

The Ties That Shape Us: Parental Attachment, Quality of Friendship and Psychological Adjustment in College Students

Habiba Muqadas¹, Dr. Muhammad Nasar Iqbal¹, Huma Gul², Fatima Javed¹

1. Lahore School of Behavioural Sciences, The University of Lahore, Pakistan.
2. Department of Psychology, University of Southern Punjab Multan, Pakistan.

Corresponding Author: Dr. Muhammad Nasar Iqbal; Email: psynasir@gmail.com

Abstract

Parental attachment and peer relationships are pivotal in shaping psychological adjustment during emerging adulthood. College students, undergoing significant developmental transitions, rely heavily on both family bonds and quality friendships for emotional and social stability. The present study was conducted with the aim to find the correlation among parental attachment, quality of friendship and psychological adjustment in college students. A correlation research design, along with a purposive sampling technique, was used to collect data from college students. The sample comprised 250 college students (females = 125, males = 125), aged between 15 to 19 years, recruited from government and private colleges in Lahore by using three self-report measures. The results indicated a significant positive relationship among psychological adjustment, friendship quality, and parental connection. Mother attachment and friendship quality were found to be significant positive predictors of psychological adjustment by multiple regression analysis. Additionally, males showed a higher level of psychological adjustment. Also, students from private institutions reported higher levels of psychological adjustment compared to those from government institutions. This study demonstrated that college students who have better parental attachment and better friendship quality are more psychologically adjusted.

Keywords: Parental Attachment, Quality of Friendship, Psychological Adjustment, College Students

Introduction

The transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood is a critical developmental period characterized by substantial psychological, emotional, and social changes (Bonnie & Stroud, 2017; Noreen et al., 2022). During this stage, individuals begin to establish their identities, develop autonomy, and build significant interpersonal relationships outside the family context. One of the most influential factors in shaping these developmental processes is parental attachment, which forms the foundation for the way young adults perceive themselves and interact with others (Iqbal & Ijaz, 2024). Attachment theory, originally proposed by Bowlby (1969), suggests that early bonds formed between children and caregivers profoundly influence their socio-emotional development and adjustment in later life. Secure parental attachment not only fosters emotional regulation and resilience but also acts as a protective factor against stress and mental health issues during the college years (Mahmood et al., 2023). In the context of college students, psychological adjustment is a multi-dimensional construct encompassing emotional well-being, academic performance, social integration, and the ability to manage stress (Mayo et al., 2025). Students with healthy psychological adjustment tend to demonstrate

better coping strategies, higher life satisfaction, and improved interpersonal relationships (Khizer et al., 2024). The quality of early attachments, particularly with parents, plays a crucial role in shaping one's ability to adjust psychologically in novel or challenging environments, such as college. The level of parental warmth, responsiveness, and communication experienced during childhood can significantly influence a student's self-esteem (Mushtaq et al., 2020), interpersonal competence, and ability to navigate academic and social pressures (Sana et al., 2021).

Equally important in this stage of life is the role of peer relationships. As young adults spend increased time in academic and social settings outside the family, friendships become a major source of emotional support and identity formation (Huebner & Mancini, 2003). The quality of these friendships marked by trust, reciprocity, and emotional closeness—contributes significantly to psychological health. According to Bukowski et al. (1994), high-quality friendships are associated with reduced loneliness, lower levels of anxiety and depression, and greater life satisfaction among adolescents and young adults (Alsarrani et al., 2022). When college students experience secure parental attachment in combination with positive peer relationships, their psychological adjustment is generally more stable and adaptive (Swenson et al., 2008). The interplay between parental attachment and friendship quality becomes especially relevant in collectivistic cultures like Pakistan, where family relationships often remain central during early adulthood. Despite this cultural emphasis on familial bonds, college students in urban areas such as Lahore increasingly encounter Western ideals of independence and peer orientation. This dual influence may cause variation in attachment patterns and how students rely on friendships to buffer stress and support adjustment. However, most existing research on parental attachment and psychological adjustment has been conducted in Western contexts, limiting its cultural generalizability. Thus, there is a need to investigate these dynamics in the local context to better understand how Pakistani college students negotiate familial and peer relationships in their psychological development.

