

The Developmental Role of Trust: parental Attachment and Romantic Attachment Mediated by Generalized Trust

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Abstract: This study explored the relationship between emotional alienation with parents and romantic attachment avoidance in Chinese female college students, with generalized interpersonal trust as a mediator. A total of 214 participants aged 17 to 25 ($M = 21.37$, $SD = 2.03$) completed validated Chinese versions of the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment–Short Form (IPPA-SF), the General Trust Scale (GTS), and the Experiences in Close Relationships–Relationship Structures questionnaire (ECR-RS) by completing the questionnaire through a secure online survey platform. Pearson correlation analysis showed that emotional alienation with parents was negatively correlated with interpersonal trust ($r = -0.241$, $p < 0.001$) and positively correlated with romantic avoidance ($r = 0.237$, $p < 0.001$). Interpersonal trust was negatively associated with romantic avoidance ($r = -0.206$, $p = 0.002$). Mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 4 revealed that generalized trust significantly mediated the relationship between emotional alienation with parents and romantic avoidance, with an indirect effect of 0.10, 95% CI [0.04, 0.17]. These findings suggest that emotional alienation with parents may reduce interpersonal trust and thus increase avoidance in romantic attachment. The study provides evidence for social learning theory and attachment theory by explaining how early family attachment shapes later relationship functioning.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the social structure and environment of Chinese youth have changed quickly. For children who were born after 2000 – the so-called post-00s – urbanization, the one-child policy, and shifting gender norms have created a unique developmental environment. Most post-00s female college students grew up as only children in a family, thereby receiving a lot of attention and high emotional expectations from their parents. At the same time, they grew up in an era of frequent use of digital media and social platforms, which encourage people to express their true feelings, be independent, and build equal relationships. These values have huge differences from traditional Chinese family rules. In a traditional Chinese family, children are expected to obey their parents' expectations. Traditional and new ideas influence how young women deal with trust and closeness in their relationships. This intergenerational value conflict may lead to psychological tension when female college students approach romantic intimacy. Traditional expectations encourage emotional

restraint and put family expectations first; on the other hand, modern values promote open expression and emotional contact in romantic relationships. Open expression was defined as the willingness to share one's feelings, needs, and vulnerabilities in close relationships (Gross & John, 2003)[8]. Also, research has shown that this emotional openness is positively associated with intimacy, trust, and relationship satisfaction (Graham et al., 2008)[7]. This conflict can result in internal ambivalence that affects their romantic attachment, such as lower relationship satisfaction and difficulty establishing secure relationships.

In today's changing society, romantic relationships play an important role in helping young people develop their identity. For many female college students, dating begins during college years and represents their first intimate relationship outside of the family. However, how these young women deal with romantic closeness might be shaped by their early attachment experiences with their caregivers. This idea is from the foundational work of John Bowlby, who first introduced attachment theory to explain how early bonds with caregivers influence emotional and social development. Attachment theory proposes that early relationships with caregivers are internalized as internal working models that shape later social and romantic expectations (Bowlby, 1988)[3]. The attachment between female college students and their parents may predict later romantic attachments, especially when they form intimate relationships during early adulthood.

There is a critical domain that may bridge family and romantic relationships, which is generalized interpersonal trust. Generalized interpersonal trust is defined as the belief that most people are honest, kind, and fair (Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994)[15]. Children who grow up in responsive, emotionally warm family environments may internalize a sense of safety into other people. These early bonds also appear to lay the groundwork for how much people are willing to trust others in general (Rotenberg, 2010)[11]. By contrast, this trust can influence how they engage with romantic partners: whether they expect emotional support, fear abandonment, or withdraw in conflict.

Although researchers studied parental attachment and romantic attachment separately, few studies focus on the connections between parental attachment, generalized trust, and romantic attachment, particularly in East Asian society. To better understand this connection, there is some basic knowledge and previous research on attachment theory, trust development, and romantic relationships.

