

# Trust in Dating Couples: Attachment Anxiety, Attachment Avoidance, and Perceived Partner Responsiveness

Elvina Jesslyn  
*Faculty of Psychology*  
*Universitas Tarumanagara*  
*Jakarta, Indonesia*  
*elvina.705150085@stu.untar.ac.id*

Fransisca Iriani Roesmala Dewi  
*Faculty of Psychology*  
*Universitas Tarumanagara*  
*Jakarta, Indonesia*  
*fransiscar@untar.ac.id*

**Abstract - Emerging adults have development task to form intimate relationships, one of which is formed through dating. An important aspect for a healthy relationship is trust. Low trust in relationship is associated with higher relationship uncertainty. This study is aimed to examine the role of attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, and perceived partner responsiveness on trust in dating couples. Research used quantitative design which included 209 subjects (female: 78%, male: 22%) currently involved in romantic relationship for at least 2 years, and aged 18 to 25 years old (M=21,19, SD = 1,72). Instruments used in this research are: (a) Trust in Close Relationship Scale, (b) Experience in Close Relationship, and (c) Perceived Partner Responsiveness Scale. Multiple regression analysis show that attachment anxiety ( $\beta = -0,019$ ;  $p > 0,05$ ), attachment avoidance ( $\beta = -0,154$ ;  $p < 0,05$ ), and perceived partner responsiveness ( $\beta = 0,539$ ;  $p < 0,05$ ) has significant role on trust in dating couples ( $R^2 = 0,407$ ,  $p < 0,05$ ).**

**Keywords: attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, perceived partner responsiveness, trust, dating**

## I. INTRODUCTION

According to Arnett [1], emerging adults, aged 18 – 25 years old, are going through a lot of changes in their life and have to make a lot of life decisions. At the same time, emerging adults have a development task to build intimate relationship with others [2]. One of the relationships established in this period is romantic relationship, in the form of dating [2].

Dating is a process of meeting between two people in a social context that aims to get to know each other and consider the possibility of making the other a life partner [3]. This means that dating is done with the purpose of marriage and building a family together. Marriage can be achieved if there is a healthy relationship during dating. Healthy and happy

marriages are characterized by strong trust between partners [4]; [5].

Trust has been discussed and associated with dating relationships. The ending of dating relationships is also often associated with a lack of trust [6]; [7]; [8]. Without trust, a relationship becomes unhealthy and couples tend to be suspicious of each other [9].

A study conducted by Kemer, Bulgan, & Cetinkaya [10] found that trust is an important component in the formation of happy and functional relationships. Rodriguez, DiBello, Overup, & Neighbors [11] found that low trust is one of the predictors of jealousy. Lack of trust in romantic relationships is one of the main reasons for the breakdown of romantic relationships, after economic conditions, communication difficulties, and differences in values [12]. Dainton and Aylor [13] also found that trust has a strong negative relationship with uncertainty in dating. Therefore, trust is a very important component in a dating relationship.

Foundation of trust in a relationship is influenced by one's attachment style [14]; [15]; [16]. The attachment theory was first introduced by Mary Ainsworth who observed the behavior of babies when left by their caregivers [2]. Attachment is an emotional bond formed between children and their primary caregiver that mainly affects the quality of the relationship between the two [2].

Bowlby [17] states that attachment formed during childhood will become a working model in someone who then determines one's attachment style as an adult. The theory of adult attachment proposed by Bartholomew [18] states that attachment consists of two dimensions, attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. The combination of the two dimensions forms four adult attachment styles, namely secure, preoccupied, fearful-avoidant, and dismissing avoidant. Individuals with low attachment anxiety and low avoidance attachments have a secure attachment style. Individuals with high attachment anxiety and/or high attachment avoidance have insecure attachment style (preoccupied, fearful-

avoidant, or dismissing avoidant). The formation of attachment relatively takes two years [19].