Objectives of the Study

- To determine the relationship among parental attachment, friendship quality, and psychological adjustment in college students.
- To measure the predictive role of mother and father attachment and friendship quality on psychological adjustment in college students.
- To find out the gender and institutional differences in psychological adjustment in college students.

Methodology

Research Design and Participants

This study utilized a correlation research design to examine the relationship among study variables in college students. A purposive sampling technique was employed to recruit participants who met the inclusion criteria. The sample comprised 250 first-year college students (125 females and 125 males), aged between 15 and 19 years, from both government and private colleges in Lahore. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. Data collection was conducted in a conducive environment to ensure participant comfort and data integrity. The data were analyzed by using SPSS-25 version.

Measures

A demographic questionnaire was developed by the researcher to gather basic information, including age, gender, educational institution, and educational level. The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA; Armsden & Greenberg, 1989) assesses adolescents' perceptions

of their relationships through three dimensions: trust, communication, and alienation. This study utilized only the parent attachment subscale, which demonstrates high internal consistency ($\alpha = .86-.93$). The Friendship Quality Scale (FQS; Bukowski et al., 1994) is a 23-item measure assessing five aspects of adolescent friendships—companionship, conflict, help, security, and closeness—on a 5-point Likert scale, with subscale reliabilities ranging from $\alpha = .71$ to $.86$. The Brief Adjustment Scale (BAS-6; Cruz et al., 2020) is a six-item self-report tool measuring general psychological adjustment over the past week, showing strong internal consistency ($\alpha = .87-.93$).

Results

Table 1 Alpha Coefficient of Parental attachment, Quality of Friendship and Psychological Adjustment

Scales	<i>k</i>	<i>a</i>
Mother Scale	25	.59
Father Scale	25	.66
LERID Friendship Scale	46	.86
Brief Adjustment Scale	06	.61

Note. *a*=Cronbach's Alpha Value; *k*=No of Items

The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for the three scales used in the study is presented in Table 1, indicating that all the scales demonstrated acceptable reliability for data collection.

Table 2 Association between Parental Attachment, Quality of Friendship and Psychological Adjustment among College Students

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
Mother Attachment	79.19	10.23	--	.66**	.32**	.14*
Father Attachment	78.22	9.83	--	--	.24*	.13*
Quality of Friendship	145.94	23.37	--	--	--	.24*
Psychological Adjustment	24.14	7.51	--	--	--	--

Note. *N*= 250; *M*= Mean; *SD*= Standard Deviation, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Table 2 presents the correlations among college students' psychological adjustment, friendship quality, and parental attachment. Mother attachment showed strong positive correlations with father attachment, friendship quality, and psychological adjustment. Similarly, father attachment was significantly positively correlated with both friendship quality and psychological adjustment. Friendship quality also demonstrated a significant positive association with psychological adjustment.

Table 3 Multiple Regression Analysis on Parental Attachment and Quality of Friendship as a Predictor of Psychological Adjustment among College Student

Variables	β	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> ²	ΔR^2
Mother Attachment	.14	.025*	.02	
Father Attachment	.06	.443	.02	.00
Quality of Friendship	.21	.001***	.06	.04

Note. β =Beta, *** $p < .001$, * $p < .05$

Table 3 shows multiple regression on college students' psychological adjustment, friendship quality, and parental connection. Mother attachment's *R*² value in this table is .02, indicating a 2% variance in the outcome variable of psychological adjustment at level $p < .05$. Additionally, at the $p < .001$ level, the results showed that friendship quality was a significant positive predictor of psychological adjustment among college students. The quality of

friendship's R² value was .06, indicating a 6% variation among the outcome variable psychological adjustment.

Table 4 Independent Sample *t*-test, Mean Differences and Standard Deviation in Psychological Adjustment in College Students

Variable	Male (n=125)		Female (n=125)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
PA	25.35	8.19	22.93	6.57	2.580	.010**	0.3

Note. ***p* < .01, ****p* < .001, PA = Psychological Adjustment; *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard

Deviation

Table 4 illustrates gender differences in psychological adjustment. The results revealed that male students reported higher levels of psychological adjustment compared to female students. The Cohen's *d* value of 0.30 indicates a small effect size.