2. Research foundation and design

2.1 Literature review

Based on Bowlby's (1988)[3] foundational attachment theory, more and more research has explored how early parental attachment influences romantic attachment in early adulthood, particularly in female college students, who are in a developmental stage of identity formation and relational exploration. Parental attachment refers to the emotional bond between a child and their caregiver, which provides a foundation for the child's sense of security, self-worth, and expectations of others in close relationships (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987)[1]. By contrast, romantic attachment refers to how individuals experience intimacy, trust, dependence, and anxiety in romantic relationships during adolescence and adulthood (Fraley & Shaver, 2000)[5]. These theories are linked with each other; secure attachment formed with caregivers can predict an individual's ability to form secure romantic attachments.

A recent meta-analysis shows that higher interpersonal trust is linked with lower romantic attachment anxiety and avoidance in different cultures (Bao, Li, Zhang, Tang, & Chen, 2024). By contrast, distrust often links with defensive withdrawal and fear of abandonment in close relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016)[9]. At the cognitive level, trust is like a bridge that can bring early attachment expectations into a new relationship (Simpson, 2007)[14].

There is more empirical research linking parental attachment, generalized trust, and romantic attachment. Shanoora et al. (2025)[13] conducted a cross-sectional survey of 463 young adults in the Maldives and found that insecure attachment, such as avoidant and anxious dimensions in parent–child attachment, was negatively associated with romantic relationship score in early adulthood. This matches with attachment theory that early insecure attachment can bring negative impact on later romantic interactions. Moreover, in the Chinese context, Du, Li, and Wang (2024)[4] showed that low parental warmth was associated with reduced generalized interpersonal trust, which in turn was linked to higher levels of depressive symptoms in adolescents. This shows that the mechanism by which insecure or insufficient attachment contexts decrease trust toward others. Also, in China, Yuan et al. (2024)[16] provided important evidence that parental emotional warmth and rejection predict daughters’ dating attitudes and stress. Trust and romantic functioning often follow a similar pattern when examined together. Collins and Read (1990) found that low general trust strength was the link between attachment avoidance and poor relationship quality. Although these studies highlight the importance of overall parental attachment, they did not focus on whether general trust can mediate parental attachment and romantic attachment.

In conclusion, there are two major gaps in attachment research. First, there is a lack of comprehensive studies in East-Asian that can assess parental attachment, generalized trust, and romantic attachment at the same time, especially for female college students in China. Second, most research combines the influence of all dimensions of parental attachment, such as trust, communication, and alienation, and cannot distinguish whether different dimensions of parental attachment will shape trust and romantic attachment function differently.

Therefore, the present study addresses these gaps by using the Chinese versions of the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment—Short Form (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987)[1] to assess parental attachment of communication, trust, and alienation; the General Trust Scale (Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994)[15] to measure general trust; and the ECR-RS (Fraley, Heffernan, Vicary, & Brumbaugh, 2011)[6] to index romantic attachment anxiety and avoidance. By examining parental attachment, romantic attachment, and general trust as mediators, this study is helpful for understanding how general trust mediates early attachment experiences on romantic intimacy among Chinese female college students.

2.2 Research Question

How does emotional alienation with parents influence avoidant romantic attachment in Chinese female college students? Does generalized interpersonal trust mediate the relationship between emotional alienation with parents and avoidant romantic attachment? To what extent do early attachment experiences shape later trust and intimacy in romantic relationships for Chinese female college students?

2.3 Hypothesis

This research shows that early attachment relationships with caregivers influence attachment relationships with other people, which shape later social beliefs and intimate behaviors. Although there is a lot of evidence that supports the connection between parental attachment and romantic attachment, the psychological mechanisms underlying this line remain underexplored, particularly in non-Western cultures. Therefore, this study explores whether generalized interpersonal trust mediates the relationship between parental attachment (communication, trust, and alienation) and romantic attachment (anxiety and avoidance) among Chinese female college students currently in dating relationships. Based on existing theory, research, and evidence, the following hypotheses were proposed:

- (1) H1. Emotional alienation with parents will negatively predict generalized interpersonal trust.
- (2) H2. Generalized interpersonal trust will negatively predict romantic attachment insecurity, including attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety.
- (3) H3. Generalized interpersonal trust will mediate the relationship between emotional alienation with parents and romantic attachment or insecurity.

