 0.78 for the RQ and 0.82 for the RSS suggested that the questionnaires had acceptable internal consistency. Mean, standard deviation and Pearson Product Moment Correlation were used to answer the research questions while Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used to test the hypotheses at the 0.05 alpha level. The study's findings revealed a moderate connection between anxious attachment and high self-esteem, as well as avoidant attachment and low self-esteem. There was a strong connection between anxious attachment and low self-esteem, while a weaker connection was found between avoidant attachment and low self-esteem. The study concluded that insecure attachment styles, particularly anxious attachment, may have a significant impact on the self-esteem of in-school adolescents. The study recommended, among others, that the management of secondary schools should consider implementing programs or interventions aimed at addressing anxious attachment behaviours in students with high self-esteem.

**Keywords:** Insecure, Attachment, Self-Esteem, Adolescent, Students

### Introduction

It is said that children are divine gifts endowed with exceptional capabilities and potential (Goodluck & Njama-Abang, 2010). However, the care and attention they receive during their formative years have a significant impact on their future success and development. Therefore, the influence of parents and carers on the development and welfare of a child is regarded as critical. The attachment style of a child has been shown to have a substantial effect on that child's self-esteem in adulthood. Individuals who have secure attachments as children exhibit greater resilience to stress and adversity and possess higher self-esteem. Conversely, children who have insecure attachments may confront challenges such as self-doubt, low self-esteem, and emotional regulation difficulties (Jamil et al., 2020; Vega, 2023). Nevertheless, the degree to which the aforementioned holds for every individual is indeterminate, given that the experiences and circumstances of each person are distinct. The absence of empirical evidence establishing attachment style as the exclusive determinant in self-esteem development among students in the study area motivated the design of this research to explore this correlation.

Self-esteem and insecure attachment are two interrelated concepts that have been the subject of extensive psychological research. The connection that develops between a child and their primary carer, typically the mother, is referred to as attachment (Martínez et al., 2014). When the carer consistently and compassionately meets the child's needs, thereby instilling a feeling of safety and security, a secure attachment is established (Jamil et al., 2020). Conversely, an insecure attachment develops when the child perceives the carer as unreliable or

inconsistent, resulting in the child experiencing anxiety and apprehension (Narváez et al., 2019). Sadly, this matter may result in enduring consequences for an individual's self-esteem, given that individuals with insecure attachments might find it difficult to cultivate a constructive perception of their value. Existing research has established a positive correlation between diminished self-esteem and relationship challenges, as well as experiencing significant levels of anxiety and depression (Jamil et al., 2020; Vega, 2021).

### **Self-esteem**

Self-esteem is a crucial component of mental health and well-being, influencing how individuals perceive and value themselves. It can impact relationships, career success, and the overall quality of life. According to Sedikides and Gress (2003), self-esteem is defined as an individual's assessment of their own value, encompassing self-respect, confidence, and their overall perception of themselves. In a study by Murphy et al. (2005), self-esteem is described as an overall measure of self-assessment that includes cognitive evaluations of one's self-worth and emotional responses tied to these evaluations.

Self-esteem pertains to an individual's comprehensive assessment of their value or worth. It encompasses a person's self-perception, their sense of capability, and their position within society (Murphy et al., 2005). Lavoie (2012) explained that high self-esteem is commonly correlated with favourable consequences, including enhanced overall welfare, improved interpersonal connections, and improved mental health. Conversely, Mackinnon (2015) explained that low self-esteem may give rise to sentiments of insufficiency, depressive symptoms, and challenges in developing significant interpersonal relationships. Adolescents can determine the extent of their self-esteem by observing their thoughts and emotions. One may inquire of oneself, "How do I feel regarding my capabilities and achievements?" Do I have confidence in my value or am I uncertain? Do I engage in self-comparisons with others? Am I at ease being myself and expressing my opinions in the presence of others? Adolescents may also discern indications of low self-esteem through the observation of negative self-dialogue, anxiety or depression, social withdrawal, or self-destructive conduct.

Elements of evaluation and emotion are inherent in every definition and theory of self-esteem that is currently in existence. Based on the foregoing, it can be deduced that self-esteem is a complex construct that involves both cognitive evaluations and emotional responses to one's self-perception (Wang & Ollendick, 2001). Understanding the multifaceted nature of self-esteem is crucial to addressing individuals' negative perspectives about themselves and promoting a positive self-image (Trujillo et al., 2013). However, the dimensions of self-esteem are discussed as high self-esteem and low self-esteem.