Adult attachment theory according to Mikulincer [14], states that individuals with secure attachment have a higher trust in couples than individuals with other attachment styles. Fitzpatrick and Lafontaine [20] found a negative relationship between attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance with trust in partners. Other studies conducted by Rodriguez et al. [11] showed a significant negative relationship between attachment anxiety and trust.

In addition to attachment style, another aspect that can influence trust in dating relationships is perceived partner responsiveness [21]. Perceived partner responsiveness is a one's perception that their partners are able to understand, appreciate, and care for themselves [22]. This perception is formed through an intrapersonal and interpersonal process [23]. Intrapersonal processes occur when a person expresses one's hopes and desires, then continues with an interpersonal process when one's partner gives a positive response. The partner's response will be perceived as responsive if it meets three criteria, (a) understanding, is considered to have the right view of oneself; (b) validation, confident and appreciates one's abilities, attitudes and views; and (c) caring, willingness to provide assistance when needed [23].

Perceived partner responsiveness has been shown to influence the intimacy of partners [24], relationship satisfaction [25]. This shows that perceived partner responsiveness is an important aspect in a relationship. However, there has not been much research on perceived partner responsiveness. Research conducted by Shallcross & Simpson [21] found a positive relationship between responsiveness and trust in dating couples.

John Gottman [26] explained a concept similar to perceived partner responsiveness to build trust between partners, which is emotional bids. Emotional bids are efforts made by someone to get attention or emotional connection with their romantic partner. Trust will be built when emotional bids are responded well.

Based on the explanation of phenomena and research above, it is known that attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, and perceived partner responsiveness correlate with trust in dating couples. However, as far as the researchers know there have been no studies that examine the effect of attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, and perceived partner responsiveness to trust, especially in dating couples. Based on these reasons, researchers are interested in knowing the influence of attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, and perceived partner responsiveness to trust, and which factors have a greater role in trust.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Trust

Rempel, Holmes, and Zanna [27] defined trust as the expectancy that someone's words, promises, or statements can be relied upon. Trust is also interpreted as a one's perception of one partner's dependability and loyalty to the continuity of their relationship [28].

Trust is an important component to have a healthy relationship [27] explained that trust is built on past experience and interaction between partners. Then there will be a positive attribution between partners. Trust is also defined as faith in the stability and continuity of the positive response given by the current partner.

Rempel, Holmes, and Zanna. [27] describe three components of trust, (a) predictability, (b) dependability, (c) faith. Predictability is influenced by the consistency of past individual behavior and the stability of the social environment. By knowing the consistency of past behavior and consequences that may arise from potential behavior, possible behavior can be predicted. Predictability of behavior is influenced by one's observations of the consistency of their partner's behavior patterns in certain social situations.

The second component of trust is dependability between partners Rempel, Holmes, and Zanna., [27]. At this stage the main focus is on the positive and negative characteristics of partner. By evaluating positive and negative characteristics, individuals are able to put trust in their partners. By trusting a partner, individuals believe that their partner will behave according to their expectations. This means that individuals take risks to get rejection and are in a vulnerable position. If the couple behaves according to expectations, then trust is formed. Through experiences like this, trust can be built in stages.

The final component of trust is faith [27]. The first two components of trust involve evidence and experience in the past. In relationships, couples will find a number of challenges and problems that cannot be anticipated beforehand. To deal with problems and bad possibilities in the future, relationships between partners are needed. Confidence in a partner illustrates the individual's sense of trust that his partner will remain responsive and caring even if there is no certainty in the future. Confidence is influenced by the predictability and dependability of partners in the past to be able to feel confident about the future of a relationship.

The trust model discussed by Rempel, Holmes, and Zanna. [27] shows a hierarchy. Predictability, dependency, and faith arise from cognitive and emotional levels that vary across relationships. Building each component of trust needs time and emotional involvement of partners in relationship. Dependability will be built based on predictability. Likewise, faith will be built based on dependability.