By looking at both mother and father attachment at the same time, this study offers a more complete understanding of how family bonds shape romantic relationships in China and may help improve relationship education for college students.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The participants in this study were 214 female undergraduate students (ages 17–25, $M = 21.37$, $SD = 2.03$). All participants self-identified as currently being involved in a heterosexual romantic relationship lasting at least three months. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, and participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

3.2 Instruments and measures

The present study used the Chinese versions of three standardized psychological instruments to assess key constructs: parental attachment, generalized trust, and romantic attachment. Minor wording modifications were made to a few items to improve clarity and ensure better comprehension for participants, without changing the original meaning or structure of the scales.

3.3 Parental Attachment

Parental attachment was measured using a modified Chinese version of the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment–Short Form (IPPA-SF; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Raja, McGee & Stanton, 1992)[1,10], containing 10 items for father and 10 items for mother, respectively. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The scale covers trust (e.g., “My father respects my feelings”), communication (e.g., “I tell my mother about my problems and troubles”), and alienation (e.g., “I often feel upset with my father”). In this scale, there are two scoring methods. Positive items: Items such as “My parents help me understand myself” were scored directly. Negative items (requiring reverse scoring): Items such as “I didn’t get much attention from my parents”; “I feel angry with my parents”; and “I often argue with my family.” Higher total scores indicate higher levels of parental attachment security.

3.4 General Trust

General trust was measured using a 6-item Chinese version of the General Trust Scale (Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994)[15]. Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Items included general beliefs about human nature (e.g., “Most people are basically honest,” “Most people are essentially kind and friendly”). All items were positively worded, and no reverse scoring. Higher scores reflect a greater tendency to trust others in general.

3.5 Romantic Attachment

Romantic attachment was measured using 9 adapted items from the Chinese version of the

Experiences in Close Relationships–Relationship Structures Questionnaire (ECR-RS; Fraley et al., 2011)[6], which focused on the participant’s relationship with her boyfriend. Each item was rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). The scale includes items reflecting attachment anxiety (e.g., “I often worry that this person doesn’t care for me”) and avoidance (e.g., “I am not comfortable being emotionally close to this person”). There are 6 items that reflect the avoidance subscale; higher scores show greater avoidance. There are 3 items that reflect the anxiety subscale; higher scores show greater anxiety. Moreover, there are negatively worded items (e.g., “I don’t like showing this person how I feel deep down”) that were reverse scored in this scale.

3.6 Procedure

Participants were recruited from two social media platforms (Wechat and Rednote) in Chinese mainland China. They completed the questionnaire through a secure online survey platform. Demographic questions (age, parental marital status, only-child status, whether the family resides in a rural or urban area, and annual household income) appeared first, followed by the three standardized scales described above. The average completion time was approximately 5 minutes.

4. Data analysis and results

4.1 Data analysis

To explore whether generalized trust mediated the relationship between parental attachment and romantic attachment outcomes, a mediation analysis was conducted using Model 4 of the PROCESS macro (v4.2; Hayes, 2022) in SPSS. All variables were standardized before analysis. The sample size for this analysis was 214. Rather than using only total scale scores, different subdimension scores of parental attachment and romantic attachment were entered into the models to allow for specific analysis. The significance of the indirect effect was tested by looking at the regression coefficients and the 95% confidence intervals, which were calculated using bootstrapping with 5,000 samples in the PROCESS default setting.

4.2 Results

Descriptive statistics were calculated for the three main variables: emotional alienation with parents (X), interpersonal trust (M), and romantic avoidance (Y). As shown in Table 1, the mean score of emotional alienation with parents was 2.45 (SD = 0.77), with scores ranging from 1.00 to 5.00. The mean score of interpersonal trust was 3.42 (SD = 0.67), ranging from 1.33 to 5.00. The mean score of romantic avoidance was 3.27 (SD = 0.92), ranging from 1.00 to 5.33.