#### **i. High Self-esteem**

This is characterized by a positive self-perception, confidence, and confidence in oneself. People with a strong sense of self-worth are more inclined to take on challenges, have healthier relationships, and overall lead more fulfilling lives. As per Lavoie (2012), strong self-esteem is linked to improved mental health results and the ability to bounce back from challenges. Furthermore, Moksnes and Espnes (2012) explained that high self-esteem serves a role in resilience or positive adaptation. In other words, individuals with high self-esteem are better equipped to bounce back from setbacks and difficult situations. Overall, developing and maintaining high self-esteem is crucial for overall well-being and success in life.

#### **ii. Low self-esteem**

Low self-esteem is characterized by negative self-perception, self-doubt, and feelings of inadequacy. Individuals with low self-esteem may struggle with confidence, have difficulty setting boundaries in relationships, and might have a higher likelihood of experiencing mental health challenges like depression and anxiety (Mackinnon, 2015). Ha (2006) opined that low self-esteem can also lead to a decreased ability to handle stress and challenges effectively, ultimately hindering personal growth and achievement. Depression, aggression, diminished ability to surmount challenges, and a decline in overall well-being are all associated with low self-esteem among adolescents (Stavropoulos et al., 2015). It's crucial to understand that self-esteem is acquirable through different methods like therapy, self-care routines, and fostering supportive connections

### **Insecure Attachment**

The term "insecure attachment" refers to a type of attachment style in which individuals may have difficulty forming healthy and stable relationships with others due to past experiences of inconsistent caregiving or neglect (Jamil et al., 2020). This type of attachment can manifest in various ways, such as fear of abandonment, difficulty trusting others, and seeking excessive reassurance from partners. Martínez et al. (2014), describe attachment as a parental bond that shapes an individual's ability to regulate emotions and navigate social interactions. Insecure attachment can lead to challenges in forming secure, long-lasting relationships and may contribute to difficulties in managing stress and emotional regulation. Furthermore, Narváez et al. (2019) suggest that insecure attachment can also impact cognitive development and lead to difficulties in problem-solving and decision-making. These

challenges may persist into adulthood if not addressed through therapy or other interventions. Consequently, there are two dimensions of insecure attachment styles: anxious attachment and avoidant attachment, each with its unique characteristics and impacts on relationships and overall well-being.

### Anxious Attachment

Anxious attachment is defined by a fear of being left alone and a continual need for validation in relationships. Individuals with an anxious attachment may exhibit clingy behaviour and have difficulty trusting others, leading to heightened emotional reactivity and conflict in relationships. According to Di Bártolo (2016), research indicates that individuals with anxious attachment styles frequently face challenges related to anxiety and insecurity in relationships, leading to struggles in forming secure and long-lasting connections with others. Hernández and Cáceda Mori (2021) are of the view that individuals with an anxious attachment may benefit from therapy or counselling to address underlying insecurities and develop healthier coping mechanisms in relationships.

### Avoidant Attachment

A fear of intimacy and a propensity to push people away to maintain emotional distance characterize avoidant attachment. This attachment style can result in difficulties forming close connections and may lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness. Jamil et al. (2020) explained that individuals with avoidant attachment may struggle with vulnerability and trust, making it challenging to establish deep emotional bonds with others. Ravitz et al. (2010) explained that students with avoidant attachments may also have a heightened sensitivity to perceived rejection or criticism, which can further hinder their ability to form secure relationships. Based on the foregoing, it can be deduced that individuals with avoidant attachment styles may benefit from therapy or counselling to work through their trust issues and develop healthier ways of relating to others.

### Theoretical Framework

**Attachment theory:** The study is based on the attachment theory, which was propounded by John Bowlby in 1969. This theory proposes that initial interactions with carers can influence a person's emotional connections and behaviours in subsequent relationships. It emphasizes the importance of secure attachments for healthy development and well-being (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). This theory emphasizes the impact of early experiences on an individual's sense of security and self-esteem, which can influence their relationships and overall well-being in adolescence. Research has shown that insecure attachments during childhood can lead to lower self-esteem and difficulties in forming healthy relationships later in life (Sroufe, 2005). The attachment theory is relevant to the study on the link between insecure attachment and self-esteem in in-school adolescents as it offers a framework to comprehend how early attachment experiences can influence an individual's self-esteem development in adolescence. This theory proposes that the quality of attachment relationships during childhood can influence an individual's self-perception and their capacity to develop secure, healthy relationships in the future. Thus, individuals who have faced insecure attachment in their early years might encounter challenges with self-esteem in their teenage years, affecting their general welfare and social relationships.