## B. Attachment Style

Bowlby [19] states that attachment has a large role not only in relationships between baby and caregiver, but also in relationships between adults. Based on the attachment theory, interaction between baby and caregivers during the first few months will form an internal working model that represents their interaction. The internal working model is a subjective model of self-esteem and expectations of support and attention from others [29]. This model then becomes the basis of the regulation of adult attachment styles [19]. If caregivers show a warm, responsive attitude, and meet the needs of baby, the baby will learn that other people are reliable. Adult attachment style tend to be stable and resistant to change [30] ; [31].

Based on the internal working model concept proposed by Bowlby, Bartholomew [17] suggests that the measurement of attachment style through two dimensions, the model of self and model of others. The model of self is a subjective picture of a person about himself, while a model of others is a subjective picture that other people are supportive and reliable [29]

Brennan [32] developed a dimension-based measure, Experience in Close Relationship (ECR), Items used in ECR reflected the scale used by Ainsworth while observing babies. Attachment anxiety measures fear of abandonment and separation, while attachment avoidance measures lack of intimacy and tendency to be self-reliant [18].

Mikulincer and Shaver [18] explain that attachment-related avoidance is a person's discomfort with closeness and dependence on partners, preferences for maintaining emotional distance and self-reliance, and the use of deactivation strategies when feeling stressed and unsafe. While attachment-related anxiety is an excessive desire to gain closeness and protection, intense worry to be close to partner uncertainty of the self-worth, and the use of hyperactivation strategies when feeling stressed and unsafe.

Hazan and Shaver [17] designed an adult attachment prototype based on children attachment style introduced by Ainsworth. In their research, Hazan and Shaver [17] made a brief description of three attachment styles, secure, avoidant, and anxious. Subjects were asked to reflect on the romantic relationship that had been carried out and choose one of the three available attachment styles. The results of the research by Hazan and Shaver found that adult attachment style was related to one's belief in romance and recollection of past experiences with parents [18].

Griffin and Bartholomew [29] developed a categorization of adult attachment style based on the model of self and model of others. This concept was further developed by Brennan [32] into two dimensions of adult attachment, attachment anxiety

and attachment avoidance. The combination of the two dimensions forms four adult attachment styles, namely secure, fearful-avoidant, preoccupied, and dismissing-avoidant.

Individuals with secure attachment style have low scores on attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance, have a high sense of security, trust and expectation for high partner responsiveness, comfortable with closeness and interdependence, and the ability to deal with stressors in a constructive way [18].

Individuals with fearful-avoidant attachment styles have high scores on attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance [18]. Therefore individuals with fearful-avoidant attachment style want intimate relationships but find it difficult to trust or depend on others [33].

Individuals with preoccupied attachment style have high scores on attachment anxiety and low scores attachment avoidance. Individuals with preoccupied attachment style has an excessive desire to form close relationships with other people, feel uncomfortable without close relationships, but feel they are not valuable to those around them [18].

Individuals with dismissing-avoidant attachment style have low scores on attachment anxiety and high scores on attachment avoidance. This attachment style is characterized by a high sense of independence and an inconvenience to depend on others [18]. Individuals with this attachment style feel they can rely on themselves and feel comfortable without a close relationship with others [33].

## C. Perceived Partner Responsiveness

Perceived partner responsiveness explains about affective interdependence, which is how one's emotional regulation is affected by other's behavior. Ekman and Davidson [23] explain that emotions generally emerge as a result of other people's behavior, emotions that emerge subsequently influence the interaction process between individuals. In the context of romantic relationships, a one's emotions are influenced by behavior or actions done by their partners.

Perceived partner responsiveness is a one's perception that their partner can understand, appreciate, and care for oneself [22]. Individuals who are considered responsive are partners who are warm, sensitive to their partner's feelings and willing to make their partners feel comfortable, valued, heard, and understood [34]. If one knows that their partner wants to provide support, then that individual becomes more courageous in facing challenges and interacting with others. The support given by couple can be take form in three aspects described previously (understanding, validation, and caring). Understanding indicates that someone has the right facts or perception of their partner (needs, fears, goals, and potential). Validation shows that a person respects their partner and is willing to sacrifice for the

benefit of the relationship (Murray & Holmes, in Reis, 2014)[23]. While caring implies that someone is worried and considers the well-being of their partner. Together these three aspects form responsive and reliable behavior (Reis, 2014)[23].