Table 1 Means, Standard Deviations, and Ranges for All Variables (N = 214)

Variable	Min	Max	M	SD
Emotional Alienation with Parents (X)	1.000	5.000	2.452	0.774
Interpersonal Trust (M)	1.330	5.000	3.422	0.665
Romantic Avoidance (Y)	1.000	5.330	3.276	0.921

Using Pearson correlation analyses to examine the relationships between these variables. The results indicated that emotional alienation with parents was negatively correlated with interpersonal trust ($r = -0.241$, $p < 0.001$) and positively correlated with romantic avoidance ($r = 0.237$, $p < 0.001$). Also, interpersonal trust was also significantly related to romantic avoidance ($r = -0.206$, $p = 0.002$). These findings show that the three variables are associated with each other. The correlations are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Correlations of Three Variables (N = 214)

	Emotional Alienation with Parents (X)	General Trust (M)	Romantic Avoidance (Y)
Emotional Alienation with Parents (X)	1.000		
General Trust (M)	-0.241	1.000	
Romantic Avoidance (Y)	0.237	-0.206	1.000

Note: All correlations were significant at $p < 0.01$ or $p < 0.05$.

After using the PROCESS macro Model 4 (Hayes, 2022), the analysis showed that the emotional alienation score of parental attachment predicted generalized trust ($B = -0.207$, $SE = 0.057$, $t = -3.613$, $p = 0.0004$), indicating that higher levels of emotional alienation with parents were related with lower trust in others.

Both emotional alienation with parents and generalized trust were factors of romantic avoidance. Results showed that emotional alienation with parents will influence romantic avoidance directly ($B = 0.282$, $SE = 0.080$, $t = 3.554$, $p = 0.0005$), and generalized trust significantly predicted romantic avoidance ($B = -0.220$, $SE = 0.094$, $t = -2.329$, $p = 0.0208$).

The total effect of emotional alienation with parents on romantic avoidance was significant ($B = 0.282$, $SE = 0.079$, $t = 3.554$, $p = 0.0005$). Also, the indirect effect through generalized trust was also significant (effect = 0.045, BootSE = 0.025, 95% CI [0.0026, 0.1018]), meaning the confidence interval did not include zero. This indicates that generalized trust mediated the relationship between emotional alienation with parents and romantic avoidance (see Figure 1 and Table 3).

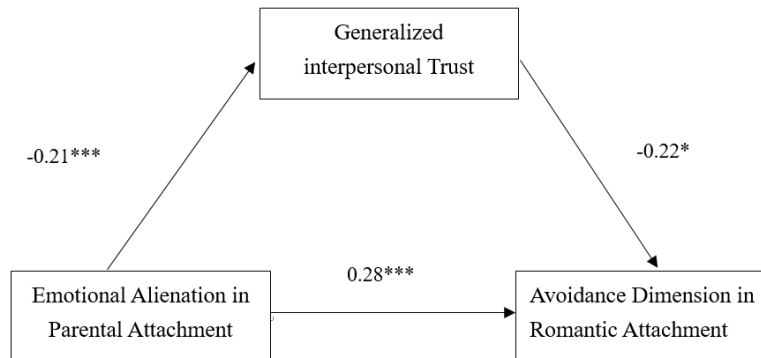


Figure 1 Path model showing the mediating role of interpersonal trust in the relationship between emotional alienation with parents and romantic avoidance. Standardized regression coefficients are displayed on each path. Note: *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$. X = Emotional Alienation in Parental Attachment, M = Generalized interpersonal Trust, Y = Avoidance Dimension in Romantic Avoidance.

Table 3 Mediation Analysis Summary Table

Effect Path	B	SE	LLCI	ULCI	P
X→M	-0.207	0.057	-0.320	-0.094	0.0004
M→Y	-0.220	0.094	-0.405	-0.033	0.0209
X→Y(Direct)	0.282	0.080	0.126	0.439	0.0005
X→Y(Indirect)	0.045	0.026	0.003	0.102	
X→Y(Total)	0.282	0.079	0.126	0.439	0.0005

5. Discussion

This study examined how emotional alienation with parents influences romantic attachment avoidance in college female students, and whether generalized interpersonal trust acts as a mediator. The results supported that higher emotional alienation with parents was associated with lower trust and predicted greater avoidance in romantic relationships—a model that is the same as empirical findings and theoretical expectations.