The impact of styles of identity and dimensions of insecure attachment on internalising behaviours was examined by Vega (2021). The data utilised in this investigation originated from the "Identity Attachment Project" of 2017, an academic endeavour funded by the University of Rhode Island College of Health Sciences. The study sample comprised 438 individuals enrolled in romantic relationships at the institution who were not pre-married, engaged, cohabitating, or cohabitating. The findings showed a positive connection between anxiety and/or depression with The knowledge persona style, the diffuse-avoidant identity style, avoidant attachment, and anxious attachment. Individuals who exhibited elevated levels of both an avoidant attachment style and an informational identity style demonstrated elevated levels of anxiety and depression, according to the findings. Similarly, Jamil et al. (2020) examined the correlation between self-esteem and secure attachment style in latency adolescents. The study's sample consisted of 180 adolescents, 90 of whom were female and the remaining 90 were male. Following obtaining authorization from the appropriate authorities, consent was obtained from the participants to partake in the research, and a demographic questionnaire was completed. The Attachment Style Classification Questionnaire by Finzi et al. (1996) and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale by Rosenberg (1965) were utilised to assess the connection between attachment and self-esteem. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) and descriptive statistics were utilised to examine the correlation between the study variables. A significant correlation was observed between secure attachment styles and self-esteem, as indicated by the r-value of .118 and the P value of .116.

Delta State's Okpe Local Government Area is a heterogeneous region containing numerous elements that may affect the attachment and self-esteem of secondary school students. However, beyond the potential impact of environmental factors on self-esteem, peer relationships assume a progressively significant role in shaping self-perception and confidence during adolescence. Thus, it becomes apparent that the level of attachment and self-

esteem among students in the Okpe LGA may be influenced solely by their personal experiences and self-perceptions, rather than by the calibre of their peer relationships. Therefore, this research inquiry, may provide valuable insights for educators and mental health practitioners regarding how to assist students in cultivating secure attachments and healthy self-esteem. Regarding the mental health and general wellbeing of its school-age teenagers, Okpe LGA in Delta State, Nigeria, presents a major challenge. The frequency of insecure attachment styles and their possible effect on kids' self-esteem in the area's secondary schools are causes for increasing concern. Most teenagers worldwide, according to research, have insecure attachment styles, which have been connected to a number of detrimental effects, such as low self-esteem. Little is known, meanwhile, regarding the prevalence and effects of insecure attachment specifically in the setting of Okpe LGA, where certain sociocultural elements and educational circumstances are considered as important.

It is troubling to consider the possible outcomes of untreated insecure connection. Adolescents' emotional health, scholastic achievement, and chances for the future can all be negatively impacted by low self-esteem. Potential issues that could impede their healthy growth and limit their potentials include anxiety, depression, social isolation, and dangerous behaviours. Furthermore, given the context of Okpe LGA's customs and culture, the particular types of insecure attachment, anxious, avoidant, and fearful-avoidant, may be present in distinct ways. Comprehending the stated variables is crucial in devising efficacious interventions and support frameworks customised to the unique requirements of this demographic. It is therefore necessary to look at the frequency of insecure attachment styles and how they affect students' self-esteem in secondary schools in Okpe LGA.

### Research Questions

1. How does anxious attachment relate to high self-esteem in students?
2. How does avoidant attachment relate to high self-esteem in students?
3. What is the connection between anxious attachment and low self-esteem in students?
4. How does avoidant attachment relate to low self-esteem in students?

### Research Hypotheses

1. There is no significant connection between anxious attachment and high self-esteem in students.
2. There is no significant connection between avoidant attachment and high self-esteem in students.
3. There is no significant connection between anxious attachment and low self-esteem in students.
4. There is no significant connection between avoidant attachment and low self-esteem in students.

### Methodology

A correlational research design was employed in the investigation carried out in the Okpe Local Government Area of Delta State. The population was 1,590 SS1 students who attended both public and private schools within the study area while the population of the schools covered was 159. Using a stratified random sampling technique, a sample of 320 students was selected from 20 schools; which was derived from Taro Yemen's formula for determining sample size. The sample size comprised 105 students from private schools and 215 students from public schools.

