

Factors Affecting Romantic Relationship Satisfaction of University Students

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Abstract

Background/Objectives: The purpose of this study was to identify the factors affecting romantic relationship satisfaction of university students.

Method/Statistical analysis: This study was conducted with 187 students from four universities in cities and provinces nationwide. Data were collected from September to October 2019 using a self-administered questionnaire. Collected data were analyzed through the stepwise regression analysis using the SPSS statistics program.

Findings: The final regression model showed that self-esteem, anxiety attachment, and avoidance attachment were significant predictors related to romantic relationship satisfaction in university students and explained 34.7% of the variance in romantic relationship satisfaction.

Improvements/Applications: The university student period is a time to form an adult attachment, thereby preparing for a happy marriage in the future by increasing the romantic relationship satisfaction. Therefore, it is necessary to develop and apply the educational programs that can increase self-esteem and positive heterosexual relationship for university students.

Keywords: *University students, sexual attachment, sexual attitude, self-esteem, romantic relationship satisfaction.*

Introduction

The time in university is a transitional stage from adolescence to adulthood^[1], and it can be seen in the three main area of identity exploration: love, work, and worldviews which is the late period of adolescence and early period adulthood^[2]. In Korea, many young people begin to date only after entering university^[3]. A satisfactory experience through the romantic relationship with a partner enhances an individual's psychological

health and level of happiness, allows them to feel positive emotions, and influences the development of positive self-concept^[4]. Romantic relationship satisfaction refers to the subjective evaluation, attitude, and positive feelings about relationships^[5], and attachment is one of key factors related to relationship satisfaction^[6].

Adult attachment is the result of a process in which the attachment target shifts from the primary caregiver to friends and lovers as an individual enters into adulthood^[7]. For university students in the emerging adulthood, who are in the process of forming adult attachment, the experience of healthy romantic relationship is important in itself. In particular, individuals with stable attachment in relationships with partners have displayed positive characteristics such as confidence, happiness, and constructive approaches toward relationship conflicts, while individuals with high levels of attachment anxiety

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and avoidance showed negative characteristics such as discomfort, jealousy, etc., in their relationships^[7,8]. Therefore, in order for unmarried men and women to maintain a satisfactory relationship with the opposite sex, the sexual aspect must be considered, and for this, an individual's attitude toward sex is important.

Sexual attitude is one's own cognitive perspective on an individual's sexual aspect, is formed through sexual behaviors, and enables individuals to determine current and future sexual behavior based on it^[9]. Positive sexual attitudes not only affect personality maturity, but also premarital and post marital sex life^[10].

Self-esteem, meanwhile, is a key factor in determining an individual's behavior and adaptation, and it is essential for the healthy sexual function in romantic relationships^[11]. Specifically, Lee's study^[12], which finds that teenagers with low self-esteem are more exposed to unwanted sex, suggests that self-esteem is related to satisfaction in relationships. Prior studies in Korea frequently show that sexual attitude affects satisfaction in relationships, but the direction of the influence is different. Although the results are inconsistent, it is clear that sexual attitude is correlated with relationship satisfaction^[13]. In addition, there are studies on adult attachment and satisfaction with romantic relationship, but there is a only of handful of research on the mechanism. Moreover, there is no research on an integrated approach to the factors affecting the satisfaction of relationships among university students. Therefore, this study aims to provide the necessary basic data to establish healthy romantic relationships and appropriate sexual attitudes of university students by identifying the determinants in relationship satisfaction of university students using variables of various aspects.

Method

Subjects: The subjects of this study were students of universities located in four cities and provinces in Korea and were convenient-sampled to male and female university students with dating experience. Using G*Power 3.12, the sample size of the study was set to be 160, where the median size effect is 0.15, a significance level is 0.05, and the number of predictor variables is 8, to secure 95% of the statistical power for regression analysis. Therefore, in this study, a total of 187 questionnaires were included in the final analysis after distributing the questionnaire to 192 people considering the dropout rate of 20%.

Tools:

Adult Attachment: The Experience in Close Relationship (ECRS), developed by Brennan et al.^[14], was used. Adult attachment measurement tools consist of two areas: 18 questions for avoidance attachment and 18 questions for anxiety attachment. The higher the score on a 5-point scale of 36 questions, the higher the avoidance attachment and anxiety attachment. In this study, Cronbach's α were found to be 0.74 (avoidance attachment), 0.87 (anxiety attachment), and 0.83 overall

Sexual Attitude: The sexual attitude measurement tool developed by Woo^[10] was used. The tool was comprised of 35 questions with a 5-point scale. A higher score means a more open sex attitude, and a lower score means a more conservative sex attitude. Cronbach's α in this study was found to be 0.74

Self-esteem: The self-esteem measurement tool developed by Rosenberg^[15] was used. The self-esteem measurement tool consists of 10 questions with a 5-point scale. A higher score means a higher degree of self-esteem. Cronbach's α in this study was found to be 0.82

Romantic relationship satisfaction: The romantic relationship satisfaction measurement tool developed by Lee^[16] was used. The tool consists of 41 questions with a 5-point scale. A higher score means higher romantic relationship satisfaction. Cronbach's α in this study was found to be 0.92.