Firstly, the negative association between emotional alienation with parents and interpersonal trust showed that the result was consistent with previous research. For example, lower parental warmth was related to reduced interpersonal trust in Chinese youth (Du et al., 2024)[4]. From a theoretical perspective, Bandura's (1977)[2] social learning theory claims that children learn interpersonal strategies by observing caregivers. When caregivers show detachment or unresponsiveness, children may imitate caregivers, leading to reduced expectations of trust in others (Bandura, 1977)[2]. Similarly, Rotter's (1967)[12] interpersonal trust model states that trust is based on consistent, reliable social interactions. Therefore, the lack of emotional support in early caregiving may shape thinking in which others are perceived as unsafe or unpredictable, weakening generalized interpersonal trust (Rotter, 1967)[12].

Second, the result that lower interpersonal trust predicted romantic avoidance is supported by attachment theory: individuals who think others are unreliable or rejecting often keep partners at a distance to protect themselves emotionally (Collins & Read, 1990; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016)[9]. This pattern matches the logic that trust is the basis of emotional openness, while distrust is the basis of emotional withdrawal.

Importantly, the mediation analysis showed that interpersonal trust partially mediated the relationship between emotional alienation with parents and romantic avoidance. In other words, most of the influence through internalized expectations about others' reliability rather than being directly affected by early attachment. This supports Bowlby's internal working model, which proposes that early attachment type build an internal model in shaping later relational expectations (Bowlby, 1988)[3].

Together, these results create a model: early attachment type with parents may train individuals—via social learning—to predict others will be untrustworthy, thereby influencing romantic behaviors of avoidance. By exploring trust as a mediating mechanism, this study deepens understanding of the simple direct link from parent attachment to romantic outcomes.

From a theoretical point of view, composing Bandura's and Rotter's models with attachment theory allows a unified explanation: the lack of early security attachment with caregivers leads to learned distrust, which then manifests as emotional distancing in adult romance. This adds detail and understanding to traditional attachment theory by specifying how early family dynamics shape romantic functioning through cognitive-affective processes (Bandura, 1977; Rotter, 1967; Bowlby, 1988)[2-3,12].

Practically, these findings have implications for psychological education and intervention. Interventions that enhance interpersonal trust—perhaps through modeling trustworthy relationships or cognitive restructuring—could mitigate the impact of emotional alienation with parents on relational avoidance. Programs in college counseling or family therapy could be a trust-building exercises to help young women become more open and secure in romantic relationship.

This study has several limitations. First, it used a cross-sectional design, which limits causal inference. If using longitudinal design, which would better clarify time sequences. Second, all variables were self-reported, which may contain some bias. Third, the sample only consisted of heterosexual female college students in one country, limiting generalizability.

In the future, research could explore similar mediational pathways in different populations, such

as males or LGBTQ+ youth. Additionally, experimental designs could test interventions that work for increasing generalized trust and examine whether changes in trust lead to shifts in romantic attachment patterns.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that generalized interpersonal trust mediates emotional alienation with parents and romantic avoidance. This study contributes to the literature by showing how early family experiences may shape later relationships through trust. This idea matches both social learning theory and attachment theory. These results are helpful for theory, research, and practice in fostering healthier romantic relationships in individuals with insecure family attachment histories.

6. Conclusion

This study explored how emotional alienation with parents influences romantic attachment avoidance in Chinese female college students and whether interpersonal trust is a mediator. The findings suggest that young women perceive their parents as emotionally distant or unresponsive; they are more likely to have difficulty trusting others in general. This lower level of general trust may result in avoiding intimacy or closeness in romantic relationships.

The results show the importance of early family experiences in shaping how people relate to others later in life. Trust is a psychological bridge that connects childhood attachment patterns with adult romantic behavior. In other words, how much someone trusts others may be influenced by how much they are close and supportive from their parents, and this trust may then affect their attachment in a romantic relationship.

By exploring emotional alienation with parents specifically, this study provides some different details to previous research that usually looks at parent-child attachment. Chinese female college students as participants also provide valuable insight into how cultural and gender factors might shape attachment and trust patterns.

Although this study has some limitations, such as relying on self-report and cross-sectional data, the results still provide meaningful implications for counseling and relationship education. Helping individuals reflect on their early family experiences and rebuild interpersonal trust may be one way to improve romantic relationships and emotional well-being in young adulthood.

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