A 20-item questionnaire titled the Insecure Attachment and Self-Esteem Questionnaire (IASQ) was used to collect data from the selected students. The questionnaire, measured on a 4-point Likert Scale consisted of 10 items each adapted from the Relationship Questionnaire (RQ) developed by Bartholomew and Horowitz in 1991 and the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (RSS) developed by Morris Rosenberg in 1965 to measure insecure attachment and self-esteem levels in the students. To differentiate students with anxious and avoidant attachment levels; students who scored above 10 on the RQ were categorized as having anxious attachment, while those who scored below 10 were categorized as having avoidant attachment. Also, students who scored below 10 on the RSS were categorised as having low self-esteem, while those who scored 10 and above were categorised as having high self-esteem.

Two experts in measurement and evaluation confirmed the face and construct validity of the instruments, while the internal consistency of both the RQ and RSS, was determined using Cronbach alpha statistic resulting in values of 0.78 for the RQ and 0.82 for the RSS, indicating good reliability. At a significance level of 0.05, mean, standard deviation and while Pearson Product Moment Correlation were used to answer the research questions, while Pearson Product Moment Correlation was utilised to test the null hypotheses.

### Results

**Research Question One:** How does anxious attachment relate to high self-esteem in students?

**Table 1: Mean, standard deviation and PPMC coefficient on how anxious attachment relates to high self-esteem in students**

Variables	n	Mean	Std. Deviation	r
Anxious Attachment	320	12.80	2.410	0.59
High Self-esteemed	320	12.95	2.346	

In answering research question one, Table 1 showed the extent of the connection between anxious attachment and high self-esteem in students. The result revealed that anxious attachment relates to high self-esteem to a moderate extent ( $r = 0.59$ ); since the correlation coefficient ( $r = 0.59$ ) was within the range of  $r \leq \pm 0.40$  to  $\pm 0.59$ .

**Research Question Two:** How does avoidant attachment relate to high self-esteem among students?

**Table 2: Mean, standard deviation and PPMC coefficient on how avoidant attachment relate to high self-esteem among students**

Variables	n	Mean	Std. Deviation	R
Avoidant Attachment	320	13.35	2.850	0.54
High Self-esteemed	320	12.95	2.346	

In answering research question two, Table 2 showed the extent of the connection between avoidant attachment and high self-esteem in students. The result revealed that avoidant attachment relates to high self-esteem to a moderate extent ( $r = 0.54$ ); since the correlation coefficient ( $r = 0.54$ ) was within the range of  $r \leq \pm 0.40$  to  $\pm 0.59$ .

**Research Question Three:** What is the connection between anxious attachment and low self-esteem in students?

**Table 3: Mean, standard deviation and PPMC coefficient on how anxious attachment relate to low self-esteem in students**

Variables	n	Mean	Std. Deviation	r
Anxious Attachment	320	12.80	2.410	0.82
Low Self-esteemed	320	12.82	2.433	

In answering research question three, Table 3 showed the extent of the connection between anxious attachment and low self-esteem in students. The result revealed that anxious attachment relates to low self-esteem to a very strong extent ( $r = 0.82$ ); since the correlation coefficient ( $r = 0.82$ ) was within the range of  $r \leq \pm 0.80$  to  $\pm 1.00$ .

**Research Question Four:** How does avoidant attachment relate to low self-esteem among students?

**Table 4: Mean, standard deviation and PPMC coefficient on how avoidant attachment relate to low self-esteem among students**

Variables	n	Mean	Std. Deviation	r
Avoidant Attachment	320	13.35	2.850	0.35
Low Self-esteemed	320	12.82	2.433	

In answering research question four, Table 4 showed the extent of the connection between avoidant attachment and low self-esteem in students. The result revealed that avoidant attachment relates to low self-esteem to a weak extent ( $r = 0.35$ ); since the correlation coefficient ( $r = 0.35$ ) was within the range of  $r \leq \pm 0.20$  to  $\pm 0.39$ .

**Hypothesis One:** There is no significant connection between anxious attachment and high self-esteem in students.

**Table 5: PPMC analysis on the connection between anxious attachment and high self-esteem in students**

		Anxious Attachment	High Self-esteemed
Anxious Attachment	Pearson Correlation	1	0.59**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.00
	N	320	320
High Self-esteemed	Pearson Correlation	0.59**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.00	
	N	320	320



In testing null hypothesis one, Table 5 showed that the connection between anxious attachment and high self-esteem in students was significant ( $r = 0.59$ ), with a  $p\text{-value} = 0.00 < 0.05$ , leading to the rejection of null hypothesis one at the 0.05 significance level.