Perceived partner responsiveness is an important component in building intimate [23]; [34]. Research shows that perceived partner responsiveness is related to intimacy [24] and relationship satisfaction [25]. Individuals who perceive their partners as responsive (understanding, appreciating, and caring) tend to express themselves more and behave more responsively to their partners [35]. When a reciprocal process occurs, it will develop intimacy and relationship satisfaction.

Reis explained that perceived partner responsiveness is formed through intrapersonal and interpersonal processes [23]. The intrapersonal process occurs when one expresses his desire, willingness, and hope to one's partner. The interpersonal process occurs when the couple responds to the statement given. The response given by a partner can be perceived as responsive if certain requirements are met: (a) understanding, is considered to have the right view of him; (b) validation, respect and appreciate one's abilities, attitudes and views; and (c) caring, willingness to provide assistance when needed [23].

The process of forming perceptions does not always work as explained above. Couples can provide an unsupportive response so that the response is not perceived as responsive. In addition, positive responses are not always perceived as responsive by partner [23]. Individuals who perceive their partners as responsive tend to give positive responses to their partners, resulting in reciprocity.

A concept similar to perceived partner responsiveness is emotional bids, introduced by John Gottman [26]. Emotional bids are efforts made by someone to get attention or emotional connection with their partner. Bids can take the form of verbal or non-verbal, in the form of questions, statements, or physical contact. The partner's response to emotional bids is the basis of building trust, emotional connection, passion, and sexual life satisfaction [36].

### III. RESEARCH METHOD

Research used quantitative non experimental design to test the role of attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, and perceived partner responsiveness on trust.

#### A. Participants

Participants included in this study were 209 individuals currently involved in premarital romantic relationship (dating). Only individuals who had been dating for at least 2 years were included as attachment took 2 years to be stable in a relationship [19]. In total, there were 163 women and 46 men included, aged 18

to 25 years old ( $M = 21,19$ ,  $SD = 1,72$ ). Participants were recruited through convenient and snowball sampling. Variations in education background included high school graduates (64,6%), diplomas (1,9%), bachelor's degree (32,1%), and master's degree (1,4%).

#### B. Measures

##### i. Trust

Trust was measured using trust in close relationship scale developed by Rempel, J. K., Holmes, J. G. & Zanna, M. P. (1985) [27]. This scale measured trust through 17 items. Participants were asked to rate how much the statements suited their situations with the use of a Likert scale, ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Example of items included "I can rely on my partner to keep the promises he/she makes to me" and "My partner has been proven to be trustworthy and I am willing to let him/her engage in activities which other partners find too threatening."

All 17 items were averaged to have a mean trust score. High score indicated that participants have a relatively high trust towards partner. This measure has a high reliability with an  $\alpha$  coefficient of 0,784.

##### ii. Attachment Style

Experience in Close Relationship [37] consisted of two subscales, each used to measure attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. Each subscale consisted of 18 items, summing 36 items in total. Example of items measuring attachment anxiety includes "I'm afraid that I will lose my partner's love" and "I often worry that my partner doesn't really love me." Meanwhile example of items measuring attachment avoidance includes "I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down" and "I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on romantic partners." Participants were asked to give a response to these statements using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Each subscale was scored separately resulting in one score for attachment anxiety and one score for attachment avoidance. Low score on attachment anxiety indicated low attachment-related anxiety and low score on attachment avoidance indicated low attachment-related avoidance. Both attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance subscale reported high reliability, with  $\alpha$  coefficients of 0,89 and 0,888 respectively.