Data collection: For the data collection, universities located in four different regions across the country from September 9 to October 31, 2019 were randomly selected. Through a research assistant at each local university, the purpose and method of the study were explained to the study subjects, and written consents from the subjects who exhibited voluntary participation were received. The research assistants explained that the collected data would not be disclosed or used for any purpose other than research, that the subject's personal information would be kept confidential and guarantee anonymity, and that the subject could stop participating in the research at any time if desired. The data were collected using structured questionnaires and it took 10~15 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

Ethical Considerations: This study was conducted after receiving research approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of University C to project the subjects in prior to conducting the study (IRB No: CKU-19-01-0207)

Data Analysis Method: The collected data were processed by computer statistics using SPSS/WIN 22.0 program. Descriptive statistics for the general characteristics and variables of the subjects were obtained. The difference in Romantic relationship satisfaction level was determined according to general characteristics t-test, ANOVA, and post-test Scheffé test. The correlation between the Romantic relationship satisfaction and the variables was analyzed by Pearson’s correlation coefficient. In addition, in order to identify factors affecting the Romantic relationship satisfaction, it was analyzed by stepwise multiple regression after multicollinearity diagnosis.

Result

General characteristics of subjects: Mean age of the subjects was 21.03(±2.06) years old and 20 to 29 years old group was the most among these with 134 persons (71.7%). The distributions of the gender were 95 male (50.8%), 92 female (49.2%). There were 1st 55(29.4%), 2nd 41(21.9%), 3rd 39(20.9%) and 4th 52(27.8%) in the Grade. Residence was living alone 82(43.9%), dormitory 72(38.5%) (Table 1).

Table 1. General Characteristics and Difference in Degree of Romantic Relationship Satisfaction according to General Characteristics

Characteristics	Categories	n(%) M±SD	Romantic relationship satisfaction			
			M±SD	t/F	p	Scheffé
Age	Teens (10’s)	53(28.3)	2.60±0.52	0.09	.929	
	Twenties (20’s)	134(71.7)	2.59±0.52			
		21.03±2.06				
Gender	Male	95(50.8)	2.53±0.54	-1.73	.085	
	Female	92(49.2)	2.66±0.50			
Grade	1 st	55(29.4)	2.56±0.49	2.42	.067	
	2 nd	41(21.9)	2.76±0.45			
	3 rd	39(20.9)	2.62±0.55			
	4 th	52(27.8)	2.48±0.56			
Residence	Home	31(16.6)	2.60±0.47	0.38	.767	
	Dormitory	72(38.5)	2.64±0.48			
	Living alone	82(43.9)	2.56±0.55			
	Etc.	2(1.1)	2.44±1.28			

Descriptive statistics of the study variables: Attachment averaged 2.78(±058). In addition, the average sexual attitude was 3.04 (±0.36), and the self-esteem was 3.66 (±0.62) (Table 2).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables

Variables	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Avoidance attachment	2.73	0.44	1.33	3.72
Anxiety attachment	2.78	0.58	1.28	4.67
Sexual attitude	3.04	0.36	1.46	4.43
Self-esteem	3.66	0.62	1.30	4.90
Romantic relationship satisfaction	2.59	0.52	1.27	4.24

Difference in degree of romantic relationship satisfaction according to general characteristics: The degree of romantic relationship satisfaction was non-significantly different according to general characteristics (Table 1).

Correlation between romantic relationship satisfaction and variables: The degree of romantic relationship satisfaction of the subjects was positively

correlated with self-esteem ($r=0.53$, $p<0.001$) and negatively correlated with avoidance attachment ($r=-0.40$, $p<0.001$), anxiety attachment ($r=-0.42$, $p=0.008$), and sex attitude ($r=-0.19$, $p=0.008$). In other words, a higher degree of self-esteem, lower avoidance and anxiety attachment, and more conservative sexual attitudes all led to higher satisfaction in romantic relationships (Table 3).

Table 3. Correlations Coefficient among the Variables

Variables	Avoidance attachment	Anxiety attachment	Sexual attitude	Self-esteem
	r (p)	r (p)	r (p)	r (p)
Romantic relationship satisfaction	-0.40 ($<.001$)	-0.42 ($<.001$)	-0.19 (.008)	.53 ($<.001$)

Influencing factors on romantic relationship satisfaction: As a result of verifying the multicollinearity before performing regression analysis, the variance expansion index (VIF) among the variables is 1.140 to 1.561, which is less than 10, which can be considered free of autocorrelation. In addition, the Durbin-Watson statistic that confirms the independence among the error terms was found to be 1.594, which satisfies the assumption of independence. A total of four independent

variables were used to identify the determinants of romantic relationship satisfaction: adult attachment (avoidance attachment and anxiety attachment), sexual attitude, and self-esteem. The stepwise regression analysis results are as follows: self-esteem ($\beta=0.330$, $p<0.001$), anxiety attachment ($\beta=-0.237$, $p<0.001$), and avoidance attachment ($\beta=-0.209$, $p=0.002$). The exploratory power of the three variables 34.7%, and the most influential variable was self-esteem (Table 4).