**Hypothesis Two:** There is no significant connection between avoidant attachment and high self-esteem in students.

**Table 6: PPMC analysis on the connection between avoidant attachment and high self-esteem in students**

		Avoidant Attachment	High Self-esteem
Avoidant Attachment	Pearson Correlation	1	0.54**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.00
	N	320	320
High Self-esteem	Pearson Correlation	0.54**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.00	
	N	320	320

In testing null hypothesis two, Table 6 showed that the connection between avoidant attachment and high self-esteem in students was significant ( $r = 0.54$ ), with a  $p\text{-value} = 0.00 < 0.05$ , leading to the rejection of null hypothesis two at the 0.05 significance level.

**Hypothesis Three:** There is no significant connection between anxious attachment and low self-esteem in students.

**Table 7: PPMC analysis on the connection between anxious attachment and low self-esteem in students**

		Anxious Attachment	Low Self-esteem
Anxious Attachment	Pearson Correlation	1	0.82**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.00
	N	320	320
Low Self-esteem	Pearson Correlation	0.82**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.00	
	N	320	320

In testing null hypothesis three, Table 7 showed that the connection between anxious attachment and low self-esteem in students was significant ( $r = 0.82$ ), with a  $p\text{-value} = 0.00 < 0.05$ , leading to the rejection of null hypothesis three at 0.05 significance level.

**Hypothesis Four:** There is no significant connection between avoidant attachment and low self-esteem in students.

**Table 8: PPMC analysis on the connection between avoidant attachment and low self-esteem in students**

		Avoidant Attachment	Low Self-esteem
Avoidant Attachment	Pearson Correlation	1	0.35**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.00
	N	320	320
Low Self-esteem	Pearson Correlation	0.35**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.00	
	N	320	320

In testing null hypothesis four, Table 8 showed that the connection between avoidant attachment and low self-esteem in students was significant ( $r = 0.35$ ), with a  $p\text{-value} = 0.00 < 0.05$ , leading to the rejection of null hypothesis four at the 0.05 significance level.

## Discussion

The result of research question one revealed that anxious attachment related to high self-esteem to a moderate extent. Furthermore, the test of hypothesis one revealed that the connection between anxious attachment and high

self-esteem in students is significant. The results contradicted the research conducted by Vega (2021), which revealed that anxiety and/or depression were positively associated with informational identity style, avoidant attachment, and anxious attachment. This implied that students with anxious attachment had higher self-esteem, contrary to previous findings. The result of research question two revealed that avoidant attachment related to high self-esteem to a moderate extent. Furthermore, the test of hypothesis two revealed that the connection between avoidant attachment and high self-esteem in students was significant. The findings went against research by Vega (2021), which indicated that Informative identity style, avoidant attachment, and anxious attachment all showed positive associations with anxiety and/or depression. This implied that students with an avoidant attachment had higher self-esteem levels, which challenges previous findings in the field.

The result of research question three revealed that anxious attachment relates to low self-esteem to a very strong extent. Furthermore, the test of hypothesis three revealed that the connection between anxious attachment and low self-esteem in students is significant. The findings were consistent with research by Vega (2021), which showed that the informational identity style was positively associated with anxiety and/or depression. This implied that students with anxious attachment struggled with self-worth and confidence, impacting their overall self-esteem. The result of research question four revealed that avoidant attachment related to low self-esteem to a weak extent. Furthermore, the test of hypothesis four revealed that the connection between avoidant attachment and low self-esteem in students was significant. The findings were in contrast to Jamil et al.'s (2020) research, which found a significant correlation between secure attachment styles and self-esteem. This implied that students with avoidant attachment struggled with feelings of low self-worth and confidence, which affect their overall well-being.

### Conclusion

The research examined the connection between insecure attachment and self-esteem of in-school adolescents in the study area. Based on the findings; the study concluded that insecure attachment styles, particularly anxious attachment, had a significant impact on the self-esteem of in-school adolescents. These findings highlighted the importance of addressing attachment styles and developing interventions to improve self-esteem in adolescents, especially those with anxious attachment.

### Recommendations

The study recommended as follows:

1. The management of secondary schools should consider implementing programs or interventions aimed at addressing anxious attachment behaviours in students with high self-esteem.
2. School counsellors should be trained to identify and support students who exhibit both anxious attachment and high self-esteem to promote healthy emotional development.
3. Management of public and private school systems should prioritize interventions that address anxious attachment and low self-esteem in students to improve overall well-being and academic performance.
4. School counsellors should be trained to identify and support students exhibiting signs of anxious attachment and low self-esteem, by providing necessary resources and interventions to help them develop healthier coping mechanisms.

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