##### iii. Perceived Partner Responsiveness

Perceived partner responsiveness was measured using Perceived Partner Responsiveness Scale developed by Reis, Crasta, Rogge, Maniaci, & Carmichael [38]. This scale consisted of 18 items to measure perceived partner responsiveness. Participants were presented with 18 statements about

their current romantic partner and asked to give a response using a 5 point Likert scale. The scale ranged from 1 (not at all true) to 5 (completely true). Examples of item included “My partner usually is responsive to my needs” and “My partner usually seems interested in what I am thinking and feeling.”

Since perceived partner responsiveness is unidimensional, all items were averaged to get a final score of perceived partner responsiveness. High score indicated a positive perception of partner’s responsiveness. This scale has a coefficient of 0,897 indicating a high reliability.

#### IV. RESULTS

##### A. Descriptives

Trust measures show that generally participants have a relatively high trust on their romantic partners ( $M = 5,72$ ,  $SD = 0,57$ ). Participants also have low attachment anxiety ( $M = 3,25$ ,  $SD = 1,09$ ) and low attachment avoidance ( $M = 2,57$ ,  $SD = 0,67$ ). Based on scores of these two subscales, participants were categorized into four attachment styles. Most participants (145 participants) have secure attachment style. Others were categorized into preoccupied attachment style (56 participants), dismissing-avoidant attachment style (4 participants), and fearful-avoidant attachment style (4 participants). Scores on perceived partner responsiveness indicated that generally participants have positive perception towards partner’s responsiveness ( $M = 4,16$ ,  $SD = 0,47$ ).

##### B. Assumptions Test

Tests for normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity were done before multiple conducting multiple regression analysis. Normality test shows p value larger than 0,05. Linearity test for attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, and perceived partner responsiveness resulted in p value 0,888; 0,074; and 0,491 ( $> 0,05$ ). Multicollinearity test for each independent variable resulted in tolerance value  $> 0,1$  and  $VIF < 10$ . And homoscedasticity shows that variance was homogenous. Data was fit for analysis using parametric methods since assumptions were met.

##### C. Hypothesis Analysis

Multiple regression analysis was conducted and results show that simultaneously attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, and perceived partner responsiveness have effect on trust in dating couples ( $R^2 = 0,407$ ,  $p = 0,000 < 0,005$ ). This indicated that attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, and perceived partner responsiveness contributed 40,7% to trust in dating couples. Partially, perceived partner responsiveness has the largest positive effect on trust with beta weight of 0,539 ( $p = 0,000 < 0,005$ ), followed by attachment avoidance’s negative effect

with beta weight of -0,154 ( $p = 0,015 < 0,05$ ). Meanwhile, attachment anxiety showed no significant negative partial effect on trust with beta weight of -0,019 ( $p = 0,739 > 0,05$ ).

Therefore we conducted a simple regression analysis to validate the previous analysis. Simple regression analysis showed that there was significant effect of attachment anxiety on trust ( $R^2 = 0,054$ ,  $p = 0,001 < 0,005$ ). Result indicated that attachment anxiety contributed only 5,4% to trust in dating couples. Attachment anxiety has a negative effect on trust ( $\beta = -0,232$ ,  $p = 0,001 < 0,005$ ). The effect of attachment anxiety was too small to be detected on multiple regression analysis. The other two independent variables have much larger effect on trust.

##### D. Test of Variance

Test of variance showed that there was no difference on trust between female and male participants ( $t = 0,304$ ,  $p = 0,762 > 0,05$ ). There was also no differences reported on trust between long-distance and geographically-close couples ( $t = 0,575$ ,  $p = 0,566 > 0,05$ ). Test of variance showed differences on trust based on participant’s birth order ( $F = 4,193$ ,  $p = 0,007 < 0,05$ ). Results indicated that participants who are only children have higher trust compared to participants with siblings. While among participants with siblings, middle born reported higher trust than oldest and youngest.

#### V. CONCLUSIONS

Attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, and perceived partner responsiveness simultaneously affect trust in dating couples. Largest effect came from perceived partner responsiveness.