Table 5 Independent Sample *t*-test, Mean Differences and Standard Deviation in Psychological Adjustment among College Students between Government and Private Institutes

Variable	Govt (n=125)		Private (n=125)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
PA	21.63	7.573	26.69	6.547	5.655	.001***	0.7

Note. PA = Psychological Adjustment; *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation

Table 5 illustrates the differences in psychological adjustment based on college type. Results indicated that students attending private colleges reported higher psychological adjustment levels than those in government colleges. The Cohen's *d* value of 0.70 suggests a medium effect size.

Discussion

The present study aimed to find the correlation among parental attachment, quality of friendship, and psychological adjustment among college students. The study revealed that all the variables were significantly correlated. This suggests that adolescents who experience supportive and secure relationships with their parents and peers tend to have better psychological adjustment. Bowlby's attachment theory (1969) supports these findings, emphasizing the importance of emotional bonds developed in the early period of life, which also shape individuals' interpersonal functioning and psychological well-being throughout life. The results indicated that maternal attachment and friendship quality were significant positive predictors of psychological adjustment among college students. These findings are consistent with previous research, which highlights the crucial role of parental attachment—particularly mother attachment in promoting emotional security. Such emotional security is essential for adaptive coping strategies and enhanced psychological well-being (Kenny & Sirin, 2006; Laible & Panfile, 2009). In many cultural milieus including in Pakistan mothers tend to be more emotionally available and more involved in caregiving responsibilities, which may be why mother attachment exerts more influence on adjustment outcomes.

Father attachment was not a significant predictor in the regression model although it correlated strongly with psychological adjustment. The disparity may be due to the fact that mothers and fathers usually take up different roles concerning their children's emotional development. Fathers are rarely viewed in a nurturing heart giving capacity more than an authoritative provider in collectivistic societies. These findings correspond to the findings from other

research suggesting that while significant mother and warmth may not have that direct impact on internal emotional regulation of adolescents in the same way that mother proximity does (Pleck 2010).

The study also discussed the importance of open peer interactions that their friendship quality was one of the significant predictors of psychological adjustment. Peer support allows teens to express themselves, feel validated and feel like they belong all traits important for healthy psychological growth.

The search for intimate interpersonal relationships and identity characterizes adolescence, and meeting these goals of psychosocial development rests on good peer relationships (Erikson, 1963). Its high extent of internal consistency attests to the validity of the LERID friendship scale in measuring the assorted dimensions of relationship quality in this study. Men showed definitely higher levels of adjustment than women did, with respect to psychological adjustment. Such findings are in line with the previous research of Babasaheb (2019), which also found that men's psychological adjustment was superior. Gender based socializing processes that tend to promote the development among men of more independent and problem oriented coping styles may be a reason for such disparity. In addition, the cultural expectations may make the women absorb stressful situations and emotional difficulties more indigenously and negatively influence adjustment.

Another surprising finding is the huge disparity in the adjustment of mind between the students of government and private colleges, with the former adjusting well. This may be the case for the fact that private universities have a superior academic environment, smaller classes, better institutional resource, and more structured psychosocial support networks. These gaps may be a symptom of overall greater socioeconomic inequalities that affect the welfare of the students, which resulted in emphasizing the need for systemic, distribution of resources in the public educational environment.

Conclusion

The research results were considered to provide substantive answers regarding the interactive role that relationships with peers and parents play in the psychological adjustment at a critical period in human life. Peer focused and family based interventions have been supported to support the mental health and emotional health of college students by research. Programs that can make friendship better, promote safe attachment styles, and enhance parent-child communication may buffer young people entering into adulthood from the psychological problems they face.

Limitation and Recommendations

Future studies should examine potential mediating and moderating factors including self-esteem, academic stress, or cultural identity, as well as longitudinal designs to evaluate causation and developmental changes over time.

Conflict of Interest

There was no conflict of interest in this study.

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