Table 4. Influencing Factors on Romantic Relationship Satisfaction

Variables	B	β	t	p
Intercept	-2.334		-5.371	$<.001$
Self-esteem	.275	.330	4.574	$<.001$
Anxiety Attachment	-.213	-.237	-3.601	$<.001$
Avoidance Attachment	-.246	-.209	-3.166	.002

F = 33.875, $p < .001$, Adj R2 = .347

Discussion

In this study, the romantic relationship satisfaction level of the university students was 2.59 points on a scale within a range from 1 to 5. This score was lower than the average of 3.47 points of the local university students, which was measured with the identical measurement tool^[17].

As a result of examining the correlation between university students' romantic relationship satisfaction and their variables, it was found that adult attachment had a negative correlation with romantic relationship satisfaction. This result is consistent with Choi and Kim^[17] and Yildiz, Cokamay, and Artar^[18]. In general, the two dimensions of adult attachment, avoidance attachment and anxiety attachment, are viewed

as unstable attachment, and there tend to be more relationship problems as the degree of adult attachment grows stronger^[19]. Anxiety attachment in this study had a stronger negative correlation with romantic relationship satisfaction than did avoidance attachment, which is similar to the results in the previous literature^[17].

People with high anxiety attachment tend to focus on their stress, reflect on negative thoughts, and emotion-centered coping strategies. On the other hand, those with a high level of avoidance attachment use strategies that cognitively and behaviorally distance themselves from the cause of stress^[20].

The university students' sexual attitude and romantic relationship satisfaction were found to have a negative correlation, which was consistent with the prior result of Hendrick, Hendrick, and Reich^[21] that more conservative sexual attitude leads to higher romantic relationship satisfaction. Conversely, a study of unmarried men and women with sexual experience reports a significant positive correlation between sexual consciousness and romantic relationship satisfaction^[13], showing no consistency in the correlation between sexual attitude and romantic relationship satisfaction. In the future, if one establishes a strategy to maintain a satisfactory relationship by identifying the attitude of individuals, he or she will be able to increase satisfaction on the relationship.

Furthermore, romantic relationship satisfaction is higher in the group with high self-esteem^[22], which is consistent with the results of this study. Through these results, one will be able to enhance romantic relationship satisfaction by turning negative sexual attitude into positive sexual attitude when establishing a strategy to maintain a satisfactory romantic relationship.

After analyzing the effects on romantic relationship satisfaction in the study, self-esteem, ($\beta=0.330$, $p<0.001$), anxiety attachment ($\beta=-0.237$, $p<0.001$), and ($\beta=-0.209$, $p=0.002$) explain 34.7% of romantic relationship satisfaction. Among them, self-esteem was the most influential variable on relationship satisfaction. It can be interpreted that those who love themselves and feel valued maintain satisfactory relationships with their partners^[23]. There are several factors in the characteristics which people with low self-esteem exhibit in relationships. First, they need more acceptance and incorrectly perceive others' attitude. These people believe that they need to live up to the specific standards

they have set for themselves or need to have valuable traits to be loved and accepted by important people, so they underestimate the positive attitudes their partners have toward themselves or evaluate less of their partners' attitude^[11]. If the partner's continued acceptance is suspected, he or she could distance himself or herself from the partner, devalue romantic relationships, be unnecessarily disappointed in them, and end the relationship in dissatisfaction^[24].

Anxiety and avoidance attachment, which are forms of unstable attachment among adult attachments, were the second and third factors that explained the relationship satisfaction of the university students. Hazan and Shaver^[7] argue that adult attachment is the one of the most well-known variables in predicting relationship satisfaction and is related with romantic relationships in adulthood. Their findings demonstrate that positive emotions as happiness and trust are usually reported in relationships in the case of stable attachment, whereas instable attachment types such as avoidance or anxiety feel a lot of negative emotions such as discomfort or jealousy in relationships.

The overall results suggest that it is necessary for university students, in order to improve the romantic relationship satisfaction, to have a positive and active life attitude toward their own lives so that they can establish positive sexual attitudes and enhance their self-esteem.

Conclusions

In this study, self-esteem, anxiety attachment, and avoidance attachment were significant predictors that influence university students' romantic relationship satisfaction and the three variables' explanatory power was 34.7%. Based on these results, it is necessary for university students to develop a sense of self-respect and experience the process of exchanging positive feelings with their partners in order to improve their satisfaction with romantic relationships.

This study is meaningful in that it takes account sexual attachment variables, a new concept in nursing, into account to provide nursing intervention to enhance healthy relationship satisfaction of university students.

Ethical Clearance: Not required

Source of Funding: Self

Conflict of Interest: Nil

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