##### A. Discussion

Results show that attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, and perceived partner responsiveness have significant effect on trust in dating couples. Partially, perceived partner responsiveness has the largest effect on trust. This finding is in line with theory introduced by Reis [23] that trust is build based on positive perception of partner’s responsiveness. It is also in line with a statement by Holmes and Rempel [15] that individuals who perceived their partners as responsive and able to amend their needs have higher trust toward romantic partners.

A similar concept to perceived partner responsiveness was introduced by John Gottman [26], called emotional bids. These bids are attempts given by someone to gain attention or to build

emotional connection with significant others. Trust in romantic relationships is built on the basis of response to emotional bids. Positive response to emotional bids enables trust to be built in romantic relationships.

Findings in this research indicated that attachment avoidance has a significant negative effect on trust in dating couples. Similar results were found by Fitzpatrick and Lafontaine [20], their study found that attachment avoidance was negatively correlated to trust in dating couples. This indicated that individuals high in attachment avoidance are less dependable on their partners.

Multiple regression analysis shows that attachment anxiety does not have a significant effect on trust, while simple regression analysis shows that attachment anxiety has a role of 5.4% toward trust. This means that attachment anxiety only has a small role in trust. Therefore multiple regression analysis was unable to detect the significant role of attachment anxiety towards trust. In accordance with the findings of this study, Rodriguez, L.M., DiBello, A. M., Overup, C.S., & Neighbors, C. [11], and Fitzpatrick and Lafontaine [20] also found a weak correlation between attachment anxiety and trust.

Research findings show that perceived partner responsiveness has the largest effect on trust. This means that one will have a high sense of trust if they perceive their partner as responsive to their needs. On the other hand, attachment avoidance has a smaller effect towards trust. Attachment anxiety also does not have a significant role on trust. Therefore a person with an insecure attachment style can still have high trust toward partner, if the individual perceives their partners sensitive and responsive to their needs.

The influence of adult attachment style and perceived partner responsiveness on trust in romantic partners is 40.7%, while 58.3% is influenced by other factors not taken into account in this study. Other factors that can influence trust are personality traits [39], perceptions of partner commitment [16]; [40] and communication between partners [40].

Research findings did not show a significant difference between male and female trust. The results found in this study are in accordance with the study conducted by Kemer, G., Bulgan, G., & Çetinkaya Yıldız, E. [10] and Fitzpatrick and Lafontaine [20] who also found no significant difference in trust between men and women. This means that in a romantic relationships, men and women show the same trust.

Analysis of differences in trust based on birth order shows that only children have a higher sense of trust than individuals who have siblings. While for individuals who have siblings, the highest trust is reported on middle child. Previous studies on differences in trust based on birth order showed inconclusive results. Research conducted by Rohrer, J. M., Egloff, B., & Schmukle, S. C. [41] found no difference in trust based on birth order, while Courtiol et al. found that middle children showed more trust

than other birth orders. The researchers' findings are in accordance with the study conducted by Courtiol, A., Raymond, M., & Faurie, C. [42] that middle child has a higher level of trust than other children in the birth order. This can be caused by the similarity in age of the research samples. In addition, the results of this study are different from the findings of Rohrer, J. M., Egloff, B., & Schmukle, S. C. [41] because previous research analyzed interpersonal trust. Interpersonal trust is the general expectation that other people's words or promises are reliable. While this study analyzes trust aimed at specific individuals, namely partners.

Researchers also did not find any difference in trust between partners who are in long distance relationships and non-long distance relationships. Researcher's findings are in accordance with previous studies conducted by Dainton and Aylor (2001) [13] who did not find differences in trust between partners in long distance relationships and partners in geographically close relationships. This means being in a long distance relationship is not a factor that influences trust in partners.

Limitations in this study are that sample weren't able to represent the four existing attachment styles. This happened because the researchers did not screen the subject's attachment style. This study also only takes into account internal factors that can influence trust without considering external factors, such as partner's trust or partner's attachment style. Another obstacle faced by researchers when adapting a measure of trust is that language in a measuring instrument is no longer commonly used today.

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